

Jennifer Haigh

Thrift

Agnes has never spent a winter in a trailer. From the window she watches Luke leave for work. In his boots and battered Carhartt he climbs into the truck and roars down the lane, gouging tracks in the muddy earth. It's a blustery morning in November, the ground slick with wet leaves. A storm overnight knocked the last color from the trees. Now the narrow kitchen feels drafty without him, and smaller, as though its aluminum sides have contracted in the cold.

The coffee is tepid but she finishes it anyway, then picks at what's left on Luke's plate: a few bites of scrambled egg, a half-eaten slice of toast. She remembers a summer job—thirty years ago? Is that possible?—busing tables in a restaurant. The customers' leftovers had disgusted her, contaminated by saliva from strangers' forks.

Once, when her nephew was small, Agnes had watched her sister share a lollipop with him, the boy squealing with delight as he passed the sticky thing from his mouth to his mother's.

That's unsanitary, Agnes told her sister.

To which Terri merely shrugged. He's mine, she said.

Is it odd that Agnes feels that way about Luke? That his body belongs to her, and no part of it displeases her. That she can love his feet and armpits as she loves his eyes, his hands, his groin, his mouth.

She clears the dishes. From the window she sees a car make its way up the lane, tires sliding in the muck. It's small and sporty, a new hatchback. The hunters and fishermen drive Jeeps and pickups. The nearest year-round house is a half mile up the hill.

Then the car stops and her sister steps out—as though, in thinking of the lollipop, Agnes has conjured her from the air. This has happened her whole life, at least where Terri is concerned: simply thinking of her is enough to make the phone ring. Today she wears a long sweater-coat trimmed with fake fur. In stiletto-heeled boots she picks her way through the mud. The white sweater-coat, a size too small, gapes open at her wide bosom. She is a woman whose clothes never fit properly; she is always dieting or gaining. She clutches the collar with one hand, close at her throat.

Agnes steps back from the window, her bare feet silent on the

linoleum. She catches her reflection in the mirror above the sink: pale, shiny face; hair loose and needing a wash. It's her day off from the hospital, and she wears green scrub pants, no bra, an old flannel shirt of Luke's. The shirt is soft from many washings, gentle on her skin.

Terri's boots climb the stairs, sharp and adamant on the porch Luke built. The high, shallow windows have no curtains. Agnes has been meaning to make some. *Oh, hell*, she thinks, crouching low.

Terri knocks at the door. "Agnes? Are you there?"

Agnes holds her breath as the doorknob turns. Every morning Luke kisses her goodbye at the door. That morning, luckily, she remembered to lock it behind him.

"I know you live here. I saw your name on the mailbox."

Agnes nearly groans. Luke had bought adhesive letters at the hardware store and spelled out both names, GARMAN and LUBICKI. She'd asked him to leave hers off, but it wasn't practical. Their bills—gas and electric and Luke's cell phone, insurance for his truck and motorcycle—come addressed to her.

"I can't believe you're living in a *trailer*."

Agnes waits.

"I've been trying to call you, but you don't answer. I'm starting to worry." There is a long pause. "We missed you at Thanksgiving. The kids miss their aunt Aggie."

This is a blatant lie. Agnes's nephew is a sulky teenager, indifferent to relatives. The little twins might miss the candy she brought, the gifts on their birthday; but her company, itself, was never much of a draw.

"I just want to see you," Terri warbles. "To make sure you're okay." Her tone is one Agnes recognizes; it means she is about to cry.

A rustle then, a jangle of keys: Terri rooting around in her pocketbook.

"I found some old photos of you and Mum. Daddy too. I thought you might want to have them."

It is just like Terri to entice her with these treasures, all that remains of their dead parents. Shameless. Yet in the silence Agnes feels a pang of longing, just as Terri intends her to.

"Fine," Terri huffs. "Be that way."

Agnes thinks, *Please go away*.

"He's using you. Don't say nobody warned you."

The screen door slams shut. Agnes exhales softly as Terri's boots

clomp down the stairs.

Cautiously she approaches the window, just in time to see Terri lose her footing on the path and land gracelessly on her broad behind. Agnes feels a flash of alarm, a wash of tenderness. *Baby fell down.* For a second she wants to burst through the front door and run down the porch stairs, to make sure her baby sister isn't hurt.

The moment, and the urge, pass swiftly. Terri gets to her feet. The sweater coat is ruined, a blessing really. She was doing her figure no favors in that coat.

