

The queen, for her part, is the unifying force of the community; if she is removed from the hive, the workers very quickly sense her absence. After a few hours, or even less, they show unmistakable signs of queenlessness.

—Man and Insects



Chapter One

At night I would lie in bed and watch the show, how bees squeezed through the cracks of my bedroom wall and flew circles around the room, making that propeller sound, a high-pitched zzzzzz that hummed along my skin. I watched their wings shining like bits of chrome in the dark and felt the longing build in my chest. The way those bees flew, not even looking for a flower, just flying for the feel of the wind, split my heart down its seam.

During the day I heard them tunneling through the walls of my bedroom, sounding like a radio tuned to static in the next room, and I imagined them in there turning the walls into honeycombs, with honey seeping out for me to taste.

The bees came the summer of 1964, the summer I turned fourteen and my life went spinning off into a whole new orbit, and I

mean *whole new orbit*. Looking back on it now, I want to say the bees were sent to me. I want to say they showed up like the angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary, setting events in motion I could never have guessed. I know it is presumptuous to compare my small life to hers, but I have reason to believe she wouldn't mind; I will get to that. Right now it's enough to say that despite everything that happened that summer, I remain tender toward the bees.



July 1, 1964, I lay in bed, waiting for the bees to show up, thinking of what Rosaleen had said when I told her about their nightly visitations.

“Bees swarm before death,” she'd said.

Rosaleen had worked for us since my mother died. My daddy—who I called T. Ray because “Daddy” never fit him—had pulled her out of the peach orchard, where she'd worked as one of his pickers. She had a big round face and a body that sloped out from her neck like a pup tent, and she was so black that night seemed to seep from her skin. She lived alone in a little house tucked back in the woods, not far from us, and came every day to cook, clean, and be my stand-in mother. Rosaleen had never had a child herself, so for the last ten years I'd been her pet guinea pig.

Bees swarm before death. She was full of crazy ideas that I ignored, but I lay there thinking about this one, wondering if the bees had come with my death in mind. Honestly, I wasn't that disturbed by the idea. Every one of those bees could have descended on me like a flock of angels and stung me till I died, and it wouldn't have been the worst thing to happen. People who think dying is the worst thing don't know a thing about life.

My mother died when I was four years old. It was a fact of life, but if I brought it up, people would suddenly get interested in

their hangnails and cuticles, or else distant places in the sky, and seem not to hear me. Once in a while, though, some caring soul would say, "Just put it out of your head, Lily. It was an accident. You didn't mean to do it."

That night I lay in bed and thought about dying and going to be with my mother in paradise. I would meet her saying, "Mother, forgive. Please forgive," and she would kiss my skin till it grew chapped and tell me I was not to blame. She would tell me this for the first ten thousand years.

The next ten thousand years she would fix my hair. She would brush it into such a tower of beauty, people all over heaven would drop their harps just to admire it. You can tell which girls lack mothers by the look of their hair. My hair was constantly going off in eleven wrong directions, and T. Ray, naturally, refused to buy me bristle rollers, so all year I'd had to roll it on Welch's grape juice cans, which had nearly turned me into an insomniac. I was always having to choose between decent hair and a good night's sleep.

I decided I would take four or five centuries to tell her about the special misery of living with T. Ray. He had an orneriness year-round, but especially in the summer, when he worked his peach orchards daylight to dusk. Mostly I stayed out of his way. His only kindness was for Snout, his bird dog, who slept in his bed and got her stomach scratched anytime she rolled onto her wiry back. I've seen Snout pee on T. Ray's boot and it not get a rise out of him.

I had asked God repeatedly to do something about T. Ray. He'd gone to church for forty years and was only getting worse. It seemed like this should tell God something.

I kicked back the sheets. The room sat in perfect stillness, not one bee anywhere. Every minute I looked at the clock on my dresser and wondered what was keeping them.

Finally, sometime close to midnight, when my eyelids had nearly given up the strain of staying open, a purring noise started over in the corner, low and vibrating, a sound you could almost mistake for a cat. Moments later shadows moved like spatter paint along the walls, catching the light when they passed the window so I could see the outline of wings. The sound swelled in the dark till the entire room was pulsating, till the air itself became alive and matted with bees. They lapped around my body, making me the perfect center of a whirlwind cloud. I could not hear myself think for all the bee hum.

I dug my nails into my palms till my skin had nearly turned to herringbone. A person could get stung half to death in a roomful of bees.

Still, the sight *was* a true spectacle. Suddenly I couldn't stand not showing it off to somebody, even if the only person around was T. Ray. And if he happened to get stung by a couple of hundred bees, well, I was sorry.

I slid from the covers and dashed through the bees for the door. I woke him by touching his arm with one finger, softly at first, then harder and harder till I was jabbing into his flesh, marveling at how hard it was.

T. Ray bolted from bed, wearing nothing but his underwear. I dragged him toward my room, him shouting how this better be good, how the house damn well better be on fire, and Snout barking like we were on a dove shoot.

"Bees!" I shouted. "There's a swarm of bees in my room!"

But when we got there, they'd vanished back into the wall like they knew he was coming, like they didn't want to waste their flying stunts on him.

"Goddamn it, Lily, this ain't funny."

I looked up and down the walls. I got down under the bed

and begged the very dust and coils of my bedsprings to produce a bee.

“They were here,” I said. “Flying everywhere.”

“Yeah, and there was a goddamn herd of buffalo in here, too.”

“Listen,” I said. “You can hear them buzzing.”

He cocked his ear toward the wall with pretend seriousness. “I don’t hear any buzzing,” he said, and twirled his finger beside his temple. “I guess they must have flown out of that cuckoo clock you call a brain. You wake me up again, Lily, and I’ll get out the Martha Whites, you hear me?”

Martha Whites were a form of punishment only T. Ray could have dreamed up. I shut my mouth instantly.

