

Orphans

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In my memory it is always summer. Winters in the middle of the country where I grew up were freezing, bitter, and dismal, but the summers were usually fiercely hot and humid. Not so good during the day if you had to be out working in it, but wonderful in the evenings after supper, when it had cooled off. Evenings, the kids would gather at someone's house or simply sit out on the steps and talk far into the night. I often wonder what it is we talked about for so many hours. The future, no doubt. What we'd be doing, who we would marry, the names of the children we would have, and how many. We talked about the kids who weren't there, of course, and the ones we didn't like, and if I was sitting with some of my girlfriends, the boys. Oh, how we talked about the boys, dissecting them bit by bit: what they wore, what they looked like, the ones we dreamt about, and then the ones we thought we could actually have, the ones who would like us back. I imagined myself married to every boy I knew, trying on various lives as though I was trying on outfits. We talked beneath an apricot colored sky with streaks of amber and gold, then cobalt blue, and finally, a deep, dark black, dotted with bright stars spread like wings over the dome above us.

I had felt summer coming on for months before that. In between the biting, blustery days of March, the light lingered longer, the air was balmy, and heavy coats and boots were discarded as though we were doing a strip-tease with the weather. We brought jacks to school and boxes of trading cards. Old-fashioned ships with masts might be exchanged for collies leading sheep in some far-distant country. Boys brought yo-yos and practiced

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diligently until they could do complicated loops. The girls skipped rope, double Dutch. At home we drew giant hopscotch squares on the sidewalks with colored chalk. Lavender lilacs appeared and seemed to float, suspended in air, releasing their perfumed scent, rows of red tulips and yellow daffodils, purple and gold irises and soft gray pussy willows blossomed as though they had come out of nowhere. The trees grew full and fragrant, latticed with an abundant, overflowing canopy that sheltered us in their embrace. By May, when the showers had dwindled, the fathers came out to trim hedges and mow grass that had miraculously sprung up from the rain-soaked earth. Teachers exchanged their black, serviceable dresses for light, flowered ones that exposed their sagging breasts and broad hips. And then, suddenly, overnight it was June and school was out, the buildings locked up as though that whole life from September until now had existed on another planet, and finally, we had our real life back, the life we were meant to have, free at last for the next three months, which stretched deliciously ahead of us like baskets of summer fruit ready to be plucked and devoured.

Our street began at the top of a hill and then cautiously wound its way down to the bottom, curving slightly as it went. Our house was about mid-way down, but it didn't matter where you lived. There were kids at almost every house. You had only to step out your door, and there would be dozens of them. The only house that didn't have children was across the street. The Apfelbaum's only child, a son, had been killed in the war, his plane shot down in the Pacific Theater. Mr. Apfelbaum had grown more and more bent over and glum, his lips a thin line of sorrow, even when he tried to force a smile; and Mrs. Apfelbaum, who occasionally came out to water the grass, had grown so old we barely recognized her. Her drab hair had turned the shade of pewter and then white, which she pinned up helter-skelter,

reminding us of a bird's nest, straggling around a face that had become as wrinkled as a crumpled paper bag.

Occasionally, my mother would go over there to pay them a visit. "I don't know what's going to happen to those poor people," she said. "They've got no one at all now." As soon as she said that, even though he had been dead for years, I remembered David Apfelbaum and his wide grin, the merriment in his eyes when he teased me, and thought how different he had been from his solemn, dull parents.

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The life that interested me took place on the street. My own parents hadn't been getting along for months, and all I wanted was to get away from their quarrels. In summer, the kids would fly out of their houses by six-thirty right after the dinner dishes had been cleared. Sometimes we would go down to the vacant lot to play a game of softball, and then hang around for hours drinking Cokes and smoking cigarettes that we had snatched from our parents' hidden stash. I was almost 17, old enough to get into trouble. I knew I was pretty. Everyone told me so, adults that is, and when I looked in the mirror I liked what I saw. At school the girls had to wear skirts or dresses, but now I could wear whatever I wanted to: shorts, tee shirts, and jeans that were worn all the way through to my knees. I had always been thin, like my mother and sister, but then unexpectedly that summer I began to fill out in ways that pleased me, and I wanted to show off my new accomplishments. Sometimes a bunch of us rode our bikes out into the country to ride the horses at a nearby stable or went to the roller rink and skated to "She's Too Fat For Me" until our legs got so tired we could barely lift them. But most of the time we gathered at one of those houses on the street, happy and contented that the summer we had been thinking about all those dreary months had finally arrived.

