

notes, she "writes with such joy and laughing sensuality about Virginia/Kentucky hill people that she could also be said to have an Appalachian streak of Garcia Marquez." Her primary characters are women who are seeking both to understand and receive acknowledgment of their wholeness as strong, creative, sexual females during a time of radical dislocation and social change, in a culture that would attempt to deny all but the most childlike or maternal expressions of womanhood. Dorothy Hill writes, "The serious issues of female isolation and identity make up the core of her work. She elucidates the female psyche in landscapes and homes jarred by increasing complexity and change attended by bewilderment and pain, and her fiction is a struggle to find healing and reconciliation." In *Oral History*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *The Devil's Dream*, Smith draws from the archetypes in ancient myths of journey and quest for elements of plot and structure. These motifs acquire additional power by their rootedness in a particular landscape, the hauntingly beautiful, yet economically ravaged Virginia mountains.

She writes, Smith says, because she must—as a way of reclaiming self, to release emotion, and to give expression to her feelings about creativity and religion: "I continue to feel deep conflicts," Smith says in our interview, "but the link for me between my own religious feelings and creativity is that with writing, you go out of yourself—but you know you can come back. You won't stay stuck in the craziness. To become caught up in a fictive world is a craziness that you can come back from."

Smith's religious passion threatened to become all-consuming, and as an adult, she pulled back from it: "I still believe in God; I've just never been able to find a way to act on that without it taking me over. It's something I struggle with all the time." Smith plays out the struggle significantly in her writing, particularly in the characters of Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies* and Karen in "Tongues of Fire." She said of "Tongues of Fire" that it is "in a way truly one of the most autobiographical stories I have ever written. The family is all made up, but the character of Karen is absolutely the way I was as a child, including the obsessive reading and the obsessive religion."

Lee Smith's fiction is a rich panoply of fully-lived life, vividly comic and darkly tragic, infused with sensual detail and a deeply spiritual appreciation of the natural world of the Appalachian mountains and hollers. †

for Aug. 9th at

9:00 a.m.

in conference

room. -

Deborah Zilber

Tongues of Fire

139-1957-
the young

The year I was thirteen—1957—my father had a nervous breakdown, my brother had a wreck, and I started speaking in tongues. The nervous breakdown had been going on for a long time before I knew anything about it. Then one day that fall, Mama took me downtown in the car to get some Baskin-Robbins ice cream, something she never did, and while we were sitting on the curly chairs facing each other across the little white table, Mama took a deep breath, licked her red lipstick, leaned forward in a very significant way, and said, "Karen, you may have noticed that your father is not himself lately."

Not himself! Who was he, then? What did she mean? But I had that feeling you get in your stomach when something really important happens. I knew this was a big deal.

Mama looked all around, as if for spies. She waited until the ice cream man went through the swinging pink doors, into the back of his shop.

"Karen," she said, so low I could hardly hear her, "your father is having a nervous breakdown."

"He is?" I said stupidly.

The ice cream man came back.

"Sssh," Mama said. She caught my eye and nodded gravely, once. "Don't eat that ice cream so fast, honey," she said a minute later. "It'll give you a headache."

And this was the only time she ever mentioned my father's nervous breakdown out loud, in her whole life. The older kids already knew, it turned out. Everybody had wanted to keep it from me, the baby. But then the family doctor said Mama ought to tell me, so she did. But she did not elaborate, then or ever, and in retrospect I am really surprised that she ever told me at all. Mama grew up in

Birmingham, so she talked in a very southern voice and wore spectator heels and linen dresses that buttoned up the front and required a great deal of ironing by Missie, the maid. Mama's name was Dee Rose. She said that when she married Daddy and came up here to the wilds of north Alabama to live, it was like moving to Siberia. It was like moving to Outer Mongolia, she said. Mama's two specialties were Rising to the Occasion and Rising Above It All, whatever "it" happened to be. Mama believed that if you can't say something nice, say nothing at all. If you don't discuss something, it doesn't exist. This is the way our family handled all of its problems, such as my father's quarrel with my Uncle Dick or my sister's promiscuity or my brother's drinking.

Mama had long red fingernails and shiny yellow hair which she wore in a bubble cut. She looked like a movie star. Mama drank a lot of gin and tonics and sometimes she would start on them early, before five o'clock. She'd wink at Daddy and say, "Pour me one, honey, it's already dark underneath the house." Still, Mama had very rigid ideas, as I was to learn, about many things. Her ideas about nervous breakdowns were:

1. The husband *should not* have a nervous breakdown.
2. Nobody can mention the nervous breakdown. It is shameful.
3. The children must *behave* at all times during the nervous breakdown.
4. The family must keep up appearances at all costs. *Nobody should know.*

Mama and I finished our ice cream and she drove us home in the white Cadillac, and as soon as we got there I went up in my tree-house to think about Daddy's breakdown. I knew it was true. So this is it, I thought. This had been it all along. This explained the way my father's eye twitched and watered now, behind his gold-rimmed glasses. My father's eyes were deep-set and sort of mournful at best, even before the twitch. They were an odd, arresting shade of very pale blue which I have never seen since, except in my sister Ashley. Ashley was beautiful, and my father was considered to be very good-looking, I knew that, yet he had always been too slow-moving and thoughtful for me. I would have preferred a more military model, a snappy go-getter of a dad. My dad looked like a

professor at the college, which he was not. Instead he ran a printing company with my Uncle Dick, until their quarrel. Now he ran it by himself—or rather his secretary, Mrs. Eunice Merriman, ran it mostly by herself during the time he had his nervous breakdown. Mrs. Eunice Merriman was a large, imposing woman with her pale blond hair swept up in a beehive hairdo as smooth and hard as a helmet. She wore glasses with harlequin frames. Mrs. Merriman reminded me of some warlike figure from Norse mythology. She was not truly fierce, however, except in her devotion to my father, who spent more and more time lying on the daybed upstairs in his study, holding books or magazines in his hands but not reading them, looking out the bay window, at the mountains across the river. What was he thinking about?

"Oh *honestly*, Karen!" my mother exploded when I asked her this question. My mother was much more interested, on the day I asked her, in the more immediate question of whether or not I had been invited to join the Sub-Deb Club. The answer was yes.

But there was no answer to the question of what my father might be thinking about. I knew that he had wanted to be a writer in his youth. I knew that he had been the protégé of some old poet or other down at the university in Tuscaloosa, that he had written a novel which was never published, that he had gone to the Pacific Theater in the War. I had always imagined the Pacific Theater as a literal theater, somewhat like the ornate Rialto in Birmingham with its organ that rose up and down mechanically from the orchestra pit, its gold-leaf balconies, its chandelier as big as a Chevrolet. In this theater, my father might have watched such movies as *Sands of Iwo Jima* or *To Hell and Back*. Now it occurred to me, for the first time, that he might have witnessed horrors. Horrors! Sara Nell Buie, at school, swore that her father had five Japanese ears in a cigar box from the Philippines. Perhaps my father had seen horrors too great to be borne. Perhaps he too had ears.

But this did not seem likely, to look at him. It seemed more like mononucleosis to me. He was just lying on the daybed. Now he'd gotten his days and nights turned around so that he had to take sleeping tablets; he went to the printing company for only an hour or two each day. He rallied briefly at gin-and-tonic time, but his conversation tended to lapse in the middle of itself during dinner,

and frequently he left the table early. My mother rose above these occasions in the way she had been trained to do as a girl in Birmingham, in the way she was training Ashley and me to do: she talked incessantly, about anything that entered her head, to fill the void. This was another of Mama's rules:

A lady never lets a silence fall.

Perhaps the most exact analysis of my father's nervous breakdown was provided by Missie, one day when I was up in the tree-house and she was hanging out laundry on the line almost directly below me, talking to the Gardeners' maid from next door. "You mean Missa Graffenreid?" Missie said. "He have lost his starch, is all. He be getting it back directly."

In the meantime, Mama seemed to grow in her vivacity, in her busyness, taking up the slack. Luckily my sister Ashley was a senior at Lorton Hall that year, so this necessitated a lot of conferences and visits to colleges. The guidance counselor at Lorton Hall wanted Ashley to go to Bryn Mawr, up North, but after the visit to Bryn Mawr my mother returned with her lips pressed tight together in a little red bow. "Those girls were not ladies," she reported to us all, and Bryn Mawr was never mentioned again except by Ashley, later, in fits of anger at the way her life turned out. The choices narrowed to Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina; Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina; Sophie Newcomb in New Orleans; and Sweet Briar, in Virginia. My mama was dead set on Sweet Briar.

So Mama and Ashley were very busy with college visits and with all the other activities of Ashley's senior year at Lorton Hall. There were countless dresses to buy, parties to give and go to. I remember one Saturday that fall when Ashley had a Coke party in the back garden, for the senior girls and their mothers. Cokes and finger sandwiches were served. Missie had made the finger sandwiches the day before and put them on big silver trays, covered with damp tea towels. I watched the party from the window of my room upstairs, which gave me a terrific view of the back garden and the red and yellow fall leaves and flowers, and the girls and their mothers like chrysanthemums themselves. I watched them from my window—just as my father watched them, I suppose, from his.