Still, I couldn’t let the matter go entirely—T. Ray thinking I was so desperate I would invent an invasion of bees to get attention. Which is how I got the bright idea of catching a jar of these bees, presenting them to T. Ray, and saying, “Now who’s making things up?”



My first and only memory of my mother was the day she died. I tried for a long time to conjure up an image of her before that, just a sliver of something, like her tucking me into bed, reading the adventures of Uncle Wiggly, or hanging my underclothes near the space heater on ice-cold mornings. Even her picking a switch off the forsythia bush and stinging my legs would have been welcome.

The day she died was December 3, 1954. The furnace had cooked the air so hot my mother had peeled off her sweater and stood in short sleeves, jerking at the window in her bedroom, wrestling with the stuck paint.

Finally she gave up and said, “Well, fine, we’ll just burn the hell up in here, I guess.”

Her hair was black and generous, with thick curls circling her face, a face I could never quite coax into view, despite the sharpness of everything else.

I raised my arms to her, and she picked me up, saying I was way too big a girl to hold like this, but holding me anyway. The moment she lifted me, I was wrapped in her smell.

The scent got laid down in me in a permanent way and had all the precision of cinnamon. I used to go regularly into the Sylvan Mercantile and smell every perfume bottle they had, trying to identify it. Every time I showed up, the perfume lady acted surprised, saying, "My goodness, look who's here." Like I hadn't just been in there the week before and gone down the entire row of bottles. Shalimar, Chanel No. 5, White Shoulders.

I'd say, "You got anything new?"

She never did.

So it was a shock when I came upon the scent on my fifth-grade teacher, who said it was nothing but plain ordinary Ponds Cold Cream.

The afternoon my mother died, there was a suitcase open on the floor, sitting near the stuck window. She moved in and out of the closet, dropping this and that into the suitcase, not bothering to fold them.

I followed her into the closet and scooted beneath dress hems and pant legs, into darkness and wisps of dust and little dead moths, back where orchard mud and the moldy smell of peaches clung to T. Ray's boots. I stuck my hands inside a pair of white high heels and clapped them together.

The closet floor vibrated whenever someone climbed the stairs below it, which is how I knew T. Ray was coming. Over my head I heard my mother, pulling things from the hangers, the swish of clothes, wire clinking together. *Hurry*, she said.

When his shoes clomped into the room, she sighed, the breath

leaving her as if her lungs had suddenly clenched. This is the last thing I remember with perfect crispness—her breath floating down to me like a tiny parachute, collapsing without a trace among the piles of shoes.

I don't remember what they said, only the fury of their words, how the air turned raw and full of welts. Later it would remind me of birds trapped inside a closed room, flinging themselves against the windows and the walls, against each other. I inched backward, deeper into the closet, feeling my fingers in my mouth, the taste of shoes, of feet.

Dragged out, I didn't know at first whose hands pulled me, then found myself in my mother's arms, breathing her smell. She smoothed my hair, said, "Don't worry," but even as she said it, I was peeled away by T. Ray. He carried me to the door and set me down in the hallway. "Go to your room," he said.

"I don't want to," I cried, trying to push past him, back into the room, back where she was.

"Get in your goddamned room!" he shouted, and shoved me. I landed against the wall, then fell forward onto my hands and knees. Lifting my head, looking past him, I saw her running across the room. Running at him, yelling. "Leave. Her. Alone."

I huddled on the floor beside the door and watched through air that seemed all scratched up. I saw him take her by the shoulders and shake her, her head bouncing back and forth. I saw the whiteness of his lip.

And then—though everything starts to blur now in my mind—she lunged away from him into the closet, away from his grabbing hands, scrambling for something high on a shelf.

When I saw the gun in her hand, I ran toward her, clumsy and falling, wanting to save her, to save us all.

Time folded in on itself then. What is left lies in clear yet disjointed pieces in my head. The gun shining like a toy in her hand,

how he snatched it away and waved it around. The gun on the floor. Bending to pick it up. The noise that exploded around us.

This is what I know about myself. She was all I wanted. And I took her away.



T. Ray and I lived just outside Sylvan, South Carolina, population 3,100. Peach stands and Baptist churches, that sums it up.

At the entrance to the farm we had a big wooden sign with OWENS PEACH ENTERPRISES painted across it in the worst orange color you've ever seen. I hated that sign. But the sign was nothing compared with the giant peach perched atop a sixty-foot pole beside the gate. Everyone at school referred to it as the Great Fanny, and I'm cleaning up the language. Its fleshy color, not to mention the crease down the middle, gave it the unmistakable appearance of a rear end. Rosaleen said it was T. Ray's way of mooning the entire world. That was T. Ray.

He didn't believe in slumber parties or sock hops, which wasn't a big concern as I never got invited to them anyway, but he refused to drive me to town for football games, pep rallies, or Beta Club car washes, which were held on Saturdays. He did not care that I wore clothes I made for myself in home economics class, cotton print shirtwaists with crooked zippers and skirts hanging below my knees, outfits only the Pentecostal girls wore. I might as well have worn a sign on my back: I AM NOT POPULAR AND NEVER WILL BE.

I needed all the help that fashion could give me, since no one, not a single person, had ever said, "Lily, you are such a pretty child," except for Miss Jennings at church, and she was legally blind.

I watched my reflection not only in the mirror, but in store windows and across the television when it wasn't on, trying to get a

fix on my looks. My hair was black like my mother's but basically a nest of cowlicks, and it worried me that I didn't have much of a chin. I kept thinking I'd grow one the same time my breasts came in, but it didn't work out that way. I had nice eyes, though, what you would call Sophia Loren eyes, but still, even the boys who wore their hair in ducktails dripping with Vitalis and carried combs in their shirt pockets didn't seem attracted to me, and they were considered hard up.

