

III FISSURES

Margaret left the Karnival with Frank and Horace soon after she had given birth. Though she never intended to remain so distant for so long, it would be more than a decade before they returned to Klieg's. Arthur convinced himself that Margaret's leaving was best for her and her family. He missed her terribly, but busied himself with improvements to Klieg's as the monkey family rehearsed their symphonies and the acrobatic dogs perfected new tricks. The bear was retired to a home on Algonquin Island because he would dance no longer after Tim-Tina's passing.

Margaret and Frank settled in a lovely suburb of Niagara Falls, Ontario. Frank found employment with the parks department. He worked during the day while Margaret cared for Horace, and cared for Horace at night while Margaret attended university. Margaret majored in literature. She approached her courses with enthusiasm, but the books they studied were dark, heavy with philosophy and death, and midway through her first year she dropped out.

Seeking to change her perspective, Margaret decided to write children's books. She illustrated them herself, clumsily at first. Horace was her critic. If he sat still and listened, she knew she had done well. If he did not, she set the book aside possibly to rewrite later. With the money left from her schooling, she and Frank converted the garage. She installed a printing press, set and inked type, and cut plates for her illustrations. She took the finished pages to a binder, from whence they emerged, as if by magic, as real books with lives of their own.

Once she had completed several books, she selected the best six, left Horace with a trusted neighbour, and sped off in the car to visit local bookstores. She was greeted with little enthusiasm, though managers were polite in their refusals. Striding to the parking lot, it struck her that bookstores were not her only option. She

stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and turned to survey the stores across the street.

Toward the end of the block she saw a children's clothing shop. In the front window, among the displays of clothing, were teddy bears and dolls, a child's tea set, building blocks, and toy cars. She hurried to the corner, her foot tapping as she waited for the light to change. She pushed ahead of the other pedestrians and, once inside the shop, looked around for a salesperson.

"May I help you, Miss?"

The woman who spoke was the proprietor and, after she said, "How perfectly lovely!" several times, she ordered five copies of each book. Thereafter, Margaret paid sales calls on all the specialty stores for children and expectant mothers. Within a few years, Clifford Press was a viable business. Margaret's books were well-loved in homes throughout the country.

Margaret wrote twenty-eight books by the time Horace turned six. That was the year she signed what would prove to be her most lucrative contract. A major restaurant and motel chain, which catered to the family travellers, began to carry the series in more than three hundred locations. As The Fates would have it, Nola and Ralph soon discovered the books.

They had been together for nearly a year, but Ralph had not yet learned that Nola could not read. In restaurants and truck stops, Nola chose her meals by looking at the pictures in menus or the plates of food on other tables. Most restroom doors had pictographs of either a male or female form, but it was easy to watch who went in and out, or to time her visits with Ralph's, going through the door that he did not. There were no occasions that demanded Nola read or write, and so Ralph remained unaware for some time that she was illiterate.

One afternoon, as Ralph was paying for lunch, Nola saw on the wall behind the cashier the display of Clifford Press books. She was intrigued by the lively, colourful covers. Seeing her wonder, Ralph purchased what was then the entire collection.

Back in the truck, Nola looked through the books. She was delighted by the illustrations and Ralph was happy to see her smiling.

“Read me one,” Ralph said.

Delight evaporated. Nola stared at the pages of the book in her hands, and the markings she knew must be the words of the story, lost. Her heart pounded.

“Well?” Ralph said. “Can’t decide?”

“I can’t,” Nola said. “I don’t know how.” Her eyes clouded. The illustrations became as fogged as the letters she could not decipher. Then she was angry and wished she had never wanted these books.

Ralph reached for her hand. “It’s okay,” he said. “I’ll show you.” That moment he began, ever patiently, to teach Nola how to read.

Over the next few years, Nola progressed slowly, and she was eventually able to read to Ralph with little assistance. When Nola told him that she was pregnant, they were both pleased that she would be able to read to her child.

Ralph felt it was time that they see about getting married. But the young lovers were unable to obtain a licence. Nola had no identification, and the clerks could not proceed without proof of her birth. Back in the cab of the truck, after a day and a half of arguing with bureaucrats, Nola snuggled into Ralph’s arms.

“We don’t need them to get married,” she said. “We’ll do it ourselves.” She picked up one of the cigars on the dashboard and removed its paper band. “With this ring I wed ye,” she said. She slipped the paper band onto the proper finger of Ralph’s left hand. It stopped after the first knuckle, but at least it fit.

Ralph hugged her close. “I do,” he said. He kissed her deeply.

“I do, too,” Nola said.

It was mid-December when Nola and Ralph awoke snowed in on a lonely side road. Nola was in labour, and though Ralph was frightened, she assured him she was not. As the pains intensified, coming more often, he read to her from Margaret’s books and chipped an icicle from the side mirror for her to suckle.

Nola had done all that she could to forget her early life, including the birth of her son. But as she lay in the built-in sleeper, Ralph holding her hand as her second child entered the world, she could

not help thinking of Baby. She found herself saying a silent prayer, that he was either happy or blessedly dead.

“Honey,” Ralph said.

Her eyes were closed, her mind finishing the prayer, and as her breathing slowed she raised her arms to take the gurgling baby from Ralph.

“It’s a girl, honey,” Ralph said, but his voice was tight. “A very pretty, special little girl.”

Nola struggled to sit up. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, honey, she’s –”

“What is it?”

With a sigh, Ralph lifted the baby, letting the blanket fall away. Nola studied her daughter. “My God, Ralph,” Nola said, “she’s ...”

“Special,” Ralph said.

The baby was pink and plump and healthy. In addition to all the standard parts, the baby had a third arm. The arm extended from the right side of her chest, just below the nipple, the fingers curled as if forever caught in the act of grasping the air.

“What does it mean?” Nola asked.

“I don’t know.” Ralph wrapped the baby in the blanket and placed her into Nola’s arms.

“She’s very pretty,” Nola said. “Do you think she’s okay?”

“I don’t know,” Ralph said. “Maybe we should ask someone.”

Once the sun had risen and melted enough of the ice and snow, they took the baby to the nearest hospital. As nurses and interns gossiped and stared, a doctor explained.

“She seems perfectly healthy,” the doctor said.

Nola and Ralph breathed a sign of relief. “What about – ?”

“No need to be concerned. Birth anomalies are much more common than people realize. It will be a simple procedure to have the offending limb removed.”

“The what?” Nola said.

“The offending limb,” the doctor said.

“Offending who?” Nola’s eyes narrowed. “I just wanted to know if she’s okay.”

“She will be perfectly normal,” the doctor said. “After the operation, of course.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Nola said.

“Are you saying,” Ralph asked, “that you want to operate to take her arm away?”

“Of course. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“I’ve told you a hundred times now,” Nola said. “We just wanted to know if she’s okay.”

“She’s healthy, if that’s the question. But, really, Mrs. Greeson ... Don’t you want a normal child?”

“Who are you?” Nola demanded. “How do you know what’s normal?”

“You need only look around you.” The doctor smiled, thinking that he had, indeed, said something meaningful and intelligent.

“What kind of answer is that?” Nola said.

“We’re just regular people,” Ralph said. “We don’t know much about medical things.”

“As I mentioned earlier, birth anomalies are not uncommon. Quite frequently, we are called upon by parents to ensure that their children are able to live normal lives.”

“What?” Nola said. “You mean you go around cutting up babies all the time? Just to make sure they look like what you think they’re supposed to?”

