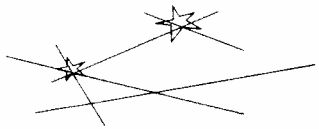
Cousins



Here is a scene. Two sisters are fishing together in a flat-bottomed boat on an olive green lake. They sit slumped like men, facing in opposite directions, drinking coffee out of a metal-sided thermos, smoking intently. Without their lipstick they look strangely weary, and passive, like pale replicas of their real selves. They both have a touch of morning sickness but neither is admitting it. Instead, they watch their bobbers and argue about worms versus minnows.

My cousin and I are floating in separate, saline oceans. I'm the size of a cocktail shrimp and she's the size of a man's thumb. My mother is the one on the left, wearing baggy gabardine trousers and a man's shirt. My cousin's mother is wearing blue jeans, cuffed at the bottom, and a cotton blouse printed with wild cowboys roping steers. Their voices carry, as usual, but at this point we can't hear them.

It is five A.M. A duck stands up, shakes out its feathers, and peers above the still grass at the edge of the water. The skin of the lake twitches suddenly and a fish springs loose into the air, drops back down with a flat splash. Ripples move across the surface like radio waves. The sun hoists itself up and gets busy, laying a sparkling rug across the water, burning the beads of dew off the reeds, baking the tops of our mothers' heads. One puts on sunglasses and the other a plaid fishing cap with a wide brim.

In the cold dark underwater, a long fish with a tattered tail discovers something interesting. He circles once and then has his breakfast before becoming theirs. As he breaks from the water to the air he twists hard, sending out a cold spray, sparks of green light. My aunt reels him in, triumphant, and grins at her sister, big teeth in a friendly mouth.

"Why you dirty rotten so-and-so," my mother says admiringly.

It is nine o'clock on Saturday night, the sky is black and glittering with pinholes, old trees are bent down over the highway. In the dark field behind, the corn gathers its strength, grows an inch in the silence, then stops to rest. Next to the highway, screened in vegetation, a deer with muscular ears and glamorous eyes stands waiting to spring out from the wings into the next moving spotlight. The asphalt sighs in anticipation.

The car is a late-model Firebird, black on black with a T-roof and a tape deck that pelts out anguish, Fleetwood Mac. My cousin looks just like me except she has coarse hair and the jawline of an angel. She's driving and I'm shotgun, talking to her profile. The story I'm recounting to her is full of what I said back to people when they said things to me. She can sing and

listen at the same time, so she does that, nodding and grimacing when necessary.

She interrupts me once. "What's my hair doing?"

"Laying down. I'll tell you if it tries anything." Her hair is short but so dense it has a tendency to stay wherever the wind pushes it. When she wakes up in the morning her head is like a landscape, with cliffs and valleys, spectacular pinnacles.

"Okay, go ahead," she says. I finish my story before my favorite song comes on so I can devote myself to it.

We sing along to a tune about a woman who rings like a bell through the night. Neither of us knows what that means, but we're in favor of it. We want to ring like bells, we want our hair to act right, we want to go out with guys who wear boots with turned-up toes and worn-down heels. We're out in the country, on my cousin's turf. My car is stalled in the city somewhere on four low tires, a blue-and-rust Volkswagen with the door coat-hangered shut. Her car is this streamlined, dark-eyed Firebird with its back end hiked up like a skirt. We are hurtling through the night, as they say, on our way to a bar where the guys own speedboats, snowmobiles, whatever else is current. I sing full-throttle: *You can take me to paradise, but then again you can be cold as ice; I'm over my head, but it sure feels nice.* I turn the rearview mirror around, check to see what's happening with the face.

Nothing good. But there you have it. It's yours at least, and your hair isn't liable to thrust itself upward into stray pointing fingers. It doesn't sound like corn husks when you brush it.

My cousin, beautiful in the dashboard light, glances over at me. She has a first name but I've always called her Wendell. She pushes it up to eighty and the song ends, a less wonderful one comes on. We're coming to the spot on the highway where the giant trees dangle their wrists over the ground. In the crotch of an elm, during daylight hours, a gnarled car is visible, wedged among the branches.

Up ahead, the cornfields are dark and rustling. The deer shifts nervously behind the curtain of weeds, waiting for its cue. The car in the tree's crotch is a warning to fast drivers, careening kids. Hidden beneath the driver's seat, way up in the branches, is a silver pocketwatch with a broken face. It had been someone's great-grandfather's, handed down and handed down, until it reached the boy who drove his car into the side of a tree. Below the drifting branches, the ground is black and loamy, moving with bugs. In the silence, stalks of corn stretch their thin, thready feet and gather in the moisture. The pocketwatch is stopped at precisely 11:47, as was the boy. Fleetwood Mac rolls around the bend and the deer springs full-blown out of the brocade trees. In the white pool of headlights, in front of a swerving audience, it does a short, stark, modern dance, and exits to the right. We recover and slow it down, shaking.

"He could have wrecked my whole front end," Wendell says. This is the farm-kid mentality. Her idea of a gorgeous deer is one that hangs upside down on the wall of the shed, a rib cage, a pair of antlers, a gamy hunk of dinner. She feels the same way about cows and pigs.

We're in the sticks. Way out here things are measured in shitloads, and every third guy you meet is named Junior. I've decided I don't even like this bar we're going to, that howling three-man band and the bathroom with no stalls, just stools. Now I'm slumped and surly, an old pose for me. That deer had legs like canes, feet like Dixie cups.

Wendell pats my knee, grinning. "Settle down," she says. "It didn't *hit* us. We're safe." She likes excitement as long as her car doesn't get hurt. I light a cigarette, begin dirtying up her ashtray, and mess with the tape until our favorite song comes on again. We're back up to eighty on the narrow highway, daring the ignorant to take a step onto the asphalt. This is Illinois, a land of lumbering raccoons, snake-tailed possums, and flat-

out running bunnies, all trying to cross the road. The interior of the car smells like leather and evergreen trees, the moon peers through the roof, and Wendell drives with one finger.

