1

The fortune teller and her grandfather went to New York City on an Amtrak train, racketing along with their identical, peaky white faces set due north. The grandfather had left his hearing aid at home on the bureau. He wore a black suit, pearl-gray suspenders, and a very old-fashioned, expensive-looking pinstriped collarless shirt. No matter what happened he kept his deep-socketed eyes fixed upon the seat in front of him, he continued sliding a thumb over the news clipping he held in his hand. Either the train had turned his deafness absolute or else he had something very serious on his mind, it was hard to tell which. In any case, he would not answer the few things the fortune teller said to him.

Past his downy white head, outside the scummy window, factories and warehouses streamed along. Occasionally a leftover forest would coast into view and then out again—twisted bare trees, trunks tipped by lightning, logs covered

with vines, tangled raspy bushes and beer cans, whisky bottles, rusted carburetors, sewing machines, and armchairs. Then some town or other would take over. Men wearing several layers of jackets struggled with crates and barrels on loading docks, their breaths trailing out of their mouths in white tatters. It was January, and cold enough to make the brick buildings appear to darken and condense.

The fortune teller, who was not a gypsy or even Spanish but a lanky, weedy blond woman in a Breton hat and a faded shift, took a *National Geographic* from a straw bag on the floor and started reading it from back to front. She flicked the pages after barely a glance, rapidly swinging one crossed foot. Halfway through the magazine she bent to rummage through the bag again. She felt her grandfather slide his eyes over to see what she was keeping there. Tarot cards? A crystal ball? Some other tool of her mysterious, disreputable profession? But all she showed was a spill of multicolored kerchief and then a box of Luden's cough drops, which she took out and offered him. He refused. She put one in her mouth, giving him a sudden smile that completely upturned every one of her pale, straight features. Her grandfather absorbed it but forgot to smile back. He returned to his view of the seat ahead, a button-on antimacassar with an old lady's netted hat just beyond.

In his hand, stroked by his puckered thumb, the newspaper clipping first rustled and then wilted and drooped, but the fortune teller knew it by heart anyway.

TABOR

Suddenly on December 18, 1972, Paul Jeffrey, Sr., of New York City, formerly of Baltimore. Beloved husband of Deborah Palmer Tabor. Father of Paul J. Tabor, Jr., of Chicago and Theresa T. Hanes of Springline, Massachusetts. Also survived by five grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

Services will be held Thursday at the . . .

'My throat is dry, Justine,' her grandfather said.

'I'll get you a soda.'

'What?'

'A *soda*.'

He drew back, offended. No telling what he thought she had said. Justine patted his hand and told him, 'Never mind, Grandfather. I'll just be gone a minute.'

She left, sidling between shopping bags and weekend cases along the narrow aisle, holding tight to her saucer-like hat. Three cars up, she paid for two root beers and a sack of Cheez Doodles. She returned walking carefully, opening doors with her elbows and frowning at the plastic cups, which were filled to the brim. Just inside her own car, the Cheez Doodles fell and a man in a business suit had to pick them up for her. 'Oh! Thank you!' she said, and smiled at him, her cheeks grown suddenly pink. At first glance she could be taken for a young girl, but then people saw the fine lines beginning to show in her skin, and the faded blue of her eyes and the veined, parched, forty-year-old hands with

the scratched wedding band looking three sizes too large below one knobby knuckle. She had a ramshackle way of walking and a sharp, merry voice. '*Root* beer, Grandfather!' she sang out. If he didn't hear her, all the rest of the car did.

She put a cup in his hand, and he took a sip. 'Ah yes,' he said. He liked herby things, root beer and horehound drops and sassafras tea. But when she tore open the cellophane bag and presented him with a Cheez Doodle—a fat orange worm that left crystals on his fingertips—he frowned at it from beneath a tangle of white eyebrows. He had once been a judge. He still gave the impression of judging everything that came his way. 'What *is* this,' he said, but that was a verdict, not a question.

'It's a Cheez Doodle, Grandfather, try it and see.'

'What's that you say?'

She held out the bag, showing him the lettering on the side. First he replaced the Cheez Doodle and then he wiped his fingers on a handkerchief he took from his pocket. Then he went back to drinking root beer and studying the clipping, which he had laid flat on one narrow, triangular knee. 'Theresa,' he said. 'I never cared for that name.'

Justine nodded, chewing.

'I don't like *difficult* names. I don't like foreignness.'

'Perhaps they're Catholic,' Justine said.

'How's that?'

'Perhaps they're Catholic.'

'I didn't quite hear.'

'*Catholic!*'

Faces spun around.

'Don't be ridiculous,' her grandfather said. 'Paul Tabor went to the same church I did, he was in my brother's Sunday school class. The two of them graduated from the Salter Academy together. Then this—dissatisfaction set in. This, this *newness.* I can't tell you how many times I've seen it come to pass. A young man goes to a distant city instead of staying close to home, he gets a job, switches friends, widens his circle of acquaintances. Marries a girl from a family no one knows, lives in a house of unusual architecture, names his children foreign names that never were in his family in any preceding generation. He takes to traveling, buys winter homes and summer homes and vacation cottages in godforsaken states like Florida where none of us has ever been. Meanwhile his parents die and all his people just seem to vanish, there's no one you can ask any more, "Now, what is Paul up to these days?" Then he dies himself, most likely in a very large city where there's nobody to notice, only his wife and his barber and his tailor and maybe not even the last two, and what's it for? What's it all about? Now in Paul's case I just couldn't say for certain, of course. He was my brother's friend, not mine. However I will hazard a guess: he had no *stamina.* He couldn't endure, he wouldn't stay around to fight it out or live it down or sit it through, whatever was required. He hadn't the patience. He wanted something new, something different, he couldn't quite name it. He thought things would be better

somewhere else. Anywhere else. And what did it get him? Watch, next time I'm in Baltimore I'll tell the family, "Paul Tabor died." "Paul *who?"* they'll say. "Paul Tabor, it was in the Baltimore *Sun.* Don't you read it any more? Don't you know?" Well, of course they do read it and would catch any familiar name in a flash but not Paul Tabor's. Forgotten, all forgotten. He discarded us, now he's dead and forgotten. Hear what I say, Justine. Do you hear?'