When I came home, I could still hear my parents' fighting. The words drifted through the air and crept under my closed door when I tried to go to sleep. Once I left home, I decided, I would never come back. In fact, my sister would probably do just that. She was going off to college, even though she'd been ill, and her back had begun to curve dangerously. The summer before she'd had an operation and now, still wearing a brace and walking with difficulty, my mother took her shopping to look for clothes. The college was actually a finishing school, and she was required to wear elegant dresses to pour tea for the President's receptions and Sunday Vespers. Every day they took excursions into town and came back weighted down with boxes that held those same dresses, slender packages with long, white gloves for dances, short ones for trips into town, and a dark- brown mouton lamb jacket that would serve for winter occasions.

I would watch them take out the clothes and hold them up, trying to imagine myself wearing them. I was more excited than my sister, who looked frightened. It was a miracle she was going anywhere at all. After the surgery her face was the color of ash, and she had worn a cast for a long time, her eyes dim with pain. Now, in spite of her misgivings, they were filled with anticipation.

It was the first time she was going to be away from home. I could not imagine that she was actually leaving. My sadness at seeing her off was balanced by my eagerness to have her room for myself. It overlooked the back garden and my mother's carefully tended roses that climbed the arbor at the far end of the yard. She had her own bathroom and a closet that you could actually walk into that now held those same dresses they had brought home in boxes. My mother had removed the tissue and carefully put them on hangers, which seemed a waste to me since they would only have to be packed again.

At breakfast the first week of vacation, she asked, “Well, what are you going to do today?”

The question seemed ridiculous. “The same thing I did yesterday.”

“You might think about doing something constructive. I heard that the five and ten needs people. It would keep you busy and out of mischief.”

The five and ten a few blocks away was dark and dingy and smelly. I had no intention of spending my summer vacation trapped there.

“Maybe tomorrow.” I took a bowl, poured some Rice Krispies and milk into it, listened to them crackle, and sat down to eat.

“Have it your way,” my mother said petulantly. Since she hadn’t been getting along with my father she got annoyed easily.

“Mom’s right,” my sister added. She was just finishing her breakfast— poached eggs on toast with strawberry jam. “You’ll be sorry you didn’t make better use of your time.”

“Your sister’s going to be a college girl,” Mom said proudly. Beams of sunlight were shining on her face, and suddenly, I saw that there were a few more silver strands in her hair, enough to make me realize that she was growing older. Her skin wasn’t shiny and smooth the way it used to be, and now there were fine lines beneath her eyes that made her look tired all the time.

I knew what my sister was getting at, though. I didn’t like school very much. Everything came easily to her, but I had to struggle just to stay afloat. I’d rather look out the window and dream. Numbers were my downfall— math, dates in history, equations. The only thing I liked was words. Putting them together and trying to make sense of the things that happened to me, connecting the random events that occurred. There was a lot I was still trying to figure out. I didn’t understand why my sister had been made to suffer, for example,

and I had not. Beneath her horn-rims, she was actually prettier than I was, but she hid it because she didn't want to be disappointed when boys wouldn't even give her a passing glance. Her body had fallen into ruin because of her illness, but I never heard her complain.

My mother was smoking a cigarette. She poured herself another cup of coffee, while she browsed through the newspaper, checking out the advertisements, still searching for the clothes my sister needed. "Here's one," she said. My sister glanced up and nodded approvingly, and my mother added, "We might take a look at it today."

Then, she fixed her gaze on me as though she had just remembered that I was still there. "Your turn will come, too," she said. I didn't answer her. I didn't have to. A few moments later, as though she was still thinking of ways for me to occupy myself during the long summer ahead, she told me, "The Apfelbaums have visitors."

She had caught my interest now. The Apfelbaums? No one ever went there. The door was always shut, the widows tightly closed, and the shades drawn on even the hottest day.

"Who?" I asked, curious to know who would actually want to visit them.

"Twins. They're about your age, maybe a little older. A boy and a girl. They're orphans, only you mustn't ever mention that. You might go over and introduce yourself. Their parents died this winter, and now that school is out, they've come to live with their aunt and uncle."

