

I took her arm and led her to a chair in a removed corner of the long room. "Sit down. You look very tired."

"Thank you." She sat, then withdrew from the pocket of her coat a small rag, with which she dabbed her eyes. "You must forgive me. The child was my first born. I could not keep her, but neither can I forget her."

I appraised the peasant before me. "She is a sweet child. Very healthy, and much bigger than when you . . . last saw her."

"Mi Cha, who found her, said that she could be put in the care of a good family. To think that she is happy would mean everything."

"I can say only that this is possible."

The young woman nodded, then put to me the question I felt sure she had come to ask. "May I see her . . . just for an instant?"

"The rules are very clear. We have her custody, and we cannot permit what you ask. I am very sorry. But perhaps it is better this way."

She looked doubtful in her silence, staring at her hands which twisted the rag. I eyed her evenly, fighting against being drawn into the pathos of her disappointment. After a time she said, still focusing on her hands, "But what if she remains here? Can I never see her again?"

"If you chose to come when the public is invited, I cannot prevent it. Open House will next be held in March, on the last Saturday. But I would urge you strongly against coming because it will make your life without her more difficult and because she may by then be gone to her new life."

She managed a weak smile. "You are correct. I must think not only of myself but of her. I will decide later, when I am less tired. Thank you for your kindness. Now, if you will direct me out of the city, I must go."

From the window I watched as she crossed the street to the bus stop. Minutes later she was gone.

7

Elizabeth

On the morning after Christmas, we packed the van for the eight hour trip to South Carolina. I tolerated these as a rule, but dreaded this particular one because I knew I would be blamed for the adoption idea, and

Coleman couldn't have been looking forward to it either because the time had come to tell his parents we were expanding the family and, "no, Elizabeth is not pregnant." I told Josh and Steven they could each take one new toy and they showed what I thought commendable restraint in limiting to three the number smuggled aboard in overnight bags.

When you marry a southerner, you get a husband, his extended family, a region with all its quirks (and there are many), not to mention historical legacies that brides from the Midwest like me know nothing of until long after they say "I do." It seemed so simple when Coleman proposed, when naïve me asked myself the question most brides ask: did I want to spend the rest of my life with him? I did not ask whether slavery was as cruel and heartless as is often portrayed (it was), whether the Civil War was justified (it was) or rightly decided (it was), or whether the evening meal is properly called dinner or supper. Who cares?

His parents, to name two, care very much, and that should tell you something about how this adoption news will be received. Adoption is a word in the southern lexicon, but it isn't used much except to refer to things like the "adoption of Articles of Secession" or "adopting the ways of our forefathers." To adopt, as in embracing as your own a child not related by blood, and taking over the care and custody of that child? That's pretty rare, as I am learning. Coleman's mother, Sarah, once told me she had a friend who adopted twins orphaned by the death of their widowed mother, but was emphatic in pointing out that her friend was a cousin of the deceased, so the bonds of family, while stretched, were not broken, as if a stranger stepping up to adopt those twins would have committed an act of perversion. This conversation took place just after Josh was born and long before I had taken any steps to adopt.

His parents live in a beautiful old home in the Battery area, on Church Street. In Charleston it is fashionable to live "south of Broad," the street that separates the elite from the rest of the world. You can't get much further south of Broad than Church Street without finding yourself in Charleston Harbor. I waited until the third day of what had been a pleasant enough visit to approach Coleman after breakfast. "Let's take a walk," I suggested. He agreed, but I think he knew what was coming.

"Why should I tell them?" he asked when we were safely distant from the house. "It's your idea. Why are you afraid to take responsibility for something you feel so strongly about?"

My pace increased, no doubt from nerves. "I'm not afraid. But they think I influence you. Coming from you, it will sound like our idea."

He said, "I hate to disillusion you, my darling, but they could read this news in skywriting over Charleston and know it was your idea."

"Oh, Coleman! You'd think I had suggested we make a porn video. It's just a child who needs parents."

"Have you ever heard my father discuss his time in the Philippines during World War II?"

"Yes, and it's narrow-minded and disgusting."

"I'm not defending it. I'm only pointing out what we're dealing with."

"I *know* what we're dealing with. That's why I think you should tell them. You're the golden boy. They won't attack you like they do me."

"Come on. When do they attack you?"

"If you only knew."

"Tell me."

"No. One crisis at a time. Trust my instincts. This is news you need to break."

"Yeah? Well, trust mine that we better be prepared to duck no matter who tells them."

By the time we returned, Coleman had resigned himself to being the messenger although clearly he wasn't happy about it. You can count on one hand the number of times he has disappointed them in his life. One time was when he married me, and another was when we decided to live in Virginia rather than Charleston. Of course, neither of them ever said they were disappointed in either me or Virginia—things don't work that way here. What isn't said is what I've learned to listen for.

In the hour before lunch, as Sarah sliced a ham and his father read the paper and the boys played on swings in the back yard, I looked at him expectantly, but he bore deeper into the novel I had given him for Christmas. When his father rose to get the mail, I walked to his chair and whispered, "What are you waiting for?"

"The right moment," he replied, as if this delay was part of some grand psychology.

"That's another way of putting it off," I said.

"Later," he countered, but lunch came and went with no mention of "it."