Matters below my neck had shaped up, not that I could show off that part. It was fashionable to wear cashmere twinsets and plaid kilts midhigh, but T. Ray said hell would be an ice rink before I went out like that—did I want to end up pregnant like Bitsy Johnson whose skirt barely covered her ass? How he knew about Bitsy is a mystery of life, but it was true about her skirts and true about the baby. An unfortunate coincidence is all it was.

Rosaleen knew less about fashion than T. Ray did, and when it was cold, God-help-me-Jesus, she made me go to school wearing long britches under my Pentecostal dresses.

There was nothing I hated worse than clumps of whispering girls who got quiet when I passed. I started picking scabs off my body and, when I didn't have any, gnawing the flesh around my fingernails till I was a bleeding wreck. I worried so much about how I looked and whether I was doing things right, I felt half the time I was impersonating a girl instead of really being one.

I had thought my real chance would come from going to charm school at the Women's Club last spring, Friday afternoons for six weeks, but I got barred because I didn't have a mother, a grandmother, or even a measly aunt to present me with a white rose at the closing ceremony. Rosaleen doing it was against the rules. I'd cried till I threw up in the sink.

"You're charming enough," Rosaleen had said, washing the

vomit out of the sink basin. “You don’t need to go to some high-falutin school to get charm.”

“I do so,” I said. “They teach everything. How to walk and pivot, what to do with your ankles when you sit in a chair, how to get into a car, pour tea, take off your gloves . . .”

Rosaleen blew air from her lips. “Good Lord,” she said.

“Arrange flowers in a vase, talk to boys, tweeze your eyebrows, shave your legs, apply lipstick . . .”

“What about vomit in a sink? They teach a charming way to do that?” she asked.

Sometimes I purely hated her.



The morning after I woke T. Ray, Rosaleen stood in the doorway of my room, watching me chase a bee with a mason jar. Her lip was rolled out so far I could see the little sunrise of pink inside her mouth.

“What are you doing with that jar?” she said.

“I’m catching bees to show T. Ray. He thinks I’m making them up.”

“Lord, give me strength.” She’d been shelling butter beans on the porch, and sweat glistened on the pearls of hair around her forehead. She pulled at the front of her dress, opening an airway along her bosom, big and soft as couch pillows.

The bee landed on the state map I kept tacked on the wall. I watched it walk along the coast of South Carolina on scenic Highway 17. I clamped the mouth of the jar against the wall, trapping it between Charleston and Georgetown. When I slid on the lid, it went into a tailspin, throwing itself against the glass over and over with pops and clicks, reminding me of the hail that landed sometimes on the windows.

I’d made the jar as nice as I could with felty petals, fat with

pollen, and more than enough nail holes in the lid to keep the bees from perishing, since for all I knew, people might come back one day as the very thing they killed.

I brought the jar level with my nose. "Come look at this thing fight," I said to Rosaleen.

When she stepped in the room, her scent floated out to me, dark and spicy like the snuff she packed inside her cheek. She held her small jug with its coin-size mouth and a handle for her to loop her finger through. I watched her press it along her chin, her lips fluted out like a flower, then spit a curl of black juice inside it.

She stared at the bee and shook her head. "If you get stung, don't come whining to me," she said, "'cause I ain't gonna care."

That was a lie.

I was the only one who knew that despite her sharp ways, her heart was more tender than a flower skin and she loved me beyond reason.

I hadn't known this until I was eight and she bought me an Easter-dyed biddy from the mercantile. I found it trembling in a corner of its pen, the color of purple grapes, with sad little eyes that cast around for its mother. Rosaleen let me bring it home, right into the living room, where I strewed a box of Quaker Oats on the floor for it to eat and she didn't raise a word of protest.

The chick left dollops of violet-streaked droppings all over the place, due, I suppose, to the dye soaking into its fragile system. We had just started to clean them up when T. Ray burst in, threatening to boil the chick for dinner and fire Rosaleen for being an imbecile. He started to swoop at the biddy with his tractor-grease hands, but Rosaleen planted herself in front of him. "There is worse things in the house than chicken shit," she said and looked him up one side and down the other. "You ain't touching that chick."

His boots whispered *uncle* all the way down the hall. I thought, *She loves me*, and it was the first time such a far-fetched idea had occurred to me.

Her age was a mystery, since she didn't possess a birth certificate. She would tell me she was born in 1909 or 1919, depending on how old she felt at the moment. She was sure about the place: McClellanville, South Carolina, where her mama had woven sweet-grass baskets and sold them on the roadside.

"Like me selling peaches," I'd said to her.

"Not one thing like you selling peaches," she'd said back. "You ain't got seven children you gotta feed from it."

"You've got *six* brothers and sisters?" I'd thought of her as alone in the world except for me.

"I did have, but I don't know where a one of them is."

She'd thrown her husband out three years after they married, for carousing. "You put his brain in a bird, the bird would fly backward," she liked to say. I often wondered what that bird would do with Rosaleen's brain. I decided half the time it would drop shit on your head and the other half it would sit on abandoned nests with its wings spread wide.

I used to have daydreams in which she was white and married T. Ray, and became my real mother. Other times I was a Negro orphan she found in a cornfield and adopted. Once in a while I had us living in a foreign country like New York, where she could adopt me and we could both stay our natural color.



My mother's name was Deborah. I thought that was the prettiest name I'd ever heard, even though T. Ray refused to speak it. If I said it, he acted like he might go straight to the kitchen and stab something. Once when I asked him when her birthday was and what cake icing she preferred, he told me to shut up, and when I

asked him a second time, he picked up a jar of blackberry jelly and threw it against the kitchen cabinet. We have blue stains to this day.

I did manage to get a few scraps of information from him, though, such as my mother was buried in Virginia where her people came from. I got worked up at that, thinking I'd found a grandmother. No, he tells me, my mother was an only child whose mother died ages ago. Naturally. Once when he stepped on a roach in the kitchen, he told me my mother had spent hours luring roaches out of the house with bits of marshmallow and trails of graham-cracker crumbs, that she was a lunatic when it came to saving bugs.