I could not imagine that those two wax-like figures, Mr. and Mrs. Apfelbaum,, could be an aunt and uncle. They seemed like people who had fallen off the earth and would never be able to come back as anything human.

"I'll see," I said. She gave me a look that said, "Okay, have it your way." I knew what she meant. "You're just like your father. You do whatever you have a mind to do and

nothing more.” I thought about this. Maybe she was right. My sister and mother started talking again about the dresses that were advertised in the paper, trying to decide which store to go to first. I closed the door firmly behind me and went outside to sit and wait for the orphans to come out.

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Later in the day the heat would rise from the pavement. As the summer wore on, it would be hotter still, much hotter, until the air shimmered hazily. When it grew dark, fireflies would glow in the night with bright sparks of light and mosquitoes would torment us, but now it was the middle of June, and summer was just beginning. The air was clear and fresh and so still that it made me feel that I was looking at a painting in a museum. Only the birdsong and buzzing of insects kept it real. I sat on the front steps and looked across at the Apfelbaumss . Behind the massive oak tree on the front lawn, the shades were up, and a window was open for the first time in years. I waited for a long time until the sun was hot on my back, and then I saw them. They didn’t look like orphans. I don’t know quite what I expected. They didn’t even look like twins. The girl was plain and plump, what my mother often called *zaffig*, but her brother was tall and lean and handsome.

We stared at each other for a few minutes. Then I said, “Hi.”

The girl crossed the lawn first and waited for me to come over. Her drab, brown hair straggled around a dumpling face. Then the boy joined his sister. Up close I saw that his eyes were deeply set and very dark, with pools of opaque thoughts I couldn’t decipher, but from the way he looked at me, I felt something pass between us. Even though he was lean, he was well built, with strong, broad shoulders and arms, thick, black, wavy hair that was untamed, and skin that would turn darker in the sun. He looked like the pictures of movie stars I had saved from magazines, except for his nose, which was long and curved

crookedly at the bridge, as though it had been broken and badly reset. I recognized it at once. It was the nose handed down from our ancestors in that land from which we had once been exiled and forced to wander the Earth, but it made his face distinctive and slightly exotic, and I thought that it was beautiful.

“I’m Maddy,” I said.

“Maddy,” he repeated. “I never heard that name before. What kind of a name is that?”

I didn’t know what to say, and in that awkward space, he told me “That’s Esther, I’m Jack.” Their last name was Jacobson. Esther and Jack Jacobson. “We’re twins,” he added, “but fraternal. That’s why we don’t look alike.”

I thought that Jack Jacobson had gotten the better deal than his sister. I was reminded of the nursery rhyme I had learned when I was a child. *Jack Sprat could eat no fat. His wife could eat no lean. And so between the two of them, they licked the platter clean.* They were from Texas, and the way they pronounced their words was different than the way I was used to in the middle of the country.

“So,” I asked, “what are you two doing here?”

“Going to live here, I guess,” Jack said. “Nowhere else to go except back to the orphanage. Our parents are dead.” He said it matter-of-factly, as if it was a fact like any other.

The orphanage. In my mind I saw rows of stark beds and meals at long tables and tattered kids, but the Jacobson twins weren’t tattered. They were both wearing clean jeans and clean shirts that were freshly pressed. Esther invited me in and proudly showed me her room. I hadn’t been there in years, not since I was very young, and David Apfelbaum had still been alive. It looked just the same, though. The rooms were dark, with massive,

intricately carved furniture. The only room that had changed was Esther's room. I remembered that it had been Mrs. Apfelbaum's sewing room, but now the machine where she had spent so many hours conferring with my mother about patterns and material was nowhere to be seen. Frilly curtains hung at the windows, and a white bedspread decorated the bed.

I browsed through her closet. Her clothes were as plain as she was. She told me her mother had made them for her, and there was a catch in her voice as she said it, like a hiccup mid-sentence, that we both ignored. I stared out Esther's bedroom window. It faced the street, and between the leaves that fanned over the front lawn, I could see my house. It was strange seeing it from that perspective. I couldn't see inside, of course, but in my mind I could still imagine my sister and mother sitting at the breakfast table and trying to decide what they would buy that day.

