

Susan Zettel / WATCH

I sometimes wonder how my father sees me. I have to squint to see myself. Maybe because I am so skinny. Tall — five foot nine at sixteen — and fair too. I feel as if I'm more eyes and ears than anything else. Somedays I look in the mirror to try to connect the pieces of my face to one another, but what I see are eyes looking at eyes looking at eyes. Or I see what I am that's like him, and think: these blue eyes are fine, his are brown, but I'd like to have a more definite chin line. (Here I lift my chin far up on my neck and press the skin under my jaw tight into my throat. I hold it until I think I'll choke, then let go.) And a longer neck, a less sharp nose than mine and his.

What else I have from him is my name, Bertha. It's really from an aunt he loved, he says, who gave him hard maple candy whenever he visited her. She was short and dark. I hate maple candy. The name also came from a saint who'd been rich, had only one child and gave away all of her money to the poor. For God's sake, I like to say to him when he shows me this story in the Book of Saints. My father hates blaspheming. I call myself Bertie. My father doesn't.

What I do have that's mine is this: a full-time summer job at Vogel's store (part-time during school) that pays enough to indulge my passion for buying shoes and presents, like the toaster oven I got my mother for her birthday, with some left over for my savings account marked "Nurse's Training Savings." Blonde hair that feels good, shines in the sun, and is long enough to flick over my shoulder. It even stays there. A best friend, named Karen, who I should be planning to go roller skating with at the Glenbriar right now. She has 38B breasts with smooth, dark brown nipples, a flat stomach, hips like a boy's. She has more boyfriends than she wants, she says, and wears false eyelashes to roller skating just for fun. She even has a pair made from mink fur that are self-adhesive and so thick they don't need mascara. Her eyes are small and the fur lashes make them look frightened and tired. I've never told her this.

I also have a valid driver's licence, and a brand new pair of white cotton duck bermuda length shorts. I bought them for this very holiday that we are on, from Sommer's Ladies Wear. They were full price, but

the saleswoman, Rita, gave them to me at 25% off because I was leaving town for nurse's training.

Rita has dyed red hair teased up at least three inches on the top. It's so stiff with hairspray it shifts as a whole if it moves at all. Sommer's sells traditional women's clothes on the main floor and up-to-date junior's in the basement down a narrow set of wooden stairs that smell like lemon oil and ironing. Rita works in the basement, but always wears upstairs clothes — a straight skirt with a slit up the back, a kitten sweater set with a sweater clip and red lipstick that leaves traces on her teeth. When she sold me the shorts she said, "Nurse's training. Why don't you go to university. Don't go away to learn how to clean up messes after sick people. Be something! Your poor mother's going to miss you."



I'm wearing the shorts now on this hottest day of the year. They're probably wrinkled because my legs are stuck to the hot vinyl seat covering and because my brother, Robert, has been sitting on my lap for the last twenty minutes. His sweaty, fat legs push the material into bunches and their sticky dampness practically strips the skin off my thighs every time he shifts to look out the window, which is constantly. There are twelve people in the car — my parents, myself, four sisters and four brothers all younger than I, and my maternal grandmother who I adore. I begged off work to go on this, my last, family holiday to a cottage called "Happy Hours" at Sauble Beach.

Ours is a full-sized, three-seat station wagon. Even when completely loaded with all our gear and the roof rack full, it rides up high on the suspension. The car was driving just fine, but now begins to lose power. My father, who talks to me about cars because I'm the only one in my family who drives or is even remotely interested, looks for my eyes in the rearview mirror.

"I think it's the gas pump or something in the gas line Bertha. It gets these surges then slows down. I give it all the gas I can, then my foot's on the floor again and nothing happens. We had that trouble one other time remember?"

I do, but it isn't really a question. My father just needs to say something because he's not the swearing type. I know, if the trouble gets worse, he'll become silent. His mouth will set in a firm line pulling

all his anger into tiny wrinkles that appear sewn into his lips like darts into a dress. As I grow older I find myself angry in silence too. I feel, in my skin, that my father's face becomes impressed on my own. I have to open my mouth, say some words to ease the lines so that my face no longer feels the way my father's looks.

