

Keepsakes

Steven Cantwell

ON THE DAY OF HER FUNERAL, my mother's two sister-wives put on a dinner in her honor. Sister Karen and Sister Sharlene spent the morning before the services baking pies and fresh bread, making potato salads, and chopping vegetables while I gave Sharlene's twin girls a bath and helped Karen's boys and my brother Jason into their Sunday clothes. At least a hundred people from both the Hildale and Colorado City communities came to the house to pay their respects. I was surprised to see them chattering in the usual way, as they had so many Sundays after services, smiling at each other, relieved to be on their way home. When I walked into the room, they hovered around me talking in whispers about Mama's eternal reward and happiness in the next world, but I knew they were aching to ask me what I was going to do now that she was gone. When would I marry? Would I be Brother Joe Cardon's fifth wife? Would Brother Vaughn allow it? No one dared to ask these questions so soon. That morning when Brother Vaughn had prayed over the grave, I had closed my eyes, imagining my mother at my side with her finger over her lips, her head bowed, almost begging me to keep silence. I didn't know myself what I was holding back, but all day it had sustained me to do as she wished.

Since people couldn't talk about *my* future, they talked instead about Sister Sharlene's new twin girls and the five boys that everyone called "Karen's boys" even though one of them was my brother Jason, not one of Vaughn's sons, but my mother's son by another man. This is not what people wanted to hear. I had long ago given up trying to explain.

"You're so good with those kids, Sarah," they told me. "You and Sharlene, wrestling those kids night and day without a sour word. Never a sour word."

Sharlene was sixteen when she married Vaughn, his third wife. It was barely a year ago now and already she had the twins. We were the same age. People at church treated us like sister-wives. "Sharlene and Sarah, what sweet girls you are!" they would say. Sharlene looked worn out to me (her bloodshot eyes, the tiny beads of sweat on her upper lip. I

wondered if I looked the same. I took one of Sharlene's baby girls out to the backyard, away from everyone.

From the backyard I could see the five new grain silos at Brother Rulon's compound. His second family had moved down from Salt Lake City this summer to help build the silos and two other barn-sized buildings used to store food and supplies. Brother Rulon acted as leader of our congregation, and he never stopped preaching about preparations for the troubled times ahead, reading prophecies from the Bible about the great and dreadful day. Everyone was storing up food now more than ever. Vaughn called Brother Rulon "God's mouthpiece," but I could tell he didn't believe everything he said. The last time Brother Rulon spoke during services, he said Salt Lake City was the wickedest city on earth, saying it will be destroyed. Vaughn told me later, "Salt Lake is just another city, no worse, no better."

I didn't believe everything Brother Rulon said either. Like the story of the 2,500 people who would be lifted up into heaven from Berry Knoll, south of town, a mass ascension of the righteous. I could see Berry Knoll from here. It looked like so many other juniper-covered hills down here on the Utah-Arizona border, down here in this desert. Brother Rulon had grown old and weak. He had oxygen tubes in his nose as he spoke. People were frightened. Brother Rulon preached about more marriages. "The last days are here," he said, "And if the end is coming, it is better if people are paired off." The next month there were a dozen marriages. One of them was Sister Sharlene's little sister Anna, sixteen years old, who married Brother Joe Cardon, a man with three other wives and nine children. He was over fifty. The night I heard the news, I started to cry. I tried to get Sharlene to explain it to me. She told me I didn't understand, couldn't understand. Her face was flushed with anger as she spoke. "I can't explain it to you if you're not inside of it. You have to have a testimony of the truth. You can't understand it if you're outside," she said.

She was right. I was an outsider. I could only believe when I was singing the hymns. Then it was easy to forget myself and imagine pioneers singing as they pushed handcarts over the Oregon Trail. I loved the sound of all the people in the congregation singing around me. The words would pour over me like a blessing: *There is no end to virtue. . . There is no end to might. . . There is no end to wisdom. . . There is no end to light.* Many times we would stand together at the end of a night meeting and sing one hymn after another. The music moved through me, communicating beyond words somehow that we, the people in the room, were all one creature. There was the rest of the world out there, and we were separate from them. We were God's people.

