IT was quiet time. The frosted globes were dimmed, the wind­
dow shades pulled down, and the children were lying on rugs spread across the floor. Norah turned on her back and squinted at the shadows on the ceiling, searching for pictures of her mother. She never looked for Poppa or Lucinda or Fronnie. It was Sunny she had to guard.

And then the shadows moved, and there Sunny was, sitting in the garden. She was wearing her yellow sweater and her silky blond hair was swirled on top of her head. She was smiling. She was safe. Norah closed her eyes.

When she felt Dickie's toe pressing into her leg, she twisted around so she could see him. He had wrapped his arms all the way around his head and was jerking the lobes of his ears and waggling his tongue. There was a rustle of excitement in the room, and the children lifted their heads off their rugs and grinned at Dickie. Norah saw that even Mary Wood Clements grinned.

"All right now, Dickie," Miss Bellamy said. "I won't have you disrupting the class again today." Miss Bellamy was tall and boney and always slumped over, and her skin looked like the damp sand at the beach. Dickie claimed Miss Bellamy was a spook, but Lucinda said Miss Bellamy lost her sweetheart in the war and grief had made her ugly. "Bring your rug up to my desk."

Dickie looked wild, as though starting up one of his tantrums. When he has a tantrum at home, he yells and screams and jerks around on the floor and hits anyone who comes near, and his mother gives him whatever he wants. One time she bought him a big drum and another time a ukulele, though he never could play either of them. But, when Miss Bellamy took the yellow pencil from the thin coil of hair on her neck and cracked it against her desk, Dickie picked up his rug and just said, "Norah started it."
"I saw you, so don’t try to blame Norah."

Norah turned to Mary Wood and smiled. See? she wanted to say. It isn’t my fault. Mary Wood was wearing black patent-leather shoes and a light blue angora sweater the same color as her eyes. Norah wanted to be friends, but sometimes Mary Wood wouldn’t even speak to her.

A ball of paper soggy with spit hit Norah’s arm. Dickie. He waved frantically and pointed under Miss Bellamy’s desk. He loved to look up girl’s dresses, but Norah didn’t think he would try that on Miss Bellamy. Still he might. Norah slid toward him on her back, dragging herself with her heels.

She stopped suddenly and looked again at the ceiling. Sunny was laughing and waving from the big black car that had taken her off to Las Vegas that time with that ugly redheaded man. Norah put her head down and closed her eyes. *I didn’t mean to look at Dickie,* she said silently. *I’m being good, honest.*

Dickie hit her with another spitball, but she kept her eyes closed the rest of quiet time. When Miss Bellamy turned on the lights, Norah opened her eyes. The ugly picture of Sunny was gone.

"Sunny," she called as she opened the front door, "where are you?" There was no answer. "I know you’re here. You’re playing hide-and-seek, aren’t you?"

The kitchen door squeaked open. But it wasn’t Sunny. It was just Fronnie. "Come get you something to eat," Fronnie said, wiping her hands on her apron. "If you been a good girl today I’ll let you have two big cookies. Ain’t let that Dickie get you in no trouble?"

"Where’s Sunny?"

Fronnie put her arms around Norah and began to pull her toward the kitchen. "Something come up your momma had to tend to, honey."

"The picture lied," Norah shouted. "It was Dickie’s fault."

"I don’t know about no picture, but don’t you worry, your momma be coming home real soon." With Norah clasped to her, Fronnie backed into the kitchen. "Now you stop that snuffling. We don’t need no snuffling." She took Norah’s hand and twirled her around. "Look at you, dancing, you a dancer. God a’mighty, ’fore long you be dancing yourself like your momma."
“No, I won’t. I hate dancing.” Norah said, jerking away. “I wouldn’t dance for anything.”

Fronnie sat down on the kitchen stool. “Come sit on my lap,” she said, patting her knees. “Come on, baby, let’s have us a little hugging and then you go find that Dickie.”

“I hate Dickie. I’ll never play with him again.”

“Least not till tomorrow,” Fronnie said.

Lucinda came home in late afternoon. She never came straight home but always went to the house of a friend from middle school and arrived home just before Poppa did. Poppa didn’t like for her to be out after dusk.

Norah watched as Lucinda stashed her books on a chair and took off her coat. “Sunny’s not home.”

“So? What’d you expect?” Lucinda flipped her shoulders to show she didn’t care whether Sunny was there or not. But she drew a clump of hair into her mouth and chewed on it, and that meant she did care.

“Your hair looks better on your head than in your mouth.” Norah had heard Sunny say that to Lucinda.

“So what?” Lucinda looked angrily at Norah. “You’ve been crying. Did that stupid Icky hurt your feelings as usual?” That’s what Lucinda called Dickie when she was angry. Icky.

“No,” Norah said. “I won’t ever play with him again.” She waited for Lucinda to ask why.

“Well, goody for you.” Lucinda brushed past her into the kitchen.

Fronnie stood at the stove, tasting and shaking in more salt and pepper. She glanced at Lucinda and rolled her eyes. “Here we go,” she said.

“What’s for dinner?” Lucinda asked.

“Lamb stew from Sunday’s roast,” Fronnie said. “Lots of folks would think that was mighty fine eating.”

“Leftovers—that’s all we ever get.”

Fronnie chuckled. “Well, we couldn’t have leftovers if we didn’t have something fresh ever’ once in a while to get left over, now could we?” She stirred the pot a moment or two more and then set the big spoon down on the counter and turned to face Lucinda. “It ain’t my fault she ain’t here, so don’t you be taking it out on me.” She smiled in the way that said Lucinda better watch out.
“She promised,” Lucinda said in a thick voice.

“Now, you just hush,” Fronnie said, “else you’ll get the little one started again.”

Lucinda took a deep breath and turned to Norah. “You ought to wash your face before Poppa gets here,” she said. She reached over and rubbed Norah’s cheek. “It’ll just make everything worse if he sees you’ve been crying.”

“Sometimes I call him Icky, too,” Norah said. “Sometimes he is icky.”

“Most times,” Fronnie said.

“All the time.” Lucinda said over her shoulder as she went out into the hall.

“Where’re you going?” Norah asked.

“To my inner sanctum. Any law against that?” Lucinda stopped with one foot on the stairs. After a long pause she said, “You can come with me, if you promise you won’t mess up my things.”

With the heel of her hand Norah cleared the vapor from the window and gazed out. The air was misty, and she could hear the faint sound of a foghorn in the distance. When she saw the snub nose of the Chrysler in the glow of the streetlight, she ran to hide behind the heavy draperies. Poppa scraped his shoes on the front-door mat and put his coat and hat into the closet and then went to the kitchen. She heard the low murmur of Fronnie’s voice and then Poppa saying, “She’ll be lucky if she doesn’t get killed on the highway.”

When Poppa came out of the kitchen, he made straight for the draperies instead of going all around the house looking for her as he usually did. “Oh, there you are,” he said. “I found you.” His voice was quiet and sad. When Sunny wasn’t there, it ruined the fun. He took Norah’s hand and led her into his study.

On one wall he had hung brownish drawings of old buildings and maps that he said he liked too well to sell at his shop. The opposite wall had glass-fronted shelves lined with little cardboard boxes containing books that Poppa said might fall apart if exposed to the elements. He sat down in his leather chair and lifted Norah onto his lap. “And what mischief have you been making today, little one?”

“None, Poppa,” she said.
“Not one speck of mischief all day?”

She tried to keep looking at him, but it was hard to because of his eyes. He seemed not to blink. Once she heard Sunny tell him his eyes were like hailstones. “I didn’t do anything bad, but Dickie crawled under the desk and looked up Miss Bellamy’s skirt,” she said.

“The Great Dickie,” he said.

“At least he said he did, but I think he was lying.”

Poppa sighed. “Lying is as contagious as measles or chicken pox. Where did your mother say she was going? San Jose to see a sick friend?” He smiled, but he didn’t seem very happy.

Norah felt tears suddenly flooding her eyes. “I don’t lie, Poppa. I’m not a liar.” She twisted her head to look at him, so that he would believe her.

“Of course you aren’t,” he said. “Aren’t you Poppa’s girl?”

“Lucinda sometimes lies. Is she Sunny’s girl?”

Poppa said, “Poor Lucinda.” He let his head fall against the back of the chair. He had a bony throat and little hairs inside his nose.

