

## How We Are

### *Virginia Quarterly Review*

Maddy Foss grew up on the river, in a small, shingled house that was part of Bow Terrace, where the back yards sloped down to the water. The houses across the street, like the one where Norma Zielek lived with mother, Dolly, were two-storied, and had porches and garages.

The Foss house had a narrow gray dock and a rowboat. Ed Foss touched up the paint every spring. Loretta Foss tried to get Maddy to swim by teaching her the basics near shore, then lowering her off the dock one day and letting go, but Maddy clung instead to a piling, then followed the rope to the boat, with her eyes shut as tight as a blind girl's. She climbed into the boat, hoisted herself up to the dock, dodged her mother, ran into the house, peeled off her swimsuit, and threw it in the trash. Loretta and Ed believed that the reason their daughter acted this way was that, given the choice between making them happy and not, she went for not, just purely for the sake of being difficult.

When Maddy pulled a chair to the foot of her bed, and climbed on it and jumped on the mattress, she tried to imagine what buoyancy is. But she always just lay there and felt leaden, and thought it must be something you're born with. She had tried out for the girls' swim team, the Minnows, which Loretta had belonged to as girl before going on to win prizes, all through school, in competitive swimming and diving. Maddy didn't make the team, and she wasn't trying again.

A boy was missing. Suddenly a cry went up from the public beach, and people ran about in all directions. Loretta flew out of the house with her best friend, Norma, behind her. At the shore they joined the two teenage lifeguards and a few other grownups. They waded out with their arms across each other's shoulders; farther out they took turns diving. The police came. An ambulance

came. The world stopped turning for a while, then the girls who belonged to the Minnows, who wore goggles that said "Minnows" over and over on the straps, fanned out and made chirpy noises and called, "Derek, Derek," as if the boy who was missing was hiding under a rock.

When everyone came out of the water they stood in the sand with bloodshot eyes. Ed made supper that night, but no one ate much. After supper they went out to the yard, and Norma and Dolly came over.

They sat in a ring of lawn chairs. The river was dark and serene. Maddy moved her chair next to Dolly's so they could touch.

Dolly Zielek had rheumatoid arthritis, bad. Norma was big and careless. She smoked cigarettes down to the filters, and dropped ash all over herself, and kept brushing it off. When she bumped into something, which was often, she turned around and kicked it. She laughed loudly, with her teeth all showing and her head flung back. She had big loose bones that seemed to roll around inside her. Ed called her Norma the Man behind her back. She was nighttime plant supervisor at the cereal mill, A.O.K. Grain and Breakfast, where Ed worked days. Loretta used to work at the bowling alley, but it closed ten years ago. She used to coach the Minnows, but she'd been ordered to give it up by parents of girls who felt she was too hard, too unpredictable, too much of a failure at controlling her temper.

Norma never talked about her private life. At the Foss house she talked about things the Fosses, or one of them, could relate to directly. Now she was talking about a comedian she had heard in the car, on a radio talk show Loretta was a fan of. "I laughed so hard, I think I split a gut," she was saying.

"My favorite was the one about the chicken," said Loretta. In the twilight, in the yellow light of the mosquito candle on the picnic table, Loretta let out a laugh that sounded genuine. It

was always alarming to Maddy that her mother was able to switch moods so easily, so effortlessly, like summer days when rain came out of nowhere, stopped, and came later out of nowhere again with hail and a newly dark sky.

Norma said, "You mean the one that went, you take the chicken, and I'll take the eggs, and then comes the bit about the frying pan?"

"What's the whole thing?" said Ed. "Was the chicken alive, or what? You should cheer us all up. I mean, that kid. We could all use the cheer. Right, Dolly?"

"They put too much static in their ears," said Dolly. "They act like teenagers all the time."

Loretta reached for Norma's ear. She turned it like a knob, and said, "This is a test. This is a test." When Norma started screeching through her teeth, her voice really sounded like a radio.

Maddy said, "I hate." But she didn't say how the sound of the water sucking up to the sand was a type of static, or what it felt like to be thinking of the boy's eyes in the river, which were sure to be open, or the weeds she was sure were in his mouth. "You," she said. She turned to her mother when she said this. "And I'm not learning how to swim, for forever. I don't care what you do to me."

Too late she saw the raised hand. It surprised her because Loretta had never hit her before in front of anyone. It was a sharp, quick slap, and Maddy took it on the side of her neck.

No one said anything. Maddy made herself feel like she was far away. She did not cry. She made herself hold her breath as long as she could stand it, and she said to herself, "Missing." She kept thinking about the boy, like he was down at the bottom with his feet in the mud, swaying this way and that, but never falling over. He was just like a statue down there.