Sharlene soon forgot about her anger, but we didn't talk again about Anna's wedding. We didn't talk about my future. We fell back into being

friends. I thought about this again now looking down at Sharlene's baby, who was so content to be in my arms. Her eyes were wide open, looking back and forth between the sky above and my face; she was smiling wide, blowing spit bubbles, moving her arms and legs all at once. Sharlene called it a baby's "all-body happiness." Sharlene was always coming up with sayings like this, sayings that condensed twenty words down to three.

I was still alone in the backyard with Sharlene's baby when Peter Romney walked up. He took off his hat. He stopped in front of me. He was scratching the back of his head and staring down at the ground, looking up at me, then back down again.

"I'm real sorry. . .," he said.

When I didn't say anything, he sat down next to me and started playing with Sharlene's baby, walking his fingers along her body up to her chin and cooing at her until she smiled. Peter was seventeen like me. He was the oldest of ten kids. He knew about babies. His arms were tan from summer work, and I liked the way his hair was bleached by the sun on top but still dark underneath. Many times at church I had caught him looking at me. There was always the same panic in his eyes before he looked away, and then he would smile. When the baby fell asleep, we were alone. Without thinking about it, I reached over and touched his face, and then I kissed him on the cheek. He looked back at me like I had appeared out of nowhere, like he was seeing me for the first time, and then he smiled without looking away.

It wasn't ten seconds before I heard Brother Vaughn's voice.

"Sarah, you're wanted inside the house," he said.

Peter retreated under his hat to avoid Vaughn's glaring look. Last summer Brother Rulon had publicly denounced another boy, Joel Peterson, for daring to talk to girls his age, saying that he made himself "unclean for marriage." Brother Rulon also used say to us, "The most obedient are careful about speaking to outsiders." Thinking about all this made me like Peter more than ever.

Peter bowed his head and retreated, "Pardon me, Ma'am."

II

We came to Arizona seven years ago when my mother first started getting sick. On the Greyhound bus Mama told me about Hildale and Colorado City and the community of people there, how they worked together, shared property, shared everything between them in what they called a United Effort Plan. That's what she called it, anyway. I knew she wasn't telling me everything. I didn't know how she had learned about the Hildale people, and I still don't know. That day I cried in the

cramped bathroom at the back of the bus. I knew I would never see my girlfriends at school again. This was permanent. This changed everything.

Brother Vaughn and Sister Karen met us at the bus station in St. George, Utah, on the Arizona border. Vaughn wore his striped shirt buttoned all the way to the top and his blue pants had flecks of mud on the cuffs. I remember the horse emblem on his silver belt buckle and how his dark, shaved beard made his face look almost blue. Sister Karen wore a pleated skirt that reached to her ankles. Her white blouse had long sleeves. Her brown hair was braided tight and twisted into a bun on top of her head. She wore no makeup. They both smiled without showing their teeth. Vaughn had his arms folded across his chest. Sister Karen stood behind him. It was Karen who had arranged the marriage. I didn't know what kind of agreement they had made. I didn't know how sick Mama was or that she was pregnant with my brother Jason. I was only ten years old. All I could think about was how unfair it was to have to leave my Salt Lake friends behind.

Mama told me that we needed people around us, people who would always take care of us. Jason was born later that year. I think my mother was more worried about him than me. I didn't even know who Jason's father was. Mama had had a string of boyfriends in Salt Lake City. I couldn't keep track of them all. There was a blond man named Bill and another guy named Richard who looked so much the same he could have been Bill's brother. And Lamar, who always wore a baseball cap to cover his bald spot, and Scott, the one with the crooked mustache. None of them ever lived with us. My mother didn't talk about them much. There were times when she came home late at night crying.

Mama didn't even tell me much about my own father. She said it made her miserable to talk about him. All I knew was that they were separated when I was still a baby and that he lived somewhere in California. She told me she had been afraid of him. For months before she actually left him, she carried extra money in her purse and a change of underclothes. "I was ready to leave at a moment's notice," she told me. "I knew the day was coming when I wouldn't be able to stay another second. Then one day when you were at the day-care center, your father and I were driving in the car. He was angry with me about a new dress I bought for you. I was chattering on, trying to explain, when he reached over and covered my mouth with his hand. I could smell the sweat on his skin. He gripped hard around my mouth so I had to breathe through my nose. It was all I could do to keep from biting his hand."