"Hey, how's my hair?" she asks suddenly. Her eyes are clear brown, her cheekbones are high and delicate, brushed with pink, her lips aren't too big or too little. She's wearing my shirt. A clump of hair has pushed itself forward in the excitement. It looks like a small, startled hand rising from the back of her head.

I make an okay sign, thumb and forefinger. The music is deafening.

Back in the cluster of trees, the deer moves into position again and the willows run their fingers along the ground. The corn whispers encouragement to itself. In the bar up ahead waitresses slam sloe-gin fizzes down on wet tables and men point pool cues at each other in the early stages of drunkenness. The singer in the three-man band whispers *test* into the microphone and rolls his eyes at the feedback. The sound guy jumps up from a table full of ladies and heads over to turn knobs.

We crunch over the parking lot gravel and wait for our song to finish. *I'm over my head, but it sure feels nice.* The bar is low and windowless, with patched siding and a kicked-in door; the lot is full of muscle cars and pickups. A man and a woman burst through the door and stand negotiating who will drive. He's got the keys but she looks fiercer. In the blinking neon our faces are malarial and buttery. As the song winds down, the drama in front of us ends. He throws the keys at her as hard as he can but she jumps nimbly out of the way and picks them up with a handful of gravel, begins pelting his back as he weaves into the darkness.

Wendell turns to me with a grin, a question on her lips. Before she can ask I reach over and press her excited hair back down.

Their house has a face on it, two windows with the shades half down, a brown slot of a door, and a glaring mouthful of railing with a few pickets missing. Pink geraniums grow like earrings on either side of the porch. It's August and the grass is golden and spiky against our ankles, the geraniums smell like dust. A row of hollyhocks stands out by the road, the flowers are upside-down ladies, red, maroon, and dried-up brown. An exploded raccoon is abuzz over on the far side of the highway and crows are dropping down from time to time to sort among the pieces. On either side of the house, fields fall away, rolling and baking in the heat.

The sisters are sitting on the stoop shelling peas, talking overtop of each other. My mother says mayonnaise goes bad in two hours in the hot sun and my aunt says bullshit. They've just driven out to the fields and left the lunches for the hired men. They argue energetically about this, until the rooster walks up and my aunt carries her bowl in the house to finish the discussion through the screen door. She and the rooster hate each other.

"He thinks you're a chicken," my mother explains. "You have to show him you won't put up with it." She picks up a stick, threatens the rooster with it, and he backs off, pretends to peck the yard. My aunt comes back out.

The front of her head is in curlers, the brush kind that hurt, and she keeps testing her hair to see if it's done. She has on a smock with big pockets and pedal pushers. Her feet are bare, one reason why the rooster is scaring her so much. My mother doesn't wear curlers because her hair is short but she has two clips crisscrossed on either side of her head, making spit curls in front of her ears. Every time a car drives by she reaches up automatically, ready to yank them out. She has on Bermuda

shorts and a wide-bottomed plaid blouse with a bow at the neck. They are both pregnant again.

We're going to be in a parade at four o'clock, Wendell and I, riding bikes without training wheels, our dolls in the baskets. We asked to have the training wheels put back on for the parade but they said no. Our older sisters are upstairs somewhere, dumping perfume on one another and trying on bracelets. They'll be in the parade, too, walking behind us and throwing their batons in the air, trying to drop them on our heads.

Wendell jumps at the rooster suddenly and he rushes us, we go off screaming in different directions while he stands there furious, shifting from one scaly foot to another, slim and tall with greasy black feathers and a yellow ruff like a collie. He can make the dirty feathers around his neck stand up and fall back down whenever he gets mad, just like flexing a muscle. Even his wives give him a wide berth, rolling their seedy eyes and murmuring. They get no rest. I haven't yet connected the chickens walking around out here with what we had for lunch, chopped up and mixed with mayonnaise.

The mothers give up and go in the house to smoke cigarettes at the kitchen table and yell at us through the windows. Wendell and I work on decorating our bikes and complaining about no training wheels.

"What about if there's a *corner*?" I say.

"I know," says Wendell. "Or if there's *dog* poop?" I don't know exactly how this relates but I shudder anyway. We shake our heads and try twisting the crepe paper into the spokes the way our mothers showed us but it doesn't work. We end up with gnarled messes and flounce into the house to discipline our dolls.

Here is the parade. Boys in cowboy getups with cap guns and rubber spurs, hats that hang from shoestrings around their necks. The girls squint against the sun and press their stiff dresses down. This is the year of the can-can slip so we all have

on good underpants without holes. Some kids have their ponies there, ornery things with rolling eyes and bared teeth, all decorated up. Two older boys with painted-on mustaches beat wildly on drums until they are stopped. Mothers spit on Kleenexes and go at the boys' faces while fathers stand around comparing what their watches say to what the sun is doing.

Two little girls wear matching dresses made from a big linen tablecloth, a white background with blue and red fruit clusters. One has a bushy stand of hair and the other a smooth pixie. Both have large bows, one crunched into the mass and the other practically taped on. The scalloped collars on their dresses are made from the border of the tablecloth, bright red with tiny blue grapes, little green stems. There are sashes tied in perfect bows, and pop-bead bracelets. Our shoes don't match.

The dolls rode over to the parade in the trunk of the car so we wouldn't wreck their outfits. They have the ability to drink water and pee it back out but they're dry now, our mothers put a stop to that. They have on dresses to match ours, with tiny scalloped collars and ribbon sashes. We set them carefully in our bike baskets with their skirts in full view. Mine's hair is messed up on one side where I put hairspray on it once. Wendell's has a chewed-up hand and nobody knows how it got that way. We stand next to our crepe-papered bikes in the sunlight, waiting for them to tell us what to do.

Our sisters have been forbidden to throw their batons until the parade starts and so they twirl them around and pretend to hurl them up in the air, give a little hop, and pretend to catch them again. They are wearing perfume and fingernail polish with their cowboy boots and shorts. They don't like us very much but we don't care.

