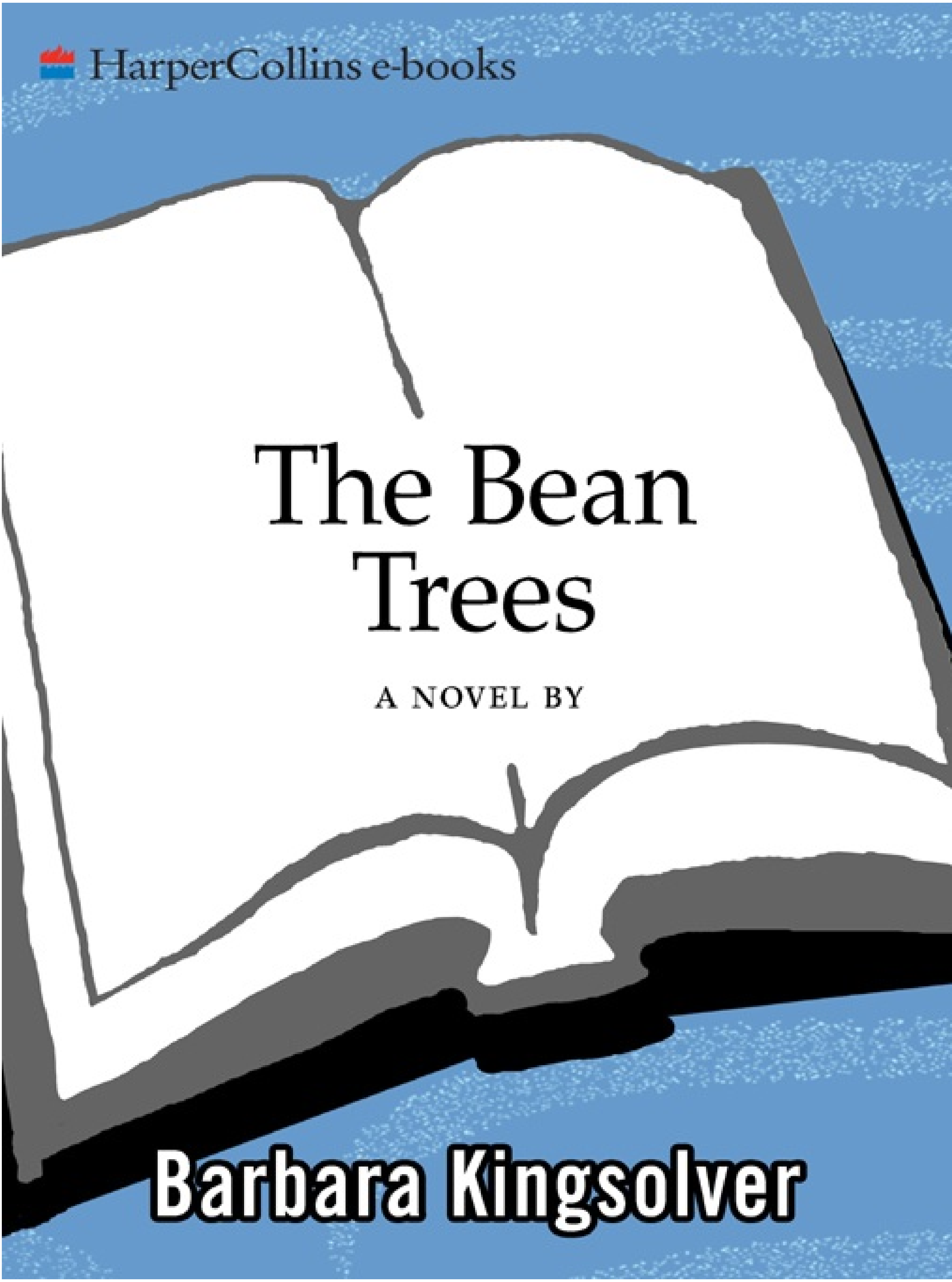
HarperCollins e-books
The Bean Trees
A NOVEL BY
Barbara Kingsolver

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For Ismene,
and all the mothers who have lost her.

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ONE

The One to Get Away

I have been afraid of putting air in a tire ever since I saw a tractor tire blow up and throw Newt Hardbine's father over the top of the Standard Oil sign. I'm not lying. He got stuck up there. About nineteen people congregated during the time it took for Norman Strick to walk up to the Courthouse and blow the whistle for the volunteer fire department. They eventually did come with the ladder and haul him down, and he wasn't dead but lost his hearing and in many other ways was never the same afterward. They said he overfilled the tire.

Newt Hardbine was not my friend, he was just one of the big boys who had failed every grade at least once and so was practically going on twenty in the sixth grade, sitting in the back and flicking little wads of chewed paper into my hair. But the day I saw his daddy up there like some old overalls slung over a fence, I had this feeling about what Newt's whole life was going to amount to, and I felt sorry for him. Before that exact moment I don't believe I had given much thought to the future.

My mama said the Hardbines had kids just about as fast as they could fall down the well and drown. This must not have been entirely true, since they were abundant in Pittman County and many survived to adulthood. But that was the general idea.

Which is not to say that we, me and Mama, were any better than Hardbines or had a dime to our name. If you were to look at the two of us, myself and Newt side by side in the sixth grade, you could have pegged us for brother and sister. And for all I ever knew of my own daddy I can't say we weren't except for Mama swearing up and down that he was nobody I knew and was long gone besides. But w were cut out of basically the same mud, I suppose, just two more dirty-kneed kids scrapping to beat hell and trying to land on our feet. You couldn't have said, anyway, which one would stay right where he was, and which would be the one to get away.