When they came to the next stoplight, Mama grabbed her purse and got out of the car. She walked down the road while he drove alongside. He laughed. He thought it was all some kind of joke. "Get back in the damn car," he yelled at her. Mama told me she never even looked back at

him. She went inside a bookstore, then out through a back exit. At a pay phone, she called a girlfriend who drove her to the day-care center to pick me up and then to a hotel. She never spoke to my father directly again. Mama had made her escape in one bold move.

It was three nights after the funeral when Brother Vaughn came to my room to give me a wrapped package from my mother. He said she never told him what was inside. He told me not to tell Karen and Sharlene anything about it.

"Even such things should be shared between us," he said. "But your mother asked me to keep this for you alone. It was her wish."

When he left the room, he looked back at me with a helplessness I had never seen in his face before. He had always been polite with me, always formal, and now there was this sadness. I knew he wanted to touch me, to comfort me, but he was afraid to.

"It was her wish," he said again before he left. At first I thought he must have opened the package and wrapped it up again. The wrapping was torn slightly on one corner and the ribbon was lopsided. After I opened it, I knew he would never have given it to me if he had known what it contained.

Inside the wrapping was a white box tied with string. On the lid of the box was a note in my mother's spidery handwriting—the same writing from the newspaper crossword puzzles she'd done while sitting up in bed at the hospital. *For Sarah only*, it said. Inside the white box, I found a little girl's yellow dress with blue bows. There was a thick, heavy envelope, sealed, and a bundle of photographs. One picture of me wearing the same yellow dress. On the back it said, *Sarah, two years*. My mother was in the picture, too, wearing a red sweatshirt like the ones I'd seen the college girls wear in Cedar City and St. George. In another picture she was wearing a long white gown, cut low in front, leaving her arms and shoulders bare. Her lips were red with lipstick and she was holding hands with a skinny, blond boy. She didn't look any older than I looked then, and the boy looked even younger. His pants were crumpled up around his shoes. *Your father and me, Our Wedding, May 24th*, it said on the back. I knew I had seen these pictures before because I knew this was my father, but I had forgotten about them. In the wedding picture my father had small ears like mine and my dark-brown eyes, almost black. His hair was the same light blond. Another picture showed him in an army uniform, wearing one of those pointed hats that fold out flat like a napkin in your lap. His blond hair was gone. He didn't smile, and this made him look older.

I opened the heavy envelope last, expecting to find more pictures, but inside, wrapped in a thick cotton handkerchief, so that no one could hold the envelope up to the light and see through, I found two thousand dollars.

That night I couldn't sleep, and at four in the morning I opened the white box again, the pictures, the baby clothes, the money. Did these things really belong to me? Since I couldn't sleep, I decided to take a bath, running the water slow to keep from waking anyone else, shaking from the cold at first while the hot water flowed over my cupped hands. The warmth soon began to move through me. First, in my legs, then up my arms to my shoulders. I put my head under the flow of water and washed my hair, letting the suds and water pour down my back. I lay down in the soapy water, with my knees up, soaking in the heat. I looked down the length of my body, arching my back slowly, as slowly as I could, until I could feel the last drops of water running over my stomach, down my sides. This sent a shiver through me like I had been touched there, the gentle touch of a man. I thought about Peter Romney. Somehow I knew he was the kind of boy who would hold me as long as I wanted to be held, who would touch me this way, but would never force me to do anything. I thought about how it would feel to kiss Brother Vaughn with his rough beard and how Peter Romney's face had been almost as soft as mine.

My mother had told me about the keepsakes only once before when she was in the hospital for the last time. I was alone with her. Sister Karen had gone with her two youngest boys to the hospital cafeteria. My mother cleared a place for me on the bed, and I sat down close to her. My mother's hair was thin from treatments at the hospital. The skin under her eyes looked bruised. Her lips were dry and chapped. I would bring her water, but she would only take a sip and let the water sit for hours getting warm, bubbles forming on the side of the glass. "I'm just not thirsty, sweetheart," she would say.

This time she took my hand and looked at me as steady as she could. "When it comes to marrying," she told me, "You wait until you're ready. Nobody's going to pressure you on purpose, but you know how people can be. You're seventeen. For them that's marrying age."

"I understand, Mama."

I knew by the way she said "people" that it didn't include us. It never had. After seven years in Arizona, seven years in the Hildale Community, we were still outsiders.