TERRI, THERESA, HAS always been her baby—twelve years younger, a toddler when Agnes started high school. For the first year of her life Agnes carried her around like a doll; and Theresa did, in fact, resemble the dolls of that era: blonde curls and a dimple, chubby hands that clapped and a tiny mouth always pursed for a kiss. She was born pretty and stayed pretty. Unlike Agnes, who was backward, Theresa was bubbly and sociable. *As different as they can be*, their mother often said. *Like apples and turnips.*

There was no doubt, ever, which sister was the turnip.

If they'd been closer in age, Agnes might have envied Theresa. Instead she felt nothing but pride that her baby sister did not stutter, did not blush; that she jumped rope with the other girls at noon recess. (Agnes had spent lunchtimes in the school library with a book.) On the playground, the school bus, Theresa was surrounded by girlfriends: a little chubby always, but still the prettiest, a girl everyone loved. Agnes and her mother took turns dressing her. At the dime store they studied the pattern books. They bought sprigged cotton and gingham, cherry-pink and sunny yellow. They shared Theresa like well-behaved children. Each day after school, they kept her company at the kitchen table while she had her snack, a slice of homemade cake or pie. Theresa was an excellent mimic, adept at imitating her teachers and schoolmates. Agnes and her mother sat by patiently, waiting to be entertained.

They were two big, strong women, sturdy and plain as Russian peasants. Of the two, Agnes was slightly smaller and softer. She had the comfortable proportions of a woman who'd borne four children, without actually having done so; in fact, she had never been on a date. At that time she worked second shift at the hospital, four to midnight. The other nurses, married with children, groused about the hours; but

Agnes didn't mind.

They were happy years: her parents still living, the mines booming, her father sleeping all day, working the night shift—known locally as *Hoot Owl*—at Baker Nine. Later, looking back, Agnes wished she had paid more attention, that she had noticed and savored every moment. Her mother would have liked more children, but Nature hadn't cooperated; and as she liked to tell her telephone friends, she wasn't one to complain. After all the miscarriages she had been blessed with Theresa, a peppy girl with the energy of several, filling the house with life.

Then, in one bewildering year, several things happened. Theresa graduated high school and went on a diet and began calling herself Terri. She started and quit the nurse's training, married a town cop named Andy Carnicella and moved into her own house behind Mount Carmel, the Italian church in town. And when the dust had settled, Agnes was thirty-one and living with two aging parents, and she understood for the first time that her family were isolated people. Her mother, an only child, had grown up on the Hoeffler farm in the middle of nowhere. Her father's people, the Lubickis, had disapproved of his marriage to Mae: they were Poles, and clannish; and so Mae had never bothered with them. As a result, Agnes had a pile of Lubicki cousins she'd never met. These cousins lived a few miles away, in Bakerton or Moss Creek; but she'd be hard pressed to recognize them in the grocery store.

When Agnes was a girl, this had seemed unimportant. But her mother, in her later years, was lonely. Before her marriage, during the war, Mae had worked four years in the dress factory; she'd retained a few friends from that time—a Mrs. Miller, a Mrs. Goss; women she kept up with by telephone. For years she'd left the house only for church on Sunday. While Agnes or her father did the grocery shopping, Mae stayed at home—to work in the garden; to sew the family's clothes; to bake bread and pies; to put up quarts of vegetables and homemade preserves. Always she cooked enough for a crowd, even after Theresa left and she had only a single overfed daughter and a lean, fussy husband who ate like a bird. They lived in a newish house on the edge of town, a pleasant split-level with a large back yard; and yet Mae labored like a farm wife with a dozen children. Agnes was an adult before she understood that this was work that didn't need to be done, that her

mother had simply been desperate to fill the days.

Sometimes, her other chores finished, Mae would get down on her knees and scrub the garage floor with a brush.

She had never been a beauty—in the eyes of the town, an unlikely bride for John Lubicki, who as a young man had been handsome as a film star. He'd come back from the war determined to marry, a decision made while marching across Belgium sick with pneumonia. What, in that faraway place, made him think of Mae Hoeffler? In school she'd been two grades ahead; she had never been his sweetheart, or anyone else's. When the war ended, handsome John Lubicki had his pick of the Bakerton girls, and he had chosen her.

It had been pointed out—though not to Mae's face—that the Lubickis were dirt poor, and Mae would inherit the Hoeffler farm. In marrying her, John had shown some initiative. The more charitable of the town gossips called it *a practical choice*.

IN THE AFTERNOON the rain stops. Agnes pulls on her boots and walks down the muddy lane to the road. Deer Run is high and winding, overlooking a deep valley. The abandoned coal mine looms in the distance, the rusted tipple of the old Baker Twelve. Years ago, PennDOT had resurfaced Deer Run every year, for the hundreds of miners who drove it each day to work. Now the road is poorly maintained, the asphalt crumbling in places. Moving out here had been Luke's idea: on Deer Run they'd have no prying neighbors. Their trailer is invisible from the road.