Missy was what everyone called me, not that it was my name, but because when I was three supposedly I stamped my foot and told my own mother not to call me Marietta but *Miss* Marietta, as had to call all the people including children in the houses where she worked Miss this or Mister that, and so she did from that day forward. Miss Marietta and later on just Missy.

The thing you have to understand is, it was just like Mama to do that. When I was just the littles kid I would go pond fishing of a Sunday and bring home the boniest mess of blue-gills and maybe a bass the size of your thumb, and the way Mama would carry on you would think I'd caught the famou big ~~lunker in Shep's Lake that old men were always chewing their tobacco and thinking about.~~ "That my big girl bringing home the bacon," she would say, and cook those things and serve them up like Thanksgiving for the two of us.

I loved fishing those old mud-bottomed ponds. Partly because she would be proud of whatever I dragged out, but also I just loved sitting still. You could smell leaves rotting into the cool mud and watch the Jesus bugs walk on the water, their four little feet making dents in the surface but never falling through. And sometimes you'd see the big ones, the ones nobody was ever going to hook, slipping away under the water like dark-brown dreams.

By the time I was in high school and got my first job and all the rest, including the whole awful story about Newt Hardbine which I am about to tell you, he was of course not in school anymore. He was setting tobacco alongside his half-crippled daddy and by that time had gotten a girl in trouble, to so he was married. It was Jolene Shanks and everybody was a little surprised at her, or anyway pretended to be, but not at him. Nobody expected any better of a Hardbine.

But I stayed in school. I was not the smartest or even particularly outstanding but I was there an staying out of trouble and I intended to finish. This is not to say that I was unfamiliar with the back seat of a Chevrolet. I knew the scenery of Greenup Road, which we called Steam-It-Up Road, and I knew what a pecker looked like, and none of these sights had so far inspired me to get hogtied to a future as a tobacco farmer's wife. Mama always said barefoot and pregnant was not my style. She knew.

It was in this frame of mind that I made it to my last year of high school without event. Believe me in those days the girls were dropping by the wayside like seeds off a poppyseed bun and you learned to look at every day as a prize. You'd made it that far. By senior year there were maybe two boys to every one of us, and we believed it was our special reward when we got this particular scienc teacher by the name of Mr. Hughes Walter.

Now *him.* He came high-railing in there like some blond Paul McCartney, sitting on the desk in his tight jeans and his clean shirt sleeves rolled up just so, with the cuffs turned in. He made our country boys look like the hand-me-down socks Mama brought home, all full of their darns and mends. Hughes Walter was no Kentucky boy. He was from out of state, from some city college up north, which was why, everyone presumed, his name was backwards.

Not that I was moony over him, at least no more than the standard of the day, which was plain to see from the walls of the girls' bathroom. You could have painted a barn with all the lipstick that wer into "H. W. enraptured forever" and things of that kind. This is not what I mean. But he changed my life, there is no doubt.

He did this by getting me a job. I had never done anything more interesting for a living than to help Mama with the for-pay ironing on Sundays and look after the brats of the people she cleaned for Or pick bugs off somebody's bean vines for a penny apiece. But this was a real job at the Pittman County Hospital, which was one of the most important and cleanest places for about a hundred miles Mr. Walter had a wife, Lynda, whose existence was ignored by at least the female portion of the high school but who was nevertheless alive and well, and was in fact one of the head nurses. She asked Hughes Walter if there was some kid in his classes that could do odd jobs down there after school an on Saturdays, and after graduation maybe it could work out to be a full-time thing, and he put the question to us just like that.

Surely you’d think he would have picked one of the Candy Stripers, town girls with money for the pink-and-white uniforms and prissing around the bedpans on Saturdays like it was the holiest substance on God’s green earth they’d been trusted to carry. Surely you would think he’d pick Earl Wickentot, who could dissect an earthworm without fear. That is what I told Mama on the back porc Mama in her armhole apron in the caned porch chair and me on the stepstool, the two of us shelling out peas into a newspaper.

“Earl Wickentot my hind foot” is what Mama said. “Girl, I’ve seen you eat a worm whole when you were five. He’s no better than you are, and none of them Candy Stripers either.” Still, I believed that’s who he would choose, and I told her so.

She went to the edge of the porch and shook a handful of pea hulls out of her apron onto the flowerbed. It was marigolds and Hot Tamale cosmos. Both Mama and I went in for bright colors. It was a family trait. At school it was a piece of cake to pick me out of a lineup of town girls in their beige or pink Bobbie Brooks matching sweater-and-skirt outfits. Medgar Biddle, who was once my boyfriend for three weeks including the homecoming dance, used to say that I dressed like an eye tes I suppose he meant the type they give you when you go into the army, to see if you’re color blind, no the type that starts with the big E. He said it when we were breaking up, but I was actually kind of flattered. I had decided early on that if I couldn’t dress elegant, I’d dress memorable.

Mama settled back into the cane chair and scooped up another apronful of peas. Mama was not one of these that wore tight jeans to their kids’ softball games. She was older than that. She had already been through a lot of wild times before she had me, including one entire husband by the nam of Foster Greer. He was named after Stephen Foster, the sweet-faced man in the seventh-grade histor book who wrote “My Old Kentucky Home,” but twenty-two years after naming him that, Foster Greer’s mother supposedly died of a broken heart. He was famous for drinking Old Grand Dad with a gasoline funnel, and always told Mama never to pull anything cute like getting pregnant. Mama says trading Foster for me was the best deal this side of the Jackson Purchase.

She snapped about three peas to every one of mine. Her right hand twisted over and back as she snapped a little curl of string off the end of each pod and rolled out the peas with her thumb.