Justine smiled at him. 'I hear,' she said.

She had moved away from Baltimore herself. She and her husband and daughter now lived in Semple, Virginia; in another place last year and another the year before that. (Her husband was a restless man.) Next week they were moving to Caro Mill, Maryland. Was it Caro Mill? Caro Mills? Sometimes all these places would run together in her mind. She would mentally locate friends in towns those friends had never set foot in, she would await a visit from a client whom she had left two years ago without a forwarding address. She would ransack the telephone book for a doctor or a dentist or a plumber who was actually three hundred miles away and three or four or fourteen years in the past. Her grandfather didn't guess that, probably. Or care. He had scarcely bothered to learn the towns' names in the first place. Although he lived with Justine and made all those moves with her he called it visiting; he considered himself a citizen still of Baltimore, his birthplace. All other towns were ephemeral, no-account; he shuffled through them absent-mindedly like a man passing a string of shanties

on the way to his own sturdy house. When he arrived in Baltimore (for Thanksgiving or Christmas or the Fourth of July) he would heave a sigh and lower the sharp narrow shoulders that he held, at all other times, so tightly hunched. The brackets around his mouth would relax somewhat. He would set his old leather suitcase down with finality, as if it held all his earthly goods and not just a shirt and a change of underwear and a scruffy toothbrush. 'There's no place in the world like Baltimore, Maryland,' he would say.

He said it now.

This morning they had passed through the Baltimore railroad station, even stopping a moment to let other, luckier passengers alight. The thought of having come so near must have made him melancholy. He looked down at his clipping now and shook his head, maybe even regretting this trip, which had been entirely his own idea. But when Justine said, 'Are you tired, Grandfather?'—thinning her voice to that special, carrying tone he would be certain to hear—he only looked at her blankly. It seemed that his mind was on Paul Tabor again.

'They don't say a word about where they buried him,' he said.

'Oh well, I imagine—'

'If you died in New York City, where would you be buried?'

'I'm sure they have—'

'No doubt they ship you someplace else,' he said. He turned his face to the window. Without his hearing

aid he gave an impression of rudeness. He interrupted people and changed the subject willfully and spoke in a particularly loud, flat voice, although normally he was so well-mannered that he caused others to feel awkward. 'I never made the acquaintance of Paul's wife,' he said, while Justine was still considering cemeteries. 'I don't recollect even hearing when he got married. But then he was younger than I of course and moved in different circles. Or perhaps he married late in life. Now if I had known the wife I would have gone up for the funeral, then asked my questions afterwards. But as it is, I hesitated to barge in upon a family affair and immediately put my case. It would look so—it would seem so self-serving. Do you think I did right to wait?'

He had asked her this before. He didn't listen for the answer.

'By now she will be calmer,' he said. 'Not so likely to break down at any mention of his name.'

He folded the clipping suddenly, as if he had decided something. He creased it with one broad yellow thumbnail.

'Justine,' he said.

'Hmm?'

'Am I going to be successful?'

She stopped swirling the ice in her cup and looked at him. 'Oh,' she said. 'Why—I'm certain you are. Certainly, Grandfather. Maybe not *this* time, maybe not right away, but—'

'Truly. Tell me.'

'Certainly you will.'

He was looking too closely into her face. Possibly he hadn't heard her. She set her voice to the proper tone and said, 'I'm sure that—'

'Justine, how much do you know?'

'What?'

'This telling fortunes. This bunk. This—*piffle*,' said her grandfather, and he brushed something violently off his sleeve. 'I hate the very thought of it.'

'You've told me all that, Grandfather.'

'It's not respectable. Your aunts go into a state whenever we speak of it. You know what people call you? "The fortune teller." Like "the cleaner," "the greengrocer." "How's that granddaughter of yours, Judge Peck, the fortune teller. How's she doing?" Ah, it turns my stomach.'

Justine picked up her magazine and opened to a page, any page.

'But, Justine,' her grandfather said, 'I ask you this. Is there anything to it at all?'

Her eyes snagged on a line of print.

'Do you really have some inkling of the future?'

She shut the magazine. He locked her in a fierce, steady frown; his intensity made everything around him seem pale.

'I want to know if I will find my brother,' he said.

Yet immediately afterward he turned away, watching the train's descent into the blackness beneath Manhattan. And

Justine repacked her straw bag and brushed cheese crumbs off her lap and put her coat on, her expression calm and cheerful. Neither one of them appeared to be waiting for anything more to be said.

Because they were trying to save money, they took the subway from Penn Station. Justine loved subways. She enjoyed standing on them, gripping a warm, oily metal pole, feet planted slightly apart and knees dipping with the roll of the train as they careened through the darkness. But her grandfather distrusted them, and once they were off the shuttle and onto the IRT, he made her sit down. He continually rotated his face, scanning the car for enemies. Silent young people returned his stare. 'I don't know, Justine, I don't know what's happening. I don't like this city at all any more,' her grandfather said. But Justine was enjoying herself too much to answer. She watched each station as they drew into it, the murky light and bathroom-tile walls and those mysterious, grimy men who sat on benches, one or two at every stop, watching trains come and go without ever boarding one. Then when they were moving again she drank in the sensation of speed. *Getting* somewhere. She loved going fast in any kind of vehicle. She particularly liked the rickety sound of these tracks, on which something unexpected might happen at any moment. She hoped the wheels would howl in that eerie way they had while heading through the deepest stretch of darkness.

