

Kathleen Miller / THREE STORIES

CROWS

There was something she needed to tell him. But she couldn't remember what. She couldn't even remember what she had ordered, just minutes ago. He touched her hand. Anything wrong? There was real concern in his voice. There always was. She smiled and shook her head.

He began planning out loud. He drew one of his plans on his serviette for her to see. She looked, pretending to understand the crosshatch of blue ballpoint lines shredding the nubby paper. He had plans to renovate, plans to add on. Plans for himself and plans for her, too. Sometimes he would steeple his fingers and look long and hard at her. Then he would make a suggestion: she should try this, take a course in that, get a job doing something else. She was a remarkable person, he would insist, his eyes very earnest behind their square lenses. Her potential was awesome.

She allowed herself, on occasion, to laugh at his plans. But gently. Sweetly. Carefully.

This morning, she did not laugh. She sat pretending to listen, watching his mouth move. Part of her was still trying to remember what she had ordered. The other part was trying to feel the shape of the thing inside her.

It was, she decided, like a large, round, smooth stone. Its surface was like glass. No, like marble, for she couldn't see inside it. Looking at him, smiling at the right times, making the correct sounds, she kept coming back to it. She touched it with inner hands, examined it with inner eyes. It was sitting just below her breastbone, bobbing slightly like a buoy.

He had stopped talking and was looking at her. She felt a flutter of panic, wondering which smile she had mistimed, what inappropriate sound she had made. But his eyes were warm and teasing. She had something on her mind, didn't she? Sure she did. He could tell. What was it? Come on!

Her mind screeched in fast forward and reverse, searching for something to say. When she found it, she continued to smile. But part of her backed slowly away, appalled at what she was about to do. She took a deep breath and told him she had been remembering something from her childhood. He nodded encouragingly.

One spring, she began, when she was very small, she kicked an eggshell with her foot. She thought it was just a blue-grey mottled stone. It tumbled a little way in the grass, then stopped. She saw then that it was in fact a bird's egg, broken, with a baby bird sticking halfway out. The baby bird was all scrunched up and bald, with bulging purple eyelids, like a beaky-nosed little old woman. She picked it up carefully and put it on a flat rock in the sun. There, she reasoned, it would stay warm until the mother and father bird could pick it up and take it back to the nest.

And sure enough, two big black crows flew down in a little while and examined the baby bird. They bobbed their heads and strutted, ruffling their feathers, as if wondering what to do. A third big black crow joined them. That seemed to help them decide, for one of the first pair suddenly stabbed down with its beak. It flew with something clamped there up onto a wire, where it swallowed jerkily and cawed. Then it flew back down to the rock where the other two were rhythmically stabbing and tearing.

The waiter brought their food. She looked down at her plate and saw two poached eggs with bloodshot rims of smoked salmon and an iris of sliced black olive in the middle of each. Then she looked up into his eyes. He was bewildered and blinking, his mouth softly open.

She reached out and covered his hand with hers. She said she was sorry for telling him that awful story. For upsetting him, putting him off his brunch. She even managed a tear. She was just tired, she said. And crampy. And bitchy. When she had denigrated herself enough, he forgave her and dug in.

She wondered how long he would go on accepting the usual excuses. Still, it was true about being tired. Last night they had given another dinner party. Just after the soup, she had smilingly excused herself and gone into the kitchen. She had stood as far away from the closed door as she could, still hearing the talking and laughing and clinking and chewing. Then she had squatted down, knees to chin, and had scream-whispered shut up! shut up! shut up! into the pink-tinted darkness of her palms. She had stood up and dropped her hands just in time. Half a second later, he had poked

his head around the kitchen door. What was keeping her? They were ready for their fish.

First like a fish, they said. Then like a bird. A scrunched-up, featherless, purple-eyed bird. And what now? What did it look like now?

Steam rose from the yellow eyes on her plate. She tried to concentrate on watching him eat. He always ordered the same thing, and ate it with a little boy's gusto that usually made her smile. She watched him spread his potato pancakes with sour cream, then chop up his side order of sausages, then attack his fried egg, scrambling it up...

He pulled one of her hands away from her face. There WAS something wrong! Did she want to go home? No. Sure? Yes. She just couldn't eat. She'd just have her coffee. And she'd be fine.

Over the rim of her cup, she saw a tiny speck of shell in his egg. She should have told him about it. She watched it slide onto his fork, travel up into his mouth, be chewed and swallowed. She really should have said something. A person could choke on a speck of shell.