It was then she told me about the keepsakes that she had saved for me. She said Vaughn would give them to me when the time came. I didn't like the way she said, *when the time came*, as if I wouldn't know what she meant.

"What kinds of things?" I asked.

She didn't answer. Her eyes were closed. When she opened them again and saw the way I was looking at her, she sat up straight in the bed.

"Now don't you start worrying. There are some pictures from when you were young and other things meant only for you. I've talked it over with Vaughn and he understands."

"Why can't you show me the pictures now?"

"Sweetheart, you'll understand later. It's more than just the pictures."

"But Mama. . ."

I wanted to ask her about when I was small, when it was just us living together alone, before we moved to Hildale, but then Sister Karen came back into the room with her boys. My mother closed her eyes, disappointed. The room was crowded again.

I wanted it to be as it had once been. My mother and me (no one else). But I had learned to live with things as they were. And many times I had been happy. There was the night when I woke up to see it snowing hard, something that rarely happened this far south in Utah. It was the middle of the night, but I stared out the window for hours, watching the snow slowly cover the reddish dirt and dry grass. In Salt Lake City, before Mama and I came to Hildale, I had seen it snow like this many times without really noticing it. But that night I thought nothing could be more beautiful. I walked out into the night, without a coat, almost sleepwalking. I picked up the snow in my bare hands, making a small ball then rolling it around the grass until it was too heavy to roll any more. I added another ball, slightly smaller, and put it on top of the first, then a third. And so I made a snowman, really more of a snow boy. I was careful not to wake anyone when I went back into the house to find a carrot nose and two olive eyes and one of my own scarves to wrap below the head and make it seem as if the snowman had a neck. I finished at first light and went back to my room to wait by the window. Vaughn was the first to see the snowman. He stood in front of it with his hands on his hips. Even from inside, I could hear him laugh out loud. He came back in the house and brought out Sharlene. For the next hour, the kids appeared one or two at a time, all of them finding a way to touch the snow boy as if to test its existence. Their pleasure was as natural and instinctive as breathing. Everyone smiled. They even brought my mother out to see it. She looked immediately up to my window, giving away my secret. Sister Karen cried because the snow reminded her of her childhood home in Wyoming where, she said, the snow had drifted halfway up their kitchen windows. At the prayer over breakfast Brother Vaughn said, "Thank you Father for Sarah and her kindness in making the snowman and giving us all a chuckle."

There was no letter in my mother's keepsakes where she told me to leave the Hildale Community, to leave Vaughn's home and Sharlene and Karen and the kids, to leave my brother Jason. But I knew somehow that she was opening a door for me.

III

Two days later, another door opened. Karen and Sharlene asked me to go with them into St. George to buy supplies. I was usually the one to stay at home with the younger children when they made these trips, but this time they wanted to bring all the children along.

"If we drive both the station wagon and the truck, you can come back whenever you want," Karen said. Sharlene and I started dressing the children. They agreed to drive separately and meet at Karen's favorite clothes outlet store where she bought fabric for the dresses she made for the girls and bought work clothes for Vaughn and the boys. I knew that the bus station was only a few blocks away.

I saw my chance, and it came to me quickly what I had to do. Before we left, I put on a pair of pants under my long skirt, rolling them up high on my legs so that no one would see. I put my mother's keepsakes and some socks and underwear in a pillowcase, and I tied it around my waist, under my skirt. I filled my pants pockets with all the money my mother had left me, and at the last second I took a small pair of scissors from Karen's sewing room.

At the store Sharlene and Karen sorted through the cotton fabrics and overalls while I watched the kids. I knew that the Chevron station across the street had bathrooms in the back that opened without a key. We had stopped there before. My plan was to pretend to leave the store with Sharlene and then hide at the gas station while Karen finished shopping. I would change clothes. They wouldn't miss me until both of them got home. I would have time to walk to the bus station and buy a ticket to Salt Lake City. That was my plan. All I could do was wait for the right moment.

