

Woods - Leah

After the shootout, those of us who were still alive went in all directions, and though Claire was my favorite of the mothers, I had to go with Blanche who said I was hers, something I had sort of known all along.

We changed our names—which was nothing new—and moved from town to town and sometimes she told me to call her not “mother” or “Mom” but “aunt.” Blanche always made friends and found some kind of work to do and she kissed me and hugged me before tucking me in at night so I knew I’d been lucky in the mother I ended up with, to make up for being so unlucky, my childhood disrupted and all. That’s why when the police caught up with us and put me in foster care, the only good to come of it in my view was I got to take back my first, original, or at least my favorite name. Leah. Even now, at almost thirty, I find myself writing it over and over on paper sometimes, like an adolescent, or tracing the four letters out on tabletops or even in the air.

I know now about the people Ned killed. The man he shot—and not the only one, either, I know that now—and the wife who simply fell to her knees and took her husband’s hand and never uttered a cry. She knelt like a marble statue and Ned stepped up behind her and put a single bullet in the back of her head. But I didn’t see that happen. As far as I know, none of the children did. I read about all of it recently, through interlibrary microfilm loans, and how more bodies were found in a wooded area near the ranch.

I remember my childhood vividly, so I truly doubt any terrible memories are lodged and moving slowly like soon-to-end-their-hibernation snakes. I seek reminiscence, not revelation. Leah. I’m Leah. My childhood was not traumatic. I was not abused. I loved the mothers and Ned and most of all Susannah, my more-than-sister, who I lost when we were nine years old and I went with Blanche and she went with Claire.

Leah sits alone at a truck stop counter in Virginia. She is on her way to Texas; an adoptees’ association has helped her find Susannah, her “sister.” She places her right hand flat over the coffee mug, palm down, until the steam is too hot; then the other hand. She means to hold her fingers still, but she can feel a tremble, pulsation. She holds her right hand up before her. The fingers bow in greeting and each one has a little face and each fingertip bulbs and opens and Leah sees their faces: the Mothers. Five heads and faces emerge from her hand, and Leah’s arm is a single trunk and how complex are all the arteries and veins that form its roots! This tree—this is what *family* should mean, though we never used that word: Ned said Charlie Manson gave it a bad name. Leah sees Claire (the impudent finger, of course), and Blanche, Alma, and the Mare (so-called because she joined Ned’s Battalion to kick horse). The thumb is Debbi, no question about it, anomalous to the others, essential, blunt squat and stumpy, it’s

Debbi, the one-armed mother with the stump.

We called her Stump, we children did, and sometimes Tree Stump or, for short, Tree. On her left side, the hair didn't grow under her armpit, but rather in the crook of her elbow, like a girl trying to copy mother and getting it wrong. On the right side, she had no hand or elbow at all. When I was a child and she washed me in the tub, she had me stand or hold to the faucets or her body while she scrubbed away with the left hand. The stump would prod against me, blind and warm. It never repelled or frightened me. I felt a stirring pleasure combined with feeling sorry for her, till in the middle of my bath I'd begin to cover the part-arm with soapy kisses. For years my dream was to be a faith healer. I didn't want to fool anyone, but oh, to be able to touch people, restore them and set them free! Debbi didn't mind attention to her stump, what she hated was to be put up on a pedestal. That, she told me, is what her first husband did, and that's why she left him. "Just because I'm missing an arm, does that mean I can't live, that I can't know life?"

Alma was Red for her hair, and also Nurse, because she was one, and I think the Mare was really named Jan—at least one of them was, but every addict-mother who came along was called Mare. We called Blanche Spot, for the dark brown birthmark on her arm, near her vaccination mark. Claire was Shot—hotshot, crack shot; Claire loved guns.

We kids gave them nicknames to keep track because the Mothers kept changing names. Ned started it, saying, "This week you'll be Blanche," or "Today you're Claire." But then the Mothers took it on themselves, trading names the way later my high school friends and I swapped clothes. Ned wasn't mad when we made our nicknames, but then he got into the act, telling them to swap nicknames, too. One day Blanche would be called both Claire and Stump; and Stump would be Debbi and Spot. He would tell me, "Blanche is your mother," but Blanche could be anyone, and "I'm your mother," he told Susannah, "and you're my wife." He said Bobby was my daughter even though Bobby was a boy and older, I think, than me.