Immediately after Walter Cronkite's broadcast, his father, Coleman Sr., who everyone calls Coles, announced cocktails. "Supper" followed, served, as always, by his mother. Sarah Carter must have been a beauty in her day. I associate her with the same grace that pervades Charleston in springtime. My first visit here took place in April, before Coleman and I became engaged, and I remember how seductive I found the azaleas, the magnolias, the trumpet honeysuckle, the lush lawns and gardens afforded by the heat and humidity that is so much a part of lowcountry life and that Sarah Carter seemed equally to be part of, as if she had been raised in the rich loam of a mulched flower bed. I found she possessed a simple charm without being a simple person. She seemed to wear her personal virtue on her sleeve, not out of pride but because she lacked the guile to do otherwise, and had she any shameful failings she would have been equally incapable of concealing them. I learned with experience of her tendency to color things black or white, but I always sensed this sprang from an intuitive, rather than analytical, sense of how things were and ought to be. She told me she lived by her trinity: God, family and the sovereign state of South Carolina, in that order. I noted that Kansas didn't make that list, but it was impossible to take its omission personally since no state other than her own was included. A part of me admires anyone who, like Sarah, can divide the world and its challenges into black and white, yes or no, right and wrong, but I've always found things to be a bit more complicated.

At the other end of the table sat his father, a man I hardly knew at all, and I'm not certain Coleman knows him much better. He is shy, introverted to the point of enigma. Sarah said that comes from lack of social confidence, and I guess she should know. I've tried to engage him in conversation dozens of time, and the only time I succeeded was after he had a cocktail or two, as alcohol seems to help him overcome his reticence. Given tonight's inevitable discussion, I was tempted to fix him a double in hopes he would embrace his fellow man a little more; maybe even throw his arms around the plan soon to be unveiled. It had to be tonight, as we were leaving in the morning. I will never forget the conversation which followed.

By supper's end, a scotch and water and a glass of wine had steeled Coleman to his task, so that when I cleared my throat, fidgeted in my

chair, and urged him forward with eyes darting over the rim of my wine glass, he leveled his eyes at his mother.

“Mom, Dad, Elizabeth and I have decided to buy a gook.”

I exclaimed, “Coleman!” but found myself smiling nonetheless. Anything to vent the pressure.

Sarah looked first at Coleman, then me, before laughing pleasantly. “You’ve decided to buy a what?” As the last to get any joke, she often bought time with repetition while searching for the punch line.

“A gook. That’s a slang word for an Oriental.”

“But I don’t understand. How can you buy an Oriental?”

“Not buy one, exactly. Adopt one.”

“Adopt an Oriental?” Sarah grew quizzical. “Why would you do that?”

Coleman avoided looking at me, then pushed some untouched peach cobbler around on his dessert plate. “We want a girl. We may never have one the old-fashioned way.”

Sarah Carter stared at her husband as she might have sought the aid of an interpreter in a foreign land. “You’re not being serious. Elizabeth, what is he talking about?”

Coleman took a pull on his wine, then looked directly at me. “Yes, Elizabeth, what am I talking about?”

I deliberately placed my dessert fork down beside my plate. I’m sure my face was flushed. “*We* are talking about adopting an international child; a girl. Your son will fill in the details.”

His father spoke, businesslike. “Coleman, have you lost your mind?”

Coleman shrugged. “It makes more sense than you think, because—”

“I hope so, because at this moment it makes none.”

Sarah, shaking her head as if to clear it, said, “Back up, Coleman. Let me understand. You intend to adopt what child?”

“We don’t know, Mother,” he said. “We are going through an agency called Open Arms. They haven’t identified a child yet. But there is no shortage of them in Korea.”

“Korea! Why, I can’t even imagine it.”

His father spoke next. “They tried to kill me in World War II.”

“Dad, be fair. Those were Japanese. Korea was our ally a few years back.”

Coles Carter sniffed his contempt. "The Oriental mind is all the same. They come from a common genetic cesspool. They are vicious and merciless and heathen." At that moment, he pushed away from the table, the flair in his cheeks like rouge against his pale, sedentary skin. He turned and walked toward the stairs, which he climbed with an aggression audible through the carpet. Coleman looked toward me, staring down at my plate. He turned to his mother.

"I had a feeling this might upset you."

She lifted her plate and with her head down broke for the kitchen, from which no sound issued for several minutes. Coleman and I sat there. To avoid staring at me, he made circular impressions on the linen tablecloth with his fork while the clock above the sideboard ticked with what sounded like small explosions in the stillness. At length, we heard Sarah leave the kitchen and mount the stairs.

"Like I told you. A piece of cake," he said.

"They need some time to get used to the idea."

"Elizabeth, you're speaking of people who are still trying to reconcile losing the Civil War. I wouldn't look for any sudden conversions."

"I know they're conservative. They reacted about like you predicted."

Coleman shook his head. "Not really. I've never seen my father like that. Never."

"He's got to come around. Adopting a child is not something that tears a family apart."

He propped his chin on his fist to gaze at me directly. "You know that coffee table book written on Mother's family? The one that traces her people back to the boat? Have you ever looked through it?" I nodded. "How many Orientals did you see? That's what I've been trying to tell you. They're southern, and family means something here that it doesn't mean anywhere else."

"We're not going to back out."