My mother loved to shop, serve on committees, go to club meetings, and entertain. (Probably she should have been running Graffenreid Printing Co. all along—I see this now—but of course such an idea would not have entered anyone's head at the time.) Mama ran the Flower Guild of the Methodist church, which we attended every Sunday morning, minus my father. She was the recording secretary of the Ladies' Auxiliary, which literally ran the town as far as I could see; she was a staunch member of the Garden Club and the Bluebird Book Club.

Her bridge club met every Thursday at noon for lunch and bridge, rotating houses. This bridge club went on for years and years beyond my childhood, until its members began to die or move to Florida. It fascinated me. I loved those summer Thursdays when I was out of school and the bridge club came to our house—the fresh flowers, the silver, the pink cloths on the bridge tables which were set up for the occasion in the Florida room, the way Mama's dressing room smelled as she dressed, that wonderful mixture of loose powder (she used a big lavender puff) and cigarette smoke (Salems) and Chanel No. 5. The whole bridge club dressed to the hilt. They wore hats, patent-leather shoes, and dresses of silk shantung. The food my mama and Missie gave them was wonderful—is still, to this day, my very idea of elegance, even though it is not a menu I'd ever duplicate; and it was clear to me, even then, that the way these ladies were was a way I'd never be. *

But on those Thursdays, I'd sit at the top of the stairs peering through the banisters into the Florida room, where they lunched in impossible elegance, and I got to eat everything they did, from my own plate which Missie had fixed specially for me: a pink molded salad that melted on the tongue, asparagus-cheese souffle, and something called Chicken Crunch that involved mushroom soup, chicken, Chinese noodles, pecans, and Lord knows what else. All of Mama's bridge-lunch recipes required gelatin or mushroom soup or pecans. This was Lady Food. } La

So—it was the year that Mama was lunching, Daddy was lying on the daybed, and Ashley was Being a Senior. My brother Paul had already gone away to college, to Washington and Lee up in Virginia. At that time in my life, I knew Paul only by sight. He was incredibly old. Nice, but very old and very busy, riding around in

cars full of other boys, dashing off here and there when he was home, which was seldom. He used to tell me knock-knock jokes, and come up behind me and buckle my knees. I thought Paul's degree of bustle and zip was *promising*, though. I certainly hoped he would be more active than Daddy. But who could tell? I rarely saw him.

I rarely saw *anybody* in my family, or so I felt. I floated through it all like a dandelion puff on the air, like a wisp of smoke, a ghost. During the year of my father's nervous breakdown, I became *invisible* in my family. But I should admit that even before my *invisibility* I was scarcely noticeable, a thin girl, slight, brown-haired and brown-eyed, *undeveloped* (as Mrs. Black put it delicately in health class). There was no sign of a breast anyplace on my chest even though some other girls my age wore B and even C cups, I saw them in gym. I had gone down to Sears on the bus by myself the previous summer and bought myself two training bras, just so I'd have them, but my mother had never mentioned this subject to me at all, of course. And even after I got the training bras, I remained—I felt—still ugly, and still invisible in the midst of my gorgeous family.

* Perhaps it is not surprising that I turned to God.

I had always been *interested* in religion, anyway. When I was a little girl, my favorite part of the summer was Vacation Bible School, with the red Kool-Aid in the little Dixie cups and the Lorna Doone cookies at break. I loved to color in the twelve disciples. I loved to make lanyards. I loved to sing "You Are My Sunshine" and "Red and Yellow, Black and White, They Are Precious in His Sight." I loved to hold hands with Alice Field, who was my best friend for years and years until her family moved to Little Rock, Arkansas. I loved Mrs. Treble Roach, the teacher of Vacation Bible School, a plump soft woman like a beanbag chair, who hugged us all the time. Mrs. Treble Roach gave us gold stars when we were good, and I was *very* good. I got hundreds of gold stars over the years and I believe I still have them upstairs someplace in a jewelry box, like ears.

I had always liked church too, although it was less fun. I associated church with my grandparents, since we sat with them every Sunday, third pew from the back on the left-hand side of the little

stone Methodist church which my grandfather had attended all his life, which my grandmother had attended since their marriage fifty years before. Usually my mother went to church too; sometimes Ashley went to church, under duress ever since she became an atheist in tenth grade, influenced by an English teacher who was clearly *not a lady*; my father attended only on Easter. Frankly, I liked those Sundays when none of them made it, when Mama just dropped me off in front of the church and I went in all alone, clutching my quarter for the collection plate, to sit with my grandparents. Even though I was *invisible* in my own family, my grandparents noticed me plenty. I was their good, good little girl. . . certainly, I felt, their favorite. I did everything I could to ensure that this was true.

My grandmother had wispy blue hair and a whole lot of earrings and brooches that matched. She was the author of four books of poems which Daddy had printed up for her at the printing company. She suffered from colitis, and was ill a lot. One thing you never wanted to do with Grandmother was ask her how she felt—she'd tell you, gross details you didn't want to know. My mama, of course, was entirely above this kind of thing, never referring to her own or anybody else's body in any way. My grandfather wore navy-blue suits to church with red suspenders underneath. He was a boxy little man who ran the bus station and had a watch that could tell you the time in Paris, London, and Tokyo. I coveted this watch and had already asked Granddaddy to leave it to me when he died, a request that seemed to startle him.

After church, I'd walk up the street with my grandparents to their house on the corner across from the Baptist church and eat lunch, which frequently ended with lemon meringue pie, my favorite. I kept a close eye out the window for Baptists, whose service was dismissed half an hour later than ours. There were so many Baptists that it took them longer to do everything. In pretty weather, I sat out on the front porch so that I could see the Baptists more clearly. They wore loud suits, and made more noise in general than the quiet Methodists.

Our church had only forty-two members and about twenty of them, like my grandparents, were so old as to be almost dead already. I was not even looking forward to joining the MYF, which

class & church

I'd be eligible for next year, because it had only eight members, two of them definite nerds. All they did was collect food for the poor at Thanksgiving, and stuff like that. The BTU, on the other hand, did great stuff such as have progressive dinners, Sweetheart Banquets, and go on trips to Gulf Shores. The BTU was a much snappier outfit than the MYF, but I knew better than to ask to join it. My mother had already explained to me the social ranking of the churches: Methodist at the top, attended by doctors and lawyers and other "nice" families; Presbyterian slightly down the scale, attended by store owners; then the vigorous Baptists; then the Church of Christ, who thought they were the only real church in town and said so. They said everybody else in town was going to hell except for them. They had hundreds of members. And then, of course, at the *very bottom* of the church scale were those little churches out in the surrounding county, some of them recognizable denominations (Primitive Baptist) and some of them not (Church of the Nazarene, Tar River Holiness) where people were reputed to yell out, fall down in fits, and throw their babies. I didn't know what this *meant*, exactly, but I knew I'd love to see it, for it promised drama far beyond the dull responsive readings of the Methodists and their rote mumbling of the Nicene Creed.

Anyway, I had been sitting on my grandparents' front porch for years eating pie and envying the Baptists, waiting without much hope to be seized by God for His heavenly purpose, bent to His will, as in *God's Girl*, my favorite book—a biography of Joan of Arc.

So far, nothing doing.

But then, that fall of Daddy's nervous breakdown, the Methodist church was visited by an unusually charismatic young preacher named Johnny Rock Malone while Mr. Treble Roach, our own preacher, was down at Duke having a hernia operation. I was late to church that day and arrived all by myself, after the service had already started. The congregation was on its feet singing "I Come to the Garden Alone," one of my favorite hymns. One unfamiliar voice led all the rest. I slipped in next to Granddaddy, found the right page in the hymnal, and craned my neck around Miss Eulalie Butters's big black hat to see who was up there singing so nice. It looked like an angel to me—probably the angel Gabriel, because of his curly blond hair. And he was so *young*—just out of seminary,

somebody said after the service. It was a warm fall Sunday, and rays of colored light shot through the stained-glass windows at the side of the church to glance off Johnny Rock Malone's pale face. "He *walks* with me, and He *talks* with me," we sang. My heart started beating double time. Johnny Rock Malone stretched out his long thin arms and spread his long white fingers. "Beloved," he said, curling his fingers, "let us pray." But I never closed my eyes that day, staring instead at the play of light on Johnny Rock Malone's fair face. It was almost like a kaleidoscope. Then the round rosy window behind him, behind the altar, began to *pulse* with light, to glow with light, now brighter now not, like a neon sign. I got the message. I was no dummy. In a way, I had been waiting all my life for this to happen.

The most notable thing about me as a child—before I got religious, I mean—was my obsessive reading. I had always been an inveterate reader of the sort who hides underneath the covers with a flashlight and reads *all night long*. But I did not read casually, or for mere entertainment, or for information. What I wanted was to feel all wild and trembly inside, an effect first produced by *The Secret Garden*, which I'd read maybe twenty times. And the Rev. Johnny Rock Malone looked exactly the way I had always pictured Colin! In fact, listening to him preach, I felt exactly the way I felt when I read *The Secret Garden*, just exactly. ** oh*

Other books which had affected me strongly were *Little Women*, especially the part where Beth dies, and *Gone With the Wind*, especially the part where Melanie dies. I had long hoped for a wasting disease, such as leukemia, to test my mettle. I also loved *Marjorie Morningstar*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Heidi*, and books like *Dear and Glorious Physician*, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, *Christy*, and anything at all about horses and saints. I had read all the Black Stallion books, of course, as well as all the Marguerite Henry books. But my all-time favorite was *God's Girl*, especially the frontispiece illustration picturing Joan as she knelt and "prayed without ceasing for guidance from God," whose face was depicted overhead, in a thunderstorm. Not only did I love Joan of Arc, I wanted to *be* her. *Joan of Arc*

The only man I had ever loved more than Colin in *The Secret Garden*, to date, was Johnny Tremaine, from Esther Forbes's book of that title. I used to wish that it was *me*—not Johnny Tremaine—

who'd had the hot silver spilled on my hand. I would have suffered anything (everything) for Johnny Tremaine.