Choking is a possibility with a general, even if one eats nothing beforehand. Having told her this, the doctor had steepled his fingers and suggested she have a local. The discomfort was minimal and the procedure a fast one, thirty minutes at the most.

They'd have to be fast, he said, wiping his mouth. They had a lot planned besides picking out the prints. He motioned to the waiter for more coffee. Then he drummed his fingers, waiting.

Her eye traced his profile, his boyishly tousled hair, the important-looking thrust of his glasses. Where, she wondered, had her feeling for him gone? Had it been sucked up by the thing inside her? Everyone told her how lucky she was to have him. He got As in all the right categories. In those magazine surveys—"Quiche-eater or Caveman: Rate your Mate"—he would get a tick in the best box every time. He dressed well. He had a diagram of different knots taped over his tie rack. Before they went out, he always asked her anxiously if his knot was straight. Knowing he did not want a frivolous answer, she always took her time replying.

Just as he had taken his time before replying to her question. He had cleared his throat, taken his glasses off and cleaned them with his handkerchief. He always had a clean handkerchief. Then, his face neutral, he had sat at the table across from her and had folded his hands. He had answered, looking at his hands the whole time, that it was entirely up to her. He claimed no rights in the matter. It was her decision. It was hers. Then he had cleared his throat again, and assured her that, naturally, he would not leave her. Should she. Decide. To.

She had reached out and covered his hands with hers, saving him having to finish. She had seen his knuckles turning white.

He raised a finger for the bill, then asked the waiter for a coffee to go. For her, she realized. Because she had not been able to finish hers. He did little things like that. Saw her little needs and filled them.

She rose carefully while he held her coat, again aware of the thing bobbing beneath her breastbone. She knew, suddenly, that it was hollow. And she knew, of course, that it was not actually beneath her breastbone, but somewhere in her head. Everything happened in her head. She had an orgasm in her head. The stone in her shoe hurt in her head. She knew that. Still. She moved carefully, imagining the thing knocking against the red-ridged inner walls of her body.

The waiter brought her coffee and set it on the table in front of her. It was in a styrofoam cup with a fitted plastic lid. The lid was fogged with the heat of the contents. She stared at it. There it was. The forgotten thing she needed to tell him. That it was kept—not thrown out or burned right away, but kept in a covered styrofoam container. To be examined. The pieces identified. The results noted down. The procedure justified, its tangible results seen to be. Perhaps if he knew that it wasn't just gone, that it was somewhere, that it WAS...

He was shifting his feet impatiently behind her. They had to hurry. They had plans. She thrust her arms back into the sleeves of the coat he was holding. He had not noticed her looking at the cup. He was not aware that she left it behind.

Outside, the spring wind was fresh and clean. He grinned at her, his tie flapping crazily, his hair parting and reparting all over his head. He grabbed her hand and swung it. He told her the wind had rosied up her face, and that she was beautiful, and that he loved her.

Some moments, she knew, were the hooks on which she hung her life. She tried to fill herself up with the spring wind, right down to the bottom. It was going to be all right, she told herself. That covered styrofoam cup—surely she could just...

Just keep in mind what we want, he advised her. Take your time choosing. They had arrived at the print shop. They had a horizontal space to fill in their livingroom, and a vertical space in their bedroom. Their colours were grey and cream. Their accessories were brass.

She began flipping through a rack of prints, trying to think only of grey, cream and brass. That covered styrofoam cup... She would just tuck it inside. Inside the hollow stone beneath her breast, where everything else had gone. Her inner hands ran over it again. No cracks. No openings. And not a stone, after all. Her inner eyes saw the smooth, blue-grey mottled surface. She was flipping very quickly through the rack, not seeing the prints. How could she tuck the covered styrofoam cup inside if the egg had no opening?

But she had needed a general. She had needed to be knocked right out. The doctor with the steepled fingers had told her the pain would be worse, after, if she had a general. Best to stay awake.

But when she had wakened, there had been no pain. None. She had braced herself for it, had searched carefully within herself for it. Her inner hands had finally been stopped by the smooth walls of the egg.

The egg contained thirty minutes of her life. Had she just lain there? Had she even once screamed at them to stop?