My mother tells me to stand up straight and Wendell's mother tells her to push her hair back down. The baton twirlers get a last minute talking-to with threats. The parade

moves out ragged and wobbly, someone immediately starts crying, a pony wanders out of line and looks for some grass to chew. The main street is crowded with bystanders and parked automobiles. It is never clear what this parade is for, except to dress the children up and show them off, get the men to come in from the fields for a while.

As the parade pulls itself slowly down the street, the mothers stand with wry, proud faces and folded arms while fathers stand smoking, lifting the one-finger farmer's salute as their sons go by. Wendell and I steer carefully and watch our mothers as they move along the sidewalk, following. Tall, lanky frames and watermelon stomachs, the gray eyes and beautiful hands of the Patterson side of the family. Our dolls are behaving perfectly, staring straight ahead, slumped forward in their baskets. My sash has come untied and Wendell's underpants are showing. We don't care, they won't bother fixing us now; we're in the parade and they have to stay on the sidewalk.

The street is brilliant in the sun, and the children move in slow motion, dresses, cowboy hats, tap shoes, the long yellow teeth of the mean ponies. At the count of four, one of our sisters loses control, throws her baton high in the air and stops, one hand out to catch it when it comes back down.

For a long, gleaming moment it hangs there, a silver hyphen against the hot sky. Over the hectic heads of the children and the smooth blue-and-white blur of crepe-papered spokes and handlebar streamers, above the squinting smiles and upturned eyes, a silver baton rises miraculously, lingers for a moment against the sun, and then drops back down, into the waiting hand.

Back at the bar, someone has hold of me and I'm on the dance floor. Wendell's standing just inside the door. I'm going backward swiftly, in a fast two-step, there's an arm slung across my shoulder. It's good old Ted, trying to make a girl feel welcome. The bar is as dark as a pocket and my eyes haven't adjusted yet. Ted runs me into a couple of people and I tell him his arm weighs a ton. He grins but doesn't move it. He has long legs and a drinking problem. Two ex-wives follow him everywhere, stirring up trouble.

When the song finally ends, I untangle from Ted and look for Wendell. She's got us a table back by the wall, beneath the bored head of a deer. As I pass the bar several guys in turn swivel their stools around and catch me. Blue-jeaned legs are parted, I'm pulled in, pressed against a chest, clamped. Hello, hello. I bum a cigarette from the first one and blow smoke in the face of the second when his hand crawls like a bull snake up the back of my shirt. Even way out here I'm known for being not that easy to get along with.

Wendell takes her feet off my chair and pushes a rum and Pepsi my way. She tries to tell me something over the din.

"What?" I holler back and turn my ear to her.

"I *said*, your *buddy*'s here," she yells into my hair. I pull back and look at her. She jerks a thumb upward, to the passive, suspended face of the deer. Someone has stuck a cigarette butt in one of its nostrils. I show her my middle finger and she sits back again, satisfied. Side by side at the spindly table, we drink our drinks for a while and watch the dancers go around.

Ida's out there, going to town, seventy-five if she's a day, with dyed black hair and tall, permanently arched eyebrows. From nine to midnight, even when it's just the jukebox, she takes herself around the dance floor — fox-trot, swing shuffle, two-step. She comes here every Saturday night to dance by herself while her grandson drinks Mountain Dew and plays pool in the back room. Her tennis shoes look like they're disconnected from the rest of her body. Every once in a while, she

presses one hand against her waist and closes her eyes for an instant, keeping time with her shoulders, all part of some interior dancing-drama, some memory of Pete and her, before they got old, before she up and got widowed. Apparently, they were quite a deal on the dance floor. Nobody ever bumps into her out there, even the drunkest of the drunk make a space for those shoes and that head of hair. She's dancing with a memory, putting all the rest of us to shame.

Here comes our darling Nick. Everyone's in love with him, blond hair in a ponytail and wire-rims, drives a muddy jeep. Too bad he's related to us. He sets us up with two more drinks, takes a joint out of his shirt pocket, puts it in my cigarette pack, and lays a big kiss on Wendell, flat on the lips. Right as he leaves, he zooms in on me unexpectedly. I give him one hand to shake and put the other one over my mouth. Wendell takes a drink and leans over.

"Gross," she shouts into my ear. I nod. Cousin cooties.

"I'm telling Aunt Bernie," I shout back. Aunt Bernie is his mom.

We've been sitting too long. Wendell carries her drink, I light a cigarette, and we move out into the revelers, and lose each other. The rum is a warm, dark curtain in my chest. I suddenly look better than I have in weeks, I can feel geraniums blooming in my cheeks, my mouth is genuinely smiling for once, my hair, fresh from the ironing board, falls like a smooth plank down my back. It's Saturday night and I'm three rum and Pepsis to the wind. I love this bar, the floor is a velvet trampoline, a mirrored ball revolves above the dance floor, stars move across faces and hands, everyone encountered is a close personal friend. I'm in line for the bathroom, chatting with strangers.

"I like your shirt." This from the woman behind me, she may be trying to negotiate her way up the line.

"Thanks," I tell her. She's pretty. "I like yours, too."

"Your cousin's really drunk," she says, rolling her eyes. I guess she knows me. She means Nick, not Wendell. Women are always striking up conversations about Nick.

"I know" is what I tell her. I smile when I say it and shrug, trying to indicate that she can come to family dinners with Nick as far as I'm concerned. We lapse back into silence until the door bursts open and three women come out, reeking of reefer and perfume.

I look at the woman who struck up the conversation with me. We raise our eyebrows.

"Nice perfume," she says, wrinkling her nose.

"Nice reefer," I say. I let her come in while I go and she checks her makeup and examines her teeth in the mirror. I wait for her, too, bending over at the waist, shaking the hair out, and then flipping it back. It makes it fluffier for a few minutes, before it settles back into the plank again. The bending and flipping sends the room careening for a moment, I'm in a centrifugal tube, then it halts. She wants to know who Nick's going out with.

