

Carly Lynn Gates

## The Fall Line

It was almost two hours to Kibbee from Macon, a gradual decline through Dublin and Tarrytown from pavement to packed clay. Hazel lay prostrate across the back seat beneath a flannel blanket, tensing to keep from toppling to the floorboard at each unanticipated curve, counting each labored breath through the thick fabric as she waited for the signal. By the time her mother gave the tap, allowing Hazel to yank the blanket from her back, she felt they could have fled the state of Georgia. Hazel's mother clicked on the radio, but her father clicked it off, never taking his eyes from the road. Hazel stared at the window crank, sweat beading her brow in the late June heat. Between her parents' silhouettes, the bouncing light from the headlamps revealed only a small parcel of what lay ahead.

Cousin Jo was waiting on the porch with a kerosene lantern, her face a leering apparition in the flickering light. Hazel's father slid the gear into park, but sat, idling. He re-clasped his fingers at ten and two. She felt the urge to grab his arm, to bury her face against the shoulder of his suit, but suddenly her mother was pulling her from the car by the wrist, dragging her up the wooden steps. Aunt Shirley and Uncle Gene sat at the dining table. Her mother nodded in acknowledgement, but they didn't stand or say a word. She waited, then,

turning on her heel, Hazel's mother gestured for Jo to open the door to the front bedroom, her lower lip quivering.

"Sit down," she said to Hazel, and frowned, smoothing her skirt. "Mind your aunt and uncle until we return." Her shoulders shook as she turned away to set Hazel's suitcase on the floor. She faced Jo, pulling a crisply folded envelope from her pocketbook. "Please give this to your parents. For their trouble."

"Aunt Muriel." Jo shrugged. "You know I can't."

"Please." She trembled as she pressed the envelope into Jo's hand. "Just leave it on the table after I'm gone."

Jo hesitated, then slipped the envelope into the upper pocket of her overalls.

Her mother's tone regained its condescension. "Try not to cause any further embarrassment."

Hazel lowered her eyes. "Yes, ma'am."

Her mother's cool fingertips brushed against her cheek, then she was gone. The mattress creaked as Jo sat down next to her. Hazel strained to pick something out from the hushed voices in the dining room, but couldn't grasp a word. Neither girl spoke until the Opel's head beams had swept across the wall, and the door to Shirley and Gene's bedroom had opened and shut.

"Hot shit," Jo said. "Told you there'd be trouble." She reached over and pinched Hazel's thigh.

"Ow!" Hazel yelped. "What did you do that for?"

"Just got to be the center of attention, don't you?" Jo picked up her lamp and walked out.

Hazel had been around Shirley and Gene and their youngest Jo plenty, but always at Granny's house in Dublin—she'd never been to the farm. They'd done everything together at Granny's: played together, cried over

skinned knees together, celebrated their July birthdays together. They'd even slept side-by-side in the same cot on the porch together. Two peas in a pod, Granny'd say, poking them in the bellies through the blanket to make them giggle before she'd kiss them good night. They'd lie awake long after lights out, whispering wishes and secrets and hopes.

Her mother said when she'd grown up out here this room had been the parlor, but once Jo was born, Shirley and Gene had converted it into a bedroom for Jo's older brothers. They were both in the Navy now. The dusty calico curtains covering the windows seemed to keep the night at bay better than the walls, whose plaster crumbled away in moist defeat. She reached out and touched the corner of the oak desk, the quarter-sawn veneer chipped and peeling away.

Jo set a pitcher of water and a glass next to the basin on the dresser. "I expect you know you's got to go out back to use the privy?"

Hazel shook her head.

"Course not. I'll show you in the morning, when you're not likely to frighten Mama and Daddy out of their bed." She held up an old ceramic bowl, sweeping her arm around it dramatically. "This here's your piss pot, which you'll have to use when you can't go outdoors, but I wouldn't go making a habit of it, especially in this heat." She set the bowl next to the bed. "Shit, know how many nights I laid awake in bed about to piss myself, terrified by my brothers' stories about spiders and scorpions just waiting to bite my bare ass?" She didn't wait for a reply. "Well, you can't waste lamp oil around here. It won't just keep coming like your electric lights." She pulled the door shut behind her, then stepped back in and sneered. "Don't sleep too deeply. It ain't bed bugs that bite around here."

Hazel picked up her suitcase and sat it on the dresser, but she didn't unpack it. She lay down on the mattress fully clothed, pulled the quilt up to her chin. She blew out the lamp. The dark, humid night pressed against her, cut by shafts of denim moonlight. Her ears pricked up at the sounds outside the screens: a mule's snort, the crickets' chirp, a bullfrog's bellow in the distance. And something closer, a faint scratching. Her mother had told her a story about rats. About a couple who laid their baby in the crib, then woke in the morning to find the tip of his nose and the pout of his lower lip gnawed off, a pool of blood beneath his head and rat droppings on the sheets. He hadn't even screamed. Rats were meant for gnawing, for grinding down their iron-hard incisors on wood, brick, cement, lead. Grinding down teeth that never stop growing. In order to stay alive they had to gnaw something.

She felt queasy. And tired, like she'd run all the way from Macon. But her heart pounded at the thought of losing consciousness. Just yesterday she'd been cleaning out her locker at Miller Senior High, saying goodbye to her friends for the summer. They'd all been gleeful, celebrating becoming seniors, yelling, "Class of '58!" while Hazel smiled numbly. Mother had told her to be vague about her summer plans, not to say anything about missing the fall semester. As if they wouldn't guess when she came back with the story of an illness or a sick relative. She placed her hands against her flat stomach. It was her breasts that were growing—rapidly, painfully. Five months. How could she possibly be expected to last that long in this house? And how would Paul find her now? He hadn't answered her letter, and she had sent it weeks ago. Paul. She wished she could kiss the dusting of freckles across the bridge of his nose. They had to make a plan. Shifting her aching pelvis, she began to compose a letter in the dark.

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“Wake up, Sleeping Beauty.” Jo flung open the door. “What’d you think this is, a holiday?” She shoved a plate with biscuits and a fried egg into Hazel’s lap as she sat up in bed. “Mama and Daddy’s gone on to church already, but I can’t go no more.” She sighed. “Can’t flirt with the Tate boy neither. Now I have to stay here and look after you.”

“Are they—” Hazel hesitated. “Are they avoiding me?” She’d been lying awake for over an hour, paralyzed with the thought of facing them, of the disappointment and disgust she knew she’d see in their faces.

“They don’t want nothing to do with you.” Jo straddled the desk chair. “So now you’re my problem. You’re gonna do what I say or I’ll be on you like a duck on a June bug.”

Hazel looked down at her plate. “I didn’t mean for this.”

“But you meant for something to happen.” Jo threw her arms out and gestured around the room. “Here it is. Is it all you imagined?”