Agnes climbs the hill to the mailbox, one of several mounted on an old railroad tie. The other mailboxes are unused, unlabeled—relics from an earlier time, when the property had been covered with trailers. Five years ago a strip mining company, Keystone Surface, had descended on Saxon Mountain, peeling back the trees and vegetation and extracting what coal they could. They'd brought their own trailers and stayed just a year, but you could still see the imprints they'd left behind, rectangular depressions in the bare earth. Luke and Agnes's trailer is the only one left; they rent it from a man named Jay Wenturine, whom Luke calls *my old buddy*. Luke speaks often of his *old buddies*, boyhood friends he's tracked down since returning to town. He'd been a teenager when his father was laid off and moved the family to Maryland. Luke had reappeared in Bakerton less than a year ago, and

met Agnes soon after. In that time she's met no old buddies except Jay Wenturine, who stops by the trailer on the first of each month.

In the mailbox she finds a phone bill addressed to her, a sale flyer from the grocery store. Behind them, wedged at the back of the box, is a slender packet of photographs.

I though you might want to have them.

Greedily she shoves the envelope into her pocket. She walks fast and sticks close to the road. It's the first week of buck season, and the woods ring with gunshot. She should have worn Luke's orange jacket.

Back inside, she opens the packet. The first photo makes her throat ache. Herself and her mother at the kitchen table, rolling dough for noodles. They sit shoulder to shoulder, Agnes in an old sweatshirt, Mae in one of her flowered housedresses. Their large hands are crusted with flour. They wear the same shy smile.

The next photos are from Terri's wedding, a day Agnes has no particular interest in reliving. It's disorienting to see her mother in the dress Terri had chosen for her, a pale blue sack covered with a tent of sheer lace. She is bigger than Agnes remembers, and Dad looks smaller. His tuxedo is a size too large. Terri stands between them in her frilly white dress and picture hat, which had been the style at the time. Agnes herself lurks at the edge of the photo, in her nursing smock and slacks. That day, as always, she'd worked the second shift, though she could have swapped with someone if she'd wanted. She hadn't wanted. She'd been glad to skip the reception at the church hall, to which Terri had invited two hundred guests: Andy Carnicella's large family, plus half her graduating class from Bakerton High. For bridesmaids she'd chosen four friends from high school. *I didn't think you'd want to*, she'd explained to Agnes. Getting dressed up and all. I know you don't like to make a fuss.

Certainly this was true. She'd have been mortified to stand at the altar alongside the others, who even young and slender looked ridiculous in their shiny dresses, with puffed sleeves and a bow on each hip. Still, she'd have liked to be asked.

Agnes shuffles quickly through the photos. Each one sets a fire in her, sharp bright bursts like Fourth of July sparklers: a crackle, a smolder, a lingering trace.

The last photo is of her parents, younger than she has ever imagined them being: her father in uniform, his pompadour glistening

with Brylcream; her mother thinner then, a big raw-boned girl tightly corseted, her red hair crimped into precise curls. They sit at a table littered with empty glasses; behind them, couples are dancing. On the back of the photo is a handwritten date: *June 1, 1946*. In six months they would be married. In two years he'd run the Hoefffer farm into the ground.

She studies the photo. Her father smiles easily for the camera, his arm around Mae's shoulders, a gesture Agnes finds startling. Her parents had never, in her lifetime, shared a bedroom. She can scarcely remember seeing them touch. In his final years, when John Lubicki was breathless and wheezing from Black Lung, it was Agnes who'd combed his hair and shaved his handsome face, who'd pounded his back to help him cough.

The years underground had ruined his lungs, though by local standards he was considered lucky: to have a daughter who'd never married, a daughter who happened to be a nurse. Agnes, a strong girl, had changed his oxygen tanks without fanfare; for many years a local company, Miners Medical, delivered them to the front door. She could strip his bedsheets almost without disturbing him, a magician's trick.

As miners did, he spent a long time dying. His wife, in those years, had seemed sturdy as a tree. Then, ten years into his dying, Mae suffered a sudden stroke and went quietly in her sleep.

Two deaths in a single winter; two funeral Masses. After that Agnes lived alone, in the house her father had left her as payment for her devotion. Three days a week she worked double shifts at the hospital; the other days she slept endlessly. That spring she planted a large garden, as her mother had done. In September she canned sixty quarts of tomatoes.

The following year she planted nothing at all.

She lived on coffee and canned soup, sandwiches made with store-bought bread. Her uniform hung on her like a shroud. Taking in the smock seemed like too much bother, so she ordered new ones from a catalog. Clocks ticked in the quiet house.