On the way out, we passed the room that had been given to Jack. Airplanes on wires were still strung from each wall as though at any moment they would soar into the sky. There were the usual college pennants and a bronze sculpture of a bucking horse and rider, and on the dresser a picture of David Apfelbaum staring seriously into the camera in his Air Force uniform and cap, tilted rakishly at an angle.

"Did you know him?" Jack asked.

For those few minutes David Apfelbaum came to life, the way I remembered him, the way he had been on those glorious days of summer when I was very young. "He was much older, but I used to see him with his friends." I didn't mention that he had a girlfriend who had married someone else when he didn't come home.

I would have told him more, but I could hear Mr. and Mrs. Apfelbaum somewhere in the house, the scrape of Mr. Apfelbaum's walker, his heavy, shuffling steps. He was much

older than his wife and had been a pharmacist. I recalled his bald, freckled head above the glass partition filling prescriptions, eyes intent on the task at hand, the careful way he had given instructions with each medication he handed us. It was hard to believe that he was the same person now.

“Mr. Apfelbaum is doing poorly,” she explained when her husband distracted her, as though he wasn’t standing right there and could speak for himself. At the mention of his name he looked up, and I saw that his eyes were rheumy and rimmed in red. Mrs. Apfelbaum opened the refrigerator and poured some juice from a pitcher into a tall glass, and Mr. Apfelbaum sat down at the kitchen table to drink it, his right hand shaking as he brought it to his lips.

Why don’t you ask your mother if you can stay for dinner, Maddy,” Mrs. Apfelbaum suggested, turning back to us. She was as light as a bird, thin and bony and all white as though she had been dipped in flour—white hair, white papery skin, starched, white blouse. She seemed not entirely well, and her hand fluttered to her breast and rested there.

Esther came with me. My mother and sister were getting ready to catch the bus into town, wearing their summer dresses and hats and white cotton gloves. I could see my sister’s brace through the filmy material, a sad, dark shadow of something metal.

“Be home before dark, Madeleine,” my mother said. It made me mad. It was her way of proving she was still in charge.

“Your name’s Madeleine?” Esther asked in a voice that sounded like an accusation. “I thought you told me it was Maddy.”

“Only my mother calls me that.” The answer seemed to satisfy her. We went back over to her house. “So are you going to stay here?” I asked

“It all depends. . .” she began, and then the words drifted away into silence.

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After that we saw each other every day. In the evening, while Esther helped Mrs. Apfelbaum with the dishes, Jack and I went and sat outside on the steps next to each other beneath the oak tree. The leaves were lobbed and feathery, and through the foliage I could see the patchwork of pale-blue sky turning dusky. The trunk was wide and rough and forked halfway up, and I noticed that each fork followed its own pattern, with jagged arms that branched out in every direction, as if each branch had decided to take a different path. At first Jack and I didn't know what to say to each other, and at last we became quiet, taking in the day gradually darkening and night falling around us, as though we had never seen it happen before. And perhaps I had never really felt it, the way I felt it at that moment next to him.

But after the awkwardness passed, these evenings unfolded as though a curtain had parted and we were actors in a play, going through our parts. Once, when Esther came out to join us, her face flushed from being in the hot kitchen, I asked how they had come here.

“By train,” she answered.

“How come I never saw you here before?”

“Oh, that,” she said. “They always came to see us. Aunt Thelma is my mother's cousin, but I call her Auntie,” she added quietly. “They said they'd take us after our parents died.”

I wanted to ask how it had happened, but I didn't have to. Esther said, “Train wreck. They got stuck on the tracks; maybe they didn't hear it coming.”

It didn't seem fair that they had to travel here by train, I said, perhaps the very train that had killed their mother and father.

Jack got up and brushed his hands on his pants, and I thought that he didn't want to talk about it any more. Then, suddenly, biting off the words, he said, "I wasn't getting along with them. Especially my father. I never had a chance to say good-bye. You wouldn't understand that kind of pain, would you, Maddy?"

"How do you know?" I answered sharply. How could Jack Jacobson possibly know what I felt? He backed down then, and I thought it was strange that up until that summer I hadn't even known Esther and Jack Jacobson and now, after only a few weeks, I felt that I had known them my entire life.