“The way I see it,” she said, “a person isn’t nothing more than a scarecrow. You, me, Earl Wickentot, the President of the United States, and even God Almighty, as far as I can see. The only difference between one that stands up good and one that blows over is what kind of a stick they’re stuck up there on.”

I didn’t say anything for a while, and then I told her I would ask Mr. Walter for the job.

There wasn’t any sound but Henry Biddle using a hay mower on his front yard, down the road, and our peas popping open to deliver their goods out into the world.

She said, “Then what? What if he don’t know you’re good enough for it?”

I said, “I’ll tell him. If he hasn’t already given it to a Candy Striper.”

Mama smiled and said, “Even if.”

But he hadn’t. After two days passed with nothing more said about it, I stayed after class and tol him that if he didn’t have his mind made up yet he’d just as well let me do it, because I would do a right smart job. I had stayed out of trouble this long, I said, and didn’t intend to let my effort go to waste just because I was soon going to graduate. And he said all right, he would tell Lynda, and that I should go up there Monday afternoon and she would tell me what to do.

I had expected more of a fight, and when the conversation went straight down the road this way took me a minute to think what to say next. He had to have about the cleanest fingernails in Pittman County.

I asked him how come he was giving the job to me. He said because I was the first one to ask. Just like that. When I think of all the time and effort girls in that school put into daydreaming about staying after school to make an offer to Hughes Walter, and I was the only one to do it. Though of course it was more a question of making the right kind of offer.

It turned out that I was to work mainly for Eddie Rickett, who was in charge of the lab—this wa blood and pee and a few worse things though I was not about to complain—and the x-rays. Eddie was an old freckled thing, not really old but far enough along that everybody noticed he hadn’t gotten married. And Eddie being the type that nobody made it their business to ask him why not.

He didn’t treat me like teacher’s pet or any kind of prize-pony thing, which was okay with me. With Eddie it was no horseradish, I was there to do business and I did it. Lab and x-ray were in two connected rooms with people always coming in and out through the swinging doors with their hands full and their shoes squeaking on the black linoleum. Before long I was just another one of them, filing papers in the right place and carrying human waste products without making a face.

I learned things. I learned to look in a microscope at red blood cells, platelets they are called though they aren’t like plates but little catchers’ mitts, and to count them in the little squares. It was the kind of thing I’m positive could make you go blind if you kept it up, but luckily there were not th many people in Pittman County who needed their platelets counted on any given day.

I hadn’t been there even one whole week when hell busted loose. It was Saturday. These orderlie came in from the emergency room yelling for Eddie to get ready for a mess in x-ray. A couple of Hardbines, they said, just the way people always said that. Eddie asked how much of a hurry it was, and if he’d need help to hold them still, and they said half and half, one of them is hot and the other cold.

I didn’t have time to think about what that meant before Jolene Shanks, or Hardbine rather, was rolled in on a wheelchair and then came a stretcher right behind her, which they parked out in the hallway. Jolene looked like the part of the movie you don’t want to watch. There was a wet tongue of blood from her right shoulder all the way down her bosom, and all the color was pulled out of her lip and face, her big face like a piece of something cut out of white dough. She was fighting and cursing, though, and clearly a far cry from dead. When I took one of her wrists to help her out of the wheelchair it twisted away under my fingers like a sleeve full of cables. She was still yelling at Newt “Don’t do it,” and things like that. “Go ahead and kill your daddy for all I care, he’s the one you want not yourself and not me.” Then she would go still for a minute, and then she’d start up again. I wondered what Newt’s daddy had to do with it.

They said Doc Finchler was called and on his way, but that Nurse MacCullers had checked her over and it wasn’t as bad as it looked. The bleeding was stopped, but they would need x-rays to see where the bullet was and if it had cracked anything on its way in. I looked at Eddie wanting to know would I have to get her out of her top and brassière into one of the gowns, and couldn’t help thinking about bloodstains all over the creation, having been raised you might say in the cleaning-up business But Eddie said no, that we didn’t want to move her around that much. Doc would just have to see around the hooks and the snaps.

“Lucky for you he was a bad shot,” Eddie was telling Jolene as he straightened her arm out on th table, which I thought to be rude under the circumstances but then that was Eddie. I held her by the elbows trying not to hurt her any more than she was already hurt, but poor thing she was hysterical ar fighting me and wouldn’t shut up. In my mind’s eye I could see myself in my lead apron standing ov Jolene, and this is exactly what I looked like: a butcher holding down a calf on its way to becoming a cut of meat.

Then Eddie said we were done, for me to keep her in the room next door until they could see if the pictures came out; they might have to do them over if she’d moved. Then he yelled for the other one, and two guys rolled in the long stretcher with the sheet over it and started hoisting it up on the table like something served up on a big dinner plate. I stood there like a damn fool until Eddie yelled at me to get on out and look after Jolene, he wasn’t needing me to hold this one down because he wasn’t going anyplace. Just another pretty picture for the coroner’s office, Eddie said, but I couldn’t stop staring. Maybe I’m slow. I didn’t understand until just then that under that sheet, that was Newt.

In the room next door there was a stretcher intended for Jolene, but she would have none of it. She took one of the hard wooden seats that swung down from the wall, and sat there blubbering, saying, “Thank God the baby was at Mom’s.” Saying, “What am I going to do now?” She had on this pink top that was loose so it could have gone either way, if you were pregnant or if you weren’t. As fa as I know she wasn’t just then. It had these little openings on the shoulders and bows on the sleeves, though of course it was shot to hell now.