Hazel sniffled and shook her head. She pointed to the folded letter she’d written earlier that morning. “I wrote him another letter, Jo. Will you get it to him?”

“You got money for the stamp?”

“No, but,” Hazel swallowed. “When you go to Dublin—” She knew Shirley and Gene spent quite a bit of time there. Granny was always giving Mother grief for not coming around enough.

Jo picked her teeth with her thumb nail. “Don’t know when I’ll be going to Granny’s next.”

“But when you do...maybe you could walk over there, try to talk to him?”

“It ain’t my concern.” She stood. “Finish up so I can show you your chores. Laundry, for one. I don’t suppose you’ve ever used a washboard and wringer?”

Hazel nibbled a biscuit. “Shouldn’t you have electric by now? Granny’s had it for ages, and she’s not that far away.”

“Daddy’s too stubborn for that. Even if he had enough money to burn a wet mule, he still wouldn’t pay five dollars to the REA.” Jo shook her head. “Nothing ever changes around here. I’m gonna spend my whole damn life fetching water so we can piss it out and drink some more. A real Southern Sisyphus.”

Hazel peered into the shaft of light in the space between the curtain and the window. To the left she saw rows of corn, dent corn for grain, probably. As they dried, the crown of each kernel would dent with the endosperm’s collapse. The kernels were dried until they cracked under pressure, then ground down until they were no longer recognizable. To the right she could just make out the edge of the barn. She wondered if a still remained inside. Their family had once made a living running moonshine in high-speed tanker cars. Mother remembered the days when Granny sold bootleg whiskey in half-pint jars from the back door of the kitchen. She’d been told only one still remained, Uncle Gene’s quiet protest of the Federal Liquor Tax.

Jo nodded toward Hazel’s mostly untouched breakfast. “Are you gonna eat that?”

“I’m finished.”

“Haven’t even been here a day and already you’re wasting our food and my time.” Jo snatched the plate. “Keep acting a fool and you’re gonna go hungry.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Save it. Now get yourself dressed and meet me on the back porch.”

It wasn’t fair. Hazel didn’t want to be stuck on the farm any more than Jo wanted to be stuck looking after her. But what was fair, anymore? She wished they could go back to the way things used to be. Hazel’s

earliest memory of Jo was at Granny's first reunion. Granny had recently paid to hook up to electric through a co-op, and Hazel remembered being shushed for laughing at Granny in the kitchen, so scared something was going to zap her she used pot holders to plug in the appliances. Her father'd had a good laugh too, mimicking the oohs and ahs as half her mother's family stood in the bathroom to watch the flush of the commode.

At seven and eight Jo and Hazel were the closest kids in age, so Granny had shooed them outside to play together. Her yard had been the great equalizer: armed with sticks for swords and daisy chains for crowns, they'd prowled the street looking to enforce justice. Eventually the girls outgrew the game and began wandering the street out of boredom instead, as a way to escape Granny's crowded house. That's when she'd first noticed the neighbor's son, Paul.

It was just last summer, but already it felt like it had happened to a person Hazel could no longer be. She had brought an issue of *Seventeen* magazine in her bag and snuck it out with Jo. They'd walked to the edge of a pasture down the road and lay on their bellies in the long grass, flipping through page after page of women posed in swim caps and snug bathing suits. Hazel pointed to the one she liked, a black-and-white checkered suit with a ruffled halter and a black stripe around both the waist and bottom hem.

Jo wrinkled her nose. "Where you gonna wear that, anyway?"

"That's not the point. It's pretty." Hazel plucked a grass shoot and slowly slid off the seeds between her thumb and index finger. Jo stopped on an article about hope chests. "Do you have one of those?" Hazel asked.

"Nah. Mama's crocheted a couple things and stashed them in her bottom drawer."

"Me either."

Jo flipped the page again. "Your family's got money. When some fella comes courting, your mama's

gonna start picking things ready to order.” Jo mimicked on the glossy pages. “Table linens, towels, dishware. Hell, you can order a whole damn house out of a catalog.” She grabbed a handful of grass and tossed it in Hazel’s face. “Think you could fit that in your hope chest?”

Hazel squealed. “Cut it out!” She tried to poke Jo, but she rolled out of the way and jumped up.

“Let’s go back.” They moseyed down the street, kicking up dust with their shoes and knocking shoulders and elbows against each other playfully.

In the next yard a boy tinkered under the hood of an old car, his broad shoulders reddened with sun. He leaned against the front grill and wiped his brow. “Hey,” he said with a slight nod, a confident half smile.

“Hey yourself,” Jo said, hooking her thumbs through the straps of her overalls. “That your Daddy’s Commodore?”

“Was my uncle’s.” He tapped a cigarette from its pack. “Could be mine if I can ever make it run again.” He smiled at Hazel.

Hazel blushed and smiled back. She was thrilled at the notion of someday taking a ride in that car with someone so handsome—anywhere. Feeling the warmth of his arm across the back of her bare neck, looking across to see the dimpled cheeks of that smile.

Jo walked up the drive. “I might could help ya.”

Hazel trailed slightly behind Jo, suddenly aware of how plain she looked in dungarees and a gingham shirt. Not as plain as Jo in baggy overalls, her straw-colored hair wrenched back into a ponytail, but still. She wondered if she could make her hips sashay as she walked, like Mother’s, like a figure eight. She sauntered up to the driver’s door and leaned against the car with her arm propped on top.



“Will it turn over?” Jo asked. She squinted into the sunlight.

“Yeah, but spins over fast. Makes this high-pitched sound.” He stole a glance past Jo at Hazel.

“Probably blew a gasket. You could try squirting some oil into the cylinders. Sometimes that’ll bring the compression up enough to start.”

Hazel tried to suck her cheeks as she smiled and made a loud smacking sound.

“Are you all right?” Jo asked.

Hazel nodded, giggling.

Jo caught Paul’s attention and rolled her eyes. “Try it, anyway. Worked for Daddy.” She shifted back and forth on her feet. “Well, we best be getting on. Maybe I’ll come back and help you with it. We’re staying a few extra days after the city folk go home.” Jo trailed her fingers down the hood of the car, then grabbed Hazel’s hand and started back toward Granny’s.

“Hey, thanks. Thanks a lot,” he called after them. “Hope I’ll see you around.”

Jo shot Hazel a look. “Without a doubt.”

That was only the beginning of Hazel’s infatuation. Anytime they were at Granny’s, she would ask Jo to walk with her just to linger near his house or watch him mowing the yard or repairing the fence. She’d bring a book and sun herself in the grass while Jo and Paul worked on the car together, stealing glances at Paul across the spine. During school that year, Paul and Hazel wrote letters back and forth. She printed SWAK—sealed with a kiss—across the back of each envelope she mailed. Even on paper he could make her laugh. In a letter to Jo, Hazel wrote that she wasn’t exactly sure how to describe this dizzying feeling, but she was pretty sure it was love. She realized, now, that Jo had never responded.