Once the lights went out and when they came on again her face was surprised and joyous, open-mouthed; everybody noticed. Her grandfather touched her wrist.

'Are you watching for the proper station?' he asked.

'Oh yes.'

Although she hadn't been.

Clutched in her hand was Mrs. Tabor's address, which she had copied from a telephone book. She had suggested calling ahead from Penn Station, but her grandfather refused. He was too impatient, or he wanted to hold onto his hopes just a little bit longer, or he was afraid of being turned away. Also he might have been anxious to reach Mrs. Tabor's bathroom. He preferred not to use any public facilities.

When they were above ground again—Justine taking gulps of the ashy, foreign air, the old man limp with relief—they walked a block and a half west and entered a gray building with a revolving door. 'Look,' her grandfather said. 'Wood for the door and polished handles. Marble floor. I like old buildings. I like places like this.' And he nodded to a lady just stepping out of the elevator—the first person in all New York whose existence he had recognized. He was disappointed, however, that the elevator was self-service. '*Once* upon a time they would have had a boy to do this,' he said, watching Justine jab a button. The elevator toiled upward, creaking and sighing. Its walls were fine oak but on one panel there was a concentration of four-letter words that the old man

covered immediately, stepping square in front of them without appearing to notice and then staring upward. Justine smiled at him. He pursed his lips and studied an inspection certificate.

On the eighth floor, at the end of a long dark hall, they pressed another button. Bolts slithered and locks rattled, as if connected somehow to the button. The door opened three inches and a rouged, seamed face peered out from behind a police chain. 'Yes?' she asked.

'Mrs. Tabor?' said Justine.

Puffy eyes took her in from top to toe, her streaky ribbons of hair and her brown coat with the uneven hemline. 'What is this,' Mrs. Tabor said, 'are you selling something? I don't need a thing and I already have religion.'

So the grandfather had to step up and take over. There was no mistaking the elegance of his bow, or the way he raised one hand to his head even though he wore no hat. He presented her with his card. Not his business card, oh no, but his calling card, cream-colored, aged yellow around the edges. He slipped it beneath the police chain into her jeweled hand. 'Daniel Peck,' he said, as if she could not read, and she looked up into his face while one finger tested the engraving. 'Peck,' she said.

'I knew your husband. Paul? Back in Baltimore.'

'Why didn't you *say* so?' she asked, and she unhooked the chain and stood back to let them in. They entered a room that Justine might have grown up in, all wine-colored and velvety, giving off a scent of dust although

every piece of furniture gleamed. Mrs. Tabor's white hair was precisely finger-waved, webby with beauty parlor hairspray. She wore black wool and ropes and ropes of pearls. Her focus was on the old man and she barely looked at Justine even when he remembered to introduce her. 'Of course you do know about his passing, Mr. Peck,' she said.

'I beg your pardon?'

'You'll have to speak up,' said Justine. 'He left his hearing aid at home.'

'You know he *passed,* Mr. Peck.'

'Oh. Passed. Oh yes. Yes, naturally, I read it in the paper. You see we hadn't heard of Paul for many many years, we—' He followed, absently, to the couch where she led him. He sat down beside Justine, pinching the creases in his trousers. 'We had no idea where he might be until that death notice, Mrs. Tabor. Why, I've made several trips to New York in my life and never even knew he was here! Never guessed! We could have talked over old times together.'

'Oh, it's sad how people lose track,' said Mrs. Tabor.

'Well, I wanted to offer my condolences. Our family thought highly of Paul and my brother Caleb in particular was very close to him.'

'Why, thank you, Mr. Peck. It was painless, I'm happy to say, sudden and painless, just the way he would have wished it. All the more shock to *me,* therefore, but—'

'What was that?'

'*Thank* you.'

'My brother's name was Caleb Peck.'

'What a fine old-fashioned name,' said Mrs. Tabor.

The old man looked at her for a minute, perhaps wondering whether it was worthwhile asking her to repeat herself. Then he sighed and shook his head. 'I don't suppose you knew him, did you?' he said.

'Why, not that I remember, no. I don't believe so. Because of Paul's work we moved about so, you see. It was difficult to—'

'What? What?'

'*No,* Grandfather,' Justine said, and laid one hand on top of his. He looked at her dimly for a moment, as if he didn't recognize her.

'I assumed he might have kept in touch with Paul,' he told Mrs. Tabor. 'Written, or sent Christmas cards. Or visited, even. You know they were very close. Perhaps he stopped to see you on his way to someplace else.'

'We never had many visitors, Mr. Peck.'

'Pardon?'

He looked at Justine. Justine shook her head.

'Or possibly Paul just mentioned his *name* on some occasion,' he said.

'Possibly, yes, but—'

'Yes?'

He snatched his hand from Justine's and sat forward. 'When would that have been?' he asked.

'But—no, Mr. Peck, I can't say I remember it. I'm sorry.'

'Look here,' he said. He searched a pocket and came up with something—a small brown photograph framed in gold. He leaned over to jab it in her face. 'Don't you know him? Doesn't he look familiar in any way? Take your time. Don't be in a hurry to say no.'