I liked Esther, but she wasn't that interesting. I already knew that when she got married, she would settle for someone like herself. Her nature was sweet, docile, and obedient. Jack was different. He wasn't like any of the boys I had known. He appeared to be older than his years, even though we were nearly the same age, already self-absorbed in his own misery, and yet, like all the other girls, I was drawn to him: the pulsing of something wild and unbroken and fiery. I understood the blackness in his soul. I tried to picture myself suddenly without parents. I was afraid my father would leave eventually and that my mother and I would move somewhere else, but at least they would still be alive. A slight breeze rustled through the trees. I shivered as the night came closer. A full moon dipped in the sky. I looked at Jack. In the pale reflection, the burst of anger had released the tension in his face, and he looked calmer.

I told him about my parents.

"Don't expect me to feel sorry for you, Maddy." But he put his arm around me, and even though I barely knew him, his lips brushed mine, full and ripe and warm.

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My father came and went. Sometimes he packed a suitcase and stayed away for days. My mother accused him of having other women, but he said he just wanted some peace and quiet. If my mother looked older, he had already become old. The flesh around his jaw sagged and his color was poor.

“So what are you doing with yourself?” he asked, as though we were two strangers passing the time of day.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” he pressed. “You’re old enough to start doing something. You ought to think about that. Nothing will get you nothing.”

I didn’t want to listen to my father—or my mother. As far as I was concerned they had wasted their lives chasing illusions. I decided that it was something I would never do.

“You’re growing up,” he said. It seemed to startle him, as though he was wondering when it had happened. I knew that he was right. That summer I could feel my childhood slipping away. At the same time he must have known that his own life was passing by just as quickly.

Every day was like being given a shiny gold coin to spend, as if they were inexhaustible, and the summer would go on forever just like this: the sweetness in the early mornings before a sphere of yellow gilded the crown of the sky, and the day was used up, the languorous, sleepy afternoons, the longing of evening, first twilight, and then the passion of night, when the stars mysteriously appeared like messengers from other worlds, and later still, the black watch before early morning came, when troubling thoughts that were brushed aside at other times refused to leave.

The friends I’d grown up with on the street faded away. When Jack wasn’t working, we spent our days together. We caught a bus and went to the movies, not to see the picture,

of course, but to have some time alone in the dark, the flickering celluloid telling its own story while our knees touched, and I could feel his breath and the brush of his mouth on my neck. We went to the zoo and gazed at the animals who looked back at us, and while we were walking and tossing peanut shells on the ground, holding hands, he would reach over and kiss me, gently at first, and then more intensely as we spread out a blanket on the grass and licked through swirling cones of chocolate chip ice cream that melted deliciously on our tongues.

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During those lazy summer afternoons, Esther and I occasionally sat on her porch or mine, making scrapbooks for the children at the hospital. We wrote stories and cut out poems and pictures from old magazines, or rearranged letters to form words like “Get Well” or “Keep Smiling,” to cheer them up. Esther could never think of anything. Her mind seemed closed up like a box that had no opening. She was always asking, “How do you have so many ideas?”

“They just come to me,” I answered, but she didn’t understand. A lot was in my mind. Besides writing, I liked to read. Other summers I had gone through all the Nancy Drew books, saving up my allowance to go down to the penny candy store and buy them. The candy store was different than the five and ten. It was a long, dark, corridor, without any windows. In the front there was an ancient glass counter with bottles of penny candies, and on the shelves, rows of books like The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries. An old couple owned the store. They must have lived in the back rooms because Mrs. Sullivan was always cooking, and the unpleasant odor of cooked cabbage or something else just as unappealing drifted out whenever I was there. Mr. Sullivan sat and listened to the baseball games all day on the radio with the volume turned up, and when anyone came in, he would