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When Shirley and Gene returned from church, Jo took Hazel out to the chicken coop. She made a clucking noise and shoved Hazel toward the wire fence. “Go on now.”

“Go on what?”

“Catch us dinner.” Jo smirked.

Hazel chewed her bottom lip, her brow furrowed with concern.

“That’s fine. Just take your sweet time.” Jo paused, smoothing stray hair back behind her ears. “It’s not like any of us got to eat.”

Hazel skulked inside, hoisting up the bottom hem of her dress with one hand to keep it from dragging in the dirt. She tried to chase and corner one, but with each lunge the chickens grew warier, squawking and fluttering out of her path, nervously scattering around the yard. Jo goaded her, laughing in the background. In desperation, Hazel dove at a hen and got a mouthful of dust. Jo doubled over in laughter as Hazel stood up, shaking clouds of dirt from her dress.

“You’re just plain useless.” Jo grabbed a long, heavy piece of wire with a small hooked loop on one end that was leaning against the wall of the coop. “Let me show you how it’s done.” She crept within a few feet of a hen and in one motion hooked a leg and pulled the chicken close until she had the foot in her free hand. Jo clutched both legs and wing tips and walked over to the stump and axe. “Why don’t you go see if Mama has any use for you.” As Hazel opened the screen door, Jo called out to her, her voice full of mirth. “I can call you back to clean the gizzard if you want. Mama says we get a new book for each unbroken pouch.” The thump of the axe made Hazel cringe as the screen slammed shut behind her.

Hazel stood at the ready as Shirley prepared the meal, but mostly just got in the way, wilting in the heat of the stove. Watching Shirley bounce between the sink, stove, and ice box with a cigarette dangling from her bottom lip exhausted her. Shirley was plump compared to Mother. The added weight rounded and softened the harshness of their shared features. Gene sat with his back to them by the fireplace, a few worn shirts beside him as he carefully ripped out the seams to remove the collar of a shirt before reversing it and sewing it back on again. He still hadn't spoken to Hazel since she'd arrived. A Brooklyn Dodgers game droned in the background, Shirley and Gene occasionally yelling out to curse or praise a player. Shortly before the meal, Shirley passed Hazel a pitcher of tea to fill the glasses. Her hands shook as she poured, as she helped Jo set the table.

“Supper!”

“Coming, Mother.” Gene clicked off the radio and stood at the head of the table to bless their food. For a long time there was no sound but the thump of rested dishes, the scrape of fork tines.

Hazel forced herself to remember her manners. Her voice cracked as she finally spoke. “The chicken’s delicious, Aunt Shirley. And— ”

“Children do not speak unless spoken to in this house,” Gene said.

“She’s not a child, Gene,” Shirley said.

“You’re right. She’s not a child. Not anymore.” Gene wiped his mouth and tossed the napkin on his plate. “And your highfalutin’ sister had no qualms about pawning her off on us. Like we need another mouth to feed.”

Hazel froze, terrified to draw Gene’s attention directly.

Shirley waved him off. “They were worried about Stan’s job at the university. If word got out—”

Gene stood, his chair scraping backward. “Hogwash. It’s not like raising a loose woman makes you a communist. That baby may be a bastard,” he pointed at Hazel, “but it’s her bastard. Your sister’s family needs to take care of their own.” Gene gave Shirley a quick kiss on the forehead before grabbing his pipe and dulcimer from the sideboard and walking out onto the front porch.

“Pay him no mind,” Shirley said, and burped into her fist.

Jo stared into her folded palms, twiddling her thumbs. “Well,” she said. “I’m plumb tired. May I be excused?”

“You hardly touched your chicken.”

“I’m sorry, Mama,” Jo pleaded. “It’s not your cooking making it tough.” She glared across the table at Hazel. “If we’d been able to butcher it last night like we’re supposed to—”

“Hush up now.” Shirley reached into Hazel’s lap and squeezed her hand. “Your mother said the girls’ home is so crowded you’ll be here until the first week of December. Everyone’ll be out in the field all day, but you need to stay in the house, mostly. Your mother would have a conniption if the neighbors start talking. And when Granny comes you’ll stay out of sight.”

“Granny finds out she’ll find that boy and knock his dick in the dirt.” Jo instinctively ducked.

“Don’t think you’re too old to pick a switch, Jo Muriel.” Shirley sipped her glass of tea. “Granny finds out she’ll tan all our hides for sneaking around like this, like kids who can’t fess up to our own sins.”

“Then why’d you let me stay?” Hazel asked.

“We do crazy things for family,” Shirley said, pushing back from the table. “Sometimes against our best judgment. I expect doing dishes is something you can manage?”

Hazel blinked back tears. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” Shirley nodded to Jo. “Grab your guitar. Let’s cheer up your father.”

Hazel piled the plates to carry into the kitchen. As she cleaned, songs she recognized from The Carter Family resonated in the air around her, but they did nothing to assuage her fear. What if they changed their minds? Where would she go? Hazel cleaned fast and scrubbed hard, praying she’d somehow make herself valuable in this house. Praying she’d make it back to her room before encountering Gene again.

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“What do you think you’re doing?” Jo slammed the bedroom door. “Get away from there.”

Hazel leapt back from the window. She’d tried to be careful over the past few days, slowly mastering the art of standing in the shadows at just the right angle.

“Your mama and daddy’s not coming to Granny’s for the Fourth of July this year.” Jo faked a cough. “You know, on account of you being sick, so Granny’s coming tomorrow.” She stalked over to the dresser, grabbed Hazel’s suitcase, and tossed it onto the bed.

“Wait—what are you doing?” Hazel pressed her hands on top of the suitcase to keep Jo from opening it.

“I’m not doing a thing. This is Granny’s room. You’ve got to pack up and move in with me.” Jo looked around the room in disgust. “You better wipe it down good. Don’t leave that city stink behind.”

Hazel tossed the few items she’d brought back into her suitcase, slowing only to gently tuck the letters she’d written into the satin pocket. The rest of the day was a race against time, and she hoped her freshly washed sheets would dry before nightfall. By the time she fell into bed, she was too tired to notice Jo’s stiffness beside her, her protracted sighs.

Jo jerked her awake in the morning, clamping a hand over her mouth before Hazel could speak. “She’s here,” Jo hissed. “You best be quiet as a church mouse. Sure as shit you can’t peek out the window like you’s the lady of Shalott.”