Mrs. Tabor seemed a little startled by the picture, but it took her only a second to make up her mind. 'I'm sorry,' she said. Then she looked at Justine. 'I don't understand. Is this important in some way?'

'Well—' said Justine.

'We've lost track of Caleb too, you see,' her grandfather said. He shoved the photograph back in his pocket. He turned down the corners of his mouth in a bitter smile. 'You must think we're very careless people.'

Mrs. Tabor did not smile back.

'However it was no more our fault in this case than in Paul's; he left us.'

'Oh, what a pity,' Mrs. Tabor said.

'Our family is very close knit, a *fine* family, we have always stuck together, but I don't know, periodically some . . . *explorer* sets out on his own.' He scowled suddenly at Justine. 'The last time I saw Caleb was in nineteen twelve. I have never heard of him since.'

'Nineteen twelve!' Mrs. Tabor said. She sank back in her chair. Wheels seemed to be clicking in her head. When she spoke next her voice had become softer and sadder. 'Mr. Peck, I'm so very sorry that I can't help you. I *wish* I could. Might I offer you some tea?'

'How's that?' he said.

'*Tea,* Grandfather.'

'Tea. Oh. Well . . .'

This time when he looked at Justine he was handing the rest of the visit to her, and she straightened and clutched her carry-all. 'Thank you, but I don't think so,' she said. Phrases her mother had taught her thirty years ago came wisping back to her. 'It's kind of you to . . . but we really must be . . . however, I wonder if my grandfather might freshen up first? He just got off the train and he . . .'

'Surely,' said Mrs. Tabor. 'Mr. Peck, may I show you the way?'

She beckoned to him and he rose without question, either guessing at where she was leading him or no longer caring. He followed her through a polished door that swept open with a hushing sound across the carpet. He went down a short hall with his hands by his sides, like a child being sent to his room. When she pointed him toward another door he stepped through it and vanished, not looking around. Mrs. Tabor returned to the living room with careful, outward-turned steps.

'That poor, poor man,' she said.

Justine would not answer.

'And will you be in New York long?'

'Just till we find a train home again.'

Mrs. Tabor stopped patting her pearls. 'You mean you only came for this?'

'Oh, we're used to it, we do it often,' Justine said.

'Often! You go looking for his *brother* often?'

'Whenever we have some kind of lead,' said Justine. 'Some name or letter or something. We've been at this several years now. Grandfather takes it very seriously.'

'He'll never find him, of course,' said Mrs. Tabor.

Justine was silent.

'Will he?'

'Maybe he will.'

'But—nineteen *twelve!* I mean—'

'Our family tends to live a long time,' Justine said.

'But even so! And of course, dear,' she said, leaning forward suddenly, 'it must be hard on *you*.'

'Oh no.'

'All that wandering around? I'd lose my mind. And he can't be so easy to travel with, his handicap and all. It must be a terrible burden for you.'

'I love him very much,' said Justine.

'Oh, well yes. Naturally!'

But the mention of love had turned Mrs. Tabor breathless, and she seemed delighted to hear the bathroom door clicking open. 'Well, now!' she said, turning to Justine's grandfather.

He came into the room searching all his pockets, a sign he was preparing to leave a place. Justine rose and hoisted her straw bag. 'Thank you, Mrs. Tabor,' she said. 'I'm sorry about your husband. I hope we haven't put you to any trouble.'

'No, no.'

The grandfather ducked his head in the doorway. 'If you should recollect at some later date . . .' he said.

'I'll let you know.'

'I wrote my Baltimore number on my calling card. Justine has no phone. If you should chance to think of something, anything at all . . .'

'Will do, Mr. Peck,' she said, suddenly jaunty.

'You do?'

'What?'

'She *will* do, Grandfather,' Justine said, and led him into the hall. But he did not hear and was still turned to Mrs. Tabor, puzzled and unhappy, when the door swung shut and the locks began tumbling into place again.

In the railroad station they sat on a wooden bench, waiting for the next train home. Justine ate a sack of Fritos, a Baby Ruth, and two hot dogs; her grandfather would not take anything. Neither of them liked Cokes and they could not find any root beer so they drank warm, bleachy New York water begged from a concession stand. Justine finished the last of her cough drops. She had to go buy more, paying too much for them at a vending machine. When she came back she found that her grandfather had fallen asleep with his head tipped back and his mouth open, his empty hands curled at his sides. She moved some sailor's unattended seabag over next to him and adjusted his head to rest upon it. Then she opened her carry-all and took out magazines,

scarves, a coin purse, road maps and unmailed letters and a snaggle-toothed comb and a clutch of candy wrappers, until at the very bottom she came upon a deck of playing cards wrapped in a square of old, old silk. She unwrapped them and laid them out on the bench one by one, choosing places for them as surely and delicately as a cat chooses where to set its paws. When she had formed a cross she sat still for a moment, holding the remaining cards in her left hand. Then her grandfather stirred and she gathered the cards quickly and without a sound. They were back in their silk before he was fully awake again, and Justine was sitting motionless on the bench with her hands folded neatly over her straw bag.

2

On moving day they were up at five, not because there was any rush but because the house was so uncomfortable now with everything packed, the walls bare and the furniture gone, no place to sleep but mattresses laid upon newspapers. All night long one person or another had been coughing or rearranging blankets or padding across the moonlit floor to the bathroom. People fell out of dreams and into them again, jerking awake and then spiraling back to sleep. The hollow walls creaked almost as steadily as the ticking of a clock.

Then Justine rose and stalked around the mattress, working a cramp out of one long, narrow foot. And Duncan opened his eyes to watch her fling on her bathrobe, all flurry and rustling and sleight-of-hand. Darkness swirled around her, but that was only chenille. 'What time is it?' he asked. 'Is it morning yet?'