Jolene was a pie-faced, heavy girl and I always thought she looked the type to have gone and found trouble just to show you didn’t have to be a cheerleader to be fast. The trouble with that is it doesn’t get you anywhere, no more than some kid on a bicycle going no hands and no feet up and down past his mother and hollering his head off for her to look. She’s not going to look till he runs into something and busts his head wide open.

Jolene and I had never been buddies or anything, she was a year or two ahead of me in school when she dropped out, but I guess when you’ve just been shot and your husband’s dead you look for a friend in whoever is there to hand you a Tylenol with codeine. She started telling me how it was all Newt’s daddy’s fault, he beat him up, beat her up, and even had hit the baby with a coal scuttle. I was trying to think how a half-dead old man could beat up on Newt, who was built like a side of beef. But then they all lived together in one house and it was small. And of course the old man couldn’t hear, s it would have been that kind of life. There wouldn’t be much talk.

I don’t remember what I said, just “Uh-huh” mostly and “You’re going to be okay.” She kept saying she didn’t know what was going to happen now with her and the baby and old man Hardbine, oh Lord, what had she got herself into.

It wasn't the kindest thing, maybe, but at one point I actually asked her, "Jolene, why Newt?" Sh was slumped down and rocking a little bit in the chair, holding her hurt shoulder and looking at her feet. She had these eyes that never seemed to open all the way.

What she said was "Why not, my daddy'd been calling me a slut practically since I was thirteen so why the hell not? Newt was just who it happened to be. You know the way it is."

I told her I didn't know, because I didn't have a daddy. That I was lucky that way. She said yeah

By the time it was over it seemed to me it ought to be dark outside, as if such a thing couldn't have happened in daylight. But it was high noon, a whole afternoon ahead and everybody acting like here we are working for our money. I went to the bathroom and threw up twice, then came back and looked in the microscope at the little catchers' mitts, counting the same ones over and over all afternoon. Nobody gave me any trouble about it. The woman that gave up that blood, anyway, got her money's worth.

I wanted Mama to be home when I got there, so I could bawl my head off and tell her I was quitting. But she wasn't, and by the time she came in with a bag of groceries and a bushel basket of ironing for the weekend I was over it for the most part. I told her the whole thing, even Jolene's pink bow-ribbon top and the blood and all, and of course Newt, and then I told her I'd probably seen the worst I was going to see so there was no reason to quit now.

She gave me the biggest hug and said, "Missy, I have never seen the likes of you." We didn't tal too much more about it but I felt better with her there, the two of us moving around each other in the kitchen making boiled greens and eggs for dinner while it finally went dark outside. Every once in a while she would look over at me and just shake her head.

There were two things about Mama. One is she always expected the best out of me. And the othe is that then no matter what I did, whatever I came home with, she acted like it was the moon I had jus hung up in the sky and plugged in all the stars. Like I was that good.

I kept that job. I stayed there over five and a half years and counted more platelets than you can think about. A person might think I didn't do much else with all that time other than keeping Mama entertained and off and on dating Sparky Pike—who most people considered to be a high-class catch because he had a steady job as a gas-meter man—until I got fed up with hearing who laid out in their backyards by their meters wearing what (or nothing-but-what) in the summer-time.

But I had a plan. In our high school days the general idea of fun had been to paint "Class of '75" on the water tower, or maybe tie some farmer's goat up there on Halloween, but now I had serious intentions. In my first few years at Pittman County Hospital I was able to help Mama out with the ren and the bills and still managed to save up a couple hundred dollars. With most of it I bought a car, a '55 Volkswagen bug with no windows to speak of, and no back seat and no starter. But it was easy to push start without help once you got the hang of it, the wrong foot on the clutch and the other leg out the door, especially if you parked on a hill, which in that part of Kentucky you could hardly do anything but. In this car I intended to drive out of Pittman County one day and never look back, excep maybe for Mama.

The day I brought it home, she knew I was going to get away. She took one look and said, “Well if you’re going to have you an old car you’re going to know how to drive an old car.” What she mean was how to handle anything that might come along, I suppose, because she stood in the road with her arms crossed and watched while I took off all four tires and put them back on. “That’s good, Missy,” she said. “You’ll drive away from here yet. I expect the last I’ll see of you will be your hind end.” Sh said, “What do you do if I let the air out of the front tire?” Which she did. I said, “Easy, I put on the spare,” which believe it or not that damned old car actually had.

Then she let out the back one too and said, “Now what?” Mama had evidently run into trouble along these lines, at some point in her life with Foster and an Oldsmobile, and she wanted to be sure was prepared.

I thought, and then I said, “I have a bicycle pump. I can get enough air in it to drive down to Norman Strick’s and get it pumped up the rest of the way.” And she just stood there with her arms crossed and I could see that she nor God nor nobody else was going to do it for me, so I closed my eyes and went at that tire for everything I was worth.

Mama hadn’t been there that day. She couldn’t know that all I was seeing behind those shut eye was Newt Hardbine’s daddy flying up into the air, in slow motion, like a fish flinging sideways out o the water. And Newt laid out like a hooked bass.

When I drove over the Pittman line I made two promises to myself. One I kept, the other I did not.

The first was that I would get myself a new name. I wasn’t crazy about anything I had been calle up to that point in life, and this seemed like the time to make a clean break. I didn’t have any special name in mind, but just wanted a change. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that a name is not something a person really has the right to pick out, but is something you’re provided wit more or less by chance. I decided to let the gas tank decide. Wherever it ran out, I’d look for a sign.

I came pretty close to being named after Homer, Illinois, but kept pushing it. I kept my fingers crossed through Sidney, Sadorus, Cerro Gordo, Decatur, and Blue Mound, and coasted into Taylorvil on the fumes. And so I am Taylor Greer. I suppose you could say I had some part in choosing this name, but there was enough of destiny in it to satisfy me.