People came and went separate from their names till it was hard to tell how many we were or whether anyone was new or gone or missing. Sometimes Susannah and I shared a name, one person split in two, so that if Ned wanted to pat my head, he had a head for each hand. It was dizzying, like the wind that comes up on the plains, so exciting it can make you cry. First you see a dust devil whirling, then another, and then the sun is going down with nothing on the horizon to block it. The wind roars over and swallows every spinning dervish and sweeps everything away and if you're outside you'll be smashed into the nearest door or wall or tree and the doors won't open though you pull with all your might. Inside, the Mothers are pushing hard to let you in but the wind flattens you against the wood and the wind puts its shoulder to the door. Once the wind filled my clothes and lifted me up in the air and over the fence, at least that's how I remember it, though everyone told me no, when I came to on the ground so happy, saying I can fly. "A concussion," said Ned, "and you're not out of the woods yet." And Benjamin was Bobby's sister. "You're the major," Ned told Bobby. "And you're the new lance corporal," he said to me.

Leah is a day closer now. She's got as far as Tennessee and she's thinking about Ned's Battalion (so-called, though it never got to full strength, we were just a small tactical unit, hardly big enough to be called a squad). She's remembering on purpose, not the way it used to be all through her teenaged years living with a kind family in the suburbs; they had no idea of her loyalties. She never knew then when the pictures would surface like a pimple, the sudden awareness of something pushing against the skin. A minor pain, a swelling. Minor, but she would get self-conscious about it till it took all her concentration. Do you touch it, do you squeeze it? You're sitting there in class and it's pushing, growing, with as much natural right on its side as a blade of grass pushing itself up through the earth and when you feel it emerge and pop you feel relief, and also shame that other people will see. She would remain at her desk, no longer quite so bored, smiling attentively at the teacher, pretending there was no sudden picture inside her of a woman bathing a child and the stump where her hand should be goes bump bump bump or else Bobby and Benjamin are hooting and pointing or she's reaching to take Susannah's hand and then they are setting up the cots for the night, they're too small, struggling, not so much lifting as pushing up with all her strength to keep the cot up as they move it from the storeroom to the sleeping gallery, pushing against the wood and the canvas rubbing against her face and her body colliding with Susannah's and she can hear Susannah's soft trying-hard grunt. Or see Angela and Heather in the shower, turning hairier every day. It's a lie, Ned said, that monkeys became people, but Leah worried that people could turn into apes. Maybe just Angela and Heather because they were born before any of the Mothers met Ned.

Maybe Ned was our father—though I don't think so—or the men who used to visit though Ned hardly ever allowed them to stay the night. I asked Blanche later. She said, "What difference does it make?" The only Father we were allowed to think about was God, and Ned was His soldier. We turned out, standing barefoot on the frosty ground, feet speared by tiny cactus invisible to see; Ned in full dress uniform by the light of the moon: his camouflage pants and khaki shirt with the sleeves torn off to show the chevrons tattooed on his arm—the only kind, he said, they can't strip you of or take away.

Leah looks out a café window in Tennessee.

As a child, I didn't know what state we lived in, but there was prairie and in the winter it was bitter cold. Our place was called the Frenchman's House because of the wide halls upstairs that looked like they were built for dancing which we were not supposed to do. When it rained miles away, I watched the rainbow arc over the Northern plains in sunlight mixed with black clouds and I imagined climbing it like a road. Blanche said when she was a girl she used to imagine climbing the searchlight beam all the way to Hollywood. Susannah loved the words *Milky Way*; she wanted to wander the path of sweet white light. At night, Ned turns on the searchlights that are mounted on the barn. They don't revolve like Blanche says they do in Hollywood, and they don't lead anywhere. They light up the area so that approaching enemies will be an easy target. Blanche had a cocker spaniel that used to lick her face. Ned's dogs bark and lunge. When he goes to town, there's always a couple in the back of the pickup truck, and even if Ned leaves the keys in the ignition and the engine running, no one dares go near. Leah is