But on that fateful Sunday morning, Johnny Rock Malone eclipsed both Colin and Johnny Tremaine in my affections. It was a wipeout. I felt as fluttery and wild as could be. In fact I felt too crazy to pay attention to the sermon which Johnny Rock Malone was, by then, almost finished with. I tried to concentrate, but my mind was whirling. The colors from the windows seemed to deepen and swirl. And then, suddenly, I heard him loud and clear, reading from *Revelations*: "And I saw a great white throne, and Him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books were opened. . . and whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."

I can't remember much about what happened after that. I got to shake hands with him as we left the church, and I was surprised to find that his hand was cool, not burning hot—and, though bony, somehow as soft as a girl's. I looked hard at Johnny Rock Malone as he stood in front of our pretty little church, shaking hands. He was on his way to someplace else, over in Mississippi. We would never see him again. I would never see him again. And yet somehow I felt exhilarated and *satisfied*, in a way. I can't explain it. Back at my grandparents' house, I couldn't even eat my lemon meringue pie. I felt shaky and hot, like I might be getting a virus. I went home early.

My father was upstairs in his study, door closed. Nobody else was home. I wandered the house. Then I sat in the Florida room for a while, staring out at the day. After a while, I picked up my mother's sewing basket from the coffee table, got a needle and threaded it with blue thread, and sewed all the fingers of my left hand together, through the cuticle. Then I held out my hand and admired it, wishing desperately for my best friend Alice Field, of Little Rock. I had no best friend now, nobody to show my amazing hand to. Weird little Edwin Lee lived right across the street, but it was inconceivable that I would show *him*, the nerd, such a hand as this. So I showed it to nobody. I left it sewed up until Mama's white Cadillac pulled in the driveway, and then I cut the thread between my fingers and pulled it all out.

It was about this time too that I began to pray a lot (*without ceasing* was my intention) and set little fires all around the neighborhood. These fires were nothing much. I'd usually take some shredded newspapers or some Kleenex, find a few sticks, and they'd burn themselves out in a matter of minutes. I made a fire in my treehouse, in our garage, in the sink, in the basement, on Mrs. Butters's back patio, on Mr. and Mrs. Harold Castle's front porch, and in little Charlotte Lee's playhouse. Here I went too far, singeing off the hair of her Barbie doll. She never could figure out how it happened.

I entertained visions of being a girl evangelist, of appearing with Billy Graham on television, of traveling throughout Mississippi with Johnny Rock Malone. I'd be followed everywhere I went by a little band of my faithful. I made a small fire in the bed of Ashley's new boyfriend's pickup truck while he and my sister were in the den petting and watching the Hit Parade. They didn't have any idea that I was outside in the night, watching them through the window, making a fire in the truck. They all thought I was in bed!

Although I was praying a lot, my prayers were usually specific, as opposed to *without ceasing*. For instance I'd tell one friend I'd go shopping with her, and then something I really wanted to do would come up, and I'd call back and say I couldn't come after all, that my grandmother had died, and then I would go to my room and fling myself to the floor and pray without ceasing that my lie would not be found out, and that my grandmother would not really die. I made big deals with God—if He would make sure I got away with it this time, I would talk to Edwin Lee for five minutes on the bus, three days in a row, or I would clean out my closet. He did His part; I did mine. I grew in power every day. *he!*

I remember so well that important Friday when I was supposed to spend the night with Margaret Applewhite. Now Margaret Applewhite was totally boring, in my opinion—my only rival in the annual spelling bee (she won in third, I won in fourth and fifth, she beat me out in sixth with *catarrh*, which still rankled). Margaret Applewhite wore a training bra too. Our mothers, who played bridge together, encouraged our friendship. I'd rather do just about *anything*, even watch Kate Smith on TV, than spend

time with boring Margaret Applewhite. Still, earlier that week when she'd called and invited me, I couldn't for the life of me think of any good reason to say no, so I'd said yes. Then that Friday right before sixth period, Tammy Lester came up to my locker popping her gum (against the rules: we were not allowed to chew gum in school) and—wonder of wonders—asked me to come home with her after school that very day and spend the night.

Tammy Lester! Shunned by Sub-Debs, sent to Detention, noticed by older boys. I couldn't believe it. I admired Tammy Lester more than any other girl in my entire class, I'd watched her from afar the way I had watched the Baptists. Tammy Lester lived out in the county someplace (in a trailer, it was rumored), she was driven in to school each morning by one or the other of her wild older brothers in a red pickup truck (these brothers slicked back their hair with grease, they wore their cigarette packs rolled up in the sleeves of their T-shirts), and best of all, she was missing a tooth right in front, and nobody had taken her to the dentist yet to get it fixed. The missing tooth gave Tammy a devilish, jaunty look. Also, as I would learn later, she could whistle through this hole, and spit twenty feet.

Her invitation was offhand. "You wanna come home with me today?" she asked, in a manner that implied she didn't give a hoot whether I did or not. "Buddy's got to come into town tomorrow morning anyway, so he could bring you back."

"All right," I said, trying to sound casual.

"I'll meet you out front when the bell rings." Tammy flashed me her quick dark grin. She popped her gum, and was gone.

I didn't hesitate for a minute. I stopped Margaret Applewhite on her way to health class. "Listen," I said in a rush, "I'm so sorry I can't come spend the night with you, but my mother is having an emergency hysterectomy today, so I have to go straight home and help out." I had just learned about hysterectomies, from a medical book in the library.

Margaret's boring brown eyes widened. "Is she going to be all right?"

I sucked in my breath dramatically and looked brave. "We hope so," I said. "They think they can get it all."

Margaret walked into health. I sank back against the mustard-yellow tile walls as, suddenly, it hit me: Margaret's mother knew my mother! What if Margaret's mother called my mother, and Mama found out? She'd be furious, not only because of the lie but because of the nature of the lie—Mama would *die* before she'd ever mention something like a hysterectomy. Mama referred to everything below the belt as "down there," an area she dealt with darkly, indirectly, and only when necessary. "Trixie Vopel is in the hospital for tests," she might say. "She's been having trouble down there." *Down there* was a foreign country, like Africa or Nicaragua. *Friend*

What to do? I wrote myself an excuse from gym, signed my mother's name, turned it in and then went to the infirmary, where I lay down on a hard white cot and prayed without ceasing for upwards of an hour. I promised a lot: If Mama did not find out, I would sit with Lurice May at lunch on Monday (a dirty fat girl who kept her head wrapped up in a scarf and was rumored to have lice), I would be nice to Edwin Lee three times for fifteen minutes each, I would clean out under my bed, I would give back the perfume and the ankle bracelet I had stolen from Ashley, and I would put two dollars of my saved-up babysitting money in the collection plate at church on Sunday. It was the best I could do. Then I called my mother from the infirmary phone, and to my surprise, she said, "Oh, of course," in a distracted way when I asked if I could spend the night with Tammy Lester. She did not even ask what Tammy's father did.

Then "Karen," she said in a pointed way that meant this was what she was *really* interested in, "do you have any idea where your sister is right now?"

"What?" I couldn't even remember *who* my sister was, right now.

"Ashley," Mama said. "The school called and asked if she was sick. Apparently she just never showed up at school today."

"I'll bet they had some secret senior thing," I said.

"Oh." Mama sounded relieved. "Well, maybe so. Now who is it you're spending the night with?" she asked again, and I told her. "And what did you say her father does?"

"Lawyer," I said.

Spending the night with Tammy Lester was the high point of my whole life up to that time. She did *not* live in a trailer, as rumored, but in an old unpainted farmhouse with two boarded-up windows, settled unevenly onto cinder-block footings. A mangy dog lay up under the house. Chickens roamed the property. The porch sagged. Wispy ancient curtains blew out eerily at the upstairs windows. The whole yard was strewn with parts of things—cars, stoves, bed-springs, unimaginable machine parts rusting among the weeds. I loved it. Tammy led me everywhere and showed me everything: her secret place, a tent of willows, down by the creek; the grave of her favorite dog, Buster, and the collar he had worn; an old chicken house that her brothers had helped her make into a playhouse; a haunted shack down the road; the old Packard out back that you could get in and pretend you were taking a trip. "Now we're in Nevada," Tammy said, shifting gears. "Now we're in the Grand Canyon. Now we're in the middle of the desert. It's hot as hell out here, ain't it?"

I agreed.

At suppertime, Tammy and I sat on folding chairs pulled up to the slick oilcloth-covered table beneath a bare hanging light bulb. Her brothers had disappeared. Tammy seemed to be cooking our supper; she was heating up Dinty Moore stew straight out of the can.

"Where's your daddy?" I asked.

"Oh, he's out West on a pipeline," she said, vastly unconcerned.

"Where's your mama?" I said. I had seen her come in from work earlier that afternoon, a pudgy, pale redheaded woman who drove a light blue car that looked like it would soon join the others in the backyard.