“Sunny’ll be home soon,” Norah said. “Honest.”

Poppa opened his eyes and pulled her tight against him.

After dinner Frannie went home, and Lucinda and Norah joined Poppa in his study as they did every evening. Poppa said evening was family time, and he liked to have his girls with him whether Sunny was there or not. Lucinda sat at Poppa’s desk and did sums in a notebook, and Poppa was in his big leather chair, reading a thick book and listening to the music from his record player.

Norah’s favorite place was right in the center of the rug, over the red giraffe and the little trees with square limbs. She had a box of crayons and a tablet of rough paper, and she began to copy an old map that was hanging on the study wall.

When Poppa realized what she was doing, he took the map down and propped it against the side of the desk so she could see it better. “This map was probably drawn sometime in the late sixteenth century,” he said.

Lucinda glanced up from her notebook. “Do you think Sir Walter Raleigh or Frances Drake used it?”

“You can tell it was drawn by an Englishman because England
is so large and in the middle, so perhaps one or the other might have drawn it. That's America.” Poppa bent over and pointed at the right side of the map.

Lucinda got up and stood next to him. “Look how narrow and little it is compared to Europe.”

Poppa shrugged. “I guess you wouldn't want to depend on this map to navigate the world, would you? No wonder Drake ended up at Point Reyes. Most maps at that time were based on conjecture. And hope.” He leaned close to the map and nodded his approval. “But it's beautiful, isn't it? I never could bear to sell it. Look how everything seems to be flowing from Europe, almost like lava. That's the way they thought. They thought Europe was the center of the world.”

“So it was okay to come over and kill the Indians and steal their land,” said Lucinda.

“Do you think the world would be better off if they hadn't come?”

“The Indians would be. The white man destroyed the Indian civilization.”

“Lots of tribes had disappeared long before the Europeans came,” Poppa said with a slight smile. “Like the Anasazi.”

“If they had still been around, they would have been killed too.”

“Well, we can't know that, can we? Since it didn't happen. You mustn't jump to conclusions.”

“It doesn't take a jump to know that the white people destroyed the Indian civilization—the Cherokee, the Chickasaw, the Shawnee.”

“Civilization develops that way,” Poppa said. “Good and bad together, or perhaps one and then the other, and then you get something better.”

“More bad than good,” Lucinda said. “The white man brought smallpox and lots of other diseases and killed the buffaloes, and stole the land.” Lucinda's face had reddened and her voice was rising. “I guess you never heard of the Trail of Tears.”

“Long before you did, my dear,” Poppa said in a hard voice.

Norah said, “You’re in my way. I can’t see to draw.”

Lucinda abruptly turned away and went back to the desk, and Poppa shrugged and picked up his book.
They sat in silence for a few minutes, and then the telephone rang. After a quick glance at Poppa, Lucinda ran into the front hall to answer it. She didn’t say much, just yes, right here, no, no, all right; but her voice sounded hidden and tight. When she came back to the study, she said, “Sunny’ll be home in less than an hour. She had a flat tire.” Lucinda looked at Poppa quickly, then ducked her head and turned away. In an angry voice she added, “Cars do get flat tires.”

“So they do. With remarkable regularity.” Poppa turned off the music and lifted Norah from the floor. “Bath time for you, little one. And then bed. I’m sure you’ll still be awake in an hour, Lucinda, but if by some strange chance your mother has another flat tire, I don’t want you waiting up past ten.”

Lucinda glared at the floor and looked furious, but she just said, “Yes, Poppa.”

“Can I stay up and wait for an hour, too, Poppa?” Norah asked.

“No, sweetheart,” he said. “You take your bath and go right on to sleep.”

After Poppa had kissed her goodnight and turned off her light, Norah lay in the dark, waiting. Sunny said no matter what, she would always come in to kiss Norah goodnight. If Norah fell asleep, she might not see Sunny for days. Sunny would probably still be in bed when school started and gone when school let out.

Suppose Sunny wasn’t lucky and got killed on the highway. Suppose she was dead, like Granny. The day before Granny had died, Poppa had taken Norah to Berkeley to the dark house where Granny lived with a nurse. Granny was propped against the big wooden headboard. She was almost bald, with wisps of gray hair springing from her head and little bristles on her cheeks and chin. Her breath smelled awful.

When Norah told Fronnie that evening how ugly Granny was, Fronnie had said, “People dying you not supposed to be thinking bad things about them. You supposed to think about where they soul is going.”

“Where do souls go?” Norah asked.

“God and Jesus decide that,” Fronnie said. “When you die, if you been meek and loved Jesus you get to see God’s face in
Heaven. But, if the Devil had hold of you, God sends you to hell where you freeze like an ice cube or burn like paper in a fireplace, one or the other.”

After Granny died, Norah told Poppa and Sunny what Fronnie had said. “Well, that’s just superstition,” Poppa said. “Sunny, please ask Fronnie not to talk to the children about religion.”

Sunny had laughed. “You ask her. I’m afraid she’d quit, and then where would we be? Anyway, I rather like what she tells them. It’s comforting. I hope when I’m about seventy-five Jesus gives me the sign and I have a sudden conversion right there so I won’t mind dying.”

“Maybe you could have some kind of conversion before then,” Poppa said.

Sunny left the room.

If Sunny were killed on the highway, would she go to Hell and be cold as an ice cube or hot as fire? If only she would behave she might go to Heaven.

Norah woke to noise, bare feet slapping against the bare floor, a thump, a grunt, whispering. She heard the door to Sunny’s room creaking and Lucinda running down the hall to her own room and closing her door.

Poppa said, “Is that you, Marlene?” He only called Sunny by her real name when he was upset with her. Norah heard him walking down the hall. He stopped at Lucinda’s door and tapped lightly. “Lucinda,” he said in a whisper.

“Yes, Poppa?”

“I heard something.”

“I got up to get a drink of water,” Lucinda said. “My throat’s dry,”

“You made quite a lot of noise getting it.”

“I bumped against something. I forgot to turn on the light.”

“Is Marlene home?”

“Oh, yes,” said Lucinda. “She’s been in a long time. And she’s all right, Poppa, she’s really all right. That flat tire . . .”

“You’re not a very good liar,” Poppa said, “but with all this practice you’re bound to improve.” He walked back into his room.

Norah lay in bed, waiting. Then suddenly Sunny was silhouetted in the doorway, her long blond hair let loose and falling
across her shoulders. She came over and sat down on Norah’s bed. “Awake, little one?” she whispered.

In the faint glow of the streetlight, Norah saw a bandage on Sunny’s cheek and a bruise on her forehead. “You’re hurt,” she said.

“I had an accident.”

“Poppa told Fronnie you’d be lucky if you didn’t get killed on the highway.”

“I almost wasn’t lucky,” Sunny said. “But it could have been a lot worse.” Her voice sounded funny. Was she drunk? Norah sniffed but she couldn’t smell anything.

“You promised you’d be here when I got home,” Norah said.

“Something came up. I really meant to.” She lay down on the bed.

“You always mean to.”

“I don’t blame you for being mad at me,” Sunny said with a big sigh. “Let’s not talk. Let’s go to sleep.”

“You talked to Lucinda,” Norah said. “You always talk to her. She’s your girl. I’m Poppas’s girl.” She scooted away from Sunny and buried her face in the pillow and began to cry. Sunny took her by her shoulders and drew her close against her breasts.

“You’re my girl, nobody else’s. You’re my baby love.”

At quiet time the next day, Norah put her rug down next to Mary Wood’s instead of Dickie’s. She looked at the ceiling, and there was Sunny out in the garden, her hair pulled back and held by a yellow ribbon. Norah closed her eyes as tight as she could. She ignored Dickie when he hit her with a spitball, and after school she walked home by herself.

And there was Sunny leaning against the refrigerator, talking to Fronnie. This time the picture hadn’t lied.

“I knew you’d be here,” Norah said. Sunny’s hand was wrapped in adhesive and there was a Band-Aid above her eye. “Are you bad hurt?” Norah asked. When she reached up to touch the Band-Aid, Sunny drew back.

