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The Short Novel

By Wendy E. Lapham

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For my parents, who have always believed in me; and for Jonathan, whose perspective meant everything.
THE GOOD THING

A Novella

by

Wendy Lapham

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Colby College

Waterville, Maine
A few people thought Livy Sparks had designs on the old firehouse from the beginning. Don't forget it was Livy who stood up at town meeting and asked why it had to be torn down just because we were building a new one. Besides, she said, wasn't the lot next to it a better place for a firehouse anyway, right near the bend in the stream? People listen to Livy most of the time, because most of the time she's right. Eventually we voted Livy's way, and the town of Lambert built a brand new Volunteer Fire Station on the lot next to the old firehouse. That's why some people thought Livy had planned the whole thing all along, even before she went away to the city and came back two weeks later with a truckload of bums.

But then again, maybe Livy never planned any of it. To Livy Sparks, saving an old firehouse from destruction was a natural thing to do—it just turned out that she was also the one to find a use for it. Livy was always able to see the possibilities for things. She was much more interested in what something could become than what it had already been.

If you go up Dunn Hill road past the bridge, you'll get to Livy's house. Once the whole road and the surrounding land belonged to Livy's father,
Bertram Sparks. The farm was divided between Livy and her sister Virginia when he died. Livy took the house her grandfather had built, and Virginia and her family moved into a new house they had built just up the road.

Livy has torn down the fence that used to be in the front yard—she says fences limit people. There's a stone walkway there now, and Livy dug up every one of those stones and put them in herself. The front steps need painting, but if anyone ever took the time to paint them they'd have to paint around all the people who like to sit there. To enter the house, you have to walk through a screened-in porch, and it takes some maneuvering, because there's usually a lot of stuff stored there—fishing gear and old summer hats and potting soil and stacks of newspapers. That's where you can usually find Livy, if she isn't sitting out on the steps either with somebody or just by herself.

From the very first day of spring to the first cold day of fall, the windows of the house are open. Sometimes you can hear Livy singing, taking familiar old tunes and putting in her own words as she goes along. The screens on both the front and back doors are busted from dogs trying to get through, but Livy doesn't seem to mind. Bertram never bothered to put a bathroom in the house, either—he used to say he respected a woman most if she could shit in the woods and not complain. After he died, Livy built herself a new outhouse in the back, with a slanted glass window in the roof so she could look at the sky.

The fact that Livy stuck with an outhouse instead of installing indoor plumbing really got to Virginia. They've always been like night and day, those two, and the older they've gotten, the more they've resisted each other's point of view. Livy couldn't understand why Virginia had married Harry, who Livy thought had about as much life as a winter fly. Virginia had
never fully accepted the fact that Livy was happy without a husband, and brought it to her sister's attention as often as possible. You'd never have known they were sisters by looking at them—Livy cared as little about her appearance as Virginia valued hers, and Livy was so relaxed and at home in her body she made Virginia's cold stiffness seem to turn the ground white with frost where she stood.

When they were children, Virginia used to play dress up all the time. Their mother, Amanda Sparks, had died when they were both very young, and she had left behind her a huge trunk full of old clothes. Virginia would spend hours trying on Amanda's dresses and shoes in the big room, while Livy stood outside in the yard and blew her cheeks against the window. In Sunday school, Virginia always knew every Bible verse by heart, but Livy only cared about the stories. Sometimes she could get Bertram to tell one to her, and his version was always more exciting than Virginia's. Livy spent whole days pretending she was David fighting the mighty Goliath, and every now and then she'd be Delilah cutting off Samson's hair. Although she tried her best, Livy could never get Virginia to play the roles of either Samson or Goliath. She didn't like the idea of Livy even pretending to cut off her hair, and she absolutely refused to pretend she'd been hit in the forehead with a rock.

After a while, Livy gave up trying to convert Virginia's nature and made friends with other people. She went to college the day after Virginia's wedding. But in her junior year, Bertram had a heart attack and died, so Livy left school to take over the farm. Livy put all of her energy into the old place, while Virginia concentrated on having two babies. Livy was surprised that Virginia and Harry were even capable of having children, but they did, and the space between Livy and her sister grew even wider. Livy loved babies, but something in Virginia's smiling triumph made her resist the
temptation of being part of Virginia's family. Virginia's first child was a round, rosy, sweet-tempered baby girl who could amuse herself for hours and hardly ever cried. Livy loved her, and put up with Virginia's happy humming and cutesy baby talk so she could hold the baby in her arms and smell her clean baby smell and wonder at the smallness of her hands and feet.

After a while, Livy found herself growing impatient and tired of her sister's motherliness. Virginia was extremely proud of the fact that she had brought two children into the world—that was something Livy had never done. She made that painfully clear to Livy, and eventually Livy stopped going over to Virginia's all the time to see her niece.

When Virginia's son was born, Livy went to Harry and Virginia's to visit the new baby. Livy expected him to have the same easy disposition as his sister, and she was unprepared for what happened. He was a fussy and unhappy baby, and he hated to be held. When Harry placed him in Livy's arms, he immediately began to scream, balling up his little red fists and kicking his legs and pinching his face together. Each long thin cry was followed by a space of silence that seemed too long, and the baby's mouth remained open but no sound came out. Then, suddenly, he would catch his breath in a hiccup and wail again. Every time he caught his breath he would open his eyes wide and look deeply at Livy, as though there were some connection between them. It seemed to be too strong an expression for a baby, as if he was trying to say something that he didn't have the power to say in words. Livy felt a little frightened because the baby wouldn't stop crying and just kept fixing her with that eerie look, as if he knew something about her that she didn't want anyone to know. "What's wrong with him, Virginia?" Livy said.

"I don't know. Maybe it's something your wearing that's scaring him."

"Or maybe he just doesn't like me," Livy said.
"Don't be silly, Liv," Harry said, "Little babies can't decide things like that."

"He's probably just afraid of you because he hasn't seen you before," Virginia said.

Livy handed the screaming, kicking baby back to Harry. He quieted down a little.

Livy felt upset all the way home. She never wanted to hold that baby again, he had given her such a weird feeling. She felt guilty about thinking like that, but something about that look in the child's eyes made her shiver. From then on, she kept her distance. No more cuddling babies, she thought. When the children get older they can come visit me.

A few people have asked Harry Ward why he named his children the way he did. He called the girl China and the boy Cleveland. We knew he was responsible, because Virginia never would have done it that way. Harry said when China was born and he held her for the first time, she was so tiny and fragile he felt like if he dropped her she would shatter like a porcelain cup. That's why he named her China. The name Cleveland was a little harder for him to explain. Harry's son was named after his favorite United States President, Grover Cleveland--the twenty-second and twenty-fourth president of our nation. No one knew why Grover Cleveland was Harry's favorite president, and most people thought the boy was named after the city in Ohio, but Harry explained that he'd never been to Ohio. He never thought of "China" as being a place either. The naming of his children was one of the few things Harry demanded from his marriage, and to many of us it seemed he hadn't been particularly strong in that area, either. Some people thought that the reason Cleveland turned out the way he did was because he was named after one
of the least important presidents ever. If he had been Jefferson or Lincoln, they theorized, he might have been different.

China Ward was always everybody's darling. She was one of those kids who would climb right up on your lap and lean against you, happy to view the world with you from where you sat. All the teachers in the school liked having her in their class, and she was popular with most of the kids, too. There was a warmth about her that couldn't help but rub off on you when you were around her. As she grew older, that warmth grew into something solid and lovely, and she seemed to get more beautiful with every passing summer.

Cleveland Ward was another story. No one could understand how two kids from the same parents could have turned out so differently. Cleveland was extremely bright--some teachers even said brilliant--but he always seemed to be out of step with things around him, as if he drank in information more quickly than it flowed. He always seemed to be frustrated and irritable, and his only friend was his sister China. We don't have many cynics in Lambert, and he was a strange creature to us. He seemed to send out silent signals that the frustration he felt, reflected in the mocking look in his eyes and the twist of his smile, went more deeply into him than we could understand. He seemed like some frantic animal desperate to get out of his cage and hating the people who had put him there.

As Cleveland got older, the trouble between him and Livy that had started back when Cleveland was a baby seemed to get worse instead of better. Livy always seemed to be disappointed by everything he did. "Why don't you go and do something constructive instead of hanging around here all day?" she would say to him, and he would look down and shuffle his feet and say something about being bored. Being bored was a terrible sin to Livy. "Bored?" she would say, "With a brain like yours, you're bored?" And she would give him
books to read and he would read them overnight and bring them back to her in
the morning.

"What did you think of it?" she would say, almost like a command.

"I don't know," Cleveland would say.

"Well didn't you like anything about it?"

"I don't know," Cleveland would say. He would get this look of pain on
his face, and he might even begin to say something else, but when he looked
over at Livy, who sat staring at him as if waiting for the perfect answer, he
could only squeeze out an 'I don't know.'

Livy gave Cleveland a ukelele once, but he left it out in the rain and
ruined it. "I never played it anyway," Cleveland said.

What made matters worse was that Livy and China became almost like
mother and daughter. China was always eager to please her aunt, and it
seemed to Cleveland that China could do nothing wrong in Livy's eyes. China
loved nothing more than helping Livy out around the farm. Cleveland hated
farms.

More than anything else, Cleveland wanted his aunt to think well of him,
but she was like a clenched fist that never relaxed, never unfolded and
reached out to him. When she spoke to him in that sharp way, he withdrew
involuntarily and nervously, and he responded with sarcastic remarks he
didn't seem to be able to keep from flying out of his mouth. Livy couldn't
control her feelings very well, either. She just didn't like Cleveland's
attitude, or the hostile squint in his eye, or the way he spoke. She
couldn't even pity him because he frustrated her so much—not just by
hanging around all the time, but also because she knew she would never like
him with the easy way she liked China. She knew she should try to get along
with him, but when he turned towards her with that sarcastic look on his
face, she had to control the urge to slap it off. The look was too resistant to love, and it mocked her senses. Cleveland admired the way Livy could make people listen to her, and he longed to be able to feel as good about the world as she did. He remembered once when he was little, Livy had told him that she heard a voice inside her head sometimes. She told him all about the way it started as a humming, and then she got a message—not really like a voice, but close enough to one so that she understood it. Cleveland knew, even then, that this voice was something he had in common with Livy. But from the way she talked about it, what she heard seemed different from what he heard inside his own head, and he was afraid to say anything. She said the voice made her do good things, but the things his voice said to do were dark and scary and bad. He longed to tell her about it and be loved by her because they had something in common that even China didn't have, but he was afraid of the voice in his head, and even more afraid of what Livy would do if she found out she wasn't the only one who heard voices. As Cleveland grew older, these fears transformed themselves into a bitter green resentment of everything she stood for and did.
Right around the time of the town meeting that saved the old firehouse, Livy began to hear the voice in her head again. She had been hearing it off and on during her life for as long as she could remember. Sometimes she thought it was her dead mother talking to her, but whatever the voice was, she listened to it.

She was sitting in the kitchen with her elbows resting on the wide wood of the chopping block table, sipping tea. A light breeze blew the mingled scents of drying herbs that hung from a broomstick stretched from the top of the window to the top of the refrigerator. Copper and cast-iron pots hung solidly on the walls, and a soft lingering glow seeped from the electric coil on the white enamel range. There was a humming in Livy's head—the edge of the voice.

Livy stood up and moved out the door into the back yard. The yard was purple-dark, and peepers chanted so loudly they seemed to breathe together in waves of sound. They made a frantic background to the humming in Livy's head, the voice, which spoke in a language not quite made up of words, but of combinations of things—impulses, flashes of sudden clarity, a constant drumming that seemed to urge her on and on toward some unframed picture of the future. Before when the voice had come, it had meant there was some change going on inside her, some movement within, a sort of tearing-out of seams to be sewn back up differently or better. Livy stood in the yard,
clutching her arms to her sides and lifting her face upward. Her senses
were filled with the loudness of the tree frogs and the smell of deep night.
The voice made her feel dream-like, and she began to move around the yard in
a peculiar trance, her attention drawn to small objects around her and a
puzzled smile indenting her mouth.

She leaned down and scooped up a stone from the dewy grass. It fit
almost perfectly into her palm. She began to squeeze it, harder and harder,
as if it had an answer inside it that she could wring out. Her hand began to
ache, and she slowly unwrapped her fingers, one by one, and let the stone
roll out of her palm and fall to the ground with a sullen sound. She stared
at its dark outline in the grass. Her hand throbbed slightly, but she found
she missed the gripping sensation the stone had given her—why had she
dropped it?

She spotted the outline of an old metal rake in the grass to her left,
its rusty spikes bent and broken from overuse. She slipped a hand under it,
hers fingers touching the spot where the spikes met and branched out from one
another where they were fastened against the wooden handle. With a strong,
gentle motion she pulled it upright so that she looked through the spikes,
which stood up curved and twisted like a wild hairdo. She began to dance
with the rake, twirling and dipping low and making light steps with her feet.
Then she stopped, suddenly, and pushed it away from her. It fell on the
grass with a slight clang and lay there on its back. She was exhausted. At
the corner of the house by the back door, she leaned her body into the
outside of the house and hugged it as if saying goodbye. The wood on her
cheek and the roughness of the boards under her fingers brought her back to
the present time in the yard. The voice was gone, the trance was over. She
pulled herself away from the house and went inside.
Livy knew every shadow of her darkened kitchen, and she reached up easily to a shelf and got her notebook. She sat in the dark and wrote herself a letter. It was the only way she could find out what the voice had been trying to tell her.