"I reckon she's reading her Bible," Tammy said, as if this were a perfectly ordinary thing to be doing on a Friday night at gin-and-tonic time. "She'll eat after while."

Tammy put half of the Dinty Moore stew into a chipped red bowl and gave it to me. It was delicious, lots better than Lady Food. She ate hers right out of the saucepan. "Want to split a beer?" she said, and I said sure, and she got us one—a Pabst Blue Ribbon—out of the icebox. Of course I had never tasted beer before. But I thought it was great.

That night, I told Tammy about my father's nervous breakdown, and she told me that her oldest brother had gone to jail for stealing an outboard motor. She also told me about the lady down the road who had chopped off her husband's hands with an ax while he was "laying up drunk." I told her that I was pretty sure God had singled me out for a purpose which he had not yet revealed, and Tammy nodded and said her mother had been singled out too. I sat right up in bed. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, she's real religious," Tammy said, "which is why she don't get along with Daddy too good." I nodded. I had already figured out that Daddy must be the dark handsome one that all the children took after. "And she was a preacher's daughter too, see, so she's been doing it all her life."

"Doing what?" I asked into the dark.

"Oh, talking in tongues of fire," Tammy said matter-of-factly, and a total thrill crept over me, the way I had always wanted to feel. I had hit pay dirt at last.

"I used to get embarrassed, but now I don't pay her much mind," Tammy said.

"Listen," I said sincerely. "I would give *anything* to have a mother like that."

Tammy whistled derisively through the hole in her teeth.

But eventually, because I was already so good at collective bargaining, we struck a deal: I would get to go to church with Tammy and her mother, the very next Sunday if possible, and in return, I would take Tammy to the country club. (I could take her when Mama wasn't there; I was allowed to sign for things.) Tammy and I stayed up talking nearly all night long. She was even more fascinating than I'd thought. She had breasts, she knew how to drive a car, and she was part Cherokee. Toward morning, we cut our fingers with a kitchen knife and swore to be best friends forever.

The next day, her brother Mike drove me into town at about one o'clock. He had to see a man about a car. He smoked cigarettes all the way, and scowled at everything. He didn't say a word to me. I thought he was wonderful.

I arrived home just in time to intercept the delivery boy from the florist's. "I'll take those in," I said, and pinched the card which said,

"For Dee Rose. Get well soon. Best wishes from Lydia and Lou Applewhite." I left the flowers on the doorstep, where they would create a little mystery later on, when Mama found them, and went upstairs to my room and prayed without ceasing, a prayer of thanksgiving for the special favors I felt He had granted me lately. Then before long I fell asleep, even as a huge argument raged all over the house, upstairs and down, between Mama and my sister Ashley who had just come in, having stayed out all day and all night long.

"If a girl loses her reputation, she has lost everything," Mama said. "She has lost her Most Precious Possession."

"So what? So what?" Ashley screamed. "All you care about is appearances. Who cares what I do, in this screwed-up family? Who really cares?"

It went on and on, while I melted down and down into my pink piqué comforter, hearing them but not really hearing them, dreaming instead of the lumpy sour bed out at Tammy's farm, of the moonlight on the wispy graying curtains at her window, of a life so hard and flinty that it might erupt at any moment into tongues of fire.

Not only was the fight over with by Sunday morning, but it was so far over with as not to have happened at all. I came in the kitchen late, to find Mama and Ashley still in their bathrobes, eating sticky buns and reading the funnies. It looked like nobody would be available to drive me to church. Clearly, both Ashley and Mama had Risen Above It All—Mama, to the extent that she was virtually levitating as the day wore on, hovering a few feet off the floor in her Sunday seersucker suit as she exhorted us all to hurry, hurry, hurry. Our reservations were for one o'clock. The whole family was going out for brunch at the country club.

Daddy was going too.

I still wonder what she said to him to get him up and dressed and out of there. I know it was the kind of thing that meant a lot to her—a public act, an event that meant *See, here is our whole happy family out together at the country club; see, we are a perfectly normal family; see, there is nothing wrong with us at all.* And I know that Daddy loved her.

Our table overlooked the first tee of the golf course. Our waiter, Louis, had known Daddy ever since he was a child. Daddy ordered a

martini. Mama ordered a gin and tonic. Ashley ordered a lemon Coke. I ordered lemonade. Mama was so vivacious that she almost gave off light. Her eyes sparkled, her hair shone, her red lipstick glistened. She and Ashley were discussing which schools her fellow seniors hoped to attend, and why. Ashley was very animated too. Watching them, I suddenly realized how much Ashley was like Mama. Ashley laughed and gestured with her pretty hands. I watched her carefully. I knew Mama thought Ashley had lost her most precious possession (things were different down there), yet she didn't look any different to me. She wore a hot-pink sheath dress and pearls. She looked terrific.

I turned my attention to Daddy, curiously, because I felt all of a sudden that I had not really seen him for years and years. He might as well have been off on a pipeline, as far as I was concerned. Our drinks arrived, and Daddy sipped at his martini. He perked up. He looked weird, though. His eyes were sunken in his head, like the limestone caves above the Tombigbee River. His skin was as white and dry as a piece of Mama's stationery. My father bought all his clothes in New York so they were always quite elegant, but now they hung on him like on a coat rack. How much weight had he lost? Twenty pounds? Thirty? We ordered lunch. Daddy ordered another martini.

Now he was getting entirely too perky, he moved his hands too much as he explained to Ashley the theory behind some battle in some war. He stopped talking only long enough to stand up and shake hands with friends who came by our table to speak to him, friends who had not seen him for months and months. He didn't touch his food. Underneath my navy-blue dress with the sailor collar, I was sweating, in spite of my mother's pronouncement:

Horses sweat, men perspire, and women glow.

I could feel it trickling down my sides. I wondered if, as I grew up, this would become an uncontrollable problem, whether I would have to wear dress shields. We all ordered baked Alaska, the chef's specialty, for dessert. My mother smiled and smiled. I was invisible. When the baked Alaska arrived, borne proudly to our table by Louis, nobody could put out the flames. Louis blew and blew. Other waiters ran over, beating at it with linen napkins. My mother

laughed merrily. "For goodness' sakes!" she said. My daddy looked stricken. Finally they got it out and we all ate some, except for Daddy.

Gazing past my family to the golfers out on the grass beyond us, I had a sudden inspiration. I knew what to do. I emerged from invisibility long enough to say, "Hey, Daddy, let's go out and putt," and he put his napkin promptly on the table and stood right up. "Sure thing, honey," he said, sounding for all the world like my own daddy. He smiled at me. I took his hand, remembering then who I had been before the nervous breakdown: Daddy's little girl. We went down the stairs, past the snack bar, and out to the putting green at the side of the building.

My dad was a good golfer. I was not bad myself. We shared a putter from the Pro Shop. We started off and soon it was clear that we were having a great time, that this was a good idea. The country club loomed massively behind us. The emerald grass, clipped and even, stretched out on three sides in front of us, as far as we could see, ending finally in a stand of trees here, a rolling hill there. This expanse of grass, dotted with pastel golfers, was both comforting and exhilarating. It was a nine-hole putting green. On the seventh hole, we were tied, if you figured in the handicap that my father had given himself. I went first, overshooting on my second stroke, sinking it with a really long shot on my third. I looked back over at Daddy to make sure he had seen my putt, but clearly he had not. He was staring out over the grass toward the horizon, beyond the hill.

"Your turn!" I called out briskly, tossing him the putter.

What happened next was awful.

In one terrible second, my father turned to me, face slack, mouth agape, then fell to his knees on the putting green, cowering, hands over his face. The putter landed on the grass beside him. He was crying. I didn't know what to do. I just stood there, and then suddenly the putting green was full of people—the pro, Bob White, in his jacket with his name on it, helping Daddy to his feet; our dentist, Dr. Reap, holding him by the other elbow as they walked him to our white Cadillac which Mama had driven around to pick us up in. Ashley cried all the way home. So did Daddy.

It was not until that day that I realized that the nervous breakdown was real, that Daddy was really sick.

I ran upstairs and prayed without ceasing for a solid hour, by the clock, that Daddy would get well and that we would all be *all right*, for I had come to realize somehow, during the course of that afternoon, that we might *not* be. We might never be all right again.

At least I had a New Best Friend. I banished all memory of Alice Field, without remorse. Tammy Lester and I became, for the rest of that spring, inseparable. The first time I brought her to my house, I did it without asking. I didn't want to give Mama a chance to say no. And although we had not discussed it, Tammy showed up dressed more like a town girl than I had ever seen her—a plaid skirt, a white blouse, loafers, her dark hair pulled back and up into a cheerful ponytail. She could have been a cheerleader. She could have been a member of the Sub-Deb Club. No one could have ever guessed what she had in her pocket—a pack of Kents and a stolen kidney stone once removed from her neighbor, Mrs. Gillespie, who had kept it in a jar on her mantel. But even though Tammy looked so nice, Mama was giving her the third degree. "How many brothers and sisters did you say you had?" and "Where was your Mama from?"

This interrogation took place upstairs in Mama's dressing room. Suddenly, to everyone's surprise, Daddy lurched in to fill the doorway and say, "Leave those little girls alone, Dee Rose, you've got your hands full already," and oddly enough, Mama *did* leave us alone then. She didn't say another word about it at the time, turning back to her nails, or even later, as spring progressed and Ashley's increasing absences and moodiness became more of a problem. Before long, Daddy refused to join us even for dinner. Mama *did* have her hands full. If I could occupy myself, so much the better.