“Bad enough not to want you to touch the wound, but you ought to see the other fellow.” Sunny sat down and patted her knees, and Norah climbed onto her lap. “Fortunately the other fellow was a telephone pole.”
“Mr. Prescott say you wrecked your car bad,” Fronnie said.
“Say you lucky you didn’t kill yourself,” Fronnie said.
“I’m indestructible,” said Sunny. “But suppose I had killed someone else?” She began to rub her nose against Norah’s cheek.
“Suppose I had hurt someone’s little girl? How could I live with that?”
“They’s lot of ways to hurt little girls,” said Fronnie. She and Sunny looked hard at each other.
“I really don’t need that from you, Fronnie.”
Fronnie shrugged and turned away. “I just work here,” she said.
“You know I didn’t mean it that way,” Sunny said. “You think I haven’t told myself?”
“Maybe talk a little louder,” Fronnie said. “You be too willful.”
“Maybe I ought to just leave and stop everybody’s misery.”
Norah buried her face in Sunny’s neck. “You aren’t going to leave, are you?”
Sunny held Norah away from her and pretended to be outraged. “Who said that? Who said leave? Anybody try to separate me from my girls had better hire some bodyguards.” Sunny made her hands into fists.
Fronnie said, “They’s easier ways to solve trouble than fighting or running.”
“I know that,” said Sunny. “Look, I’ve been awake about six hours, lying up in bed wrestling with the angel of the Lord,” she sighed. “Okay, Fronnie, Norah, you’re the first to know. As of this very moment, I’m ready to change.”
“Well,” said Fronnie. “I hope you talking the truth.”
Sunny set Norah on the floor and began to sing.

I’m going to change my way of living
And if that ain’t enough
I’m going to change the way I strut my stuff.
Nobody wants you when you’re old and gray.

She grabbed Norah’s hands and danced her around the room.

There’ll be some changes made today, today . . .
There’ll be some changes made today . . .
“Just look at the two of you,” Fronnie said, laughing with her hand over her mouth. “You just dancing fools.”

Sunny said Fronnie could go home early. She said they would have a special party in honor of the change in the way she was going to strut her stuff. While Sunny fixed a chicken dish with little potatoes and onions and made up the batter for brownies, Norah spread a white linen cloth over the dining table and set out the good silver and crystal goblets.

Lucinda came in just at dusk and looked at Sunny and without smiling said, “You’re home.”

Sunny threw her arms wide and began to sing:

There’ll be a change in the weather  
And a change in the sea,  
And before long there’ll be a change in me.  
My walk will be different, my talk and my name.  
And nothing about me’s going to be the same.

Lucinda said, “Yeah, and get off at Saratoga for the fourteenth time,” and left the room.

Sunny looked very sad until Norah said, “I believe you,” and then Sunny laughed and hugged her.

When Poppa got home, he and Sunny had a long talk in Poppa’s study. Norah waited on the steps, but she couldn’t hear anything. When Sunny came out of the study, she looked as though she had been crying. She said, “There’s a change in the fashion, just ask the feminine folks. Even Jack Benny has been changing jokes,” and went into the kitchen. Norah was afraid to follow her—Sunny might be mad. But a few minutes later she rang the bell and called “Dinner ready,” just as Fronnie always did.

During dinner Poppa asked Lucinda about school, and Lucinda said, “I hate math.”

Poppa said, “Keep at it. It trains the mind. It’s good for you.”

Lucinda frowned. “I can’t help it if it bores me, Poppa.”

Sunny laughed. “Maybe boring things are always good for you.” She glanced at Poppa and her face turned very serious. “I liked geometry. At least I liked it better than algebra.”
"They say the artistic temperament prefers geometry." Poppa smiled. "I preferred algebra. I guess that means I'm not artistic."

"And there it is, folks." Sunny stood up and began to sing. "He says potaytoes and I say potahtoes, he says tomaytoes and I say tomahtoes, so let's call the whole thing off."

"Sunny," said Lucinda in a tight voice.

Poppa laughed. "Your mother used to tease me all the time, kept me from taking myself too seriously. I always loved it." When Sunny was being good, Poppa was always happy.

Sunny walked up behind Poppa and rubbed his head with her knuckles and said, "Okay, is this geometry or algebra? If two cars going side by side at eighty-five miles an hour come to a single-lane bridge, who wants brownies and ice cream?"

"Just a smidgen," Poppa said, patting Sunny's hand.

While they were eating the brownies and ice cream, Sunny asked Norah how Dickie-bird was.

"I didn't play with him," Norah said. It wasn't really a lie. She had played with him at first recess, but at second recess, after she had seen good pictures at quiet time, she had played jump rope with Mary Wood and some other girls. "I have a new friend, a girl."

"Good," Poppa said. "It's good for you to have little girls for friends. What's her name?"

"Mary Wood Clements," Norah said.

"She sounds a little stiff but forgiving." Sunny said, flicking her eyebrows at Poppa: "Wood, get it? Clements, get it? Ho-ho-ho."

Poppa smiled and said, "But even so it's bound to be an improvement."

"Good riddance to Icky Dickie," Lucinda said.

Norah said, "I'm going to change the way I strut my stuff."

Sunny really laughed then. "Hey, our daughter's witty."

Poppa smiled at Sunny. "I wonder where she gets that. Where does your new friend live?"

"I don't know, Poppa, but she's really nice."

"Still, I'd like to know more about her."

Sunny said, "Before you get too cozy, better be sure she lives in the right neighborhood, eh, Peter?"

No one spoke. Poppa looked down at his plate, and so did Lucinda. Then Sunny rolled her eyes and smiled. "Just teasing—
the way you like.” She turned to look at Lucinda. “I was the chief cook—who’s the bottle-washer? I mean, the machine filler. Did I hear you volunteer, Lucinda?” She turned to Norah. “And did I hear you volunteer to clear the table? And, Peter, did you volunteer to take out the garbage?” And then everyone laughed.

After dinner they sat in the study. Norah lay on her favorite spot on the rug with her crayons and drawing tablet, and Lucinda sat down at Poppa’s desk and opened her math book. Poppa motioned to the big chair and said to Sunny, “Don’t you want to sit here?”

“That’s your chair,” Sunny said.

Poppa smiled. “Not ours?”

“That isn’t what I meant. I meant if I get too comfortable I’ll fall asleep.”

Lucinda slammed her hand down on her book. “If I have to do one more of these stupid problems, I’ll shoot myself. Will somebody please please please tell me what this Y equals?”

“Look in the back of the book,” Sunny said. “They used to have the answers in the back.”

When Lucinda started flipping the pages to the back, Poppa went to stand behind her. “Don’t look at the answer. Do the problem. Where do you think the 5 should go, with the Y or the x? Now subtract . . .”

“I’m asleep already,” Sunny said. When she pretended to snore, Lucinda frowned at her, but Poppa laughed, and then so did Lucinda, and so did Norah.

Every day Norah saw good pictures at school, and every afternoon when she came home Sunny was tired. And almost every day Sunny took Norah for an outing, downtown to Union Square or to the zoo or out to the ocean to look at the seals on the rocks.

One rainy afternoon they drove down to Woodside to see Aggie, Sunny’s old friend from her hometown in Maine. While Sunny and Aggie talked, Norah watched television. A man named Elvis was playing a guitar and banging his hips back and forth and singing about a dog. Norali thought that looked like fun, and she stood and pretended she was playing a guitar and singing and dancing the way he did. Sunny and Aggie laughed until the tears were coming down their cheeks.
That evening when the family went into the study, Norah tried to show Poppa how she had imitated Elvis, but he raised his hand to stop her. "Trash like Elvis is exactly why I don't want television in the house. Promise you'll never imitate that awful man again."

"For God's sake, Peter, it was just a joke," Sunny said. She stared at him for a minute, her face reddening, her lips curled under.

Poppa looked at her as though surprised. "All the same," he said, "I don't think it's appropriate for a little girl."

And Sunny left the room. Still she was being good.

At first the telephone rang often, but Sunny always refused to answer it. "Tell him I died and the funeral was last week." While Fronnie was on the telephone, Sunny listened with a funny sad smile on her face. "God, you'd think people would just give up."

Lucinda said, "Why don't you tell him straight out that you don't want to see him anymore?"

"See who?" Norah asked.

Fronnie put the telephone back in its cradle. "Nobody going to see nobody," she said. "We ain't studying nothing like that."

Sunny nodded. "You're right, Fronnie. As usual. But be nice to me, please. I'm trying so hard."