She stopped flipping through the prints. He came up behind her to see what she was staring at. Van Gogh's *Wheatfield With Crows*. A long, thin, drawn-out painting of glaring yellow wheat and angry black crows in a too-blue sky. He let his breath out testily. Yes, he liked Van Gogh, too, but so did everybody else. And *Wheatfield With Crows* was ubiquitous, even trite. Besides, it wasn't in their colours. It wouldn't fit in with their plan.

Naturally, she agreed. And naturally, she loved the subtle, delicate Japanese prints he had found. They would be perfect for the horizontal space in the livingroom and the vertical space in the bedroom.

While he took the prints over to the framing table, she wandered back to the rack that still stood open at *Wheatfield With Crows*. She began thinking mad thoughts about slipping it out of its plastic envelope, rolling it up and sneaking it out of the shop under her coat. Hanging it anywhere she wanted, and letting it scream and scream from the wall. She was so absorbed that he had to call her three times to come see the frames he had chosen.

THE LURE

First, my father lifts the fish flip-flopping from its prison pail, then hits it on the head just behind the eyes with the butt of his hunting knife. The fish stiffens in his hand, the eyes becoming the smudged glass eyes of a doll. Then he zippers the knife point down either side of the backbone and peels the silvered skin down to the belly, exposing the grey-veined, bloodless flesh. His blunt fingers begin a delicate exploration for the natural divisions as he separates flesh from bone. He stacks the fillets on a piece of waxed paper and balances it carefully on my out-stretched palms.

"Take that in t'your mother."

The day belongs to my father. These three weeks are his only holiday all year, my mother reminds me as we walk the road behind the cabin. That is why her holiday and mine must fit around the edges of his.

The dirt of the road is a soft, dry powder for my bare feet. Behind us is an unbroken trail of dust suspended in the hot air, marking where we have walked. While we pick daisies and black-eyed susans, we can always catch sight of my father fishing alone in his boat in the middle of the lake. The flowers bend mournfully in the dry dirt by the side of the road. The surrounding grass is sere. I keep thinking of the vase of cool lake water waiting in the cabin for the thirsting stems of the flowers we pick.

By the time my mother and I have gone to the little highway store for ice cream cones, and have come back to the cabin crunching the last points of biscuit, my father is sitting at the picnic table, cleaning the day's catch. I give my flowers to my mother and go to sit across from him, watching.

For these three weeks, the three of us live in one of eight cabins that cluster around the owner's white house like chicks around a hen. My parents sleep in the bottom of the bunk bed, and I on the top, my face inches from the slanting wooden roof. Every morning I creep down the ladder past my sleep-rumpled parents, take a towel and bar of soap from the counter and go down to the shore to wash my hands and face in the lake.

There is a small sanded inlet where we go in to swim. The lake nudges gently, probing the shore with a finger. Its morning ripples are tiny. Even the minnows are still in the shallows. The lake in the morning is my own huge, gentled beast.

But by day, it belongs to my father. It carries him along as he cuts its surface with oar and outboard motor. Then it swallows the anchor he throws overboard and rocks his boat gently while he sits still as a monument, fishing.

I am fishing with him today—something that has never happened before. Last night he lit a cigarette and, along with the smoke, exhaled the words,

“Go out’n th’lake with me t’morrah?”

His grey cut-glass eye fixed on me. My mother did not turn around from the two-burner hot plate where she was frying fish. But I could tell she was waiting. So I nodded that, yes, I would go fishing with him.

I didn’t want to. I wanted to lie on my top bunk and read Nancy Drew, or dress and undress Barbie, forever surprised at the sight of her identical nippleless breasts. But I nodded.

And this morning, earlier than ever, I surprised the lake in its dawn smoothness. A perfect mirror for its ring of perfectly straight green pines. And no minnows at all in the shallows. Nothing. It had been waiting for me, but not as the gentled beast would wait. If I watched its centre long enough, surely a silver sword-tip would pierce the surface, held by a white hand on a white arm, slender as lake weed.

I shook my head and marched to the shore, where I spoiled the clear surface of the lake by washing my hands and face. I squatted for a long time on the bank, my face in the pink-tinted darkness of my hands.

Now, when the boat speeds up and the breeze turns to wind, my face begins to feel chapped. The joints of my right hand are water, for my father has let me handle the tiller of the outboard for the first time. Guided by his own square, freckled hand, the nose of the boat swings with grace. But under mine, it jerks and bounces and bucks. I can’t get used to pushing the tiller left to go right and right to go left. I am relieved when my father cuts the engine and drops the anchor, a rock-filled paint can with wire mesh at either end open to shed water.