Dear Olivia-

It's time to say goodbye to this place and go somewhere where you can think and you don't have to worry about every living soul knowing who you are and everything you've done.

People you don't know need you for some reason. Let go and move away. Not for good, but long enough so that you come back different.

Livy sat alone in the dark for a while trying to sort everything out. She remembered she hadn't read her mail today—it sat in front of her on the table. She turned on a light and looked through it. There were a few pieces of junk mail and a water bill, and a notice of overdue books at the library, and there was a letter from her friend Carl. She had known Carl at college all those years ago, and they had kept in touch. Livy read the letter carefully.

Dear Livy—

I know I've been just terrible about writing, but I've been going through some pretty rough times. I think the last time I wrote I had told you my wife and I were separated, well, now the divorce is final. My son and daughter are both on the West Coast now, so it's just me. Oh, God, Liv, I don't know what to do—everything is just falling apart, and I don't even know why. Every day I hate the city a little bit more, and it's an effort to go to work in the morning. Actually, it's an effort to do almost everything. How are things with you on the farm? I know I keep promising to visit, and then I never do, but I would really like to sometime. Your place must be beautiful this time of year. Gotta go—take care of yourself.

Love, Carl xxoo

Livy thought for a moment, then took out a fresh piece of paper and wrote to Carl:

Dear Carl—

I realized tonight I need to leave here for a while. It sounds like you could use a change, too. Let's trade places for a couple of weeks—take a vacation and come here, and I'll stay in your apartment. Let me know what you think as soon as you can.
With respect, Livy.

A letter came back a few days later. It said:

Dear Livy-

I hope you're not doing this just for me, but I'd love to come to the country for a while. I've got lots of vacation time saved up, and at this point, any change would be welcome. My apartment is all yours, and I'll explain everything when I get to Lambert. I should be there Tuesday afternoon.

Love, Carl xxoo
On Tuesday, Carl drove into Livy's yard in the car he'd rented. Livy jumped down off the screen porch and gave him a big hug. She'd been waiting for him all day.

"I've got to show you everything fast," she said, "Because I've gotta get going."

Carl put his bags down on the grass. When he looked up at Livy, his eyes squinted into the sun and his jaw dropped just enough so that his lower teeth were showing. The skin on his face was slack and fleshy, and his hair was almost gone in the front.

"What do you mean, Livy" he said. "I just got here. What's the rush?"

"Well," Livy said. "You're here, so now I can leave."

"Are you really that excited about going to the city?" Carl said. "Look at me, do I look like I'm in good shape?" His body looked bloated by the heat, and sweat beads sat in a row on his upper lip. His shoulders were stooped as though he'd carried a bag of rocks over them all the way from the city.

"Oh, Carl, you just need a break from all that," Livy said, "And I need a break from all of this. Come on, bring in your stuff and I'll show you around." Carl unloaded the rest of his things and put them on the porch. Then he followed Livy around the place as she talked rapidly, trying to remember how much she said to feed the hens and the horse, and how to hook up
the sprinkler in case it didn't rain, and where to turn on the light in the barn, and where the canning jars were.

"Canning jars?" Carl said.

"Yep," Livy said, "I'll be gone when the tomatoes come in, so you'll have to put them up for me. Start early enough, though, because tomatoes are always ready all at once and it's easy to get behind."

"Livy, I don't know how to can tomatoes."

"It's easy, just start early enough," Livy said. Carl shook his head, following her toward a small building behind the barn.

"Here's the john," she said.

"This?" Carl asked. His nostrils widened and his eyes grew very large.

"There's a can of lye in the barn," Livy said, "Throw about three coffee cans full down the hole if it starts to stink."

"But, Livy..." Carl said.

"It's great in there--you can look at the clouds." Carl was silent.

Livy went back to the house. "Gotta get going!" she said.

Before she left, Carl made Livy go over everything one more time.

"I thought this was supposed to help relax me," he said.

"It will, don't worry," Livy said hurriedly, "Now where are the keys?"

"The keys to the apartment? I gave them to you," Carl said.

"No, the keys to the rental car," Livy said impatiently, "How else am I supposed to get there?"

"But it's in my name," Carl said, "I have it for two weeks."

"I don't have time to call the place, Carl, so after I leave, walk down to my sister Virginia's and call them and tell them I'm bringing it back today," Livy said.

"Call what place? Go where? What are you bringing back?"
"The CAR RENTAL place—call them and tell them I'm bringing the CAR back today!"

"Livy," Carl said, "You can't leave me here without a car." He was trying to sound very serious, but a slight sense of panic had drifted into his voice. Livy reached into the pocket of his jacket and took the keys.

"I'm not. You have my truck. You might need it. Be careful with reverse—it's a little tricky—and don't forget to call the rental place or they'll keep charging you."

"Where's the phone?" Carl asked quietly.

"I told you. At Virginia's—the next house down." Livy put two small bags in the trunk of Carl's car. She walked swiftly to the front and got in.

"Isn't yours working?" Carl asked over the noise of the engine. Livy stepped on the gas; the engine growled loudly. She cocked her head to the side and pushed her hand against the back of her ear—"WHAT?" she yelled.

"YOUR PHONE—IS IT BROKEN?" Carl yelled back.

"I DON'T HAVE ONE!" Livy shouted. Then she smiled and waved, backed out the driveway, threw the car into gear, and peeled out onto the road. She waved at Carl again and blew him a kiss. Then she was swallowed up by the long hill.

Livy passed the gas station, and waved to the kids out front. They waved back solemnly as she passed, their eyes gliding over the car. Where was Livy Sparks going in someone else's car? they wondered. Livy drove on past the Congregational church, then the Catholic church. She passed the sign for Doug's Bowling Supplies, hand-lettered and leaning where it had been stuck in the front yard of Doug Shea's house. She drove past fields spurting
new growth of corn and pastures of ambling cows. She drove out of town to
the entrance of the highway.

Back at Livy's, Carl was taking a look around the house. He was
surprised by what he found inside. He imagined it would be like a roadside
antique shop, filled with things no one ever took the time to throw out. But
there wasn't much furniture at all in the big room except for a few soft
chairs and a bookcase. The chairs were covered in fabric with huge flowers
on it, and there were three small wooden tables with old oil lamps on them.

The chairs seemed to invite Carl to sit down and rest for a while, so he
did. He liked the openness of the room—the way he could stretch out without
worrying about knocking something over. He noticed a note lying on one of
the tables. It was for him. It said:

Dear Carl—
Have a nice stay. If you start feeling lonely or depressed, just look
around you.
With respect, Livy.

Carl chuckled. Livy always assumes everyone thinks just like she does,
he thought. He got up and went to the window, lifting his elbows so they
rested on the insides of the frame. The sun was just setting on the far edge
of a broad green field. It seemed to lick around the bottom half of the sky,
spreading shades of light and color to the tops of trees, to flat surfaces,
and to the waving grass of the field so that they looked like they had been
dipped in some rich melted substance that tinted them almost the same color
as the edges of the sky. Through the open window, Carl felt the hush of dusk
settling in, the gentle shift in temperature that always marks the end of an
early summer day. From far away, he heard children's laughter and a barking
dog. A woman's voice cut through the cool air, and the children's voices
switched to a chorus of answers. All around him trees flaunted an abundance
of leaves, and the yard was drenched with the scent of hot vegetation cooling down for the night. Carl smiled, thinking suddenly of Livy's note. He left the window and peered into the kitchen. He smiled again. He could just picture Livy there--reaching up to break off a piece of basil for a soup, or sipping coffee in front of the screen door.

He went upstairs, putting his things in the room to the left of the stairway. It looked out over the garden, and was sure to get the morning sun. There was another room at the back of the house, with a view of the barn. There was one other door, too, but it was locked. Carl wondered if that was Livy's bedroom. He knew it couldn't be the bathroom. That must be Livy's room, he thought; these other rooms don't look like they're ever used.

As the days passed, Carl began to get used to Livy's ways. There were things he wasn't used to--getting up early when he didn't have to, being around chicken and horses and hissing geese, and the quiet at night--the wind, the sounds, the availability of the stars.

Everyone in town wondered who he was and how long he was staying, and someone was always wandering by Livy's to see how he was getting on. We got a kick out of seeing him get chased around Livy's yard by her geese, hissing evilly at him with their necks stuck out. Then there was the day he helped Mel Russo catch his pigs.

Mel has been promising to build a better pen for his hogs for years, but the summer Carl came to Lambert, Mel still hadn't gotten around to it. Mel's place borders the field behind Livy's barn, and when the pigs get loose, they make a straight run across the field, past the barn, and right up into her yard.
Carl woke up one morning to find that Livy's entire yard was filled with pigs running through the bushes, rooting the dirt around the foundation of the house, stampeding over the steps of the porch and swarming through the open door of the barn. Above the squeaking and snorting noises of the pigs, Carl heard a man's voice yelling "GODDAMMIT! GET BACK HERE!" Carl jumped up and slipped into his new Goretx rain pants, ran down the stairs, and went out the back door. In the yard, surrounded by a moving stream of running pigs, stood Mel Russo, wearing green Dickie work pants, a blue and white t-shirt that showed off his big stomach, and an adjustable hat that said "Randolf Feeds" on it. He looked up when he saw Carl come out the door. Mel put one hand on the back of his hat and moved it off his head so he could see Carl better.

"My pigs got loose again," Mel said simply.

"Does this happen a lot?" Carl asked.

"You just ask Livy about that," Mel said, then he laughed and leaned back on his boots a little. "You make sure to ask Livy that when she gets back!"

"Do you need some help?" Carl asked.

"Sure!" Mel said, and began to circle the pigs.

After a while, though, Mel gave up trying to catch the pigs at all. He was having too much fun watching Carl land face-first in the mud grasping nothing but air and seeing nothing but the retreating rear end of a pig. Carl kept asking himself how in God's name those animals could move that fast, and every time he looked at Mel he was standing there laughing, which made Carl feel even more stupid. Why am I doing this? Carl wondered to himself, but when he looked over in Mel's direction, his anger slipped away, because the look on Mel's face wasn't mean—he was just getting a big kick.
out of the whole thing. But Carl was far too embarrassed and frustrated to laugh along with him. Finally, Mel seemed to have gotten a big enough charge out of Carl's predicament and began to help him herd the pigs into the empty woodshed. Carl watched as Mel backed his white Scrambler van into the entrance of the woodshed and then picked each pig up one by one and threw them into the back of the van. Mel stuck out his hand to Carl and shook it hard.

"Thanks," Mel said, "They sure are good runners, aren't they? Catching a pig is always a bitch. You did good." Mel spat gracefully on the ground and readjusted his hat--his eyes were still laughing and his mouth was a big tobacco-stained grin.

Carl felt suddenly as if he had walked into a room full of strangers and been asked to pull up a chair. "Want to come in for a cup of coffee or anything?" he said. He smiled shyly.

"Naw, I better get these buggers home. Thanks again, Carl, and sorry about your pants," Mel said, climbing into the front of the van. The pigs stood in the back, staring at Carl with their beady eyes.

"No problem," Carl said, and backed out of the driveway. He beeped the horn once as he turned out. Carl waved.

He felt good. He unzipped his fly and peed in the front yard. He whistled "Home on the Range" as he fed the hens. He hissed back at the geese and chased them with a whiffle ball bat he found lying in the grass. He cracked a few stones into the woods with the yellow plastic bat. He made sounds like a cheering crowd.

The yard had grown sweet in the dusk. Carl went to the barn and climbed up on the bales of hay stacked in the loft. The inside of the barn was
darker than outside and a bluish light seeped in through the open door and the cracks in the boards of the walls. The hay made cubic hills around him, and he leaned back into a bale, not minding the prickly sensation of it. Nothing was important to him at that moment but being where he was, even covered with mud and with an uncomfortable feeling of dirt under his nails. Because that moment in the barn was perfect and timeless and all he wanted to do was listen to the faraway sounds of clucking hens and the deep thump of a horse’s hoof meeting wood in the deepening blue and dusty odor of an old building.
Livy took a cab to Carl's apartment after she dropped off the rental car. The city bloomed with people in summer clothing, and light reflected off of every wide store window. But to Livy, the colors and the light were too dazzling, and the energy she felt from the crowded streets made her nervous. The odors of hot tar and exhaust in the humid air made her a little queasy, and her eyes were tired from the exhausting swirl of sights. She was relieved when she finally got to Carl's building. It was in a nice section of clean streets and quiet parks, and a little of her fear faded away as she walked into the marble-floored lobby and found the elevator.

Inside, the apartment was stuffy-hot. It was very neat, and everything matched and looked new. Carl had chosen two colors for the living room—tan and beige—and everything, including the paintings on the walls, was either one color or the other. Livy drew back the light-brown curtains and opened the windows. The noise of cars and shouts leaped into the apartment. Livy walked into the completely white kitchen. There was no dirt anywhere, and there were magnets shaped like chocolates on the refrigerator. Livy couldn't find any tea bags.