"His dog, I think," I tell her. I'm politely not noticing her peeing. "He's got the nicest golden retriever you ever saw." I love that dog; it refuses to hunt, just walks along and stirs up ducks and pheasants, watches with surprise when they go flapping off. "That's one thing about Nick. His dog's nice." I don't think Nick ever shoots anything anyway, he just looks good in the boots and the vest.

Actually, I think Cousin Nick's going out with everyone, but I don't tell her that. She looks hopeful and sparkly and she's not nearly as drunk as me. I give her a swimmy smile on the way out and we part company forever.

The band rolls into a slow one, with a creaky metallic guitar hook and a lone warbling voice. Someone asks me to dance and

we stroll around the floor, amid the stars and the elbows. I close my eyes for a moment and it's night inside my head, there are strange arms moving me around, this way and that, feet bumping into mine. The steel guitar comes overtop of it all, climbing and dropping, locating everyone's sadness and yanking on it. In the shuffling crowd the dark curtain of rum parts for an instant, and reveals nothing. I open my eyes and look up at my partner. He's leading away, a grinning stranger, his hand strolls down and finds my back pocket, warms itself. Christ Almighty.

Ida swims through, and past, eyes blank as nickels, disembodied feet, arms like floating strings. One song ends and a new one starts up, I shake my head at my partner and he backs off with a sullen shrug. Apparently he likes this song because he begins fast-dancing by himself, looking hopefully around at the other dancers, trying to rope a stray.

This is Wendell's favorite song, *She's a good-hearted wo-man, in love with a two-timing man.* Here she is, ready to dance. I move with her back into the lumbering crowd on the dance floor, and we carve out a little spot in front of the band. *She loves him in spite of his wicked ways she don't understand.* The bar has gone friendly again while I wasn't looking, the faces of the other dancers are pink with exertion and alcohol, Nick's dancing with the bathroom girl, Ted's twirling an ex-wife, the singer in the band knocks the spit out of his harmonica and attaches it to his neck again. Look at Wendell's face. She's twenty-one and single; her hair has a story to tell. In the small sticky space in front of the band, we twirl a few times, knuckles and lifted elbows, under and over, until I get stomped on. We're singing now, recklessly, it's almost closing time and us girls are getting prettier by the moment. *Through teardrops and laughter we pass through this world hand in hand.* Of course, both Wendell and I would like to be good-hearted women but we're from the Patterson clan, and just don't have the temperament for it.

The sisters are making deviled eggs. They have on dark blue dresses with aprons and are walking around in nyloned feet. No one can find the red stuff that gets sprinkled on top of the eggs. They're tearing the cupboards apart right now, swearing to each other and shaking their heads. We all know enough to stay out of the kitchen.

We're at my grandma's house in our best dresses with towels pinned to the collars. Our older sisters are walking around with theatrical, mournful faces, bossing us like crazy, in loud disgusted whispers. They have their pockets loaded with Kleenex in preparation for making a scene. We're all going to our grandfather's funeral in fifteen minutes, as soon as the paprika gets found.

Wendell and I get to go only because we promised to act decent. No more running and sliding on the funeral-home rug. Someone has *died*, and there's a time and a place for everything. We'll both get spanked in front of everyone and put in chairs if we're not careful. And if we can't keep our gum in our mouths then we don't need it: both pieces are deposited in a held-out Kleenex on the ride over. Wendell and I are in disgrace from our behavior last night at the visitation.

"It wasn't our fault he moved," Wendell had explained, right before being swatted in the funeral-home foyer. Our grandfather had looked like a big, dead doll in a satin doll bed. We couldn't stop staring, and then suddenly, simultaneously, got spooked and ran out of the room, squealing and holding on to each other. We stayed in the foyer for the rest of the night, greeting people and taking turns sliding the rug across the glossy floor. We were a mess by the end of the evening.

Our dads have to sit in a special row of men. They're going to carry the casket to the graveyard. We file past them without looking, and the music gets louder. The casket sits like an open

suitcase up front. After we sit down in our wooden folding chairs all we can see is a nose and some glasses. That's our grandpa up there, he won't be hollering at us ever again for chewing on the collars of our dresses or for throwing hangers out the upstairs window. He won't be calling us giggleboxes anymore. He doesn't even know we're all sitting here, listening to the music and the whispers. He is in our hearts now, which makes us feel uncomfortable. Wendell and I were separated as a precautionary measure; I can just see the tips of her black shoes. They have bows on them and mine have buckles. She is swinging hers a little bit so I start to swing mine a little bit too. This is how you get into trouble, so I quit after a minute and so does she.

Pretty soon the music stops and my mother starts crying into her Kleenex. My aunt's chin turns into a walnut, and then she's crying too. Their dad is dead. Wendell puts her shoe on the back of the chair in front of her and slides it slowly down until it's resting on the floor again. I do the same thing. We're not being ornery, though. A lady starts singing a song and you can hear her breath. I can see only one inch of her face because she's standing in front of the dads. It's a song from Sunday school but she's singing it slower than we do and she's not making the hand motions. I do the hand motions myself, very small, barely moving, while she sings.

Wendell's mom leans over and tells me something. She wants me to sit on her lap. She has a nickname for me that nobody else calls me. She calls me Jody and everyone else calls me Jo. She's not crying anymore, and her arms are holding me on her lap, against her good blue dress. It's too tight in the armpits but you can't tell from looking. My mom's got Wendell.

After a while everyone starts crying, except Uncle Evan, my grandma's brother who always spits into a coffee cup and leaves it on the table for someone else to clean up. My aunt rests her chin on my head and rearranges her Kleenex so there's a

dry spot. I sit very still while the preacher talks and the mothers cry, not moving an inch, even though my arms don't have anywhere to go. Wendell keeps moving around but I don't. Actually, I don't feel very good, my stomach hurts. I'm too big to sit on a lap, my legs are stiff, and now my heart has a grandpa in it.