"You doing good, too," Fronnie said.

In Poppa's study one evening, Norah and Sunny looked through the photograph album. There were photographs of Sunny as a little girl, frowning into the light, and Sunny in college wearing a long dress with shiny dots around the neck and another picture in a bathing suit standing on a man's shoulders and a beautiful picture of Sunny in her long white wedding gown. There were photographs of Poppa in a black robe with a funny hat on his head and another in a red robe and a tam. There was a picture of Poppa holding Lucinda on his lap when Lucinda was a tiny baby and Sunny stood behind him with her hand on his shoulder.

Sunny said, "He was so handsome. I fell in love at first sight. At the Officers' Club, remember, Peter?"

"What's an Officers' Club?" Norah asked.

Poppa put down his book and turned down the music. "During the war large towns had clubs where army and navy officers
could go when they were in town, and very nice local girls came and talked to them and danced with them. I was at Bath—that's in Maine—waiting for my destroyer to be commissioned, and one weekend I went to Portland and your mother was at the Officers' Club. There must have been ten men lined up to dance with her."

"Ah, so that was it." Sunny winked at Norah. "You wanted to beat out the competition."

"You had such life in your face, so I wanted to get to know you."

Poppa and Sunny looked at each other. They both seemed sad, which was better than when they were angry. Sunny turned back to the photographs. "Here, Norah, see all those medals? Your poppa was a hero."

"Not a hero," he said. "I just happened to be on a ship that was in some battles against the Japanese. I myself did nothing heroic, though I hope I did my duty."

Sunny looked at Lucinda and then at Norah and shook her head. Then she laughed. "And all the time I thought you were a hero."

Poppa smiled at Sunny. "So you went for my medals?"

There were pictures of Lucinda as a baby and as little girl and baby pictures of Norah, too, and a few when Norah was just learning to walk, and pictures taken at a beach with the four of them. And then there were only empty pages in the album.

"Why aren't there any more?" Norah asked.

"We must have run out of film about then." Sunny kissed her on the forehead and closed the book.

The first time Norah brought Mary Wood home after school, Sunny drove them downtown and parked the car in the underground garage at Union Square. Then they ran across the street to a place Sunny said had the best ice cream in the world.

The place was crowded with women in dark suits and with fur pieces around their necks and high-heel shoes and hats. Sunny was the only one wearing slacks and no hat. When she caught Norah's eye, she pulled her collar up around her cheeks and pretended to be embarrassed. Norah laughed but Mary Wood didn't get the joke.

They sat down at a white marble table with pink napkins and a bowl of tiny pink flowers. When the waitress in a starched pink
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uniform came to take their order, Sunny said, "You can have anything you want so long as it's thick, creamy, rich, and sweet."

Mary Wood said, "Mommy doesn't like for me to eat sweet things between meals."

Sunny rolled her eyes. "Just say to your mother real loud 'We had milk' and then whisper 'shakes.'" And that time Mary Wood laughed. She and Norah both ordered chocolate shakes.

Afterward they walked around through Macy's, and Sunny let them run down the up escalator until a man in a uniform made them stop. Sunny told them that, if they got separated, to stay exactly where they were and she'd find them. They went next door to I. Magnin, where Sunny bought a bright purple lipstick and showed them the ladies' room that had marble walls so shiny they could see themselves, and Mary Wood did some tap dance steps in front of the mirror.

Outside, Sunny took each of them by a hand and ran across the middle of the street through the traffic, horns blaring and brakes shrieking. Mary Wood squealed and laughed. When they stopped at her house, she said she wouldn't tell her mother about the milkshake or nearly getting hit by the cars because it had been such fun.

Just as Norah and Sunny walked into the house, the telephone rang, and when Fronnie answered it and held it out to Sunny, Sunny shook her head. Fronnie said into the telephone, "She ain't home. You don't need to be bothering her."

Sunny still occasionally lost her temper with Poppa. Once Lucinda caught Sunny slipping Norah some of her cards when the three of them were playing Go Fish. Lucinda laughed but she pretended to be angry and shouted. "You're cheating."

Poppa looked up and asked what the problem was. When Lucinda told him Sunny had cheated, Poppa said, "I'm sure you don't mean to be encouraging the girls to cheat, Sunny, but . . ."

Sunny broke in with, "It's just a game, Peter; we're just playing a game. Just having a little fun." She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling.

Poppa shook his head. "Children's games are preparation for life," he said. "I read a very interesting book . . ."

But Sunny was on her feet. "I will not read a book that takes the
play out of play. I would rather play. I play better than I do other things, and I will not be chastised for playing as I choose to play.”

Every time she said the word *play*, a little spit flew out.

Poppa lowered his gaze to the book in his lap. Lucinda bit her lip. Norah felt that she might cry. Sunny was being bad again.

“Why do you do this, Peter? Why do you try to squelch the life out of everyone? I will not live in a morgue.”

“Please, Marlene,” Poppa said, nodding at Norah and Lucinda.

“We don’t need to discuss this now.”

“That’s right. The famous Prescott decorum at any cost. I sometimes wonder if you have any feelings at all.”

After a moment Poppa said in a quiet voice, “Unfortunately I do.”

Sunny stared at him and then drew a quick breath, and walked to the door. Then she stopped and came back and stood behind Poppa’s chair and put her hands on his shoulders. “Sorry, sorry, sorry” she said, her voice tight and whispery. “Maybe one of these days you’ll teach me how to be civilized.” Then she looked at Norah and Lucinda and smiled a funny smile. “Then again, maybe not. Good night all,” and she went up to her room and closed the door.

One evening Poppa said he had been invited to London to give a talk to the rare-book society convention, and he thought that would be a very nice trip for him and Sunny. He said they could fly over the pole and spend a week or so.

“Who’ll look after us?” Norah asked.

“I thought Fronnie,” Poppa said.

“Fronnie has her own life,” Sunny said, “and it includes a husband and a little boy. Remember Gilbert?”

Poppa said, “I guess I’d forgotten Gilbert. I’ll ask Evelyn. I’m sure she’d be happy to look after two sweet little girls.”

Sunny said, “Doesn’t Evelyn have a family?”

“She lives with her sister, and she’d probably like a few days away.”

Evelyn was Poppa’s assistant at the shop and she was quiet and hardly spoke. “Evelyn wouldn’t be any fun at all,” Norah said.

Sunny looked around the room. “It might be better if you went and I just stayed here.”

Poppa looked surprised. “Does that mean you don’t want to go?”

Sunny shrugged. “To be honest, visiting dusty old bookstores
and talking to antiquarians with halitosis is not exactly my idea of a fun holiday."

Poppa frowned. "We wouldn’t have to spend all the time at the convention. We could go to the theater and the museums."

"I haven’t seen all the museums in California yet," Sunny said, with a half laugh, "and no one has written a really good play since Chekhov."

"I thought it would be a nice holiday for us, but I don’t need to go."

Sunny stood up from the floor, where she and Norah had been playing cards. "I want you to go, Peter," she said. "I want you to trust me for once. I can look after my girls better than any Frannies or Evelyns or even Peters. And if you’re so worried, the girls can stand guard over me and keep me on the straight and narrow."

Poppa bit his lips for a moment. "Perhaps we should discuss this at some other time," he said, glancing at Norah.

"Or not at all." Sunny went out of the room and Lucinda followed her.

Norah heard their heavy steps on the stairs. "It’ll be all right," she said to Poppa. "I promise."

He smiled and nodded.

The evening after Poppa flew off to London, Sunny took Lucinda and Norah to a pizza place for early dinner and to see a movie about a man who flew around the world in a balloon. Sunny said Poppa would definitely approve. The second night the three of them listened to a crime drama on the radio, and Sunny said Poppa would definitely not approve. Right in the middle of the program, the telephone rang. Sunny motioned Lucinda not to answer it. When it continued to ring, Sunny said, "Maybe it’s Peter calling from London," and stood up and went out into the hall to the telephone. Lucinda got halfway up but then sat back down.

While Sunny was talking, a new program started and a man cracked jokes that made the audience laugh. When Sunny finally came back, she looked flushed, as though she had been running.

"Was it Poppa?" Norah asked.

Sunny flipped the dial of the radio until she came to some dance music. "Just a friend," she said over her shoulder.