She took a hot bath, and then went out for a walk. She wandered through the neighborhood and then got on a subway downtown. She began to feel very strange when she emerged from the subway station. There was some kind of energy that seemed to be flowing all around her, but it had changed shape
slightly from what she had felt that afternoon. The streets were cooler, but there was no relaxation in the approaching night. Instead, there was a feeling of controlled panic in the air. Livy continued to walk, farther and farther out to the decaying edges of the city. Old men perched on the front steps of buildings, looking out distractedly at the street. White bras and slips stirred in the heavy breeze from where they hung between buildings. Dirty grass brushed the edges of alleys and trees wilted in their small squares of earth, surrounded on all sides by sidewalks. She passed a group of girls skipping rope. They stopped to stare at her briefly as she passed. Streetlights popped on above her head, and they cast a strange glowing tint in the surrounding dusk. Unlike the creeping dusk at home, this city night seemed to fall hard on the streets all at once, and there was no relief, only the sense that some control had been lost with the end of daylight.

After a few days, Livy began to take the city in stride, and she even began to enjoy the anonymity of it. She knew there was something out there she was supposed to see or understand, and she would just have to wait until it appeared. She listened carefully for the voice, but it didn't come.

She found Lotus the night of the thunderstorm. Clouds had been gathering themselves together for a war all afternoon, and by early evening they were ready—sending down cold bullets of rain and cracking open the sky with lancing shivers of light. Livy sensed her fears coming back, as the added energy of the storm mixed with the undercurrent of the streets. The charge of the thunder and lightening seemed to propel people a little faster, and Livy found herself caught up in it, too. She found herself running back to Carl's apartment, and had to stop herself once or twice to catch her breath in the thick rain. At one corner, she noticed a mound of red fabric
stuck in a gutter. Water swirled around it and into the drain. As she got
closer, Livy noticed that there were red shoes sticking out from the mound,
and the shoes were attached to legs. It was a woman's body curled into a
little ball, but the face was thrown back and a few strands of hair bobbed in
the moving water. Something glittered. When she looked closer, Livy saw the
woman had a gold tooth.

Livy knelt down. She lifted the hair from the woman's face. She had
thought she was dead, but now she heard a humming coming from the woman's
mouth. It was a muddled attempt at something that the woman couldn't
complete. Livy checked to see if the woman was hurt, hoping she wouldn't
find any wounds and not sure about what she would do if she did. Maybe she's
just drunk, Livy thought. She certainly smelled drunk. She lifted up the
woman's face in her hands. The woman's eyes opened a crack and slid to the
side. She started waving her hands and trying to get up. Livy helped her.
The woman wobbled on skinny legs, trying to straighten her hair and pull down
her dress at the same time.

"Who're you?" the woman said.

"I'm a friend," Livy said, "Do you have anywhere to stay tonight?"

"That fuckin' Louie did this to me," she said, "I'm gonna killim!" She
took a step to the side and almost fell over. Livy caught her.

"Would you like a place to stay tonight?" Livy asked. The woman yanked
back her head sharply and looked at Livy suspiciously. Then she gave a brief
bob of her head.

"Shuure! Les' go!" she said, and started to move away.

Livy guided her gently towards the subway entrance. They waited for the
train without speaking, Livy holding tightly to the woman's arm to keep her
standing. The subway was almost empty. Livy sat down, and the woman sat next
to her, peering at her through half-closed eyes, her head swaying back and forth with the motion of the train.

"What's your name, lady?" she said to Livy.

"Livy."

"Libby?"

"No, Livy. With a V."

"Oh."

"What's yours?" Livy asked.

"Lotus," the woman said, bringing a limp hand to her forehead.

"That's a pretty name" Livy said.

The woman laughed a rasping laugh. Then she stopped abruptly, her face tense with fear. She stared down at the end of the train. A tall thin man stood there, leaning against the graffiti-stained doors of the subway. He wore tiny orange headphones, and was rocking back and forth. All Livy and Lotus could hear was a tinny beat, punctuated every now and then by the man's voice saying "boo-wah, boo-wah."

"Do you know him, Lotus?" Livy asked.

"Shit. I'm fuckin seeing things. I thought it was Louie for a minute," Lotus said softly. Her voice sounded clearer. She sat hunched over in her wet, soiled dress, staring at the floor of the train. It began to slow down and came to a squeaky halt.

"Okay, this is the stop," Livy said.

Lotus didn't get up. "Why are you doin this?" she said.

"Because it's raining outside," Livy said.

Lotus got up and followed Livy out of the car. They walked to Carl's building. Lotus seemed to be dragging her feet and slowing her place the closer they got.
"What do you want from me, man?" Lotus asked. She looked at Livy with clear eyes.

"I don't want anything from you, Lotus," Livy said, "I just want to help you."

Lotus looked up at her and her eyes smiled.

"What the fuck," she said.
Carl didn't hear from Livy all week. Then, a letter came in the mail:

Dear Carl,
I found someone else who needs to stay in my house, so I'm sending her there. Don't forget about the tomatoes!
With respect, Livy.

Carl threw the letter down in disgust. Why did Livy have to do this to him, just when he was enjoying being alone and feeling like a part of things again? He realized he didn't want to share any of the things he had found at Livy's house with anyone else. And who was this woman? What would they talk about? He went outside and sat on the steps to sulk. He sighed deeply. Just when I start to gain on things, he thought, something always screws me up.

The next day Carl decided to go for a drive. He hadn't driven Livy's truck at all yet, and he figured that if he was lucky this "her whoever she was, would think no one was home or it was the wrong house and she would go away. He climbed into the truck and slid behind the wheel. The truck was a standard transmission with the gear shift on the steering column. Carl couldn't drive a standard, and he had never seen a gear shift on a steering column before.

"ARRRRRRRRRRRRGCGGGGGGHHH!" he yelled. He started the engine and attempted to put the truck into first gear and
work the clutch. He stalled and jerked and stalled some more, and then finally got the truck moving. It bucked so badly his teeth hurt, and his head swung back and forth in huge arcs. Carl hunched over the wheel in a trance of resolution, his shoulders trying to absorb the shock. He managed to maneuver the truck around the back yard and towards the driveway. He was concentrating so hard that he didn't even see her until he almost ran her down. Or maybe he never saw her, because he didn't even look past the nose of the truck until he heard a loud, hoarse voice scream: "WATCH IT ASSHOLE!"

Standing in front of the truck, hands on hips, legs planted on the ground like two thin trees was the ugliest woman Carl had ever seen. She had a mocking look in her eyes and her hair was jet-black except for an inch-wide band in the front that was almost white. Her face, hidden behind layers of foundation, seemed pinched and strained. It was an unreal, dirty-looking face. But Carl couldn't take his eyes away from the woman's mouth—her lips were like a ripe plum, and as she stood there glaring at Carl and heaving her chest up and down, he noticed through her gritted teeth that one front tooth was covered completely in gold. Her mouth was the one fascinating thing about her, and Carl was mesmerized by the gold tooth, even though he had almost killed her and she had just called him an asshole.

"What the fuck are you staring at?" the woman said.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you," Carl said.

"Yeah, I guess not. Where does Livy Sparks live?" the woman asked.

"What?" Carl said.

"Livy Sparks. Does she live near here?"

"Why?" Carl said.

"Whaddya mean WHY? Just tell me, for Jesus sake."

"Yes," was all Carl could manage.
"Yes what?"
"Yes she does."
"Yes she does live near here?"
"Uh huh."
"Where? God, what's with you? Are you the village idiot or something?"
"No."
"Well could you please tell me where to find her fucking house?"
"Sure. It's down the road about four miles," Carl said. He traced a finger around the edge of the steering wheel.

"Oh. I'd ask you to give me a ride in your truck, but it's probably safer to walk."

The woman turned around and walked abruptly back down the driveway towards the road. Carl slipped down farther into the seat. He pounded the dashboard softly. Then he cupped his hands around his mouth and in a loud voice said out the window to the woman's back, "I lied!"

"What?" she said, stopping and turning her head to look at Carl.

"I lied. She lives here."

"Where?"

"Here. This house." Carl jabbed his thumb behind him at Livy's house.

"THAT house? THAT one right there? NOT the one four miles down the road?"

"Nope."

"Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Carl," Carl said, "I'm Carl."

"YOU'RE CARL? The Carl I'm supposed to be looking for?"

"Yep."

"God fuck America, I don't believe it. I have to stay here with YOU in
"It looks that way."

"Well, I can't take any more of this. Excuse me," the woman said, and she surged past Carl up to the house.

Carl felt like crying. This was "her"? This was the woman Livy had sent? It was much worse than he'd thought. What was Livy trying to do to him?

He could hear her muttering to herself inside the house. Carl just sat in the truck with his arms folded, trying to think of what to do. He finally realized he couldn't stay out in the truck forever, so he wandered up to the screen porch. He found Lotus standing in the kitchen with her whole upper body in the refrigerator.

"How long have you known Livy?" Carl asked.

Lotus jumped, hitting her head on the shelf of the fridge. "Jesus! Five days," she said, closing the refrigerator door and rubbing her head.

"That's all?"

"Yeah. She found me drunk in the street with one side of my head in a sewer drain. She took me to your apartment and I hung out with her for a few days. Nice place, Carl, but who decorated it? It looks like a soap opera set or something. She told me about this place and I told her I'd love to see it sometime. Actually, I told her I'd like to see it right away because I've got some nasty people on my tail, so here I am."

"What did she say about me?" Carl asked.

"Nothing. She just told me some guy named Carl would be here. She didn't tell me you were a reckless driver and a compulsive liar, if that's what you mean."

"No, that's not what I meant. Listen, I have to go do the chores, so
try not to eat all the food while I'm gone."

"What chores?"

"Oh, I've got to feed the horse and collect the eggs and stuff like that." Carl sounded like he'd been doing those things since boyhood.

"Can I come with you?" Lotus said.

"I don't care," Carl said, but in a way he was glad she had asked. On the way out to the barn, he asked her her name.

"Lotus," she said.

"Lotus?"

"Yeah, that's my working name."

"Your working name?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with it?"

"Uh, nothing," Carl said.

"Didn't Livy tell you she was sending you a low-class whore for a friend?"

Carl looked uncomfortable. He didn't know what to say. "Well...no," was all he could manage. He felt like a jerk.

"What did she tell you?" Lotus asked.

"Nothing. She just said you were coming."

"She didn't warn you?"

"No. I guess she didn't think it was important."

"Do you?"

"I don't know. I guess it's not."

They were at the barn. Lotus went up to the stall where Livy's horse stood rubbing his neck against the wall. She stood in front of the half-door, terrified.

"You can touch him, he won't hurt you," Carl said.
Lotus slowly lifted one hand and scratched the horse's ear with a bright red fingernail. Then she touched his nose with the back of her hand.

"It's so soft. I've never felt anything so soft," she said.

The horse flapped its lips against her hand. She pulled it away fast.

"What's he doing?" she said.

"He thinks you have something for him to eat," Carl said.

"Or maybe he's kissing me," Lotus said.

Carl smiled. "Yeah, he's a nice guy." Carl reached his hand out and petted the horse between the eyes. "Why don't you collect the eggs?" Carl said.

"You mean go in there?" Lotus said, pointing to the coop.

"Yeah, just nudge them out of the way with your foot and look in the roost." Carl felt a surge of pride. He had been collecting eggs for over a week now. Lotus went in with a little scream.

"Oh Jesus, there's an egg in there--TWO! THREE!" She scooped them up hesitantly. "Shit! They're warm! Carl, they're warm!" She passed them quickly into Carl's hands.

"I know. It's hard to believe, isn't it?"

"How do they squeeze them out?" Lotus asked.

"I don't know. I never looked," Carl said.

"That's a big egg. It's gotta hurt like hell." Lotus laughed as Carl held up an egg for them to examine. He laughed too.

They brought the eggs into the house and Lotus insisted on making an omelette out of them. Carl was a little skeptical, but he didn't say anything. He sat out in the big room listening to Lotus humming to herself in the kitchen to the accompaniment of sizzling butter. He felt like going in there with her, but instead he just stayed where he was. It's kind of
nice to have her here after all, he thought. Lotus came through the door
carrying a platter, two plates and two forks. On the platter was the most
beautiful omelette Carl had ever seen. He gaped at it.

"What's the matter with you?" Lotus said. She looked slightly offended.

"Nothing— I—I," Carl stammered.

"Admit it. You thought all I knew how to do was screw, didn't you?"

"I never thought about it, that's all. It looks great."

"Well thanks," Lotus said, and placed the platter and dishes on the
floor.

"Okay, I was wrong," Carl said, "I'm just surprised."

"You didn't know all about this farm shit either, did you?—before you
came here?" Lotus said, "No more than I did."

"No, not really," Carl said, "But I do now."

"Oh, what a natural guy," Lotus said, "Livy didn't tell me you were so
down to earth."

"Okay, come on, what did she tell you?"

"Nothing. She just said you were here." Lotus lifted a forkful of
omelette to her mouth. "She did mention something about tomatoes, though."

After Lotus and Carl finished the omelette they reclined in the big
chairs, feeling satisfied and sleepy. Then they heard a faint knock on the
door. Carl jerked his head up.

"Is someone here?" he said.