afraid of the dogs. She is transfixed by the rainbow, but she can't see where the other end touches the ground; it dissipates into empty space. There must be another world there. Maybe that's where King Arthur has gone to wait. If she could find Excalibur and pull it from the stone, the world would know she had the greatest power on earth and then Armageddon wouldn't have to come. She might have to kill one person or two, but it won't be the way Ned has warned them. The rainbow comes out of the black clouds. Instead they will have peace.

There was a rainbow once for me and Blanche, somewhere in the Northwest, living out of suitcases and cartons and I was playing and I found a gun. My mother made some fluffernutter sandwiches and we walked to the water. We carried a burlap bag with the gun inside, and boxes of ammunition. And when my mother threw the bag into the water, a fine mist rose and a rainbow. When I put rainbow decals on my notebooks in high school, I was just like everyone else and no one had to know what I remembered.

Blanche was different. She was a lawyer, and that's how she met him. She was working for Legal Aid and went to see him in jail. Later, when the case came apart, he said, "You see, they locked me up for a crime I didn't commit," and Blanche ran away with him. She didn't know Claire was going too. She believed that Ned had been done an injustice, and twenty-four hours after running off, she knew she'd made the mistake of her life.

I believe she only stayed because of the others: first Claire—she wouldn't leave without taking Claire—then the rest of us who joined in or were born. And I believe this because she did leave, taking me with her once or twice, so she told me later, and I have some memories: being carried in her arms over thresholds late at night, being carried into a house, up a cinder block onto a porch and inside there's an old woman, a Gray Lady, who pinched my cheek. It smelled bad inside, something burning, and Blanche talked to the Gray Lady quietly and only sometimes stopped and covered her face and cried. There was a cabin once we hid in and spent the day cleaning up garbage, beer cans, bottles, and a black-bearded man came along swinging two dead squirrels and he and Blanche had words and we had to leave. And I can remember sitting in the car, the engine running, while Blanche stood in the light of the telephone booth and came back so angry I feared her; and Ned never came to get her, he sent Debbi, he sent Claire and the other Mothers and the teenagers the lady in town sent to us even though she was the one who collected from the State for foster care. They'd come and cry on her shoulder and I'd watch, jealous, as she would comfort them, and eventually we would follow them back. She said to me, I can't leave them. Especially if this one or that one was going to have a baby. I was happy to go home, but Blanche turned her face away, poor girls, those poor poor girls.

Blanche was different. Not just because she was my real mother. I believe it because she was the one Ned used to hurt.

There's a mound of cold pork—looks like tuna salad—on Leah's plate in Mississippi. She can't eat it. And though she's freezing to the point that her teeth have begun to chatter, the waitress has left her a pitcher of iced tea. "Is everything all right?" asks the waitress, and it sounds sincere, as if she's really asking about *everything*, and Leah believes she could actually start talking here, forget the meal and just talk. To describe Ned who sometimes in her memory is so attractive, and then he turns into an unpleasant sweat-and-tobacco-smelling runt. He scratched his backside a lot, which made me feel I was the rude one, because I didn't always turn my face away. He was fidgety, which you wouldn't think of as appealing, but sometimes she remembers those jerky movements and twitches, so different from the men in the ordinary suburbs where she in the end was raised, the fathers who sit on trains motionless behind the news, except for the tiny hand movements that turn the pages, who don't walk on the balls of their feet. They look, their ties around their necks, like men cut down just in time from the gallows. They sit in front of television sets like dustbusters being recharged. They put their jogging suits on and they run, they work out hooked up to machines, foreheads creased with determination. Their arms move like pistons, they show glassy automaton eyes. While the mothers are always running to answer doorbells, one hand still fiddling with an earring not yet hooked through the lobe, and their movements are abrupt, not quite frantic but compelled, as if alarm clocks in their heads keep on ringing and buzzing, eliciting reactions that happen so quickly that the mothers act in that nervous scurry even before they awake or understand.