The oddest things caused me to miss her. Like training bras. Who was I going to ask about that? And who but my mother could've understood the magnitude of driving me to junior cheerleader tryouts? I can tell you for certain T. Ray didn't grasp it. But you know when I missed her the most? The day I was twelve and woke up with the rose-petal stain on my panties. I was so proud of that flower and didn't have a soul to show it to except Rosaleen.

Not long after that I found a paper bag in the attic stapled at the top. Inside it I found the last traces of my mother.

There was a photograph of a woman smirking in front of an old car, wearing a light-colored dress with padded shoulders. Her expression said, "Don't you dare take this picture," but she wanted it taken, you could see that. You could not believe the stories I saw in that picture, how she was waiting at the car fender for love to come to her, and not too patiently.

I laid the photograph beside my eighth-grade picture and examined every possible similarity. She was more or less missing a chin, too, but even so, she was above-average pretty, which offered me genuine hope for my future.

The bag contained a pair of white cotton gloves stained the

color of age. When I pulled them out, I thought, *Her very hands were inside here*. I feel foolish about it now, but one time I stuffed the gloves with cotton balls and held them through the night.

The end-all mystery inside the bag was a small wooden picture of Mary, the mother of Jesus. I recognized her even though her skin was black, only a shade lighter than Rosaleen's. It looked to me like somebody had cut the black Mary's picture from a book, glued it onto a sanded piece of wood about two inches across, and varnished it. On the back an unknown hand had written "Tiburon, S.C."

For two years now I'd kept these things of hers inside a tin box, buried in the orchard. There was a special place out there in the long tunnel of trees no one knew about, not even Rosaleen. I'd started going there before I could tie my shoelaces. At first it was just a spot to hide from T. Ray and his meanness or from the memory of that afternoon when the gun went off, but later I would slip out there, sometimes after T. Ray had gone to bed, just to lie under the trees and be peaceful. It was my plot of earth, my cubbyhole.

I'd placed her things inside the tin box and buried it out there late one night by flashlight, too scared to leave them hanging around in my room, even in the back of a drawer. I was afraid T. Ray might go up to the attic and discover her things were missing, and turn my room upside down searching for them. I hated to think what he'd do to me if he found them hidden among my stuff.

Now and then I'd go out there and dig up the box. I would lie on the ground with the trees folded over me, wearing her gloves, smiling at her photograph. I would study "Tiburon, S.C." on the back of the black Mary picture, the funny slant of the lettering, and wonder what sort of place it was. I'd looked it up on the map once, and it wasn't more than two hours away. Had my mother

been there and bought this picture? I always promised myself one day, when I was grown-up enough, I would take the bus over there. I wanted to go everyplace she had ever been.



After my morning of capturing bees, I spent the afternoon in the peach stand out on the highway, selling T. Ray's peaches. It was the loneliest summer job a girl could have, stuck in a roadside hut with three walls and a flat tin roof.

I sat on a Coke crate and watched pickups zoom by till I was nearly poisoned with exhaust fumes and boredom. Thursday afternoons were usually a big peach day, with women getting ready for Sunday cobblers, but not a soul stopped.

T. Ray refused to let me bring books out here and read, and if I smuggled one out, say, *Lost Horizon*, stuck under my shirt, somebody, like Mrs. Watson from the next farm, would see him at church and say, "Saw your girl in the peach stand reading up a storm. You must be proud." And he would half kill me.

What kind of person is against *reading*? I think he believed it would stir up ideas of college, which he thought a waste of money for girls, even if they did, like me, score the highest number a human being can get on their verbal aptitude test. Math aptitude is another thing, but people aren't meant to be overly bright in everything.

I was the only student who didn't groan and carry on when Mrs. Henry assigned us another Shakespeare play. Well actually, I did *pretend* to groan, but inside I was as thrilled as if I'd been crowned Sylvan's Peach Queen.

Up until Mrs. Henry came along, I'd believed beauty college would be the upper limit of my career. Once, studying her face, I told her if she was my customer, I would give her a French twist that would do wonders for her, and she said—and I quote—

“Please, Lily, you are insulting your fine intelligence. Do you have any idea how smart you are? You could be a professor or a writer with actual books to your credit. Beauty school. *Please.*”

It took me a month to get over the shock of having life possibilities. You know how adults love to ask, “So . . . what are you going to be when you grow up?” I can’t tell you how much I’d hated that question, but suddenly I was going around volunteering to people, people who didn’t even want to know, that I planned to be a professor and a writer of actual books.

I kept a collection of my writings. For a while everything I wrote had a horse in it. After we read Ralph Waldo Emerson in class, I wrote “My Philosophy of Life,” which I intended for the start of a book but could get only three pages out of it. Mrs. Henry said I needed to live past fourteen years old before I would have a philosophy.

She said a scholarship was my only hope for a future and lent me her private books for the summer. Whenever I opened one, T. Ray said, “Who do you think you are, Julius Shakespeare?” The man sincerely thought that was Shakespeare’s first name, and if you think I should have corrected him, you are ignorant about the art of survival. He also referred to me as Miss Brown-Nose-in-a-Book and occasionally as Miss Emily-Big-Head-*Diction*. He meant Dickinson, but again, there are things you let go by.

Without books in the peach stand, I often passed the time making up poems, but that slow afternoon I didn’t have the patience for rhyming words. I just sat out there and thought about how much I hated the peach stand, how completely and absolutely I hated it.



The day before I’d gone to first grade, T. Ray had found me in the peach stand sticking a nail into one of his peaches.

He walked toward me with his thumbs jammed into his pockets and his eyes squinted half shut from the glare. I watched his shadow slide over the dirt and weeds and thought he had come to punish me for stabbing a peach. I didn't even know why I was doing it.