The lake is choppy now, its dawn perfection the fading memory of a dream. It bobs our boat as hands would a balloon. Each of my father's cigarette butts makes a soft hiss as it hits the water. They form an escort for us of tiny yellow-brown vessels. To them, and to the water skimmers frantically rowing, we are an ocean liner.

Every few minutes, my father casts his line out and reels it part way in. I do it too, adopting his rhythm. I like to cast. My wrist knows how to send the fly in a perfect arc, and my thumb knows exactly when to release the button. I do not remember being taught this. Surely, if I had been taught, I would remember his rarely heard words, his even more rarely felt hand on my wrist.

Between casts, he sits with both forearms balanced on his knees, the wrists hanging. The right hand holds a cigarette. The left, with deceptive gentleness, cradles the fishing rod. Yet at the first dipping of the rod's tip, that hand will clench into iron.

"C'mon, ya bugger!"

When my mother is with us, she says a reproving "Bill!" and is ignored.

Usually, when she says his name, she puts a question mark after it—"Bill?"—as if she must first awaken him from a kind of sleep. He lifts his head and looks at her, and this is her cue to begin. She has developed a stream of unanswerable prattle to fill the hole of his silence. I try to think of what she says, but can remember only the rhythm and melody of her voice, not the actual words. She is as comfortable on the periphery of his silence as he is within it.

I am not comfortable. Nancy Drew always says bright, chirpy things to her lawyer father, who steeples his fingers and comes back with precisely the bit of wisdom she needs at the moment. But I can't think of anything to say. I strain against the silence, wondering if he is straining back.

This is the longest I have spent alone with him since the day he took me with him on his rounds in the company car. Peterborough, Gravenhurst, North Bay, Sudbury. Names barely mentioned over supper, when my mother manages to get out of him where he's been. And now I was seeing them. At least, I was seeing the corners of them he visited.

They were identical islands of noise dotting the long, silent miles we covered. Dusty offices flimsily attached to dustier factories. Screen doors that banged. Plants quietly browning in curtainless, sun-drenched windows. Chipped arborite counters with men behind

them whose eyes widened when they saw my father. They called him "Bill!" with an exclamation mark.

And my father pushed his hat back and leaned his elbows on the counter, his hips cocked at an angle. He talked loud, saying "This here" and "Not nothin'." His grin was fixed and fierce. He barked a laugh that would have made my mother look away and sniff.

To explain me, he would boast, "Got muh sweetie with me!" or "This here's muh honey!" I would stare warm-faced at the scuffed floor while roars of "Hey, hey, hey!" or "Ain't she a cutie!" crashed like waves over my head.

Then a great to-do would be made about what was to be done with me while business was conducted. "She kin sit right over here!" "Yah! She'll be fine, wontcha Honey?" One of the behind-the-counter men found me a dusty, cellophane-wrapped sucker.

Then I would sit, hearing but not comprehending their loud talk. It was like being in a strange house, or even a strange country. I could not speak the language, and could offend by simply being. So I sat perfectly still.

It was the same as standing perfectly still beside my mother while she talked over the backyard fence to Mrs. Kiraja. They both stood with their laundry baskets balanced on one hip, sometimes dabbing at the front of their hair in a token tidying gesture. They called each other "Mrs." and spoke in hushed, courteous tones, looking directly into each other's wide eyes. Though they might shift their laundry baskets from one hip to the other, they would never put them down on the ground, for to do this would be to suggest they actually had the time to talk.

A man, he works from sun to sun,
But a woman's work is never done.

My mother sometimes said this to me, along with,

A son's a son till he takes a wife,
But a daughter's a daughter all her life.

She liked poems that rhymed, and she liked hymns. Sometimes, in the middle of the day, in her housedress, with dust motes boiling up from the keys, she would play the piano and sing,

And He WALKS with me and He TALKS with me
And He tells me I am His Oooowwnnn...

Or "Jerusalem," or "The Old Rugged Cross," or "Onward Christian Soldiers," all in her high, uncertain soprano.

It was on a Sunday, in church, that it came to me that my mother was actually a happy woman. On Sunday, she was the chooser of shirts, the straightener of ties, the whitener of shoes and the mender of gloves. In church, she bloomed while my father looked artificial.