Lucinda said, "Who?"
Sunny whirled around and looked hard at Lucinda. “A classmate from Colby. She’s just passing through. Okay?”
“I don’t care who it was,” Lucinda shouted and ran out of the room.
“What’s biting her?” Sunny asked. “Don’t answer that, little one.”
After a minute Sunny went to the door and called, “Lucinda, please come back, please.” Lucinda came into the room with her head down. Sunny took her by the hand and led her to Poppa’s leather chair. She sat down and pulled Lucinda onto her lap. Lucinda sat stiff on Sunny’s knees and stared at the far wall. Sunny said, “Honest, I promise, nobody is coming over, and I’m not going out. And I’m sorry I spoke shortly to you. Please don’t be mad at me.”
Sunny pulled Lucinda’s head down and cradled it against her shoulder. “Such fragile little shoulders,” she said, “to carry the burdens of the world. Or at least the family.” She motioned for Norah to come to the big chair, too, and drew her down against the arm of the chair. “You’re my girls, and I love you better than anything in the world.”

The next day Sunny surprised Norah by meeting her after school. They walked up the hills so fast Norah was soon breathless. But she was afraid if she asked Sunny to slow down, Sunny would get mad—Sunny looked as though she wanted to be mad. When they got home, Sunny walked rapidly from room to room, picking little specks off the wood floors, straightening pictures, shifting ashtrays. She picked up an old abalone shell on the sideboard in the dining room and said, “You’d think Fronnie might just once dust under something and not just around it.”

When the telephone rang, she started toward it and then yelled, “For God’s sake, Fronnie, can’t you answer the damn phone? Say I went out to see a man about a dog.”
After a few minutes Fronnie came to stand in the doorway. She looked hard at Sunny. “They’s a number for you to call when you get shed of the dog business.”
“Just tear the damn thing up.”
“I don’t take kindly to being yelled at,” Fronnie said. Norah had never seen Fronnie look so angry, not even when Lucinda was ugly to her.
“I don’t blame you,” Sunny said. “I wouldn’t either.” She took a deep breath. “And I will make every effort to make sure that it isn’t repeated.”

“Else I don’t need to be working here.”

Sunny walked over and hung her wrists over Fronnie’s shoulders and rested her head against Fronnie’s cheek. “Please help me,” she said.

“You got to help yourself. Ain’t nobody do it for you.” Fronnie put her arms around Sunny and began to rub her back.

“I’ll help you,” Norah said. “What do you want me to do?”

Sunny broke from Fronnie and grabbed Norah. “Just be you, little one. That’s the very best help. Just be my baby love.”

For the next few days Sunny was irritable and nervous. One day she said the sweater Lucinda wore was such an ugly match with her skirt that it made her want to vomit and the next day told Norah to for God’s sake pull her socks out of her shoes and if the socks were too small get another pair or go barefoot; and one day she had to apologize to Fronnie twice. The worst, though, was the second time Mary Wood came home with Norah.

As they were drinking a glass of orange juice, Sunny stood at the kitchen table and looked down at Mary Wood. She said, “I thought you’d be playing with Dickie today, Norah.”

Norah said, “I don’t play with Dickie any more.”

“I like Dickie,” Sunny said. “Wild is better than prissy.” She began to walk around the room, lifted the top off a pot, and picked up and dropped silverware in the sink.

Fronnie looked up from the apples she was slicing into a bowl. “Go take yourself a nap. I’ll look after the girls.”

Sunny said. “I can take care of them, thank you.” She turned away and walked to the back window and stared out at their little garden. Then she whirled around and came back to the girls. “Okay,” she said, “who wants a beauty lesson?”

Norah grabbed Mary Wood’s hand and said, “This is fun.” She and Mary Wood ran up the steps to Sunny’s room.

Sunny said. “It’s more fun when it’s a surprise,” and she set them side-by-side on the makeup bench, facing away from the mirror. She rubbed rouge on their cheeks and spread a purplish cream above and below their eyes. “Beautiful. Gorgeous. Ava Gardner, look out.” Then she applied a pencil across their eye-
brows and a brush across their lashes and patted their faces with a puff so that a big pink cloud rose around their heads. "The final touch," she said, taking a bright red lipstick and drawing it across their lips. Her eyes were gleaming. "Now you can look."

Norah and Mary Wood twisted around to face the mirror. Their eyebrows were thick and black, and around their eyes were smears of greasy green and yellow. They had big red circles on their cheeks, and their skin was a chalky pink with little black dots, and their lips were blood red and enormous.

Mary Wood yelled, "I hate it, I look ugly like a clown," and spun away from the mirror and stood up. She looked as though she would cry.

"How about a little sense of humor here," Sunny said, patting the air to silence Mary Wood. "We're just having a little fun, right, Norah?"

Norah hated the way she looked, but she didn't want to anger Sunny. "Yeah, Mary Wood, this is fun."

"I want to go home." Mary Wood's voice rose, and she began to wipe her mouth with the sleeve of her sweater.

"Don't smear it on your clothes." Sunny grabbed her arm and pushed her back down on the bench. "I'll clean it off."

She unscrewed the top off a jar on the table and dipped in her fingers. "We don't want any tell-tale signs, do we?"

"I'm going to tell my mother anyway," Mary Wood said. "She won't let me come here anymore."

"Hey, there's no permanent damage." Sunny smeared the cream over Mary Wood's face. Mary Wood looked like a ghost, but Norah didn't laugh or say anything.

Mary Wood said, "She doesn't like me to come here because you don't set a good example."

Sunny stopped spreading the cream. She lowered her head and narrowed her eyes and her lips rolled inside so her teeth showed. It was Sunny's angriest look, and it frightened Norah.

"Marlene," Norah said.

Sunny looked at Norah. "Well, Peter, hello. You're two days early," she said. But her anger went away, and she began to laugh. "Okay, here we go," she said. She pulled a handful of tissues from the box and wiped Mary Wood's face until all the makeup was gone. "There," Sunny said. "Pretty as ever."
After they came back from driving Mary Wood home, Norah went into her room and lay down on the bed. She didn’t cry, but she wanted to.

“Hey, kiddo, it isn’t the end of the world.” Sunny came into the room and sat down on the edge of the bed and began to rub Norah’s back. “Don’t ever have a friend who can’t take a joke on herself.”

“She can, too, take a joke,” Norah said. “She’s fun. Now I won’t have anybody to play with.” She began to snuffle.

“You can play with Dickie,” Sunny said, “He’s more fun anyway.”

“You want me to be bad so you can be bad again.”

“So I can be bad again?” Sunny stopped rubbing Norah’s back.

“What do you mean?”

Norah didn’t want to tell Sunny about the pictures. They would be angry with her and go away forever. “I promised Poppa I’d be good,” she said, “and keep you from being bad.”

“You promised Poppa? That you’d keep me from being bad?” Sunny abruptly stood up. She threw the box of tissues against the wall and stalked out of the room.

When they gathered in Poppa’s study after dinner, Lucinda turned on the radio. Sunny didn’t say anything but just twirled her fingers around for Lucinda to turn it off. She shook her head when Norah asked her to play Slap. She hardly spoke all evening, just held a magazine on her lap, though she seldom turned a page. But nothing really bad happened.

The next day, when Norah had placed her rug down next to Mary Wood’s at quiet time, Mary Wood picked hers up and started toward the other side of the room. Miss Bellamy asked if anything was wrong.

“My mother told me not to rest next to some people,” Mary Wood said.

“Well, tell your mother this isn’t a hotel with private rooms,” Miss Bellamy said. “Put your rug back where it was.” Mary Wood put down her rug, but she turned her back toward Norah.

Once the lights were out and the shades down, Norah looked at the little holes in the ceiling. She saw pictures of Sunny at home in her orange sweater laughing with Fronnie. She wasn’t mad anymore. At recess Norah played alone on the jungle gym. She didn’t want to take a chance playing with Dickie.
When she got home and went to the hall closet to hang up her coat, she saw that the big rug in the living room was rolled up, and the chairs that had belonged to Poppa's mother had been pushed against the walls. The chairs had fancy carved backs and hard bottoms, and Sunny said they had been used by the Chinese to torture their in-laws. Poppa's record player had been brought from his study and was on a table.