Instead he said, "Lily, you're starting school tomorrow, so there are things you need to know. About your mother."

For a moment everything got still and quiet, as if the wind had died and the birds had stopped flying. When he squatted down in front of me, I felt caught in a hot dark I could not break free of.

"It's time you knew what happened to her, and I want you to hear it from me. Not from people out there talking."

We had never spoken of this, and I felt a shiver pass over me. The memory of that day would come back to me at odd moments. The stuck window. The smell of her. The clink of hangers. The suitcase. The way they'd fought and shouted. Most of all the gun on the floor, the heaviness when I'd lifted it.

I knew that the explosion I'd heard that day had killed her. The sound still sneaked into my head once in a while and surprised me. Sometimes it seemed that when I'd held the gun there hadn't been any noise at all, that it had come later, but other times, sitting alone on the back steps, bored and wishing for something to do, or pent up in my room on a rainy day, I felt I *had* caused it, that when I'd lifted the gun, the sound had torn through the room and gouged out our hearts.

It was a secret knowledge that would slip up and overwhelm me, and I would take off running—even if it was raining out, I ran—straight down the hill to my special place in the peach orchard. I'd lie right down on the ground and it would calm me.

Now, T. Ray scooped up a handful of dirt and let it fall out of his hands. "The day she died, she was cleaning out the closet," he

said. I could not account for the strange tone of his voice, an unnatural sound, how it was almost, but not quite, *kind*.

Cleaning the closet. I had never considered what she was doing those last minutes of her life, why she was in the closet, what they had fought about.

"I remember," I said. My voice sounded small and faraway to me, like it was coming from an ant hole in the ground.

His eyebrows lifted, and he brought his face closer to me. Only his eyes showed confusion. "You *what*?"

"I remember," I said again. "You were yelling at each other."

A tightening came into his face. "Is that right?" he said. His lips had started to turn pale, which was the thing I always watched for. I took a step backward.

"Goddamn it, you were four years old!" he shouted. "You don't know what you remember."

In the silence that followed, I considered lying to him, saying, *I take it back. I don't remember anything. Tell me what happened,* but there was such a powerful need in me, pent up for so long, to speak about it, to say the words.

I looked down at my shoes, at the nail I'd dropped when I'd seen him coming. "There was a gun."

"Christ," he said.

He looked at me a long time, then walked over to the bushel baskets stacked at the back of the stand. He stood there a minute with his hands balled up before he turned around and came back.

"What else?" he said. "You tell me right now what you know."

"The gun was on the floor—"

"And you picked it up," he said. "I guess you remember that."

The exploding sound had started to echo around in my head. I looked off in the direction of the orchard, wanting to break and run.

"I remember picking it up," I said. "But that's all."

He leaned down and held me by the shoulders, gave me a little shake. "You don't remember anything else? You're sure? Now, think."

I paused so long he cocked his head, looking at me, suspicious. "No, sir, that's all."

"Listen to me," he said, his fingers squeezing into my arms. "We were arguing like you said. We didn't see you at first. Then we turned around and you were standing there holding the gun. You'd picked it up off the floor. Then it just went off."

He let me go and rammed his hands into his pockets. I could hear his hands jingling keys and nickels and pennies. I wanted so much to grab on to his leg, to feel him reach down and lift me to his chest, but I couldn't move, and neither did he. He stared at a place over my head. A place he was being very careful to study.

"The police asked lots of questions, but it was just one of those terrible things. You didn't mean to do it," he said softly. "But if anybody wants to know, that's what happened."

Then he left, walking back toward the house. He'd gone only a little way when he looked back. "And don't stick that nail into my peaches again."



It was after 6:00 P.M. when I wandered back to the house from the peach stand, having sold nothing, not one peach, and found Rosa-leen in the living room. Usually she would've gone home by now, but she was wrestling with the rabbit ears on top of the TV, trying to fix the snow on the screen. President Johnson faded in and out, lost in the blizzard. I'd never seen Rosaleen so interested in a TV show that she would exert physical energy over it.

"What happened?" I asked. "Did they drop the atom bomb?" Ever since we'd started bomb drills at school, I couldn't help thinking my days were numbered. Everybody was putting fallout

shelters in their backyards, canning tap water, getting ready for the end of time. Thirteen students in my class made fallout-shelter models for their science project, which shows it was not just me worried about it. We were obsessed with Mr. Khrushchev and his missiles.

“No, the bomb hasn’t gone off,” she said. “Just come here and see if you can fix the TV.” Her fists were burrowed so deep into her hips they seemed to disappear.

I twisted tin foil around the antennae. Things cleared up enough to make out President Johnson taking his seat at a desk, people all around. I didn’t care much for the president because of the way he held his beagles by the ears. I did admire his wife, Lady Bird, though, who always looked like she wanted nothing more than to sprout wings and fly away.

Rosaleen dragged the footstool in front of the set and sat down, so the whole thing vanished under her. She leaned toward the set, holding a piece of her skirt and winding it around in her hands.

“What is going on?” I said, but she was so caught up in whatever was happening she didn’t even answer me. On the screen the president signed his name on a piece of paper, using about ten ink pens to get it done.

“Rosaleen—”

“Shhh,” she said, waving her hand.

I had to get the news from the TV man. “Today, July second, 1964,” he said, “the president of the United States signed the Civil Rights Act into law in the East Room of the White House. . . .”

I looked over at Rosaleen, who sat there shaking her head, mumbling, “Lord have mercy,” just looking so disbelieving and happy, like people on television when they answered the \$64,000 Question.

I didn’t know whether to be excited for her or worried. All

people ever talked about after church were the Negroes and whether they'd get their civil rights. Who was winning—the white people's team or the colored people's team? Like it was a do-or-die contest. When that minister from Alabama, Reverend Martin Luther King, got arrested last month in Florida for wanting to eat in a restaurant, the men at church acted like the white people's team had won the pennant race. I knew they would not take this news lying down, not in one million years.