"I wasn't suggesting that. Just be patient with them. They're getting older, and changes frighten them. Changes like this terrify them."

"Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"You'll be firm."

"I promise," he said, although I sensed doubt as he said it.

The next day, Coleman arose early to pack the car. His father retrieved the newspaper from the driveway and read it over coffee. He turned the pages with more crispness than usual. The boys slept in, then wolfed down bowls of cereal before dashing off for a final bike ride. In the kitchen, over breakfast dishes, Sarah asked me to accompany her on a walk.

“We won’t be gone fifteen minutes,” she said, doing her best to sound lighthearted. I was not fooled, but saw no exit.

We left the house and walked down Church Street to the Battery. “I brought this heavy sweater but I certainly won’t need it today,” Sarah said as we sought a bench in the sunlight. I just waited.

“What I’m about to say,” Sarah began, “will sound like I’m injecting myself into your personal business; yours and Coleman’s. We’ve always tried to avoid that. I think we’ve been successful there, don’t you?” I nodded, and I meant it. “It’s hard, I don’t mind telling you. It’s hard when you see your children making mistakes you think they could avoid; making mistakes which your experience tells you they’ll regret. Still, you have to respect their right to make them, hard as it is to keep quiet. You’ll see this clearly as your boys grow up.”

At that moment, her voice softened. Her tone turned reverential. “My parents, especially my father, were so strict with me. Why, I couldn’t even choose my clothes or hairstyle until I got to college. I rebelled, I can tell you. I fought hard against restrictions I felt were totally unreasonable, although looking back, I can see I dug in my heels on the minor issues and did what they wanted on the major ones. But they were determined to ‘bring me up southern,’ as my father termed it. For so long, I had no concept of what that meant. I mean, every girl in Darlington grew up southern as far as I could see. It was only after I was married and moved around during the war that I began to understand a bit. By then I was in my thirties, about your age, actually.

“The people out west and in New England, where we were stationed while Coles was teaching at OCS, were friendly, most of them, and very nice to us. But those people didn’t have the sense of identity I felt with the South. You could tell it right away. Whenever I met someone I liked, I wanted them to come to Darlington, to meet my parents and brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins, to have a big Sunday dinner and cut the fool with everyone around the table. I actually invited some

of them; they thought I was crazy, I'm sure, driving fifteen hundred miles to meet someone's relatives. The point is, those people were my identity. I belonged to them and they belonged to me. Are you getting warm? I can't believe this is December."

"It is heating up," I acknowledged. As much as I wanted this conversation behind me, I knew my mother-in-law would have her say and I had resolved to hear her out. More from obligation than desire, I said, "Why don't we sit under a tree?"

"I was thinking of just that," Sarah said. We crossed the park, stopping at a bench shaded by a mammoth, gnarled oak, surely old enough to have witnessed the firing on Ft. Sumter. Along the promenade railing, a couple passed a set of binoculars between them while nearby a man with a telephoto lens trained his camera on the island fortress in the harbor. Pigeons flapped about, indifferent to tourists.

"I was talking about identity," Sarah continued. "This child you are considering. I wonder what identity she'll feel in a strange land surrounded by people who are so obviously different."

"But what is her alternative?" I resolved to be patient. "The Koreans don't adopt girls. I would think it would be worse to be in a country where you look the same but are treated like an alien."

Sarah cocked her head slightly and stared ahead. "Well, I suppose you have a point. But dear, you can't save the world. What will she do to your family's sense of identity? You've your children to consider."

"Of course. We wouldn't do anything that would hurt the boys."

"Naturally you wouldn't, which is my point. You don't think it will hurt. You probably think it will be an interesting experience for them. But in time you will come to see what I have seen; that family is the most important thing on earth, and bringing a stranger into yours will be a disservice to you and to her. You'll see."

"Maybe," I said, turning away.

"Let's take a stroll around the square," Sarah suggested. We walked west, to the Ft. Sumter Hotel, then turned north. "You see these grand old homes?" she asked. "Some of the finest families in the world live here. People think they're snobbish, and I suppose they are. But their clannishness is an effort to protect what so many people in this country seem to want to tear down or dilute. I admire them for it. Coles grew up here, and

he can walk into any house on the South Battery and be the equal of anyone inside. That's a valuable heritage that Coleman enjoys and your sons will too. But this child will never be a part of that world."

"Which may be a loss for them."

Sarah shook her head slowly. "I believe that's wishful thinking. There is another matter you should consider."

"What is that?"

"My son, your husband. I know this was your idea. He didn't need to tell me that."

"Yes, we guessed you'd make that assumption."

"If Coleman agrees to this, he's doing it for you. Deep down, he agrees with me. I know because of the way he was brought up. He can't divorce his heritage, no matter how hard he wants to please you. Perhaps it is unfair to put him in this position?"

"Coleman is a grown man. He can say no if he chooses. I'm not forcing this on him."

Sarah just smiled at that, a doubtful smile that said she didn't believe me for a moment. "Good," she said, reaching over to pat me on the arm. "You two talk it over. Pray over it. The right decision will emerge."