The second promise, the one that I broke, had to do with where I would end up. I had looked at some maps, but since I had never in my own memory been outside of Kentucky (I was evidently bor across the river in Cincinnati, but that is beside the point), I had no way of knowing why or how any particular place might be preferable to any other. That is, apart from the pictures on the gas station brochures: Tennessee claimed to be the Volunteer State, and Missouri the Show-Me State, whatever that might mean, and nearly everyplace appeared to have plenty of ladies in fifties hairdos standing near waterfalls. These brochures I naturally did not trust as far as I could throw them out the window Even Pittman, after all, had once been chosen an All-Kentucky City, on the basis of what I do not know. Its abundance of potato bugs and gossip, perhaps. I knew how people could toot their own hor without any earthly cause.

And so what I promised myself is that I would drive west until my car stopped running, and ther I w~~ould stay. But there were some things I hadn't considered. Mama taught me well about tires,~~ and many other things besides, but I knew nothing of rocker arms. And I did not know about the Great Plain.

The sight of it filled me with despair. I turned south from Wichita, Kansas, thinking I might fin a way around it, but I didn't. There was central Oklahoma. I had never imagined that any part of a round earth could be so flat. In Kentucky you could never see too far, since there were always mountains blocking the other side of your view, and it left you the chance to think something good might be just over the next hill. But out there on the plain it was all laid out right in front of you, and no matter how far you looked it didn't get any better. Oklahoma made me feel there was nothing left to hope for.

My car gave out somewhere in the middle of a great emptiness that according to the road signs was owned by the Cherokee tribe. Suddenly the steering wheel bore no relation to where the car was going. By the grace of some miracle I surely did not yet deserve, I managed to wobble off the highwa all in one piece and find a service station.

The man who straightened out my rocker arm was named Bob Two Two. I am not saying he didn't ask a fair price—I should have been able to fix it myself—but he went home that night with hi pocket full of something near half the money I had. I sat in the parking lot looking out over that godless stretch of nothing and came the closest I have ever come to cashing in and plowing under. Bu there was no sense in that. My car was fixed.

I had to laugh, really. All my life, Mama had talked about the Cherokee Nation as our ace in the hole. She'd had an old grandpa that was full-blooded Cherokee, one of the few that got left behind in Tennessee because he was too old or too ornery to get marched over to Oklahoma. Mama would say, "If we run out of luck we can always go live on the Cherokee Nation." She and I both had enough blood to qualify. According to Mama, if you're one-eighth or more they let you in. She called this ou "head rights."

Of course, if she had ever been there she would have known it was not a place you'd ever go to live without some kind of lethal weapon aimed at your hind end. It was clear to me that the whole intention of bringing the Cherokees here was to get them to lie down and die without a fight. The Cherokees believed God was in trees. Mama told me this. When I was a kid I would climb as high as could in a tree and not come down until dinner. "That's your Indian blood," she would say. "You're trying to see God."

From what I could see, there was not one tree in the entire state of Oklahoma.

The sun was headed fast for the flat horizon, and then there would be nothing but twelve hours o headlights in front of me. I was in a hurry to get out of there. My engine was still running from Bob Two Two's jumper cables, and I hated to let a good start go to waste, but I was tired and didn't want t begin a night of driving without a cup of coffee and something to eat. I drove across the big patch of dirt that lay between the garage and another small brick-shaped building that had a neon Budweiser light in the window.

When I drove around to the front, a swarm of little boys came down on my car like bees on a bear.

“Wash your windows, lady,” they said. “Dollar for the whole car.”

“I got no windows,” I told them. I reached back and put my hand through the side window hole t show them. “See, just the windshield. Lucky me, because I got no dollar either.”

The boys went around the car putting their hands through all the window holes again and again. thought twice about leaving my stuff in the car while I went into the restaurant. I didn’t have anythin worth taking, but then it was all I had.

I asked them, “You boys live around here?”

They looked at each other. “Yeah,” one of them said. “He does. He’s my brother. Them two don’t.”

“You ever hear of a Polaroid memory?”

The big one nodded. The others just stared.

“Well, I got one,” I said. “It’s just like a camera. My memory just took a picture of what y’all look like, so don’t take any stuff out of my car, okay? You take any stuff, you’re in for it.”

The kids backed off from the car rubbing their hands on their sides, like they were wiping off anything their hands might have already imagined grabbing onto.

After the cool night, the hot air inside the bar hit me like something you could swim through. Near the door there was a wire rack of postcards. Some had Indians in various hokey poses, but most were views-from-the-air of Oral Roberts University, which apparently was in the vicinity—although I’m pretty sure if it had been within two hundred miles I could have seen it from the parking lot.

I picked out one with two Indian women on it, an older and a younger, pretty one, standing side by side next to some corn-grinding thing. I had often wondered which one-eighth of me was Cheroke and in this picture I could begin to see it. The long, straight hair and the slender wrist bones. The younger one was wearing my two favorite colors, turquoise and red. I would write on it to Mama, “Here’s us.”

I sat down at the counter and gave the man a dime for the postcard. I nodded when he pointed th pot of coffee at me, and he filled my cup. The jukebox was playing Kenny Rogers and the TV behind the counter was turned on, although the sound was off. It was some program about, or from, Oral Roberts University, which I recognized from the postcards. Frequently a man with clean fat hands an a crest of hair like a woodpecker would talk on and on without sound. I presumed this was Oral Roberts himself, though of course I can’t say for certain that it was. From time to time a line of blue writing would run across the bottom of the screen. Sometimes it gave a telephone number, and sometimes it just said “Praise the Lord.” I wrote my postcard to Mama. “Grandpa had the right idea,” I told her. “No offense, but the Cherokee Nation is crap. Headed west. Love, M.” It didn’t seem right just yet to sign it Taylor.