"Hallelujah, Jesus," Rosaleen was saying over there on her stool. Oblivious.



Rosaleen had left dinner on the stove top, her famous smothered chicken. As I fixed T. Ray's plate, I considered how to bring up the delicate matter of my birthday, something T. Ray had never paid attention to in all the years of my life, but every year, like a dope, I got my hopes up thinking *this* year would be the one.

I had the same birthday as the country, which made it even harder to get noticed. When I was little, I thought people were sending up rockets and cherry bombs because of me—hurray, Lily was born! Then reality set in, like it always did.

I wanted to tell T. Ray that any girl would love a silver charm bracelet, that in fact last year I'd been the only girl at Sylvan Junior High without one, that the whole point of lunchtime was to stand in the cafeteria line jangling your wrist, giving people a guided tour of your charm collection.

"So," I said, sliding his plate in front of him, "my birthday is this Saturday."

I watched him pull the chicken meat from around the bone with his fork.

"I was just thinking I would love to have one of those silver charm bracelets they have down at the mercantile."

The house creaked like it did once in a while. Outside the door Snout gave a low bark, and then the air grew so quiet I could hear the food being ground up in T. Ray's mouth.

He ate his chicken breast and started on the thigh, looking at me now and then in his hard way.

I started to say, *So then, what about the bracelet?* but I could see he'd already given his answer, and it caused a kind of sorrow to rise in me that felt fresh and tender and had nothing, really, to do with the bracelet. I think now it was sorrow for the sound of his fork scraping the plate, the way it swelled in the distance between us, how I was not even in the room.



That night I lay in bed listening to the flicks and twitters and thrums inside the bee jar, waiting till it was late enough so I could slip out to the orchard and dig up the tin box that held my mother's things. I wanted to lie down in the orchard and let it hold me.

When the darkness had pulled the moon to the top of the sky, I got out of bed, put on my shorts and sleeveless blouse, and glided past T. Ray's room in silence, sliding my arms and legs like a skater on ice. I didn't see his boots, how he'd parked them in the middle of the hall. When I fell, the clatter startled the air so badly T. Ray's snore changed rhythm. At first it ceased altogether, but then the snore started back with three piglet snorts.

I crept down the stairs, through the kitchen. When the night hit my face, I felt like laughing. The moon was a perfect circle, so full of light that all the edges of things had an amber cast. The cicadas rose up, and I ran with bare feet across the grass.

To reach my spot I had to go to the eighth row left of the tractor shed, then walk along it, counting trees till I got to thirty-two.

The tin box was buried in the soft dirt beneath the tree, shallow enough that I could dig it up with my hands.

When I brushed the dirt from the lid and opened it, I saw first the whiteness of her gloves, then the photograph wrapped in waxed paper, just as I'd left it. And finally the funny wooden picture of Mary with the dark face. I took everything out, and, stretching out among the fallen peaches, I rested them across my abdomen.

When I looked up through the web of trees, the night fell over me, and for a moment I lost my boundaries, feeling like the sky was my own skin and the moon was my heart beating up there in the dark. Lightning came, not jagged but in soft, golden licks across the sky. I undid the buttons on my shirt and opened it wide, just wanting the night to settle on my skin, and that's how I fell asleep, lying there with my mother's things, with the air making moisture on my chest and the sky puckering with light.

I woke to the sound of someone thrashing through the trees. *T. Ray!* I sat up, panicked, buttoning my shirt. I heard his footsteps, the fast, heavy pant of his breathing. Looking down, I saw my mother's gloves and the two pictures. I stopped buttoning and grabbed them up, fumbling with them, unable to think what to do, how to hide them. I had dropped the tin box back in its hole, too far away to reach.

"Lileeee!" he shouted, and I saw his shadow plunge toward me across the ground.

I jammed the gloves and pictures under the waistband of my shorts, then reached for the rest of the buttons with shaking fingers.

Before I could fasten them, light poured down on me and there he was without a shirt, holding a flashlight. The beam swept and zagged, blinding me when it swung across my eyes.

“Who were you out here with?” he shouted, aiming the light on my half-buttoned top.

“N-no one,” I said, gathering my knees in my arms, startled by what he was thinking. I couldn’t look long at his face, how large and blazing it was, like the face of God.

He flung the beam of light into the darkness. “Who’s out there?” he yelled.

“Please, T. Ray, no one was here but me.”

“Get up from there,” he yelled.

I followed him back to the house. His feet struck the ground so hard I felt sorry for the black earth. He didn’t speak till we reached the kitchen and he pulled the Martha White grits from the pantry. “I expect this out of boys, Lily—you can’t blame them—but I expect more out of you. You act no better than a slut.”

He poured a mound of grits the size of an anthill onto the pine floor. “Get over here and kneel down.”

I’d been kneeling on grits since I was six, but still I never got used to that powdered-glass feeling beneath my skin. I walked toward them with those tiny feather steps you expect of a girl in Japan, and lowered myself to the floor, determined not to cry, but the sting was already gathering in my eyes.

T. Ray sat in a chair and cleaned his nails with a pocketknife. I swayed from knee to knee, hoping for a second or two of relief, but the pain cut deep into my skin. I bit down on my lip, and it was then I felt the wooden picture of black Mary underneath my waistband. I felt the waxed paper with my mother’s picture inside and her gloves stuck to my belly, and it seemed all of a sudden like my mother was there, up against my body, like she was bits and pieces of insulation molded against my skin, helping me absorb all his meanness.



The next morning I woke up late. The moment my feet touched the floor, I checked under my mattress where I'd tucked my mother's things—just a temporary hiding place till I could bury them back in the orchard.

Satisfied they were safe, I strolled into the kitchen, where I found Rosaleen sweeping up grits.