"Just fine," Leah says to the waitress, and traces her name on the table. A father, one mother, a house. Now that's just fine and normal. Sometimes she wants to say *HA!* And no one but Susannah will understand.

In her lifetime of thirty years, Leah has been moved from place to place, but now she's not being moved, she is moving. She's in Louisiana and getting closer now, moving towards, or maybe away from. She wants to say, Susannah, I have a job, a home, a man who sometimes says he loves me, and sometimes I feel so hemmed in.

Hemmed in is something she knows about, not from the years in Ned's Battalion, but later, a place Blanche took her, down a long dark corridor, past beds where old women lay on their stomachs and young dark girls stood over them, pressing down hard on their backs and necks. Some beds were half-screened by curtains and Leah saw bundles that might have been dead people. She and Blanche undressed and passed through a shower, then the pool was square, the water warm and gave off a funny smell. Blanche and Leah lowered themselves into the soapless bath. The walls were dark and thick and stained and up above a skylight not cleaned for who knows how long, a thin screen of dried dirt, a lattice of dead leaves. Old women came, Spanish and Indian, and they wore bathing suits and some wore clothes and made sounds to each other as they lowered themselves into the pool and Blanche sat up on the ledge, naked, to show them she was not (though Leah was) ashamed. An old woman walked over and asked Blanche something. Told her to put her clothes on, Leah thought. She was almost right. They went to get wrapped. Someone took Leah into a room and she lay down on one of those beds. The woman pulled a scratchy blanket around her and made her fold her

arms over her chest. Then she was tied up tight. The woman explained something but Leah couldn't understand. Then she was left alone. She felt herself sweat without getting wet, like a leaf that's fallen, drying brittle and brown. Which meant she was probably dying. She wanted to squirm, to scratch where the blanket made her naked body itch, but this was like a straitjacket, she couldn't move, and she felt sorry for crazy people. How could this calm anyone down? It made you panic, go wild. She wanted to call out for her mother and call the lady back and say please let me go. But when they lived at the ranch, Ned was always preparing them for the Ordeal. At fourteen years, each child born in the Battalion had to undergo one. You got three matches and three gallons of water and you spent three days in the wilderness alone. Leah was mostly afraid because no one had done it yet, she wasn't sure how it was done—on your actual birthday, or just during your birthday year, and since they told her she was born on January 23, she saw herself wandering through a blizzard, trying to strike her last match, her feet frozen or freezing to the ground. When they left the ranch, Leah had asked, Will I still have my Ordeal? and Blanche said, No, that's over now, don't worry. Leah had been disappointed. So now she thought, I'm only eleven and this is my Ordeal, and she tried to endure, just like when they heard the shooting and she didn't scream.

When they lived with Ned, they didn't have much money but they were happy. She used to play with the knucklebones of a slaughtered pig. Blanche saved the bones and bleached them in the sun. She held Leah on her lap and pulled at her toes, reciting, This little piggy went to market, and then she did it with the bones. She was a good mother, as you can see. The bones, like little animals, danced up Leah's arm and just under the neckline of her summer T-shirt. Ned had made the children watch the slaughter. Leah hoped for the resurrection of the pig; then he could go back to the moon and live with his mother and sister. She caught moonbeams and tried to save them in a jar, but Ned needed the jar for something else. Moonbeams turned to dust in her pockets, but Leah believed: when her pockets were full, she'd clutch her knuckle-dolls and ascend.

She didn't tell Susannah about the intended flight. Later, when she and Susannah were separated, she felt guilty. She had planned to fly with her dolls named Ona, Alathena, and Padeesee, but not Susannah. She was being punished. Later in life, she remembered how she'd imagined climbing the rainbow—hadn't she?—alone.

The man she lives with says, "I would no more tell the truth to everyone than I'd go to bed with every woman I meet." He also says, "I only lie to you for your protection."

"Protection from what?"

"From what might hurt you. What you won't like, or won't understand."

(You can see the rainbow, Ned says, but it isn't real. What you see is illusion. You'll learn

about that when you study science someday. In the meantime, what is real is what I tell you.)