Hazel lay in bed after Jo left, listening as everyone chatted in the sitting room just outside Jo’s door. She’d just woken up. She hadn’t even had a chance to use the outhouse. Jo’s room was plain compared to hers, to the pink ruffled bed skirts and pillows and matching drapes her mother’d picked out. Jo’s room was mostly taken up by a bed covered with a handmade quilt—she didn’t even have a dressing table. The walls were bare. Hazel’s mother wouldn’t let her hang posters either, but she did stick clippings of Elvis on the edge of her mirror. She glanced up at Jo’s bookshelf: *Robinson Crusoe*, *King Solomon’s Mines*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. She grabbed a book. She’d be fine. She’d just read to pass the time.

After a few hours she was already having trouble concentrating. Every time footsteps echoed close to Jo’s door, she froze in place and held her breath. A fly had somehow found its way in the room, its persistent buzz around the window distracting her. *I heard a Fly buzz*, she thought. *I heard a Fly buzz*, but she couldn’t finish the line, her heart was already beating faster at the thought of that kind of stillness. Her mouth was cottony, and she could feel the pressure in her bladder. She glanced at the chamber pot on the floor next to her, but she remembered Jo’s warning. I can do this, she thought. I can make it until Granny goes to bed.

But by supertime she realized she couldn’t. The smell of baking yeast rolls wafted through the room and her mouth watered. Was anyone going to come check on her? The pressure was so great she felt as if her legs were going numb. Her face was hot and wet with tears as she finally broke down and squatted over the pot, the lingering acrid smell a humiliating reminder.

After supper, she heard footsteps echo toward the door. “Pour me another shot while I grab my autoharp,” Granny said. “I’m feeling good and warmed up. Play with me, Jo?”

Someone’s hand was on the doorknob. Hazel dropped to the floor, craning her head as far away from the pot as she could manage as she hovered over her own excrement.

“No, Granny!” Jo shouted, a little too loudly. “I want to hear you play for us.”

Granny laughed. “Dish me up another slice of pie and I’ll think on it.”

Hazel sighed as the footsteps moved on and the door to the front bedroom creaked.

When Jo finally came in with a plate of cold food, she grimaced. “Goddamn, Hazel. You could gag a maggot in here.” She grabbed the chamber pot, holding it at arm’s length while she used her other hand to pinch her nose, and marched out of the room. Hazel suffered through one more day of Granny’s visit, but she didn’t make the mistake of not rising well before dawn again.

Even after moving back into the front bedroom, she still felt hesitant to leave the confines of the room, begged Jo to let her bring a stack of books with her. The days blurred. She marked them by writing letters to Paul every night before bed, then stacking them inside her suitcase. In the letters she practiced being positive, upbeat. Trying to sound like she was living a normal life. She knew eventually she’d write the perfect one for Jo to carry to him. They could still get married. Though she spent most days in the bedroom other than meals and chores, after a couple weeks she became brave enough to pace the house for exercise while everyone was out tending the fields. But mostly she read or lay still, waiting.

And then it was her birthday: July 22<sup>nd</sup>. A small part of her had held hope that someone would remember. A slim package from her parents, a letter from Paul, an off-key rendition of “Happy Birthday” from

Jo. It seemed a lifetime ago when she and her best friend Leona had made plans to go to the Macon double-feature to see *The Cyclops* and *Daughter of Dr. Jekyll*. They would have treated themselves to Cokes, walked home for her mother's peach cobbler, vanilla ice cream. Leona had been there when Hazel knew something was wrong. At first she thought it seemed to be a touch of flu, a stomach virus, or undercooked food, but as Leona dutifully held her hair she'd realized it had been several weeks since her last period, since before spending Easter weekend at Granny's. She'd admitted she thought she might be with child, but Leona had just stared at her, incredulous. "But you can't be!" she'd exclaimed. "That can only happen to married women."

It had taken a couple of weeks to tell her parents. She'd written the letter to Paul first. She'd learned she could get married at sixteen with her parents' permission, and she'd just known they would allow it if she and Paul told them together and her parents saw how in love they were. But she never heard from Paul, and her mother started asking questions about her sickness. One night at supper, listening to her mother drone on about the new drapes she wanted to have made over clinks of silver and china, Hazel blurted, "I'm in trouble," before she could change her mind, then hung her head, clenching her napkin in her lap.

"Meaning what?" her father demanded.

Her mother covered her face with her hands and moaned. "Oh, you know exactly what that means."

Her father paused, then his look of surprise twisted into anger. "Is it so?" He banged his fist on the table. "Look at me, damn it. Have you been with a man?"

Hazel just stared at the uneaten lumps of corned beef and cabbage on her plate and cried. He nearly swung the door off its hinges leaving the room. Her mother fanned her face, blotted the running mascara beneath her eyes.



“Help me, Mother. I don’t know what to do. I wrote to—”

“I think you’ve done enough, young lady,” she said, and pressed her lips together, refreshing her lipstick. “Your father and I will decide what to do from here.”

That night Hazel listened at their door. No one spoke, but someone was crying. After a few minutes she realized the sobs were her father’s. She crawled back to her room and wept.

Two days later the doctor’s office called them in for results. Dr. Hutchins gestured for them to sit, but there were only two chairs. Her father stood beside her mother, his hand resting on her shoulder. Hutchins opened her file and tapped his finger on the paperwork inside. “The lab results have confirmed your daughter is expecting.” He cleared his throat. “Presuming the information she provided is accurate, I estimate her due date to be January 18<sup>th</sup>.”

“I could die from shame,” her mother said. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocketbook and held it to her face, shielding her stricken expression. “Please, Doctor. Isn’t there anything we can do?”

Hutchins offered her father a cigarette. “There is a Florence Crittenton Home for unwed mothers in Atlanta. If I were a man in your position, Mr. Davis, I’d send my daughter there. She doesn’t deserve to keep this baby.”

Hazel’s heartbeat pulsed in her eardrums. No one asked what she wanted. She realized no one trusted her to make a good decision. That evening her mother ordered her into the bathroom upstairs and told her to strip and get in the tub. She had the hot water bottle and hose prepared, the empty brown container of Lysol still sat on the counter. Hazel shivered and sobbed, her forehead pressed against the porcelain as the chemical smell filled her nostrils, cold fluid splashed her thighs. “No matter how we take care of this problem,” her

mother whispered, “you will not be bringing a baby into this home. I will not let you ruin the reputation of this family.”

After that night she’d never entertained the illusion that she had any say. Her father never asked to know the name of the boy. And in the end, it hadn’t mattered. Her parents would have planned to ship her off and give away the baby all the same.

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Hazel was reading when Jo came in.

“We’re fixin’ to leave,” Jo said. Jo and her parents were traveling to Granny’s annual reunion.

“You’ll take it to him?” She pulled the letter she’d selected from her suitcase.

Jo shrugged. “We’ll see about it.”

Hazel looked down at her toes. “Do you think he got it? The first one?”