“That’s a little dramatic,” the doctor said.

“That’s sick is what it is,” Nola said, and Ralph said, “Honey, now let’s be calm here.”

“When a child is that different from what is normal, life can be quite difficult.”

“Maybe if you didn’t cut babies apart there’d be no normal. And then my baby would be fine just the way she is.”

The doctor stared at her, looked at Ralph who was nodding slowly, and pushed back his chair. He silently escorted them to the door.

Back in the truck, Ralph turned to look at Nola, who was cuddling her daughter and kissing her face.

“You okay?”

“I don’t know,” Nola said. “Do you think he’s right?”

Ralph studied her. “I think you did the right thing,” he said. “After all, it’s the kind of thing that you can’t undo. I just wouldn’t feel right if ... Anyway, she can decide for herself later on if she wants to.”

“I just couldn’t stand the thought of some man taking a knife ...” Nola pulled her daughter close. “Besides. Things like this don’t happen for no reason, right?”

“Well ... Sounds right.”

“So there must be a reason for it. Right, Ralph?” To Nola’s mind, bad things happened because of bad people, and that train of thought led to Mollie and Thad. “Right, Ralph?”

Ralph saw in her beautiful eyes the desperate plea for agreement. “God must have very special plans for her,” he said.

“I think so, too,” Nola said. She snuggled her daughter, humming softly.

Ralph’s thoughts floated on the notes of the song. “As long as we love her,” he said, “and we teach her how to love herself, then everything is going to be all right.”

They named her Chloe and Nola read to her every night, cuddled against her in the built-in sleeper. Over time, as Clifford Press released new books, Nola and Ralph purchased these as well. Ralph constructed an ingenious storage space in the built-in sleeper to house the series.

Margaret had published fifty-seven books, and her son, Horace, was eleven, when she and Frank brought Baby – then nine and properly named Heath – into their home.

That September, in the lovely suburb of Niagara Falls, Margaret watched as Horace took Heath off to his first day of school. At the corner, Heath turned to wave to her, and she wished for the same sense of loss she had felt when Horace first left for school so many years before.

After school, Heath brought home a starving dog he had found scrounging in a ditch. Margaret’s first impulse was revulsion. The animal brought to her mind Hamilton’s dog act, her mother, and Tim-Tina ...

“Oh, honey, we can’t keep him,” Margaret said. She stood blocking the doorway.

“But we have to!” Heath insisted. “Nobody else wants him!”

She did not have the heart to refuse him. “Well ... We’ll have to take him to a vet first. Where’s Horace?”

“He stayed after school to play baseball,” Heath said.

“Well, come on then. We’ll pick him up on our way.”

The veterinarian gave the animal a thorough examination, administered shots, ear drops, and pills for de-worming. She treated him for fleas and ticks, prescribed a special diet, and assured them the dog would be healthy “in no time.”

That night, beneath his bed, Heath and the dog – which Heath named “Dog” – slept peacefully, leaving it to Margaret to explain to Frank, who did not arrive home until late.

“I thought we told Horace he couldn’t have a dog,” Frank said.

“I know, I know ... But Heath found it and the poor thing was dying from starvation and Heath seemed so attached, so determined to save it ... I don’t think he had a good day at school, he didn’t seem to like it, I don’t think he made any friends. But when I asked him about it he said he guessed it really wasn’t any different from his other school and ... I just couldn’t tell him no. After everything the child has gone through and now coming to live with us and everything so different for him ... I think it might help him adjust.”

Frank sat back in his chair and lit his pipe, which was a habit he had acquired after leaving the Karnival. “Well, I understand that, but what is Horace supposed to think? You tell Horace no, you tell Heath yes. Are you forgetting that Horace has some adjusting to do?”

“Of course not,” she said, thinking perhaps she was.

“I think it’s only fair you explain to Horace your reasoning,” Frank said.

She did, the next morning in the upstairs hallway after Heath had gone down to breakfast.

Horace simply rolled his eyes and sighed. “Aw, Mom, do you think I’m thick or what? Course I know why you told Heath he

could keep Dog, I’m not stupid. Besides, he’s a good kid but he never talks to anyone around the neighbourhood, yesterday in school, nowhere. He just watches people. And sometimes if they start teasing him, he growls ... Growls, Mom. It’ll probably be good for him to have someone to pal around with.”

“Why doesn’t he pal around with you?”

“Because he doesn’t want to. I ask him, lots of times. He just shakes his head because he doesn’t like the other kids and I’m usually playing baseball or something.”

“Why doesn’t he like the other kids?”

Horace shrugged. “Why doesn’t he like sleeping in a bed? Don’t get all freaked out about Heath, Mom. He’s fine. We talk sometimes when we’re supposed to be asleep ... I mean – he likes it here and everything, he likes you and Dad. He just doesn’t seem to like people in general. He just likes to sit and read.”

Pulling Horace close, Margaret kissed his cheek and thanked him for being so understanding. He smiled at her, returned her kiss, and clomped off down the stairs and into the kitchen. She could hear him talking with Heath – “Morning, Heath. How’s Dog today?” – and her heart swelled with pride. She marvelled at how she and Frank had managed to raise a child so wise, so caring and sure. She had seen many children over the years, and most of their mothers seemed torn between love and disgust. But she was grateful because she had Horace.

That night, Margaret gathered up copies of all fifty-seven of her books and brought them upstairs in a box to Heath. He likes to sit and read, Horace had said. Though some of the books might be more suited to younger readers, she thought she would try.

Heath looked through the box. He lifted books in turn, opening them, wondering at the pages, fingers caressing the illustrations. “You made these?”

“Yes,” she said. Her writer’s ego anticipated rejection.

“Wow,” he said.

She dropped to her knees beside him on the floor. “They’re for you. I know you like to read.”

His eyes were wide. “For me?”

She nodded.

He reached out to hug her. She was certain she could feel tears on his cheeks but, when he pulled back, his eyes were dry and he was smiling. "I love to read," he said. "And since you wrote them I think I'll love them even more."

Her heart swelled as it so often did with Horace. She thought that she would feel sad when Heath next left for school. She searched through the box and pulled out a book. "It's about a dog," she said. "I thought you might like to read this one first."

He took the book from her, touching it with gentle fingers, and opened it with care. He studied the picture of the dog on the title page before reading aloud: "*A Dog's Tale*." He smiled at her and reached for her hand. He held it as he read to her, and she thought that she had never heard the words aloud, other than the times she had read to Horace. But that had been her voice and somehow different from this.

Margaret closed her eyes as the words washed over her...

* * * * *

Dog lived on a farm in the country. The farm was large and gave him many chances to run and play, to roll in the grass and gaze at the sky. He slept in the shade of the giant oak tree and talked with the squirrel who lived in its branches. He slunk through the tall grass in the meadow, enjoying the feel of it touching his fur, softly, like the hand of his master who lovingly stroked him when they sat together on the porch. Dog talked with the cattle who grazed in the pastures and spoke with the crow in the cornfield.

Dog knew that once a week — on Wednesdays — Master climbed into the red pickup truck and rode away, going through the gate at the bottom of the hill and down the road. Dog would follow the truck to the gate and wait there until Master came back. Leaving with corn, sometimes with other vegetables or a calf, Master returned with things that Dog did not know and had not seen before. These strange things went into the house and Dog would soon forget what they looked like, because he was not

allowed inside past the mudroom. Nevertheless, he remembered that Master brought home wonderful strange things, which lived in the house with him. Dog could not help but wonder from where those things had come.