The fairgrounds are huge and hot, an expanse of baking bodies and an empty stage. There are guys monkeying around on the lighting scaffold, high in the air. Mostly they're fat, stoned, and intent on their tasks, but Wendell's spied one that might be okay. Ponytailed and lean, he has his T-shirt off and stuck in the waistband of his jeans. I can't look at him because he's too high up, hanging off of things that don't look reliable. Wendell trains her binoculars on him, focuses, and then sets them down. "Yuck," she reports.

We will see God this afternoon — this is an Eric Clapton concert. We're sitting on one of our grandmother's worn quilts, spread out on the ground twenty feet from the stage. "Hey, look." I show Wendell a scrap of fabric. It's blue-and-red plaid with dark green lines running through. She and I used to have short-sleeved shirts with embroidered pockets made out of that material. On the ride over here we each took a small blue pill, a mild hallucinogen, and now Wendell has to put her face about an inch away from the quilt in order to get a sense of the scrap I'm talking about.

"It used to be seersucker," she says sadly. "And now it isn't." We think that over for a few minutes, how things change, how nothing can be counted on, and then Wendell remembers something. "My shirt had a pony on the pocket and yours had a *schnauzer*." She snickers.

For some reason that irritates me no end. I hadn't thought of that schnauzer in years, and she has to bring it up today.

Thanks a whole hell of a lot. It did used to be seersucker, too, which is very strange, because now it's not. What could have happened to it? How can something go from being puckered to being unpuckered? You could see if it was the other way around, but this just doesn't make sense. My halter top keeps feeling like it's coming undone.

We put the cooler over the unsucked seersucker so we can quit thinking about it. Wendell stretches out on her back and stares at the sky. I stretch out on my stomach and stare at some grass. We are boiling hot but we don't know it, my hair is stuck to my back and Wendell's is standing straight up in a beautiful manner.

"Your hair is standing straight up in a beautiful manner," I tell her. She nods peacefully. She holds her arms up in the air and makes a *c* with each hand.

"I'm cupping clouds," she says. I try to pay closer attention to my grass, which is pretty short and worn down. It looks like it's been grazed. I read somewhere once that hysterical fans used to eat the grass where the Beatles had walked.

"Do you think Eric Clapton walked on this grass?" I ask Wendell. She looks over at me and considers. She thinks for so long that I forget the question and have to remember it again.

"No," she says finally. I feel relieved.

"Well then, I'm not eating it," I tell her flatly.

"Okay," she replies. I wish she had said "Okey-dokey" but she didn't. She said "Okay," which has an entirely different meaning.

I sit up and my halter top sags alarmingly. All I can do is hold it in place. There's nothing else to be done, I wouldn't have any idea how to retie it. Wendell is curled up in a ball next to me with her eyes shut.

"My top is falling off," I tell her. She doesn't open her eyes. I can feel sweat running down my back like ball bearings. Wendell groans.

"The clouds are cupping *me* now," she says. "Get them off." She's still got her eyes shut, making a whimpering sound. I don't know exactly what to do because I can't see any clouds on her and my shirt is falling off. I have to think for a moment. If I had just taken one bite of grass this wouldn't have happened.

A guy on the blanket next to us tries to hand me a joint. I can't take it because I'm holding my chest. He looks at me, looks at Wendell balled up on the ground, and nods knowingly. "Bummer," he proclaims.

I can't stand to have Eric Clapton see me like this. I let go of my shirt for one second and wave my arms over Wendell. My halter top miraculously stays in place. In fact, it suddenly feels too tight. "I just got the clouds off you," I inform her. She opens one eye, then the other, and sits up.

"You look cute," she tells me. She's turning pink from the afternoon sun and her hair is hectic and alive. We open beers from our cooler and start having fun.

By the time old Eric comes out, we've completely forgotten about him, so it's a pleasant surprise. We climb up on our cooler and dance around, waving our arms in the air. We're so close to the stage he is almost life-size. This is amazing. We dance and mouth the words while Eric sings tender love songs about George Harrison's wife and plays his guitar in a godlike manner.

The sky has turned navy blue. Eric stands in a spotlight on the stage. I pick him up once, like a pencil, and write my name in the air, then put him back down so he can play his guitar again. My halter top stays stationary while I dance around inside it naked. *Darling,* we sing to Eric, *you look won-der-ful tonight*. The air is full of the gyrations of six thousand people. My cousin is covered with clouds again but she doesn't seem to notice. Although it's still five months until Christmas, tiny lights wink on and off in her hair.

The tablecloth is covered with pie crumbs and empty coffee cups, a space has been cleared for the cribbage board and ashtrays. The sisters are smoking, staring at their cards, and talking about relatives. Neither of them can believe that Bernice is putting indoor-outdoor carpeting in her kitchen.

"You can't tell her a thing," my mother says. She lays down a card and moves her red peg ahead on the board.

"Shit," my aunt says softly. She stares at her cards. One of the husbands comes in for more pie. "What do I do here?" she asks him. He looks at her hand for a moment and then walks around the table to look at my mother's hand. He points to a card, which she removes and lays down. "Try that on for size," she tells my mother.

The back door flies open and two daughters enter. There is a hullabaloo. Barbie's little sister, Skipper, was sitting on the fence and accidentally fell off and got stepped on by a pig. "She's wrecked," Wendell reports. "We had to get her out with a stick." I show them the stick and Wendell shows them Skipper.

"Stay away from the pigs," my aunt says. She's looking at her cards.

"We *were* staying away from the pigs," I answer, holding up the muddy stick as evidence. "Tell them to stay away from *us*, why don't you?" My mother looks up. "Well," I say to her.

"You might find out *well*, if you're not careful," she tells me.

Wendell takes a whiff of Skipper, who is wearing what used to be a pair of pink flowered pajamas. A small bit of satin ribbon is still visible around her neck, but the rest, including her smiling face, is wet brown mud and something else. "Part of this is *poop*," Wendell hollers.