All you think about is Paul.” Jo sat on the edge of the bed next to Hazel. “When will you start thinking about your baby?” she asked softly.

“It’s not my baby.”

“Sure is. You’ll be a mama soon, like it or not. When you gonna start acting like one?”

Hazel didn’t know how to answer. She was seventeen years old; she couldn’t support and raise a child. Her father had told her she needed to think about what was best for the baby, about the adoption that would bring joy to an infertile couple.

Jo sighed.

“If Paul—”

“How many weeks?”

“Sixteen.”

“Sixteen.” Jo yanked Hazel’s foot. “And look at you. You ain’t gained a damn pound.”

But Hazel spent the rest of the day thinking about Paul. Maybe he hadn’t gotten the letter. Maybe it had slipped from the mail carrier’s bag, went to the wrong address. Maybe he had written back, and her mother had thrown it away. Maybe he was worried sick because he hadn’t heard from her. She just knew he’d want to get married. He loved her. As the sun began to set, she fetched pen and paper to write her daily letter to Paul, the only sound its nib scratching against the fibers.

Even with the family gone to Granny’s she mostly stayed inside the threshold of her room. The summer heat had grown as July turned into August, and the air took on an eerie calm, too damp to move. Hazel lost her appetite for books. Instead she sat, waiting, perspiration rolling down her back, sticky under her breasts, and imagined the best and worst of news Jo might bring about Paul. Maybe Paul agreed with her parents, maybe he’d wait to find her until she’d had the baby and signed the adoption papers. But they could still get married, they could have another baby when they were ready. “You’ll forget about it after it’s over and done with,” her father had said. “You can go back to living a normal life.” If only she could have gone to find Paul herself. She’d spent the first two weeks of June researching her condition in the library after school. She thought now about those changes happening to her body, especially the placenta, that dark red disk that provided a barrier, filtering the toxins from her blood to protect the baby. The placenta was already moving as her womb continued to stretch and grow. And here she was, in stasis, possessing the only transient organ in the human body.

When Jo returned, Hazel knew something was wrong. She sat on the edge of Jo’s bed, watching her

unpack her knapsack without making eye contact. The late afternoon sun illuminated the particles in the air between them, the dust they both breathed. Her tongue felt pasted to the inside of her mouth. She was no longer sure which answer she was most afraid of.

“Your mama’s telling everybody you’ve got rheumatic fever.” Jo blew a stray strand of hair from her eyes. “Granny was worried about ya. She blessed your mama’s heart for leaving you home alone.”

There hadn’t been much in Jo’s knapsack. A few toiletries, a couple books, a change of clothes. Hazel watched Jo stack and restack the items on the quilt. “Hmmpf,” Hazel said finally.

“Hazel, he’s...” Jo paused. “He’s gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“Gone. Joined up. Marines, I think.” She refolded a blouse.

“And the letter?”

“I left it, but no one was home.” Jo crossed her arms across her chest. “So.”

“So?”

“So that’s it. There’s nothing left to tell.”

But there had to be. “Do you think he tried to get me a letter first? I’ve been thinking Mother might have kept it from me.”

“Doesn’t much matter.” She shook out a pair of dungarees. “You’re on your own now. Always were.”

“But maybe this is part of his plan, a way to support a family. We’re in love. When he comes back on leave—”

“Do you even know that he’s the father?”

“What? Of course I do.” Hazel could feel hot tears studding her cheeks. “What are you accusing me of?” She clenched the fabric of her dress.

“I have no idea what your life is like in Macon.” Jo paused. “Neither does Paul.”

Hazel pushed Jo away from her. She threw herself onto her bed, pressing her face so flat against the quilt that she could hardly breathe. When she heard Jo’s footsteps enter the doorway behind her, she didn’t look up.

“Look,” Jo said, “you ain’t got to like what I have to say, but you’ve got to stop with this Paul bullshit. All you talk about is Paul.” She mimicked Hazel in a high-pitched voice. “Where’s Paul? What am I going to do about Paul? I’m sick of it.” She turned and walked away.

Hazel raked her fingers down the fabric of the quilt, her nails catching and ripping at the stitches. She wished Jo would be her friend, her ally again, but things hadn’t been the same since that Easter weekend at Granny’s. Jo and Paul had finally managed to get the Commodore running that spring, and Paul had promised he would take Hazel out in it the next time she came to Dublin. After hours of begging, she and Jo had finally convinced their parents and Granny to let them go to the drive-in with Paul and his cousin Robert to see a western called *The Tall T*. She’d been impressed to see Paul wearing a button-down shirt and slacks, and wished it hadn’t been so chilly she needed a sweater over her dress.

Robert hadn’t dressed at all—he slouched in the back seat in a wrinkled shirt and torn 501s. But then Jo hadn’t either. It didn’t matter. After listening to Robert groan about his shot in the minors being ruined because the local team had been dissolved, Jo resolutely denounced him as a goober when he left with borrowed money to buy them all popcorn and Cokes. Paul was nothing like his cousin. He was finishing his senior year, but he’d

already been working part time repair jobs as an electrician after school, hoped to get a job with Utilities after graduation.

When Robert returned, Paul popped the glove box and pulled out a fifth of whiskey, carefully pouring the amber liquid through the long glass necks of their Cokes. Hazel giggled and teased and flirted, her skin flush with the alcohol, with the awareness of Paul's hand on her upper thigh. She realized she may have drunk her Coke too quickly when she stumbled getting out of the car to visit the ladies' with Jo. "Watch yourself," Jo said, giving her a disapproving look. When Robert went to buy more Cokes, Paul asked Jo to go with him. Jo tried to protest, but Paul stood firm. "Don't make me go, Hazel," she'd pleaded, but Hazel had waved her away.

As Paul cupped her breasts through her clothes and kissed her neck, Hazel felt electrified by his desire. It wasn't long before Jo was rapidly knocking on the fogged glass of the passenger window. Paul moaned, but didn't unlock the door. "Sneak out with me tonight." He kissed her bottom lip. "After everyone's in bed." Hazel didn't say anything. Jo pounded on the window again. "Come on, baby, please. I need you," he whispered, nibbling her ear. She shook her head yes. Paul grinned and kissed her nose as he reached across and popped the lock. Jo ripped open the door. "Unbelievable," she'd said, and refused to say anything more the rest of the night, her arms tightly crossed as she glared out the passenger window.

Hazel didn't say anything to Jo that night as they got ready for bed, climbed into their cots on the sleeping porch, but as soon as the adults shut off the last of the lights, Jo laid into her. "I'm so mad I could drown puppies." She spat on the floor of the porch. "Leave me standing outside, like I'm some vagabond. You wouldn't even be riding in that car if it wasn't for me."

Hazel shrugged, still feeling a little lightheaded from the whiskey. "Sorry."