'I don't know,' she said.

Neither of them wore watches. On them, watches broke or lost themselves or speeded up to keep some lawless schedule of their own so you could almost see the minute hand racing around the dial.

Duncan sat up and felt for his clothing, while Justine sailed through the living room. Her gritty bare feet whispered on the floor and her bathrobe sash galloped behind. 'Coming through! Excuse me! Coming through!' Her daughter's bedclothes stirred and rumpled. In the kitchen, Justine switched on the light and went to the sink to make tap-water coffee. The room gave off an icy chill. Everything was bare, scraped and smudged by the past—four bald spots on the linoleum where the table had once stood, and dimples where Duncan had tipped back in his chair, scorches and chips on the countertop, the uncurtained window filmed with cooking grease, the rickety wooden shelves empty but still bearing rings of molasses and catsup. Justine made the coffee in paper cups and stirred it with a screwdriver. When she had set the cups on the counter she turned to find her grandfather teetering in the doorway. Noise could not wake him, but light could. He wore withered silk pajamas and held his snap-top pocket watch open in his hand. 'It's five ten a.m.,' he said.

'Good morning, Grandfather.'

'Yesterday you slept till noon. *Regularity* is what we want to aim for here.'

'Would you like some coffee?'

But he hadn't heard. He pursed his lips and snapped the watch shut and went back to his bedroom for his clothes.

Now throughout the house came the sounds of people dressing, doors opening and closing, teeth being brushed. Nobody spoke. They were struggling free of their dreams still—all but Justine, who hummed a polka as she darted around the kitchen. In her flimsy robe, flushed with heat when anyone else would be shivering, she gave an impression of energy burning and wasting. She moved very fast and accomplished very little. She opened drawers for no reason and slammed them shut, pulled down the yellowed windowshade and let it snap up again. Then she called, 'Duncan? Meg? Am I the only one *doing* anything?'

Duncan came in with his oldest clothes on: a white shirt worn soft and translucent and a shrunken pair of dungarees. His arms and legs gawked out like a growing boy's. He had a boy's face still, the expression trustful and the corners of his mouth pulled upward. With his hair and skin a single color and his long-boned, awkward body he might have been Justine's brother, except that he seemed to be continually turning over some mysterious private thought that set him apart. Also he moved differently; he was slower and more deliberate. Justine ran circles around him with his cup of coffee until he stopped her and took it from her hands.

'I could be dressed and gone by now, the rest of you would still be lolling in bed,' she told him.

He swallowed a mouthful of coffee, looked down into the cup and raised his eyebrows.

Justine went back through the living room, where Meg's mattress lay empty with her blanket already folded

in a neat, flat square. She knocked on the bathroom door. 'Meg? Meggie? Is that you? We're not going to *wait* all day for you.'

Water ran on and on.

'If you set up housekeeping there the way you did yesterday we'll leave you, we'll walk right out and leave you, hear?'

She tapped the door once more and returned to the kitchen. 'Meg is crying again,' she told Duncan.

'How can you tell?'

'She's shut up in the bathroom running the faucet. If today's like yesterday, what are we going to do?' she asked, but she was already trailing off, heading toward her bedroom with her mind switched to something else, and Duncan didn't bother answering.

In the bedroom, Justine dressed and then gathered up heaps of cast-off clothing, a coffee cup and a half-empty bottle of bourbon and a *Scientific American.* She tried to fold her blanket as neatly as Meg's. Then she straightened and looked around her. The room swooped with shadows from the swinging light-bulb. Without furniture it showed itself for what it was: a paper box with sagging walls. In every corner were empty matchbooks, safety pins, dustballs, Kleenexes, but she was not a careful housekeeper and she left them for whoever came after.

When she returned to the kitchen her grandfather and Duncan were standing side by side drinking their coffee like medicine. Her grandfather wore his deerskin slippers:

otherwise, he was ready to leave. No one was going to accuse him of holding things up. 'One of the trials I expect to see in hell,' he said, 'is paper cups, where your thumbnail is forever tempted to scrape off a strip of wax. And plastic spoons, and pulpy paper plates.'

'That's for sure,' Duncan told him.

'What say?'

'Where's your *hearing* aid?' Justine asked.

'Not so very well,' said her grandfather. He held one hand out level, palm down. 'I'm experiencing some discomfort in my fingers and both knees, I believe because of the cold. I was cold all night. I haven't been so cold since the blizzard of eighty-eight. Why are there not enough blankets, all of a sudden?'

Duncan flashed Justine a wide, quick smile, which she returned with the corners tucked in. There were not enough blankets because she had used most of them yesterday to pad the furniture, shielding claw feet and bureau tops and peeling veneer from the splintery walls of the U-Haul truck, although Duncan had told her, several times, that it might be best to save the blankets out. This was still January, the nights were cold. What was her hurry? But Justine was *always* in a hurry. 'I want to get things done, I want to get going,' she had said. Duncan gave up. There had been no system to their previous moves either; it seemed pointless to start now.

Meg came into the kitchen and claimed her coffee without looking to left or right—a neat, pretty girl in a

shirtwaist dress, with short hair held in place by a sterling silver barrette. She was scrubbed and shining, buttoned, combed, smelling of toothpaste, but her eyes were pink. 'Oh, honey!' Justine cried, but Meg ducked out from between her hands. She was seventeen years old. This move was the worst thing that had ever happened to her. Justine said, 'Would you like some bread? It's all we've got out.'

'No, thank you, Mama.'