The boys were running up and down the aisles and hiding inside the racks of shirts and pants. My brother Jason was the noisiest of all, but I couldn't scold him. I was memorizing his face—the curve of his lips, his long eyelashes, the small scar on his forehead that he'd gotten when he fell off Brother Vaughn's horse. To anyone else, Jason was just another one of Sister Karen's boys. The same blue eyes and white-blond hair, the same overalls and black boots. When I looked at him, I saw my mother. I liked to tease him by sitting on his legs and holding his arms down by the wrists, then tilting my head forward so my braids dangled in his face, the paintbrush ends tickling him. Jason would laugh and try to bite at the ends. Most of the time now Jason was with Karen's boys, playing Cowboys and Indians, or riding on the tractor with Vaughn. I knew he would miss me only for a short time and then forget. I told myself it was better this way.

Long before I expected it, Sharlene took the twins and one of boys

out to the station wagon. It was time to leave. I could feel the money tight in my pockets, the keepsakes tied around my waist, and the scissors. I was afraid something would come loose and fall out on the floor. I was afraid Karen would insist that I stay with her.

"I think I'll go back with Sharlene," I said.

Sister Karen looked up from the fabrics. I felt this sinking heaviness in my chest. I hated lying to her. The words caught in your throat. My face flushed.

"Are you all right, Sarah?" Karen asked me.

"Yes, yes. It's just a little hot in here. I'd like to go back with Sharlene," I said.

"Oh, that's fine, dear," Karen said. "That's just fine. But you better lie down when you get home." She didn't look worried.

Across the room Jason was down on all fours, crawling out from under a rack of blue denim shirts. He didn't see me staring at him as I walked out the door. Outside, I helped Sharlene put the twins in their car seats, and I opened the door to get in. But I didn't get in. Instead I told her I had changed my mind. I told her I remembered a promise to help the boys try on some new pants.

Sharlene looked up at me and smiled, shaking her head and laughing. I waved as she backed out to the road, and then I pretended to lace my shoes as they drove away. My hands were shaking. I couldn't stop crying. This wasn't how I had expected to feel at all. My throat was closed up so tight it was hard to breathe. I walked quickly across the street to the Chevron station and found the bathroom empty. I locked the door behind me.

I knew I had to wait at least twenty minutes before Karen would finish shopping. By the time she got home and found out that I had been left behind, an hour would have gone by. Maybe more. Then Brother Vaughn would drive back to town to look for me.

I took off my skirt and rolled it up tight and hid it in the trash can, using some paper towels to cover it up. I unrolled my pants. With my blouse tucked into my pants, I looked more like the college girls in St. George. My leather shoes seemed bigger without the skirt to hide them, but I couldn't do anything about that now.

In the bathroom mirror my face looked mottled and pale. The eyes looking out at me from the dirty mirror were someone else's eyes. I could feel drops of sweat running down the center of my back. I wanted to change my hair, but I didn't know where to begin. The college girls I saw never wore their hair this way—not this long and straight, and never braided and pinned up in back. I didn't want to stand out in a crowd anymore. Not for one more minute. Or have people in town looking at me and saying, "Now, there goes one of those Hildale women. Isn't she a picture, something out of the Old West."

I unpinned my braids. My face was framed perfectly by braids that fell to my hips. I held the scissors in my right hand and waited. In one of the pictures my mother had given me, she had her hair cut straight across at her shoulders. I liked the way she smiled in that picture and the way she was sticking her hip out to one side to hold me. I could cut my hair like hers, I thought. And I decided it would be easier to leave the braids in. A few quick cuts and it would be over. I put the scissors halfway up one of my braids and started to cut.

I expected it to happen all at once, but I couldn't cut through easily. I worked the scissors hard and it hurt my hands. The scissors felt as dull as the ones I had used in grade school to cut paper. I couldn't hold my hands steady, and when the first strands of hair finally cut free and fell into the sink, I felt my face go cold, and I dropped the scissors on the floor, bending over the sink. For a long time I couldn't catch my breath. Then someone was knocking hard at the bathroom door, and I didn't know how long they had been knocking. I still couldn't get my breath. I heard a little girl's voice outside the door.

"Is somebody in there?" she said.

"Please, please wait," I said.

The girl knocked louder.

My jaggedly cut blond hair clung to the sink like wet grass in the bed of Vaughn's truck. I couldn't do it. I couldn't cut my own hair. Not like this. The girl outside knocked again.

"Please, a minute, Please."

I left the scissors in the trash and tied my braids up in back again. Even the side I'd started to cut was still long enough to pin up. My face felt hot with the shame of it. I had ruined my hair.

When I opened the bathroom door, two girls, one holding the hand of a smaller girl, crowded past me to the toilet.