We returned toward the house, making small talk for the duration of our walk. I had known it would come, eventually but inevitably, to where we left it. I would be the culprit, manipulating Sarah's blameless son into a scheme he opposed and exposing Sarah's grandsons to the Red peril, which in Sarah's view had begun taking over America on the day the Japanese built their first transistor radio. "They've taken all those jobs from those poor people in Detroit. I'd rather die than drive a Honda." At the root of Sarah's xenophobia were the Communists, those tireless devils whose agent on earth was the Trilateral Commission. And the list went on: Robert E. Lee and Barry Goldwater were defeated but right, a woman's place was in the home, "separate but equal" was "a sound policy which should never have been abandoned" and mankind took a giant step toward eternal damnation when the Episcopal Church approved the new Book of Common Prayer.

I perfectly understood my impatience with Sarah. We disagreed on everything from abortion to Vietnam, from cooking vegetables (Sarah cooked broccoli for forty-five minutes, until it was literally beyond recognition) to toilet training. On the other hand, she possessed an elusive

quality which drew me to her even as I had not been drawn to my own mother. It went beyond our mutual interest in Coleman, for Sarah loved her son uncritically and without reserve while I had come to a point in my life that I couldn't say that, although I had said it when we married and thought I meant it. Marriage has taught me how difficult it is to love another person, any person, uncritically, and logic tells me it must be just as hard for anyone to love me that way. I'm convinced Sarah sees Coleman as perfect, rationalizing the imperfections as you might choose not to notice a tiny crack in your favorite mirror. Love for a spouse can't be that way. You see the flaws, and he sees yours. The trick is to look past them, to the compensating qualities that brought you to him in the first place. I've even come to recognize my own flaws, at least some of them. I'm judgmental, for one, with little patience for those who disagree with me, particularly when they can't back up whatever it is we disagree on. Uncritical love is a rare commodity, reserved for children I suppose. My love for Josh and Steven mirrors Sarah's love for Coleman, and soon I will bestow that same kind of love on a child that may or may not have been born. Coleman says he isn't sure he can love an adopted daughter that way. I'm betting he can, and that he will experience that sooner than he thinks. Sarah? Will she love her granddaughter as she loves her grandsons? I wonder.

As we approached the front door, Josh came bounding out of the house. "Mom, Grandma!" he yelled, nearly tripping as he reached us. "You should see Steven! Blood everywhere. His whole head is blood, blood, blood!"

I froze. "Josh, what are you talking about?"

"Steven's head. He fell down on his bike and he couldn't see after that because he had blood in his eyes and everywhere."

My heart raced as I felt my knees and legs weaken. I grabbed Josh by his shoulder. "Where is he?"

"Daddy and granddaddy took him off. In the car."

"Where were they going?" I demanded.

"Someplace to get the blood out of his eyes. You should have seen him, mom. I got some on my hands."

I looked down. The sight of the red smears sickened me. "Oh, God. Get in the car, Josh. Sarah, where would they have gone?"

"Well, I'm just not sure," said Sarah.

“Well, get sure!” I screamed. “Let’s go find them.” I got behind the wheel as Josh and Sarah entered the passenger side. I backed wildly down the driveway, narrowly avoiding a car parked on the street, threw the shift into forward, simultaneously hitting the gas and spinning my tires on the cobblestones. With a death grip on the wheel, I maneuvered through the neighborhood. Sarah held Josh as he explained, yet again, how much blood covered Steven. “Josh, please!” I pleaded.

Sarah, refocused, gave directions to the emergency room as her eyes widened and the speedometer climbed. We jammed on brakes at a traffic light that stayed red for minutes, causing me to first pound the wheel in frustration, then gun the car through the light, still red. I almost collided with a bread truck, avoiding disaster only by a sudden swerve into a sidewalk. At the hospital, I pulled into the ER lot, parked so as to fill two spaces, and threw open my door. “Wait here,” I called as I slammed the door. Seconds later, I entered the building.

My father-in-law sat in the reception area, his eyes focused on the magazine in his lap.

“What happened?” I demanded.

“Oh, just a little accident,” he said calmly. “Steven fell off his bike.”

“But the blood!”

“He cut his forehead, but a few stitches should do it, according to the doctor. Coleman’s with him.” He nodded toward the double doors.

I found them in a harshly lit cubicle cordoned off by a green curtain. On the table lay Steven, his eyes open and riveted on the white-coated man hovering over him. On the other side of the gurney stood Coleman, who looked up from the intricate work being done on Steven’s forehead.

“Hi, dear,” he said cheerfully. “Looks like we’re going to get a late start on the trip home.”

Steven started to turn his head toward me but was restrained by the doctor, whose fingers bracketed the child’s forehead as his thumb and forefingers did the work. I knelt beside, holding his hand and whispering words of comfort as the doctor cautioned him against sudden movements.

“You wouldn’t want me to make a mistake and sew your nose shut, would you?” Steven’s eyes widened momentarily until the laughter of the adults, even mine, reassured him.

Ten minutes and four stitches later, the doctor announced he was through, but wanted Steven kept still for a time. I thought it best to drive

Sarah and Josh, still waiting in the car, home while Coleman waited for Steven to be released. On my way to the parking lot, I offered a ride to my father-in-law, but he declined.