My father doesn't say another word about the car.

I turn my eyes away from the mirror, where I can still see his face, to look at my mother who sits in the front seat, the baby on her lap and my sister between them and my father. My mother, too, remains silent on the subject of the car, putting all of her energy into keeping the children quiet and seated. The car moves in a roller coaster motion, first speeding along, then almost slowing to a stop before it surges violently forward again.

"What's that Mommy? Why's the car doing that? I'm thirsty. Daddy when do we get to the cottage?"

"Sh." my mother says. "Bertie would you get your brother's arm in from out of the window?"

My mother's tone is gentle. Tired. As always asking something that she seems to think is impossible.

My grandmother remains quiet, too, having learned to let my mother handle these situations in her own way. My grandmother is proud of the fact that she's come to look after us children every time my mother has gone to the hospital to have a baby. She'd start out doing everything — baking, mending, even ironing the underwear. By the end of the week she'd be exhausted and short tempered.

Once she said to me, "I hope your father has the sense to stay away from her for awhile. This is too much work for any human being."

I remember every word. I hear it in my head. After each baby is born I understand more.

When my grandmother repeated this sentiment to my mother, when she returned home from the hospital, my mother asked her, "Which of these children would you have me get rid of? Which one should I not have had?"

My grandmother took this newest baby from my mother's arms while my mother hung up her coat and talked to each now older child. We all went into my parents' bedroom where my grandmother placed the baby on the chenille bedspread. My mother sat on the edge of the bed and showed the baby: hair like one of us, fingers long like

another's, this the cord where the baby got his food. It would fall off in a week or so. We laughed and said yes, yes. My grandmother's voice was the loudest and happiest, this being the longest, fattest, prettiest one so far. But when she said these things, when I saw her eyes look at my father, they looked dark and hard. Blaming. Just like they do now, every time the car slows.

"We passed a garage a ways back, Daddy. Maybe we should turn around."

I try not to sound whiny in case it makes my father more determined to go on. There's no need. The car motor comes to a complete stop. The wind from the open windows diminishes and heats up. All the children hush at once. As we roll along all we hear is the crunch of each and every piece of gravel the tires touch as my father steers the car off to the side of the road.



My father sits in his seat. Both of his hands are on the steering wheel, one at ten o'clock and one at two, just as he had showed me when he taught me how to drive. I notice his neck is sunburned. Some of the pores on it are enlarged; one has a deep core of black that is raised slightly above the skin level with a distinct, whitened ridge around it. I want to lean forward and squeeze it out, but instead, jiggle my brother's legs up and down to try to cool off our thighs. I can't take my eyes off it though. There are also two lines of curly dark hair growing down both sides of his neck that disappear into the collar of his clean white T-shirt. As I watch, without moving his head, only his shoulders, he reaches down and pulls the hood-release knob. The hood thumps open and in one motion he opens his door, is out and walking around to the front of the car.

Inside the car, heat and noise explode. I get out to see what my father will do. I stand as close to him as I can because he seems not to notice that I'm here. He touches the hoses, the engine lines, hits a hot spot and sucks in his breath, pulls his hand away, shakes it, touches it to his lips. He checks the battery connections. I look at his mouth, watch it tighten. Much as I wish he would say something, I know he won't.

"May as well get out and take the kids over there into the shade, Mom."

I lean my head into my mother's window as I talk to her. I can smell the sour cheesy white spot on the shoulder of her blouse where the baby has spit up. My mother has smelled this way for as long as I have known her.

"He's pretty quiet. I don't think he's got this one figured out and he's sure not looking for help."

I jerk my head in the direction of my father almost wishing that he'd overhear. I'm about to stand up when the baby grabs my hair in his relentless, non-release grip. I start to frown but give him my biggest smile instead. He responds as he always does: an open-mouthed, toothless grin full of drool and laughter. I can't imagine my father ever being a baby but the thought makes me laugh. What I do imagine is his face as it is now on a baby's body. The baby laughs even louder as though he knows what I'm thinking and is having the same thought. That's the way it is with this baby.