Loretta jumped up and hurried to the house and they could all hear sobbing as if the one who was hit was herself. Ed sighed and blew out the mosquito candle, and Norma said to Maddy,

"I hope you're happy, making her behave like that." Between them, Ed and Maddy walked Dolly home, and Maddy bunched herself up and lay down next to her on the couch. Dolly was overweight. She was gnarly. Her breathing, as often happened, was labored. Her medications made her drowsy, made her slow in her wits and perceptions, but not always.

Ed was already wobbly from most of a six-pack he had put down since dusk, but he went straight into the kitchen to get a beer.

"The river is worse than a toilet," Dolly said. "You were right to never go in it. You should whack her right back if she does that to you again."

"That would make me just like her."

"You should stick up for yourself. If I hit Norma, she would murder me. Even when she was a baby this was true."

"Never say you hate your mother again," said Ed. He stood in the doorway and drank Norma's beer. Then they heard the back door flung open. Norma called out, "Eddie?" She rushed in with a wild look. "Go home, Eddie. Leave Maddy here. Loretta's back in the water and she thinks she found something."

The gray summer darkness poured in the open windows with a smell of the river. Dolly made the sign of the cross on her own forehead, chest, and both shoulders, and did the same to Maddy, and Maddy pressed herself closer to her, and listened as Dolly talked and talked to her, softly, like crooning, in a mixture of Polish and English. Maddy didn't know what she was saying. It was nothing. It was everything. It was the language of someone telling her she was safe, and Maddy stopped wishing she was down in the mud with all that water on top of her, like a statue of herself that no one would ever find and pull up.

Wayne Booth was twenty. He was a machinist's apprentice at the plastics factory where Maddy got a job the summer she turned sixteen.

It was a high brick building with long, dirty windows. The walls were thick with ivy that stayed brown all year. Soot came steadily down from the chimneys, and up from the basement exhausts, and out from the engines of the big machines like pulverized spit or sweat.

Maddy was a packer, seven a.m. to three-thirty. There was a low cement wall in the back between the yard and the river; it seethed with heat all summer, but Maddy sat there with the girls from her line. She watched what they did and did the same. She ate swiftly, and hardly noticed what it was—after a few days in the factory, everything tasted the same. She began to feel she was part of a team. She could not believe how much she liked it: Maddy Foss of Line Eight. When the whistle blew to go back, Maddy and her new friends waited until the last possible second to obey it.

The noise inside made her ears feel like stone. The silver blades of the ceiling fans made the hot air hotter. Someone slipped off to the Coke machine every half hour or so, and the line girls scooped ice from the cups and rubbed their cheeks with it. The ice melted fast, and ran down like they were crying.

The routine went like this: boxing and packing and sealing, and heaving it onto the belt, a new one every six minutes for Maddy, although several older girls were much faster. Sometimes when the foreman wasn't looking, someone jammed the gears of the conveyor with a small bit of cardboard or a barrette, shutting things down for a breather. Maddy felt that no one owned her. She was learning how to walk a new way, and talk out the sides of her mouth.

The end of every day was always a miracle. Flooded with life, the Line Eight girls raced each other to the time clock, and jostled for cards and thumped their elbows and hipbones at each

other. They laughed and shouted and felt sorry for the dumpy girls from other lines, who shuffled out saggy and depressed, and you knew they'd go home all their lives to nothing but tv and a bag of potato chips; and the married girls, who looked so tired and disappointed; and the secretaries, who spent half their income on spas and makeup and outfits and hairdressers, and that was all they ever talked about, and when they turned up their noses at the floor girls, they were acting out a fantasy that they had someone or something worth hurrying to. When the machinists came out, blinking in the sunlight, Maddy stood off to the side and looked for Wayne. Then she walked home slowly, watching for him in his dark green Impala, one arm out the window and the windows all open and the air conditioner on full blast, like he was desperate for air.

When she thought about how it would feel to grow up and be a woman and someone loved her, she thought it would feel like a room with two doors in the inner part of your mind. One door opened into darkness and not enough oxygen, and the other one, where the man who loved you was standing, was filled with airy daylight.

One afternoon on the line Maddy made up her mind to take action, and she held up her hand to ask her foreman for a bathroom break, and went down to the molding machines instead, and found Wayne. He was reaching up into the panels of a large machine, and the bottom of his shirt had slid out of his jeans. She saw the white line where his suntan ended and the rest of his skin began. She wanted to put my mouth there.

"Something's wrong with the machine on Eight," she said.

He bounced back down on his feet and dropped the wrench he'd been using to the toolbox beside her on the floor. No one else had sideburns, but he did. His hair was long to his collar, and his sideburns went nearly to his jaw.

"What's the matter with it?" he said.