Coleman

While I didn't look forward to our time in Charleston, knowing the tempest that would ensue when we broke the news, I always enjoy the trip itself. Holiday traffic in New Hampton receded as we crossed the wide expanse of the James River, cold and foreboding with choppy whitecaps stretching to the Chesapeake Bay. An hour later, as we entered North Carolina, the excitement of the trip gave way to fatigue, and I found myself the only one awake. I count the solitude of a long drive, unmarred by radios or conversation, among life's simple pleasures.

I glanced at Elizabeth, dozing against her headrest, remembering that my second view of her had been in profile, like this one. In a larger sense I have been attempting to profile her ever since. Beyond the complex chemistries that explain mutual attractions, I sense in her certain strengths and sensitivities I feel I lack. I told her as much on our honeymoon.

"Yes?" she said. "Like what? Name them and don't leave any out." I hit her playfully with a pillow but she persisted. "I'm waiting." We were in Barbados, still in bed at three in the afternoon.

"You have . . . intuition," I said. "You trust your instincts more than I trust mine. I'm too analytical."

"Are you saying I'm not analytical?"

"You pay more attention to your passions. I wish I was more that way."

"You've been doing alright in the passion department for the past three days."

"You know what I mean."

We met, or re-met, as it turned out, in May 1970. She had been up all night, as had I. The month before, U.S. forces based in Vietnam had invaded Cambodia, seeking to destroy guerrilla bases in an area called the Fishhook. Three days later, amidst antiwar outrage, the Ohio National

Guard shot and killed four students during a protest at Kent State. Riots swept campuses of the nation's top universities. I was in my senior year at the University of Virginia. The very last thing we needed tossed into our academic bunker, a bunker filled with seniors worried about the draft, sophomores angry about everything, and wanna-be revolutionaries who would eventually go to business school, was the hand grenade unpinned when William Kunstler, a New York attorney who had achieved national notoriety by his defense of the Chicago Seven, and Jerry Rubin, a Kunstler client and a platoon leader in the antiwar army, came to Charlottesville to give a speech. They packed University Hall, otherwise used for basketball, and worked the crowd into a maniacal froth. Rumors abounded that some building or feature of Mr. Jefferson's academic village would that night be sacrificed on an altar of revolution; that only by fire could the righteousness of the peace movement be sanctified.

Many opposed Kunstler, Rubin, their entourage, and their politics. Many more recoiled at the thought of torching the living history the Rotunda represented. A call went out for student volunteers to stand guard that night against any act of vandalism directed at university property.

I volunteered. Like so many with whom I would soon stand on that same lawn to take our degrees, I cursed the war for its toll, its ineptitude, its strategic schizophrenia, its mushrooming divisiveness, its monumental waste. But the war was in Southeast Asia, and I was there, in lovely Charlottesville, where every student feels, in varying degrees, the presence of Mr. Jefferson. I listened to all the zealots spouting quotes from the great man himself, quotes that they insisted justified and even encouraged the kind of revolt they felt part of, the "tree of liberty" to be liberally watered with the "blood of tyrants" like LBJ. All well and good, I thought, but not at his university, on his grounds, at the cost of his magnificent architecture. And not on my watch. Perhaps, I reasoned, if approached by anarchists set on destruction, I could talk them down, distract them, convince them that a target more replaceable was somehow more suitable.

They assigned me to one end of Cabell Hall's portico. With another student I did not know, I manned my barricade, drinking black coffee from a dented green hunting thermos and talking with curious students who ambled by with fresh gossip but no hard facts. One rumor held that Rubin, at that moment, was massing a mob at a student crossroads known

as “the corner.” Another: that Rubin and Kunstler had gone to dinner at the Farmington Country Club and retired early. By three A.M., the coffee was cold, the campus quiet, and a humid chill had settled over the lush mall leading to the Rotunda. My companion yawned, stretched, declared victory and left, abandoning me within shouting distance only of the hardcore cadre stationed at likely targets. At dawn, I spotted a group of five or six people advancing toward me. My pulse quickened as I sought to make them out in the dimness. I heard a female laugh, and from it reasoned that these must be doubtful arsonists, so I spoke. One woman offered the fact that they had come from another college to hear Kunstler, then stayed for the prospect of witnessing some historic havoc—Beach Week with a conscience. They traded rumors each had heard, not for their truth or falsity but for their aberrance. By now, it seemed plain that the campus would survive. What had happened became less interesting than all the things that could have occurred.

The women began walking away just as the sun rose behind Monticello and the first beams of a new day followed them through Cabell Hall’s colonnade, and at the moment I told myself I had seen the last of them, that my twelve hour shift defending Mr. Jefferson’s Lawn had ended and I could get some sleep—at that instant she had hesitated, offering me a momentary view of her profile. She fell out of step with her denim-clad comrades, then turned to me, squinting into the sunrise, and said, “I know you.” I tried to place her, but four years had passed and much had changed since 1966, and at that moment she looked vaguely like every coed I had met during that brooding era.

“Elizabeth Hetzel. Hollins?”

Then I remembered. As she faced me, testing my memory and squinting into the morning coming up behind me, I mentally sheared off the tangle of curls framing her face to summon her image as it must have appeared to me on that blind date our freshman year. “Sure,” I said. “We went to Tony’s. You ordered pizza with pineapple on it. I didn’t know they put pineapple on pizza.”