One day when Master went out, instead of waiting at the bottom of the hill, Dog went back up to the house and nuzzled the door. Dog wanted to see those wonderful things again and get to know them. Master had not latched the door, and after working for some time with his paw, Dog managed to pull the door open just enough to slip inside. He stood for a moment in the mudroom, his heart beating rapidly. He was frightened and excited about what he might find.

From the mudroom, a door opened into a large room. The room smelled of meat and vegetables and apples. Dog knew this was what Master called the kitchen. Along the walls were shelves holding objects that looked like the dishes Master used to bring Dog food and water. Dog figured that these were the dishes from which humans ate. There was a large table (Dog knew what that was: there was one on the porch) and chairs. Dog imagined Master sitting in one of the chairs, eating food from the dishes which would rest on the table.

There were other rooms in the house. In one there was a rug on the floor, but this rug was much nicer than the one on the porch. All around the room were things that looked like chairs, only bigger. When Dog climbed up onto one, it was soft and warm and very roomy, not hard and confining like the chair on the porch. There were small tables with shiny objects and a dish with Master's pipe. There was something that looked similar to the lantern Master carried out to the barn when it was dark and there was no moon. Dog stood in awe, looking around at all the colours and the patterns and remembering the softness. He thought about how beautiful it all was. Dog thought that perhaps he might like to live in a house like this.

Suddenly Dog heard Master's truck chugging up the hill. He turned and ran hurriedly from the house. Dog ran through the kitchen and mudroom and out onto the porch and across the yard,

barking to welcome his master. He hoped Master would not find out he had been in the house.

"There you are," Master said, smiling. "I was wondering where you were when I didn't see you by the gate." He patted Dog's head, and Dog yipped and wagged his tail. "You're a good boy, Dog," Master said, and patted him again. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to get these things into the house."

Dog sat down and watched as Master carried a box into the house. Then Dog jumped up, putting his paws on the tailgate of the truck to look in. Master had brought home another beautiful colourful thing to put inside his house, but Dog could not imagine its purpose. It was large and flat, rectangular in shape, and it had what looked like trees and grass on one side, but it could not be real trees and grass, being flat. Then Master returned and picked up the beautiful colourful thing and took it into the house.

The back of the truck was empty now, and Dog walked across the yard. He would lie in the cornfield and think about all the wonderful things he had seen today.

He was lying in the cornfield almost asleep when Crow called and Dog jumped alert. Dog looked around and saw the large black bird sitting on the scarecrow.

"What are you thinking so hard about?" Crow asked Dog.

Dog settled down again in the corn. "I was inside my Master's house today and I saw all these beautiful colourful things. They were soft and warm and I would like to have things like that."

"What for?" asked Crow. "We have beautiful soft colourful things here in the fields and woods and pastures."

"It's not the same," Dog said, and sighed. "I wish I knew where those things came from."

"They come from the city," Crow said. "Everybody knows that."

"What's the city?" Dog asked, his mind spinning with the thought of a magical place filled with soft warm colourful things.

"Have your master take you," Crow said, flying away. "But it's not like the farm."

And so Dog decided that was exactly what he was going to do – go to the city with Master. Dog waited and waited, counting the

days until Wednesday. At night in his dreams he wandered soft roads and gazed at a world alive with beautiful colourful sparkling things, like those things he had seen in the house.

Finally Wednesday arrived. When Master started out, Dog jumped into the back of the truck and crouched down, hiding behind the spare tire. Dog was afraid Master would see him when Master got out to open the gate, but Master did not see him. Once they were on the road, Dog lifted his head and looked around, excited that finally, finally, he would get to see the city, which produced the beautiful things.

Dog watched as the trees and pastures began to change into tall brick towers spitting out smoke. The air did not smell very good and Dog wondered what this place could be. It was not beautiful and colourful, so it could not be the city of his dreams.

The smoking towers disappeared. Now they were on a wide road with cars and trucks everywhere. There were loud sharp noises, which seemed to come from the cars and trucks. Dog noticed that when Master pressed on the centre of the steering wheel their truck made this same loud noise. Dog put his head down and covered his ears, because the noise hurt him.

After some time, the truck stopped and Master got out. Dog lifted his head and saw tall buildings and many people walking around on what looked like hard white ground. Was this the city? Dog sniffed the air and jumped out of the truck. The ground was hard – very hard – and hot. People walked by him so quickly, pushing him along, that soon Dog had lost his way. He could no longer see Master and Dog slunk over to the side of a building and sat down.

Was this the city? he wondered. Where were all the beautiful things he had expected? Where was the colour, the softness? Dog began walking along beside the wall when he saw a window and jumped up, placing his front paws on the windowsill to look inside. There they were! There were the things he had come to see! People were inside touching them, picking them up, putting them down. Other people were putting things into boxes and carrying them outside, going along the hard white ground only to take the

boxes once again indoors, where the beautiful things would be safely unwrapped and admired. So yes, this was the city, and there were the beautiful colourful things, inside behind glass and bricks and stone.

Dog turned around and looked up and down the street. Nothing but people and hard white ground and cars and more buildings. Why were there no beautiful things outside? Where were the trees, the grass, the animals? Why did the air sting his nose and the noise hurt his ears?

If all the beautiful things were inside maybe they would not stay beautiful outside. Maybe they would turn hard and white and dull, like the ground. Dog watched the people carrying their beautiful colourful things into the buildings and closing the doors. Maybe these people had these things because outside was not beautiful, and Dog wondered if these people stayed inside all the time with their things, only coming outside to buy more soft colourful things. Dog thought he would not like to live in the city, would not like to have all those beautiful colourful things if he would have to stay inside all the time or walk on hard hot white ground because there was no grass, no cornfield, no crows or cattle with whom to talk. These people must like their city and their buildings with their things inside, but Dog knew he would not. Dog knew that he would be happier on the farm, outside, and he wondered why Master came here to buy these things when they had the grass and the cornfields, the pastures and woods of the farm.

“Dog! Dog, what are you doing here?”

Dog looked up and saw Master. Dog had never been so happy. He was not lost, he would not be trapped here! Master would take him back to the farm. Dog jumped up and down and barked with joy and Master patted his head.

“Come on, boy,” Master said. “It’s time to go home.”

Dog walked proudly beside Master to the truck and jumped into the cab with him. He lay down on the seat, his head resting beside Master’s leg. He sighed.

“So what do you think of the city?” Master asked.

Dog barked, saying he did not like the city, he would rather be

on the farm.

“I know what you mean,” Master said. “The city’s no place for a farm dog. You need the fresh air and the grass and the fields.”

Dog snuggled down on the seat, happy and content, glad that he was a farm dog with a kind, loving master.

* * * * *

Heath finished reading and the room was silent. After awhile, Margaret opened her eyes. Heath was still, seeming to be staring at the book in his lap. But his eyes had a distant look about them, and his lips quivered. She sat up quickly and squeezed his hand.

“I was born on a farm,” he whispered.

Margaret watched him, not knowing what to say.

“I had a dog there, too ... she took care of me and we ...” Then he glanced at her and smiled. “Thank you, Margaret.”

“I’m glad you like it,” she said.

“Did you grow up on a farm?”

Margaret shook her head. “My father owned a carnival. Still does, actually.”

“A carnival?”