The door opened and a thin figure slipped inside. It was a kid about
fifteen years old.

"Who are you?" Carl said. "Where did you come from?" He tried to speak
kindly, but there was something about the boy that made him a little nervous.
He had a catlike squint, and eyes that were set deeply into his angular face. They were suspicious eyes—eyes that seemed to expose Carl when the kid leveled them at him, daring him to look away.

“Livy called us,” the boy said, “She told us to remind you about the tomatoes. I’m Cleveland.”

“You’re from Cleveland?” Carl said, “Are you going to be staying here too?” He was confused.

“No, that’s my name—Cleveland. I live here—well, up the road. Livy’s my aunt,” Cleveland said.

He looked at Lotus.

“Oh, okay,” Carl said, “You’re Virginia’s son?” He looked at Lotus, too. She shrugged at both of them. The boy nodded.

“Yeah. You’re the guy that caught Mel’s pigs?” Cleveland said. His mouth twisted up and he rubbed his left eyebrow with one finger.

“I tried,” Carl said, “We finally trapped them in the woodshed.”

Cleveland turned towards Lotus. “Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m a friend of Livy’s, kid. My name is Lotus.”

“That’s original,” Cleveland said, “Is that real gold on your tooth?”

“Yeah, it’s real,” Lotus said.

“It’s very dramatic,” Cleveland said. He stood around with his hands plunged in his pockets for a few minutes, staring from one to the other, and then slipped out the door without saying goodbye.

“What a weird kid,” Lotus said.

“No kidding,” Carl said.

“Most kids don’t use words like ‘dramatic’ or ‘original,’ do they?”

“Not the kids I know. He came over here for a reason, didn’t he? What was it?” Carl said.
Then at the same time, Carl and Lotus looked at each other and said:

"To-ma-toes."

"We'll think about it in the morning," Lotus said, "Now I just want to get some sleep." Lotus stood up, stretched herself, took a crumpled pack of Lucky Strikes out of her jacket pocket, and flopped her body over a chair. She sat smoking, her eyes narrowed at Carl. Then her face relaxed. "Thank you," she said softly. Then, after stubbing her cigarette out on a dirty plate, she leaned back in the chair and fell soundly asleep.

How could she do that? Carl wondered. Even now, it took him at least forty-five minutes to fall asleep. He sat in the room a few minutes, watching her. He wondered what kind of life she led, where she lived. He knew they never would've met if this whole strange scene of Livy's hadn't taken place. He wondered about Livy as he sat in the darkened room listening to Lotus sleep. How did Livy know? he wondered. How did she always know the things she knew? He shrugged and tiptoed upstairs to his room. His last thought before he fell asleep was of Lotus saying thank you.
Livy walked along the sidewalk away from the bus station where she'd taken Lotus. She felt pleased with herself, happy that she had helped Lotus escape this place. It gave her the sense that she had done something constructive while she was waiting for some sort of clue about the important work she was supposed to do. Then she bumped into something soft. It was a man, tipped over to one side with his knees drawn up to his chest. An old hat covered his face, and his eyes were swallowed up by coat sleeves that were too long. Livy froze, staring at his form, trying to see his face. She heard a sound behind her and jumped. The sound came from a boarded-up doorway where another man sat gripping a short paper bag. His eyes were closed and he had a huge bruise on his cheek. His head rolled from one side to the other and a wheezing noise came out of his mouth. Livy hurried on, trying to push the sight of the two men out of her mind, and trying to forget the feel of her shoe hitting that body. She realized she was whimpering, then she realized she was running. She ran faster and faster, needing the safety of Carl's apartment.

She sat in Carl's kitchen thinking, a brown mug resting between her hands. She knew that sending Lotus to Lambert had been a good thing to do. She also knew that Carl would resent her for it at first, but would make friends with Lotus the same way she had. She thought about the grateful look on Lotus' face when she had offered her her home in the country. People like
Lotus need some alternative to this, she thought. They need some relief.

Livy's head began to hum. She had been waiting for the voice and it seemed about to speak now. She stood up and went to the window. The city lay all around her, lit up and moving, but filled with big gaps and shadows, loud noises, threatening shapes. She was happy to be inside Carl's apartment instead of out there.

I've been so lucky, she thought. I've had so much peace and so little fear. She saw a vision of the shadows of the city before her—the places where the streetlights didn't seep—the empty, dirty alleys filled with dented trash cans, the boarded-up buildings with shattered glass on the floor, the man with the bruised face, dirty papers skittering along streets with curbs.

There are so many people, she thought, so many people who live in the shadows. She finally understood why she had come there.
Lotus woke with the sun in her face and a fragment of a dream left shredded in her head. It was a city dream, a nightmare where Louie was chasing her screaming her name and she couldn't find her way through the maze of traffic and alleys and people without faces who moved like sleepwalkers. When she woke up, she had no idea where she was, but when her eyes focused again and some of the fear wore off, she saw the plates on the floor where she and Carl had eaten the omelette.

She got up and began to dance around the room. Looking out the window, she saw the garden, and there were the tomato plants, with ripe tomatoes suspended from them. She rushed out the screen door and ran around the house to the garden. She started pulling tomatoes off the prickly plants. She aimed a few rotten ones at Carl's window, and they hit the glass with a satisfying sound. Lotus began to sing "YOU SAY TOMATO, AND I SAY TOMAHTO, YOU SAY POTATO AND I SAY POTAHTOOOOO!"

"Shut up down there!" she heard Carl say from the window. "There are people around here who are trying to sleep!"

"Yeah, well read this!" Lotus said, holding up the middle fingers of both hands. "Come and help me. It's beautiful out here."

Carl came down to the garden in a few minutes. He leaned over the fence and lazily watched Lotus pick tomatoes until she sent him off to find something to put them all in. He came back from the barn with a few bushel
baskets, and they worked together harvesting every ripe tomato they could find. Lotus was a lot of fun to be with, Carl discovered, as more rotten tomatoes came zinging past his head, or she suddenly turned a cartwheel between the rows of new corn. He rolled up his pant legs and dug his toes deep into the dirt. The top of the soil was warm and crumbly, while underneath it was cool and moist. When they had filled the three bushels, they brought them inside. The tomatoes had an earthy, chemical smell to them, and after the last one had been brought in, Carl and Lotus just stood in the kitchen and stared.

“What do we DO with them?” Lotus whispered.

“I don't know, I thought you would know,” Carl said.

“Me?”

“Yeah, well, you seemed so at home with the omelette.”

“This is a little bit different, don't you think?”

“I guess so. I TOLD Livy I didn't know how to do this,” Carl muttered.

“All I know is, they go in jars. Livy showed me where they were.”

“We'll look it up,” Lotus said.

“Where?”

“In a cookbook. Livy must have one.”

“Oh,” Carl said. “I'll get the jars, and you find the cookbook.”

In the bookcase in the big room, Lotus found a book entitled *Preserving Garden Vegetables*. It had been pulled out from the rest of the books about an inch. She saw there was a whole chapter devoted to canning, and a whole page on tomatoes. She gave a little cry of triumph. Then they set down to work. Lotus walked around the kitchen shouting out directions, and Carl did his best to follow them. After a while they began to get the hang of it.

In the spaces where they waited for the mixture to cook down or the jars...
to sterilize, they spoke to each other. Lotus lit cigarettes and sat cross-legged on the table, and Carl leaned against the refrigerator with his arms folded. They talked about themselves and their lives, and what had happened to them along the way, what they would've changed, and what they liked to remember. Carl talked about his ex-wife and his kids, about his job, about his years in college. Lotus told tales of her life that would've made him wince if she hadn't told them in a way that made them both laugh.

After a while, they felt like they were separated by the space in the kitchen only. It was a good space, filled with gleaming objects and filtered sunshine and odors of cooking.

Carl had never felt this way with a person before. It may have been that he woke up hearing her singing that stupid song, but he thought it was probably that he felt so good about everything now, being here at Livy's. He realized he was grateful that Lotus was there, and he was relieved to notice there wasn't any tension between them. What he felt for Lotus wasn't anything physical, and he still thought she was rather ugly, but she seemed to possess herself completely, and she was just who she was. Livy is like that, too, he thought. What strange women they both are, so different from the other women he had known. His wife, for instance.

"What was she like?" Lotus asked.

"She was a very good person," Carl said, "You know, one of those people who apologizes for their foot being in the way if you step on it."

"Oh, one of those. I don't understand people like that," Lotus said.

"Why'd you get divorced?"

"We stopped communicating."

"What does that mean?" Lotus snorted.

"I didn't mean to hurt her, I just couldn't take it anymore."
“Yeah, yeah—don't worry about it, Carl, we all make mistakes.” Lotus looked down and shook her head slowly. “You still have good memories—of your good years, your kids, stuff like that?”

“Of course.”

“How old are you, Carl?”

“Forty-seven. I feel older.”

“You feel older! I've been hustling since I was fourteen. I'm only twenty-six, and I feel like I'm the oldest person alive.”

“How can you do it, Lotus? It must be awful,” Carl said softly.

“I don't know,” Lotus said. “I put myself in a trance when it's happening so I don't have to feel anything. And I don't feel anything.”

“Nothing?”

“No. I taught myself how to forget, and then I forgot.”

“You can do that?”

“Everyone does it. I'm just good at it. You can teach yourself to forget anything, and if it's something you want to forget badly enough, you just do it.”

“You really think you can teach yourself to forget things?”

“Do you remember what it was like to love your wife?”

Carl waited a moment before he answered. “No I guess I don't,” he said, “But that's different.”

“Yeah, but it's not that different,” Lotus said.

“Now that I think about it, I really can't remember. I can't really even remember her. Christ, that's a strange feeling.” Carl rubbed his face with his hands.

“But you remember when your kids were little and other important things, right?”
"Yes, I remember that."

"I remember the things I want to," Lotus said, "and I don't worry about the rest. If I did, I'd be dead."

"What's your real name?" Carl said.

"I can't tell you."

"Why?" Carl said.

"It's mine," Lotus said.

They stopped talking for a while and went back to the tomatoess. They stood side by side in the kitchen and worked together. They worked all day, laughing and talking and getting the job done, just as Livy had asked. When the last tomato had been sealed up in the jars, they realized they were exhausted. But it didn't matter, because there, on the counter, on the table, on the floor—sat rows of gleaming jars filled with bright red fruit. The glass twinkled, the brass-colored lids blinked, and the tomatoes inside looked tempting and festive. Carl and Lotus were incredibly proud.

"Where are the labels?" Lotus asked.

"Maybe they're in a drawer somewhere," Carl said. They found the labels and wrote on them "TOMATOES July 1, by Carl and Lotus."

"Can tomatoes be 'by' anyone?" Carl asked.

"These are," Lotus said.

That night they stayed up late talking, even though they were bone-tired from their day of canning. Finally, they went upstairs to bed. Lotus took the room in the back. "Good night Carl," he heard her say.

"Good night Lotus."

The next few days passed quickly. They cleaned the barn, they cooked all kinds of things in Livy's kitchen, they went on picnics. They kept their bedroom doors open and talked in the dark like children.
Ihen Carl and Lotus got a letter in the mail from Livy:

Dear Friends,

Tell China to drive into the city with my truck—I need it. Tell her to meet me at the apartment (Carl, give her directions) as soon as she can. I'll be waiting. How did the tomatoes turn out? I'll be home as soon as China gets here with the truck. Take care of each other.

With respect, Livy.

"Who's China?" Carl said.

"Probably her niece. I mean, if her brother's name is Cleveland—"

Lotus said.

"Yeah, that makes sense I guess," Carl said. "I'll go over there now. I don't really want to show this letter to that Virginia woman, though. I don't think it's going to make her day."

"Yeah, but if she's Livy's sister, I doubt she'll be surprised."
Once her mind was made up, Livy's only worry was if everyone would fit into the back of the truck.

She and China spent the whole afternoon driving around decaying streets, picking up the bums that had agreed to work on the farm and stay there for a while. Livy always called them her Bums, so we got into the habit of calling them that, too. The way Livy said it, you would've thought it was a wonderful, romantic thing to be. They weren't really wonderful or romantic, but they became a real part of our town anyway. China was old enough at the time not to be surprised by anything that Livy did, but this was something she was sort of unprepared for. It was the first time she began to question Livy's judgement, and wonder what these dirty, drunken men were going to do with themselves in our small town. But Livy seemed so excited about the whole idea that China didn't say anything. She just drove to the next pick-up point and tried to be as cheerful as she could.

Carl and Lotus were outside weeding the garden when Livy's truck drove in. Cleveland was hiding in the woods. Livy parked her truck in the driveway, and out of it peeped ten very strange faces. They looked terrified
and dirty. China was in the front seat, and she just looked overwhelmed. They were all men, and their eyes were bloodshot, their faces unshaven, and their clothes ragged and filthy. They smelled as bad as they looked. Everyone stared at each other.

“What’s everybody staring at?” Livy said, “Aren’t you even going to say hello?”

Lotus went up to Livy and gave her a hug. “Who are they?” she whispered.

“They are my new employees,” she said. Some of the men looked around and smiled sheepishly. “They will be living in the firehouse for now.”