I will tell you, Susannah, what I learned in school. In El Prado, our neighbors were Spanish. They didn't usually mix with Anglos, but they liked us OK because Blanche didn't throw her weight around. We were just there, and I think they knew even better than we did that we weren't going to stay. So they liked me and told me stories, and when we moved and I had to write a paper for school, I wrote about El Prado. About the priest, Padre Martínez, who got in trouble with the Church a long time ago. He was excommunicated, but the people still trusted him and he still celebrated Mass. So the Archbishop came to town and put a big round cheese on the altar. He said, This half of the cheese shows the soul of Padre Martínez, and by the time the service was over, that side of the cheese had turned pitch black. The teacher put a U for Unsatisfactory on my paper. She said it was nothing but superstition.

Years later, in college, I went to see the woman who lectured on world religions. She repeated my question back to me, but wrong. She said, Yes, I suppose there's a lot to choose from. Then she launched into a patient account of the values she'd been brought up with and the convictions she'd come to as an adult.

I thanked her for her time, though she never understood what I had asked her: How do you know what *not* to believe?

Just across the Texas line, Leah stops for gas. An hour or two and she'll be there. The thought makes her weak along with the long days of travel, the engine vibrations that start her body shaking when she steps out of the car and tries to stand. She fills the tank and buys a Dr. Pepper. She writes her name in condensation on the can and then, before it all melts away, the first few letters of Susannah's. Then she drinks it down facing into a wind that smells of pine trees and gasoline. She's almost there.

The night of the miracle, Claire woke the children gently. She went down the row, caressing foreheads and whispering, "Wake up, darling." *Darling* was a forbidden word, but Claire was very brave. When people persecuted us, like Mr. Nystrom who made his little comments, Claire rode on the back of Ned's motorbike and she was the one who carried the gun and shot Mr. Nystrom's windows out. Also, she had caught Leah and Susannah playing Lovey-Dovey and drawing hearts in the dirt with a stick and she never told, even though soldiers weren't supposed to think about love.

After Claire woke Susannah, she could have reached over to Leah, but didn't. She saved her for last, walked around so she could lean over and come close with her warm cinnamon-smelling breath. Maybe she knew Leah had been awake all along, that she had heard things smashing and breaking, and the screams.

Claire marched them to Ned's bedroom, Susannah and Leah side by side, swinging their arms so that they brushed against each other. They wanted to—but knew they better not—hold hands. The children entered in single file, stepping carefully around the shattered lamp, and silent. They grouped themselves against the wall, backing into their own shadows which rose up, growing fast and tall by candlelight. They waited, like a childrens' choir, for Ned to give a sign, though some, who couldn't wait, had already begun to cry.

Ned usually towered over them—the children at least. Next to the Mothers—even the teenage Junior Mothers—he wasn't so big and tall. Now he knelt, his back towards them, the back of any ordinary man. Then he turned to let his eyes sweep over them. He moved a little so everyone could see Blanche's body on the floor. The candlelight wasn't good enough. He had Claire play the flashlight beam so the children could see Blanche naked. Or almost. The light showed them her breasts, gave just a hint of what was between the legs. The beam played over her shoulder tattoo, the full-blown rose all the Mothers had, faded like a bruise. They stared at her broken face, the blood.

He said, "Blanche is dead."

He killed her, Leah thought. He killed her.

"I killed her," he said.

He bowed his head and took one of her hands between his. "Lord," he prayed, "why did You create me this way? With too much strength, with such smouldering rage? This anger I should direct against Your enemies, I have directed against my own child. Blanche, in her wilfulness, disobeyed You, but I should have corrected her gently. Father, why have You given me so much power? If I have found favor in Your eyes, work through me! Save this woman! Not only her soul, but her body, her incarnation, her holy holy flesh!"

Lancelot had knelt the same way and prayed over the body of a fallen knight, and his faith and purity had restored the man's life. Lancelot had suffered, as Ned was suffering, shaking with strain. The children sobbed, their bodies trembling one against the other, and Susannah reached at last for Leah's hand.