My aunt turns around finally. "Take that goddamn doll outside." She means business so we go upstairs, put Skipper in a shoe box, and find our Barbies.

"Mine's going to a pizza party," I say. My Barbie has a bubble haircut, red, and Wendell's has a black ponytail.

"Let's just say they're sitting home and then Ken comes over and makes them go to a nightclub," Wendell suggests. Hers doesn't have a pizza-party outfit so she never wants mine to get to wear one either.

"Mine's going to sing at the nightclub then," I warn her.

"Well, mine doesn't care," Wendell offers generously. She's eyeballing a white fur coat hanging prominently in my carrying case. Her Barbie walks over to mine. "Can I wear your fur tonight?" she asks in a falsetto.

"If I can wear your bola," my Barbie replies.

"It's boa, stupid," Wendell tells me. She digs out a pink feathered scrap, puts it in her Barbie's hand, and makes her Barbie throw it at mine.

"Let's say it's really hot out and they don't know Ken is coming over and they're just sitting around naked for a while," I suggest.

"Because they can't decide what to wear," Wendell clarifies. "All their clothes are in the dryer." She wads up all the outfits lying around and throws them under the bed.

"Oh God, it's so hot," my Barbie tells hers. "I'm going to sit at the kitchen table." Naked, she sits down in a cardboard chair at a cardboard table. Her hair is a smooth auburn circle, her eyes are covered with small black awnings, her legs are stuck straight out like broomsticks.

Black-haired, ponytailed Barbie stands on tiptoe at the cardboard sink. "I'm making us some pink squirrels," she announces. "But we better not get drunk, because Ken might come over."

Both Barbies do get drunk, and Ken does come over. He ar-

rives in an ill-fitting suit, and the heat in the Barbie house is so overwhelming that he has to remove it almost immediately.

"Hey baby," Ken says to no one in particular. The Barbies sit motionless and naked in their cardboard kitchen, waiting for orders. This is where Dirty Barbies gets murky — we aren't sure what's supposed to happen next. Whatever happens, it's Ken's fault, that's all we know.

The Barbies get tired and go lie down on their canopied bed. Ken follows them in and leans at a forty-degree angle against their cardboard dresser. He's trying to tell them he's tired, too.

"You're going to prison, buddy," Wendell finally says, exasperated. She heaves him under her bed and we get our Barbies up and dress them.

"Ken better not try anything like *that* again," ponytailed Barbie says. She's wearing a blue brocade evening gown with the white fur coat, and one cracked high-heeled shoe.

"He thinks he's funny but he's not," my Barbie replies ominously. "He's in jail and *we're* the only ones who can bail him out." She's got on a yellow satin-and-net dress with a big rip up the back, and the boa is wrapped tightly around her neck. By the time they get Ken out of jail and into his tuxedo, the whole evening is shot. The judge has to be bribed with a giant nickel that ponytailed Barbie holds in her outstretched hand.

"Crap," Wendell says when they holler at us from downstairs. I pack up my carrying case, drag it down the steps and out to the car. I keep sitting down the whole way because I'm tired.

"Get moving," my mother tells me. My aunt calls me Jody and gives me a little whack on the behind, but she doesn't mean anything by it. I climb in beside my sister and roll down the window.

"Whaaa," Wendell says to me. This is the sound her Betsy-Wetsy makes when it gets swatted for peeing.

The car pulls out onto the highway and turns toward town.

I left my Barbie's pizza-party outfit under Wendell's pillow so she could use it until next time. Too bad, I miss it already. Red tights and a striped corduroy shirt with tassels that hang down. It goes better with a bubble cut than a ponytail, really. I should never have left it.

August, early evening. We're crammed into Uncle Fred's yellow Caddie, driven by Little Freddy, our cousin. I have on a low-backed, peach-colored dress with spaghetti straps and a giant, itching wrist corsage made of greenery and tipped carnations. Wendell is wearing an ivory wedding gown with a scoop neck and a hundred buttons down the back. It's the dress our grandmother married our grandfather in and it makes Wendell look like an angel. There are guys present — my boyfriend, a sweet, quiet type named Eric, and Wendell's brand-new husband, Mitch, a mild-mannered, blue-eyed farmer who is gazing at the cornfields streaking by.

Cousin Freddy is in control at this point, possibly a big mistake. One misplaced elbow and all the windows go down at once, causing hot air to whirl around inside the Caddie, stirring up everyone's hair and causing a commotion. "Okay, okay," Freddy says in a rattled voice. He pushes another button and all the windows go back up, the commotion stops, the air conditioning comes back into play.

Wendell has a wreath of baby's breath perched on top of her head like a crown of thorns. A slight crevice has appeared in the front of her hair, the baby's breath has lifted with the landscape and sits balanced on two distinct formations. The back is untouched. She wrestles herself over to the rearview mirror and gets a glimpse.

"Oh my God, it's the Red Sea," she says. "You parted my *hair*, Freddy."

There is an audible combing noise inside the car for a mo-

ment as she tries to impose some discipline on it. Freddy looks at her in the rearview mirror. He's got Uncle Fred's five-o'clock shadow and Aunt Velma's tiny teeth, he's wearing a powder blue short-sleeved shirt and a flowery necktie, fashionably wide. "We can borrow you a rake at one of these farmhouses," he says, braking. The Caddie, dumb and obedient as a Clydesdale, slows down, makes a left and then a right, pulls onto a dirt track leading into a cornfield. Freddy gets his wedding present from under the seat, lights it, and passes it back. We pile out into the evening and stand, smoking, next to the car.

The sky is way up there, a lavender dome. There's a gorgeous glow of radiation in the spot the sun just vacated, a pale peach burst of pollution that matches my dress. The corn is waxy and dark green and goes on forever. We're standing in a postcard.

"This is my big day," Wendell mentions. The crown of thorns is resting peacefully, swifts are swooping back and forth, drinking bugs out of the sky. We're trying to keep the hems of our dresses from dragging in the dirt.