I love this baby differently than I love my other brothers and sisters. I can't resist touching him whenever I'm near him; his skin is tight and smooth as an apple. But warm. I like his milky breath and the way his fingernails and his hair grow. And how he'll fall asleep in my arms with his mouth open, head leaning back, after I feed him his bottle. I sometimes think he is mine. That I made him. And that's the crunch. I could have made him.

Before, when my mother got pregnant, she just did and was. At some point we'd notice, place our hands on the stretched elastic over her belly and feel it move. She'd go away for a week and come home with a baby. There was no surprise, except for the time her waters broke when she was taking a roast out of the oven. We all laughed because our mother had had an accident on the kitchen floor. This is what I remember: she went to the bathroom, got a towel and put it over the wet spot. She served us supper, sometimes stopping to hold onto the edge of the stove or the table. While we ate, she cleaned up the mess on the floor, then went to lie down in the bedroom. After my father finished eating, he called my grandmother to come in a taxi, told me to clear up the supper dishes, which I resented, and took my mother to the hospital. She came home a week later with my sister Veronica.

The difference with the last baby was that I knew, from the beginning, how the baby was conceived. And my mother knew I knew. She took me aside before she was even showing and told me, "I'm pregnant. The baby will be born in February, probably the second week. I wanted you to be the first to know. I'll need your help, Bertie." At first I just said sure, and was she going to tell the other kids. She said no, she was going to wait awhile. As I digested the news I began to understand. My parents went all the way. Had been for years, in the bedroom across the hall from mine and my sisters'.

I knew what it was like, almost. I had made out before, kissed until my panties were wet and sticky. I had felt a hard penis rub on my leg, up and down, over and over again, pressing and pressing. My breasts had been touched and the sensations had connected with my groin, making it tight and aching, throbbing with too much blood. I had never gone all the way, but my parents had. Watching my mother's breasts grow heavy and her stomach swell was enough to slow me down. This was not going to happen to me for a long, long time.

When my mother went into labour she told me what was happening. I could see her huge belly tighten and seem to get longer and thinner, but that could have been in my mind. She lifted her top and said to touch it, go ahead, now, while it's contracting. I did. It was harder than any skin I'd ever felt, even harder than the muscle in my father's arm when he flexed it. Harder by far than the boy's penis that I had felt on my leg, that I'd reached down to touch once or twice.

And when my mother brought this baby home, I felt I knew him better than the rest. When my grandmother said this was the best baby yet, I was inclined to agree. I watched closely. I loved him and saw him take as much as my mother and everyone else had to give. Babies are like that.

Several weeks before this holiday that we are supposed to be on, I also watched and helped my mother nurse herself and the rest of us through a bout of stomach flu. I noticed darkness around my mother's eyes and a lined heaviness at the edges of her mouth. We were doing the dishes — my mother, myself, and my sisters. I rubbed the dish towel round and round a plate with a faded rose pattern. I felt each bubble along the edge, let my fingernails pop over each one, making a noise like a dripping faucet.

"I'm never going to have children."

"Oh Bertie." Her voice was thick and low. She didn't look at me.
"Why?"

I stood still. I tried to think why. I knew I had to answer and more than that I wanted to. I wanted her to know I saw everything.

"I never want to be like you."

I was looking straight ahead. Even so, in the distance that separated us at the sink, I felt her body pull away from mine.

"You might change your mind someday."

I didn't answer that.



Now I want to protect my mother.

"I'll get the blankets out of the back of the car. You and Grandma can go to that patch of grass. I'll be over in a minute."

My father is standing by the side of the car. He is not moving, though his image wavers in the heat shimmering up in waves from the car engine in front of him and the pavement behind. I help the children to the grassy places, carry one, take another by the hand and tell them where they can play and where they can't.

"See that line over there where the grass starts to get stoney? Don't go past that line."