I buttered a piece of Sunbeam bread.

She jerked the broom as she swept, raising a wind. "What happened?" she said.

"I went out to the orchard last night. T. Ray thinks I met some boy."

"Did you?"

I rolled my eyes at her. "No."

"How long did he keep you on these grits?"

I shrugged. "Maybe an hour."

She looked down at my knees and stopped sweeping. They were swollen with hundreds of red welts, pinprick bruises that would grow into a blue stubble across my skin. "Look at you, child. Look what he's done to you," she said.

My knees had been tortured like this enough times in my life that I'd stopped thinking of it as out of the ordinary; it was just something you had to put up with from time to time, like the common cold. But suddenly the look on Rosaleen's face cut through all that. *Look what he's done to you.*

That's what I was doing—taking a good long look at my knees—when T. Ray stomped through the back door.

"Well, look who decided to get up." He yanked the bread out of my hands and threw it into Snout's food bowl. "Would it be too much to ask you to get out to the peach stand and do some work? You're not Queen for a Day, you know."

This will sound crazy, but up until then I thought T. Ray probably loved me some. I could never forget the time he smiled at

me in church when I was singing with the hymnbook upside down.

Now I looked at his face. It was despising and full of anger.

“As long as you live under my roof, you’ll do what I say!” he shouted.

Then I’ll find another roof, I thought.

“You understand me?” he said.

“Yes, sir, I understand,” I said, and I did, too. I understood that a new rooftop would do wonders for me.



Late that afternoon I caught two more bees. Lying on my stomach across the bed, I watched how they orbited the space in the jar, around and around like they’d missed the exit.

Rosaleen poked her head in the door. “You all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I’m leaving now. You tell your daddy I’m going into town tomorrow instead of coming here.”

“You’re going to town? Take me,” I said.

“Why do you wanna go?”

“*Please,* Rosaleen.”

“You’re gonna have to walk the whole way.”

“I don’t care.”

“Ain’t nothing much gonna be open but firecracker stands and the grocery store.”

“I don’t care. I just wanna get out of the house some on my birthday.”

Rosaleen stared at me, sagged low on her big ankles. “All right, but you ask your daddy. I’ll be by here first thing in the morning.”

She was out the door. I called after her. “How come you’re going to town?”

She stayed with her back to me a moment, unmoving. When

she turned, her face looked soft and changed, like a different Rosaleen. Her hand dipped into her pocket, where her fingers crawled around for something. She drew out a folded piece of notebook paper and came to sit beside me on the bed. I rubbed my knees while she smoothed out the paper across her lap.

Her name, Rosaleen Daise, was written twenty-five times at least down the page in large, careful cursive, like the first paper you turn in when school starts. "This is my practice sheet," she said. "For the Fourth of July they're holding a voters' rally at the colored church. I'm registering myself to vote."

An uneasy feeling settled in my stomach. Last night the television had said a man in Mississippi was killed for registering to vote, and I myself had overheard Mr. Bussey, one of the deacons, say to T. Ray, "Don't you worry, they're gonna make 'em write their names in perfect cursive and refuse them a card if they forget so much as to dot an i or make a loop in their y."

I studied the curves of Rosaleen's R. "Does T. Ray know what you're doing?"

"T. Ray," she said. "T. Ray don't know nothing."



At sunset he shuffled up, sweaty from work. I met him at the kitchen door, my arms folded across the front of my blouse. "I thought I'd walk to town with Rosaleen tomorrow. I need to buy some sanitary supplies."

He accepted this without comment. T. Ray hated female puberty worse than anything.

That night I looked at the jar of bees on my dresser. The poor creatures perched on the bottom barely moving, obviously pining away for flight. I remembered then the way they'd slipped from the cracks in my walls and flown for the sheer joy of it. I thought about the way my mother had built trails of graham-cracker

crumbs and marshmallow to lure roaches from the house rather than step on them. I doubted she would've approved of keeping bees in a jar. I unscrewed the lid and set it aside.

"You can go," I said.

But the bees remained there, like planes on a runway not knowing they'd been cleared for takeoff. They crawled on their stalk legs around the curved perimeters of the glass as if the world had shrunk to that jar. I tapped the glass, even laid the jar on its side, but those crazy bees stayed put.



The bees were still in there the next morning when Rosaleen showed up. She was bearing an angel food cake with fourteen candles.

"Here you go. Happy birthday," she said. We sat down and ate two slices each with glasses of milk. The milk left a moon crescent on the darkness of her upper lip, which she didn't bother to wipe away. Later I would remember that, how she set out, a marked woman from the beginning.

Sylvan was miles away. We walked along the ledge of the highway, Rosaleen moving at the pace of a bank-vault door, her spit jug fastened on her finger. Haze hung under the trees, and every inch of air smelled overripe with peaches.

"You limping?" Rosaleen said.

My knees were aching to the point that I was struggling to keep up with her. "A little."

"Well, why don't we sit down on the side of the road awhile?" she said.

"That's okay," I told her. "I'll be fine."

A car swept by, slinging scalded air and a layer of dust. Rosaleen was slick with heat. She mopped her face and breathed hard.

We were coming to Ebenezer Baptist Church, where T. Ray and I attended. The steeple jutted through a cluster of shade trees; below, the red bricks looked shadowy and cool.

“Come on,” I said, turning in the drive.

“Where’re you going?”

“We can rest in the church.”

The air inside was dim and still, slanted with light from the side windows, not those pretty stained-glass windows but milky panes you can’t really see through.

I led us down front and sat in the second pew, leaving room for Rosaleen. She plucked a paper fan from the hymnbook holder and studied the picture on it—a white church with a smiling white lady coming out the door.

Rosaleen fanned and I listened to little jets of air come off her hands. She never went to church herself, but on those few times T. Ray had let me walk to her house back in the woods, I’d seen her special shelf with a stub of candle, creek rocks, a reddish feather, and a piece of John the Conqueror root, and right in the center a picture of a woman, propped up without a frame.