“You know, there’s rides and games and –” She stopped herself just in time. “It’s like a circus, but without as many animals.”

Heath thought about this and Margaret wondered if it could be true that the boy had never seen a carnival or circus. “I saw a circus on television once,” Heath said as if reading her mind. “Do you have circuses near here?”

Margaret considered the tourist traps in Niagara Falls. “Not a real circus,” she said. “Not like the old days.”

“What about a carnival?”

“Klieg’s? They’re still travelling – all over the world. All across North America, Europe, maybe even Mexico by now.”

“Wow,” Heath said. “I’d like to see it.”

“Would you? Well, we’ll have to take you then. I’ll find out what their route is, where they’re going to be. And when it’s close we’ll take a day and go.”

“Has Horace seen the carnival?”

“He was born there.”

“Really?” Fascination brightened his face.

Margaret laughed. “Yes. But I doubt he remembers it.”

“You think he’d want to go?”

“That doesn’t matter,” she said. “If he doesn’t want to go that’s no reason why we can’t. Okay?”

“Okay,” Heath said.

“Now I think you’d better climb into –” Don’t be neglectful, she thought. “I think it’s your bedtime. You’d better take Dog for a short walk before you two go to sleep.”

He gathered his books with care and put them on top of the bureau. Then he kissed her, thanked her again for the books, and woke Dog. Dog squinted at him and climbed to his feet, following Heath out of the room and down the stairs.

Carrying the empty box, Margaret passed Horace’s room, saw him lying on the bed, and went in. She sat beside him and kissed his forehead. “Homework?”

“I was listening to your story, Mom. I haven’t heard that one in a long time.”

“You stopped letting me read to you years ago,” she said.

“I know,” Horace said. “But, listening to Heath ... it was pretty and kinda sad. Like Heath was the dog and ...” He trailed off, uncertain of the words. “I don’t think I mean that,” he said. “Like Heath wanted to be the dog.”

She thought she knew what he meant. “I don’t think he’s been very happy,” she said. “When he was on that farm ... Well – I think dogs are the only friends he’s ever had.”

“You know what I think?” Horace said. “I think – sometimes – Heath could go off with only Dog for company and never miss anyone.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Margaret said. She hoped it would never be true. She hoped that Heath would miss them. She hoped that Heath would never just run off.

As Margaret tucked the covers tightly around Horace, Heath stood in the front yard with Dog. He was thinking about

Margaret’s story when a high, thin, angry voice shattered the night:

“Nola? Nola! Where the hell is you, girl? Nola!”

Heath turned, expecting to face the owner of the voice. But his gaze fell on the empty yard, the tall evergreens, the flowerbeds.

“Noolaaa!”

He covered his ears with his hands, shutting his eyes.

“Baby? Where are you, Baby? Baby!”

Terror spurred him across the yard to reach Dog. He threw trembling arms around the animal’s neck, burying his face in the softness, the fur tickling his nose, his eyes. Dog whimpered and nuzzled him, tongue licking his face.

“Heath?”

Don’t look don’t look! Heath thought. But Dog was wresting away, fighting against Heath’s grip.

“Heath?”

He could feel the body coming closer. Dog pulled free, barking and running across the lawn. Now is when it happens, Heath thought. Now is when she –

A hand touched his shoulder. He whirled to see Margaret.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?”

Terror subsided. He nodded, unwilling to trust his voice. Heath pushed himself to his feet and forced a smile, unable to hold Margaret’s gaze.

“You’re certain?”

“Yeah.”

She slipped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close. “Then let’s go in. You’ll catch a chill out here on that wet grass.”

In his room, Heath lay awake. He turned over and over on the floor beneath the bed. Dog whined in sleep and stretched, his paws resting on Heath’s stomach. Terror returned, and Heath hugged himself, knowing that, above him, walking about and calling his name was –

NO!

Heath buried his face in the blanket. The room plunged into darkness. Maybe she wouldn’t see him, wouldn’t find him here. But she was calling, just as she’d done before ...

Heath's eyes flew open. Bolting upright, he struck his head on the bottom of the mattress. He pulled the blanket out from under Dog and crawled through the shadows to the doorway.

"Baby!"

Across the hall, he could see Frank and Margaret's door, left ajar so they could hear should the children call. He pushed himself to his feet and surveyed the hallway (Was she out there, just waiting for him to step out so she could grab him and – and –) and then he dashed across the hall to Frank and Margaret's bedroom. He eased the door open and looked into the room. Margaret and Frank were asleep. Dragging the blanket behind him, he crawled underneath their bed, then froze for an instant as one of them shifted on the mattress above him. He laid out the blanket, working it with his hands, turning around twice before falling into fitful sleep.

On subsequent nights, when the voice was overpowering, he would return to their room, to the haven beneath their bed. They would never know of his presence, but on those nights Dog would find him there and curl up warmly beside him.

Margaret remained unaware of how her book affected Heath. When she awoke with Frank in the morning and found Heath and Dog were not in Heath's room, she assumed they had left for Dog's morning walk. She set about preparing breakfast, too busy scrambling eggs and toasting muffins to wonder why she did not hear the front door before Heath entered the kitchen.

Once Frank left for work and the children for school, Margaret sat at her desk and hunted out the letter. One arrived dutifully each year and included a copy of the Karnival's route. To her surprise, Klieg's had been in Toronto only weeks before and was making its way west, across Ontario, into Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta ... not scheduled in the East again until the following summer.

She sat staring at the route, asking herself why she had not thought of this before the children started school ... She had seen the route. She must have noticed how close the Karnival would be. Why had she not thought to introduce Heath to Arthur?

She hated to admit it, but she did not want to see her father,

could not bear to see him, the man who had virtually vanished with the smoke from her mother's body ... She loved him, yes, but she did not miss him in her life. The fire, my self-mutilation, and Tim-Tina's passing had become her memories of the Karnival. But she chided herself for her selfishness, thinking inanely, Sorry, Daddy, can't visit or write. Makes me think of death ...

She was seized with an urge to see him.

With shaking hands, she pulled out a notepad and dashed off a message. Consulting the route, she sent the telegram to Kenora, asking him to telephone. Margaret, she thought, don't be surprised if he doesn't.

Arthur telephoned the next morning. "Margaret, dear, is something wrong?"

"Daddy! It's so good to hear your voice! Nothing's wrong. How are you? Are things going well?"

"Very well, thank you. Got all kinds of excitement coming up. We've got a rock band planning on shooting videos and there'll be a reporter from *Rolling Stone*. Going to do a special issue on the band and the Karnival. Not bad, eh, Margaret?"

"That's fabulous, Daddy."

"Everyone's excited. I've been reading your books."

"Really?"

"I'm so proud of you, they're wonderful! You aren't writing one about a carnival, I suppose?"

"Not yet, Daddy. I will, though, I promise."

"That'd be nice. Can you believe what some people are doing these days? Setting up rides in supermarket parking lots and calling it carnival – ha! The world needs to see it, needs to know what it's really like before –" But he stopped and she tried to envision. A tear? A lump in his throat? Was he thinking of Anna? His youth?

"Daddy, I want to see you."

"Margaret! Oh, Margaret ... It's been too long. Too too long."

"I know, Daddy. I'm sorry."

"No sense in being sorry, Margaret. Sorry is a word we can forget. When are you coming?"

"I was thinking Christmas week. You'll be wintering and –"

“We’ll still be working, Margaret. Just outside Vancouver. Got that special stand for six whole weeks! The lot will be closed to the general public, but it’ll still be carnival time, crazy time, pretty much like you remember it. Please come.”