Livy went into the house to see the tomatoes, and then took a quick peek in the barn to say hello to her horse. When she came back to the yard, the men had all climbed out of the truck and were standing around looking nervous. A few were even lying down on the grass with their eyes closed. When Livy approached, the standing ones prodded the ones on the grass to their feet.

“Ohay,” Livy said, “We’re going to take a short walk down to the village where you’ll be staying.” The Bums looked around skeptically, swaying a little. But then off Livy marched, down the driveway and to the left, on down the road to the firehouse.

The Bums shuffled in a single line with their heads bowed, one following in the footprints of the next. Sometimes they darted their eyes around in a panic, looking for an escape, but when their eyes fell back on the front of the line, there was Livy, leading the way like a camp counselor.

In a few minutes, they were in front of the IGA. A couple of people stood around in Bill’s Garage next door, and a few were emerging from the electric doors of the supermarket. Everyone stopped and stared. Livy looked like a middle-aged Snow White leading a motley assortment of dwarves, and
that's pretty much how she felt about it, too. In answer to their stares, Livy waved her hand and shouted hello to each person she saw, never stopping the motion of her body, and never giving them time to acknowledge that anything different was going on. Livy smiled to herself as they passed, checking briefly to see if all the Bums were still there. She noticed Cleveland was hanging around the back of the line. "Cleveland!" she shouted, "Stay there and make sure we don't lose anyone!"

Cleveland felt his face darken. He kicked a stone, and his whole stomach felt like it was full of stones. Yeah, I'll make sure we don't lose anyone, Livy, he thought to himself. I know how important these drunks and vagrants are to you. You're the only one who would care about them, even more than your own family. Certainly more than your screwed-up nephew. Maybe I should move into the firehouse with them, Aunty. Then maybe you'd notice me.

Cleveland was so angry he wanted to run and push the Bum in front of him, so the whole line of Bums would fall like dominoes. It isn't fair, he thought. It isn't fair and it isn't right.

Livy and the Bums marched on to the firehouse. The grass hadn't been mowed for a long time, and a few downstairs windows had been broken by bored teenagers, but otherwise the place looked fine. It was an oddly elegant two-story brick building with a wide garage area to the right and a regular doorway to the left. It was simple and rectangular, with big windows and a blacktop driveway. Livy pulled a key out of her pocket. It was rumored that Livy Sparks had a key to every public building in town, but that was an exaggeration. She used to organize dances for the Volunteer Fire Department
with some of the other women in town, and she had just kept the key.

Livy opened the door. Inside it was cool and empty. There was an office downstairs with nothing in it but a filing cabinet, an old swivel desk chair, and a few dead flies. Beyond the office was a big kitchen, and off of that there was a room that used to be the mess hall for the firemen. All the furniture was gone and all that remained were a few faded pin-ups left hanging and abandoned on the walls. There was a thin flight of stairs that led to the loft above, and of course there was a wide hole in the ceiling with a smooth pole in the middle of it running from the loft to the garage area. A door led from the garage to the mess hall.

Livy entered the office. The Bums stayed outside, dirty hands stuffed into grimy pockets.

"Come in, come in," Livy said. She made a motion of welcome with her hand. "This is all yours." The Bums looked at her with confusion. A few of them looked like they were going to cry. No one moved.

"We have a lot to do," Livy said. "Don't be afraid—this isn't a jail, it's a firehouse!" The Bums looked weak. "Follow me," Livy said.

They all went inside and looked around. They followed Livy upstairs. In the loft there were twelve cots, six on each side. The mattresses seemed to be in good shape.

"Everyone choose a bed," Livy said, "and check them for bugs.

"Cleveland, where are you?"

Cleveland moved up the stairs so that only the top of his head was visible. "Yeah?" he said.

"Go back and get Lotus and Carl, and tell them to stop at the IGA and buy soap and razors and shaving cream and to bring that big box of toothbrushes I bought at Doctor Browning's garage sale, and oh—on your way
back downstairs, see if you can find where they might have stored all the blankets for these beds and anything else that might have been left here," Livy said. Cleveland's head disappeared from the stairs, but they could hear him muttering to himself on the way back down, and he made a lot of noise rummaging through the closets downstairs. Bums started turning over their mattresses. A few of them were shaking so badly they had to sit down.

"Here's the plan," Livy said. "Sit down, you all look terrified. Now, I need help with my farm, and you all need a home, right? So I'm giving you all permanent jobs here. You'll have a place to stay, and meals, and you'll get paid according to how much work you do."

Livy looked at the Bums sitting there on their cots, eyeing her as if she was some strange, frightening ghost. She began to speak again, in a low voice. "There's a stream that runs through this town—it weaves all the way behind here, and around in back of my place. I have a whole coopful of chickens, and a horse, and sometimes a pig or two, and geese and a big garden. And anytime you feel like it, except when I'm sleeping, you come right up to the house and see me. Just walk right in the door just like everyone else does."

Cleveland had become very quiet downstairs. He could hear Livy talking and he went to the pole and looked up through the hole in the ceiling so he could hear her better. He was surprised at the tone of her voice. It was like the voice she used when she talked to her horse, and he realized she had never used that soothing way of speaking with him. He gripped the pole tightly, as the meaning of her words hit him from above. She has never said any of those things to me, he thought. How can she just invite them into her house like that, and make me her little errand boy?

"Everything is yours if you agree to live here and work for me and not
cause any trouble. I don't have anything valuable in my house to steal and I
don't have any booze, either, so you're on your own," Livy said. Cleveland's
head began to ache. Everything is theirs? he thought.

"People around here will think you don't belong in Lambert, just like
the people where you came from didn't think you belonged with them, but
they'll get over it, you'll see. You just have to say, 'I work for Livy
Sparks,' and that will mean you have every right to be here, too. Even if
they don't ever know that, you and I know it, and that's enough."

Cleveland leaned his face on the cold pole. His closed eyes seemed very
dark and swimmy behind their eyelids. He just stood there for a minute,
clinging to the pole, biting his lip. That weird humming sound was in his
ears again, the sound that frightened him and seemed to speak. I better go,
he thought, I better get going or Livy will yell at me. He lifted his face
from the pole, opened his eyes, and left the firehouse rubbing his head.
The humming turned into an ache as Cleveland walked back down to Livy's
house. His mind was full of dark thoughts that fought with each other for
the rest of the afternoon.
Ten pairs of tired eyes stared at Livy in the loft of the firehouse. The quality of her voice was like a charm on them that made their hearts beat a little slower. To the group of filthy, hopeless men who only hours before had been just more old piles of clothes and spittle for people to pass by without seeing, there began to glow a small bright spot of hope—a cautious, warm feeling that maybe things would be different now, maybe the gnawing would subside and the awful wounds would begin to heal up. Something eased inside them, giving them something clean and bright to hold on to.

"Now you tell me your names, and I'll write them down," Livy said, "and then you can get cleaned up and we'll go have a big dinner and then we'll see what we can do about fixing up this place."

"Oh," she added, "Are there any questions?"

A strange sound rang out. It was like the warble of a bird, but higher and more excited. Livy saw that it was coming from a pudgy little man on one of the end cots. He was waving his arm in the air. He made the sound again, still waving his arm. Livy was a little confused. "Does anyone know what he's saying?" she asked.

The Bum on the cot next to him was a big man with a round red face. Livy noticed that the pinky finger was missing from his left hand. His eyes held a look of deep intelligence, and Livy had a feeling this man would be
the leader of them all. His voice was a clear baritone.

"He does that when he's happy, ma'am," he said.

Livy smiled. "Does he ever speak the way you and I do?" she asked.

"No ma'am. He's a mute. But he does bird calls like you've never heard. He can imitate any bird you ever saw."

"Will you do a bird call?" Livy asked the mute. The man nodded vigorously and pointed to Livy over and over.

"What does that mean?" Livy asked the Bum with the missing finger.

"He means he wants to do it for you," he said.

The mute made a gesture of straightening his tie, which brought a few guffaws and knee slaps from some of the other Bums. Then everyone was quiet, and in the hush of the empty firehouse, with the afternoon sun making squares of dust-filtered light on the floor and the smell of unwashed, discarded men and summer wind, there came a sound that would stop your heart from beating. It was the song of the whippoorwill, and it floated up from the Bum's throat without seeming to come from anywhere, floating around the people in the room and into the shadows and under the cots and between the cracks in the walls. It was a sound that mingled all feelings of isolation and remorse and renewal together, signaling in everyone there all the longing and desire they had ever felt, and every lonely day they had ever spent.

He whistled it over and over, lingering on its melody, and then slowly let it die out. Livy wiped a few tears from her eyes and stood up. Her footsteps made the only sound in the room as she walked over to his cot and kneeled in front of him. She took his hands in hers and squeezed them tightly, looking into his eyes with a silent thanks. Then she stood up again.

"We have time for a few more I think," she said, "Whaddya wanna hear,
boys?"

From the middle of the room came a gruff voice. "Turkey." Then, before Livy could turn around, the room was filled with the sound of wild turkeys—strutting and fighting and gobbling away. "Seagull!" someone said, and they were soaring overhead. "Pigeon!" and the room was filled with muted cooing. Everyone laughed and clapped their hands. The mute took a bow.

"All right, that's enough," Livy said, "Pretty soon this place will be filled with bird crap." She pulled a small pad and pencil out of her pocket.

"Give me your names. What's his name, please?" Livy asked the Bum with the missing finger, pointing to the mute.

"We call him Snail," he said.

"And yours?"

"Ralph."

"Okay, let's go down the line, starting with you," Livy said, looking at a frail young man with red hair and squinty eyes. His thin face was mottled by acne scars, and his teeth were almost gray. He blushed.

"Bobby," he said.

Livy pointed. "Jack," the next one said.

"Hopper."

The rest of the Bums said their names as Livy pointed. When she had them all written down, she said, "Okay, I guess that does it. I'm just plain old Livy to you, just like everyone else calls me." They heard voices downstairs.

"Livy?" Carl called, "We brought all the stuff. Where do you want it?"

"Leave it right there, we'll be down in a minute," Livy said. She walked over to the pole and slid down it. Some of the Bums did the same, but most of them took the stairs.
"Everyone look around in these lockers and see what you can find," Livy said. The firehouse bustled with activity. All sorts of things had been left behind—mostly old fire equipment and clothes. They made a big pile in the middle of the garage. There were boots and shirts and old hose nozzles and a transistor radio and a few sauce pans and cans of stew and back issues of Reader's Digest and lightbulbs and coveralls and long underwear and rolls of toilet paper. There were eight pairs of coveralls in all—Lotus had found them stored in a bench in the mess hall. They were faded to a light orange, but they looked clean and comfortable. Whoever didn't get a pair could wear long underwear.

Livy sorted out the clothing and gathered it in her arms. "To the stream!" she shouted, and the Bums ambled out after her through the door. Lotus and Carl watched from the office as all eleven of them, Livy in the lead, marched down to the stream which ran behind the firehouse and wove through the whole town. From the firehouse, they could hear Livy shouting, "Don't be shy! Take everything off! I'm not going to look!~ Then, a few minutes later, they heard the sounds of splashing and men yelling—men's voices converted for a minute to the voices of children as the cold stream met their miserable bodies.

They were transformed. Pale flesh pitted and scarred by city grime and clod sidewalks leaped around in the water, rubbing armpits and crotches and in between toes, washing away the smog and the death. They emerged from the water bashfully and pulled on the long underwear and the coveralls. They ran their wrinkled fingers through their wet hair. They shook water from their rosy ears.

And then back they marched to the firehouse. Livy joined them from her hiding place in the bushes. In their matching coveralls they looked like a
Off the loft of the firehouse there was a dormitory-style bathroom with two sinks, three toilets and a shower. Carl went down to the basement to see if the water was still turned on. It wasn't, so four of the Bums went back to the stream to get water. The Bums shaved their faces and brushed their teeth with the toothbrushes Livy passed around. She had to remind them to share when she caught a few of them slipping the tubes of toothpaste into their pockets. Some of the Bums had combs, and they passed them around to whoever needed them. Downstairs, Livy helped Lotus and Carl sweep up a little.

"Is there any food in the house besides eggs?" Livy asked.

"Not much," Lotus said.

"Would you go back and see if you can find something?" Livy said, "I'll be along as soon as I can." Upstairs they could hear the Bums whooping and jabbering. They were clean, they were shaved, they had a place to sleep and probably dinner, and they had Livy Sparks for a boss.
When Lotus and Carl got back to Livy's, they found China in the kitchen filling two huge pots in front of the sink.

"Hi," she said. She was sixteen that summer, and something about her seemed to glow like a glass of water held up to the sun.

"I figured Livy would be bringing them back here. I'm making spaghetti, do you want to help?" She put the pots on the stove and looked up at them sideways. A few pieces of her hair brushed her eyelashes.

"What can we do?" Carl asked.

"Well, you could start making the sauce. Do you know where everything is? Get some canned tomatoes and some meat and a few herbs and maybe a little tomato paste--what's wrong?" China said.

Lotus was trying her best not to laugh. Her upper lip was completely covered by her lower one, and the skin under her nose was white. In an incredibly low voice Lotus drawled, "Do we HAVE any canned tomatoes?" Her eyes bulged.

"Lotus my dear," Carl said, taking her hand, "What in the world is a to-mah-to?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, Carl," Lotus said, tossing her hair.