The first time I saw it, I’d asked Rosaleen, “Is that you?” since I swear the woman looked exactly like her, with woolly braids, blue-black skin, narrow eyes, and most of her concentrated in her lower portion, like an eggplant.

“This is my mama,” she said.

The finish was rubbed off the sides of the picture where her thumbs had held it. Her shelf had to do with a religion she’d made up for herself, a mixture of nature and ancestor worship. She’d stopped going to the House of Prayer Full Gospel Holiness Church years ago because it started at ten in the morning and didn’t end till three in the afternoon, which is enough religion to kill a full-grown person, she’d said.

T. Ray said Rosaleen’s religion was plain wacko, and for me to

stay out of it. But it drew me to her to think she loved water rocks and woodpecker feathers, that she had a single picture of her mother just like I did.

One of the church doors opened and Brother Gerald, our minister, stepped into the sanctuary.

“Well, for goodness’ sake, Lily, what are you doing here?”

Then he saw Rosaleen and started to rub the bald space on his head with such agitation I thought he might rub down to the skull bone.

“We were walking to town and stopped in to cool off.”

His mouth formed the word “oh,” but he didn’t actually say it; he was too busy looking at Rosaleen in his church, Rosaleen who chose this moment to spit into her snuff jug.

It’s funny how you forget the rules. She was not supposed to be inside here. Every time a rumor got going about a group of Negroes coming to worship with us on Sunday morning, the deacons stood locked-arms across the church steps to turn them away. We loved them in the Lord, Brother Gerald said, but they had their own places.

“Today’s my birthday,” I said, hoping to send his thoughts in a new direction.

“Is it? Well, happy birthday, Lily. So how old are you now?”

“Fourteen.”

“Ask him if we can have a couple of these fans for your birthday present,” said Rosaleen.

He made a thin sound, intended for a laugh. “Now, if we let everybody borrow a fan that wanted one, the church wouldn’t have a fan left.”

“She was just kidding,” I said, and stood up. He smiled, satisfied, and walked beside me all the way to the door, with Rosaleen tagging behind.

Outside, the sky had whited over with clouds, and shine

spilled across the surfaces, sending motes before my eyes. When we'd cut through the parsonage yard and were back on the highway, Rosaleen produced two church fans from the bosom of her dress, and, doing an impersonation of me gazing up sweet-faced, she said, "Oh, Brother Gerald, she was just kidding."



We came into Sylvan on the worst side of town. Old houses set up on cinder blocks. Fans wedged in the windows. Dirt yards. Women in pink curlers. Collarless dogs.

After a few blocks we approached the Esso station on the corner of West Market and Park Street, generally recognized as a catchall place for men with too much time on their hands.

I noticed that not a single car was getting gas. Three men sat in dinette chairs beside the garage with a piece of plywood balanced on their knees. They were playing cards.

"Hit me," one of them said, and the dealer, who wore a Seed and Feed cap, slapped a card down in front of him. He looked up and saw us, Rosaleen fanning and shuffling, swaying side to side. "Well, look what we got coming here," he called out. "Where're you going, nigger?"

Firecrackers made a spattering sound in the distance. "Keep walking," I whispered. "Don't pay any attention."

But Rosaleen, who had less sense than I'd dreamed, said in this tone like she was explaining something real hard to a kindergarten student, "I'm going to register my name so I can vote, that's what."

"We should hurry on," I said, but she kept walking at her own slow pace.

The man next to the dealer, with hair combed straight back, put down his cards and said, "Did you hear that? We got ourselves a model citizen."

I heard a slow song of wind drift ever so slightly in the street behind us and move along the gutter. We walked, and the men pushed back their makeshift table and came right down to the curb to wait for us, like they were spectators at a parade and we were the prize float.

“Did you ever see one that black?” said the dealer.

And the man with his combed-back hair said, “No, and I ain’t seen one that big either.”

Naturally the third man felt obliged to say something, so he looked at Rosaleen sashaying along unperturbed, holding her white-lady fan, and he said, “Where’d you get that fan, nigger?”

“Stole it from a church,” she said. Just like that.

I had gone once in a raft down the Chattooga River with my church group, and the same feeling came to me now—of being lifted by currents, by a swirl of events I couldn’t reverse.

Coming alongside the men, Rosaleen lifted her snuff jug, which was filled with black spit, and calmly poured it across the tops of the men’s shoes, moving her hand in little loops like she was writing her name—Rosaleen Daise—just the way she’d practiced.

For a second they stared down at the juice, dribbled like car oil across their shoes. They blinked, trying to make it register. When they looked up, I watched their faces go from surprise to anger, then outright fury. They lunged at her, and everything started to spin. There was Rosaleen, grabbed and thrashing side to side, swinging the men like pocketbooks on her arms, and the men yelling for her to apologize and clean their shoes.

“Clean it off!” That’s all I could hear, over and over. And then the cry of birds overhead, sharp as needles, sweeping from low-bough trees, stirring up the scent of pine, and even then I knew I would recoil all my life from the smell of it.

“Call the police,” yelled the dealer to a man inside.

By then Rosaleen lay sprawled on the ground, pinned, twisting her fingers around clumps of grass. Blood ran from a cut beneath her eye. It curved under her chin the way tears do.

When the policeman got there, he said we had to get into the back of his car.

“You’re under arrest,” he told Rosaleen. “Assault, theft, and disturbing the peace.” Then he said to me, “When we get down to the station, I’ll call your daddy and let him deal with you.”

Rosaleen climbed in, sliding over on the seat. I moved after her, sliding as she slid, sitting as she sat.

The door closed. So quiet it amounted to nothing but a snap of air, and that was the strangeness of it, how a small sound like that could fall across the whole world.

