

It was the middle of the day but no one saw her go.

Her gas tank was full. Her tires didn't need air. Her engine didn't need oil. Her water levels were perfect.

She didn't own a suitcase. She'd never needed one. She took the pillowcase off her pillow and filled it with the contents of her top bureau drawers: socks, underwear, a few t-shirts, one pair of white sweatpants cut off at the knees to make shorts, and an old gray zip-front sweatshirt cut off at the neckline, where the hood used to be. This was all that would fit in the pillowcase. She slung it over her shoulder like Santa Claus. In the bottom drawer was four hundred forty dollars, her own private petty-cash stash, and she took that, too.

"Bye!" said Tara, and she didn't care that there was no one to hear her.

Home was so small.

The rowhouses of Johnson Street were a mile and a half from the downtown shops, but they were off in a world of their own. With their flat roofs and old gray bricks, they stood like big cartons around a parking lot in the shadows of the plastics factory. There were four separate blocks of apartments.

They looked like bunkers in a fort or compound, with eight gray front doors in each row, and eight gray identical stoops. The rows were numbered, although no one knew why, for the four main points of a clock. Starting with the block in the front, they went clockwise: Block Six, Block Nine, Block Twelve, Block Three.

The front windows and stoops faced the parking lot directly, on purpose, the way windows around a pond face a pond.

In Tara's rearview mirror, the buildings of home looked like four rows of dominoes. Her bedroom window, in the middle of Block Twelve, was less than the size of a dot. It didn't matter anymore that the window looked out on a solid brick wall of the factory, and could never be clean, and could never be opened, not even with a screen, because particles of pulverized, burned-plastic dust would rush in.

Now the factory smokestacks disappeared. The highway on-ramp sloped up before her in a wide, slow arc. The woods between the road and the river were thick with oaks. A light, swirly fog was in the air. She didn't expect to see the water.

There were other rivers in the world, and they were bound to be better than this one. This one was dirty and dull, and full of who knew what from the factory. The water was yellowy-brown. In a book she'd read at school, there was a description of pea soup. She was surprised to learn it meant fog. "Pea" meant the vegetable. Pee soup was what everywhere in the valley called the river. No one ever went into it, not even in motorboats.

But just before Tara left it, a streak of river came leaping up between the trees like a big healthy fish, all flat and silver and shiny, showing itself in a flash, and she stuck her head out the window and cried out, "Bye, you stupid river!"

Along the rim of the valley, the hills started shrinking away, bottoms first, as if sinking. All her life, she'd known these hills as well as the walls of her own room.

"Bye, you dumb-ass hills!"

She headed west. Trees began to go by in long, high, evergreen blurs that were bundled with fog, as if someone dropped big bales of gauze from an airplane, and it all broke loose and got caught in the branches. It was woodsy for a very long time. She felt

like a girl in a fairy tale, riding off into a forest of staunch New England hemlock, spruce, and fir.

Tara patted her dashboard. She wondered what it must have been like to be the first person in automaking history to have thought of putting a V-8 engine in a small, low car. "My little V-8," she called it. That was as close as she'd come to giving it a name. "My little V-8, like the juice."

She realized that sooner or later she would have to stop driving.

In a rational way, she made up her mind that the first motel she came to, she'd check in.

The motel was set off the road at the end of a well-paved driveway. The office in the front had lights on, and their door was open. There were big leafy oaks out in back, and beyond the oaks were pine trees. She could smell them.

It was shaped just like home. She had left one set of blocks for another, but this one was full of colors, and no one knew her.