"It squeaks. It sounds completely ready to break down."

"Who sent you?"

"Nobody. I believe in taking, you know, initiative."

She liked how it felt when he looked at her. "I guess I better go up there," he said. When he leaned against the machine, his body was the shape of a three-quarter S. His t-shirt had a large pocket on the chest and a blue and white bandana was hanging out of it. He took out the bandana and wiped some sweat off his forehead. He folded it carefully, as if folding a flag, and put it back. Do that to me, Maddy was thinking.

Nights, she slept across the street. Norma could have afforded a nurse for Dolly, but Maddy went over there gladly. Dolly was eighty-seven, the arthritis was uncontrollable, and she was losing her mind.

It was small things at first. Dolly talked out loud to people no one else ever heard of. When Norma turned on the washing machine, she tipped her head back startled, and demanded to be told what it was. One morning when she came home from her nightshift, Norma found her on her hands and knees in front of their sofa, slicing the upholstery with a paring knife. "Quick. Help me get my money out," said Dolly in Polish. She had removed a lot of the stuffing. She had shredded some up. She had hidden some inside her slippers, and in the pockets of her robe. When Norma took out her dentures, she found some there as well, all thin and wet and gummy.

Norma had the couch fixed. That was where Maddy slept. As soon as Dolly heard Norma's car leave the driveway, she called from her bedroom, "Maddy, Maddy," like an old woman softly calling her cat. In the stillness of those nights she would turn her head on the pillow and look at

Maddy with joy. She reached for the tissue box on her bedside table. She took out some tissues and placed them in Maddy's hand, telling her, take it, take it, it was money for the trip, *go*.

Maddy was never out with Wayne for more than two or three hours. When she returned, she told Dolly she had landed in Polish woods like a bird. She had seen Polish darkness where it seeped into houses, into bricks and wooden slats. She had listened to the wind in Polish trees. She hummed the tunes of songs she'd heard on the radio in Wayne's car. "This is what everyone's listening to in Poland, Dolly." Sometimes, Dolly hummed along, and Maddy knew she felt lifted and airy, to where voices aren't voices anymore; they're just flight. And she was lying there imagining her body was as light as a girl's.

Maddy left the factory at the end of August to start her last year of high school. The school day was merely a wait period before it was time to get over to the factory to meet Wayne as he came off his shift. She'd go home and tell her parents she'd been studying; she'd been all afternoon at the library. She planned to keep Wayne a secret until she was finally through with being young.

They drove out of town for back roads, stopping for beer if Wayne didn't already have some in his trunk. Maddy took off her shoes and crooked her legs and put up her feet on the dashboard. She kept switching the radio so nothing ever played but good songs. On a hot Indian Summer late afternoon, he took her home to meet his parents. He lived alone with them. His sister had finished school last year, and moved out, and was already married.

First they shared a beer. Wayne threw the empty bottle down an embankment, so it crashed on a tree. He said, "Don't let them know where I met you, because it pisses them off where I work. They want me to get a job in clothes, like end up running a shop or something, or be a buyer. I do not give one goddamn about clothes. And if they ask, you're not in high school. You're nineteen."



Both his parents had worked at the textile mill, now closed. They lived in the mill's old housing development. The rowhouses were A-frame, and narrow and shabby, but the front doors had been painted, long ago, some unexpected bright color, and the paint hadn't all the way faded—they were green or yellow or aqua or pinkish-red, like a watermelon. On the stoop of Wayne's house there was a stone urn for plants, but it was empty. There was a brass nameplate by the door. "Don't look at that thing," he said, so Maddy went up to see it more closely. Across the bottom it was engraved with what appeared to be cracks, but they were part of a drawing. It was some kind of spaceship. The ship itself was part of the word "Booth." It went in and out of the letters.

"Is it a flying saucer?" Maddy said.

"You ever watch any of the Star Treks?"

"Not really."

"It's the Enterprise," said Wayne. "I was in sixth grade when I did it. I used a couple of needles. I keep meaning to take it off."

"Can I have it?"

"No. It's just a piece of shit."

He opened the door and they went inside. He whispered, "Get ready."

The only sound was from the air conditioner, humming and rattling so intensely, it seemed ready to propel itself out of the window. It was cold and very dry. The room was a combination living and dining room, and Wayne's father was at the table, eating an early supper. His thick hair was iron-gray. It looked like, if you touched it, your fingers would be touching something harsh. He stared at Maddy and Wayne without any change at all in his expression, and Maddy thought he was blind. She thought the blindness was something Wayne needed to show her instead of

telling her about it ahead of time. But then the man looked at his napkin, picked it up, and dabbed it against his mouth.

"Hi, Dad," said Wayne.