“Sorry doesn’t cut it.” Jo rolled over and turned her back to her.

She knew Jo wouldn’t be so mad if she understood how Hazel actually felt, but Jo had never been in love. A stiff coil of energy beneath the covers, Hazel lay still, wondering how much time had passed as the chorus of crickets became a dull roar. When the moon rode a little higher in the sky, she pushed back the covers and tip-toed to the door. At the sigh of the screen Jo hissed, “Where are you going?”

“Paul’s.”

“You’re a damn fool.”

Hazel stuck her head back inside. “A little petting’s okay when you’re in love.”

Jo sat up in bed, but her face was concealed in shadow. “If it’s love that’s making you an idiot, I don’t want nothing to do with it.”

Stepping down into the dewy grass, Hazel held the screen door until it softly latched and dashed across the yard and down the road, ruddy clay clinging to her moist heels.

\* \* \*

On the morning of September 2<sup>nd</sup> Hazel woke, drenched in sweat. She’d dreamed of drowning in the river, twisting helplessly beneath the surface in the current. It should have been her first day of senior year. She imagined waking up in her room and getting ready, eating breakfast, then walking down red-bricked High Street to Montpelier Avenue, to the girls’ school. Her father loved their hilltop neighborhood, bragged about living on the same street where the poet, Sidney Lanier, had lived. Even on hot days it was a shady, tree-lined walk which took her along the edge of Mercer University, where her father worked. She tried to remember her courses, but it all seemed so far away. She knew they’d put her in higher level math and science after she’d

received the best marks of anyone in her class. This time last year she'd been dreaming of applying to Wellesley, and now... The rumors would start today. She wouldn't even see Jo until she returned from her first day of school. It hadn't rained in two weeks, and the wind blew dust through the screens. All she could taste was clay. She missed Macon. Missed looking south down the hill toward High Street's intersection with High Place, where—past the brick walls and ivory spires of the First Baptist Church—she could see the landscape shift and level out in a distant blue haze. Macon was a fall line city: where the rolling hills of the Piedmont plateau meet the level terrain of the coastal flatlands along the Ocmulgee river, causing the rushing water to decline rapidly toward sea level. And what else was there to do at this point, but drift downstream?

Jo came in, a huge smile spread from ear to ear. She was still breathing heavily from her ten-mile trek from the county high school. "We're gonna have a Sadie Hawkins dance this year." She leaned back against the door jam. "Teacher said that means the girls can ask the guys. At lunch, Ida said she wasn't wasting any time. She was gonna wait on the bleachers and ask Cole after practice this very afternoon." She stared off for a moment before she noticed Hazel, doubled over on the bed, clutching her abdomen, the small bump beneath her skin. "Hazel?"

Hazel rolled partway onto her back. "I keep getting these stabs of pain."

Jo kneeled next to her, pushing damp strands of hair from her face. "Maybe the baby's kicking." She laughed. "Or maybe you just have gas."

Hazel grabbed Jo's fingers and squeezed. She noticed a ring hanging around Jo's neck. "Where'd you get that?"

Jo looked down at her chest. "It's a silver quarter ring." She tucked it into the neck of her shirt. "Daddy



made it for my birthday.”

Hazel groaned and rolled back over, grimacing with another stab of pain. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

“Oh, you’re all right. You’re over the hump now. Ike’ll still be president when this is over.” Jo twisted her fingers out from Hazel’s. “I think the Eagles are going to be good this year. I watched them conditioning in the field for a while before I headed home.”

Hazel tucked her knees up as far as they would go. “Will you bring me something to eat? I feel faint.”

“You’re fine. The heat’s just getting to your head.” Jo stomped off to the kitchen.

Hazel rolled over again. She felt a strange tingling sensation in her legs, as if they were going numb under the weight of sandbags.

When Jo returned she had a plateful of grits and okra with a piece of fat back. “Sit up, now.”

Hazel pushed herself up with her feet.

“You need to eat this. Look like you’ve been sucking hind titty.” Jo sat at the end of the bed while Hazel took slow, deliberate bites. “You know pregnant women’s supposed to glow. You’re too damn skinny.”

“I know.” Hazel put her fork down. “It’s just, I just—”

“So what’re you gonna name her?” Jo gestured for Hazel to keep eating.

“Her?”

“Yeah, her. Your baby.”

“I don’t know what sex it’s going to be.”

“Shit, I do. They say girls steal their mother’s beauty. I think your girl’s got your glow.” Jo paused.

“Pearl.”

“Pearl?”

“Yeah, Pearl.” She watched Hazel finish the last of the grits, then took the plate. “You and Hester have a lot in common, don’t you think?” She smirked.

Hazel rolled her back toward the door. Naming the baby. She had assumed someone else would have that honor, that her job was just to carry the burden, nothing more. Maybe Patsy, after Granny. She wondered which name Paul would pick. But what was the point? She would probably never hold this baby in her arms. She flattened her palms around her abdomen, felt the radiating heat. And what if it was a girl? It would have been better to have a boy. A boy couldn’t get pregnant. She bent forward so that her chin was practically resting on her chest and whispered, “I’m sorry.”

That night she dreamed she gave birth to a little girl who stood up and walked right out of the room in a blinding white dress and saddle shoes, her auburn hair clipped back in two barrettes. Hazel followed at a distance as the little girl opened the front gate by herself and strode down the middle of the dirt road toward town. When Hazel trailed too closely, the little girl turned to face her. “You know who I am,” she said. *Pearl*, Hazel thought. The little girl smiled, but when Hazel reached for her she turned away and continued down the road, not a spot of clay stuck to her, not even the soles of her shoes. Hazel ached as she ran after her, but the little girl moved farther and farther away until she was no more than a glowing speck of white on the horizon.

\* \* \*

The third trimester was the most difficult. The days were marked with heartburn, swollen feet and ankles, tingling wrists and hands. Her letters to Paul were sometimes no longer than his name scrawled at the

top of the page. She found herself going to bed earlier and earlier each night. That's when the baby would start moving. More like a fluttering at first, tiny hands and feet tickling her from within, and then more distinct kicks and jabs. Sometimes she would rub her belly after to see if she could make the baby kick the same place twice. Once the baby kicked so hard Hazel doubled over in pain at the desk, her pen still clenched in her left hand. "Put your weapon down, Mistress Athena." Hazel gingerly rubbed her sore belly. "Wait for word that the world is ready for you."