She fought her disappointment. She had been planning a quiet time with her father, the chance to reabsorb the atmosphere of her past without the crowds, the rides turning endlessly, the call of the agents and talkers, and lure of the sideshows. “All right, Daddy, I –” She rushed into the story of finding Heath. Children’s Aid had assured her the adoption would be finalized before Christmas. “He wants to see the Karnival, Daddy, and – and I want you to meet him.”

“That’s fine, Margaret. That’s fine. You telegram and let me know when we can expect you.”

“Thank you, Daddy, I –” But, inexplicably, she could not say it. “Thank you. Good luck with your magazine story.”

That afternoon, she began work on a book about a carnival. But, after writing only five paragraphs, she set it aside and closed it up in a drawer of her desk.

That night, she began to have nightmares.

She told the family about the proposed trip during dinner the following evening. Heath almost spilled his milk, and Dog, beneath the table, thumped his tail rapidly.

“Well,” Frank said, “this is quite the surprise.”

“Oh, I know, Frank,” Margaret said. “But – well, Heath and I were talking about Klieg’s the other night and I haven’t seen Daddy for so long, none of us has. Horace hasn’t seen the place since he was a baby and I think Heath should meet his new grandfather and –”

Frank cut her short, waving his fork. “You don’t have to sell me,” he said. “I think it’s a great idea. I’d love to see the old Karnival again.”

“Have you seen it?” Heath asked.

“Of course. I used to work there. That’s where your mother and I met.”

“Boy! What was it like?”

Frank laughed. “It was incredible! The best part was meeting your mother, of course, but – there’s an excitement about it, an electricity you never feel anywhere else. You can touch it, it seems, and when the crowds start rolling in ...” Frank sighed. “There’s nothing like it.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Heath said. “I can’t wait.”

“Well, you’ll have to wait,” Frank said. “Christmas is almost four months away.”

That’s forever, Heath thought.

“You’ll love it,” Horace said. “They’ve got a dog act you wouldn’t believe. They were even on television once!”

“I’d forgotten that,” Margaret said.

“A dog act?” Heath asked.

“Oh yes,” Margaret said. “Run by your Great Uncle Ham. There are six dogs – I think it’s six – and they do tricks.”

“I liked the pyramid,” Horace said.

“The totem pole,” Frank said.

“What’s the totem pole?” Heath asked.

“They all get on top of each other, see?” Horace said. “The biggest up to the littlest. And then the one on the bottom starts walking around and the one on top stands on his hind legs and boy! They don’t fall or anything!”

“Boy,” Heath said, “I’ll bet Dog would like to see that, wouldn’t you, Dog?”

Dog thumped his tail.

“Dog and I are gonna love it,” Heath said. “When we were talking the other night we thought maybe you’d just forget about it and we’d never see a carnival or circus or anything.”

“Gosh,” Horace said as Margaret tucked him into bed that night. “Never even seen a clown, I’ll bet. No magic ... nothing. Nothing but –” He stopped himself and shook his head. “It must’ve been awful.”

For Heath the weeks went slowly. In early October, he was walking home from school when he came across a girl weeping on her front lawn. Her name was Shay Garrett, but the neighbourhood children called her “Gargantuan Garrett” because she was

twenty pounds over her “ideal weight.” Her new kitten had been startled by a car, and retreated to the heights of the tree in her yard. Shay had tried to climb the tree, but her weight had caused the branch beneath her to collapse. She was as terrified that her parents would be angry about the tree as she was that her kitten would be hurt.

Heath rescued the kitten, took blame for the branch – which Shay’s parents quickly forgave given what they understood to be the circumstances – and the two children soon became friends.

Shay, a year older, was a year ahead of Heath in school. But she took to having lunch with him because his stoicism frightened the other children. No one ever made fun of her in Heath’s presence.

“You’re the only one who’s ever liked me,” she said to him one afternoon. And, on another occasion, “Some day, I’m going to go a long long way away from here. Someplace where people don’t care what I look like or how much I weigh.”

“You can live at my grandpa’s Karnival,” Heath said. Margaret had explained, in careful words, about the residents of the freak tent. “Nobody there would care how fat you were. You could be fatter than anything and no one would care.”

Shay aside, the children at school held no interest for Heath. He daydreamed about Klieg’s, so distant, until he felt he would never see it. Waiting another day seemed to prove that Klieg’s was just a word. It took forever just for Halloween to arrive. Summer weather stretched unseasonably long that year. For Heath, Halloween day seemed just as far from Christmas as the day so long before when Margaret first told them about the impending trip.

Halloween morning, Heath stood at the window in his room. He looked out over the yard and the woods beyond. Horace was at the picnic table, carving the top off a pumpkin. His hands were orange with slime as he scooped out the pulp and seeds. Beside Horace at the table sat a second pumpkin, that one reserved for Heath. Margaret had planned on their doing the pumpkins together, but Heath had told Horace he would do his own later.

“Jack-o-lantern,” Heath said. That’s what Horace had called it:

a jack-o-lantern.

There were no jack-o-lanterns at the Children’s Aid Society home. There were paper cutouts of black cats and witches on broomsticks and skeletons. There was a party in the dining room, with a barrel of water into which you had to stick your face until you caught an apple in your teeth. There was candy for the children, and punch for everyone. The groundskeeper told ghost stories in front of the fireplace until the matrons sent the children off to bed. Alone with strange noises they were not certain they had heard before, the children dreamed of witches and severed hands and spirits come back from the dead. Heath would not sleep on those nights. He would remain in a bundle beneath his bed, the blanket pulled up to cover all but his eyes. He had to stay awake watching for Her.

“Baby? Where are you, Baby?”

But his new family made Halloween sound like fun. Margaret told him about trick-or-treating, dressing up and going from house to house, getting candy and apples and cookies. “But you don’t eat anything – anything – until you get home and your dad and I check it, okay?” Frank told him about soaping windows and scaring other kids, “Not that I’m encouraging this type of behaviour, you understand.” One of the high school football players came around to sell something called Spook Insurance. This meant, Margaret explained as she opened her purse, that the team would stop by to scrape the soap off the windows, pull the toilet paper from the trees, hose the eggs off the car and driveway, should there be any “tricking.” Horace said he would be happy to have Heath go trick-or-treating with him if Heath wanted.

“Okay,” Heath said, but a part of him remained apprehensive. What if there really were witches? He knew there were fortune-tellers – Margaret had said so. What if there really were werewolves and vampires and ghosts, and Halloween was their night to be out and around? What if they thought he would make a delicious meal? A thirsty vampire? A successful sacrifice?

A chill passed through him and he turned away from the window. You’re not a baby, he told himself. Those things aren’t real.

“Heath! Hey, Heath!”

Heath turned back to the window, leaning out. Horace stood at the table, holding up his jack-o-lantern to show off the face he had carved: huge round eyes and an apple for a nose and a wide grinning mouth with two marshmallow teeth.

“Hey,” Heath said.

“What do you think?”

“Looks creepy,” Heath said.

“Yeah,” Horace said. “Come on down here, will ya?”

The thought of putting his hand into the pumpkin churned Heath’s stomach. But he thrust his fingers into the yielding orange flesh. It was cold and stuck to his skin – like brains, something inside him said – but it also felt strangely pleasurable. He squished the pulp in his hands, watching it squeeze through his fingers.