This went on for years and would have continued forever, if not for a thunderstorm the spring she turned fifty. A tall poplar in the back yard was struck by lightning. By God's design or His clumsiness, it tipped over onto the roof, and brought Luke Garman to her door.

THE DAY IS vivid in her memory:the smells and weather, the trilling birdsong. She woke that morning in the narrow twin bed, hers since childhood, not imagining that everything was about to change.

For the three days in a row, the roofers had appeared at dawn. When the noise of their hammering punctured her sleep, Agnes rose and dressed and closed the windows against their shouted conversations, their loud radio that played mostly commercials, the slap of shingles falling to the ground.

The roofers worked shirtless; they called each other by last names. Each hammered at his own pace. Wojick was scrawny and blond-haired. He worked fast but took frequent breaks; the lawn was studded with his cigarette butts. Garman had curly hair and a beard the color of caramel. He worked steadily, and took his time.

The third morning, while Agnes was assembling her breakfast, Garman knocked at the kitchen door. He had put on a shirt but hadn't buttoned it. "Can I use your phone?" he asked softly, his voice surprisingly deep.

Up close he was baby-faced, younger than she'd imagined. The beard seemed like a disguise to make him look older:a prop attached with spirit gum, an actor's trick. And yet his grave voice did not belong to a boy. He had a man's voice.

"My partner fell off the ladder. He's all right, but he wants me to call his wife."

Automatically Agnes went to the sink. "Let me see him," she said as she scrubbed her hands. "I'm a nurse."

She followed Garman to the back yard. Wojick lay stretched out on the grass, gripping his shoulder. No blood or abrasions; but his face was white with pain.

"Jesus Christ," he said through gritted teeth. "I landed on my fucking shoulder."

Agnes blinked. His gaunt face surprised her. She had seen him only from behind, his worn bluejeans sliding down his hips, and thought him a teenager. She saw, now, that he was her age.

"Don't move," she said.

She knelt on the grass. Wojick's skinny chest was sunburned, the blond hair going gray at his throat. She slid her hands beneath his back. "Just relax. Let your body go limp."

Wojick did, aided probably by whatever he'd been drinking.

Leaning over him she could smell the alcohol fumes rising from his skin.

In a single smooth motion Agnes lifted his lower back from the ground.

His eyes snapped open. "Whoa. What the hell?"

"You dislocated your shoulder. I moved it back into place."

She eased him into a seated position, remembering that one of her father's sisters—he'd had seven—had married a Wojick. This Wojick, if he was aware of the connection, seemed unlikely to care.

"Holy shit." Gingerly he felt his shoulder, as if making sure it was still there. "That's some trick."

Agnes helped him to his feet. "You should have an X-ray." She glanced at Garman, who stood watching. "Can you take him to the emergency room?"

"My wife can take me," said Wojick. "You called her, right?"

"Hold your horses," Garman said.

Agnes led him back into the house and showed him the telephone, an old rotary model on the kitchen wall.

"My grandmother had one of these," Garman said.

He dialed a number and spoke softly. Agnes closed her eyes and listened to his voice.

"Franny, it's Luke. Ken took a header. He's all right, but he wants you to come get him."

Luke, Agnes thought.

LATER, AFTER WOJICK'S wife had come and gone, Agnes went outside with a glass of cold water. The afternoon was muggy and still, no breeze blowing. Luke was kneeling on the grass, collecting shingles into a pile. His back was tanned and freckled, the skin peeling at the shoulders. His beard looked very soft.

"Here." She handed him the glass, struck by how easy it was. For three days he had labored in the hot sun. At any point she might have brought him a glass of water. Why had she waited so long?

He took it and drank deeply, half the glass in one gulp.

"What you did before," he said. "My buddy didn't thank you."

"That's all right," Agnes said.

"He's not usually like that." He stood. "Be careful. There are nails everywhere."

They both looked down at her bare feet—bony and white, the second toe longer than it should be. She felt a sudden urge to apologize for her feet.

“He’ll need to rest his shoulder,” she said instead. “For a few weeks at least.”

“That’s all right. I can finish without him. One more day should do it.”

Agnes shaded her eyes and looked up at the roof.

“Your gutters are shot,” Luke told her. “I can replace them if you want. I can work up a price tomorrow.”

“I thought you were a roofer.”

“I do everything.” He drained the glass and handed it back to her. His mouth looked moist and shiny. His fingers had left an imprint on the sweaty glass.

HOW THEY BECAME what they are is a question she’s stopped asking. She accepts it as she accepts other miracles, the Resurrection and Ascension. A few she has witnessed firsthand—spontaneous remissions, children sick with leukemia who recovered without warning—but none have involved her personally. Luke is the most remarkable thing that’s ever happened to her, the only one really. The great mystery of her life.