"Uh, maybe you'd rather make the garlic bread?" China asked.

"OH NO!" they answered together, stumbling over each other to get to the
jars of tomatoes. China just shook her head and got them a skillet.

"Here's the meat," she said, taking it out of the refrigerator.

The three of them cooked up a great spaghetti dinner with enough food to feed an army of Bums, and by the time everyone arrived, they were serving it up on every available dish. The Bums squatted in the yard with their plates, being careful not to get sauce on their coveralls. Everyone ate and talked and ate some more. Kids sent by curious parents rode by on bikes. Cleveland smoked a cigarette behind the barn, digging the toe of one shoe into the grass. Snail did a few more bird calls.

At the center of it all was Livy, sitting back and watching, her eyes shining and her heart swelled up a little. The Bums looked up every now and then to make sure she was still there. Lotus watched Livy, too. She chose a seat nearby her and didn't speak. She felt a sudden urge to cry, and she took Livy's hand in the dusk and held it for a moment.

"You've done a good thing," Lotus said, "I hope it works."

Livy didn't turn to her, but she gave Lotus' hand a contented squeeze.
"It was right after you left, Carl," Livy was saying. "He got out of that cruiser like he was delivering a summons. And he marched right up here onto the porch and he said 'Livy Sparks, what is going on? Do you think you run the whole damn town?' And I just looked at him and said 'How have you been, Hal? Want a cup of coffee?' And he just stood there and shook his head and took off his trooper's hat and wiped the sweat off his face. He didn't know what to say."

"And he had no idea what to say to ME," Lotus said to Carl, "The fact that I was living here was too much for the poor guy."

Snail came around the corner of the house with a saddle over his arm. He plopped down on the steps and started working saddle soap into the old leather. Lotus noticed Snail trying to reach an old rag near the top of the steps. With the saddle across his knees he couldn't quite grab it. She stood up and handed it to him. Carl noticed that her movements were softer, and he liked her new short haircut, although she still had the white streak in front. She wore an old pair of pants and a halter top, and she had no makeup on. Instead of looking like an over-the-hill hooker, she looked like a skinny kid.

"Snail," Livy said, "We're talking about last summer, after you came here—do you remember Hal Joseph coming by in his big state trooper mobile?"
Snail nodded his head and whistled through smiling teeth.

"What did he say to you then, Liv?" Carl asked.

"I just asked what the problem was, and he said 'Oh, come on, Livy, what are you trying to prove by bringing these people into Lambert?' and I said 'They're working for me, Hal,' and he said, 'Well why are they living in the firehouse?' and I said 'Because no one else is' and he said 'Livy, I can't permit this' and I said 'Permit what?' and he said 'Livy, stop playing games. You know you're wrong this time, so why don't you cooperate?'

"God, I'm so glad I didn't grow up around here," Lotus said.

"So what did you tell him?" Carl asked.

"I said 'Hal, you tell me what I'm doing wrong and I'll see what I can do about making it right.' So he started saying things like 'You can't expect the people of this town to support homeless people from the city' and 'The firehouse is public property and no one gave you permission to use it,' and I just looked at him and didn't say anything and just waited until he had gone through the whole list of things and then I just said, 'You want to go for a walk with me, Hal?' and I took him to the north field where the Bums were baling hay with Mel, and he took a good look and then just kind of turned away, remember, Snail?

"And then I took him to the firehouse and I showed him how the Bums had fixed up the place and he didn't have much to say there, either.

"Then we came back and he said, 'Livy, I know you're trying to do a good thing, but some folks don't see it that way, and they want me to tell you to get these people out of here or there's going to be a problem. I'm just trying to do what's best for everyone.' So I said, 'Give me their names,' and he said, 'Whose names?' and I said, 'The names of the people who think there's going to be a problem' and he said 'Now Livy, you know I can't
do that' and I said 'Hal, if there's going to be a problem, I have to protect
myself and my employees against it, don't I?'

Carl laughed. "You're unbelievable. Did he give you the names?"

"Of course," Livy said with a smug smile.

"I can't believe he told you," Carl said.

"Well, he did, and then I made them all feel guilty."

Snail started to laugh. "Oh, that's right!" Lotus said.

"Why, what did you do?" Carl said.

"I just told Reverend Mills and Father Lewis about the situation, and
they gave rip-roaring sermons about our responsibility to each other and
God's flock and love thy neighbor and all that, and I was there for both
services and just stared at the troublemakers the whole time. I thought
Virginia would pass out," Livy said.

"Then she staked out the Bums so they were around to help carry people's
groceries out to their cars and shovel their walks after it snowed and stuff.
I'm surprised you never asked me to start a quilting bee, Livy," Lotus said.

"I never thought about that," Livy said.

"Yeah, but the best thing was the sign she put up in the IGA saying that
any odd jobs that needed to be done would be taken care of by the Bums free
of charge as a way of—what was it?—paying back the town for letting them
use the firehouse?" Lotus said.

"Yes," Livy said, "And to show their appreciation for being accepted as
members of the community."

"You certainly can bring people to their knees," Carl said. Snail just
bobbed his head and snorted.

"The people in this town are good people," Livy said, "You just have to
help them see it sometimes."
"All the good Bums are still here, Carl," Lotus said.

"Snail is a regular native here now," Livy said, "And remember Ralph, the one with the missing pluky? We call him Chief now, because the rest of the Bums found the firechief's helmet and gave it to him. And Bobby, the one with the red hair, seems happy, and Jack and Hopper built themselves a cabin in the woods."

"I wonder where the losers who took off are now?" Lotus said.

A dark look passed over Livy's face. Lotus was instantly sorry she had said that, especially with Carl there.

"What happened to the rest, Liv?" Carl asked.

"They just weren't happy here," she said, "It was my fault. I thought they could adjust."

"Fuck it, Livy," Lotus said, "You gave them a chance to do something with themselves and they blew it. It wasn't your fault, it's no one's fault. They were scum—there's a lot of scum out there."

"She's right, Livy," Carl said, "No one expected you to work miracles."

"I guess so," Livy said.

"What do you mean you guess so?" Lotus said, "You gave five men with no future except being drunk and hungry for the rest of their lives a real shot at becoming human again. You dragged me off a drain-hole and gave me everything you had. In a way you rescued Carl, too. You saved us, Livy. But there are some people you just can't save."

Snail waved to someone in the yard. A tall skinny form was coming towards the porch. He wore a droopy hat that was pulled almost completely over his face. A cigarette dangled from his lips. Cleveland sauntered up the steps.

"Hey Carl," he said, "You back for a visit?" He didn't look at the two
women. Lotus darted a sharp glance at Livy, hoping she wouldn't start anything with Cleveland.

"Hello Cleveland," Livy said.

Cleveland tilted his head way up so he could see beyond the rim of the hat. He took a drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke out slowly.

"Hi Aunty, hi Lotus," he said.

"Cleveland. What are you up to these days?" Carl asked.

"Nothing," Cleveland said, giving Livy a sidelong look.

"We were just talking about when the cops came for the Bums," Lotus said.

"You got an extra cigarette?"

"Yeah, sure, here," Cleveland said, taking out a pack of Camels. He fumbled with it for a minute and then handed her one. He tried to hand her a lighter, but he dropped it. He blushed, and when he swallowed, his Adam's apple stuck out from his neck like a walnut. Lotus retrieved the lighter and smiled. "Care for a smoke, Liv?" she said. Livy scowled.

"Are you looking for China?" Livy asked Cleveland.

"Yeah, Virginia wants her for dinner."

"Oh, so you're calling your mother by her first name now?" Livy said.

"No, Aunty, I call her mother to her face."

"China isn't here," Livy said, "She's taking a walk with Chief."

"Oh." Cleveland dropped his cigarette butt to the ground.

"Pick that up," Livy said.

"Sorry. See you later," Cleveland said, and he turned and left.

There was a long silence. Lotus watched Cleveland walk up the road.

His boots looked too big for his body, and his arms stuck out at an unnatural angle when he stuck them in his pockets.

"You two still don't get along very well, do you Livy?" Carl asked.
"He's a big waste of time," Livy said.

"You don't usually say things like that about people," Carl said.

"He's even worse than he used to be—he's impossible. He's always been bright, but he doesn't do anything but hang around acting bored."

"You just want him to be more like his sister the Ivory Girl," Lotus said.

"That's not fair, Lotus, and I don't want to hear you talk about China like that." For a moment she looked like she was going to thrust her hand through the screen from where she sat. Then she very carefully smiled at Lotus. She stood up. "Come on," she said, "Let's find something to make for dinner."

Lotus looked at Carl with confusion as she followed Livy into the house. Carl just shrugged and looked out at the yard. I know I'm back at Livy's, he thought, because there's never a dull moment.
Cleveland walked home, feeling like his whole head was burning. When he got to his house, his mother was standing in front of the kitchen sink washing her rings with jewelry polish.

"Did you find her?" Virginia asked.

"No, she was taking a walk," Cleveland said.

"Have you been smoking?"

"Yeah, I smoked with Lotus," Cleveland said, opening the refrigerator.

"Cleveland, you know how your father and I feel about that," Virginia said, "And you know how I feel about that woman Lotus."

"God, Mother, the woman has been here for almost a year—why don't you just leave her alone?"

"Don't use that tone of voice with me, Cleveland," Virginia said.

He didn't hear her. He was already on his way upstairs. In his room, Cleveland threw himself on his bed and covered his face with a pillow.

Under the pillow it was smooth and safe. Nothing could touch him except the cloth of the pillow case, and if he clamped it over his head tightly he couldn't hear, either. This is what it must be like to be dead, he thought. He pushed down on the pillow a little harder.

Virginia finished washing her rings and dried them all carefully. She sighed deeply to herself. If only Cleveland could find a girlfriend, she
thought, maybe that would help. Why does Cleveland always hang around Livy's, asking for trouble? And why would China rather spend time with Livy than with her? She was sick of asking herself questions like this—somehow they always made her feel how much Livy meant to other people. I like my life the way it is, she thought. I don't have to drag all kinds of outsiders into it to be satisfied. I don't have to impress other people to make myself important.

But Virginia felt a little shaken up by her thoughts. She was concerned about Cleveland, and China spent almost no time at home anymore. She needed something to do, to take her mind off all these worries. She looked around the kitchen; it was neat and tidy, not a bit of clutter in sight. It looked empty, almost unused. She decided to make a pie. The finest, most delicious pie she could make. She would present it to Harry at the end of the meal and he would smile and say, "Virginia, this is the most wonderful thing I've ever tasted," and she would smile back modestly and say, "It was nothing, Harry, just something I whipped up for you and the kids." She began to hum to herself as she assembled all the ingredients and started on her pie.

"You're late, China," Virginia said as China came in the door.
"I'm sorry, Mom, I didn't mean to be."
"What's for dinner, Ginny?" Harry said from the head of the table.
"Pot roast," Virginia said.
"Cleveland, did you finish your paper?" Virginia asked her son.
"Yeah. Pass the peas, China."
"PLEASE pass the peas, Cleveland," Harry said. "What's your paper about?"
"Nothing important," Cleveland said.
"What do you mean nothing important?" Virginia said, "Why would the teacher assign something that wasn't important?"

"Because that's the way it works. You don't learn anything important in school," Cleveland said.

"What do you mean?" Virginia said.

"Mother, why do you ask me that?" Cleveland said, "You know whatever answer I give you will immediately disagree with and I'll spend the entire time defending something you won't even listen to and then you'll ask me why I have such an attitude problem and China will tell you to leave me alone, and Dad will say nothing and you'll get flustered and change the subject so that whatever we originally began arguing about will become something as equally unimportant as everything else we ever talk about." Cleveland's face was bright red and his hands were shaking. He swallowed a few times and ran a finger across his eyebrows. He looked briefly at China, who was staring at him with her mouth open, and then he looked away. God my head hurts, he thought. Why won't this humming go away?

The room was unbearably silent. Then China said softly to her mother, "I went for a walk today with Chief."

Virginia's whole body felt stiff, and her breathing had quickened. Her skin prickled with anger towards Cleveland, as if his words were bees that had stung her again and again. She blinked several times, staring straight ahead, and then in a venomous voice she said, "I know. I can't say I'm happy about it either."

"Why? He's great," China said. "He's got a lot of interesting things to say—he's had an interesting life."

Virginia snorted. "I bet he has. I don't want you to talk to that woman either, China."
“Who? Lotus?”

“Yes. I just don’t want you talking to her or hanging around her.”

“What’s the big deal?” Cleveland said, “We can’t talk to her because she used to be a whore?”

“Don’t use that word in this house, young man,” Virginia said.

“Who cares—”

“I care,” Virginia said, “And I don’t want you kids hanging around her.”

“Oh, God forbid we should be exposed to someone from the outside world,” Cleveland said, leaning back in his chair.

“That’s enough, Cleveland,” Harry said without looking up from his food.

“She’s a very nice woman, Mom,” China said. She looked at her brother and shook her head. Her eyes said ’Don’t say any more.’

“I’m sure that in her heart she is a good person, but I still don’t want you over there all the time,” Virginia said.

“Oh Christ,” Cleveland said, pushing himself away from the table.

“What did you say, Cleveland?” Virginia said.