“Save the seeds,” Horace said. “Mom puts them in the oven and roasts them and we eat them.”

“Eat them?” Heath asked.

“Sure.”

“What do they taste like?”

“I don’t know, just seeds, I guess. They don’t really taste like pumpkin or anything, just ... seeds.”

Heath finished scooping out the seeds and pulp, putting it all dutifully into the bowl on the table. He wiped his hands and looked at the hollowed out pumpkin.

“What are you going to make?” Horace asked.

“I don’t know,” Heath said. “Any kind of face I want?”

“Sure. Any kind of eyes, any kind of nose, any kind of mouth.”

“I gotta think about it.” Heath studied the pumpkin for some time, chin on his arms, as Horace watched him. At last Heath lifted his head, picked up the knife, and began to carve.

When he had finished, the eyes were thin slits, curving up and down as if they were worms crawling across the orange face. The nose was a single tiny hole. There were larger holes on either side, just below the eyes (“Those are her cheeks,” Heath explained). A thin, barely perceptible line ran between and connected them.

“Where’s her mouth?” Horace asked.

“Right there.” Heath traced the line with the knife.

“Not much of a mouth.”

Heath smiled. “Not much of a talker.”

When Margaret saw Heath’s jack-o-lantern, she did not like it, but she did not know why. Nothing wrong with it, she tried to tell herself. Nothing at all. It’s a child’s pumpkin for heaven’s sake, just a child’s pumpkin ... But she was glad she did not have to keep looking at it. She set the pumpkin down on the right side of the front door. Horace’s jack-o-lantern was on the left, and the two stared down the driveway toward the road, one on each corner of the small porch floor. She inserted the candles and lighted them with a long match, glancing up to see the boys, who lay on the front lawn with Dog. Their legs were stretched out behind them, chins resting on their hands as they surveyed their work.

“Looks creepy,” Horace said. “Creepy, kid.”

Heath was solemn. “At midnight, they’ll roll off the porch, roll down the driveway and into the road, searching, calling for their bodies, calling for –”

Margaret hurried inside and shut the door.

She thought of the Karnival, the visit to her father, wondering why she felt so unnerved. Anxious, she thought. Just anxious to see Daddy after all these years. Quite often she woke in the middle of the night, knowing she had dreamed about him, yet unable to touch the vapours of her subconscious. I’ll be glad when this is over, she thought. Halloween has always given me the willies. But she was fully aware that it was a lie.

Her uneasiness flourished. Frank was not home by the time the boys left the house with Dog. When the doorbell rang, it was a moment before she convinced herself it was safe to open the door.

The porch appeared deserted. Margaret stepped beyond the threshold. Two teenage boys leapt from the shadows, one on either side of her. They babbled sounds, the jack-o-lanterns held in front of their faces like gross orange heads. Margaret screamed. Laughing, the boys ran off, dropping the pumpkins, Horace’s rolling down the driveway and into the gutter.

She was huddled on the couch when Frank came home. She

held him and kissed him and begged him not to answer the door.

“Why don’t you go up and lie down,” Frank said. “You look exhausted.”

“I am,” she said. She had not slept the night before and, once she dragged herself from bed, realized she had not finished making Heath’s costume. Heath hadn’t been satisfied with just a head and paws, he had to have a tail also and –

“Hush now,” Frank said. He pulled her into his arms. Her behaviour frightened him, but he told himself it was only the stress: wanting to have the adoption finalized after all these weeks; anxious to see her father and the Karnival, but afraid, too, because of the memories. He had heard her in her sleep, calling for Tim-Tina.

Frank kissed Margaret and walked her up the stairs, ignoring the doorbell, which rang several times. He tucked her into bed and brought her a glass of white wine to calm her nerves. He left the bathroom light on, the door open, and went down the stairs to swing the front door wide to a witch and an alien.

“Trick-or-treat!”

After the children left with their lollipops and bubblegum, Frank spotted Horace’s jack-o-lantern in the gutter and went to retrieve it. He picked it up, cradling it in the crook of his arm as he peered up and down the street. There was no sign of the boys or Dog ... Turning back to the house, Frank noticed that his hands were sticky and damp. He looked to see that the pumpkin was split completely along one side. His finger traced the gash in the bright orange skin, as he thought how disappointed the boys would be. Then it occurred to him that he could repair it, using toothpicks as dowels to pull the two sides together.

Frank carried the pumpkin head into the house as two dogs and a pirate (Dog, Heath, and Horace respectively) made their way through the labyrinth of neighbourhood streets, the boys’ treat bags growing heavier with each stop.

At Shay’s house, they asked her to come trick-or-treating with them, but her parents said no because she was not allowed to have sweets.

“I can’t,” Shay said.

“Not even just to walk around with us?” Heath asked. “They let your brother go.”

“They don’t trust me,” Shay said. “Like I couldn’t eat just any old thing just any old time I wanted to.”

“Shut that goddamned door!” Shay’s father shouted.

Shay bit her lip, hung her head, and swiftly shut the door.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Horace said as they walked down to the street.

“Yeah,” Heath said. “They’re not very nice to her, that’s for sure. Her dad and brother even call her names and stuff.”

“That’s horrible,” Horace said. “What’s her mom like?”

“Well,” Heath said, “I guess she’s not quite so bad. But she cooks all day – and I really do mean it, all day long – cookies and pies and all kinds of stuff, and she never lets Shay have a single bite of anything.”

Horace stopped. He looked at Heath, thinking, and then looked back at Shay’s house. “They don’t hit her, do they?”

Heath shook his head, his eyes wide.

“I mean it, Heath. Mom says if we ever know about anybody who’s getting hit, we’re supposed to –”

“Naw, they don’t hit her,” Heath said. “Really, Horace, they don’t, I know, but ... It’s not right,” Heath said, “but they sure don’t seem to like her very much.”

Heath’s fears of witches and goblins quickly faded. Once Shay receded to the back of his mind, he found himself enjoying the new ritual. He liked the feel of the costume Margaret had made for him: the cowl with the droopy dog ears, the paws that flopped over his hands and shoes, the tail that swished the ground behind him. He wished he could wear it all the time, especially to school, but he doubted Margaret would let him do that. And Frank, concerned about Heath’s lack of more than a single friend, had given him a talk a few days earlier about being strong and being an individual and not being afraid to let people see what makes you You. Frank did not know he was wrong in assuming that Heath was afraid of the children at school.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Horace said. He put a hand on Heath’s

arm. "You don't want to go there." He indicated a house sitting far back from the street, shrouded by trees, dark but for a single light burning in a front window.

"Why not?" Heath asked, several steps up the walk.

"That's Old Man Martin's house," Horace said. "He doesn't like kids. A couple years ago he grabbed Jenny Mayfield and tried to touch her."

Heath looked back up the walk toward the house. A chill passed through him. Dog retreated to the far side of the street and growled deep in his throat.

"Come on," Horace said. He tugged Heath's arm. "Let's go."

As they watched, Old Man Martin came out onto his porch. He peered down the walkway, and Heath felt as if the man were looking right at him. Heath felt paralyzed.

Old Man Martin took a step onto his walk and Horace took off, running down the street. "Come on!"

Heath was unable to follow. He could hear Dog whining softly, but he stood watching as the old man approached and came to a halt only steps away.

"Who are you?" Old Man Martin demanded. He was only a foot taller than Heath, his shoulders stooped, wire rimmed glasses pinching a large hooked nose, a wrinkled face working thin lips. "I said who are you, boy?"