Wayne's father said, "Darling? Could you come in here?"

His mother came in from the kitchen. She wore a loose broadcloth apron with pockets filled with sewing things: scissors and loose bits of material and spools. There were threads all over her, with a static-like cling. Her hair was pulled back in an elastic, but she lifted a hand to her face, as if brushing it out of the way.

"Tell him to cut it out, Ma," Wayne said.

Wayne's mother looked at her husband and said, "I'm almost through with the sleeves. You are going to love this shirt. Why don't you come into the kitchen and try it on?"

"I could have sworn I heard something in the hall," said Wayne's father.

Then slowly, in small, exaggerated steps, with her finger to her lips, Wayne's mother came toward the doorway. She came just a few inches short of Wayne and Maddy. They could have been two coat racks. She peered at them, and past them, like someone in a cartoon who's looking this way and that for a sign of danger.

"All clear, dear," said Wayne's mother.

"Maddy, you want to come up and see my room?" said Wayne in a loud, rough voice. He held her arm above her wrist; his fingers closed in on her hard. When he took his hand away, she had marks there.

"I have to get home," said Maddy.

They held hands on the way to the car. When he started to turn on the ignition, Maddy grabbed him, and they kissed a hard kiss, and their teeth touched, and Maddy felt that, at the end

of it, they might have some blood on their lips. But she looked at Wayne, and she looked at herself in the mirror, and they didn't.

It was going to snow. Cold wind was in the trees, as if the branches were already slivered with ice. Maddy went down to the end of the dock. She had gathered a handful of brown leaves and twigs on the way, just to have something in her hands, and she dropped them in the river and watched them float away. They were buoyant. She saw that she was someone who envied sticks and leaves.

Norma came out to talk to her. She said, "If you saw me for the first time right now, and you didn't know me, would you say, I look prosperous?" Maddy looked at her. She was wearing her good wool coat from Lord & Taylor at the mall, and a plaid wool skirt and a new white blouse with a frilly collar. Her neck was all red. Her skin there flared up when she was nervous.

"Your mother is crazy," Maddy said. "The nursing home might not want her."

"They will. I can pay. I need to know if I look it."

"You look like someone no one would ever marry."

"Oh," said Norma. "You're mad at me."

Maddy did not feel mad at her. Maddy hated her. Maddy had the feeling that the only thing she could do to get through the rest of her life was reach into herself, just reach right in past her skin and bones, and pluck out "love" in all its warty, terrible dryness, and flick it off into the current and watch it sink.

In one of the cabinets in the kitchen, Loretta kept a box of what she called her decorating things, for the addition she and Ed had planned to build: an enclosed porch looking out on the

water, with always-clean windows and white straw furniture. Here they would sit the year round, heated and enfolded, the plan was, and people would wave to them as they went by in boats. Loretta had set the box on the table. Inside were the pencil sketches Ed had drawn. There were articles from magazines and old brochures from furniture stores, and wallpaper swatches and paint samples on cardboard charts.

"I'm going to have a baby," Maddy said.

Her mother had been lifting out wallpaper swatches. She had made them into a fan. She held up the fan and waved it and laughed and looked nervous. "Maddy! Don't scare me like that!"

Her job at the bowling alley was running the shoe counter. It was just an empty lot now. It had been razed to make way for a restaurant, or maybe it was a clothing store, which never was built.

Ed Foss used to bowl with his friends from the cereal plant. One night, a lace broke as he put his shoes on. He went to the counter for a new one. He did not rent his shoes; he owned them. He looked at the name tag on the blouse of the woman who was standing there. "What a beautiful name you have, Roletta," he said.

"It's Loretta," she told him. "Not Roe. Lor."

"Lor," he said. He blushed and turned shy. "You probably think I have a speech impediment or something."

Maddy was in middle school when her mother first told her this story. She had asked, "Did you make the shoelace rip on purpose?" She imagined that her mother must have shredded it with a nail file, or perhaps with scissors. Snap! went the lace in his hand, and Maddy had said to herself, as she was studying, at that time, the verb tenses, and had been doing her homework, That is the moment I began to be begun. Her mother slapped her hard across the face for the question. She

said the slap was to teach her the lesson that a child must never guess at things behind the actions of grownups, and Maddy had said to herself, I guessed right.

"I'm going to have a baby," Maddy repeated.

Loretta dropped the fan of swatches and went over to the cabinet under the sink. It was after supper and Maddy had already washed the cooking pots her mother would not allow in the dishwasher. Loretta took out the Ajax and sprinkled some into the sink and rubbed it with a sponge and ran the water. She rinsed her hands and looked around for a towel and couldn't seem to find one, although a dish towel was right there, by the faucet. Then she spun around and was on Maddy in what felt like one second. Maddy's head went backward when her mother pulled her hair. Holding her by the hair, she struck at Maddy's head, at her face, at her shoulders, in a rain of blows that weren't slaps, but punches.