“I think it was ’Oh Christ’ wasn’t it China?”

“Please don’t drag me into this, Cleveland,” China begged.

“Why not, you know she’s a hypocrite as well as I do.”

“Cleveland!” Harry barked, “Apologize to your mother!”

“I’m sorry, Dad, but that would mean I would have to lie, and that would be breaking a Commandment, and that would be a sin and I might go to hell for it, and I don’t want to risk that,” Cleveland said evenly. They all stared at him. Even China was surprised at the tone of his voice, which sounded like the low rasping hiss of a snake.

“Leave this table,” Harry said.

Cleveland didn’t move.
Cleveland stood up. "Sorry I have to miss dessert. It's been a wonderful meal as always, Virginia," Cleveland said. He left the table and went outside.

China followed him. "Why do you do that?" She said, hugging her arms to her chest in the night air.

"Do what?" Cleveland lit a cigarette. The flash of the lighter in the dark illuminated the strain on his face for a moment.

"Why do you have to upset them all the time just because you feel bad yourself? Even if you can't stand them, can they help being who they are? Don't you think you owe them a little bit of respect?"

"I don't owe them a thing."

"Well, then do it for me. God, I feel awful inside when you pull stuff like that."

"Please, China, don't overreact."

"You're telling ME not to overreact? What do you mean? Someone asks you a simple question and you have to answer in a way that makes everyone else look stupid. That's a really cheap way to treat people."

"I don't talk to you that way, so what do you care?"

"I care about Mom and Dad. I care about Livy. I think you owe me a little bit more, because you know how much they mean to me."

"I owe you everything. You're the only person I can talk to. But I can't change who I am, China, so don't ask me to."

"I'm not asking you to change, I'm just asking you to give in a little sometimes. Make up something if you can't hold yourself back—just tell people what they want to hear sometimes—that can't hurt you."

"You don't understand, China. There's this thing in me that won't let
me say things just because they're what other people want to hear. It's hard
to describe, but sometimes I think I don't have any control over the things
I say, like there's someone else in me that is doing the talking. It's like
a voice inside my mind that pushes me, and half the time I really regret what
comes out of my mouth. But if I give in and say what people want to hear,
I'm going to be just as full of shit as everyone else is."

"Including me."

"You're different, China."

"No, I'm not, Cleveland. Everyone does it, it's a part of life."

Cleveland laughed. It sounded like a choke.

"Where's your favorite place to go, China?"

"What? My favorite place? You mean around here, or anywhere?"

"Anywhere."

"Livy's."

"Why?"

"Because I can just be myself there," China said.

"I'll never find a place like that," Cleveland said, "And it's funny
that Livy's is your place, because I feel more lost there than anywhere
else."

"Cleveland, how do you know you'll never find a place like that? There
are other towns, other countries. I can't do anything about Livy and
you--it's both of your faults."

"Oh well, I guess I better accept the fact that Livy hates me as much as
she loves you. Fair is fair, I guess."

China sighed, and for a minute she sounded like Virginia. "She doesn't
hate you...she's just...disappointed."

Cleveland chuckled in the dark and then started to cough.
"I don't know what to say to you," China said. "Whatever I say gets twisted around in your head until it means whatever you want it to mean."

She went back inside. The pie lay on the kitchen table, uncovered. There was one piece missing, and Harry had left crumbs all over the tablecloth. China wrapped up the pie and put it in the refrigerator. She swept the crumbs into the palm of one hand and threw them away. Then she went up to her room.
Lotus was in the barn grooming the horse when Cleveland came in. He handed her a hoof pick.

"Only a few more days of school left, eh Cleve?" Lotus said to him.

"Yeah. Thank God I'm getting the hell out of there," he said.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked. She was bent forward, with the horse's left rear leg resting on her knee.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with myself. I'm certainly not staying around here. I've gotten scholarship offers, but I have no desire to go to college."

"Why not? I hear you're the brain of the village," Lotus said.

"It's all the same shit, man," Cleveland said.

"Are you gonna work?"

"I don't know, maybe."

"Hey, what's with your mother? She looks like she's going to throw up every time she sees me."

"She lives in a world of untruths," Cleveland said.

"What the hell does that mean?" Lotus said. She put down the horse's leg and stared at Cleveland. He looked away.

"She bases her whole life around other people's ideas."

"Oh. And your father?"
"My father is so henpecked it's like he's been trained to nod his head at whatever my mother says and raise his voice when she gives him the signal."

"Yeah, well, people are like that everywhere," Lotus said.

"Not like these two," Cleveland said.

"It sounds to me like you need someone to blame. You don't have it so bad, Cleveland," Lotus said.

Cleveland looked at her and blushed. His head began to ache. She's right, Cleveland thought. The idea scared him. But they don't understand what it's like for me, he thought. They don't know about this voice in my head and this darkness that takes me over so that I can't think or feel anything.

"You think you're different from everyone else, right? You think no one will ever understand," Lotus said quietly.

Cleveland's head ached more. It was true, what she said, but there was more. How could he explain to her about that feeling of slipping away into his own mind, being sucked in and swallowed up by it?

Lotus had folded her arms on top of the horse's back. If Cleveland hadn't looked so mixed up and troubled, she would've been amused by the whole thing. What did the kid think, he was the only person who ever felt like that? What made him think he was so different from everyone else?

"Look, Cleveland," Lotus said. "You make Livy really pissed off all the time. It's like you say things just to make her angry, and you hang around and get under her skin like it's something fun to do. She can't stand to see you throw your life away."

Cleveland looked at her as though he'd been wounded.

"You can be a real drag to be around. Why don't you shape up? You're a
smart kid, so figure it out."

"Figure what out?" Cleveland said. He had both hands over his face and was gripping on to it fiercely.

"That you're not that different and you don't feel things more deeply than anyone else." Lotus said slowly.

"What?" His voice was high and full of pain.

"Nothing. You're young, that's all. You have a lot to learn."

Cleveland tore his hands from his face and threw them up in the air. "I give up," he said, "I completely give up. Aunty Livy has taught absolutely everyone how to think. What the hell do you know about anything? You're as bad as the rest of them—pretending that we're one big happy family and anyone can understand anyone else if they try, and any whore off the street can become a fine upstanding citizen and work on a farm!" Cleveland leaned his head on one wall of the barn. His eyes were squeezed together like tight red knots.

"You're fucked-up, Cleveland," Lotus said. She left the barn.

"Yeah, I know," Cleveland said to himself. His voice cracked when he said it.

"What's the matter, Lotus?" Livy said as Lotus stomped up the steps of the porch.

"Oh," Livy said, "I'm sorry about him."

"Well you should be, Livy. He needs help. Why don't you help him, for God's sake?"

"He won't take it from me," Livy said.

Lotus groaned and kicked the bottom of the screen door. "How the hell
do you know that if you don't even try?" she said. "Where's Snail?"

"In the house," Livy said angrily. Lotus went inside. Snail and China were playing Monopoly.


"Something bad is going to happen," Lotus said.

"What do you mean?" China said.

"I don't know. Something's going on, though. Your brother scares me. He's got this real warped attitude about things. Why don't you talk to him?"

"He really likes you, Lotus," China said.

"Yeah, but I've said too much now. I've let him down or something. But for Christ's sake, I don't need to go through puberty with him, or whatever it is that's bugging him." She stomped upstairs.

"I'll go find him," China said with a sigh. Snail watched her leave, and then began putting the paper money back into the box.

China looked everywhere for him, but Cleveland was gone. He didn't come back until late that night. Finally China had just given up, and decided to wait for him on the back steps of their house. She thought that eventually he would come home, and he did. She saw him coming through the yard with his head bent forward and his feet moving painfully through the grass.

"Hey Grover," she said softly.

"Hi," he said, and sat down next to her.

"What's happened to you, Cleveland?" she said.

"You know, I was in the IGA the other day, China, and I saw something really sad—"

"What's wrong with you?

"You know where the gumball machines are by the doors? Well, they got
in a new one, but it's not really a gumball machine, it's one of those kind
that gives you a prize when you put the quarter in—"

"Cleveland—"

"There was this digital watch in the display area—this digital watch
that makes itself into a robot. There were a few other toys crammed in
behind the glass, too, but you could tell the distributor really only wanted
you to see the watch, because there was a little sign next to it explaining
how it turned into a robot and everything—"

"Cleveland, come on, talk sense to me."

"It made me feel so bad, you know, because I knew you'd never get the
robot watch no matter how many quarters you put into it. I wanted to get
fifty quarters and open every one of those plastic bubbles to see if there
was a robot watch in any of them. But I knew there wasn't any watch—I knew
they were just trying to cheat the kids."

"What are you trying to say, Cleveland?"

"I kept picturing the look on some kid's face, thinking there might
really be a robot watch in there—still believing there was a chance to get
one instead of being ripped off by getting some worthless plastic shit toy."

"I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"And then maybe the kid would just sit down in front of the electric
doors and cry, and if someone said 'Cleveland, what's wrong with you?' he'd
say 'Nothing's the matter with me, what's wrong with you?' and they'd give
him funny looks and go get the manager and the manager would politely ask him
to leave."

"Did you do that?" China asked.

"Yes."

"You just sat there and cried in the IGA?"
"Yeah, it was awful. But the worst part was that Livy came in and pulled the manager aside and said something to him and he said 'Thanks, Livy' and walked away. Livy just stood there staring at me like I was the most worthless thing she had ever seen. Then she just stepped over me and went in the store. Just like that, like she couldn't bother even helping me up or offering me something to blow my nose with. It was like she pretended she didn't even see me. And I hung out in the parking lot and watched her leave, and do you know what she was buying? Stuff for the Bums—tobacco and hot dogs and coffee and even a package of underwear!"

"How do you know?" China said.

"Because Hopper walked up to meet her and accidentally dropped one of the bags. Oh, and you should've seen her—it was almost laughable the way she kept telling Hopper it was okay that he dropped the bag, it was only an accident. If it had been me who dropped it—"

"Cleveland, do you want to go talk to someone?" China said softly.

"I'm talking to you."

"But maybe you need to talk to someone who doesn't know you."

"Why? So I can be more like Livy Sparks?"

"I don't know—no, Cleveland, that's not what I meant."

"I guess in some ways that's what I've always wanted. But that big dream approach of hers really gets to me. She brings these Bums to the farm and thinks that once they start breathing the good country air everything will work out great. She sees homeless drunks lying on a street and has a vision of the new Future Farmworkers of America."

"Half of them are still here."

"Yeah. Snail's here because this is the first place he was ever accepted, and Chief's here because he's got some weird sort of prestige he's
never had before, and Jack and Hopper basically just sponge off of Livy, and Bobby's such a loser he probably doesn't even know what happened to him. The other ones only stayed as long as they had to.

"So what's wrong with that? Why do you hold all that against Livy?"

"China, the whole time we were growing up, Livy always made it seem like no matter what happened, there was always a solution—that you could do anything you wanted to if you tried. But that's not true for me.

"It's the truth to her, Cleveland."

"So what? What is she? Some kind of prophet?"

"No, that's just the way she thinks."

"Why doesn't she love me, China? What do I have to do?" he sounded close to tears.

"She does love you, Cleveland."

"I'm a failure. I'm a big fucking failure and I ruin her fairy tale. That's it, isn't it?"

"I don't know."

"And I'm something that she can't find any use for, and it really gets to her. She can't stand the fact that there's someone in the world she can't rescue."

"Cleveland, stop."

"Why? It's true, isn't it?"

"Why don't you talk to her about it?"

"Why should I? How do you think I feel?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Go away, I guess. I don't know."

"Oh, Cleveland," China said, and she put her arm around her brother's shoulders and they sat there together, looking out on the yard.
“Let's go inside, Grover, I’m exhausted,” China said.
There had been rain for three straight days. It poured possessively off every surface, sinking into everything and soaking it through, weighing it down. Livy sat on the porch even though it was chilly and damp. She saw Cleveland coming up the driveway with his hat pulled over his eyes. She hit her thigh with a balled-up hand.

Cleveland came up to the porch. "Lotus around?" he said.

"Why?"

"I want to talk to her."

"Cleveland, why'd you do it?"

"Do what, Aunty?"

"Make a scene like that in the IGA. It's all over town."

"I felt like it. Why do you care, did I embarrass you?" Drops of rain fell on Cleveland's shoulders and rolled off his hat. He brushed a few damp strands of hair out of his eyes.

"No, I just wondered. It seems like a strange thing to do," Livy said.

"I guess I embarrassed you, or you would've helped me up," Cleveland said.

"I'm not angry with you if that's what you mean."

"I just get the feeling that I ruin everything, Aunty."

Livy didn't say anything. She just sat there in her chair with a strange frown on her face. Beads of rain clung to and rolled off the screen.
of the porch around her, framing her into the gray, wet day, and for the first time Cleveland noticed she looked old. He took a step toward her on the porch.

"Aunty, do you remember that time when I was little and you told me about hearing a voice in your head?" he said softly.

Livy frowned more deeply. "I don't remember ever telling you that," she said.

"You don't?" Cleveland said.

"No."

"Well, do you still hear it?"

"I hear a lot of things," Livy said. She looked down.

Cleveland realized he was choking back tears. "Aunty, I know you told me about it, I know you did. You said it was like a humming noise, and there was a message sometimes, and--"

"Cleveland, I'm sorry I just don't remember," Livy said. Her voice was thick and final.