I spread the old plaid car blanket over the tall grass. A smell like oil and stale bread rises with it and seems not to settle even when the blanket does. The heat has caught and held it like an invisible cloud above the surface of the cloth. My grandmother and mother sit down on it and the smell of bruised grasses sweetens the air around them. I walk back to the car, each step in the heat is like trying to shift a weight with my legs.

"What are you going to do?"

As I ask this, I place both my hands on the side of the car and leave them there even though the surface is too hot to touch. I won't move them until he speaks. I straighten my shoulders and toss my hair to one side. It flicks up and back in one clean motion.

I try again.

"I could walk back to the garage we passed and get the tow truck to come."

My father stands looking at the engine as though by staring hard enough the reason for its stopping will present itself. So I stare at him,

will him to look at me. I begin to feel that I have drawn his attention. He starts to turn his head just as a car slows and stops. My father looks right past me and watches the car, then the driver as he walks over to us.

The man is small and compact. He takes short steps, each one exactly the same length from the last. His arms hardly move at his sides. His eyes are on the car, but seem to take in the whole situation. He reminds me of a smaller version of my Uncle Raymond, who is a policeman. The man also ignores me. I lift my hands from the hot metal of the car, pat them gently on the cloth of my shorts before I look at them to see if they're burned. No one notices.

The man's body is turned sideways; blocks me from my father's view. I walk over to where my mother is. The little man turns our way, nods towards us, takes over. He notices the number of children to be accommodated, and flags down another car. He directs the rather startled driver to take the older women and most of the children to the garage half-a-mile back. My father and I and my two brothers, Richard and Michael, are to drive with the man in his car.

As I get into the back seat I notice how clean it is and how it smells like pine freshener. There's a line of peaked caps along the shelf by the back window — Caterpillar, Osh Kosh B'Gosh and Carling Black Label Beer are the ones I can read by their backward reflections in the glass. The radio is playing what my grandmother calls swing. The man, who my father is calling Reg and sir — "Yes sir, I thought to check that. No Reg, I don't think it's the carburetor." — has told us to keep the back windows up so the hats won't blow around. Between the heat, which swirls around me in the dead space of the back seat, and the up-and-down flow of the music, which blends with my father's fawning and grateful voice, I feel my stomach begin to rise into my throat. I swallow quickly over and over again and try not to breathe in the heavy scent given off by the pine freshener. When I can't swallow any faster I roll down my window just as the car slows to turn into the station. I avoid looking at either the man, or my father, who turns to look at me. I slam my car door as hard as I can, walk around to my brother's door and slam it, too.

Reg makes all of the arrangements to have the car towed in. Once he starts something, he likes to see it through, he tells my father. After the car arrives and is checked, the mechanic tells Reg that the problem is a

faulty gas pump.

"You knew that, didn't you, Daddy?"

I try to draw my father into the active part of this conversation. They're standing at the side of the open garage door facing each other. I'm just beside and behind my father. Reg doesn't stop talking, hasn't since he picked us up. He is telling my father of a friend of his, a taxi driver in Montreal who loves snowstorms. This friend has a box he had made especially for his taxi, with places for thermoses, food, medical supplies, two ropes, chains, shovels and blankets. He drives around the city in the middle of blizzards looking for people to help. Snowstorms are his favourite days for driving and even if he's just finished a shift, he'll work on his own time helping stranded drivers.

"Now I'll have a story for him." Reg laughs. "You sure do have a big family. Are you Catholics?"

Reg shakes hands with my father, opens the back doors of his car and brushes out each side of the seats with his hand. He rolls up the window. For the first time since he arrived on the scene he looks at me directly over the top of the window, his eyes moving up as the glass does, the contact cut the second the window is closed. He turns away, straightens the caps in the back window, gets into his car and leaves. He gives a blast on his horn and I feel he needs to be a part of the action even as he's leaving it.

"What a horrid little man."

My mother's words come from behind my father and me. We turn together to face her; my father turns away again.

"You just be grateful he came along."