Maddy did not fight back. She did not cry out. When the punches stopped, and she was dizzy and hurting, there was a part of her that wished for one moment they had been done even harder. She wished that the darkness at the edge of her mind had been given a reason to spread out and take her over, and then she'd have nothing to worry about. Who she was, herself, would be stopped. The dizziness might grow, and she would be reeling away, spinning and spinning, as if she were spun out of life from from the end of a spool.

It wasn't cold enough to freeze the river. The streetlights came on, and the lights of the houses came on, and the dark, hard surface of the water was filled with reflections. The trees by the banks plunged deeply, like shadows sweeping down through a canyon, in dark clouds of branches, as if the river were empty and airy. The dock lay dusted with snow. The boat no one used kept up its regular pattern of looking like it would sink, then not doing it. It was Saturday. In

three days, Maddy was going to run away with Wayne and marry him. When she thought about the future, she thought about herself in Wayne's car, driving away with the radio on, with Wayne's smell all around her, and with the feel of someone next to her for all the rest of her life. She kept whispering the word "husband". She believed that starting soon she would be happy.

She was in her room. Her mother called, "Maddy, come on. It's time to go see Dolly."

Maddy heard the doorbell and thought it was Norma. She heard the sound of her father's voice. He had spent the afternoon repairing a fallen-out bit of plaster in the wall above the radiator in the front hall, and painting the wall to cover the water stains. The pipes there had leaked a long time ago.

Maddy went into the kitchen. On a tray on the table there were two bowls of peanuts, a bowl of chips, and a bowl of Lipton Onion Soup dip. There were small paper plates and some napkins. These were things to take to a nursing home, like a portable tea party? Loretta looked at herself in the chrome of the stove. She had just put on lipstick. In the hall, Ed was saying, "Well, I see that you're here. Come on in." Wayne walked in with his mother and father. He wore a new pair of chinos and a striped shirt that looked like it belonged with a suit.

The two mothers eyed each other warily. Mrs. Booth said, "It's a nice little place you've got here. Must be nice, so close to the water."

"Oh, but it's damp, and in the summer it's very noisy," said Loretta.

Maddy took one look at Wayne and knew some type of booze was inside him, not just beer. He didn't come over and stand next to her.

Her father called out from the living room, "I turned up the thermostat, Loretta."

"We thought we'd be more comfortable in the front room," said my mother. She went to pick up the tray. "Hey, let me," said Wayne's father. He took the tray and Mrs. Booth told him to be careful. To Loretta she said, "You wouldn't believe what a klutz my husband is."

That was when everyone turned and looked at Maddy. Maybe they couldn't help it, but their eyes just looked at her belly. She was three months pregnant, but she pushed back her shoulders and poked herself out, as if she'd suddenly started to show.

"Where's the front room?" Mr. Booth said.

"In here!" called Ed.

Maddy said to Wayne, "You told?"

He shrugged. I am not in good shape, he was telling her with his eyes. I am just like someone who is missing, he was telling her. He was a long way from being fall-down drunk, but he looked like he meant to get there soon.

He didn't stand with her. Their parents spent the next hour discussing their marriage, and how it should be handled, but basically, Maddy was not paying attention. As far as she was concerned, there wasn't anything that needed to be discussed.

Norma said, "You want me to give you a what?"

She had switched to the day shift at A.O.K. Grain and Cereal. She had a new office behind the assembly room on the first floor. Most of the sorting was done at conveyors that ran from one end of the enormous room to the other. There were cereal boxes everywhere in great stacks, and cardboard drums of corn, wheat, and oat flakes. Fans moved overhead all the time. The blades were coated with grit, and around them were tan clouds of grain dust. The sorters, all women, wore hairnets, and some wore floppy paper caps, like chef hats. They wore loose white dresses that

looked like surgical clothes. Norma had been promoted to assistant plant general supervisor. Maddy had gone into her office to tell her she wanted a job.

Norma found her telephone under a pile of papers. She picked it up and said, "Do me a favor. No calls until I say so, and don't let anyone come near me." She had a secretary now, too. She shut her door and looked at Maddy like she wanted her to disappear.

"I'm not getting married," said Maddy.

"Loretta called me ten minutes ago," she said. "She's upset. And I'm not putting you on a line in here. No way."