get up reluctantly and get what you wanted, as though you had ruined his whole day by coming in at all. He had to fetch the ladder to get the Nancy Drew books from a long row of them on a dusty upper shelf with a long hook, grumbling about it and muttering under his breath. That summer, though, I had tired of them, and I wanted to read something more worldly. I decided to read Tolstoy, thick, fat books that would keep me occupied for weeks. I walked to the library and checked them out. Often I just sat there before I went back home. I liked the quiet and the order, the volumes arranged by subject matter or authors, the knowledge that it would stay just the same the next day and the day after that. Nothing ever changed at the library. Everything was hushed and as peaceful as a museum, as if the most important secrets in the world were kept there, and in a way they were. The librarians were the kind of women who tiptoed through the rooms, the way they tiptoed through their lives, putting the books back or checking them out with a wan smile. "Life has passed them by," my father said once, in a tone that made me hope that I wouldn't meet a similar fate. Sometimes I took volumes down at random from the shelves and read the first sentences. It was like a door opening, as though each held a different path, and just by opening it you could walk through it as though you were visiting a friend. I wondered how I would ever read all the books in those rooms, no matter how long I lived. With each book I got to know people I'd never meet in real life. When I finished, I had to stop for a moment and think where I was. I would copy out passages into a notebook of sentences I liked and wonder how real writers could create a world that was so genuine that I felt as though I had been there myself.

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Jack worked as a lifeguard. He wanted to earn enough for his clothes and school supplies for the next year, without asking for handouts.

“Won’t your aunt and uncle help you?” I asked.

“You have to be strong,” he said with the same fierceness he had shown the first night I met him.

“Who?”

“Myself, and you too,” he answered brusquely, as though I would never understand how life worked.

“What about God?”

“God?” he said, barely concealing his contempt.

That was one of the things he had argued about with his father. He was always praying. He prayed as if God was actually listening to him. “Where was God when he and my mother were killed?” he asked defiantly.

He was not asking me, really, and I knew that. He was the only boy I knew who talked about such things. Other boys didn’t have opinions. They simply believed what their parents had brought them up to believe. They didn’t talk about serious subjects. They talked about sports and girls and the money they would make as soon as they got out of school, but Jack liked to talk about ideas and poets and books he’d read. He wanted to know everything.

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We often rode our bikes out to the country while it was still light. Our destination was a small lake with boats tethered to the dock, a beach, and a place where we could get something to eat. I wasn’t supposed to go there. It attracted a bad crowd, my mother said, but I didn’t tell her. She was too occupied with her own life, ranting about my father and his misdeeds, telling me how he had ruined her life. She was still getting my sister ready for college, sewing the few things they couldn’t find in the stores, but she didn’t make real dinners anymore. Sometimes it was hot dogs and a jar of sauerkraut and baked beans, or a

salad from the garden, a carton of cottage cheese and cream, or even an omelet or French toast, easy breakfast food we used to have on Sunday mornings when my father and mother were still together, reading the papers and deciding what to do if it was a nice day. My father had bought a car that he drove to work, a second-hand Dodge that was kept in the garage at other times. On Sundays he would take it out for a drive, our summer outing. We drove aimlessly out to the country and stopped at the many farm stands along the way, coming home with just-picked vegetables, sweet corn, or fresh eggs. They were the same bumpy, ill-kept roads where Jack and I went now, past fields on either side, the stables with their pungent odor, and meadows and cows grazing, past the white-framed farmhouses with children waving at us from porches. Then, like a mirage in the desert, the lake would appear like a breath of fresh air and cottages with white shingles that needed a coat of paint. People from town stayed from June to September to fish or swim or just to sit on the sand dunes and watch the canoes gliding smoothly over the brilliant, diamond-faceted laps of the water.

Clusters of noisy groups scattered over the grounds, some of them rough, and now I knew why my mother didn't want me to go there. We took a canoe out, traveling around the circumference of the lake, paddling in a steady rhythm, as we drifted on the glassy surface, occasionally diving beneath it to meet each other in that other world where shapes were blurred and ghostly. Time lengthened on those lazy summer days, and when the sun dropped to a flaming ball of orange and a hush floated over the water, we went up to the restaurant, which was nothing but a dive with sawdust on the floor, and got something to eat, usually hamburgers and fries and a milkshake, and then we drifted into the shadows, where Jack pressed his body against mine.

I tried to pull back. "Still afraid of me, Maddy?" Jack said, as his lips closed against mine, urging me on. My mother had warned me about men and their urges. They could get a

girl in trouble. I could feel the hard, mysterious pressure of those urges. I wanted someone of my own to love, but I knew if I followed my own urges to be free, to let myself go and to do what I wanted to do, that I would be crossing an invisible line and could never go back. When darkness began to enfold us, we left. Each time I looked at the cottages as the lights went on when dusk fell and thought about Jack and me, and what we would do if we were staying there. The music from the jukebox was just beginning, and plaintive songs of love gone wrong drifted through the night and then faded as we rode farther and farther away.