“I’m fifty years old,” she told him only once. “Old enough to be your mother.”

“My mother is dead,” he said.

She’d died young, an aggressive cancer. At the end she’d cried tears of joy, ready to meet her personal Savior. After that her boys had run wild, looking for trouble. In Baltimore, where the family had settled, trouble was easily found.

“We never should have left here,” was all Luke would tell her. “From that day on, everything went to hell.”

It seemed unkind to point out that certain things would have happened anyway, that cancer didn’t care where you lived.

In Agnes’s room they pushed the twin beds together, the only possible solution. There were no double beds in the house.

Though she wanted to, she did not apologize for her feet, or any other part of her. She didn’t tell him, *I’ve never done this before*. She imagined it was obvious enough.

The act itself was not quite what she'd pictured. The main difference was the presence of herself. Her fantasies, always, had involved other people: beautiful women desired, handsome men enraptured. They were late-night thoughts, unbidden and unwanted; secret movies playing in her head. She, Agnes Lubicki, never appeared in these films. Occasionally she'd wondered: did other women, normal women, have such fantasies? Or did they dream only about themselves?

THE SUMMER UNROLLED like a satin ribbon. In the evening, after supper, they sat on the back porch until sunset. When the sky was dark she followed him to the bedroom. Luke was an early riser: exhausted by nine o'clock, wide awake at dawn.

Was it strange that, lying in his arms, Agnes thought of her mother? Though hard to imagine, it was probably true: at one time, long ago, Mae had known a similar happiness. She thought of her sister in the house across town, lying next to Andy Carnicella. They'd shared a bed for so many years that it must now seem commonplace.

She thought of her own young womanhood, gone without her noticing: her twenties and thirties, her forties even; each decade much like the last. It was pointless to wonder, now, how the years had escaped her. The hundreds of days—thousands—when she might have brought a man a glass of water, and changed the course of her life.

The house and the yard were their whole world. Luke had suggested, once or twice, going out to eat; but Agnes found reasons not to. Her mother had disdained restaurants. The prices offended her—Mae called them highway robbery—but the truth, Agnes knew, was more complex. Crowds, even small ones, had alarmed her. Each Sunday she'd given herself a silent talking-to, to work up the nerve to walk into church. I'm not like her, Agnes told herself often. All day long, at work, she spoke to nurses and doctors and patients. Restaurants did not scare her. She simply preferred eating at home.

August was a dry month, good for house painting. Luke was perched on a ladder when Terri's car pulled into the driveway. She came in without knocking and found Agnes in the kitchen fixing supper. She pointed out the window. "Who's he?"

"He's painting the house," Agnes said.

"I can see that." Terri's eyes narrowed. "I saw Mrs. Lipnic at the market. She says his truck is parked here at all hours."

Agnes busied herself at the sink. "He's been doing some work for me. He replaced the gutters and the fence."

Terri's eyes darted around the room, to Luke's boots lined up at the door, his can of snuff on the table, his jacket hanging from a hook on the wall.

"He's living here," she said in a low voice. "You're living here together. In Mum and Daddy's house."

"Go home," Agnes said softly. *Go home to your husband. Let me have something.*

"Do you really think he loves you?" Terri asked.

It was the look on her face as she asked the question, the scorn and disbelief, that made Agnes say what she said next:

"I'm selling the house."

Terri looked stunned. "You can't. Daddy wanted you to live here. That's why he left it to you."

He'd dead, Agnes thought. They're both dead. And I am still alive.

"Agnes, why?"

"I need the money." The lie rolled easily off her tongue. For twenty-eight years she'd worked double shifts. The large paychecks had gone into a savings account. She had never paid rent or taken a vacation. Her car, a frugal Ford Escort, was bought in cash ten years ago.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll give you half."

Terri stared at her, her face crumpling. She was near tears. "Agnes, what's happened to you?"

UNDERPRICED, THE HOUSE sold quickly. "What's your hurry?" the agent demanded, disappointed by the small commission. "You're giving away the store."

Agnes knew it was true. Her mother's voice haunted her—*You're throwing away good money*—but she was learning to ignore it. Her time with Luke was beyond price. Their life together was a stolen thing—the months of happiness, years maybe, though she couldn't imagine being that lucky. She had the sensation, often, of living someone else's life. Sooner or later its rightful owner would steal it back.