Sitting up in the chair, Hazel paused before crossing Paul's name from the top of the paper. *Dear Pearl,* she wrote. *You will be born in a room with crisp linens on the bed and sunlight streaming through window. The air will smell clean, and the nurses' shoes will squeak on the freshly waxed floors. Your father will come carrying a bouquet of white lilies the size of dinner plates. He will plant a kiss on your forehead as he sweeps you from the crook of your mother's elbow and lays your small, swaddled body against his thighs, bouncing you lightly as you squirm and grasp the tip of his pinky in your tiny fist. He will laugh about the strength of your grip and confess his love for you as you fall back into sleep. Your parents will sit in silence of your slumber, watching your chest rise and fall with the predictability of empires.*

As the days grew colder, Hazel started bleeding. Light spotting at first, which grew heavier and heavier. She was terrified to tell anyone, to make it real. Saturday afternoon, Jo came in with her checker board. While they played, Jo described the yellow and ivory fabric Shirley had brought home to sew Jo's dress for the dance and mentioned they might be able to buy some tulle to make the skirt elegant and full. "Mama even spent a nickel on a store-bought pattern," Jo said, smiling bashfully. But Hazel could hardly concentrate on the conversation. Before their first game had even ended, she let the news slip from her lips as she slid one of her

red disks across the board. Jo didn't say a word. She just packed up the game and left.

A few hours later, Jo came back with Shirley. "I sent for the midwife, Helen," Shirley said, pressing the top of her fingertips against Hazel's forehead. "But unless we have to, don't dare tell your mother I did any such thing."

Hazel had no desire to tell her mother any of this but feared they wouldn't have a choice. "What if I need a doctor?" she asked.

Shirley sat down on the quilt next to her. "Helen's delivered most of the babies around here, including Jo. She'll know what to do."

"It ain't like having babies is something new," Jo said. "Granny wouldn't have even let a midwife touch her."

Shirley laughed and smiled at Hazel. "Bless her. The day your mother was born, Granny took a couple shots of whiskey, went into the bedroom, and shut the door. Wasn't an hour later she came out with the cord already tied up to bathe Muriel. She caught every one of her babies herself."

Hazel couldn't even imagine such courage, but she also knew the risks, the number of women who died in childbirth.

When Helen arrived, she squeezed Hazel's hand and said hello, but she was all business. Helen checked her and the baby over: measuring her belly, listening to the strength of each heart. "Has anyone in your family had pre-eclampsia?" Helen asked.

"Not to my knowledge," Shirley answered, a thin thread of concern knitting its way across her brow.

"Your blood pressure's on the high end of normal, but your fundal height's a little low," Helen said to

Hazel, pulling the shift dress Shirley had sewn for her back down over the dome of her belly. “No reason for concern just yet. In the meantime you need bed rest. Tell your aunt if you have new symptoms.”

“Thank you, Miss Helen.” Shirley smiled as Helen packed her bag and stood to leave. “Now come on in the kitchen. I’ve got a jar of Granny’s strawberry jam I’ve been saving.”

“Give her a small dose of aspirin each day, just in case,” Helen said, and patted Shirley’s shoulder. “I know you’ll find me if anything changes.”

“I want to see a doctor,” Hazel said.

Shirley looked back over her shoulder as she guided Helen out of the room. “Didn’t you hear Helen? You’re fine.” She shut the door behind her.

Hazel turned to Jo. “I mean it. I want to go to an actual doctor. Someone with, with training and expertise.”

Jo chuckled. “It doesn’t matter what you want. We can’t afford to get you one.”

Hazel pounded her fist against the mattress. “What about the envelope?” she demanded. “The money Mother made you take for me?”

“That money’s spent.” Jo stood up to leave. “You’ve been living here for months, and you ain’t cheap.”

Bed rest became easy once the nausea began. Hazel began cataloging sounds: the house sounds of muffled voices, clanking plates or tins, something scraping, the radio; the outdoor sounds of farm animals, rustling corn, a methodical clanking. She held her breath each time footsteps echoed too close. But when the door opened it was almost always Jo, collecting the chamber pot or bringing potted ham, canned okra and onions, corn bread, biscuits. Jo hardly spoke a word to her anymore. The bedroom had turned into a cage, and

she was the animal. She worried about being so dependent on Jo. She seemed more and more sullen each day.

The baby was more restless than she was—her belly button was sore from all the squirming and kicking. Sometimes she would try to picture what Pearl looked like, imagined holding her in her arms, smoothing a tuft of auburn hair beneath a knit cap, pulling back a pale pink blanket to count tiny fingers and wrinkled toes. She knew talking to her and visualizing her would only make it worse when the time came, but she couldn't help herself. Maybe she deserved to feel the pain of separation, to have the last bit of Paul severed forever.

She lost track of the days, slipping in and out of consciousness beneath the quilt. She'd been writing letters to Pearl each night, telling her stories about her first skinned knee, her first spelling test, her first trip to Atlanta to see the lionesses at the zoo, but Hazel started slipping into sleep before she could even write the stories.

And then she heard the scratching. In the wall, right above her head. She thought she was hearing things at first, but each night it seemed to grow louder, closer, more persistent. As if something was trying to break through. She mentioned it one night to Jo when she brought a glass of water and an aspirin. "Could be a rat," Jo said. "They get stuck in the wall sometimes." She pounded her fist against the plaster. "If it dies in there we'll have to cut a hole to get it out. There ain't no getting rid of that stink." Jo held out the aspirin. "Your mama and daddy are coming soon."

"Already?" Hazel swallowed it and handed back the glass. "To take me away?"

"Mama says next week. I guess a bed opened up."

Hazel rolled over on her side. Jo waited a few minutes before leaving. Maybe she had wanted to say something. But what was left to say? Hazel sat cross-legged in bed and pulled up her dress, letting hot tears

splash on the taut skin of her belly and run down below to her pelvic bone, her feet. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.” But what was the use? Her mind kept returning to the fall line.

Hazel grabbed her pen and paper. *I never told you, Pearl*, Hazel wrote, her pen scratching furiously against the paper, *the story of how you were born. Your mother grew so restless she decided she couldn’t stay on the farm a moment longer. She got up out of bed and walked barefoot into town, her thumb turned toward the road. She hitched a ride back to Macon with a farmer, rode in the back between hay bales that cushioned each bounce, clenching one of the straws between her teeth as the wind whipped her hair. He dropped her off in front of her childhood home, and she stood across the street on the sidewalk, looking up at the towering oaks dripping with Spanish moss that shaded the stone steps up to the front porch. She never approached the house; instead she walked down the street toward the church spires and her view back in the direction of the farm. But before she could reach the end of the road, she felt the first sharp pain of contractions and stopped in the park to her right, relishing the soft carpet of grass beneath her feet. When she finally looked up, she was astonished to realize what the view to the southeast of her hilltop neighborhood had always been: the Macon Hospital.*

Exhausted, Hazel crawled back under the quilt and lay still, waiting for the baby to kick, willing her to make soft flutters or even a hard punch. But the baby didn’t move.