My father doesn't turn to look at her as he says this, but watches Reg's car pull out of sight on the highway. He watches him as though he's trying to place himself in that car, going where it is going. His feet have not moved, but his body is angled away from us, leaning in the direction the car is going. I turn my back on him and smile at my mother.

"Here, let me take the baby for awhile. You've got some spit-up on your shoulder. Maybe you want to wash it off and get a drink of something."

I point out to my mother where the stain is: I run my hand down her arm and squeeze her fingers. I reach to take the baby.



As I sit with the baby and watch the highway I'm sure that everyone is looking at us, seeing all these people together, the car in the bay, wondering and commenting on us as they whizz by. I remember how the garage mechanic stared at us, bobbing his head up and down to count as each one of us emerged from the two cars. My grandmother gives the children money. Get whatever you want, she says, which is one of the reasons why I love her so much. I sit with her now as I let the baby crawl around as much as possible. To let off some steam, I hope. Maybe he'll fall asleep in the car, if it ever gets fixed.

My parents are talking with the mechanic in his office and making phone calls. We can't hear them, only the sound of cars approaching from a distance, swooshing by in a flash of sun-on-glass. The cars leave a trail of dust, raised from the gravel shoulders of the road, which seems to take forever to settle. There's also the steady, high-pitched whir of tree frogs. The noise and the hot air seem to be attached, to belong together. The stillness at the end of each call is more an intrusion than the sound itself.

My father turns toward us. He calls to me.

"Bertha, go get Michael. He's playing too close to the road."

I get Michael and go back to sit with my grandmother. Her eyes are always on my parents as they negotiate new plans. Michael goes too close to the road again, but I choose to do nothing about it. I pretend not to see my father glare at me. I look down and concentrate on pulling up pieces of tender grass from their sockets, biting off the sweet, white ends and placing the green stems into a log-cabin-pattern on a flat spot beside me. I sense, by a shift in my grandmother's body, that my father is approaching. I can feel his shadow move onto my legs. Though the shade he makes does not change the temperature on my legs, they begin to goose bump of their own accord.

"The least you can do, young lady, is help your mother unpack the car. I've arranged for rides to get us to Sauble. They'll be here in about fifteen minutes."

I place my hand over the grass structure and look sideways up at my father. I can't see his face, only the silhouetted outline of his head against the sun.

"They?"

"Raymond doesn't have a big enough car so he got Phil to come too."

"Aw Daddy. For God's sake. Two cars again. They'll think we're so . . . Oh, I don't know. Why couldn't you rent a big car or a trailer or something."

"Do you realize how much all this will cost? The car, the cottage. If it weren't for your grandmother helping us out we'd be going home right now."

"So why don't we? I didn't want to come along in the first place."

My eyes have adjusted to the sunlight and I watch his face grow quiet and tight.

"Go help your mother. Now."



When my Uncle Raymond and cousin Phil arrive, Raymond jokes about our misfortune and they help us divide suitcases, food boxes, the baby's playpen and our beach stuff between the two car trunks.

Raymond tells us how, when he and my father were kids, their uncle used to drive the whole family to a resort, drop them off, then come back a week later to pick them up. Their dad never owned a car, refused to learn how to drive one. Every summer was the same. That's what families are for, he says. But back then they all fit into one car. They don't make cars like they used to.

Phil doesn't say a word.

"I'll ride with Uncle Raymond," I say.



It's late afternoon by the time we arrive at the cottage. There is lots of light, but it is late-August light and low in the sky. It does not lessen the heat. The cottage is on a stretch of beach where the buildings are set right on the sand. Some have cedar hedges and patches of sandy grass. Most are square wooden boxes that have porches descending onto packed sand paths that run directly down to the water. Ours is one of these. There's a rich, tinny smell in the air: warmth and water and earth.

The children get out of the cars and run for the water, curious about what it looks like up close, how it feels. My mother calls them back and promises we'll swim in the evening after supper when we're more settled.