'I thought we'd have breakfast when we get to what's-its-name, if it's not too long to wait.'

'I'm not hungry anyway.'

She said nothing to her father. It was plain what she thought: If it weren't for Duncan they would never have to move at all. He had gone and grown tired of another business and chosen yet another town to drag them off to, seemingly picked it out of a hat, or might as well have.

'Your father will be driving the truck all alone,' Justine said, 'since last time it made Grandfather sick. Would you like to ride with him?' She never would let a quarrel wind on its natural way. She knew it herself, she had no tact or subtlety. She always had to be interfering. '*Why* not go, he could use the company.'

But Meg's tears were back and she wouldn't speak, even to say no. She bent her head. The two short wings of her hair swung forward to hide her cheeks. And Duncan, of course, was off on some tangent of his own. His mind had started up again; he was finally awake. His mind was an intricate, multigeared machine, or perhaps some little animal with

skittery paws. 'I am fascinated by randomness,' he said. 'Do you realize that there is no possible permutation of four fingers that could be called absolutely random?'

'Duncan, it's time to roll the mattresses,' Justine said.

'Mattresses. Yes.'

'Would you?'

'Hold up your hand,' Duncan told the grandfather, leading him through the living room. 'Then take away two fingers. The first and third elements, say, of a four-element . . .'

'Last night,' said Meg, 'Mrs. Benning asked me again if I would like to stay with her.'

'Oh, Meg.'

'She said, "*Why* won't your mother allow it? Just till the school year is over," she said. She said, "You know we'd love to have you. Does she think you'd be imposing? Would it help if I talked to her one more time?"'

'You'll be leaving us soon enough as it is,' said Justine, stacking empty paper cups.

'At least we should consider my schooling,' Meg said. 'This is my senior year. I won't learn a thing, moving around the way we do.'

'Teaching you to adapt is the best education we could give you,' Justine told her.

'Adapt! What about logarithms? '

'Now I can't keep on and on about this, I want you to find the cat. I think she knows it's moving day. She's hiding.'

'So would I,' said Meg, 'if I could think of a place.' And she slid off the counter and left, calling the cat in her soft, sensible voice that was never raised even when she argued. Justine stood motionless beside the sink. When she heard footsteps she spun around but it was only her grandfather.

'Justine? There are neighbors here to see you off,' he told her. He sniffed through his long, pinched nose. People who were not related to him ought to keep to themselves, he always said. He watched narrowly while Justine rushed through the house, hunting her keys and struggling into her coat and jamming her hat on her head. 'Check your room, Grandfather,' she called. 'Turn off the lights. Will you help Meg find the cat? Tell her we're just about to leave.'

'Knees?'

'And don't forget your hearing aid.'

'They don't get better *that* fast, the cold has sunk into the sockets,' her grandfather said. 'Ask me again tomorrow. Thank you very much.'

Justine kissed his cheekbone, a polished white blade. She flew through the living room and out the front door, into the chalky dawn. Cold air yanked at her breath. Frozen grass crunched under her feet. Over by the U-Haul truck, Mr. Ambrose was helping Duncan load the last of the mattresses. Mrs. Ambrose stood to one side, along with the Printzes and Mrs. Benning and Della Carpenter and her retarded daughter. And a few feet away was a newsboy Justine had never seen before, a canvas sack slung from one shoulder. Except for the newsboy they all wore bathrobes,

or coats thrown over pajamas. She had known them for nearly a year and there were still these new things to be learned: Alice Printz favored fluffy slippers the size of small sheep and Mrs. Benning, so practical in the daytime, wore a nightgown made of layers and layers of see-through pink or blue or gray—it was hard to tell which in this light. They stood hugging themselves against the cold, and the Carpenter girl's teeth were chattering. 'Justine, I never!' Alice Printz was saying. 'You thought you could slip out from under us. But we won't let you go that easy, here we are at crack of dawn waiting to see you off.'

'Oh, I *hate* goodbyes!' said Justine. She went down the row hugging each one, even the newsboy, whom she might after all know without realizing it. Then a light came on over the Franks' front door, three houses down, and Justine went to tell June Frank goodbye. All but the newsboy came along with her. June appeared on her cinderblock steps carrying a begonia in a plastic pot. 'I had this growing for you ever since I knew you would be moving,' she said, 'and if you had run off in the night the way you're doing and not give me a chance to say goodbye it would have broke my heart in two.' June rolled her hair up on orange juice cans. Justine had never known that before either. And she said not to thank her for the plant or its growth would be stunted. 'Is that right?' said Justine, her attention sidetracked. She held up the pot and thought a minute. 'Now why, I wonder?'

'*I* don't know why, I only know what my mother used to say to me,' June said. 'Justine, honey, I won't come any

further, but you tell the others goodbye for me too. Tell that pretty little Meg and your sweet old grandfather, tell that handsome husband, hear? And I'm going to write you a letter. If my sister decides to get married again I have to write you first and ask you what the cards say. I wouldn't think of letting her go ahead without it. Can you manage such a thing long distance?'

'I'll surely try,' said Justine. 'Well, I won't say thank you for the plant then but I promise to take good care of it. Goodbye then, June.'

'Goodbye, old honey,' June said, and she grew sad all at once and came down the steps to lay her cheek softly against Justine's while the others looked on, suddenly still, tilting their heads and smiling.