“Not bad,” she said, grinning. Then, turning back to her friends, she had urged them to go on; she would catch up. We talked for two and a half hours. I learned things I must have learned on our blind date but forgotten. And, I learned she had arresting eyes I did not remember. Bands of welcoming brown were set off by harder bronze flecks seemingly

embedded, like mica glinting in the light. By the time we had made a date for later in the week the sun was well up and I craved sleep at any price.

I glanced at the rear view mirror at my sons, our sons, their heads canted inward on a common pillow. Josh favored his mother in appearance, but had my mellow disposition. Steven seemed the reverse. Their births mirrored their development; Josh, long and labored and Steven, shorter and to the point. Heredity's irrefutable markings at the chins, the noses, incipient eyebrows. With shallow breaths, nostrils flaring faintly, and their brows unfurrowed by a single care they slept, their trust in me complete.

By the time I turned onto the interstate they were awake, playing a car game that awarded points for cows counted and deducting them for cemeteries passed. A mileage sign, confirming progress south, renewed my dread of the impending announcement. I tried to recall if the subject of adoption had ever come up with my parents. Did they ever consider adopting a sibling for me, their only child? I doubted it. The lone reference to adoption I could remember involved a cousin, orphaned by a house fire and taken in by a cousin more distant. While I had no basis to believe my parents disliked or disapproved of the concept, I knew it would strike them as a strange, even bizarre commitment for parents who were neither childless nor forced by circumstances to assume other parents' responsibilities. The very idea would be as foreign to them as an announcement that I was leaving Elizabeth and our sons to join the priesthood—noble enough, but under the circumstances a form of mental imbalance.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, always traveled with certain angst on visits to family, hers or mine. Holidays, in particular, depressed her, for reasons I never fully understood and she articulated vaguely, with adumbrated explanations like "not happy times." When I pressed, she withdrew, a morose distancing. In days preceding them, I watched her steel herself against whatever demons preyed upon her, and for a day or two into the visit she held up, bright-eyed and spirited. But it didn't last, and her moods became cloudy, overcast. If she felt heightened angst at this trip's agenda, it didn't show.

We stopped for fast food. The boys fought over french fries while Elizabeth doctored her coffee with her standard three sugars and two creams.

Entering South Carolina, we drove through rural towns, where shoppers walked Main Streets in search of sales and overhanging strings of red and green Christmas lights swayed in the wind.

Sixty miles from Charleston, we entered the Francis Marion National Forest, a thirty-mile stretch of unbroken isolation. A two lane road divided pines tall enough to throw the roadway into deep shadow by mid-afternoon. Here, the boys always wanted to sing, and I agreed. I grew up with the Kingston Trio and Brothers Four and remembered four or five of their ballads I intended to pass down. In full voice and errant pitch we sang, "This is the story 'bout Eddie-cochin-catchinarin-tosanearin-tosanokin-samma-kamma-whacky Brown." When we reached the last line, "Took so long to say his name that Eddie-cochin-catchinarin-tosanearin-tosanokin-samma-kamma-whacky Brown . . . drowned," we burst into laughter, always. Then it was on to *MTA* and *Blue Water Line* and the rest. One day our grandchildren will be learning those words from an off-key driver and I hope I live to long enough to hear them.

Thirty miles beyond the forest, the air turned identifiably coastal, hinting of salt marsh and dried oyster banks. We crossed the high twin humps of the Cooper River Bridge, then turned down East Bay. Elizabeth gathered her things before pivoting for a quick visual inspection of the boys, crowded against the rear doors in anticipation. One last turn and I felt the familiar rumble of the cobblestones on Church Street, then saw my home, an antebellum, piazza-lined house a block from the Battery. Mom and Dad met us in the driveway.

Dad was a willowy man two inches taller than me. Even now, at age seventy, black hair predominated his head and eyebrows, and only with the onset of his illness had flecks of gray appeared. At the cheekbones, a network of blood vessels near the surface gave his skin an artificial robustness, belied by the sallow hollows in the cheeks themselves and the absence of color from his lips. A downy film of gray whiskers told me he had not shaved that morning. He had lost weight since my last visit, but his movements were sturdy, his handshake firm.

I hugged Mother and stretched my legs as the others exchanged greetings.

"That drive doesn't get any shorter," I said as Josh hugged his grandmother.

“How did you come?” asked my father, and I, who always came the same way, related it again to him, who put the same question to me after every trip.

That evening, as Elizabeth talked in the kitchen with Mother and the boys rediscovered the magic hidden inside the games drawer of the old sideboard, I retreated to the piazza off the upstairs den, leaving the French doors open. The wooden swing at the far end groaned under my weight. I pushed back, raised my feet, and felt a puff of salt air brush past me as the swing commenced its pendulum. Above, the “s” hooks at the end of its supporting chains creaked against the eye bolts augured into the ceiling as the harbor, faintly visible through the palmetto tree at the opposite end, appeared, then disappeared, with my line of sight. Winter stillness pervaded the yard below, so that while the unseasonably balmy temperatures suggested the monotone serenade of cicadas, no sound competed with the metronomic clicking from above. I breathed in, filling my lungs with the saline humidity that was as much a part of my boyhood as the maple bed in my room or the Little League trophy on my bookcase.

Out of the silence came footsteps in the hall. Looking left, I saw through the window beside the swing the outline of my father in the hallway leading to the den. “Dad! On the piazza.” Moments later Dad’s silhouette appeared in the doorway.