Through the week, the house was her country, from the laundry tubs in the basement, up through the kitchen, into the farthest corners of the bleach-smelling linen closet, and up into my room, where she poked under my bed with her mop, dragging out grey tumbleweeds of dust. Only certain powers she conceded to my father when he came home. She would say "Bill?" then tell of a faucet dripping, an oven that stayed cool, a sewing machine in need of oil.

I doubt she ever came with my father on a typical day's run and sat where I sat in the dusty offices. I doubt she ever wanted to. Listening to the men feeling acutely my difference, I tried to imagine myself holding a laundry basket, talking over a fence to a neighbour lady. I could not. I could not seem to put my face into that picture. So I looked again at the men, and wondered what would happen here if I were a boy.

Would my father say, "This here's muh boy," or even, "Wantcha t'meet my son"? "Son" had a ring to it. Shimmering, like the sound of cymbals meeting. Would there be handshakes, and then would I stand beside him, peeping over the counter, listening to the hard talk, learning?

It didn't matter. I was a daughter. All my life.

The lake tickles the sides of our rocking boat, making whispering, kissing sounds. Beneath us, the water is deep and dark. When we set out, the lake bottom dropped away with alarming speed, its innocent green weeds becoming sunken logs with branches thrust up like dead men's arms. Now the water is black. Only a few inches of wood keep it from me. I draw my feet up and away under the wooden seat.

He notices, and asks if I am uncomfortable. I know he is asking if I want to go to the bathroom, and I shake my head. He then goes down the list: am I too hot? Need a hat? Thirsty? He has a plastic bottle full of water. When I shake my head to all of these, he relaxes and casts again, his eye following the fly in its flight to the water. As he reels in, he intones, "The vorpal blade went snicker-snack."

Then he does the whole poem, his diction intact for once. He glances at me now and then, but looks away on:

And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

Nancy Drew would grin and recite the poem with her father, then clap her hands with glee and demand to hear it again. But all I can manage is an embarrassed smile.

At one time or another he has told me his version of *Moby Dick*, *Mort d'Arthur*, *The Odyssey*—books he read before he was fourteen and had to quit school to work. I never see him read anything now but the sports section and the comics.

But I have found his books in the house and put them on my own bookshelf in my bedroom. The print is archaic, the pages faintly browned on the edges. They smell of dust and damp rags. On the inside front cover of each, in ink-bottle ink, is my father's name, school and classroom number. I try to imagine him in a cap and plus-fours, but cannot.

I should be able to. Sometimes when I am at my desk, I hear his slow step on the stair. He ascends cautiously, as if crossing a border. Perhaps he is planning what he will say. Once in my room, he pulls out my white-and-gold painted dresser chair and straddles it like a horse, his elbows resting on its frail bentwood back. I put down my pen or close my book. He stares at the wall. Then he begins,

"Y'know, in the east end, when I was growin' up..."

I have never seen the east end. It is filed in my mind with Troy and Xanadu. If I were to see it, I would probably be shocked by the absence of horses clopping by, bobbing their heads in rhythm with their feet like clumsy dancers.

My father left the east end for the talk-filled offices dotting the road, for the country of my mother where he is silent, and for my country, where he speaks without interruption. His own country is his basement workbench, where he whistles tunes like "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton" and "The Last Rose of Summer." He whistles slowly and mournfully, so I know the songs are sad long before I hear their words.

Sometimes I stand on the edge of the dim, unfinished part of the basement, and watch him as he stands haloed by the one hanging yellow bulb, his undershirt a white Y against his freckled back. His hard brown arms shoot out to left and right. Bits and pieces—each, however tiny or dusty, compartmentalized in a dirty cardboard box according to specific use. Jars filled with nails in exact gradations. Potions in bottles—paint, turpentine, varnish, oil.

He carries his magic into the country of my mother to oil the sewing machine or fix the oven. He has entered mine to paper my room in Robin Hood wallpaper. That was when I was seven. Last year, when I was eleven, he painted it all over pink.

Sometimes, in my room, he examines his own handiwork during one of his long, smoke-filled pauses. Or his eye might lock onto something of mine—a pyramid of bristly curlers on my dresser, or a pink plastic hand whose splayed fingers are to hold rings. He will stare at it silently for several seconds. Then he might pick it up, turning it quarter-inch by quarter-inch, perhaps taking it apart and putting it back together. I never tell him what these things are for. His investigation lends them a dignity far above the actual. To reveal that they are for curling one's hair or displaying one's baubles would somehow disappoint him.