Ned said, "Please."

Did Blanche move, or was it a trick of light? A child screamed, and Ned—who always heard every whisper, who never missed a secret thought, who demanded discipline and self-control—didn't react at all, all his powers concentrated on this act of grace.

Leah rubbed at Susannah's knuckles with her thumb. She hated Ned. She wanted to throw herself down on the floor before him, beg him. She wanted to name each of Susannah's fingers, and imagine each one a separate animal and alive. Like the knucklebones. They were white and smooth as stone; Blanche had bleached them for her in the sun. One day, with no pockets in her clothes, Leah had carried a bone-doll tucked into her armpit, keeping her left arm tight by her side, till Ned grabbed her. When the bone fell out of her sleeve, he stepped on it, grinding it into the ground. Oh, Alathena, she mourned. You'll never see your family again.

Usually Claire was Leah's favorite Mother, but it had been Blanche who showed her how to make a fist and paint eyes and a mouth, to turn her closed hand into a face. Leah tried, but with her own hand, the face came out too small; it didn't look real. The mouth on Blanche's hand was ugly, but it talked. Leah cried, remembering, the thumb and finger moving and Blanche talking in a funny forbidden voice: I love you.

"Kneel!" cried Ned. "All of you. Kneel."

There was hardly enough room. The children bumped into each other. Leah, edging forward, felt the warm blood of her mother touch her knees. The body lay, almost inert on the floor, but the flesh rose and fell. Blanche was not dead, though later she would admit that she herself had not been sure. She'd gone in and out of consciousness and she felt something she had never experienced before: it had to be her soul leaving her body. She'd heard: Blanche is dead. I killed her. If Ned confessed this, it must be true. Now he was trying to will her back to life. If I surrender my will to his, he can use his will to save me. The children could see Blanche breathing. She moaned.

Ned rose. The children looked up at him as though they were kneeling at his feet.

"Thank you, Father," Ned whispered. "Young soldiers, this was done through your faith. You," he said, "have brought her back to life." They had done it, but he had given them the power. "Thank you," he whispered, then commanded, "Give thanks."

He hits her. He throws her to the floor. He was, in fact, lying beside her asleep and had never raised a hand to her in three years together except in affection or desire or to grab her back to the curb safe from an unexpected car.

She thinks: I can protect myself. She thinks: I'll kill you if you tell me lies.

He hits her. He throws her to the floor.

She liked to think of herself as someone who found it harder to shut her mind off than to use it. But why would these thoughts come into her head? Surely she was not a masochist, longing to be treated wrong.

The phone had rung at dinnertime; he was late coming home and she'd answered, not leaving it to the machine. It was an operator, announcing a collect call. Leah had said, I don't know anyone by that name, and, in the background, she heard a man's faint voice. She couldn't make out the words, just the annoyed yet pleading tone. The operator, Leah thought, had said the name wrong. The man was trying to correct the mistake and Leah, too, asked that the name be repeated, but the operator treated the man with such disrespect, it seemed she knew something unsavory about him. Leah suddenly *knew* that the man was calling from prison. And she remembered a boy she'd loved from afar in high school. She'd done something, in retrospect, silly, but if you don't do such things in high school, your cynicism is embarrassingly premature. She'd sent him a letter, anonymous, but he must have known. What she gave him

in the letter was the best gift she could think of. *In future years, if you're ever in trouble and feel alone, remember that someone will always love you.* And so she had the idea—she knew it was a daydream, a fantasy, but couldn't get it out of her mind—that it was *his* name the operator had garbled. He was calling her long distance from some prison, counting on her indulgence. He was calling to tell her he had killed his wife.

Why would she have a thought like that?

She was glad the operator had said the wrong name. After all these years and after her promise, how could she not talk to the man, in spite of what he had done? Not be moved that he remembered her, and her loyalty. That he believed her.

She couldn't talk to a man who'd killed a woman. She wouldn't, couldn't. If he called back, she'd say it to the operator again: I don't know anyone by that name.