“Peaceful tonight,” he offered, paused as though uncertain of whether to cross the threshold.

“Can’t beat it,” I said from the recessed darkness of the swing. “You would think that with us being near the same water a few hundred miles north the air would be the same, but it isn’t.”

My father made no reply. The overhead clicking seemed amplified in the lull.

“It’s good to be home,” I said.

“I saw Barron Morris a few days ago at a Christmas party. He asked about you. Wanted to know how you liked your practice and whether you had ever given any thought to coming back here. He said to call him next time you’re in town.”

“I’ll do that,” I said, mildly intrigued by this overture from one of Charleston’s premier attorneys. An inspiration seized me to tell my father the answers to Morris’s questions, but before I could begin Dad turned and walked away, so that light from the den again filled the unobstructed

doorway. Perhaps Dad sensed what was coming; sensed that I was about to embark upon the kind of personal disclosure that, in the rare occurrences of the past, left my father silent, unable to respond and embarrassed by it. I gave the floor a forceful thrust and continued swinging.

On the day before we were scheduled to return to Virginia, Elizabeth pressed me to broach the issue at lunch, but lunch came and went as I grew steadily more impatient with my own apprehension. I had felt more relaxed in front of juries in death penalty cases. To kill time, I read a novel and then wandered aimlessly about the house. I grew up here, and all about me were the remembered relics of my youth: furniture, photographs, lamps, baseball, and football pennants. I lingered at a photograph framed above my dresser. There was my childhood friend, Philip, grinning from the seat of a new bicycle. Philip died in Vietnam, while I was in law school. I took a nap. The afternoon waned.

I know my “buy a gook” comment at supper took Elizabeth by surprise, but we share a dark sense of humor and I needed something to counter the tension I felt building. Mother set such a nice table in honor of our last night. She shuffled in and out of the kitchen, mumbling to herself as she brought rice and cauliflower, snap beans and coleslaw, ham and artichoke pickle. Her disorganization was legendary, but she possessed the gentlest soul I had ever encountered. It was not unusual to find, in the kitchen after a sumptuous meal, a prepared dish on which she might have invested an hour’s labor, only to forget to place it on the table. On such occasions, she laughed at herself along with everyone else, proffering explanations for her absent-mindedness which provoked ever more laughter. People sensed, with the barest exposure to her, that anything said to her in anger or pique would hurt her beyond rejoinder, leaving the tormentor wounded by his own sword. I prized her congenial tenderness and testing it, as I would momentarily, disturbed me deeply.

I knew generally Dad’s attitude about Asians. Over the years, and especially during Vietnam, he made comments that evidenced a finely honed racism. His hawkish support for what we were doing there had nothing to do with the rights of South Vietnamese to live free from Communism. He didn’t much care what system they lived under or, truth be told, whether they lived at all. His rationale for putting men and money over there, and possibly his only son, found its footing in the need to stand up to the Chinese, who he was convinced aspired to world domination. A classic

domino theorist. But his expression at supper of disdain for all Asians shocked me. Voicing his most heartfelt feelings, on that or anything else, shocked me. Maybe he felt ambushed. Neither he nor Mom had a clue this was coming, so I was prepared to allow them some latitude in their response. The extent of Elizabeth's charity I would learn later.

Mother, on the other hand, followed the unwritten script to the final line. Ladies do not vent in public. They pick up dishes with dignity and adjourn to another room. She could not have cared less about the domino theory. For her, millions of slant-eyed yellow people in the Pacific, all dedicated to making her a war widow three years into her marriage, said all she needed to know. Her particular xenophobia ran to anyone living outside the South, and the emotion was not hatred or even dislike. She followed the Christian mandate to love thy neighbor—she just loved her southern neighbors more. For her, southerners were a breed chosen by God to represent all that was good and true and decent in the human race, and non-southerners, “some very nice people,” she would allow, simply fell short of that standard. When I became engaged to Elizabeth, she took solace in Elizabeth's southern college education, but deep down she was asking the question that always obsessed her: “Who are your people, dear?” I once asked Mother if she had been disappointed I had not married a woman from the South. She hesitated, weighing her words, before telling me in a tone close to professorial that the choice of a mate involved a host of considerations, geographic origin being but one of many. I knew she didn't really mean that, and she knew it too. But by then Josh and Steven had come along, and grandchildren will bridge more divides than any force on earth. Then, as an afterthought, she said, “Your father and I never insisted on a girl from Charleston. There were charming girls in Columbia, too.”

As if the adoption discussion were not crisis enough for one trip, Steven fell off his bike and cut his head on the morning we were to leave. Elizabeth arrived at the hospital as they were sewing him up. He'll be fine, the doctor assured me. The small scar will fade in time.

Dad and I drove home in silence. Steven rested his temple against the back seat, seemingly spent from his adventure. Before the station wagon came to a stop, Elizabeth emerged from the house to escort the patient inside. Clinging to her arm, he walked slowly and with his head down

toward the house. I would have been with him but for Dad's comment as I turned off the engine. "Let's talk a minute."