Meanwhile Meg had settled in the rear of the battered Ford with an enormous gray tweed cat in her lap. The cat crouched and glared and Meg cried, causing a mist of tears to glaze the squat little house with its yellowed foundations, its tattered shrubs, the porch pillars rotting from the bottom up. In the front seat, her great-grandfather placed his hearing aid in his ear, adjusted a button, and winced. Duncan slammed the tailgate on the last of the mattresses and climbed into the truck cab. He turned on the headlights, coloring the gray and white scene in front of him—Justine being passed from hand to hand down a row of neighbors in their nightclothes. 'Ho, Justine,' he called softly. Of course she couldn't hear. He had to beep the horn. Then everybody jumped and

screeched and a window lit up half a block down, but Justine only gave him a wave and headed for the car, unsurprised, because wasn't he always having to honk for her? She was late for everything, though she started out the earliest and the fastest and the most impatient. She was always leaving places the same way, calling scraps of goodbyes and then running, flying, bearing some shaking plant or parcel or covered dish, out of breath and laughing at herself, clutching her hat to her head as she sped along.

At nine o'clock in the morning, Red Emma Borden was wiping the counter in the Caro Mill Diner when these four unfamiliar people walked in—a man and wife, a teenaged daughter and a very ancient gentleman. Red Emma was about to have a cigarette (she'd been on her feet since four) and she wasn't eager to wait on anyone else. Still, it was nice to see some new faces. She had been born and raised and married and widowed in this town and she was sick of everybody in it. So she puffed up her orange curls, tugged her uniform down, and reached for the order pad. Meanwhile the strangers were trying to find acceptable seats, which was not all that easy to do. Two of the counter stools were broken, just topless aluminum pedestals, and another would tip you off as soon as you tried to perch upon it. They had to cluster at one end down near the exhaust fan. Even then, the old gentleman had a long tail of

cotton batting dangling out from under him. But none of them made any complaint; they just folded their arms and waited for her behind four pairs of blue, blue eyes. 'Well, now,' said Red Emma, slapping down cracked plastic menu cards. 'What you going to have?'

She addressed the woman first—a skin-and-bones lady wearing a hat. But it was the husband who answered. 'Speedy here will have everything in the kitchen,' he said.

'Speedy! I barely *inched* along,' the woman said.

'I thought you had entered the Indy five hundred. And your seat belt flopping out the door, after I took all that time installing it for you—'

'I will take coffee and three fried eggs,' the woman told Red Emma. 'Sunny side up. And hotcakes, link sausages, and orange juice. And something salty, a sack of potato chips. Grandfather? Meg?'

Red Emma feared she would be cooking all morning, but it turned out the others just wanted coffee. They had the dazed, rumpled look of people who had been traveling. Only the woman seemed to care to talk. 'My name is Justine,' she said, 'and this is my husband, Duncan. Our Grandfather Peck and our daughter Meg. Do you have the keys?'

'How's that?'

'We were told to stop here and pick up the keys for Mr. Parkinson's house.'

'Oh yes,' said Red Emma. She would never have supposed that these were the people for Ned Parkinson's

house—a tacky little place next to the electric shop. Particularly not the old gentleman. 'Well, he did say somebody might be by,' she said. 'Have you took a good look at it yet?'

'Duncan has. He chose it,' said Justine. 'You haven't told us *your* name.'

'Why, I'm Red Emma Borden.'

'Do you work here all the time?'

'Mornings I do.'

'Because I like to eat in diners. I expect we'll run into you often.'

'Maybe so,' said Red Emma, breaking eggs onto the grill. 'But if you come after noon it'll be my late husband's cousin, *Black* Emma Borden. They call her that because she's the one with black hair, only she's been dyeing it for years now.' She poured coffee into thick white cups. 'You say your husband chose the house?' she asked Justine.

'He always does.'

Red Emma flung him a glance. A fine-looking, straw-colored man. His conscience did not appear to be bothering him. 'Look, honey,' she told Justine. She set the coffeepot down and leaned over the counter. 'How come you would let your husband choose where you live? Does *he* understand kitchens? Does he check for closet space and woodwork that doesn't crumble to bits the first time you try to scrub it down?'

Justine laughed. 'I doubt it,' she said.

Red Emma had once sent her husband to a used car lot to buy a family automobile and he had come home with a little teeny red creature meant for racing, set low to the ground, slit eyes for windows. It ate up every cent they had saved. She had never forgiven him. So now she felt personally involved, and she glared at this Duncan. He sat there as calm as you please building a pyramid out of sugar cubes. The grandfather was reading someone's discarded newspaper, holding it three feet away from him as old people tend to do and scowling and working his mouth around. Only the daughter seemed to understand. A *nice* girl, so trim and quiet. She wore a coat that was shabby but good quality, and she kept her eyes fixed on a catsup bottle as if something had shamed her. *She* knew what Red Emma was getting at.

'There's other places,' Red Emma said. 'The Butters are letting, oh, a *big* place go, over by the schoolhouse.'

'Now on the average,' Duncan said, and Red Emma turned, thinking he was speaking to her, 'on the average a single one of the blocks in Cheops's pyramid weighed two and a half tons.' No, it was the grandfather he meant that for, but the grandfather only looked up, irritated, maybe not even hearing, and turned a page of his paper. Duncan spun toward Meg, on his left. 'It is accepted that wheels as such were not used in the construction,' he told her. 'Nor any but the most primitive surveying tools, so far as we know. Nevertheless, the greatest error to be found is only a little over five degrees on the east wall, and the others are

almost perfect. And have you thought about the angle of the slant?'

Meg looked back at him, expressionless.

'It's my belief they built it from the top down,' he said. He laughed.

Red Emma thought he must be crazy.

She flipped the hotcakes, loaded Justine's plate, and set it in front of her. 'The Butters' house is a *two*-story affair,' she said. 'They also have a sleeping porch.'