Maddy rolled up the sleeves of her sweater and showed Norma her arms. They were mostly pinch marks. There were also some welts where her mother had struck her with what she happened to have had in her hands, which had been, this time, the extension pole of the vacuum cleaner. Loretta had been vacuuming when Maddy had told her she was going to have her baby on her own. She been getting ready to clean the top of the living room windowsills. She might have gone on a little longer if Maddy had not managed to get away from her by seizing hold of the pole and throwing it into the hall. When she lay in her room weeping, her father came in and sat down on the bed and patted her and said, "I would like for you not to be mad at her. I would like for you to forgive her. She'll come round to your side. You know she hardly ever lifted a hand against you before." Maddy decided not to answer him, but she let him put ice wrapped in a towel on her bruises, and she wondered if she was the only daughter in the world of a father who could be absent and present at the same time.

"Norma, I look like a drug addict that shoots," said Maddy.

"She doesn't mean bad by you," said Norma. "She goes out of control. You think she never wishes she was someone that never goes out of control?"



"If you don't find me something in here, I'm going back to the plastics factory."

"Great. Soak up more chemical poisons, why don't you. Have a baby in toxic shock."

"Are you going to help me?"

"How do you think your father will feel if you're here? This is his plant, too."

"We never have to see each other. It's big."

The job Norma arranged for her was at the back of the plant, where Maddy sat at a small table in a tiny room without windows, doing quality control. Boxes of cereal that line workers had put aside for having something wrong with them needed to be double-checked, then put into one of four types of cartons. Different people brought in the boxes and cartons at different times and did not speak to her. She bought a cushion for her chair, a rag rug to put her feet on, and a spider plant for the table. Then Norma told her it bothered people that she brought the plant to the bubbler near the cafeteria to water it. They said her dirt was clogging their drain. "They're just sticking up for my dad because he decided to be mad at me for wrecking my life, but at least he took a stand on something," Maddy said. It was the packagers upstairs where her father worked who had complained. Norma told her that if she didn't know by now that life in a mill was sometimes like a soap opera, and sometimes like a war, except for not having actual guns, she was crazy.

"But I have to water my plant."

"Take a goddamn glass down there and stop walking around sticking out your belly, and if you have to puke with morning sickness in the toilets, do it quieter. I am sick of all these complaints."

Dolly died. Maddy was going to the nursing home most weekdays after work, and she was with her, alone, when it happened. It was in her sleep. They did not have to move her to a hospital; there had been not been a medical emergency. The nurses said her sleep kept getting deeper and

deeper every day, like she was easing out slowly, and it was a good way to go, in fact the best. Maddy had never seen anyone not alive before. She kissed Dolly on both cheeks and sat there in silence with her as long as she could stand it. The funeral was in the Polish church, all in Polish. Maddy went with her parents and Norma but they found it all right to not say much to each other about anything at all.

She rang the bell at Mrs. Volk's that said "Manager." It was an old white house, flat-roofed and shabby. The faded pink trim around the windows was like a sunburn. Yes, a room was for rent, said the girl who came to the door. She was ten or eleven. She wore a sweatshirt, inside out, that went to her knees. She was Mrs. Volk's daughter. The room was called a studio because a quarter of it was a kitchenette. Maddy said, "Norma Zielek told me to come. She's my boss. I work at A.O.K. Grain."

"Oh," said the girl. "My mother went out." She squinted in the porch light at Maddy, frowning and scowling, with a expression that said, I hate this porch, I hate this town, I hate everything, and if you don't go away, I will hate you too. Maddy liked her right away.

"What's your name?"

"Francine."

"The room furnished?"

"I guess so, if you want to call that stuff furniture. It's a hundred sixty a week."

"Norma told me a hundred forty."

"It went up, and that's with the discount for friends."

Maddy's coat wasn't buttoned and she arranged it to let it fall open.

"That looks like a baby. You with a guy?"

"There's just what you see right now," said Maddy.

"That could go either way with my mom. My father divorced her two years ago. Can I touch it?"

"Sure."

The girl put her hands on Maddy's belly. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"I don't know. I decided not to find out ahead of time."

"What are you going to name it, either way?"

"Derek, for a boy, and not for anyone on like, tv or something, just for someone that I heard about one time when I was real young, that made an impression on me," said Maddy, and the girl cut her off and said, "Come back tomorrow night. I'll make it OK with my mother. Don't name it Francine if it's a girl. Francine sucks."

Betty Volk turned out to be a dry-looking woman who kept the heat on high and went around in sleeveless tops and lightweight slacks or skirts. There was often white powder at her underarms where her deodorant caked. She had a way of thrusting out her hips when she walked, and tipping back her head, like a model on a runway. She used to work at the Grains. She went out on disability; the dust had given her asthma. She coughed a lot, and kept an inhaler on a clip at her waist. She was clear in her stipulation that the room was for one adult at the given rate. She seemed to think Maddy meant to sneak in the father of the baby, so Maddy showed her the letter from Wayne. It had arrived in a small padded envelope. The letter was folded in half and inside it was the nameplate of spaceship Booth. It was not real brass. On its own it was thin and all rusty-corroded on the back. Maybe if he had polished it, she would have kept it.