Knowing this, she paid attention. She noticed everything: Luke shaving at her bathroom mirror, drinking coffee in her kitchen; his clean shirts spinning in her dryer in a dance of wild joy. From time to

time the thought ambushed her: *someday I will be alone again*. When the time came, she would manage. Solitude was an ache she knew, as familiar as her own body. She could bear to be alone again, but not in her parents' silent house.

IN THE AFTERNOON she vacuums the trailer, ignoring the telephone. She roasts a chicken for supper, and takes Ore-Ida French fries from the freezer. They are her favorite food; she marvels at their uniform size and shape. Her mother had grown potatoes by the bushel and stored them in the cellar. If she could see Agnes now, spending two dollars for a bag of frozen French fries! Made from scratch they would cost twenty cents.

Again and again the phone rings. It strikes her as unusually shrill, an echo of her sister's voice. Certain telephones, she knows, can display the number of the person calling; but the phone company charges extra for this service. Her parents' thrift is an inherited disease, one she can't quite shake.

"Finally," Luke says when she answers. "I've been calling you all day." A large engine hums in the background. He shouts to be heard over the noise.

"I thought it was my sister," says Agnes. "She stopped by this morning."

"What did she want?"

To take me back, she thinks. *To take me away from you*.

"Where are you?" she asks. "I can barely hear you."

"At the site. We finished early." He's started working for an old buddy, Rick Marstellar, who gets state contracts to clean up contaminated lands. Unlike other businesses in Saxon County, Rick Marstellar's is thriving. There is a great deal here to clean up.

"Listen," says Luke. "I'm bringing someone home for supper. Someone I want you to meet."

THE DAYS ARE getting shorter. It is nearly dark when his truck comes down the lane. The passenger is a girl she's never seen before. Agnes meets them at the door.

"This is Renee," Luke says. "My daughter."

The girl is tall and slender and commonly pretty: little snub nose, velvet brown eyes like a puppy's or a deer's. Her eyes are ringed with

dark liner, her hair bleached silver-blond. To Agnes she looks older than fifteen.

“Welcome,” says Agnes. She’s known all along that Luke has children, that he was married and divorced, years ago, in Maryland. Then there were the girls he didn’t marry. He’d told her on the phone that Renee came from one of those, when he was only sixteen.

They sit down to eat. Luke devours most of the chicken. He has the appetite of a teenager; watching, Agnes wonders if it will catch up with him. She tries to imagine him her own age: thinning hair, a belly paunch. It is impossible to visualize.

Renee eats only a little. Her hands are delicate and birdlike, decorated with silver jewelry. She picks up a chicken wing with her fingertips and licks them when she is done.

In between bites Luke talks about his day. He started and finished a job in Kinport, pulling an underground tank from an abandoned gas station. The tank had been leaking for God knows how long, gasoline leaching into the soil. Luke’s crew hoisted the tank, then dug out the tainted earth and loaded it into a dump truck. The driver—Luke calls him a *dirt merchant*—makes his living hauling contaminated soil to the incinerator.

The work is filthy and exhausting, but Rick Marstellar pays well. “He can afford to,” Luke says, helping himself to more potatoes. “He’s making out like a bandit.” He chews each mouthful three times, then swallows. He gobbles noisily, like a dog.

After supper Agnes clears the dishes. Renee rises to help, her sharp hipbones visible through her jeans. *I was that young once*, Agnes thinks, but it isn’t true. At fifteen she was middle-aged already. She is younger now than she was then.

Agnes washes and Renee dries, until Renee complains: “I don’t know where anything goes.”

Agnes takes the dish towel and hands her the sponge.

“Thanks for letting me stay here.” Renee takes four rings from each hand and sets them on the windowsill. “My mom kicked me out. I guess he told you.”

“Why did she do that?” Agnes asks.

“She hates my boyfriend. She says he’s too old for me. I don’t think that matters.” Renee squirts Palmolive into the greasy roasting pan. “Do you?”

Agnes thinks of herself at fifteen, a sophomore at Bakerton High. She recalls Spanish and history, chemistry, and geometry. She has no recollection of even speaking to a boy.

"I have no idea," she says.

Renee eyes her curiously. "You don't have kids, do you?"

"No," says Agnes.

"I can tell," Renee says.

"I'LL TAKE HER with me in the morning," says Luke. "I can drop her off then."

They are lying in bed face to face, their feet touching.

"At school?" says Agnes.

"Yeah. It's on my way." He takes her hand. "Let's go out tomorrow. Celebrate my first paycheck. A day early, but so what." This is something local couples do, something Luke and Agnes have never done: drink beer and share a pizza at the Commercial Hotel.

"All right," Agnes says.

She wishes he would reach for her, but the walls are thin in the trailer. Unless she is dead asleep, Renee, on the fold-out couch Agnes made up for her, will hear everything.