Heath gulped. "H-H-Heath, sir."

"Well, H-H-Heath, mind if I ask what you're doing staring up at my house? You planning a robbery? You in one of those gangs, just a little thing like you?"

Heath wished he could run. "We were trick-or-treating."

"I see. Then you're in a costume? You're not a real dog, then?"

"N-no, sir. I'm a boy."

"A boy. How old are you?"

"Nine."

"Nine."

"Almost ten."

"Almost ten." Old Man Martin ran a quick mental calculation. "I've got sixty years on you, kid."

"Y-yes, sir."

"You're scared to death, aren't you?" The old man chuckled. "Scared to death. Stop shaking, H-H-Heath. I'm not going to do anything to you. I'm just an old man, is all. It's those young men you ought to worry about."

"Y-yes, sir." Heath was thinking about Jenny Mayfield.

"So. If you're out trick-or-treating – if you're not casing the joint for a robbery – why didn't you come up to my house for a treat?"

Heath could not answer. He looked around quickly for Dog.

Old Man Martin stepped back. "What are you looking for?"

"M-my dog."

"A real dog?"

Heath nodded.

"Not another young hooligan in a dog costume?"

"No, sir."

"Not a cat in a dog costume?"

"N-no, sir."

"Stop shaking, boy, please! You got any idea what it's like having people scared of you all the time? No one comes up my walk for a treat. No one brings me a Christmas card. I'm an ogre, I am."

Heath thought the old man's words sounded sincere. The old man sounded hurt. Heath took a step forward. "I was going to come up."

"You were, eh? So why didn't you?"

"Horace said ... Horace said not to."

"And who's Horace?"

"My brother."

"Your brother." Old Man Martin thought a moment. "You don't mean Horace Clifford."

"Yes, sir."

"I didn't think the Cliffords had another boy. When they get you?"

"Last summer. I'm a – I'm adopted."

"Oh, I see. I was adopted, you know."

"Really?"

“That’s right. My pappy was loony – loony, I tell you. Picked up a shotgun and blew my mum’s head clean off her shoulders, then did the same to himself. I was in her belly, so I don’t remember it. But that’s what they told me. He was loony, they told me, so –” He shrugged. “I don’t suppose you have a history as colourful as that?”

Heath shook his head solemnly. “I don’t know. I was born on a farm, but ...” His voice trailed off, and he imitated the old man’s shrug.

“Sure, I know. They haven’t told you the whole story yet, have they? Maybe they’re thinking they never will, but, believe me, boy, you got a right to know. You got a right to know what loins sprung you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Else wise – else wise you go living your life with little pieces of hell floating around in your head. Little pieces, like jigsaw puzzles, little pieces that don’t quite fit together. But you know. You know there’s something horrible, something dark, a blot on your soul. And if you never know what put it there, you spend your whole life asking, Was it something I did?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“You have to know the answer to that question, boy. No two ways about it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So. You want your treat or not?”

Heath hesitated. It seemed that the old man was trying to be nice – even though he was a bit scary. But he was only scary because he was different. That was being an individual, wasn’t it? He was an individual and his feelings were hurt and ... Heath wondered where Horace had gone, thought it might be all right if Dog were with him.

“Problem, H-H-Heath?”

“I don’t know,” Heath said. “Horace said ...”

“Horace said what?”

“Jenny Mayfield,” Heath started.

Old Man Martin burst into laughter. “Not that old story

again!” He threw back his head. “Thought I’d heard the last of that one!” When his laughter diminished to a smile, he met Heath’s gaze. “Jenny Mayfield showed up here, couple years ago I guess it was, with a handful of rotten eggs and a huge bar of soap. She got to going on my windows with that soap and tossed those eggs at my door and I’ll tell you ... I did grab that girl. I was plenty angry and I would have beat the living sh– I would have given her a spanking, I would, only I’m not as spry as I used to be. And off she went, screaming at the top of her lungs that I tried to do things to her.” Old Man Martin’s glasses bounced on his nose. “Bah! Never arrested me, I promise you that.”

“I ... They didn’t?”

“No, they didn’t. And you know the Mounties – they always get their man ... Still scared?” Old Man Martin chuckled. “Well, okay. You stay here and I’ll go on up to the house for your treat.” With a patient smile, he turned and made his way up the walk.

Heath began to feel foolish standing on the sidewalk waiting. He glanced up and down the street. There was no sign of Horace, and even Dog had deserted him. Heath shrugged and started up the walk. Reaching the porch, he met the old man on his way out the door.

“Well,” Old Man Martin said, “decided to come up after all, did you?”

“Yes, sir.”

Old Man Martin smiled. “Open your bag, Heath.”

Heath held the bag open.

“Wider, boy.” Then, “Is that your dog over there?”

Heath whirled and the old man made a quick movement. Heath stared at the handcuffs cold on his wrists, stared up at the old man wide-eyed.

Laughing, Old Man Martin pulled him toward the door ...

Margaret, tossing restlessly, awoke. She had been dreaming of her father, seated on his lap as he told her a story, in the middle of which he fell silent. When she looked at him, his head flushed orange, swelling to three times its normal size. She began to

scream, and the head dropped from his shoulders and into her lap. She scrambled to push it away from her, unable to escape its ugliness as it rolled across the bedroom floor. It grinned at her, eyes sparkling, and came to rest against a chair leg.

With the dream faded, she thought of the boys. She swung her feet out of bed and left the room. From the hallway she could smell Frank's pipe, and this reassured her. She called to him down the staircase and waited until he appeared below her.

"Yes, love?"

"Are the boys home yet?"

Frank hesitated.

"It's awfully late, don't you think?"

"Now, Margaret, it's not a school night ... They're together and they've got Dog. No sense you worrying yourself."

"But I told them to be home before nine-thirty and –" She stopped. There was barking outside.

"There, see?" Frank said. "There they are now." But when he opened the front door the boys were nowhere in sight. Dog was jumping up and down in the yard, wagging his tail.

"Frank?"

"Now, Dog," Frank said, "where are the boys?"

Dog ceased jumping and stood in the yard, just barking.

Margaret rushed down the stairs to grip Frank's arm. "You don't think something's happened to them?"

"I don't know, love," Frank said. He was a quiet and simple man, and he had lived a quiet and simple life. Though he knew that horrible things routinely happened to other people, nothing terrible had ever befallen him. He had not been a victim of abuse or neglect, no bones had been broken, no scars inflicted. He could not conceive that something untoward had happened to his sons, but his mind raced, searching for a way to calm Margaret. "We'll just wait a bit, see if they come in. They can't be far behind. Dog was with them, wasn't he?"

Margaret nodded.

"Okay, then. Give them ten minutes and then I'll go out looking for them."

"Couldn't you go now?"

Frank studied her. "All right." He rummaged in the hall closet for the flashlight. "You stay here in case they come home. I'll be back every few minutes or so. Just to check. Don't want to be wandering around with them snug in their beds." He smiled but Margaret was too frightened. "You guard the house now, Dog," Frank said.

"Be careful!" Margaret called after him, certain that whatever had befallen her children was lying in wait for her husband as well.

Once spooked, Horace ran blindly. Each step brought a rise in panic until, out of breath, he simply had to stop. He tumbled onto a lawn, his sides aching, his eyes closed against the cool grass, his treat bag on the ground nearby. "Heath?" He fought to control his breathing. "Man, Heath, I thought I was gonna have a heart attack." He lay, still panting, until he realized he was alone.