We began going there every week, and when we came back from these excursions, we stayed together for hours, reluctant to part, overcome with each other's bodies. Sometimes we joined the other kids who had gathered up and down the street, but most of the time we kept to ourselves. Now that Jack had money, he bought his own cigarettes, a pack in each pocket. He didn't talk much when he was smoking. I suppose at those times he was thinking about his parents and the life he still had when they were alive. There was a part of him that he didn't share, not even with me, an undercurrent that shifted in the shadows of his pupils, a sad lament like those songs.

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It was late when I came home. My mother was out. She was always out now, and I saw my father less and less. My lips stung from the force of Jack's lips, and my clothes smelled of him: smoke and hair cream and something musky. My sister began waiting up for me. She looked tired and cross.

"Where have you been?" she asked, even though she had a good idea just by looking at me.

I didn't answer, and she grew angrier, "You ought to take a look in the mirror. "Don't you have any sense at all?"

I wanted to tell her everything, but I didn't dare. I wanted to ask her advice, but I already knew what she would say, and I was afraid of something else. That she would tell our mother, and I wouldn't be able to go out at all. We seldom saw our father. He had become a phantom, and we never knew when he would appear. Occasionally, I thought I glimpsed a woman's face through the car window whenever he stopped by, which was always rolled up, even on the hottest day. Looking at my sister now, I was sorry that I had neglected her, and yet in a sense, I knew that we had already gone our separate ways.

She was gazing hopefully in the direction of the future, and at that moment, I was aware of the way time was passing. In the early morning the cold breath of frigid air tingled my face awake, announcing the season when bicycles would be put away and frosty nights with winter constellations would burst brilliantly into the sky. The shiny coins were being spent, one by one.

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In those waning days of August, my mother brought home a man I didn't like. Her voice changed when he was around, a cloying tone that fussed over him, setting him up comfortably in the chair my father had used when he came home tired from work and making fancy dinners and cakes that took her hours to assemble. He had a mustache and a crease between his eyebrows that moved up and down when he spoke and an oily manner that he used to try to get me to like him. But nothing worked. I barely said hello. Whenever he came I made an excuse to go to my room. I wanted my father back, and I wasn't about to give my mother the satisfaction of treating this stranger well. I barely answered the questions he asked me, polite questions that should have elicited courteous answers, the kind of questions adults ask children about school and the subjects they like and what they want to do once they're grown.

“You could be nicer to him,” my mother scolded. “You could at least be polite. I suppose you want your father to come home. Well, that’s not going to happen, so you might as well get used to it. Your father has other women,” she said. “Don’t think I don’t know.”

“How can you be so sure?”

My mother looked at me as though my brain was empty of the kind of knowledge that everyone else took for granted.

“Men,” she said, the way she had said ‘urges.’ They do what they want to do. You better get used to that too.”

* * *

Just when I thought the summer was almost over, a wicked sun asserted its way to the zenith of the sky, and an unexpected heat wave ended the pleasant days. The air became hot and unbearable. The temperature rose to a hundred and stayed there for a week. Jack and I decided to go out to the lake one last time. We would not come back the same night. I weighed it in my mind. I would have to lie, of course. I would have to say that I was spending the night with Esther or one of my friends. I thought about not being a virgin anymore. I thought about lying in Jack’s arms in the dark. I wondered what it would be like. I thought about men and their urges, and then I admitted to myself what I had never acknowledged—that I had urges too. I was in the midst of making my way through those Russian novels, after all, reading *Anna Karenina*, and I wanted to follow my heart.

We didn’t count on Mr. Apfelbaum falling one night that week as he was shuffling along with his walker from room to room. He couldn’t pick himself up, and Mrs. Apfelbaum had to call an ambulance to take him to the hospital.

“Mr. Apfelbaum is doing poorly,” she told me, her usual response. In just a few days she had lost weight and dark hollows haunted her eyes. Mrs. Apfelbaum left for the hospital early in the morning and didn’t come home until late at night. Esther took over the chores. Every day she walked to the store for groceries, and then she came home and began cooking for Jack and herself, putting a supper aside for her aunt to eat a few hours later. Everything was turned upside down. Mrs. Apfelbaum still insisted on bringing Jack his lunch, but one day when her aunt was tired, Esther asked me to take it.