I did not move because I could not move, so totally arrested by what would have passed, between others, as a routine overture. Unlike Elizabeth, who had anticipated the lecture she had received from Sarah that morning, I expected silence. But I saw now, in my father's grip on the door handle, his rigid body braced as if expecting some jarring impact, and his refusal to look at me directly, the very anguish which would render this moment, for me, indelible. For the first time, Dad's mask of anonymity slipped an inch, just enough for me to glimpse the pain behind the four simple words he had just uttered. Small wonder he hadn't spoken them more often or, to my memory, ever. His discomfort spread immediately across the space separating us physically, so that without consciousness I gripped my door handle, as if bracing.

I had seen, in the faces of witnesses at trial or deposition, an insecurity that bore some of the markings now exhibited by Dad's awkward stiffness and his effort to modulate his voice, and I had assigned that discomfiture to the intimidation which looms over one in stressful, defensive surroundings when confronted by another for whom that same environment is as relaxed as an overstuffed chair in the den at home. Growing up, we discussed politics with informal ground rules more appropriate to a confessional. No interrupting, no raised voices, considered regard for the other's opinion. But even these "arguments" occurred when Dad had armored himself in the mail of alcohol. He was not an alcoholic when measured on scales of frequency of use or quantities of consumption. By only one such measure could he have been, arguably, addicted, and that was his helpless dependency in the face of personal interaction or confrontation. Alone, he needed no anesthesia of the spirit, but venturing beyond his mental and emotional borders required the courage found in a cocktail and without it he stood at the edge of crowds, covered by a carapace of introversion, as hard and impenetrable as an oyster.

Looking straight ahead and still gripping the door handle, he cleared his throat. "If, ah, you and Elizabeth decide to go through with this idea of yours, what . . . ah, will you name her?"

I stared evenly at his profile. "We picked out Allie years ago, but of course we haven't had a chance to use it."

“I meant the last name.”

“Carter. What else?”

Dad turned toward me, and on his face he wore a florid look of undisguised rage, his features contorted into a twisted malevolence that caused me to look away. “You’re going to give our family name to some slant-eyed nobody. Unbelievable.” He jerked at the handle, sprang from the car, and slammed the door behind him. He had marched up the walk almost to the house before I realized I had not taken a breath since the word “nobody.”

I remained in the car, my breathing returning to normal as I relaxed my grip on the door handle and my heart rate slowed. I stared at the front door as if expecting Dad, against all logic and experience, to return. Instead, Elizabeth emerged from the house carrying clothes. Together, we packed the car in silence. Sarah alone kissed us goodbye, gave the boys candy for the ride home, and stood in the driveway waving until we turned out of sight.

In the late afternoon, as the car left the brooding desolation of the Francis Marion National Forest, I turned down the radio and, prompted by a sadness that had been with me since our departure and had deepened with the distance from Charleston and the moodiness of the forest, said to Elizabeth, “Why do I feel like I just left my parents with a dozen dead roses?”

“What an odd thing to say. They’ll get over it—you said so yourself. They’ll be mad for a few days until they’ve had a chance to get used to the idea. Don’t worry about it. I’m not.”

I fell silent again. Dead flowers, perhaps suggested by the moss hanging ghoulishly from oaks. The image wouldn’t leave me. I had felt their anger, yes, but beyond anger, suffering, from a wound I had inflicted. The world made less sense to me than it had four days earlier. It was as though some fundamental law of physics had been breached in the materialization of suffering out of thin air. Matter had indeed been created. By what? Not the birth of a child but the mere prospect of an anonymous child in a country I wasn’t positive I could locate on an unmarked map. How was that possible? It seemed in remoteness the equivalent of an American catching a cold across the Atlantic from a sneeze, not by a European but the ghost of a European. And now, because of some spirit once removed, I had carried those dead suffering flowers to South Carolina.

It didn't have to be this way, I decided. If matter could be created, it could be destroyed. I could stop this process before it went further. But doing so meant bringing the dead flowers back to Virginia and delivering them to Elizabeth. No matter what I did, someone I loved would end up holding those flowers.

I thought about it all the way home. Crossing the James River Bridge late that night, I decided only that he very much needed to hear the reassuring strains of *Samma-Kamma-Whacky Brown*, but Elizabeth and the boys were sleeping soundly and I did not wake them.



Elizabeth

Like most people, I do some things because I want to and a lot more because I have to. The midwinter ball at the Riverside Country Club is always for me a “have to,” because the crowd it draws consists of many of the same boring people we see all the time, only for this they dress up. I’ll bet a committee of women started it as an excuse to wear their fur coats, which they do even on the mildest evenings, and you can count on Sandra Hallet sporting her sable—a fucking sable—like we live in Moscow, and you can count on me getting slightly drunk when I see her because the I’ve-got-more-money-than-you bitch drives me up a wall. I go because it is important to Coleman, or he says it is.

It’s been a month since we left Charleston, and while we haven’t heard from his parents I feel sure they have calmed down by now, resigned to the idea and maybe even a little excited at the prospect of another grandchild, the last they will have if I have any say in the matter, which of course I do.

I needed a dress for the midwinter thing, so I stood in my closet going through my better dresses one at a time, trying to remember the last time I wore what and whether the same people would have been there and the odds were good to the point of certainty that they had been. Another reason I hate this ball is that it always brings up the old argument with Coleman about becoming members, which he is very much in favor of