Horace sat up and looked around. "Heath?" He peered down the street. "Heath? Dog? Heath!"

No answer.

Horace felt panic return. He wasn't sure that Heath could find his way home by himself. Heath didn't know the neighbourhood as well as Horace did, with all its twists and turns and shortcuts. They had already been quite far from home at Old Man Martin's.

As he thought of Old Man Martin, his heart began to pound. Remembering Jenny Mayfield, Horace snatched up his treat bag and ran back through the streets, passing groups of children, losing his sword but not stopping to retrieve it, out of breath again when he reached Old Man Martin's. But there was no sign of Heath or Dog. Horace stood on the sidewalk wondering what to do.

"Please, God," Horace prayed. "Let him be okay."

Horace wandered up and down streets, through twists and turns and shortcuts, calling Heath, calling Dog, returning every few minutes to stand in front of Old Man Martin's house. "Damn it, Heath," Horace muttered. "You weren't stupid enough to go in there, were you?"

A burst of laughter caught his attention. But it was only a group of teenagers weaving down the street. Probably drunk, Horace thought. Damn it, Heath, where are you?

Horace crept up to the Martin house. Peeping in the window, he saw the old man seated in a rocking chair, chuckling to himself and thumbing through a picture magazine. There was no sign of Heath, and Horace made his way out of the bushes and down to the street. He realized the best thing he could do was tell his parents. Looking around one last time, he started toward home.

Frank met Horace coming up the street. “Where’s your brother?”

Horace shrugged. His eyes brimmed with tears. “Last time I saw him we were in front of Old Man Martin’s house. The old guy came out and I took off. I thought Heath was behind me but – I don’t know where he is, I looked everywhere!”

Frank hugged him, stroking his head. “It’s all right. Don’t worry, we’ll find him.”

“But, Dad, I shouldn’t have let him out of my sight! If something’s happened to him, I’ll –” He buried his face in his father’s chest.

Frank held him and ruffled his hair. “Come on. We’ll get you home and I’ll go out again looking for Heath.”

* * *

Meanwhile, a thousand miles away, having done all she could to forget her firstborn, Nola was watching her daughter, Chloe. Chloe was topless, seated at Nola’s feet colouring paper and floor with crayons. She was nearly three, and Nola adored her. Chloe was still plump and healthy, with big round cheeks and big round eyes. She seemed to understand every word that people spoke. Rarely fussy, she loved to listen to stories and play with her parents. She was equally content to amuse herself, finding fascination in spoons, bits of fabric, candles, and other household objects.

Chloe’s third arm needed no particular attention, though it did make it challenging to dress the girl. For some time, Nola had tried

to convince Chloe to let her chest-arm lay flat across her stomach, covered by a shirt or, weather permitting, a bulky sweater. But, despite the fact that the arm never moved, to have it at all restricted caused Chloe a great deal of discomfort. Taking up needle and thread and scissors – with nothing more than her own imagination and sewing programmes on television to guide her – Nola refashioned all the girl’s blouses and sweaters and tee shirts to create a third sleeve or armhole as required, though Chloe generally went topless when inside the house.

They were then living on the outskirts of a small border city, their fifth rental house since Chloe’s birth, in the fifth neighbourhood that at first appeared to be kinder than most. Shortly after Chloe was born, Ralph insisted that he did not want her confined to life in the transport truck. To be healthy, he said, a child needed a yard to play in, with sunshine to warm the face and nature to entice the mind. Neither did he want her to reach his age and be as he was, hiding from the eyes of others, no shell built against their cruelty.

Nola did her best to make a comfortable home for her family, and for this occasion she had decorated with orange and black crepe paper, a jack-o-lantern on the dining room table, a paper skeleton on the front door. The skeleton was on the inside, because she was determined not to answer the door, refusing to give out candy to those who called Chloe names and laughed.

“They’re just kids,” Ralph had told her. “They don’t know any better.”

But Nola wished – kids or not – that she could cut out their tongues, gouge out their eyes, sever their limbs. She hated this neighbourhood, hated this house, just as she had hated all the others. Taunting and judgment brayed ceaselessly around them.

Nola was seated at the living room window, pulling back the curtains just a bit to peek out. In her lap rested a gun. The gun rightly belonged in the transport truck, but Ralph had given it to her that morning when he left for a quick twenty-four hour run. It was meant to ensure their safety from Halloween trickery gone out of hand, but Nola had formed a different plan. The first child who

set foot on her porch would be shot. Cleanly, she thought. Right between the eyes. Right in the mouth, the throat. Right between the legs, where their young sex parts lay dormant. That'll teach them, Nola thought. She turned her attention back to Chloe.

Chloe was eating her crayons again. Nola snatched the crayons away and picked her up, placing the girl in her lap.

"Sit still now, Chloe," Nola said. "I hear someone coming." She peeled back the curtain, her eyes scanning the darkness. Her fingers tightened on the gun as a smile widened her lips. At last, one had found the courage to approach the front door, shameless in asking for a treat from a home she consistently attacked.

"For God's sake, now, Chloe, hold still, hold still!" Nola took careful aim, but Chloe's right arm swung out at the gun, knocking it to the floor. "Damn it!" Nola was ready to strike the girl, but Chloe's innocent eyes immediately melted her. "All right," she said. "All right ... Get a book and I'll read you a story."

Chloe gurgled and scrambled down. She returned moments later with what had recently become her favourite. Handing Nola the book, Chloe climbed back into her mother's lap, snuggling into her body, content.

"Dog lived on a farm in the country," Nola read once Chloe had settled. "The farm was large and gave him many chances to run and play, to roll in the grass and gaze at the sky."

Chloe sighed, the knock at the door unanswered, the neighbourhood children safe from ambush, Nola's breast a pillow for her head. And a thousand miles away, the woman who would soon adopt her brother was showing the first outward signs of strain.

"You what!" Margaret stared at Horace. She wanted to slap him. "You left him at that crazy man's house? How could you!" Aware of how hard she was shaking him, she released him and stepped back.

"I thought he was with me, Mom, honest! Honest! I looked everywhere!"

Margaret's fury frightened her. She turned away, trembling. She went to the bar, poured a generous splash of whisky, and downed it. When she heard the front door open and close, the

glass slipped from her hand and shattered on the floor.

Heath clomped through the entrance hall, his treat bag dragging on the tile. "Hi! Boy, Horace, where'd you go?"

"Huh?" Horace said.

"Heath!" Margaret gasped. "Where were you? Horace said you were at the Martin house."

"I was. He gave me these." Heath held up one hand.

Margaret stared at the handcuffs dangling from his wrist. "What is that?"

"Handcuffs," Heath said. "Mr. Martin gave them to me. They were his when he was a boy." Heath set his treat bag on the coffee table, toying with the handcuffs. "I've got a key and everything." He caught sight of Dog and shook his head. "Some watchdog you are, running off. Afraid of some harmless old man."

"You scared your mother to death," Frank said.

"I'm sorry. We were talking and then I went looking for Horace." Heath turned to study Margaret.

He's safe, Margaret thought, but for how long? Her heart pounded.

"Heath," Horace said, "where's your tail?"

"I gave it to Mr. Martin," Heath said, but his eyes were focused on Margaret. "He had a costume like mine once, but some kids pulled his tail off and —"

Margaret fell to the couch and burst into uncontrolled laughter.