'Oh, I believe Mr. Parkinson's place is going to be just fine,' said Justine. 'Besides, it's near where Duncan's going to work. This way he can come home for lunch.'

'Now where's he going to work?' Red Emma asked.

'At the Blue Bottle Antique Shop.'

Oh, Lord. She should have known. That gilt-lettered place, run by a fat man nobody knew. Who needed antiques in Caro Mill? Only tourists, passing through on their way to the Eastern Shore, and most of them were in too much of a hurry to stop. But Red Emma still clung to a shred of hope (she liked to see people *manage,* somehow) and she said, 'Well now, I suppose he could improve on what that Mr.—I don't recall his name. I suppose if he knows about antiques, and so on—'

'Oh, Duncan knows about everything,' said Justine.

It didn't sound good, not at all.

'He hasn't worked with antiques before but he did build some furniture once, a few jobs back—'

Yes.

'The man who owns the Blue Bottle is Duncan's mother's sister's brother-in-law. He wants to ease off a little, get somebody else to manage the store for him now that he's getting older.'

'We've used up all my mother's *blood* relations,' Duncan said cheerfully. He was correcting the pitch of one pyramid wall. The truth that was coming out did not appear to embarrass him. 'The last job was with my uncle, he owns a health food store. But no one in the family has a fix-it shop, and fixing is what I really do. I can fix anything. Do you need some repair work here?'

'No indeed,' Red Emma told him firmly.

And she turned back to Justine, ready to offer her sympathy, but Justine was munching potato chips with a merry look in her eye. Her hat was a little crooked. Could she possibly be a drinker? Red Emma sighed and went to clean the grill. 'Of course,' she said, 'I don't mean to say anything against Ned Parkinson's house. Why, in lots of ways it's just fine. I'm sure you'll all be happy there.'

'I'm sure we will be,' Justine said.

'And certainly your husband can handle any plumbing and electrical problems that might arise,' Red Emma said, wickedly sweet, because she did not for a moment think he could.

But Duncan said, 'Certainly,' and started plunking his sugar cubes one by one back into the bowl.

Red Emma wiped the grill with a sour dish rag. She felt tired and wished they would go. But then Justine said, 'You

want to hear something? This coming year will be the best our family's ever had. It's going to be exceptional.'

'Now, how do you know that?'

'It's nineteen seventy-three, isn't it? And three is our number! Look: both Duncan and I were born in nineteen thirty-three. We were married in nineteen fifty-three and Meg was born on the third day of the third month in nineteen fifty-five. Isn't that something?'

'Oh, Mama,' Meg said, and ducked her head over her coffee.

'Meg's afraid that people will think I'm eccentric,' said Justine. 'But after all, it's not as if I believed in *numerology* or anything. Just lucky numbers. What's your lucky number, Red Emma?'

'Eight,' said Red Emma.

'Ah. See there? Eight is forceful and good at organizing. You would succeed at any business or career, just anything.'

'I would?'

Red Emma looked down at her billowing white nylon front, the flowered handkerchief prinked to her bosom with a cameo brooch.

'Now, Meg doesn't have a lucky number. I'm worried that nothing will ever happen to her.'

'*Mama.*'

'Meg was due to be born in May and I wondered how that could happen. Unless she arrived on the third, of course. But see? She was premature, she came in March after all.'

'I always ask for eight at the Basket of Cheer lottery,' said Red Emma. 'And I've won it twice, too. Forty dollars' worth of fine-quality liquor.'

'Of course. Now, who's the fortune teller in this town?'

'Fortune teller?'

The grandfather rattled and crackled his paper.

'Don't tell me you don't have one,' said Justine.

'Not to my knowledge we don't.'

'Well, you know where I'll be living. Come when I'm settled and I'll tell your fortune free.'

'You tell fortunes.'

'I do church fairs, bazaars, club meetings, teas—anybody's, any time. People can knock on my door in the dead of night if they have some urgent problem and I will get up in my bathrobe to give them a reading. I don't mind at all. I like it, in fact. I have insomnia.'

'But—you mean you tell fortunes *seriously?*' Red Emma asked.

'How else would I tell them?'

Red Emma looked at Duncan. He looked back, unsmiling.

'Well, if we could have the keys, then,' said Justine.

Red Emma fetched them, sleepwalking—two flat, tinny keys on a shower curtain ring. 'I really do need to have my fortune told,' she said. 'I wouldn't want this spread around but I'm considering a change in employment.'

'Oh, *I* could help you with that.'

'Don't laugh, will you? I'd like to be a mailman. I even passed the tests. Could you really tell me whether that would be a lucky move or not?'

'Of course,' said Justine.

Red Emma rang up their bill, which Duncan paid with a BankAmericard so worn it would not emboss properly. Then they filed out, and she stood by the door to watch them go. When Justine passed, Red Emma touched her shoulder. 'I'm just so anxious, you see,' she said. 'I don't sleep good at all. My mind swings back and forth between decisions. Oh, I know it's nothing big. I mean, a mailman, what is that to the world? What's it going to matter a hundred years from now? I don't fool myself it's anything important. Only day after day in this place, the grease causing my hair to flop halfway through the morning and the men all making smart remarks and me just feeding them and feeding them . . . though the pay is good and I really don't know what Uncle Harry would say if I was to quit after all these years.'

'Change,' said Justine.

'Beg pardon?'

'Change. I don't need cards for that. Take the change. Always change.'

'Well—is that my fortune?'

'Yes, it is,' said Justine. 'Goodbye, Red Emma! See you soon!'

And she was gone, leaving Red Emma to pleat her lower lip with her fingers and ponder beside the plate glass door.