Norah went into the kitchen. Sunny was mixing mayonnaise and catsup and whistling a tune. She said, "Come help me, lamb chop. I gave Fronnie the afternoon off."

Norah said, "The rug is rolled up."

"We're having a party, and people might want to dance." Sunny took some green onions out of the refrigerator and placed them on the tile counter. "Here, cut these into tiny pieces, but be careful. Onions don't taste good with blood on them." She laughed and winked at Norah. The pictures had told the truth.

As Norah was chopping the onions, Lucinda came in the back door. She stopped and looked around. "What's going on?"

"A classmate from Colby is in town," Sunny said, "and I've invited a few old friends over to see her."

Lucinda said, "The same classmate you said you were talking to last week?"

Sunny looked at Lucinda without smiling. "The very self same."

"Too bad Poppa isn't here for the party to meet this new old classmate," Lucinda said as she left the room. Sunny frowned but didn't say anything.

"Doesn't Poppa like parties?" Norah asked.

"Not the same kind I do." Sunny took the lid off a pot of boiling water and dumped in a bag of shrimp.

"Maybe he doesn't like fun," Norah said. "I've never seen him having any."

Sunny laughed. "You're quite the wit," she said. "But like most jokes, it's not totally true. He has his kind of fun with his books and maps. It just ain't my kind."

"Mine either."

Sunny reached over and ruffled Norah's hair. "Hey, you, it's okay for me to say that but not for you."
Norah stood on the rim of the bathtub, hanging on the shower curtain, watching Sunny put on her coloring. “You aren’t going to do yourself the way you did me and Mary Wood, are you?”

Sunny looked at her. “Did she forgive you, baby love?”

“I don’t want to be friends with her anymore,” Norah said.

“I’m sorry,” Sunny said, “but something just brought out the devil in me.”

“Sometimes you’re full of the devil, aren’t you?” That’s what Frommie said when people were bad.

“Up to here.” Sunny drew a line above her head. She wet a little pencil against her tongue and ran it across her eyelids and put a little black dot at the corner of each eye. “The dot makes your eyes look wider,” she said, “and that means prettier.”

“You look beautiful,” Norah said.

Sunny smiled. “I think I’ll keep you.” She drew the purple lipstick across her lips in a wide dark line and tore off a piece of toilet paper and blotted her lips. When she took the pins out, her hair fell to her shoulders, glistening in the light, like silk.

“Can I brush it?” Norah asked.

“Another time, baby love. I’m running late.” Sunny twirled her hair into a rope and fastened it on top of her head with a purple comb. She turned from the mirror and grabbed Norah from the rim of the bathtub and whirled her around.

They heard the slam of a car door, and then their doorbell chimed. Sunny said, “Be a love and let in whoever it is. I’ll just be a minute.”

It was the colonel. He used to come with Aggie to see Sunny sometimes, and when he did he always took Norah on his lap and told her about his granddaughter who lived in Denver.

As he put his coat in the closet, he said, “Did I ever tell you about my granddaughter?” he asked.

“She lives in Denver,” Norah said.

Before Norah had to sit on the colonel’s lap, the doorbell rang, and she raced off to let in more guests. Soon the house was full of people. Norah knew Poppa’s cousin Marilyn, who Poppa said had left a perfectly good husband for an artist who had never earned a nickel in his life. And she knew Sunny’s friend Marge who made her own cigarettes that left a terrible stink in the room. And of course Aggie. But there were some she didn’t know. A very fat
woman with a full-moon face shiny with sweat sat down on the sofa and sighed. A man in a black turtleneck sweater and a black corduroy jacket came in with a large paper he set down next to the phonograph player. His hair was smoothed back like a blackbird's wings. Two youngish-looking men and a very young woman walked in just as Sunny came down the steps.

Sunny had on the purple dress. The sleeves were wide like bird wings, and there was a slit up the sides so that as she walked her leg seemed to flash with light. The man in the turtleneck went up to her. He ran his hands up her arms and leaned close to her face. She glanced at Norah and said, "Don't, Rex."

"Is that the greeting I get after two months?" he asked.

Sunny pushed him away. "Just don't," she said. She motioned for Norah and said, "Come over and meet Rex."

"Did you go to Colby, too?" Norah asked the man as she shook hands with him.

"Did I?" he asked Sunny with a laugh, and Sunny laughed, too.

"Yeah, Colby."

The colonel walked up. As he shook hands with Rex, he said, "Colby, huh? Well, I went to West Point, class of '31."

"West Point?" Rex said, "I guess you voted for Ike."

The colonel nodded. "Both times. I could never vote against an old soldier."

"Old soldiers never die, but their privates do," Rex said, and the colonel laughed.

From the other side of the room, Cousin Marilyn said, "I'd lay for Adlai myself."

"Or anybody else who rattled your chain," Aggie said, and everybody laughed.

"Come on, now," Sunny said, cocking her head at Norah.

The man named Rex took one of the records from its cardboard cover and put it on the turntable. "Always start with old blue eyes."

Lucinda came into the room, and Rex walked over to her and said, "I'd be charmed if you would allow me the first dance."

"No, thank you," Lucinda said. She turned her face toward the other end of the room. Rex primped his lips and mouthed "No, thank you." He turned to Norah.

"How about you, beautiful?"
“I don’t know how,” Norah said. Sometimes she and Sunny held hands and kicked to the music, but that wasn’t really dancing.

“No time like the present for learning.” Rex took hold of Norah’s hands. “Now just listen to the beat for a second.”

As they listened, Rex kept time to the music by lightly tapping Norah on the head. “Okay, got it? Now put your feet on mine. Go on, right on them.” She placed her feet across the laces of his shoes, and they walked around the room until the music stopped.

Rex put his arm across his belt, and bowed. “Thank you for the honor, my dear.” He turned to Lucinda who was sitting on the love seat near the record player. “You be the DJ, but a punch on the schnozzle if you scratch one.” He doubled up his fists and laughed. “Now where’d your gorgeous mother get to?” Then he went into the kitchen.

Norah sat down beside Lucinda on the love seat. Lucinda didn’t say anything. Finally Norah said, “There’s nothing wrong with dancing with him.”

Lucinda’s face turned red. “You just don’t understand, do you? That’s the man Sunny was with when she had the wreck. If Poppa knew . . .”

Norah said, “I wouldn’t tattle on Sunny, but I bet you would.”

Lucinda looked furious, but she didn’t say anything. Norah said, “The music’s over.”

Lucinda frowned. “He can play his own stupid records.”

Marilyn and the artist came over and put another record on the turntable, and Marilyn said, “I’m going to rock around the clock tonight.” She and the artist put their arms around each other and began to dance. After a few minutes they let go, and each danced alone, twisting, snapping their fingers and kicking out their legs, their eyes gleaming.

Norah thought dancing was fun, and she jiggled to the music.

“If Poppa could see you now,” Lucinda said.

“Poppa doesn’t like fun,” Norah said. Lucinda didn’t laugh.

The colonel walked up to Marilyn and the artist, and said, “What’s the point of dancing if you don’t get to hug somebody?” He went close to Marilyn and bumped his behind against hers. Everyone applauded and laughed.

When that song was over, Marilyn said she would put on a slow piece so the colonel wouldn’t feel so old and out of place. The
Sunny and Rex came out of the kitchen and began to dance to the slow piece. The comb was out of Sunny's hair and her hair had fallen down her back. As they danced, Sunny held one hand on the back of Rex's neck, and in the other she held a glass. Rex was smoking one of Marge's stinky cigarettes, and occasionally he held it to Sunny's lips. Sunny took a deep drag and kept sucking the smoke back in. Norah had never seen her smoke before.

When Sunny saw Lucinda and Norah watching, she broke away from Rex and came to them. She leaned close to Lucinda. "Come on, Luce, dance one little dance with me."

Lucinda frowned. "My name is not Luce." She stood up and started to walk away. "I'm going to bed. You coming, Norah?" She stopped at the foot of the stairs. "Come on, I'll read to you."

Norah stood up to follow Lucinda, but Sunny grabbed her arm. "No, Norah is not coming. Norah is going to stay here and dance and sing. Norah is not a sourpuss." She took Norah's hands and began to dance.

Norah noticed that Sunny was wearing the big ring of bright red stones that Poppa had given her for Christmas. She had told Poppa she would keep it for special occasions.