I will never forget the first time I was allowed to go to church with Tammy and her mother. I had spent the night out at the farm, and in the morning I was awake long before it was time to leave. I dressed carefully, in the yellow dress and jacket Mama had ordered for me only a couple of months before from Rich's in Atlanta. It was already getting too small. Tammy and her mother both looked at my outfit with some astonishment. They didn't have any particular

church clothes, it turned out. At least, they didn't have any church clothes as fancy as these. Tammy wore a black dress which was much too old for her, clearly a hand-me-down from someplace, and her mother wore the same formless slacks and untucked shirt she always wore. I could never tell any of her clothes apart. For breakfast that morning, we had Hi-Ho cakes, which we ate directly from their cellophane wrappers, and Dr Peppers. Then we went out and got into their old blue car, which threatened not to start. *On no!* I found myself suddenly, terribly upset. I realized then how very much I was dying to hear Tammy's mother speak in tongues of fire, a notion that intrigued me more and more the better I got to know her, because usually she *didn't speak at all*. Never! Her pale gray eyes were fixed on distance, the way my daddy's had been that day at the golf course. The engine coughed and spluttered, died. Then finally Tammy's mother suggested that Tammy and I should push her down the muddy rutted driveway and she'd pop the clutch. I had never heard of such a thing. In my family, a man in a uniform, from a garage, came to start cars that wouldn't start. Still, we pushed it. It started. I got mud all over the bottom of my yellow dress.

Which didn't matter at all, I saw as soon as we got to the church. There were old men in overalls, younger men in coveralls with their names stitched on their pockets, girls in jeans, boys in jeans. The men stood around by their trucks in the parking lot, smoking cigarettes. The women went on in, carrying food. Tammy's mother had a big bag of Fritos. The church itself was a square cinder-block building painted white. It looked like a convenience store. Its windows were made of the kind of frosted glass you find in rest rooms. The only way you could tell it was a church was from the hand-lettered sign on the door, MARANATHA APOSTOLIC CHURCH ALL COME IN. I asked Tammy what "Maranatha" meant and she said she didn't know. Tammy would rather be at my house on Sundays, so she could look through Mama's jewelry, eat lemon meringue pie at my grandmother's, and stare at Baptists. She had made this plain. I'd rather be at her house, in general; she'd rather be at mine. We walked into her church.

"*This way.*" Tammy was pulling my arm. Men sat on the right-hand side of the church. Women sat on the left. There was no

music, no Miss Eugenia Little at the organ. Men and women sat still, staring straight ahead, the children sprinkled among them like tiny grave adults. The pews were handmade, hard, like benches, with high, straight backs. There was no altar, only the huge wooden cross at the front of the church, dwarfing everything, and a curtain, like a shower curtain, pulled closed behind it. A huge Bible stood open on a lectern with a big jug (of what? water?) beside it. More people came in. My heart was beating a mile a minute. The light that came in through the frosted-glass windows produced a soft, diffuse glow throughout the church. Tammy popped her gum. Tammy's mother's eyes were already closed. Her pale eyelashes fluttered. Her mouth was moving and she swayed slightly, back and forth from the waist up. Nothing else was happening.

Then four women, all of them big and tough-looking, went forward and simply started singing "Rock of Ages," without any warning or any introduction at all. I almost jumped right out of my seat. Some of the congregation joined in, some did not. It seemed to be optional. Tammy's mother did not sing. She did not open her eyes either. The women's voices were high, mournful, seeming to linger in the air long after they were done. "Praise God!" "Yes, Jesus!" At the conclusion of the song, people throughout the church started shouting. I craned my neck around to see who was doing this, but the back of the pew was too high, blocking a lot of my view. They sang again. I had never heard any music like this music, music without any words at all, or maybe it was music without any music, it seemed to pierce my brain. I was sweating under my arms again.

The preacher, Mr. Looney, entered unobtrusively from the side during the singing. Initially, Mr. Looney was a disappointment. He was small and nondescript. He looked like George Gobel. Tammy had told me he was a security guard at the paper mill during the week. He spoke in a monotone with a hick accent. As he led us all in prayer—a prayer that seemed to go on forever, including everybody in the church by name—my mind wandered back to a time when I was little and our whole family had gone to Gulf Shores for a vacation, and Ashley and Paul were there too, and all of us worked and worked, covering Daddy up with sand, and Mama wore a sailor hat. By the end of the prayer, I was crying, and Mr. Looney

had changed his delivery, his voice getting stronger and more rhythmical as he went into his message for the day. This message was pretty simple, one I had heard before. God's wrath is awful. Hell is real and lasts forever. It is not enough to have good intentions. The road to Hell is paved with those. It is not enough to do good works, such as taking care of the sick and giving to the poor. God will see right through you. The only way you can get to Heaven is by turning over your whole will and your whole mind to Jesus Christ, being baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and born again in Glory.

"Does sprinkling count?" I whispered to Tammy. I had been sprinkled in the Methodist church.

"No," she whispered back.

Mr. Looney went on and on, falling into chant now, catching up his sentences with an "Ah!" at the end of each line. People were yelling out. And then came, finally, the invitational, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!"

The stolid-looking young woman sitting two seats over from us surprised me by starting to mumble suddenly, then she screamed out, then she rushed forward, right into Mr. Looney's arms.

I twisted my head around to see what would happen next. Mr. Looney blessed her and said that she would "pass through to Jesus" by and by.

"What does he mean, 'pass through to Jesus'?" I was still whispering, but I might as well have been speaking aloud; there was so much commotion now that nobody else could have heard me.

Tammy jerked her head toward the front of the church. "Through them curtains, I reckon," she said.

"What's back there?" I asked, and Tammy said it was a swimming pool that people got baptized in.

And sure enough, it was not long before Mr. Looney pulled back the curtains to reveal a kind of big sliding glass door cut in the wall, with a large wading pool right beyond it, the kind I had seen in the Sears catalogue. Mr. Looney pulled the heavy young woman through the curtains and hauled her over the edge of the pool. The water reached up to about mid-thigh on both of them. I couldn't

believe they would just walk into the water like that, wearing all their clothes, wearing their *shoes*! Mr. Looney pulled back the woman's long hair and grasped it firmly. Her face was as blank and solid as a potato. "In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost!" Mr. Looney yelled, and dunked her all the way under, backwards. Although she held her nose, she came up sputtering.

Now people were jumping up all over the church, singing out and yelling, including Tammy's mother, who opened her mouth and screamed out in a language like none I had ever heard, yet a language which I felt I knew intimately, somehow, better than I knew English. It was my language, I was sure of it, and I think I might have passed out right then from the shock of sheer recognition except that Tammy grabbed my arm and yanked like crazy.

"Get ready!" she said.

"What?"

"She's fixing to fall," Tammy said just as her mother pitched backwards in a dead faint. We caught her and laid her out on the pew. She came to later, when church was over, and then we all had dinner on the ground out back of the church. Later I sneaked back into the fellowship hall on the pretext of going to the bathroom, so I could examine the pool in greater detail. It was in a little anteroom off the fellowship hall, right up against the double doors that led from the sanctuary, now closed. It was a plain old wading pool, just as I'd thought, covered now by a blue tarpaulin. I pulled back the tarp. The water was pretty cold. A red plastic barrette floated jauntily in the middle of the pool. I looked at it for a long time. I knew I would have to get in that water sooner or later. I would have to get saved.

I was so moved by the whole experience that I might have actually broken through my invisible shield to tell Daddy about it, or even Ashley, but Mama met me at the door that afternoon with an ashen face and, for once, no makeup.

"Where in the world have you all *been*?" she shrilled. "I've been trying to call you all afternoon."

"We ate lunch out at the church," I said. "They do that." Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Tammy and her mother pull away in the battered blue car and wished I were with them, anywhere but

here. I didn't want to know whatever Mama had to say next. In that split second, several possibilities raced through my mind:

1. Grandmother really *has* died.
2. Ashley is pregnant.
3. Ashley has eloped.
4. Daddy has killed himself.

But I was completely surprised by what came next.

"Your brother has been in the most terrible wreck," Mama said, "up in Virginia. He's in a coma, and they don't know if he'll make it or not."

Paul had been drunk, of course. Drunk, or he might not have lived at all, somebody said later, but I don't know whether that was true or not. I think it is something people say after wrecks, whenever there's been drinking. He had been driving back to W&L from Randolph-Macon, where he was dating a girl. This girl wrote Mama a long, emotional letter on pink stationery with a burgundy monogram. Paul was taken by ambulance from the small hospital in Lexington, Virginia, to the University of Virginia hospital in Charlottesville, one of the best hospitals in the world. This is what everybody told me. Mama went up there immediately. Her younger sister, my Aunt Liddie, came to stay with us while she was gone.

Aunt Liddie had always been referred to in our family as "flighty." Aunt Liddie "went off on tangents," it was said. I wasn't sure what this meant. Still, I was glad to see her when she arrived, with five matching suitcases full of beautiful clothes and her Pekingese named Chow Mein. Back in Birmingham she was a Kelly girl, so it was easy for her to leave her job and come to us. The very first night she arrived, Liddie got me to come out on the back steps with her. She sat very close to me in the warm spring night and squeezed both my hands. "I look on this as a wonderful opportunity for you and me to get to know each other better," Aunt Liddie said. "I want you to tell me *everything*."