The men unload the cars. Phil and Uncle Raymond go for a fast

swim, then have a beer from the cooler. The tall green bottles are wet and without labels. The labels are floating in the water made by melting ice that the children scoop out to eat and play with, the younger ones losing most of theirs to the sand. The men lean against the porch rail under the hand-carved sign: "Happy Hours." I notice that their eyes connect over the heads of the playing children and do not seem to notice what's going on below them. I mention it to my grandmother and she tells me that it takes a great deal of practice for them to do this, and then she and my mother laugh.

When Phil and Uncle Raymond leave, they'll take my father with them back to the city. He's arranged to rent a small car until Monday when he can pick up our station wagon at the garage. The fuel pump wasn't in stock and will be bussed from the city. It won't be installed until late Monday morning. I listen to the men through the screen door where we're preparing sandwiches for them to take along in the cars. I learn that my father will drive me to work Monday morning, as was planned in the first place, drop the rental car off, catch the Greyhound bus to the garage, pick up the station wagon and drive back to Sauble Beach for the rest of his holiday. I'm only glad to hear I will be getting away from this luckless family.



The rest of the weekend is almost unremarkable. The heat turns to a pre-fall coolness. The children refuse to take off their bathing suits and wear old sweaters over them. They spend their time in the water, which feels much warmer than the air, or with their arms crossed over their chests to hug the warmth to their bodies. I spread my beach towel slightly to one side of them all and press my body as close to the warmed sand as I can. I'll get a tan, come hell or high water. I watch my family from under the hollow of my arms which I cross to make a pillow for my head.

My grandmother and mother walk along the water's edge with the baby, picking up shells from the beach and pebbles from the baby's mouth where he tends to put everything he finds. My father sits in a folding, plastic lawn chair. He watches the rest of the children as they swim. His eyes never leave them. Every ten minutes his head bounces up and down several times and his lips move without noise. He is counting: one, nod, two, nod, three, nod, four . . . a pause as he looks

around. I sit up and look, too. Nod, five, nod, six, nod, seven, nod. He doesn't count me or the baby; doesn't look away from the water.

"Why don't you swim anymore, Daddy? Grandma says you were a great swimmer when you were going out with Mommy. She says you even used to dive at Elora Gorge, right from the top cliff."

"Six," he says out loud. "Six. Where's Sandy? Can you see her? Sandy! Get over here with the rest. I can't see you over there. What did you say Bertha?"

In the evening we play Rummoli. My grandmother has a passion for games and can be counted on to play anything we suggest. She even brings her button jar in her suitcase so we have something to bet with. As we play we match up sets of old buttons and try to sort our piles by colour, trading whites for blues, or abalone and mother-of-pearl for reds. We always do this when we use Grandma's buttons. Then we take turns asking her where each kind comes from. She always knows. And no matter how sad it makes her, someone must ask her about the tarnished brass military buttons from the jar. We children have an unspoken pact to take turns using them because we know it is an honour. We take turns with the question, too. It's my turn tonight.

"Where did these buttons come from, Grandma?"

"They were from your Uncle Charlie's uniform. They were in a pouch, in the package of remains they brought to me and your grandfather after Charlie's plane crashed when he was testing it. Whose turn is it?"

It's always the same answer. She never says more, but she never stops us from asking.

My mother spends the evening getting the baby and younger children ready for bed. My father shakes out and folds dry towels and bathing suits from the laundry basket. He sets them into neat piles, which he lines up by the door. Each pile is the same: sneakers on the bottom, the towel folded into a perfect square, the bathing suit on top of that and, finally, a ball or sand sifter or bottle of suntan lotion on the very top. Twelve piles all the same.

"Your pile is closest to the door, Bertha, so you can get it first thing in the morning. We have to leave very early."

"Come play Rummoli, Daddy. There's a space beside me. You're on holiday, too, you know."

"Maybe later."

I can't remember the last time my father joined in our games. He used to say he hated gambling, even with buttons, and he said it as if he knew what he was talking about. Or so I thought. I liked to imagine he had a bad experience when he was younger and learned from it the hard way. Tonight I persist.

"Come on. Just for awhile. You never play with us."