\* \* \*

Three days later she woke before dawn with pain searing along her back, cramping in her lower abdomen. The rat was scratching in the wall behind her, his claws catching on the wood lath beneath the plaster. Shivering, she tucked the quilt under her chin and curled beneath the blanket. “Go away,” she whispered. “Please, just go away.”

Jo came in mid-morning, her hair wrapped in cans pinned tightly against her scalp. She twirled into the room, holding Hazel's breakfast at arm's length like a dance partner. "Tonight's the dance," she said. "I've never felt so fancy, and I haven't even put the dress on. Wait till you see it. And Mama's helping me get all done up with lipstick and rouge and everything. She says I'll look pretty as a peach."

"Something's not right. I think I'm having contractions." She could feel her uterus tightening and softening against her fingertips.

Jo shut the door behind her. "Can't I just have one minute that's about me for once? You're fine. I'm sure your exaggerating."

"She's coming."

"Who?"

"The baby," Hazel gritted her teeth. "She's coming."

"Can't be. You ain't due 'til January." Jo's eyes grew wide as another wave hit Hazel who turned her face to groan into the pillow.

"She is. Go get Aunt Shirley. She needs to call a doctor. I need medical care."

"I can't," Jo hissed. "I was coming in here to tell you that Granny's on her way. She's coming to see me off to the dance. You don't have to move rooms—she's not staying the night—but you have got to pull yourself together." Jo bit her knuckle. "Whatever it is, it'll pass. Let's—uh. Here, let's get you a glass of water. Why don't you try shifting positions?"

Hazel pleaded, "Please, Jo. I don't care if Granny finds out. Maybe she knows something about Paul."

"Forget Paul." Jo turned to face Hazel, the glass of water clenched between both hands. "He knew."



“What do you mean?”

“He was gone before I got to Granny’s.” She sat on the edge of the bed. “But I knocked on the door and talked to his mama.”

Hazel’s face grew hot. “She knew?”

“Don’t I know it. She cussed me up and down, said I was just another floozy and we best stay away from her family.” Jo set down the glass to rub her temples. “I didn’t tell a soul, of course, but I don’t think Granny knows. You know Granny don’t keep secrets.”

Hazel stared up at the bead-board ceiling. “It wouldn’t matter, not now.”

“Of course it matters.”

“And the other letter?”

“What’d you think he was gonna do? Nobody was supporting a marriage.” Jo leaned forward to look Hazel straight in the eyes. “Be honest with yourself for a moment. Did you ever tell your mama and daddy about Paul?”

“Well, no—”

“And why not, huh? Because deep down you know they never would’ve approved. Paul’s just a working class nobody with clay dirt caked on his boots like everybody else around here, and now that your mama’s clawed her way up to a new life in the city, she thinks her shit don’t stink, just like the rest of them.” She balled her fists in frustration. “And you,” she spit. “You just wanted someone to fool around with. You were never serious about it. You were just dragging along the poor boy’s heart.”

“That’s not true—”

“Yes it is, Hazel.” Jo said. “You’ve been talking for years about applying to that school all the way up in Massachusetts. Paul’s plan was to stay here and work for Utilities. Admit it. He was just practice for those college boys. You were going to leave him behind.”

“That’s not true!” Hazel sobbed. “He’s the one who joined the military.”

“Maybe they made him go.” Jo clenched a pillow between her hands. “Or maybe he just run off like a scalded haint. It don’t matter now.”

Another wave of pain spread through Hazel like wildfire and she doubled over again.

“Look, you’re going to be all right.” Jo stood. “Drink some water. I’ll try to talk to Mama as quick as I can.”

“Just go.” Hazel clenched her eyes. “Please, go.”

The contractions kept coming all afternoon and into the evening. Jo hadn’t come back with Aunt Shirley, and Hazel realized she wouldn’t. No one was going to come to her rescue. Not now, not ever. Just then a car pulled down the drive. She recognized the roar of its engine. They were here. Back to take her to the girls’ home. She could see all the doctors she wanted now, but she felt both panicked and relieved. She pulled aside the curtain of the front window and let her face appear for the first time. But it wasn’t her parents’ Opel station wagon, it was Paul’s green and white Commodore, the thick clay clinging to his white walled tires as he parked in the drive. She gasped, gripping the windowsill. He was here. After all this time he was finally here.

She could tell he was nervous as he got out of the car. He tugged at the tie of his suit as if it were choking him. He must have felt so terribly for taking so long to find her. She wondered if he had gotten her letter. But nothing mattered anymore. She didn’t need a suit or an apology or—oh!—flowers. He pulled a

bouquet of flowers from the passenger seat and shut the door. Hazel licked her palm and tried to smooth her hair, frowned at the stains on her shift dress. She wished Paul didn't have to see her this way, but it didn't matter. All she needed now was to feel the warmth of his body pressed against hers, get into that car and never look back. He smiled—a heartbreaking smile with teeth and dimples and eyebrows raised in a way that showed his gentleness, his vulnerability—

And then she saw Jo. Her copper blond hair cascaded down her back in loose curls, complimenting the yellow and ivory print dress Aunt Shirley had made for her. She could hardly believe how breathtaking Jo looked. Jo, whose hair had always been pulled back into a ponytail, whose figure had always been hidden inside her overalls, until now. She took small steps, unsteady on her heels, until she reached Paul and pulled him close for a kiss. Full, on the lips.

Hazel felt faint. She didn't understand. Paul was here for her. He'd come to rescue her. She swung her legs over the side of the mattress, and with one hand holding the base of her belly, she lurched toward the door and crossed the threshold. Sliding one hand down the wall, she shuffled toward Aunt Shirley, who was closing the front door behind her.

“Heavens to Betsy, girl,” Shirley hurried over and put her arm around Hazel's waist. “You look like you've seen a ghost.” She turned and slowly walked Hazel back toward the bedroom. “Jo told me you weren't feeling well today.”

Hazel stumbled and shook her head.

“Careful now. You just missed Jo on her way to the school dance. I wish you'd seen her—all dolled up and happy as a dead pig in the sunshine. You remember Paul, don't you? The boy down the street from

Granny's?"

Hazel tried to form the words, but nothing came.

"Of course you do. Such a nice young man, and a catch for Jo. They've got so much in common. And, well, there's not an awful lot to choose from around here."

Hazel stumbled. Shirley shifted her grip on her waist.

"You're all right now. Almost there. Golly, we all thought both you girls had a crush on him for a time." She chuckled. "Wouldn't that have been a pickle? Love can make fools of us all, that's for sure."

As Shirley cracked the door open to the front bedroom a rat darted out of the room between their legs. Shirley yelped and let go of Hazel's waist. Hazel's knees buckled and she fell to the floor, her arms instinctively circling her belly, her Pearl. But, for once, she wasn't scared. She knew now there wasn't any farther to fall.