And he seems a disappointed enough man. Without knowing its source, I sense his disappointment as one senses the lip of a hole just beyond one's feet.

Now, in the boat under the hot sun, he sighs deeply and reels in. I do the same. We have caught nothing. He mops his brow with his scrunched-up hat, unscrews the lid of the plastic water bottle and drinks. He passes it to me and I drink, tasting cigarette on the rim.

"Let's drift."

When he pulls up the dripping anchor, the lake takes us over, nudging us toward a bullrush-choked shore. I begin to notice the tips of weeds poking through the water's surface, tickling the boat's underside. We are heading for the bullrushes, inch by whispering inch.

I look at him. His shirt is unbuttoned, his head back, eyes closed, throat exposed to the sun. I think of things to tell him, but my mouth dries at the thought.

I could tell him that I have compartmentalized my desk, and everything in it has an exact use. Or that last year, I saw a pink-and-white girl's room in a magazine and didn't want it, but was scared that maybe I should want it. So I asked him to paint over

my Robin Hood wallpaper. And when I saw it all finished, I was filled with panic.

I could tell him that the panic had no name, no sharp edge, until he came to my room and told me *Mort d'Arthur*. When he got to the part about pulling the sword from the stone, his fist clenched and his face became rigid.

I don't know whether it was the story, or the way he looked when he told it. But after, I could never get the thought of a cool, jewelled hilt out of my mind. I kept thinking about finding it, going up to it, reaching for it. Imagining the moment before the tug. The fear that it might not move, or that it might. Or the worst fear—that before I even touched it, I would hear laughter.

My mouth is so dry it feels as if it has been sealed up. My father's eyes are still closed. I feel the moment swell and die like a wave.

We are in very shallow water now, butting against a wall of weeds. Something glitters on the end of a swaying rush, and I reach out and lift it off. It is a piece of fishing tackle, an oval silver medallion, shaped like a fish. A three-pronged hook holds it to the rush's bushy head. Pulling it away, I leave a wound in the brown velvet surface that leaks seeds.

I lay the treasure carefully on my palm and extend my hand to my father.

"This was caught on a bullrush."

My voice sounds as dry as my mouth feels. He is not asleep. He turns his head and looks directly at my hand, as if he had been watching all along what I was doing. He lifts the lure carefully, so as not to snag my skin with its hook.

After examining it from every angle, he says,

"C'd get lake trout with that."

The moment is now. I say,

"Let's fish again. And if we catch anything with that, I want to clean it. I've watched you. I know how."

His eye fixes me, the eyebrow cocked. After a time, he nods. Then he straightens up, drops one oar into the water and begins poling us out of the shallows.

IN THE BLOOD

Everything speaks at last. Everything finds its voice. The crocheted antimacassar has draped my typewriter silently for years. It is my threadbare link with the notorious. And with Maria. (Me an' Mree-ah! Me an' Mree-ah!) When my own three-year-old voice woke me up a few nights ago, I knew at once why the antimacassar took so long to speak for itself.

Until then, I did everything I could to force it to tell its story. I read and re-read every account of the Kidd murder I could find. I even steeled myself to study the police photographs of John Kidd's body, a body sawn into bits by the man's bride and her lover. Checking the dates, I reflected that I was just turning three when the young Mrs. Kidd was running the table saw they had used. (Actually, she had used it all by herself. Her lover had collapsed ashen-faced in a corner.) But it was the dozens of newspaper photographs of Ruby Kidd that I studied the longest. Hers was without doubt a beautiful face, dark-eyed and dark-mouthed like a doe's.

Headlines, which she dominated for weeks, called her The Black Widow. Of her lover, the papers had surprisingly little to say, considering his equal guilt. Perhaps his complete nervous collapse shortly after his arrest made them lose interest. At any rate, they lingered lovingly over Ruby Kidd. It was not only her beauty that held them, but her utter lack of remorse.

When caught, Ruby Kidd immediately volunteered the name and whereabouts of her lover. When driven to the spot where the largest pieces of her bridegroom had been found, she cheerfully described rolling his torso down the hill and covering it with leaves. Of the still missing head, she said with a shrug, "Oh THAT. I burned it. Made a helluva mess of the inside of the chimney." Back at the station, she smiled brilliantly at a young policeman, then asked for a cigarette.

Ruby Kidd crocheted the antimacassar in prison. It was part of our household lore when I was growing up—established, unquestioned. Aunt Irene's embroidered runner. Grandma Stacey's tablecloth. Ruby Kidd's antimacassar.