The place was cleared out except for two men at the counter, a white guy and an Indian. They both wore cowboy hats. I thought to myself, I guess now Indians can be cowboys too, though probabl not ~~vice versa. The Indian man wore a brown hat and had a brown, fine-looking face that reminded~~ m of an eagle, not that I had ever actually seen an eagle. He was somewhere between young and not so young. I tried to imagine having a great grandpa with a nose like that and such a smooth chin. The other one in the gray hat looked like he had a mean streak to him. You can tell the kind that's looking for trouble. They were drinking beers and watching Oral on the silent TV, and once in a great while they would say something to each other in a low voice. They might have been on their first couple of beers, or they might have been drinking since sunup—with some types you can't tell until it's too lat I tried to recall where I had been at sunup that day. It was in St. Louis, Missouri, where they have tha giant McDonald's thing towering over the city, but that didn't seem possible. That seemed like about blue moon ago.

"You got anything to eat that costs less than a dollar?" I asked the old guy behind the counter. H crossed his arms and looked at me for a minute, as if nobody had ever asked him this before.

"Ketchup," the gray-hat cowboy said. "Earl serves up a mean bottle of ketchup, don't you, Earl? He slid the ketchup bottle down the counter so hard it rammed my cup and spilled out probably five cents' worth of coffee.

"You think being busted is a joke?" I asked him. I slid the bottle back and hit his beer mug dead center, although it did not spill. He looked at me and then looked back to the TV, like I wasn't the kin of thing to be bothered with. It made me want to spit nails.

"He don't mean nothing by it, miss," Earl told me. "He's got a bug up his butt. I can get you a burger for ninety-nine cents."

"Okay," I told Earl.

Maybe ten or fifteen minutes passed before the food came, and I kept myself awake trying to guess what the fat-hands man was saying on the TV screen. Earl's place could have done with a scrub I could see through the open door into the kitchen, and the black grease on the back of the stove looked like it had been there since the Dawn of Man. The air in there was so hot and stale I felt like I had to breathe it twice to get any oxygen out of it. The coffee did nothing to wake me up. My food came just as I was about to step outside for some air.

I noticed another woman in the bar sitting at one of the tables near the back. She was a round woman, not too old, wrapped in a blanket. It was not an Indian blanket but a plain pink wool blanket with a satin band sewed on the edge, exactly like one Mama and I had at home. Her hair lay across he shoulders in a pair of skinny, lifeless plaits. She was not eating or drinking, but fairly often she would glance up at the two men, or maybe just one of them, I couldn't really tell. The way she looked at them made me feel like if I had better sense I'd be scared.

Earl's ninety-nine-cent burger brought me around a little, though I still felt like my head had been stuffed with that fluffy white business they use in life preservers. I imagined myself stepping outside and the wind just scattering me. I would float out over the flat, dark plain like the silvery fuzz from a milk-weed pod.

Putting it off, I read all the signs on the walls, one by one, which said things like THEY CAN'T FIRE

ME, SLAVES HAVE TO BE SOLD and IN CASE OF FIRE YELL FIRE. The television kept on saying PRAISE THE LORD~~. 1-800-THE LORD. I tried to concentrate on keeping myself all in one place, even if it wasn't~~ a spot I was crazy about. Then I went outside. The air was cool and I drank it too fast, getting a little dizzy. I sat with my hands on the steering wheel for a few minutes trying to think myself into the righ mood for driving all night across Oklahoma.

I jumped when she pecked on the windshield. It was the round woman in the blanket.

"No thanks," I said. I thought she wanted to wash the windshield, but instead she went around to the other side and opened the door. "You need a lift someplace?" I asked her.

Her body, her face, and her eyes were all round. She was someone you could have drawn a pictu of by tracing around dimes and quarters and jar tops. She opened up the blanket and took out something alive. It was a child. She wrapped her blanket around and around it until it became a round bundle with a head. Then she set this bundle down on the seat of my car.

"Take this baby," she said.

It wasn't a baby, exactly. It was probably old enough to walk, though not so big that it couldn't be easily carried. Somewhere between a baby and a person.

"Where do you want me to take it?"

She looked back at the bar, and then looked at me. "Just take it."

I waited a minute, thinking that soon my mind would clear and I would understand what she was saying. It didn't. The child had the exact same round eyes. All four of those eyes were hanging there the darkness, hanging on me, waiting. The Budweiser sign blinked on and off, on and off, throwing a faint light that made the whites of their eyes look orange.

"Is this your kid?"

She shook her head. "My dead sister's."

"Are you saying you want to give me this child?"

"Yes."

"If I wanted a baby I would have stayed in Kentucky," I informed her. "I could have had babies coming out my ears by now."

A man came out of the bar, gray hat or brown hat I couldn't tell because my car was parked som distance from the door. He got into a pickup truck but didn't start the ignition or turn on the lights.

"Is that your man in there, in the bar?" I asked her.

"Don't go back in there. I'm not saying why. Just don't."

"Look," I said, "even if you wanted to, you can't just give somebody a kid. You got to have the papers and stuff. Even a car has papers, to prove you didn't steal it."

"This baby's got no papers. There isn't nobody knows it's alive, or cares. Nobody that matters, like the police or nothing like that. This baby was born in a Plymouth."