"S'cuse me," the older one said. "She's gotta go bad." She pushed the door closed behind me.

I stood outside the gas station bathrooms, blinking into the sun. I could feel the heat on my face and neck. It took the clashing noise from a passing truck to wake me up. I held the pillowcase of keepsakes in front of me like a purse. I couldn't help but cover myself with my hands. I had been wearing a dress every day for as long as I could remember. Even when we played softball behind the church or worked in the garden, we still wore skirts over our pants. Vaughn told me about the rule the day after we came to Arizona. I'd come down to breakfast in my new pair of pants. "It's not allowed here," he said, "for a girl to walk around in a pair of jeans."

"But these aren't jeans, they're school pants," I tried to explain. I expected my mother to say something, to defend me, but she pretended not to hear what Vaughn was saying. She stared across the table at Sister Karen.

IV

The dark-haired man at the ticket counter told me the next bus to Salt Lake City didn't leave for two hours. He stared at me. I don't think he blinked even once. A bus to Los Angeles was already parked at the depot, the engine running, ready to depart any moment. I fought an impulse to take it. I could go there to find my father. I thought about the California beaches and the wedding picture my mother had given me where my father's eyes looked so much like my own, and I almost made up my mind to go, but when my turn came at the window, I said, "One for Salt Lake City, please." After I had my ticket, I knew I couldn't wait around the station. This was the same bus station where Vaughn and Karen had picked us up seven years ago. I wanted to get away from the station and from the man behind the counter, the man who stared. So I walked down the main street in town, looking for a beauty shop or a place to buy shoes or a new dress. I couldn't remember the last time I had bought clothes for myself. Vaughn usually gave us clothes as gifts. Karen made me dresses. She'd taught me to make my own, but I had left these clothes behind. I wanted to change. I wanted to change everything.

If they found me before the bus left, I thought, I would say I had to tell my mother's friends in Salt Lake City about her death. I would say I had things to take care of in Salt Lake—personal things my mother had requested. Vaughn would think it had something to do with the keepsakes that my mother had given me, but he wouldn't say anything about this in front of Sharlene or Karen. If he was alone, he might try to talk me out of the trip or offer to take me himself. He might say, "Sarah, your mother wouldn't have wanted you to do this. Your mother would be worried about you." But I knew he wouldn't force me to go back with him to the house. When they told him I was gone, he might be expecting it. He might let me go. He might just pretend to go out and look for me. I knew if Sharlene came with him, she would start crying. I didn't want to see them. I didn't want to explain.

A white convertible stopped at the light as I crossed the street. There were seven girls crowded into the car, two riding up front with the driver and four more in back. They played the radio loud. One of the girls jumped out and ran to the front of the car. She was wearing shorts and her legs were tan and shiny. Her blond hair was loose around her shoulders and she flipped it as she walked. She sat down on the hood of the car with her feet up on the front bumper, pretending she was going to ride up there when the light changed. The girl who was driving honked and screamed for her friend to get back in. "Hurrrrrry!" she said, laughing and smiling, her mouth wide open. Then all the girls screamed and laughed. Several of them were staring at me as they drove off. I looked down at my big shoes and checked to see if my hair was coming undone.

The sign outside Perry's Beauty Shop said "Walk-ins Welcome." There was only one woman working there, and she was wearing a plastic nametag that said *LaRue* in big black letters that I could read from across the room. I didn't see Perry anywhere. The shop had four chairs. Two chairs were empty and sitting in the others were two older women who looked like twins. LaRue was helping both of them at once, moving quickly back and forth between them.

"I'll be with you in a minute, honey," LaRue said. I realized that I was standing in the doorway, staring at her, dazed. "Please sit down. I'll be just a minute. I'm almost finished." She winked at me.

This made me wonder if I had come to the right place, but I sat down anyway and pretended to read one of the magazines.

"Don't you rush with us, LaRue," one of the women said. "I won't go out of here with wet hair again."

LaRue laughed, "Don't you worry now."

"That goes for me, too," said the other sister. They looked at me from behind their magazines. "Who is that girl anyway? I've never seen her around here before. She looks a little odd."

"Hush," LaRue whispered. "You think she can't hear you."