"How long is she going to stay?" Agnes whispers.

"Depends on her mother," says Luke. "They had a fight. About what, I don't know."

Her mother, Agnes thinks. Who is she? Did you love her?

"She doesn't like Renee's boyfriend," she says.

"She told you that?" Luke looks surprised. "Did she say why?"

"He's too old for her."

Luke rolls onto his other side and stares up at the window. "How old is he?"

"I don't know," Agnes says.

IT IS STILL DARK when the alarm rings. Rain beats at the roof of the trailer. Luke releases her with a little groan. In the living room Renee is asleep on the sofa bed. Agnes dresses in her uniform and decides against breakfast. It's only a dollar, she thinks, and buys a cup of coffee on the way.

Her shift passes slowly. On and off she thinks of the Commercial Hotel, herself and Luke sitting at the bar, in full view of whoever might

walk through the door. Anyone would say they make a strange couple. She recalls the photo of her parents, her plain, shy mother at a dance club—the Legion or the Vets—with handsome John Lubicki. By the time Agnes was born, Mae had retreated to the house; she had simply stopped trying. Was this the reason she'd withdrawn from the world? Was she so afraid of what people would say?

By the end of her shift the rain stops. Wind chases her across the parking lot. The air smells wet and loamy, the rich perfume of decaying leaves. Agnes hears footsteps behind her, the sharp clomp of high heels.

“Agnes!”

She turns. Her sister stands beneath a floodlight. She wears a wool coat several sizes too big, a scarf wrapped at her throat. She looks like a child dressed by a careful mother, bundled against the cold.

“Jo told me you were working,” she says.

It is the curse of living in a small town. Jo, the charge nurse, was a high school classmate of Terri's.

“I didn't know what else to do. I haven't heard from you in months.” In the strong light Terri looks tired. Her hair is shorter and parted in the middle. At the part Agnes notices a few strands of gray.

“I stopped by your house the other day. Your—trailer. I saw his motorcycle outside.”

Agnes waits.

“You bought it for him,” says Terri.

“No,” Agnes lies.

They stand a long moment staring at each other.

“Thanks for the photos,” says Agnes. “I'm glad to have them.”

A truck backs up to the delivery entrance, beeping loudly. The beeping waxes and wanes with the shifting wind.

“Why do you hate me?” says Terri. “What did I do?”

“I don't hate you,” says Agnes, because she doesn't. The second question is harder to answer, and she doesn't try.

“I have to go. Luke is waiting. We have plans.” She digs for her car keys and turns away abruptly. She wants only to escape the beeping truck, her sister's stricken face.

“He was in prison down in Maryland,” says Terri. “Did he tell you that? For armed robbery. Andy knows all about it.”

Of course Agnes knows. The store was empty except for the clerk, who wasn't hurt. Luke was nineteen at the time. He served four years.

“You don’t know anything about him,” she says, opening the car door.

Terri grabs her arm. “I saw him in town yesterday. He had a girl with him.”

“That’s his daughter,” says Agnes, not turning.

“How do you know?”

WHEN AGNES GETS home the trailer is dark. Luke’s truck is gone.

Inside, the sofa bed is closed up, the sheets stripped and rolled into a ball. She changes out of her uniform and eyes the balled-up sheets—warily, as though some small animal, a squirrel or raccoon, has invaded her home.

How do you know?

The answer, of course, is that she doesn’t. Luke’s parents and grandparents came from Coalport, two towns over. Mae, if she were alive, would know the family’s entire history, or would ask one of her telephone friends.

Of course, if her mother were alive, Agnes would have no need of this information. If her mother were alive, she wouldn’t be living with Luke.

In the kitchen she puts away dishes, the clean Ziploc bags left on the counter to dry. She knows that thrift is not the disease: it is only a symptom. The underlying illness is more exotic—inherited from her mother, a familial loneliness and strangeness. It’s a condition that can’t be cured, only managed; like hypertension or diabetes.

And yet her sister had somehow escaped it.

Why do you hate me? What did I do?

The Commercial Hotel would be lively at this hour, the after-work crowd: music pouring out the windows, a live band maybe. Agnes has driven past, often, on Thursday nights, and knows that this is so.

IT IS NEARLY midnight when Luke’s truck barrels down the lane. He smells smoky, a little beery. “We stopped out after work,” he says. “Rick was buying, so I figured why not.”

Because we had plans, Agnes thinks. Because I was waiting for you.

“Where’s Renee?” she asks.

Luke shrugs. “Her mother’s, I guess. She’s pissed at me.”

“Why?” Agnes asks, feeling her heart.