"Well, it didn't happen this morning," I said. "Plymouth or no Plymouth, this child has been around long enough for somebody to notice." I had a foggy understanding that I wasn't arguing the right point. This was getting us nowhere.

She put her hands where the child's shoulders might be, under all that blanket, and pushed it gently back into the seat, trying to make it belong there. She looked at it for a long time. Then she closed the door and walked away.

As I watched her I was thinking that she wasn't really round. Without the child and the blanket she walked away from my car a very thin woman.

I held the steering wheel and dug my fingernails into my palms, believing the pain might force my brain to wake up and think what to do. While I was thinking, the woman got in the pickup truck and it drove away without lights. I wondered if that was for a reason, or if it just didn't have headlights. "Praise the Lord," I said out loud. "At least my car has headlights."

I thought: I can take this Indian child back into that bar and give it to Earl or whichever of those two guys is left. Just set it on the counter with the salt and pepper and get the hell out of here. Or I ca go someplace and sleep, and think of something to do in the morning.

While I was deciding, the lights in the bar flickered out. The Budweiser sign blinked off and stayed off. Another pickup truck swung around in the gravel parking lot and headed off toward the highway.

It took everything I had to push-start the car. Naturally I had not found a hill to park on in Oklahoma. "Shit!" I said. "Shit fire son of a bitch!" I pushed and pushed, jumped in and popped the clutch, jumped out and pushed some more. I could see the child's big eyes watching me in the dark.

"This isn't as dumb as you think," I said. "It's easier in Kentucky."

My car has no actual way of keeping track of miles, but I believe it must have been fifty or mor before we came to a town. It was getting cold with no windows, and the poor little thing must have been freezing but didn't make a peep.

"Can you talk?" I said. I wondered if maybe it spoke something besides English. "What am I supposed to do with you tonight?" I said. "What do you eat?"

I believe that flat places are quieter than hilly ones. The sounds of the cars on the highway seemed to get sucked straight out over the empty fields where there was nothing, not even a silo, to stop them from barreling on forever into the night. I began to think that if I opened my mouth nothin would come out. I hummed to myself to keep some sound in my ears. At that time I would have paid my bottom dollar for a radio. I would even have listened to Oral Roberts. I talked to the poor, dumb-

struck child to stay awake, although with every passing mile I felt less sleepy and more concerned th
I was doing something extremely strange.

We passed a sign that said some-odd number of miles to the Pioneer Woman Museum. Great, I thought. Now we’re getting somewhere.

“Are you a girl or a boy?” I asked the child. It had a cerealbowl haircut, like pictures you see of Chinese kids. She or he said nothing. I supposed I would find out eventually.

After a while I began to wonder if perhaps it was dead. Maybe the woman had a dead child, murdered or some such thing, and had put it in my car, and I was riding down the road beside it, talking to it. I had read a story in Senior English about a woman who slept with her dead husband for forty years. It was basically the same idea as the guy and his mother in *Psycho,* except that Norman Bates in *Psycho* was a taxidermist and knew how to preserve his mother so she wouldn’t totally rot out. Indians sometimes knew how to preserve the dead. I had read about Indian mummies out West. People found them in caves. I told myself to calm down. I remembered that the baby’s eyes had been open when she put it down on the seat. But then again, so what if its eyes were open? Had it blinked? What was the penalty for carrying a dead Indian child across state lines?

After a while I smelled wet wool. “Merciful heavens,” I said. “I guess you’re still hanging in there.”

My plan had been to sleep in the car, but naturally my plans had not taken into account a wet, cold kid. “We’re really in trouble now, you know it?” I said. “The next phone booth we come to, I’m going to have to call 1-800-THE LORD.”

The next phone booth we did come to, as a matter of fact, was outside the Mustang Motel. I drov by slowly and checked the place out, but the guy in the office didn’t look too promising.

There were four or five motels pretty much in a row, their little glass-fronted offices shining ou over the highway like TV screens. Some of the offices were empty. In the Broken Arrow Motor Lodg there was a gray-haired woman. Bingo.

I parked under the neon sign of a pink arrow breaking and unbreaking, over and over, and went into the office.

“Hi,” I said to the lady. “Nice evening. Kind of chilly, though.”

She was older than she had looked from outside. Her hands shook when she lifted them off the counter and her head shook all the time, just slightly, like she was trying to signal “No” to somebody behind my back, on the sly.

But she wasn’t, it was just age. She smiled. “Winter’s on its way,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am, it is.”

“You been on the road long?”

“Way too long,” I said. “This place is real nice. It’s a sight for sore eyes. Do you own this place’

"My son owns it," she said, her head shaking. "I'm over here nights."

"So it's kind of a family thing?"

"Kind of like. My daughter-in-law and me, we do most of the cleaning up and all, and my son does the business end of it. He works in the meat-packing plant over at Ponca City. This here's kind o a sideline thing."

"You reckon it's going to fill up tonight?"

She laughed. "Law, honey, I don't think this place been filled up since President Truman." She slowly turned the pages of the big check-in book.

"President Truman stayed here?"

She looked up at me, her eyes swimming through her thick glasses like enormous tadpoles. "Wh no, honey, I don't think so. I'd remember a thing like that."

"You seem like a very kind person," I said, "so I'm not going to beat around the bush. I've got a big problem. I can't really afford to pay for a room, and I wouldn't even bother you except I've got a child out in that car that's wet and cold and looking to catch pneumonia if I don't get it to bed someplace warm."

She looked out toward the car and shook her head, but of course I couldn't tell what that meant. She said, "Well, honey, I don't know."

"I'll take anything you've got, and I'll clean up after myself, and tomorrow morning I'll change every bed in this place. Or anything else you want me to do. It's just for one night."