LaRue looked over at me a couple of times while she removed curlers and combed out and sprayed the twin sisters' hair. When she walked her two customers to the door, both of them were whispering and looking back at me. I couldn't hear what they said, but I could tell LaRue was trying to get rid of them by the way she tapped her foot impatiently behind her. She was smiling and laughing the whole time, but her foot kept tapping faster. When they'd left, she walked over and stood in front of me. She rested the tops of her hands on her hips, her fingers curling up behind her like tiny wings.

"How can I help you, young lady?"

I handed her one of the pictures of my mother and then quickly put my hands back in my lap, so she wouldn't see how they were shaking.

"I want you to cut my hair like the woman in this picture," I said.

LaRue looked down at the picture, then back at me.

"She's my mother. . .when she was young."

"I can see she's your mother, honey. Please, come sit down over here."

I sat in the closest chair, holding the bundle of pictures, clothes, and money on my lap.

"You can leave your things over there, if you like," she said.

"Oh, no thank you, Ma'am, I'll just hold um."

"That's fine," she said. "Let's put this on." She pulled a plastic cape around me and tied it behind. She looked at the picture again. "So you want your hair cut straight across like this, about shoulder length?"

"Yes, but not curled up at the end like she has in the picture," I said. "And no bangs either, just the same length all around."

LaRue laughed quietly. "Okay then." She put her hands on my shoulders and smiled at me in the mirror. "Let's undo these braids first." Her voice broke a little when she said *first*. I wasn't sure why, but this made me trust her more. She kept looking back at me in the mirror as she took out the hairpins and started to unravel my braids. She didn't watch her hands until she felt that one braid was shorter than the other.

"Looks like you already got started here." She was clearly relieved.

"I tried to, but. . ."

"I understand, honey," she said.

LaRue combed my hair with long strokes, resting her left hand on the back of my head so that she wouldn't pull too hard. The brushing made a familiar, static sound as the long strands of my hair were drawn up to the magnetic pull of the brush. In the reflection on the mirror behind me, I could see that my hair reached down the length of the chair, except on the side where I had cut it myself. I closed my eyes and listened to the strokes of the brush. My hands stopped shaking, and I could feel myself breathing more deeply, slipping into a half sleep. All of those times when Sister Karen and I would brush each other's hair, after the kids were in bed, and on nights when Vaughn was staying in Sister Sharlene's part of the house. When Vaughn took Sharlene as his third wife, it was the first time Sister Karen really had to share her husband with someone else after years of talking about it, believing in it, trying to make arrangements for it. My mother was never really a second wife to Vaughn. When he married her, he knew she was terminally ill. He spent very little time alone with her that I knew about. Karen was usually with him when he visited my mother in her room. When Vaughn was alone with Sharlene, Karen was short tempered and distant, but when I combed her hair, she would relax and close her eyes. Once, Karen fell asleep while I was combing her hair. And she told me she envied me my young hair. I knew she would be angry with me now.

LaRue combed my hair until it was smooth all around. "We'll cut your hair to a more manageable length, then give you a shampoo and style it the way you asked. Is that okay?"

"Yes."

LaRue sprayed my hair with water from a plastic bottle, then carefully and with both hands, pulled my hair back over my shoulders. "Are you ready?" she asked.

She waited for me to nod my head and then picked up the scissors off the counter. Biting at her lower lip, she hesitated a few seconds, then started cutting on the right side, just above my shoulder. It made a crisp sound like paper tearing. I couldn't see what she was doing, but I imagined my long, damp hair collapsing into her left hand as she cut. When she had worked halfway across, she put the cut hair on the counter and sprayed more mist from the water bottle.

The hair looked too dark to be mine. It was still wet and looked as if it were coated with the lacquer Brother Vaughn used to protect the furniture he made. When I closed my eyes, it was Peter Romney I saw, looking at me the way he did that day after the funeral, after I kissed him, surprised, trying to hide that he wanted to touch me. I imagined myself leaning over him and my hair, still long and combed out smooth, hung loose over my shoulders, falling like a curtain on both sides of my face, making a closed-in place between me and him, the long ends of my hair brushing against his chest. And he was looking back at me with a tenderness and promise I had dreamed of. And I knew I couldn't live without that look from someone like Peter, from someone I loved, and when I heard LaRue cutting under my left ear, I knew the worst was over, and I looked up at my reflection in the mirror and saw my mother's face.