"This corn is *ready*," Mitch says quietly, to no one in particular. The stalks are taller than us by a foot, a quiet crowd of ten million, all of them watching us get high and wreck our outfits.

"Don't lean on the car," I tell Wendell. She stands in her usual slouch, one arm wrapped around her own waist, the other bringing the joint to her lips. She squints and breathes in, breathes out. "You look like Lauren Bacall only with different hair," I say.

She considers that. "You look like Barbara Hershey only with a different face," she says kindly. We beam at one another. This is Wendell's big day.

"Hey, bats," Eric says suddenly. He's looking up into the air where the swifts are plunging around. I'm very fond of him for a moment, and then I feel a yawn coming on. A breeze has

picked up and the corn is rustling, a low hiss from the crowd. We're making Wendell late to her own party.

The Caddie takes us out of the cornfield, haunch-first. Freddy steers it up to the highway, sets the cruise, and we all lean back, stare out the side windows, and watch the landscape go from corn to soybeans to cows to corn. Next thing you know we're getting out again, this time at Wendell's old house, the farm.

The wedding cake is a tiered affair with peach-colored roses and two very short people standing on top. Our mothers made the mints. This is a big outdoor reception, with a striped awning and a skinned pig. The awning is over a rented dance floor, the pig is over a bed of coals. There are as many relatives as you'd want to see in one place; the men standing around the revolving pig, the women putting serving spoons in bowls of baked beans, potato salad, things made with Jell-O, things made with whipped cream, things made with bacon bits.

Two uncles are tapping the beer keg. They keep drawing up tall glasses of foam and dumping it on the ground.

"I need a beer bad," Wendell says. She touches her head. "How's the crown?"

"Firm," I tell her. We get ourselves two glasses of foam to carry around and wander over to the food tables.

"This has prunes in it, if you can believe that," an aunt tells us, uncovering a bowl full of something pink that just came from the trunk of her car. Our mothers are standing at a long table where more women are unwrapping gifts and logging them in a book. Wendell's mother is wearing a long dress, gray silk with big peach-colored roses and green leaves down the front. My mother has on a pantsuit that everyone keeps admiring. They're both wearing corsages. "Ooh," my aunt says. A box has just been opened containing an enormous macramé plant hanger, with big red beads and two feet of thick fringe.

"Holy shit," Wendell says, taking a drink of foam.

The guests eat salads and chips and pig, the sky turns pewter, deep cobalt, then black. The band strikes up; four guys, two of them relatives. They play a fast number and everyone under the age of ten gets out there to dance. The littlest kids concentrate on trying to get it exactly right, swinging their hips and whirling their arms around. After about two songs all of them are out of control and sweating, hair stuck to their head, girls seeing who can slide the farthest on patent-leather shoes, boys taking aim and shooting each other with their index fingers without mercy. The parents have to step in, remove a few examples, and put them in chairs. One gets spanked first for calling his mother a dipshit in front of the whole crowd.

A waltz begins to play and the older couples move out onto the floor, husbands with wives, various uncles with various aunts. My own dad dances me around a few times, tells me my dress is pretty, and delivers me in front of Eric, who looks stupendously bored and not quite stoned enough. "Hey, lotta fun," he says insincerely. I make him go dance with my mom.

Wendell takes a break from talking to people and we pull up lawn chairs next to the dance floor. Her ivory dress shines in the darkness. "I keep losing my drink," she says. We share a full, warm beer that's sitting on the ground between our chairs, passing it back and forth, watching the fox-trotters.

"I wish I could do the fox-trot," I say wistfully.

She nods. "We can't do anything good," she says wearily.

"We can two-step," I answer, in our defense.

"Yeah," she says through a yawn. "But big whoop, the two-step." Two short great-aunts glide by at a smart clip and wave at us, the bride and the bridesmaid. Wendell waves back like a beauty queen on a float, I smile and twinkle my fingers. "Yee-haw," I say quietly. On the other side of the dance floor Mitch stands listening intently to one of our distant, female relatives.

He winks at us when she isn't looking and we wink back hugely. "That's my first husband, Mitch," Wendell says fondly.

The night air is damp and black against my arms, like mossy sleeves. There are stars by the millions up above our heads. Wendell and I are sitting directly under Gemini, my birth sign, the oddball twins, the split personality. Part of me wants to get up and dance, the other part wants to sit with my head tipped back. All of me wants to take off my wrist corsage.

"Nice ragweed corsage," I tell Wendell. My arm itches like fire, long red hives are marching up to my elbow. I take it off and put it under my chair.

"Give it a heave," she suggests, and I do. It lands within twenty feet of our lawn chairs. A giant calico farm cat steps out from nowhere, sniffs it, then picks it up delicately and fades back into the blackness. Under the awning the air is stained yellow, the band is playing a disco song. Our mothers are in the midst of a line dance, doing their own version of the Hustle, out of synch with everyone else. Their work is done, they've mingled, they've been fairly polite. Now they've got about twenty minutes of careening before they collapse in lawn chairs and ask people to wait on them. They're out there trying to kick and clap at the same time, without putting their drinks down. I decide I'd better join them.

My mother's cheeks are in bloom, from sloe gin and exertion, her lipstick has worn off but her corsage is still going strong, a flower the size of a punch bowl. She tries for the relaxed shuffle-kick-pause-clap of all the other line dancers but can't do it. She sets her drink down at the edge of the dance floor where it's sure to get knocked over and comes back to the line, full steam ahead. She starts doing the Bump with Wendell's mom and another aunt. Before they can get me involved, I dance myself over to the edge of the floor and step out into the darkness.

"The moms need to be spanked and put in chairs," I tell Eric,

who hands over his beer without being asked. He looks peaceful and affectionate; his hair is sticking straight up in front and there's something pink and crusty all over the front of his shirt.