Norah said, "Is this a special occasion?"

"Maybe," Sunny said with a laugh.

Sunny's friend Aggie ran over to Norah. She had big breasts that bounced like balloons full of water. "How about doing Elvis for us? Come on, sing 'You ain't nothing but a houn' dog.'"

Norah remembered her promise to Poppa, that she wouldn't sing the trash songs ever again.

"I promised Poppa I wouldn't."

"But he won't be back until tomorrow," Aggie said. "Come on, please please please."

"Go ahead, do it," Sunny said. "Don't be a sourpuss."

"I got it right here," Rex said. He removed a record from its envelope and placed it on the machine, and the music started. Rex pushed a lamp aside and lifted Norah onto the table. As Elvis sang, Norah pretended she had a guitar resting on her thighs and moved her hips back and forward, the way Elvis had done, and pretended to sing. Everybody was laughing and clapping. Marilyn
yelled, “If she doesn’t stop I’ll wet my pants,” and sat down abruptly. Rex had his arm around Sunny’s shoulders, and they were both laughing.

When the song was over, everyone cheered. Aggie slapped her hands together and said, “Please do it again, honey, please.” Norah wanted to, but Sunny shook her head and lifted Norah from the table.

“Bedtime now for the best little girl in the world.”

The colonel walked up to Sunny. “Come on, Sunny, let’s dance. You’ve had eyes only for Rex all night and I’m jealous.”

Sunny gave Norah a little shove. “Go on up to bed, now, pet. I’ll be right up to kiss you goodnight.” She turned to the colonel and offered him her hands.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” said Rex. He grabbed Sunny by the shoulders and twirled her around to face him. “This is my woman. She loves me tender.”

Sunny laughed and raised her arms to Rex, the loose sleeves of the purple dress like wings moving in the air, the red ring glinting like fire. Rex put his mouth close to Sunny’s ear. He seemed to be singing the song, and Sunny was smiling.

Standing at the foot of the staircase, Norah thought that if she fell down the stairs or had a sudden bellyache, Rex and all the people would have to go home. But then she imagined Sunny’s face, red and tight, and her eyes flashing in anger. She went on up the stairs.

She woke in the dark room. The trash music throbbed and shouts of laughter broke from below. She got out of bed and opened the door into the hall.

When she heard a low noise from Sunny’s room, she walked down the hall and put her hand on the door. The tongue had not clicked, and when she touched it the door opened silently. A lamp burned near the bed, and in the dim light Norah saw the shimmering pool of purple dress on the floor by the bed. When she pushed the door a little more, she saw that man, that Rex, stretched over Sunny and Sunny’s hand clawing at his back and neither one of them had on any clothes.

She felt something behind her, and she turned to see Lucinda with her finger pressed across her lips. Lucinda pulled Norah
away and then carefully closed Sunny’s door. She took Norah’s hand and led her back to her room. “I’ll sleep with you,” she whispered.

“He was hurting her,” Norah said.

Lucinda put her hand over Norah’s mouth and helped Norah onto the bed. “Go to sleep,” she said, lying down beside Norah. “We have to get up for school.” Her voice was snuffly and thick. Norah wanted to say something, something to make Lucinda stop crying, but she couldn’t think of anything.

Norah awakened to the morning light. Lucinda was no longer in bed with her but had laid out Norah’s clothes for the day. On her way to the bathroom Norah stopped and listened outside Sunny’s room. She couldn’t hear anything. Maybe that man was gone and Sunny was asleep.

Once she had dressed, she went downstairs. Lucinda was fixing breakfast. “Has that man gone?” Norah asked.

“Just shut up,” Lucinda shouted. “Just shut up.”

All through breakfast and all the way to school, Lucinda didn’t speak. When they got to Norah’s school, Lucinda rubbed something off Norah’s chin and straightened her coat, and with a frown said, “It’ll be okay, I promise,” and ran off to her school a few blocks away.

At quiet time, when Norah looked for pictures in the ceiling, she saw that man lying on Sunny. She didn’t know what she had done to make everything go bad. Maybe it was singing that song after she had promised Poppa not to.

After school Dickie said it was all right for her to come to his house. She almost went with him. It would serve Sunny right if she didn’t know where Norah was. But then she thought that maybe Sunny was at home and everything was all right.

Fronnie was rolling dough for biscuits, the white flour freckling her black skin. “Hello, little one,” she said, and Norah knew Sunny wasn’t there. But she wouldn’t ask yet because there was still a chance.

“Is Poppa coming this afternoon,” she asked.

“He be here soon and in for a big surprise.” Fronnie wiped her hands down her apron. “Your momma’s done called from Los Angeles. Drove down last night, on the way to Mexico or some
A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER

such.” She came toward Norah, her arms out. “Now don’t start up, little one. She be back, she always is, like remember she flew to Las Vegas that time?”

Norah felt the tears building up, “I don’t care,” she said. “Sunny’s bad and I’m going to tell Poppa about the party and everything.”

Fronnie poofed her lips. “I don’t believe you’ll have to tell him much. Cigarette burns on the record player, one of them China horses broke. I don’t know how you and Lucinda got a wink of sleep.”

When Poppa came home later in the afternoon, he dropped his bag in the front hall and lifted Norah up for a kiss. “I have a wonderful present for you. Everything go okay?” He looked around as if to see the answer, to see Sunny. Fronnie came to the kitchen doorway.

“That’s for you, Mr. Prescott,” she said, pointing at the envelope on the hall table. She looked at Norah. “You come be with me, honey.”

Poppa set Norah down. “I hope you’re well, Fronnie,” he said. He picked up the envelope, carried it into his study, and closed the door.

Norah waited in the kitchen with Fronnie, thinking Poppa would call her so he could give her the present. Fronnie peeled potatoes and let Norah grate the rat cheese for the top. Then Fronnie showed her how to cut the carrots into thin sticks. Usually, when she and Fronnie cooked together, Fronnie talked all the time, making jokes, singing, teasing. But Fronnie was silent—sulky, Sunny would have called it—and it wasn’t any fun. She was glad when she heard Lucinda come in the front door, and she ran out into the hall but Lucinda went straight upstairs without even speaking.

Norah went to the study door and knocked. “Poppa,” she called. “Not now,” he said. She could hardly hear him because his music was so loud.

Fronnie came through the kitchen door. “What you think you doing?” She took Norah’s arm and jerked her back into the kitchen.

“I just wanted my present,” Norah said in a whiney voice. “Maybe he brought me a foreign doll.”

“He ain’t studying no dolls,” Fronnie said. “Don’t you be bothering that poor man.”
“Is he sick?”

“Your momma’s enough to make anybody sick.”

Poppa didn’t come out of the study until Fronnie rang the dinner bell. He still had on his suit jacket and necktie. Lucinda came down the stairs just as Norah and Poppa got to the dinner table. He smiled at her. “Do I get a greeting?”

Without speaking or looking at him, Lucinda went to him and lowered her head for him to kiss her on the forehead. Then she immediately turned away and sat down at her place at the table. He gazed at her for a moment in silence.

All during dinner Lucinda stared at her plate. She hardly ate anything, just pushed the food back and forth. Even when Poppa told them about the wax figures of President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill and the play he had seen and then described the two maps he had bought, Lucinda didn’t look up.

After they had finished eating, Poppa said, “Would you clear the table, please, Lucinda?”

As Lucinda picked up her plate, she shot Poppa a sulky look. Poppa said, “Wait.” He carefully placed his napkin on the table and stood up. “Come here, please.” Lucinda carried her plate around the table and stood in front of him, her head bent toward the floor. He tried to draw her to him, but she didn’t move the plate that was between them.

“I know you’re very unhappy,” he said. “So am I.” He tilted her chin upward. “Norah, listen to this, too. I’m afraid Sunny won’t be living here anymore.” His voice was low and thick.

“What do you mean?” For the first time, Lucinda looked at him. “It’s going to be just the three of us now.”

“She’ll be back soon,” Lucinda said in a tearful voice.

“No, it’ll be just the three of us. Your mother made her choice, and we—and she—will have to live with it.”

“She’ll be back, I know she’ll be back,” Lucinda said, her voice rising. “She always comes back.”

Poppa shook his head. “But this time I’ve decided I can’t allow it.”