It is an exquisite piece of lace, round, with a pinwheel design in the centre. I can see her small fingers, the nails starting to shed the last coat of red polish they would ever have, wrapping the white cotton thread round the silver hook and pulling it through. Wrapping it round and pulling it through. The outermost edge of the antimacassar is bright red. I can see her yanking a handful of thread from the red spool and working it round, while the square jaw of a watching prison matron sags in surprise. I believe this is Ruby Kidd's signature. For it renders the thing vulgar and vaguely disturbing. It makes it look as if it has been held daintily by two fingertips in the centre, then dipped in blood.

The torso of John Kidd was found in our neighbourhood shortly after my third birthday. Children played near the spot where it lay, barely hidden. Maria may well have been one of those children.

Me and Maria. My earliest memory is of my feet in their new white shoes rising before my eyes as Maria levers my stroller up onto the curb. Hers is the first human voice I remember hearing: "Fold over, and over and DOWN." In Maria's sun-browned fingers, a piece of white paper becomes a little boat. A flat-bottomed boat with a pointed prow. Perfect. So perfect, I put both my hands behind my back and will not so much as touch. But Maria takes one of my hands as we walk the dusty road to the bridge over the brook. In the other hand, she holds the little boat. I watch it the whole time we walk. It nestles in Maria's hand, saved from the launching wind by her thumb crooked over its paper prow.

Then we are on the bridge, looking down through the rust-speckled railing at the impossible distance the boat must fall to the water. On the way down, it could blow in the wind and snag on the shore, there to lie slowly soaking up the damp among the orange peels and mud-caked Coke bottles. In the water, it could brush against one of the cold, gleaming stones dotting the brook, and spin helplessly upside down for ever.

It could. I press my hands into my eyes, suddenly wanting it all to be over. But Maria's arms come around my shoulders from behind, and her breath is warm in my ear: "Look!" And I do look, and suddenly she and I are standing together braced against the wind as the paper boat carries us along through the cold, clear water, navigating the boulders, turning the shores into clean, green blurs, faster, faster, while Maria chants in my ear, "You an' me are goin' to the SEA! You an' me are goin' to the SEA!"

It stops there. When I try to remember what happened next, I find I have come to the edge of something, and am looking down into nothing. Maria lives for me now in coloured fragments. Were I to piece them all together, I would have merely a larger fragment, for most of them have dissolved with time.

In one of the few that remain to me, I am running across a ploughed field toward some cows standing behind a barbed-wire fence. Their white faces watch me impassively, as if they know what will happen. I reach up and grab the topmost wire, and feel something burn my palms. When I try to pull my hands away, the fire in them flares unbearably, for they are both impaled on barbs. I hang there and shriek, hot urine bathing my inner thighs, while the cows blink and chew.

At once Maria is there, carefully lifting my hands off the barbs. I suck in my breath and look at my palms. The cuts are ragged, and so deep as to be black in their centres. My breath comes out in a wail more of horror than pain, and I close up my hands, never, never to open them again.

But Maria takes one of my balled-up hands in each of hers and says softly, her face bent so low over them that I can smell her sun-warmed hair, "Open. Open. Open. Open." My fingers hear and obey, uncurling like small animals waking up. Maria's face bends lower over one of my hands, and I feel her lips press softly into the palm. Then she bends to the other one and kisses it as slowly and gently as she did the first. When she raises her head, a sparkling thread of saliva stretches between my palm and her lips.

Perhaps my parents invited her along on a family picnic. That would explain how we came to be in a field. I have so few facts about Maria. All I know for sure is that one day my mother heard a tap on the screen door and looked through it to see a thin, tanned girl of eight or nine. She had shiny black bangs cut straight across her forehead and a crooked smile that produced a dimple on one side and a slight narrowing of one thickly-lashed eye. She said her name was Maria and that she lived over there with a man and a lady, and could she please look after the little girl? She had seen her playing in the front yard, and wanted to look after her. No, she didn't want any money. My mother, who had herself tapped on doors as a child and begged to be allowed to look after toddlers, studied Maria sharply for a moment, then nodded.

I have no sense of time in all of this. My time with Maria could have been a year, a month, a week. But I do remember now how it

ended. That much came back to me the night after I finished going through microfilmed newspaper clippings on the Kidd murder.