If a man ever hit her, he would not get a second chance. She would leave any man who abused her, and so where did these words and pictures come from? *He pushed her against the wall; he slapped one cheek, then the other; his fingers closed around her throat.*

Tears ran over her cheeks as she stared at the ceiling and watched it blur. *He hits, I leave. He hits, I leave.* Now she understood: she was looking for an excuse to leave him.

How do I know this man is who he claims to be? She lay in bed and thought of running, of going to visit an old friend, someone who had been like a sister. They've talked once, only once on the phone since Leah got the number, but she carries Susannah's address with her, always in her purse.

What do I really know about him?

He was every bit as alive asleep as awake, body taut and stretched and snoring. She'd read you could make a man stop snoring by squeezing his penis and she reached over and did so though it was strange, unpleasant; she grasped through the stickiness like a fastidious child. It worked, but it wasn't like turning off a switch. The snoring stopped but that was because he stirred and for a moment woke, with a kind of pleasure and relief, she thought, not just that he liked having his dick squeezed, but she had the sudden thought that she must trouble him the way she lay beside him, her body, unlike his, so inert, in a way that would have to make him think *a wooded area*, something you hear the newscasters say when a body is discovered, a murdered woman or a child.

Killing is easy. I think what is terrifying and hard is to admit how easy it can be. Anyone can do it. We like to believe it's the aberration and when someone kills we make him a monster or a god. I don't believe blood is a mystic substance. I don't believe that Ned was burnished with it till he began to glow. We made him glow. We could not admit that lives could be shattered by an ordinary mediocrity like Ned.

Of course he's dead now. Blanche—though I've never tried to keep up with her—they'll let her out of prison one of these days, I'm sure. I've been expecting her call.

On the phone, Susannah said, I refuse to look back. She said, Don't contact me again. She hung up. But first, she said, I don't want to see you.

I am here in Texas because I don't believe her.

Ned took us out into the pasture one night, a cloudy night without moon. We took a flashlight just as far as the fence. He helped us out of our jackets and hung them on a fence post. Cold? he asked and I said Yes, thinking he would give the jacket back. He held apart the strands of barbed wire so that I could climb through and Susannah, and then he followed and took my hand in darkness. I guess he took hers, too. Can you see? he asked. No. I was a little scared. The ground was muddy but not sloppy, it was spring and in places there were solid islands clumped by matted grasses and frost. It's not cold anymore, is it? he asked, and it wasn't. Can you feel them? And suddenly I could. This is how blind people see, he told us. They see with their bodies. I could feel their shapes, large dark rectangles of warmth, radiating like the space heater in the bathroom we were allowed to use when sick, but gentler, friendlier and darker, no red glow, a sweet breathing density, exhalations of summer, of clover, grass and hay, the heat of a burrow, an encompassing drift, stronger here, like a game, you're getting warm warm hot. You're close, closer. He dropped my hand. Walk among them without bumping. You can sense them. Their breath, their bodies. During the daytime children weren't allowed in the pasture alone. The cows seemed placid but look at the size of them, they could crush you without thinking. And the calves, babies, we wanted to grab the calves but Ned always warned us about the sharp hooves, a simple kick and you've a broken head. I knew where Susannah was because she was crying. And then I stopped hearing her. I could feel the cows swaying, the warmth coming in waves. I could tell where they were without seeing. I moved forward and wanted to kiss their mouths, the sweet breath coming from them, and the sweet warmth not like the smell of people when they sweat, but all perfume and summer and when I got very close the warmth was thicker, like a wall or fence or where the woods begin, and I would stop and turn and walk the other way. It was like touching without touching. I could tell the head from tail. I could tell—or thought I could—which cows had horns. You have to feel it. No one can tell you. I was standing on a little hummock, my arms outstretched, head tilted up to the dark sky, my eyes closed so that when the clouds parted and stars shone a moment through the aperture, I didn't even see at first, until Ned whispered my name and I saw the pinpoint lights for just an instant before the curtains above closed and a cow nearby lowed and then all of them vanished again into the warm perfumed bath, the shifting shapes, walls of hide and flesh and body heat and breath.