"Dear Maddy,

"By the time you read this I'll be in Denver, Colorado. Stevie Hamilton is fixing me up in an electronics place. He works the sales end but thinks he can get me in the plant. I sold my car. I got an incredible deal on it. I'm looking for a Jeep. I'll have to rack up a few paychecks first. I'll send you some money. How are you? I hear you're doing great. Don't hate me. I wouldn't blame you if you do, but I hate myself enough for everyone. I wrote this instead of calling because, if I heard your voice, I'd be cracking up or something. But I think I can hear it a little later and be sort of all right, if you would call me and say how you are, I mean, how the two of you are, and I would appreciate that.

"Yours sincerely, Wayne."

The letter had nothing that was spelled wrong or written wrong. It was the first time she saw something he had written. He must have done all right in school, in spite of the fact he had told her he almost flunked out. She did not feel a need to write back.

She settled into her new room. It had a sink, small stove, small refrigerator, some chairs, a table, a double bed that was almost small enough to be a twin, and two bureaus. It smelled strongly of Lysol. The house was near the big town park, and through the dirty windows Maddy looked at the beech trees, silver and solid in the moonlight of spring.

Thomas Mason was a doctor Norma found for Maddy through patients of his at the Grains. He was a short, lean, almost elderly man with thinning hair, partly brown and partly gray, and small light gray eyes and a kind expression. His shoulders were stooped. All his movements were slow, unhurried. He'd lapse off from what he was doing to some thought he'd had, and then lose it, and look back at Maddy sitting there, and say sadly, "Oh. Sorry."

Maddy didn't lie to him when he asked if she was planning to do something about dropping out of school, so close to graduation. She told him she didn't care about it and if she had no diploma for the rest of her life, it did not matter, because she knew what she knew and she did not need a piece of paper to back that up.

He said, "I want to talk about the future. Making a baby is as easy as falling off a log. But raising one? Raising one's like trying to put the tree back. How much thought did you give to not going all the way through with this?"

"I never wanted an abortion," said Maddy. "A girl in the plastics factory where I worked had one."

"She told you about it?"

Maddy liked the way he talked to her. He was old-fashioned—he was *old*—but she never had a conversation before with a man before who wanted to know what it's like to be a girl..

"She was a girl on my line. She went to a clinic. People started screaming and jumping out at her so she could hardly even walk in. They had videocams and said they were putting her on the web. She's kind of religious. She had the abortion, and she said that all she could think of, when everyone was screaming, was Jesus, when they were going, give us Barabbas."

"Lie back now," he said. It was evening and his secretary had gone home. Maddy wondered, if he turned out to be weird, if he'd been nice to her as a only a front, could she signal to Norma somehow, who was waiting outside in her car?

He placed the end of the stethoscope on her belly, and listened. He smiled.

"I've got something for you," he said. He put the ends of the stethoscope in her ears. After a while she heard a low, very faint sound, like drumming.

"What's that?" She said it stupidly and he laughed.

"Give it a minute. It'll come to you."

She heard it steadily beating. Her body had another pulse. It was a faraway sound of tapping, like two stones clapped together under water. It kept moving out of range, but Maddy got the feel of how to track it, moving the disc of the stethoscope this way and that. It felt astonishing, like the first sound anyone ever heard.

So it had her. All the pulls of her body were different. She had thought pregnancy would be like wearing something heavy on your belly, like a strapped-on extra weight. But it was something else, too, as if you don't understand what gravity is until it's gotten inside you.

One day, in her seventh month, Dr. Mason left the exam room and came back with a paperback book and showed her the title: *The Top Ten Things A Teenager Needs To Know About Delivering Her Baby*.

"There are actually more than ten things in here," he said. "But the important ones are at the beginning, in case you don't read it all the way through. The thing about a baby is, it goes in a lot easier than it comes out. And please don't wait to read it in the labor room."

"Thanks, but I don't need homework, and that looks like kind of a lame, dumb book," said Maddy. "I already know a lot. I heard that lots of girls want to get knocked out when the baby gets born, but not me. If you think you might forget it, because you might be having memory problems, because your age is kind of high, you can remember that Maddy Foss got knocked up, but she will not get knocked out."

"Thank you for the tip," he said. "Go ask Mrs. Fleury what it feels like to have a baby."