“Why do you think?” He struggles out of his jacket and tosses it on the couch. “She wants money, like everybody. She needs it for school. It’s the only reason she tracked me down.” He heads into the kitchen, his muddy boots leaving a trail on the carpet. “She says I never gave her anything.”

“Did you?” Agnes asks. Twice a month he pays child support for the three boys in Maryland. She has seen the check stubs. They are the only checks Luke ever writes.

He looks startled by the question. “I’m not even sure she’s mine, you want to know the truth.” He opens the refrigerator and studies its contents. “I wanted to take a paternity test, way back when. Her mother wouldn’t let me.” He nods once, as if vindicated. “That tells you something right there.”

Agnes supposes it does. Though what exactly it tells her is not clear.

“Don’t get me wrong. She’s a good kid. I’d give it to her if I had it.” He considers and rejects a bowl of leftover spaghetti. “Can’t get blood from a stone.”

THE NEXT MORNING, after Luke leaves for work, there is a knock at the door. Agnes remembers it’s the first of the month, and takes the checkbook from her purse.

A scrawny blond man stands on the porch. It takes her a moment to place him. When she does, she steps outside and closes the door.

“How’s your shoulder?” she asks.

Wojick looks at her without recognition. “Okay, I guess.”

“I’m Agnes. You worked on my roof.” She sees him eying the checkbook in her hand. “I thought you were the landlord.”

“No, but I’ll take his money.” He grins, showing snaggle teeth. “Where’s your man? He go hunting?”

“At work,” says Agnes.

Wojick looks surprised. “He got a job?”

“At Penn Reclamation.”

“Rick hired him? I never heard that.” Wojick pats the chest pocket of his jacket, a worn Carhartt like Luke’s. “I just cashed my settlement check. From that accident I had. It’s a long story,” he says, seeing her

frown. "I need someone to help me celebrate."

"He's on a job in Fallentree," says Agnes. "I'll tell him you stopped by."

"All right, then." Wojick ambles down the porch steps, hands in his pockets, his breath steaming in the cold. He stops to study Luke's motorcycle, parked at the bottom of the stairs.

"That's some bike he's got. It's a twelve hundred, right?"

Agnes shrugs.

"Looks brand new," says Wojick. "Where'd he get a bike like that?"

The idea comes to her all at once, with unusual clarity. It seems both correct and inevitable.

"It's for sale," she says.

THAT NIGHT SHE works second shift. She leaves a note for Luke: Supper is in the oven. When she comes home his dirty plate is in the sink. He paces the trailer like a zoo animal, a large, healthy beast in a small, rickety cage.

"I saw Kenny Wojick today," he says. "He came by the job site."

Agnes does not respond to this.

"He was riding a motorcycle. My goddamned bike." Luke studies her intently, waiting for her to speak. Calmly she returns his gaze.

"You could've told me you were going to sell it."

"That's true," she says.

She squeezes past him and heads for the freezer, takes out pork chops for tomorrow's supper. "It wasn't practical," she says. "We have other expenses."

Luke stares at her, not comprehending.

"She's your daughter. You owe her something."

He looks dumbfounded. "Renee?"

"She'll be graduating in a couple years. She'll need money for school." Agnes turns to face him. She is nearly his height. He told her, once, that he liked tall women. He didn't mention her specifically, so it wasn't technically a compliment; but Agnes cherishes it as though it were.

"We'll work it out with her mother," she says. "We can talk to her together." She thinks: *leave me now, if you're going to. If you're going to go, just go.*

THE COMMERCIAL HOTEL is lively on Friday night, already decorated for Christmas: an artificial tree with twinkling lights, tinsel hanging in loops from the pool table and the bar. On the walls are framed photographs, the owner with a variety of sports heroes: a Pirate, a Penguin, a Steeler; men Agnes doesn't recognize until Luke explains who they are.

He finds an open booth, and Agnes slides in beside him. She glances around the room. They are bulky and anonymous in their jeans and parkas; they look like every other couple starting off the weekend with a pitcher of beer.

In the corner, beside the Christmas tree, the band is setting up. The Vipers are young boys—younger, even, than Luke; skinny and eager in their T-shirts and denim jackets, not knowing or not caring that they're underdressed for the cold. One makes adjustments to a drum kit. The others tune electric guitars. Agnes watches them intently, thinking how, in a few years, they will find jobs and wives, lose and then replace them. Children will be born, parents buried, paychecks cashed, timecards punched. Fatigue will set in, the weight of understanding; and the lean eagerness of these Vipers will dissipate. The years will grow on them like moss on a tree.

Luke orders a pepperoni pie and a pitcher. He eats six slices to Agnes's two.

"We should do this every week," he says between mouthfuls.

"I'd like that," Agnes says.