"One of those kids threw a piece of cake at me," he says placidly. He's been smoking pot out in the corn with Freddy, I can tell. The band pauses between numbers and the mothers keep dancing. In the distance, two uncles stand talking, using the blue glow of a bug zapper to compare their mangled thumbnails. Up by the band, the bride is getting ready to throw the bouquet. I'm being summoned to come stand in the group of girl cousins clustered around Wendell. I walk backward until I'm past the first row of corn, Eric following amiably, pink-eyed and slap-happy. He's using a swizzle stick for a toothpick.

Inside the corn it is completely dark, the stalks stand silent, the sounds of the party are indistinct. We can hear each other breathing. There is a muffled cheering as the bouquet gets thrown, and then someone talks loud and long into the microphone, offering a toast. Eric begins nuzzling my ear and talking baby talk.

"Hey," I whisper to him.

"Mmmm?" he says.

"Have you ever seen a corn snake?"

He refuses to be intimidated. A waltz begins and we absently take up the one-two-three, one-two-three. Around us the dark stalks ripple like water, the waves of the blue Danube wash over us. "I can show *you* a corn snake," he says softly, into my hair.

Here is a scene. Two sisters talk together in low voices, one knits and the other picks lints carefully off a blanket. Their eyes meet infrequently but the conversation is the same as always.

"He's too young to retire," my mother says. "He'll be stuck to her like a burr, and then that's all you'll hear. How she can't stand having him underfoot." One of my uncles wants to retire from selling Motorola televisions and spend the rest of his years doing woodworking.

"How many pig-shaped cutting boards does anybody need?" my aunt says. She holds her knitting up to the window. "God*damn* it. I did it again." She begins unraveling the last few rows, the yarn falling into a snarl around her feet.

"Here," my mother says, holding out a hand, "give me that." She takes the ball of pale yellow yarn and slowly, patiently winds the kinked part back up. While they work, a nurse enters and reads a chart, takes a needle from a cart in the hall, and injects it into the tube leading into my mother's arm. When the door snicks shut behind her, my aunt quits unraveling long enough to get a cigarette from her purse.

"They better not catch me doing this," she says, lighting up. She's using an old pop can for an ashtray. The cigarette trembles slightly in her long fingers and her eyes find the ceiling, then the floor, then the window. She adjusts the belt on her suit, a soft green knit tunic over pants, with silver buttons and a patterned scarf at the neck. She's sitting in an orange plastic chair.

My mother is wearing a dark blue negligee with a bedjacket and thick cotton socks. She takes a puff from my aunt's cigarette and exhales slowly, making professional smoke rings. "Now I'm corrupted," she says dryly.

"If any of them walked in right now, they'd have a fit," my aunt replies uneasily. She's worried about stern daughters, crabby nurses.

"Do I give a good goddamn?" my mother asks peacefully. She's staring at the ceiling. "I don't think I do." She's drifting now, floating upward, her shot is taking effect. She gets a glimpse of something and then loses it, like a fish swimming in

and out of view in the darkness under water. She struggles to the surface. "I hope you get a girl," she says.

My aunt is knitting again, the long needles moving against each other, tying knots, casting off, creating small rosettes. Wendell is ready to have a baby any day now. "Well, she's carrying it low," my aunt answers skeptically. The room is dimming, she turns her chair more toward the window. There is a long pause, with only the needles and the tedious breath, the sterile landscape of cancer country.

"That doesn't mean anything," my mother finally replies. Her father bends over the bed to kiss her, as substantial as air; he's a ghost, they won't leave her alone. She moves slowly through the fluid and brings a thought to the surface. "We carried all of ours low, and look what we got." They swim through her lake, gray-eyed sisters, thin-legged and mouthy. They fight and hold hands, trade shoes and dresses, marry beautiful tall men, and have daughters together, two dark-eyed cousins, thin-legged and mouthy. A fish splashes, a silver arc against the blue sky, its scales like sequins. She startles awake.

"I hope you get a girl," she says again. This is all she can think to say. Her sister, in the dimness, sets down her work and comes to the bed. She bends over and pulls the blanket up, straightens it out. She can't think of what to say either. The face on the pillow is foreign to her suddenly, distant, and the weight of the long afternoon bends her in half. She leans forward wearily, and lets herself grimace.

"We got our girls we wanted so bad, didn't we?" my mother whispers to her, eyes still shut. My aunt straightens and fingers a silver button at her throat.

"Those damn brats," she comments. She presses both hands against the small of her back and shuts her eyes briefly. For an instant she sees the two original brats — wearing their droopy calico dresses, sassing their mother, carrying water up from the

pump at the home place, knocking into each other. "You were always my sister," she says softly.

My mother is completely without pain now, the lake is dark, the fish move easily out of her way. Her sister swims by and makes a statement. "I know it," she answers. She tries to think of a way to express something. Sequins fall through the water, fish scales, and a baby floats past, turned upside-down with a thumb corked in its mouth. The morphine is a thin vapor in her veins. She rouses herself.

"He did do a nice job on those Christmas trees," she says. My aunt nods. She's talking about the woodworking uncle now, who made Christmas trees for all the sisters to put in the middle of their dining-room tables.

"I told him to make me a couple more for next year," my aunt says. "My card club went nuts over it." She lights another cigarette, hating herself for it. My mother is silent, her hands cut the water smoothly, like two long knives. The little gray-eyed girls paddle and laugh. She pushes a spray of water into her sister's face and her sister pushes one back. Their hair is shining against their heads.

In the dimness of the hospital room, my aunt smokes and thinks. She doesn't see their father next to the bed, or old Aunt Grace piddling around with the flower arrangements. She sees only the still form on the bed, the half-open mouth, the coppery wig. She yawns. Wendell's stomach is out to here, she remembers, any day now. That's one piece of good news.

My mother sleeps silently while my aunt thinks. As the invisible hands tend to her, she dives and comes up, breaks free of the water. A few feet over a fish leaps again, high in the air. Her arms move lazily back and forth, holding her up, and as she watches, the fish is transformed. High above the water, it rises like a silver baton, presses itself against the blue August sky, and refuses to drop back down.