"Well," she said, "I don't know."

"Let me go get the baby," I said. "You won't mind if I just bring the poor kid in here to warm up while you decide."

The most amazing thing was the way that child held on. From the first moment I picked it up ou of its nest of wet blanket, it attached itself to me by its little hands like roots sucking on dry dirt. I think it would have been easier to separate me from my hair.

It's probably a good thing. I was so tired, and of course I was not in the habit anyway of remembering every minute where I had put down a child, and I think if it had not been stuck to me I might have lost it while I was messing with the car and moving stuff into the little end room of the Broken Arrow. As it was, I just ended up carrying it back and forth a lot. It's like the specimens back at the hospital, I told myself. You just have to keep track. It looked like carrying blood and pee was t be my lot in life.

Once we were moved in I spread the blanket over a chair to dry and ran a few inches of warm water in the tub. "First order of business," I said, "is to get you a bath. We'll work out the rest tomorrow." I remembered the time I had found a puppy and wanted to keep it, but first Mama made me spend thirty-five cents a word to run an ad in the paper. “What if it was yours?” she had said. ~~“Think how bad you’d want it back.” The ad I wrote said: FOUND PUPPY, BROWN SPOTS, NEAR FLOYD’S~~ MILL ROAD. I had resented how Floyd’s Mill Road was three whole words, a dollar and five cents.

I thought to myself, I’d pay a hundred and five to get this one back to its rightful owner. But wh kind of ad would you run to find out if anybody had lost an Indian child?

All of the baby’s clothes were way too big, with sleeves rolled up and shirt tails wrapped around and everything wet as mud boots and as hard to get off. There was a bruise twice the size of my thum on its inner arm. I threw the soggy shirt in the sink to soak. The child’s hands constantly caught my fingers and wouldn’t let go. “You little booger,” I said, shaking my finger and the little fist. “You’re like a mud turtle. If a mud turtle bites you, it won’t let go till it thunders.” I hadn’t any sooner gotten the hands pried loose from my fingers before they grabbed onto my shirt sleeves and my hair. When pulled off the pants and the diapers there were more bruises.

Bruises and worse.

The Indian child was a girl. A girl, poor thing. That fact had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine. I thought I knew about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl. She sat quietly in the bathtub watching me, and I just prayed she had enough backbone not to fall over and drown, because I had to let her go. I doubled up on the floor at the base of the toilet and tried not to throw up The floor was linoleum in a pattern that looked like rubber bricks set in mortar. Nothing, not Newt Hardbine or anything else I had ever seen, had made me feel like this.

The kid was splashing like a toad frog. Her fingers were wiggling and slapping at the surface of the water, no doubt trying to grab hold of something. “Here,” I said, and handed her a washcloth that had BROKEN ARROW written on the selvage in indelible magic marker. She hugged that wash cloth and smiled. I swear to God.

After I washed and dried her I put her to bed in a T-shirt that one of Mama’s people had brought me one summer from Kentucky Lake. It was tight on me, and said DAMN I’M GOOD. I am skinny and flat-chested like a model, and always looked great in that T-shirt if I say so myself. It was turquoise with red letters, and came down past the baby’s knees. “These are good colors,” I said, trying to pull over her sleepy, bobbing head. “Indian colors.” Finally her hands were empty and relaxed. She was asleep.

I took out the stamps I had brought from home wrapped in waxed paper, and licked one and stuc it on my souvenir postcard from the Cherokee Nation. I added a line at the bottom:

“I found my head rights, Mama. They’re coming with me.”

TWO

New Year's Pig

*L*ou Ann Ruiz lived in Tucson, but thought of herself as just an ordinary Kentuckian a long way from home. She had acquired her foreign last name from her husband, Angel. As it turned out, this was the only part of him that would remain with her. He left on Halloween.

Three years before on Christmas Day Angel had had a bad accident in his pickup truck. It left him with an artificial leg below the knee, and something else that was harder to pin down. Lou Ann often would get the feeling he didn't really like her, or anyone else for that matter. He blamed people for things beyond their control. Lou Ann was now pregnant with her first, which was due in two months. She hoped more than anything that it wouldn't be born on Christmas Day.

She had been thinking about herself and Angel splitting up for even longer than she had been pregnant, but she didn't particularly do anything about it. That was Lou Ann's method. She expected that a divorce would just develop, like a pregnancy—that eventually they would reach some kind of agreement without having to discuss it. This isn't how it worked out.

When she began to turn away from him in bed at night, and to get up quietly in the mornings to cook his eggs, Angel seemed to accept this. Possibly he thought she was worried about the baby. Late when the arguments resumed, they had a hopeless quality that Lou Ann had not experienced before. The arguments made her feel that her bones were made of something like the rubber in a Gumby doll that her body could be bent into any shape and would stay that way. She would sit at the kitchen table tracing her fingers over the artificial knots in the wood-look Formica table top while Angel paced back and forth and accused her of thinking he wasn't good enough. He listed names of people, mostly friends of his she could barely remember having met, and asked her if she had slept with them, or if she had wanted to. Angel limped so slightly it was barely noticeable, but there was just the faintest jingling sound with every other step. It was probably something he could have gotten adjusted if he hadn't been too proud to take it into the prosthetic shop. No matter how loud his voice became, Lou Ann could still hear the jingle. She could never think of anything to say that would change the course of these arguments, and so they went on and on. Once, several years before, she had become so frustrated with Angel that she threw a package of baloney at him. They both laughed, and it ended the argument. Now she didn't have the strength to get up and open the refrigerator.

Finally he had said it was because of his leg, and no matter what she said he wouldn't hear it an