Cleveland stood there for a few more minutes, wiping his hand across his eyes frantically, trying to swat the tears away before Livy looked up again. But she didn't look up. He took a deep breath and swallowed. His throat was so swollen he felt like choking. He put something into Livy's hands. It was a white envelope with one word on it: China.

"I'm going away, Livy."

"Where?"

Cleveland laughed suddenly. "Never mind. I want you to give this to China after I'm gone. Will you do that?"

Livy nodded. "Where are you going?" she repeated.

Cleveland looked at her and shook his head. "I don't think you've been
there, Livy. And there's nothing you can do to stop me. So don't feel bad about it, okay?” He sounded more sure of himself than he ever had before.

Then he turned around and clumped down the steps.

“Good luck, Cleveland,” Livy said. Tears crowded her eyes so that she could hardly see him in the gray drizzle of the day. He lifted the collar of his jacket, and disappeared around the corner of the house.

He found Lotus in the barn, absently throwing strands of hay into the horse's stall. Her body leaned into the wooden half-door, and one foot was crossed over the other. She looked bored.

“Hi Lotus,” Cleveland said. He leaned on the door next to her.

“Hi. Are you still mad at me?” Lotus said.

“No, I came to apologize. And to tell you I'm leaving,” Cleveland said.

“Leaving? Where are you headed?”

“Just away.”

“Oh. You know, I might go with you. I'm getting kind of tired of the country scene. I mean, I love Livy and the farm and everything, but it's like a... a...”

“Like a dream? Cleveland said.

“Yeah, that's a good word,” Lotus said.

“You can't come with me, Lotus.”

“I know, I was only kidding, Cleveland.” Lotus paused. “Will I ever see you again?” she asked him.

“I don't know. I always liked you, you know—you were sort of a relief from everyone else.”

“I'm glad,” Lotus said.

Cleveland hung around, as if there was more that he wanted to say.
"What's up?" Lotus said. Her eyes smiled at him in a question.

"Well, there's one more thing," Cleveland said. He couldn't look at her.

"What, Cleveland?"

"Will you do it with me?" Cleveland said. His Adam's apple bobbed.

Lotus didn't answer right away. Then she said, "Would you have asked me if you didn't know about my past?"

"Yeah," Cleveland said.

"Well listen, Cleve," Lotus said, "You're a good person and I like you, too, but the answer is no. If I've learned anything the last few months it's that you've got to remember everything that's happened to you. And I want you to remember me as the person who admired you, because I do, and not the person who let you sleep with her for the first time."

"I wouldn't do that," he said.

"The answer is still no, kid," Lotus said, and smiled.

"Then why do you admire me?" Cleveland said.

"Because you were brave enough to ask," Lotus said. "That's a good thing."

Cleveland laughed, and for a moment, standing there with Lotus in the barn, Cleveland thought he might be able to understand what that good thing was that made people feel and grow and go on living. But it was just a flash—too small and too hard to see up close—and he didn't trust it enough to change his mind about leaving. Lotus kissed him gently. He touched her gold tooth and that made her laugh. Then he left the barn.

Cleveland hid in the woods until the middle of the night. He knew China
and Virginia would be worried, but he couldn't help that. They would probably just think he had wandered off to be alone. The rope in his hands felt warm and strong. He whimpered a little. The rope was his father's. He had hidden it in the woods one day, and he had always tried to forget it was there, but he never could. It lay inside his mind, coiled and ready. He pulled himself together and walked over to Livy's front yard. Nothing moved, there was no wind. The rain had stopped, and the whole world seemed to drip, trying to shake the water from itself. He tossed one end of the rope over a big branch of the oak tree. It was a big tree, so there was no fear of failing. Cleveland made a noose. He walked silently to the barn and got a crate to stand on. He touched the horse's head in the dark barn. He looked over at the spot where Lotus had kissed him.

"Bye Lotus," he said.

A deep sob tried to shake his body, but he fought it back. He went across the yard to the oak tree. "Bye China, bye Mother, bye Dad." He placed the crate under the rope. He whimpered again. "I'm sorry everybody," he said. "Bye Livy."

He stood on the crate. He was breathing so hard his whole body heaved. He took the rope in his hands and put it over his head. His face seemed to crack in half with emotion. The darkness beckoned him, and he saw it—behind his eyes, waiting there. He wasn't afraid any more. He let go, kicking the crate aside. It made a cracking sound as his foot met it. There was a burning in his throat and a blinding light. His tongue felt huge. The air stopped. It just stopped, he thought. No more air, no more air. His eyes hurt for a minute. His ears thumped. Then nothing, only dark.
China moaned, loud and long and deep. A constant sing-song in her head, ripped apart every now and then by an internal screaming why why why why why? Oh, God, Cleveland, you didn’t have to do it, you didn’t, you didn’t. How long had you been thinking about this? I’ll lose my own mind—I’ll die here, in my room, for the rest of my life. Why didn’t you say goodbye? Why didn’t you give me the note yourself?

Dear China—

There was no other place for me. You are the only thing I will really miss. I wish I could be like you and Livy, with all your hopes and dreams and love for people. All I see when I look around are tragic things, and I seem to be the biggest tragedy of all. It brings me nothing but pain and frustration. The pain is in my head—it’s like some dark force that feels like it’s bending my brain in half. When I was little, Livy told me once that she used to hear a voice in her head all the time, telling her what to do. Maybe that’s what’s happened to me, I don’t know.

I love you. Do everything I couldn’t do.

Cleveland.

Livy wrote to herself:

Dear Olivia—

The oak tree sags with the weight of guilt. There is a pain behind your eyes that doesn’t go away. The birds sing now that the rain is over. Oh, Cleveland, where did you go? There must be a working-through. There must be time. Olivia, why didn’t you see this coming? Where were your eyes, your vision?
Will you ever get that picture out of your mind, that horrible picture of that thin body with its neck bent like a scarecrow? Will you ever forget the coldness of his skin, the blindness of his eyes, the heaviness of his shoes?

Oh, you have lost, Livy Sparks. You have lost this time. Why don't the damn birds stop singing? If they dare to build nests in that tree I'll rip them out with my own hands.
Livy was the one who found him. She got up in the morning and went out on the porch with her tea, glad that the rain was starting to be soaked up by the earth. Then she saw a shape in the yard that didn't belong there. It swung from the oak tree, a long thin shape that didn't belong in her yard. She ran out to the tree and saw it was Cleveland's body. She threw herself against the trunk and stared at it, until she had to shut her eyes. When she opened them again, it still hung there, dragged by gravity. She had no choice but to put her arms around it, lift it up, pull its head out of the noose, and let it fall into her arms. She stood there, holding Cleveland's body, her own body pulsed with deep sobs that made no sound at all. She laid him on the ground and stumbled back into the house.

No one could figure out why he had chosen that tree. Most of us thought it was the worst thing he could have done, and others felt it was better that he was found by Livy— who else could have made some sense out of it?

It would be wrong to say that people were surprised. Somehow, within all of us, we knew that Cleveland was never a part of Lambert. Still, it was a terrible, tragic thing. There seemed to be a strain on everyone, a strain that showed. It made people need to gather together, and the place we found ourselves moving towards was Livy's.
Livy was supposed to relieve us all of the burden, she was supposed to know what to say to make it all understandable. She was supposed to heal us. But she was tired, and she refused to speak. She suffered, more than any of us. People avoided looking at the tree, tried not to imagine a picture to match the story, fighting the urge to conjure up his body hanging there.

Livy was sitting inside the screen porch when she saw Virginia coming up the road. Virginia was holding a big stick against her chest. China moved along behind her. To Livy, staring through the gray mesh of the screen, they looked like part of a dream, fuzzy and altered and farther away than they really were. There was something different about Virginia—something in the determined way she held herself up, clinging to the stick. China was hunched over, lifting her hand to her face every now and then as if brushing away a fly.

They came closer. They stopped at the oak tree, which reached its branches out over the road towards them. They stood there for a moment and then took a step back. Suddenly, Virginia raised the stick and hit the tree with it as hard as she could. But it wasn't the sound of a stick hitting a tree trunk at all—it was a solid, thick sound followed by a shiver of leaves. Livy looked closer. Virginia was holding an axe.

Livy moved off the porch and swung open the screen door. Now, instead of the filtered vision through the mesh of the screen, she saw a clear picture of her sister and China. They no longer looked far away, but bigger than they really were. Livy was amazed by her sister's strength and accuracy. The axe in Virginia's hands seemed to have a secret power—each strike sank a deadly distance, and small wedges of dark-colored wood fell to the ground in a pile.
Chief and Bobby were cutting brush in the woods, and they ambled out to see what was going on. Livy moved in from the opposite direction. Chief removed his hat as they got nearer. They formed a semi-circle around China and Virginia as they watched. Virginia glowed with an inner energy that brought a flush to her skin. It was white and cruel. Every ounce of her lunged and swung and hurled itself at the oak tree. It didn't seem like she would ever stop.

But she began to get tired after a while. Bright tears ran down her face as she realized that she had to stop, that she wouldn't be able to finish the thing. With a half-cry her arms dropped away, her lovely hands all bloody, her nails broken off. She let go of the axe with one hand, and covered her face with her arm.

She's so strong, Livy thought, she's trying to chop down the tree by herself. Livy stepped forward and took the axe. China led her mother away from the tree. With each of Livy's chops, she let a distinct word fall from her lips. Each exhalation of breath contained part of a message:

"Chief . . . go . . . get . . . as . . . many . . . people . . . as . . . you . . . can . . . find and . . . bring . . . whatever . . . you . . . can . . . to . . . make . . . this . . . thing . . . fall."

Chief and Bobby ran off to find the others. When they came back, they had all kinds of things with them—saws and hatchets and even a sharp knife. Lotus came running, too, and she let out a little scream when she realized what was happening. Snail ran to the firehouse and rang the siren over and over again. People started coming and he pointed to Livy's with one finger and kept ringing the siren with his other hand. Livy continued to chop. Bobby and Chief got the crosscut saw from the woods and sawed on the side of the tree opposite Livy. Lotus took over the axe, then China did.
The tree finally fell. Like a great swarm of bees, people fell on the
ragged trunk and dug away at it, ripping the stump from the ground. Others
attacked the fallen tree, cutting pieces free and pulling them away into the
yard, chopping and chopping through sobs, tearing away bark, making piles of
shredded wood. Children broke branches over their knees and broke them again
into sticks, into twigs, until they were so small they couldn't be broken any
more. The only one who spoke was Chief; he kept yelling "Stay clear! Don't
get in each other's way! Don't get hurt!"

Then there was nothing left to chop up. All over the lawn lay pieces of
the tree, now just piles of wood smaller than kindling. With their feet,
they pushed the piles together into one big pile. They poured gas on it, lit
it, and watched it burn. They stood together in a group, but still no one
spoke. The people who had come late understood what had happened. Harry had
arrived, and held Virginia in his arms, his eyes fixed on the blaze, his jaw
working a prayer. China cried openly with Lotus, rocking back and forth.
Snail made sure the kids stayed far enough from the fire and Chief picked up
all the sharp objects which still lay around. Bobby went into the woods to
weep by himself, and Livy went to the other side of the yard and climbed into
the maple tree there. She sat in a V made by two branches and waited for the
fire to burn down.

When there was nothing left but smoldering gray ashes, Livy spoke from
her high place in the other tree.

"It's over, everybody, it's over now." Her voice was like water.
Someone began to clap and then everyone was applauding—cheering, hugging one
another, wiping dirt from each other's faces, rubbing the sweat from each
other's arms, squeezing the children, dabbing tears, smiling in the dusk.
The crowd parted to let something through. It was Jack, Hopper, Chief and
Mel. They held the old canvas circle used by the firemen to rescue people from high floors of buildings. Everyone grabbed part of the rim and held it below the tree where Livy sat. "Jump, Liv," Virginia said. And Livy jumped right in the middle of it, and didn't even hit the ground.
Bugs will eat your potatoes, vandals will run over your flower bed, your back will slip a disc, your kids will become strangers, and eventually the world will explode all together.

Who had said that? Livy thought. It must have been Cleveland. That sounded like something he would say.

Cleveland was gone. The oak tree was gone. Most of the Bums were gone. Lotus would be gone soon. And something else was gone, too. A certain feeling she had always had about life. She had always been so careful about doing the good thing, but now so much had been taken away.

--You're no saint, Livy Sparks.

Cleveland's voice again? Or Virginia's? Or maybe her own? She had this weariness now. She had never been tired like this before.

I never lost like this before, she thought.

She has brown hair, streaked with gray. Her eyes are green, and they are set in a strong face. It's a broad face, almost square, with big cheekbones and a long nose. Her teeth are straight and strong. It is a simple face. Simple and powerful and controlled.

Her body is powerful. Wide shoulders and big arms and a back as strong as a mule's. When she walks, it is with a purpose. When she moves, it is
with a sense of who she is. But she has never felt tired like this before.

She sat down in the grass.

I'll start from the beginning and think it all through, she thought.
I'll go as far back as I can and I'll find the flaw and I'll do my best to
fix it in my mind. Maybe if I do that I'll be able to understand.

The End