But I would tell her nothing, as things turned out. This was to be our closest moment. The very next week, Liddie started dating Mr. Hudson Bell, a young lawyer she met by chance in the bank. Immediately, Liddie and Hudson Bell were *in love*, and Ashley and

I were free—within the bounds of reason—to come and go as we pleased. Aunt Liddie asked no questions. Missie cooked the meals.

This was just as well with me, for I had serious business to tend to.

I knew it was up to me to bring Paul out of that coma. I would pray without ceasing, and Tammy would help me. The first week, we prayed without ceasing only after school and on the weekend. Paul was no better, Mama reported from Charlottesville. The second week, I gave up sitting on soft chairs and eating chocolate. I paid so much attention to the unfortunate Lurice May that she began avoiding me. Paul had moved his foot, Mama said. I doubled my efforts, giving up also Cokes and sleeping in bed. (I had to sleep flat on the floor.) Also, I prayed without ceasing all during math class. I wouldn't even answer the teacher, Mrs. Lemon, when she called on me. She sent me to Guidance because of it. During this week, I began to suspect that perhaps Tammy was not praying as much as she was supposed to, not keeping up her end of the deal. Still, I was too busy to care. I gave up hot water; I had to take cold showers now.

The third weekend of Mama's absence and Paul's coma, I spent Saturday night with Tammy, and that Sunday morning, at Tammy's church, I got saved.

When Mr. Looney issued his plea, I felt that he was talking right to me. "With every head bowed and every eye closed," he said, "I want you to look into your hearts and minds this morning. Have you got problems, brother? Have you got problems, sister? Well, give them up! Give them over to the Lord Jesus Christ. If his shoulders are big enough to *bear the cross*, they are big enough to take on your little problems, beloved. Turn them over to him. He will help you now in this life, here in this vale of tears. And He will give you Heaven Everlasting as a door prize. Think about it, beloved. Do you want to burn in Hell forever, at the Devil's barbecue? Or do you want to lie in banks of flowers, listening to that heavenly choir?"

* I felt a burning, stabbing sensation in my chest and stomach—something like heartburn, something like the hand of God. The idea of turning it all over to Him was certainly appealing at this point. Another week of prayer, and I'd flunk math for sure. The choir sang, "Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me." Beside me, Tammy's mama was starting to mumble and moan.

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Mr. Looney said, "Perhaps there is one among you who feels that his sin is too great to bear, but no sin is too black for the heavenly laundry of Jesus Christ, He will turn you as white as snow, as white as the driven snow, hallelujah!" Mr. Looney reached back and pulled the curtains open, so we could all see the pool. Tammy's mama leaped up and called out in her strangely familiar language. Mr. Looney went on, "Perhaps there is a child among you who hears our message this morning, who is ready now for Salvation. Why, a little child can go to Hell, the same as you and me! A little child can burn to a crisp. But it is also true that a little child can come to God—right now, right this minute, this very morning. God don't check your ID, children. God will check your souls." "Come home, come home," they sang.

Before I even knew it, I was up there, and we had passed through those curtains, and I was standing in the water with my full blue skirt floating out around me like a lily pad. Then he was saying the words, shouting them out, and whispering to me, "Hold your nose," which I did, and he pushed me under backwards, holding me tightly with his other hand so that I felt supported, secure, even at the very moment of immersion. It was like being dipped by the big boys at ballroom dancing, only not as scary. I came up wet and saved, and stood at the side of the pool where Mr. Looney baptized Eric Blankenship, a big gawky nineteen-year-old who came running and sobbing up the aisle just as Mr. Looney got finished with me. Eric Blankenship was confessing to all his sins, nonstop, throughout his baptism. His sins were a whole lot more interesting than mine, involving things he'd done with his girlfriend, and I strained to hear them as I stood there, but I could not, because of all the noise in the church.

And then it was over and everyone crowded forward to hug us, including Tammy. But even in that moment of hugging Tammy, who of course had been baptized for years and years, I saw something new in her eyes. Somehow, now, there was a difference between us, where before there had been none. But I was wet and freezing, busy accepting the congratulations of the faithful, so I didn't have time to think any more about it then. Tammy gave me her sweater and they drove me home, where Aunt Liddie looked at me in a very fishy way when I walked in the door.

"I just got baptized," I said, and she said, "Oh," and then she went out to lunch with Hudson Bell, who came up the front walk not a minute behind me, sparing me further explanations.

Aunt Liddie came back from that lunch engaged, with a huge square-cut diamond. Nobody mentioned my baptism.

But the very next night, right after supper, Mama called to say that Paul was fine. All of a sudden, he had turned to the night nurse and asked for a cheeseburger. There seemed to be no brain damage at all except that he had some trouble remembering things, which was to be expected. He would have to stay in the hospital for several more weeks, but he would recover completely. He would be just fine.

I burst into tears of joy. I knew I had done it all. And for the first time, I realized what an effort it had been. The first thing I did was go into the kitchen and fix myself a milk shake, with Hershey's syrup. And my bed felt so good that night, after the weeks on the floor. I intended to pray without ceasing that very night, a prayer of thanksgiving for Paul's delivery, but I fell asleep instantly.

When Mama came back, I hoped she would be so busy that my baptism would be overlooked completely, but this was not the case. Aunt Liddie told her, after all.

"Karen," was Mama's reaction, "I am shocked! We are not the kind of family that goes out in the county and immerses ourselves in water. I can't imagine what you were thinking of," Mama said.

I looked out the window at Mama's blooming roses. It was two weeks before the end of school, before Ashley's graduation.

"Well, what?" Mama asked. She was peering at me closely, more closely than she had looked at me in years.

"Why did you do it?" Mama asked. She lit a cigarette.

I didn't say a thing.

"Karen," Mama said. "I asked you a question." She blew a smoke ring.

I looked at the roses. "I wanted to be saved," I said.

Mama's lips went into that little red bow. "I see," she said.

So later, that next weekend when she refused to let me spend the night out at Tammy's, I did the only thing I could: I lied and said I was going to spend the night with Sara Ruth Johnson, and then prayed without ceasing that I would not be found out. Since it was senior prom weekend and Mama was to be in charge of the

decorations and also a chaperone, I felt fairly certain I'd get away with it. But when the time came for the invitational that Sunday morning in the Maranatha Church, I simply could not resist. I pushed back Tammy's restraining hand, rushed forward, and rededicated my life.

"I don't think you're supposed to rededicate your life right after you just dedicated it," Tammy whispered to me later, but I didn't care. I was wet and holy. If I had committed some breach of heavenly etiquette, surely Mr. Looney would tell me. But he did not. We didn't stay for dinner on the ground that day either. As soon as Tammy's mother came to, they drove me straight home, and neither of them said much.

Mama's Cadillac was parked in the drive.

So I went around to the back of the house and tiptoed in through the laundry room door, carrying my shoes. But Mama was waiting for me. She stood by the ironing board, smoking a cigarette. She looked at me, narrowing her eyes.

"Don't drip on the kitchen floor, Missie just mopped it yesterday," she said.

I climbed up the back stairs to my room.

The next weekend, I had to go to Ashley's graduation and to the baccalaureate sermon on Sunday morning in the Confederate Chapel at Lorton Hall. I sat between my grandparents. My Aunt Liddie was there too, with her fiancé. My daddy did not come. I wore a dressy white dress with a little bolero jacket and patent-leather shoes with Cuban heels—my first high heels. I felt precarious and old, grown-up and somehow sinful, and longed for the high hard pews of the Maranatha Church and the piercing, keening voices of the women singers.

But I never attended the Maranatha Church again. As soon as my school was over, I was sent away to Camp Alleghany in West Virginia for two months—the maximum stay. I didn't want to go, even though this meant that I would finally have a chance to learn horseback riding, but I had no choice in the matter. Mama made this clear. It was to separate me from Tammy, whom Mama had labeled a Terrible Influence.

"And by the way," Mama said brightly, "Margaret Applewhite will be going to Camp Alleghany too!" Oh, I could see right

through Mama. But I couldn't do anything about it. Camp started June 6, so I didn't have time to pray for a change in my fate. She sprang it on me. Instead, I cried without ceasing all that long day before they put me and my trunk, along with Margaret Applewhite and her trunk, on the train. I tried and tried to call Tammy to tell her good-bye, but a recorded message said that her line had been disconnected. (This had happened several times before, whenever her mama couldn't pay the bill.) My father would be going away too, to Shepherd Pratt Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, and Ashley was going to Europe.

Sitting glumly by Mama at the train station, I tried to pray but could not. Instead, I remembered a game we used to play when I was real little, Statues. In Statues, one person grabs you by the hand and swings you around and around and then lets you go, and whatever position you land in, you have to freeze like that until everybody else is thrown. The person who lands in the best position wins. But what I remembered was that scary moment of being flung wildly out into the world screaming, to land however I hit, and I felt like this was happening to us all.