I had flipped to one of the dozens of sob-sister articles that had attempted to drum up sympathy for Ruby Kidd. It must have been like trying to strike sparks from an iceberg. This particular one had apparently given up on Ruby, and had taken a whole new angle:

Mrs. Kidd has only one visitor besides her lawyer. Once a week, on Sunday, an eight-year-old girl is driven by her foster parents to the Stinson Street jail. There, she is frisked and ushered into a room containing a long, narrow table with wooden chairs on either side of it. Under a sign that reads KISS ONCE OR SHAKE HANDS HERE, she kisses Ruby Kidd, then sits down with her, her hands clenched on the table. Mrs. Kidd smokes during the visit, laughs often and calls the girl "Kiddo." The child is usually silent. If, as she often does, she brings Mrs. Kidd a present, it is first opened and examined by the attending matron. Should Mrs. Kidd ever give her anything in return, it will also have to be examined before the child will be allowed to keep it. On her way out, she is frisked again. Her name is Mary. She is the illegitimate daughter of Ruby Kidd. When Mrs. Kidd's trial began, Mary was placed in a foster home and her name altered.

I sat in the library until the lights were flicked, the microfilm cassettes scattered before me on the long table. Why had I never questioned the presence in our home of an antimacassar made in prison by a murderess? Why had I never questioned my own hoarding of it since childhood? Perhaps I really did have all the facts.

"Me an' Mree-ah! Me an' Mree-ah!"

The last time I saw Maria was the day she had promised to take me to visit the house where she was living. I had a song for the day, and was chanting it as I jumped down the stairs from my room, one jump per syllable: "Me an' Mree-ah! Me an' MREE-AH! ME AN' MREE-AH!"

It was a time when people hit their kids. This surprised no one, least of all the kids. But though my mother's hand was more noisy than painful, I drew in a huge breath at the injustice of it. Before I could let my breath out in a bellow, my mother showed me her palm and asked, "You want more? You know how to get it?" I certainly did. I sat on the bottom step, hands clapped over my mouth, breath coming out in squeaks.

I could see her standing near the front door, staring through the screen as if waiting for someone. Sunk in the utter desolation of a child fallen from grace with her mother, I thought about how angry she had been with me, for days now. Ever since Maria's last visit.

Maria! I lowered my hands from my mouth, allowing myself to start blubbering. Maria! I had been saying Maria's name! That was the bad thing! I ran into the livingroom, my steps breaking my rising wail into hiccups. I wanted to bury my face in my mother's apron and tell her I would never, never, never...

But she was propping open the screen door and calling to someone. Her voice was high and tight and strained: "Go home! You hear me? Just go home! And don't you come back here!" Maria was standing on the sidewalk, staring at us. I clutched my mother's apron and stared back. My mother's voice grew desperate: "Go AWAY, Maria! We... don't want you anymore!" Maria shifted her weight from foot to foot, her black-lashed eyes fluttering.

I saw my chance. "Don' WANT Mree-ah!" I screeched, then smiled expectantly up at my mother. She pushed me behind her, closed the screen door, then swung the inner door shut. She leaned her back up against it and whispered, her eyes shut, "She won't be back." Then, very slowly, she walked to the couch and sat down. Just as slowly, she lowered her face into her hands and began to sob. She knew I was near her without looking. Her arms shot out and grabbed me, and she rocked me, moaning, "Oh honey baby, I'm sorry! Oh darling sweetie pie, I'm so sorry!" She rocked me and cried and said she was sorry until my father came home.

That night, when I should have been asleep, I lay awake listening as she said over and over to my father, "I HAD to. You know what her mother is. And it runs in the blood. I mean, if ANYTHING had happened, I could never have forgiven myself, knowing what I know now. It runs in the blood. Doesn't it, Bill? Doesn't it run in the blood?" Up in my bed, separated from them by a whole storey, I could still see my father's silent, barely perceptible nod.

And now, though I have no facts to back it up, I can see Maria on her last visit to our house, shyly handing the antimacassar to my mother. I can see her looking up into my mother's face, suddenly sure that here was someone she could tell, even though her foster parents had warned her never to. I can hear her saying softly, "My mummy made this." And I can see my mother noticing for the first time Maria's dark fawn eyes. The promise in her face of great beauty. I can hear her asking, "What is your mummy's name?"

Maria, Maria, I did not see you walk away from our closed door. I do not know how long you stood there on the hot pavement, waiting for it to open. But I hope that your paper boat has reached the sea, and that someone along the way has kissed your hands.