Edna Fleury was his receptionist. She was old enough to be Maddy's grandmother but she wasn't soft like Dolly. She never tried to be polite or make conversation or ask how you were doing, like you'd expect from a normal person in her job.

"Mrs. Fleury hates me, she never talks to me."

The doctor picked up his phone and buzzed downstairs. He put it on speaker. Edna's voice said, "What!"

"Miss Madeline Foss wants to know how it feels to have a baby."

"Tell her it feels like shitting a pumpkin."

Maddy hadn't actually thought that part through. The idea that what was inside her was going to come out, to really come out, was something she hadn't gotten to.

Now she was having a baby. She picked up the phone and called Norma. "I'm all wet and it won't stop coming and this is too soon," she said.

Dr. Mason smelled like sweat. It was his gym morning. His legs were thin, white, and hairy below his hospital gown. He wore an old pair of white sneakers that didn't have a brand.

The room where they'd put her had gray walls. There were long yellow drapes, the color of mustard, hanging on the windows and between the cots. Dr. Mason had a surgical mask on, but hadn't tied it across his mouth, and it hung off his chin like an extra flap of skin.

"You said there wasn't a separate labor ward if you're not married," Maddy said.

"Maddy. This is the regular ward. I swear."

"I want Norma. I think she's in the waiting room."

"I know. Your parents are with her."

Maddy said, "I hate..."

She didn't finish the sentence. The pain came in punches, and kept spreading. The labor room nurses started fussing with her, and seemed excited, and said, *This is happening faster than*

*I thought*, and *Time to go, go, go*, and the pain changed shape, and reared up, kind of bucking. The voice that cried out was her own, and she knew this, but it didn't sound like herself.

What if she could slide out from under her belly, and leave it on the bed, and go over to the other side of the room and watch it crack it open like a duck's egg?

A whole new burst of pain arrived, and that was all she was, all pain, she was herself no more, it had happened, no Maddy, all pain—and then she was being swung up to light. She heard a rushing, lapping sort of noise that made her think of the river, and the light was the moon in a clear cold sky, and she was lying on something hard. She heard a thudding sound that was just like the rowboat bumping a piling. Oh no! Was she having her baby on the dock? What if her baby slipped off the edge into the water? What if her baby was born without buoyancy? Why was the moon getting darker when there weren't any clouds?

"Maddy," someone said. "Maddy, Maddy."

She couldn't answer because a tree from the park had gotten into her room. She thought she was at Mrs. Volk's. There were sticks and leaves all over the floor. As soon as she cleaned up one batch, another fell.

"Maddy, Maddy."

She opened her eyes. She was half in a dream and half not.

"You put me to sleep. You knocked me out, you bastard," she said. "I told you I wanted to be awake."

"You're a mother," said Dr. Mason. "You've got a girl. Do you want to see her? Or should I put her in my coat and bring her to Edna?"

The trunk of the tree opened. A woman stepped out of it. She was dressed for surgery, pinkly; the top and bottoms were pink. Her skin was the same as gray bark. She had a pin on her



chest that said she loved preemies and the love part was the usual red valentine of a heart. Behind her was a crib, and in the crib was Maddy's baby. This was a hospital room.

She was already clean, swaddled like a papoose in a pink and white blanket. She was so small. Her skin was mottled red here and there. Her eyes were shut tight. Her nose was a replica of a nose, on the flat side, as if it hadn't poked all the way through yet. In her backbone were bones that were smaller than marbles. Her mouth was pursed. White-blond hair stood on end on a tiny round perfect pink head.

"I 'll be taking her now to the preemie ward for a look-see, and I think we'll hang onto her in there a few days, but she looks grand," the gray-pink nurse said.

"I want to kiss her," said Maddy.

The nurse leaned over the crib like a bodyguard. She was an overweight woman and her bulky body appeared to have spread out all around it. Her eyes reminded Maddy of a crow, when it's sitting in a tree watching all that goes on with greedy eyes.

Maddy said to Dr. Mason, "I'm sorry I called you a bastard."

"That's all right. I'm sorry I told you I'd bring your baby to Edna."

"In your *coat*."

"Get some sleep," he said.

But Maddy had started to inch herself up, and now she gave herself a heave, as if she'd roll off the bed like a sack of potatoes.

Dr. Mason put his hand on her shoulder to stop her, then he reached in the crib and picked up her baby. He carried her over to where she was, slowly and carefully, as if his hands carried water. He held her up close to Maddy 's face, and she could hear for herself with her own plain ears how that heart was ticking. She listened to the sound of her breathing, and she felt that her

own breath had never worked correctly, until now. When the doctor asked if she had chosen a name, and Maddy told him what it was, he looked at her with alarm, like he thought she was talking about an actual doll, like she was still in a dream world, like she was still a little girl.