

## What I Saw

### *Fiction*

Summer, late summer. Mosquito weather. We went to the drive-in. We had an old blue Ford wagon.

The first feature had ended. There was a long stretch of cartoons, then intermission. The screen went blank, in a great, dark swath. There were streetlights behind it. We could see the wooden scaffolds that held it up, like looking through skin at someone's skeleton.

My father put the back seat down. I helped him and Mom spread out the sheets and pillows we had brought. Then my sisters came back from the playground, glowing with sweat, pinching each other, giddy with being scared they wouldn't find us.

After a while things got quiet. "Are you asleep back there?" my father whispered. "Girls? You all sleeping?"

The last of the dome lights of the cars around us went out. The darkness closed in more thickly.

My mother said, "I hope I like this one."

"You will," said Dad. "You always like Spencer Tracy."

"But sometimes he's just a big mug. If I don't like it, let's go home. I'll just watch something on tv instead. I get so sick of all these war movies which is all you ever want to see, and this one isn't even new."

"Drive-ins never have new ones," said Dad.

I had my shoulders against the back wheel hump. I leaned my head at the window. Our breaths fogged the windows, but I could see. The movie was *Judgment at Nuremburg*.

This was not a regular war movie!

It was Mom who finally turned around and noticed me. She had been slouched down low in the passenger seat. She suddenly sat upright, with a bounce. Her head blocked the screen. I think she must have seen my face in the rear view mirror. I had my hands on my mouth. When I took them away I had bite marks from biting myself to keep quiet.

"Mary Ann, you're awake," she whispered. Then she said to Dad, "That's it. We're going home."

My father looked at me. "What's the matter?"

"I never knew that part about the war. They're killing all the Jews. They're taking off their skin. I saw them," I said.

I was too far back in the seat behind my sisters for Dad to reach me. He held up his hand. He waved at me with his hand going sideways like a metronome.

He said, "No, no, no. Sweetheart! I was in that war! You know that! You've got it all wrong! This is just a movie! It's make-believe! When they turned off the cameras, everyone got up and went home, just like us!"

He was whispering. His whispers were cheerful. Some mosquitoes were buzzing around in our car.

"It doesn't look like make-believe," I said.

"Daddy doesn't lie," whispered my mother.

"It's make-believe like a scary one, like an Alfred Hitchcock," said my father.

On the screen there was a mound like rubbish at a dump site. It was people. There were hands. There were eyes. I saw them.

My father detached the speaker. He went to hang it on its stand, and missed, and it dangled down by its wire. We drove out slowly.

The back of our car dragged low along the dirt bumps. The tailpipe was scraping the rocks. The sleeping bodies of my sisters were like sisters in a freight car.

"Do you want me to drive?" said Mom.

"No, godddamn, I do not. I only had two beers," said my father.

We went out the mouth of the drive- in to the road. My mother turned and said to me, "Close your eyes. I don't want you looking at this awful movie one more second."

It was still going on behind us. The pictures on the screen were black and white and grainy. They weren't acting. They weren't wearing Hollywood makeup. I saw them bare in their bones. I saw them in bodies that had not eaten food for a very long time.

And I thought about how I was a girl in a town with factories, because factories was one of the things they were talking about in the movie.

"They had factories for making those people into soap, Dad," I said. "They had factories to make them into lamp shades. They had factories to make them into *ash trays*."

"For crying out loud, Mary Ann," said Dad. "When you went to movies last week with your friends, what did they show a preview of, that we said you are not allowed to watch for being too young?"

"Oh," said Mom, "Alfred Hitchcock. They say it's the scariest horror one there ever was. I get goosebumps just thinking about it. I bet I have nightmares for a month when I see it."

"Birds that attack people like that is made up," I said.

"And that is why you call a movie a movie," said Dad, "which is the point I am trying to knock into your head."

"Tippi Hedren is supposed to be terrific in *The Birds*," said Mom.

"You can go see it with your friends," Dad said to her. "Leave me home. You can have a ladies night out."

"Well, you never liked Alfred Hitchcock," said Mom. "But maybe he'll make a war movie with John Wayne."

"I would go," said Dad.

At school, what I saw was not in the history lessons about the war. It was not in any book I had read and I had read a lot of books. I had thought I was good in history. I knew that, when I went to school on Monday morning, I would not be the girl I had been when I left at the bell on Friday. I felt that there was a part of me that was a grownup now. I felt that I would never be able to believe my father again about anything he told me.

We drove away. All the trees along the roads were full of ghosts, filmy and white in our headlights. Our train had a stink of animals, of manure. Freight cars do not have bathrooms. Freight cars do not have windows. Freight cars do not have luggage racks for suitcases. Where are we going?