To my surprise, I loved camp. Camp Alleghany was an old camp, with rough-hewn wooden buildings that seemed to grow right out of the deep woods surrounding them. Girls had been carving their initials in the railings outside the dining hall for years and years. It was a tradition. I loved to run my fingers over these initials, imagining these girls—M.H., 1948; J.B., 1953; M.N., 1935. Some of the initials were very old. These girls were grown up by now. Some of them were probably dead. This gave me an enormous thrill, as did all the other traditions at Camp Alleghany. I loved the weekend campfire, as big as a tepee, ceremoniously lit by the Camp Spirit, whoever she happened to be that week. The Camp Spirit got to light the campfire with an enormous match, invoking the spirits with an ancient verse that only she was permitted to repeat. At the end of each weekly campfire, a new Camp Spirit was named, with lots of screaming, crying, and hugging. I was dying to be the Camp Spirit. In fact, after the very first campfire, I set this as my goal, cooperating like crazy with all the counselors so I would be picked. But it wasn't hard for me to cooperate.

ne's been isolated from her family

I loved wearing a uniform, being a part of the group—I still have the photograph from that first session of camp, all of us wearing our navy shorts, white socks, and white camp shirts, our hair squeaky-clean, grinning into the sun. I loved all my activities—arts and crafts, where we made huge ashtrays for our parents out of little colored tiles; swimming, where I already excelled and soon became the acknowledged champion of the breaststroke in all competitions; and drama, where we were readying a presentation of *Spoon River*. My canoeing group took a long sunrise trip upstream to an island where we cooked our breakfast out over a fire: grits, sausage, eggs. Everything had a smoky, exotic taste, and the smoke from our breakfast campfire rose to mingle with the patchy mist still clinging to the trees, still rising from the river. I remember lying on my back and gazing up at how the sunshine looked, like light through a stained-glass window, emerald green and iridescent in the leafy tops of the tallest trees. The river was as smooth and shiny as a mirror. In fact it reminded me of a mirror, of Ashley's mirror-topped dressing table back home.

And the long trail rides—when we finally got to take them—were even better than the canoe trips. But first we had to go around and around the riding ring, learning to post, learning to canter. The truth was, I didn't like the horses nearly as much as I'd expected to. For one thing, they were a lot *bigger* than I had been led to believe by the illustrations in my horse books. They were as big as cars. For another thing they were not lovable either. They were smelly, and some of them were downright mean. One big old black horse named Martini was pointed out to us early on as a biter. Others kicked. On a trail ride, you didn't want to get behind one of these. Still, the trail rides were great. We lurched along through the forest, following the leader. I felt like I was in a western movie, striking out into the territory. On the longest trail ride, we took an overnight trip up to Pancake Mountain, where we ate s'mores (Hershey bars and melted marshmallows smashed into a sandwich between two graham crackers), told ghost stories, and went to sleep finally with the wheezing and stamping of the horses in our ears.

Actually, I liked the riding counselors better than I liked the horses. The regular counselors were sweet, pretty girls who went to school at places like Hollins and Sweet Briar, or else maternal, jolly older

women who taught junior high school during the regular year, but the riding counselors were tough, tan, muscular young women who squinted into the sun and could post all day long if they had to. The riding counselors said "Shit" a lot, and smoked cigarettes in the barn. They did not speak of college.

My only male counselor was a frail, nervous young man named Jeffrey Long, reputed to be the nephew of the owner. He taught nature study, which I loved. I loved identifying the various trees (hickory, five leaves; ironwood, the satiny metallic trunk; maple, the little wings; blue-berried juniper; droopy willow). We made sassafras toothbrushes, and brushed our teeth in the river.

On Sundays, we had church in the big rustic assembly hall. It was an Episcopal service, which seemed pretty boring to me in comparison with the Maranatha Church. Yet I liked the Prayer Book, and I particularly liked one of the Episcopal hymns, which I had never heard before, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," with its martial, military tune. I imagined Joan of Arc striding briskly along in a satin uniform, to just that tune. I also liked the hymn "Jerusalem," especially the weird lines that went, "Bring me my staff of burnished gold, bring me my arrows of desire." I loved the "arrows of desire" part.

We all wore white shirts and white shorts to church. After church we had a special Sunday lunch, with fried chicken and ice cream. "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream!" we'd shout, banging on the tables before they brought it out. (In order to have any, you had to turn in an Ice Cream Letter—to your parents—as you came in the door.)

On Sunday nights, we all climbed the hill behind the dining hall for vespers. We sat on our ponchos looking down on the camp as the sun set, and sang "Day Is Done." We bowed our heads in silent prayer. Then, after about ten minutes of this, one of the junior counselors played "Taps" on the bugle. She played it every night at lights out too. I much admired the bugler's jaunty, *boyish* stance. I had already resolved to take up the bugle, first thing, when I got back home.

And speaking of home, I'd barely thought of it since arriving at Camp Alleghany. I was entirely too busy. I guess that was the idea. Still, every now and then in a quiet moment—during silent prayer

at vespers, for instance; or rest hour right after lunch, when we usually played Go Fish or some other card game, but sometimes, *sometimes* I just lay on my cot and thought about things; or at night, after "Taps," when I'd lie looking up at the rafters before I fell asleep—in those quiet moments, I did think of home, and of my salvation. I didn't have as much time as I needed, there at camp, to pray without ceasing. Besides, I was often too tired to do it. Other times, I was having too much fun to do it. Sometimes I just forgot. To pray without ceasing requires either a solitary life or a life of invisibility such as I had led within my family for the past year.

What about my family, anyway? Did I miss them? Not a bit. I could scarcely recall what they looked like. Mama wrote that Paul was back home already and had a job at the snack bar at the country club. Ashley was in France. Daddy was still in Baltimore, where he would probably stay for six more months. Mama was very busy helping Aunt Liddie plan her wedding, which I would be in. I would wear an aqua dress and dyed-to-match heels. I read Mama's letter curiously, several times. I felt like I had to translate it, like it was written in a foreign language. I folded this letter up and placed it in the top tray of my trunk, where I would find it years later. Right then, I didn't have time to think about my family. I was too busy doing everything I was supposed to, so that I might be picked as Camp Spirit. (Everybody agreed that the current Camp Spirit, Jeannie Darling from Florida, was a stuck-up bitch who didn't deserve it at all.) At the last campfire of First Session, I had high hopes that I might replace her. We started out by singing all the camp songs, first the funny ones such as "I came on the train and arrived in the rain, my trunk came a week later on." Each "old" counselor had a song composed in her honor, and we sang them all. It took forever. As we finally sang the Camp Spirit song, my heart started beating like crazy.

But it was not to be. No, it was Jeanette Peterson, a skinny boring redhead from Margaret Applewhite's cabin. I started crying but nobody knew why, because by then everybody else was crying too, and we all continued to cry as we sang all the sad camp songs about loyalty and friendships and candle flames. This last campfire was also Friendship Night. We had made little birchbark boats that afternoon, and traded them with our best friends. At the end of the

campfire, the counselors passed out short white candles which we lit and carried down to the river in a solemn procession. Then we placed the candles in our little boats and set them in the water, singing our hearts out as the flotilla of candles entered the current and moved slowly down the dark river and out of sight around the bend. I clung to my New Best Friend and cried. This was Shelley Long from Leesburg, Virginia, with a freckled, heart-shaped face and a pixie haircut, who talked a mile a minute all the time. It was even possible that Shelley Long had read more books than I had, unlike my Old Best Friend Tammy back at home in Alabama, who had not read any books at all, and did not intend to. Plus, Shelley Long owned a pony and a pony cart. She had shown me a picture of herself at home in Leesburg, driving her pony cart. Her house, in the background, looked like Mount Vernon. I was heartbroken when she left, the morning after Friendship Night.

It rained that morning, a cold drizzle that continued without letup for the next two days. About three-quarters of the campers left after First Session, including everybody I liked. Margaret Applewhite stayed. My last vision of the departing campers was a rainy blur of waving hands as the big yellow buses pulled out, headed for the train station and the airport. All the girls were singing at the top of their lungs, and their voices seemed to linger in the air long after they were gone. Then came a day and a half of waiting around for the Second Session campers to arrive, a day and a half in which nobody talked to me much, and the counselors were busy doing things like counting the rifle shells. So I became invisible again, free to wander about in the rain, free to pray without ceasing.

Finally the new campers arrived, and I brightened somewhat at the chance to be an Old Girl, to show the others the ropes and teach them the words to the songs. My New Best Friend was Anne Roper, from Lexington, Kentucky. She wasn't as good as Shelley, but she was the best I could do, I felt, considering what I had to pick from. Anne Roper was okay.

But my new counselor was very weird. She read aloud to us each day at rest hour from a big book named *The Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand. Without asking our parents, she pierced all our ears. Even this ear-piercing did not bring my spirits up to the level of First

Session, however. For one thing, it never stopped raining. It rained and rained and rained. First, we couldn't go swimming—the river was too high, too cold, too fast. We couldn't go canoeing either. The tennis courts looked like lakes. The horses, along with the riding counselors, stayed in their barn. About all we could do was arts and crafts and Skits, which got old fast. Lots of girls got homesick. They cried during "Taps."

I cried then and at other odd times too, such as when I walked up to breakfast through the constant mist that came up now from the river, or at church. I was widely thought to be homesick. To cheer me up, my weird counselor gave me a special pair of her own earrings, little silver hoops with turquoise chips in them, made by Navajos.

Then I got bronchitis. I developed a deep, thousand-year-old Little Match Girl cough that started way down in my knees. Because of this cough, I was allowed to call my mother, and to my surprise, I found myself asking to come home. But Mama said no. She said,

We always finish what we start, Karen.