Lucinda put her hand on his arm. “Please, Poppa, don’t say that. The only time anything happened was yesterday. Honestly she was here all the time. She was really good.”

“She went away last night, and no one was here to look after you. Suppose something had happened, suppose there had been a
fire.” He shook his head as though trying to shake loose something stuck on his face.

Lucinda said, “It was only for a couple of hours. I could have called the fire department. I’m twelve, Poppa.”

“Yes, twelve. It was utterly irresponsible, leaving you alone like that. She was no doubt drunk or high, but that’s no excuse. It just compounds the problem.”

“She didn’t just leave. She came in my room and woke me up and told me. She knew you were coming home today so we wouldn’t be alone. She told me to be sure Norah got to school and everything.”

Poppa said, “It’s for everybody’s good, even Sunny’s. It may put some sense in her head. We’ll all just have to make the best of it.”

“There won’t be any best without Sunny,” Lucinda wailed.

“It’ll be different, I grant you that.” He put his hand on Lucinda’s shoulder, but Lucinda jerked away.

“It’s your fault, it’s all your fault,” Lucinda screamed. Norah had never heard Lucinda scream at Poppa, though sometimes she screamed at Sunny. “She left because she doesn’t love you.”

Poppa smiled faintly. “That much is fairly clear,” he said. “But I always thought she did love the two of you. Now I’m not so sure. This decision won’t come as a surprise to her. She was well aware that if anything like this happened again it would mean giving you up.”

“She does so love us, but she hates you, and so do I.” As Lucinda began to cry, red blotches of color broke across her cheeks. “I won’t live here without her.”

Poppa shook his head and said, “You think it’s easy for me to lose her? She was my . . .” He stopped abruptly and looked down at the floor.

Lucinda ran into the kitchen, and as she did a carrot flew off the plate and landed near Poppa’s chair. Poppa leaned over and picked up the carrot.

Norah thought he looked the saddest she had ever seen him. “Lucinda shouldn’t blame you,” she said. “You didn’t do anything.”

“There’s blame enough for everyone. I contributed my share.”

“No, you aren’t to blame. All those people you don’t like were here dancing and singing and drinking. The colonel and Aggie
and Marilyn and a lot of others. And that man from the wreck. They're to blame.”

He motioned her to come to him. “Please take this to the kitchen,” he said, handing her the carrot.

His face looked very dark and sad, and she wanted to cheer him up. “Sunny likes that red ring you gave her. It looked really pretty with the purple dress.” He turned away and put his hands to his eyes, and Norah knew that she had said the wrong thing.

Right after dinner Lucinda went up to her room without speaking. When Poppa called up the stairs and told her to join him and Norah in the study, she didn’t answer. Poppa shrugged and said to Norah that Lucinda would feel better in the morning. “I've been remiss in letting it go on as long as it has.”

Norah followed him into his study. She didn’t want to ask him directly for her present because he might think she was selfish. Propped against the wall was an old map in a carved gold-colored frame. It was even darker than the ones on the wall. She hoped that wasn’t her present. “That's a nice map,” she said.

He peered at the map as if he had never seen it before. “Do you really think so? It doesn’t seem quite as beautiful as it did.”

“It looks like a chicken’s head,” she said. “See its beak?” She ran her finger over the map.

“That's supposed to be Brittany, but it isn't really shaped like that. They didn’t have the precision instruments we have now. It was mostly guesswork.”

“The frame is pretty. It must have cost a lot.”

“Do you like old maps?”

“Yes. You have a lot of nice ones.”

“Perhaps when you grow up you and Lucinda will take over my shop. Oh, here’s something I brought you.” He opened his suitcase and took out a large book. “It’s a picture book of London.” He set it on his desk and flipped through the pages until he came to a photograph of a bridge and a dark building. “That's the Tower of London. My hotel was just down the river and a bit west. About here.” He pointed to a spot away from the book.

“Is London very far?” she asked.

“I'll show you.” He brought down the globe from a high shelf
and placed it on the desk blotter and then lifted Norah onto his lap. "This is the world and here's California." With his finger he traced his route from San Francisco to New York and across the Atlantic to London. "Remember last summer at Lake Tahoe?" He touched a blue dot. "See how close it is, and yet it took us five hours to drive there. Just imagine, then, how far London is." He hopped his finger across to London.

When she asked where Mexico was, he paused for a moment and then pointed below California. Mexico was not as far as London or even New York. It was almost as close as Lake Tahoe.

"That's not far," she said. "She'll be back soon."

"Not this time, little one. I blame myself for letting it go on so long. It can't have been good for you and Lucinda."

Poppa looked very sad. Maybe he knew about the trash song. "I broke my promise," she said. "I pretended to sing that song I promised I wouldn't. I made some of the blame. I was bad, too."

"When I said there was blame enough for everybody, I didn't mean you, little one. You and Lucinda are just the innocent victims." He rested his head back against the top of the chair. As he spoke, Norah could hardly hear him, his voice was so mumbly. "There was always something reckless in her that I assumed she'd overcome. And I guess she thought I'd stop being an old fuddy-duddy."

"Will I ever see her again?" Norah asked.

"Of course you will, sweetheart. Perhaps soon." He leaned forward and put his hands on her shoulders and turned her so that she faced him. "But she's not going to live here anymore. I want you to understand that clearly." When Norah began to whimper, he said, "Crying is ninety percent self-pity, the least amiable of qualities. You're getting too big for crying." He kissed her on the forehead and lifted her off his lap. "Now it's time for bed. Go start your bath. Be sure the water's not too hot."

She climbed the stairs and stood outside Lucinda's room. There was a crack of light under the door, but she was afraid Lucinda would be angry if she knocked. She stood there for a moment, and from inside Lucinda shouted. "Don't just stand there. Come on in."

Lucinda was lying on the bed up against the pillows, her knees bent and a book against her thighs. Her face was red and puffy.
"You've been crying," Norah said. "Poppa says crying is ninety percent self-pity."
"These are from the other ten percent. I hate him."
"Poppa says we can see her."
"Isn't he kind, though," Lucinda said in what Sunny called her nasty voice. "Maybe in ten years he'll let us see our mother for five minutes." She began to chew on her hair.
"No. He said soon. But she just can't live here anymore."
"Does he think she'll mind that? She'll be glad. I wish I didn't have to."
"I know where Mexico is," Norah said. "We could go there and see Sunny."
Lucinda made a sneery sound and looked angry. "Mexico isn't exactly the size of Union Square. We'd never find her. Maybe she wouldn't even want us to. We'd just interfere with her fun. I hate her, too." When her finger slipped from her place in the book, she flung the book against the wall.
"I don't," said Norah. "Except when she's bad. She was real bad last night, but I didn't tell Poppa."
Lucinda sat up on the edge of the bed and picked up the book from the floor. "You're such a baby," she said. "You don't understand anything. Go on to bed." She flipped her fingers, dismissing Norah.
Though she had not expected it to happen, Norah began to cry. She tried to stop because she didn't want Poppa and Lucinda to think she was selfish and thought only of herself, but within moments she was sobbing. "Where's Sunny? Where is she? Where is she?" Her chest began to throb and heave, and the tears poured down her face.
Lucinda ran to her, and saying "Shh, shh," walked her toward the bed.
She heard her father's voice, calling, "What's going on up there?"
Lucinda drew one of the pillows from the top of the bed and motioned for Norah to cover her face. Then she ran to the door and opened it.
"It's nothing, Poppa," she called. "Everything's okay."
"I know you girls are upset," Poppa said, "but try not to take it out on each other. You'll need each other even more now."
Lucinda came back to the bed, sat down, and put her arm
around Norah. "Please don't cry." She pressed Norah's head against her shoulder and began to rock her back and forth, just as Sunny always did. Then she pulled Norah down onto the bed so that they were lying down facing each other, their foreheads touching, their knees touching, squeezing each other's hands. "She'll be back," Lucinda said. "It'll be okay."

Norah lay in bed in the dark. The tree's shadow on the wall curled around the way the coast of Mexico did. *I'll be good*, Norah murmured, *I promise.* And there was Sunny, standing on the edge of the sea. She was wearing her yellow sweater and her hair was pulled away from her face. When she saw Norah she held out her hands. *Come on, little one*, she said, *let's dance.* She was smiling, she was happy. Norah closed her eyes so the picture would never fade.