We had made it in Mrs. Apfelbaum’s kitchen, two sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs chopped up into egg salad, oatmeal cookies she had baked early in the morning after a sleepless night, still slightly warm and soft from the oven, and a bunch of grapes that I nibbled on as I walked, carrying my swimsuit and towel in my other hand. I seldom went. I didn’t like it there. For one thing Jack had to work. He had actually saved a child from drowning a week or two before, and when he told me about the bluish cast of the child’s face as he dragged him out of the pool, I considered the narrow ridge between life and death and was certain that Jack and I were doing the right thing. We belonged together, and after this was all over, we would find a way to make that happen.

He wasn’t expecting me. I finally saw him talking to one of the girls who had started fawning over him. It was the other reason I didn’t like coming to the pool. She was wearing a bathing suit that barely covered her essentials, and her long, blond hair cascaded down her back. I stood in one spot and didn’t move. I couldn’t see Jack’s eyes, of course, but I could see the way he looked at her, his head tilted attentively to what she was saying. I recognized that expression. I had seen it before when he was looking at me, and all at once I knew, as young as I was, when I saw him bend closer to touch his lips to hers, that once he had his way with me he would go on to the next girl, and the one after that. Perhaps I was

thinking of my father, still hearing my mother's words ringing in my ears. *Your father has other women. Don't think I don't know.* It had made me alert to everything that could go wrong, like those songs of betrayal that haunted my memory. I took one last glance. He was so engrossed he never saw me. I took Jack's lunch to the park, where I sat on a bench and ate it until nothing was left, and then I crumpled up the paper bag and threw it in the trash.

* * *

Mr. Apfelbaum came home from the hospital, and Mrs. Apfelbaum had to take care of him. Before long, she said that she couldn't have the orphans after all. Esther told me first. I gave her a keepsake she liked, a necklace I didn't wear, but I didn't really believe it until Jack said, "It's true. We're going home, Maddy." Then he added, "I was going to leave anyhow. I only have another year until I can be on my own."

I knew why he said that.

After that day there had been a rift between us that couldn't be mended, even though he told me, "It wasn't the way you think."

"Don't go," I said, but he didn't answer me.

Everything had been set in motion, and now it was happening too fast. I wanted to go back and have it come out differently, to change the ugly way we had begun to speak to each other.

Before Jack left, we went out to the lake one afternoon, but we didn't spend the night. We were quarreling, and the happiness that I had felt those other times was absent. It was a foolish quarrel with accusations and denials, the first of a downward spiral that only ended after Jack was gone, and had more to do with what was going on that summer with my parents than with the way I really felt about him. That night the lights in the cabins

seemed to mock me with unfulfilled promises, and when we left, and I turned for one final look, I knew that we would never return, not now, not ever.

* * *

The words I had counted on to make sense of the things that happened failed, and it was years before I could grab hold of them again. Yet when I look back and think of that summer, it is not words I see but images: Jack and I sitting under the oak tree, sweet moments tinged with sorrow because he was almost all alone in the world and mine was coming apart, our bodies seeking consolation in each other; the shock on my father's face as he realized I was growing up and away from him; my mother and sister at the kitchen table, newspapers spread out in front of them, confidently planning what she would take when she went away to school and coming home laden with those beautiful clothes.

There is a time for all of us when life heads in another direction than the one we had expected, and there is no going back to what we wanted to happen. The earth shifts, and we are displaced from everything we have taken for granted, unbalanced, as though we had entered one of those fun houses in an amusement park. That summer I knew that my father would probably leave us, but until it occurred, I did not really believe it, any more than I believed that Jack would actually leave. Eventually, my mother married again, to another man I didn't like. My sister finished school and took a job miles away from where we lived, and we seldom saw each other, As for Jack, I often thought about him, wondering who he married and what he looked like when he grew older. But, of course, in my mind, he had never really aged, and I could not even imagine him old.

After that summer, I became an orphan of sorts myself, and it took me a long time to know who I was and where I was going. Yet those first sweet stirrings of love stayed with me over the years, drifting in and out of my dreams, startling me, and invading my

thoughts, always lying beneath the surface to burst into my mind when I least anticipated them, as though they wanted to make certain that nothing is ever forgotten while we are still alive.