So that was that. I was taken into town for a penicillin shot, and started getting better. The sun came out too.

But because I still had such a bad cough, I did not have to participate in the all-camp Game Day held during the third week of Second Session. I was free to lounge in my upper bunk and read the rest of *The Fountainhead*, which I did. By then I had read way ahead of my counselor. I could hear the screams and yells of the girls out on the playing fields, but vaguely, far away. Then I heard them all singing, from farther up the hill, and I knew they had gone into Assembly to give out the awards. I knew I was probably expected to show up at Assembly too, but somehow I just couldn't summon up the energy. I didn't care who got the awards. I didn't care which team won—the Green or the Gold, it was all the same to me—or which cabin won the ongoing competition among cabins. I didn't even care who was Camp Spirit. Instead I lolled on my upper bunk and looked at the turning dust in a ray of light that came in through a chink in the cabin. I coughed. I felt that I would die soon.

This is when it happened.

God speaks

This is when it always happens, I imagine—when you least expect it, when you are least prepared.

Suddenly, as I stared at the ray of sunshine, it intensified, growing brighter and brighter until the whole cabin was a blaze of light. I sat right up, as straight as I could. I crossed my legs. I knew I was waiting for something. I knew something was going to happen. I could barely breathe. My heart pounded so hard I feared it might jump right out of my chest and land on the cabin floor. I don't know how long I sat there like that, waiting.

"Karen," He said.

His voice filled the cabin.

I knew immediately who it was. No question. For one thing, there were no men at Camp Alleghany except for Mr. Grizzard, who cleaned out the barn, and Jeffrey Long, who had a high, reedy voice.

This voice was deep, resonant, full of power.

"Yes, Lord?" I said.

He did not speak again. But as I sat there on my upper bunk I was filled with His presence, and I knew what I must do.

I jumped down from my bunk, washed my face and brushed my teeth at the sink in the corner, tucked in my shirt, and ran up the hill to the assembly hall. I did not cough. I burst right in through the big double doors at the front and elbowed old Mrs. Beemer aside as she read out the results of the archery meet to the rows of girls in their folding chairs.

Mrs. Beemer took one look at me and shut her mouth.

I opened my mouth, closed my eyes, and started speaking in Tongues of Fire.

I came to in the infirmary, surrounded by the camp nurse, the doctor from town, the old lady who owned the camp, the Episcopal chaplain, my own counselor, and several other people I didn't even know. I smiled at them all. I felt great, but they made me stay in the infirmary for two more days to make sure I had gotten over it. During this time I was given red Jell-O and Cokes, and the nurse took my temperature every four hours. The chaplain talked to me for a long time. He was a tall, quiet man with wispy white hair that stood out all around his head. I got to talk to my mother on the

telephone again, and this time she promised me a kitten if I would stay until the end of camp. I had always, always wanted a kitten, but I had never been allowed to have one because it would get hair on the upholstery and also because Ashley was allergic to cats.

"What about Ashley?" I asked.

"Never you mind," Mama said.

So it was decided. I would stay until the end of camp, and Mama would buy me a kitten.

I got out of the infirmary the next day and went back to my cabin, where everybody treated me with a lot of deference and respect for the rest of Second Session, choosing me first for softball, letting me star in Skits. And at the next-to-last campfire, I was named Camp Spirit. I got to run forward, scream and cry, but it was not as good as it would have been if it had happened First Session. It was an anticlimax. Still, I did get to light the very last campfire, the Friendship Night campfire, with my special giant match and say ceremoniously:

*Kneel always when you light a fire,
Kneel reverently,
And thankful be
For God's unfailing majesty.*

Then everybody sang the Camp Spirit song. By now, I was getting *really tired of singing*. Then Anne Roper and I sailed each other's little birchbark boats off into the night, our candles guttering wildly as they rounded the bend.

All the way home on the train the next day, I pretended to be asleep while I prayed without ceasing that nobody back home would find out I had spoken in tongues of fire. For now it seemed to me an exalted and private and scary thing, and somehow I knew it was not over yet. I felt quite sure that I had been singled out for some terrible, holy mission. Perhaps I would even have to *die*, like Joan of Arc. As the train rolled south through Virginia on that beautiful August day, I felt myself moving inexorably toward my Destiny, toward some last act of my own Skit which was yet to be played out.

The minute I walked onto the concrete at the country club pool, I knew that Margaret Applewhite (who had flown home) had told everybody. Dennis Jones took one look at me, threw back his head, and began to gurgle wildly, clutching at his stomach. Tommy Martin ran out on the low board, screamed in gibberish, and then flung himself into the water. Even I had to laugh at him. But Paul and his friends teased me in a more sophisticated manner. "Hey, Karen," one of them might say, clutching his arm, "I've got a real bad tennis elbow here, do you think you can heal it for me?"

I was famous all over town. I sort of enjoyed it. I began to feel popular and cute, like the girls on *American Bandstand*.

But the kitten was a disaster. Mama drove me out in the county one afternoon in her white Cadillac to pick it out of a litter that the laundry lady's cat had had. The kittens were all so tiny that it was hard to pick—little mewling, squirming things, still blind. Drying sheets billowed all around them, on rows of clotheslines. "I want that one," I said, picking the smallest, a teeny little orange ball. I named him Sandy. I got to keep Sandy in a shoe box in my room, then in a basket in my room. But as time passed (Ashley came home from Europe, Paul went back to W&L) it became clear to me that there was something terribly wrong with Sandy. Sandy *mewed too much*, not a sweet mewling, but a little howl like a lost soul. He never purred. He wouldn't grow right either, even though I fed him half-and-half. He stayed little and jerky. He didn't act like a cat. One time I asked my mother, "Are you *sure* Sandy is a regular cat?" and she frowned at me and said, "Well, of *course* he is, what's the matter with you, Karen?" but I was not so sure. Sandy startled too easily. Sometimes he would leap straight up in the air, land on all four feet, and just stand there quivering, for no good reason at all. While I was watching him do this one day, it came to me.

Sandy was a Holy Cat. He was possessed by the spirit, as I had been. I put his basket in the laundry room. I was fitted for my aqua semiformal dress, and wore it in Aunt Liddie's wedding. Everybody said I looked grown-up and beautiful. I got to wear a corsage. I got to drink champagne. We had a preschool meeting of the Sub-Deb Club, and I was elected secretary. I kept trying to call Tammy, from pay phones downtown and the phone out at the country club, so

Mama wouldn't know, but her number was still out of order. Tammy never called me.

Then Ashley invited me to go to the drive-in movie with her and her friends, just before she left for Sweet Briar. The movie was *All That Heaven Allows*, which I found incredibly moving, but Ashley and her friends smoked cigarettes and giggled through the whole thing. They couldn't be serious for five minutes. But they were being real nice to me, so I volunteered to go to the snack bar for them the second or third time they wanted more popcorn. On the way back from the snack bar, in the window of a red Thunderbird with yellow flames painted on its hood, I saw Tammy's face.

I didn't hesitate for a minute. I was so glad to see her! "Tammy!" I screamed. The position of My Best Friend was, of course, vacant. I ran right over to the Thunderbird, shifted all the popcorn boxes over to my left hand, and flung open the door. And sure enough, there was Tammy, with the whole top of her sundress down. It all happened in an instant. I saw a boy's dark hair, but not his face—his head was in her lap.

Tammy's breasts loomed up out of the darkness at me. They were perfectly round and white, like tennis balls. But it seemed to me that they were too high up to look good. They were too close to her chin.

Clearly, Tammy was Petting. And in a flash I remembered what Mama had told me about Petting, that

a nice girl does not Pet. It is cruel to the boy to allow him to Pet, because he has no control over himself. He is just a boy. It is all up to the girl. If she allows the boy to Pet her, then he will become excited, and if he cannot find relief, then the poison will all back up into his organs, causing pain and sometimes death.

I slammed the car door. I fled back to Ashley and her friends, spilling popcorn everywhere as I went.

On the screen, Rock Hudson had been Petting too. Now we got a close-up of his rugged cleft chin. "Give me one of those cigarettes," I said to Ashley, and without batting an eye, she did. After three tries, I got it lit. It tasted good.

The next day, Ashley left for Sweet Briar, and soon after that, my school started too. Whenever I passed Tammy in the hall, we

said hello, but did not linger in conversation. I was put in the Gifted and Talented group for English and French. I decided to go out for JV cheerleader. I practiced and practiced and practiced. Then, one day in early September, my cat Sandy—after screaming out and leaping straight up in the air—ran out into the street in front of our house and was immediately hit by a Merita bread truck.

I knew it was suicide.

I buried him in the backyard, in a box from Rich's department store, along with Ashley's scarab bracelet which I had stolen sometime earlier. She wondered for years whatever happened to that bracelet. It was her favorite.

I remember how relieved I felt when I had smoothed the final shovelful of dirt over Sandy's grave. Somehow, I knew, the last of my holiness, of my chosenness, went with him. Now I wouldn't have to die. Now my daddy would get well, and I would make cheerleader, and go to college. Now I could grow up, get breasts, and have babies. Since then, all these things have happened. But there are moments yet, moments when in the midst of life a silence falls, and in those moments I catch myself still listening for that voice. "Karen," He will say, and I'll say, "Yes, Lord. Yes." †

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