"Bertha, I said maybe later."

Everyone is looking at me. I square my shoulders, sit up straight and tighten my buttocks on the chair. My face feels fat with heat and anger. I continue looking at my father who picks up a newspaper and sits down to read. It's the only thing he ever reads. He reads each page from top to bottom with a concentration I know he will not break to answer me.

"Whose turn is it?" my grandmother asks.



Monday morning my mother wakes me while it's still dark, her voice stretched and distant, but gentle. She's prepared breakfast for us; our coffee is steaming straight up into the bare bulb above the kitchen table. No one speaks; there's only the clatter of cutlery and the contented sound of coffee being drunk. My father rises and puts his mug, silverware and plate into the sink. He places his hands on my mother's shoulders, leans over and kisses her on the cheek. She turns into him to kiss him on the lips. She does this as she continues to wipe a dish. I turn my head away from them. I know I am still irritable when the word necrophilia crosses my mind. I wonder how my mother can possibly feel affectionate when I know she was up twice with the baby, then early this morning to make our breakfast. I think she must be dead on her feet.

"I'll be back by suppertime at the latest. Ready Bertha?"

"Um. 'Bye Mom. Give the kids and Grandma a hug from me. Thanks for breakfast."

My father carries my bag out to the rented car. I watch him in the roof light. The door shuts. The blackness is absolute until my eyes adjust and notice the morning stars in the sky. There's no moon. As we drive, the time seems to move as slowly as the miles move quickly. My father is driving faster than I have ever known him to. It's not reckless, but sure and steady. I'm aware of silence, both in the car and outside

of it. There is no comfort in this quiet. It's work to hold it, but it's too settled and strong to break. My eyes sting with the air from the vents and my own tired awakes. We're going south-east and I stare at a line of light just to our left.

"Look Daddy. Look at the sky."

He turns first to me and smiles, then to the front where I'm pointing. I don't need to point anymore. As we watch, the line of light spreads across the horizon and turns a brilliant magenta. The undersides of the clouds, which are black, outlined in shimmering grey, turn pink, then red, as the light expands and seems to force colour and texture into the sky. A ball of red rises in the centre of this and as the sky in front grows brighter, the blackness behind us becomes impenetrable. Silhouettes emerge: trees, houses, barns, cars and tractors, even a dog running down a lane. The colour behind the silhouettes becomes vibrant, shimmers. Then, the moment is gone. We do not see the shadows of things, but what they really are.

"Will you look at that! Will you just look at that. 'Red sky in morning, sailors take warning'."

My father pulls out his handkerchief and hands it to me. I am crying. He turns on the radio and listens to the news. I look at my father. He looks exactly the same.

When we reach the store where I work I get out of my door, leaning in to grab my bag of clothes from the seat. My father takes a small paper sack that has been sitting on the seat under my bag. He hands it to me.

"I couldn't find the right time this weekend. Hurry up now, you're late."

I back out of the car and stand beside it. My father leans over and pulls the car door shut by the handle. From this position he smiles a sideways smile through the window and waves. As he drives away I unroll the bag and take out a blue velvet case, and open it. The watch, a fine, clear-faced nurse's watch, is gold. It has a second-hand that can time a heartbeat. It's wound and set: 8:06. I look up to see the car turn the corner. I see my father's arm resting along the windowsill of the car door, and I sense that he's looking straight ahead. As I put the watch on I notice an inscription on the back. It's done in the same fancy lettering I remember seeing on my mother's silver engagement bracelet.

To Bertha, it says, Love, Dad. August 1968.

I put the velvet case back into the bag. I roll the top of it down and press the edges into a crease until I can smell the brown paper, sweet and woody and sad. I look at the watch: 8:09. Late now, I still have to change from my shorts into my uniform for work. I decide to call Karen on my break to see if her father will let her spend the night at my house. We'll have frozen T.V. dinners and drink Coke. We have only eight more days together before I leave for nurse's training.

I look at the road again. The car is gone. There is nothing left to see. I turn away and go inside the store to work.