

# Thanksgiving

Angela Hallstrom

**B**eth: *Listening*

"Take care," says my Grandma Tess. She is the first one to leave after Thanksgiving dinner because she can't drive at night. She's got two hours' driving to do, south to Salt Lake. She's worried about me. She wonders how I will bear up. She covers my hands with her own, and her skin is paper dry.

"Things seem hard right now, but you'll see your way through. You're my Beth. You've always been a strong one," she tells me.

I am lucky to have a grandmother like her. I don't get the feeling she's lying to me. I don't get the feeling she's telling me only what I want to hear.

We stand by the open door and the sunlight streams through her thinning hair. I can see the top of her scalp, and it looks so fragile, white and veiny as a baby's.

"I'm hanging in there," I tell her. "Really, I am."

"You can do this," she says. "Yes, yes. You can."

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Today, nobody's said Kyle's name out loud. During dinner Aunt Eileen said, "Do you think he's well enough to be trusted around the baby?" Everybody knew who "he" was. But I didn't look up from my turkey. I pretended that I didn't hear her and concentrated on my chewing.

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Finally my mom said, "Who knows, Eileen," in that great tone she gets when you know the subject's about to be changed.

Nobody's said his name, but in his absence he seems just as powerfully present as he always has been. We all feel it. My own sisters keep sliding the conversation around, trying to avoid topics like love and marriage, mental health and single motherhood. My dad keeps coming up behind me and putting his hands on my shoulders. Really, they may as well all just be saying, "Kyle, Kyle, Kyle." A big family chant.

I keep listening for the door. I told him not to come. I said, Kyle, it's for the best, you know how my mom gets, it's nothing personal, she just wants some peace, you can spend time with your own mom, you can see Stella tomorrow, you can see me tomorrow, we'll talk then, I promise, we will, but today is not the day. Today is not the day.

He yelled at me. *Heartless*, he called me. *Homewrecker*.

I said, Kyle, you are not yourself. Can't you see that you are not yourself?

*Kyle: Outside*

Kyle imagines them inside the house, laughing, eating, Beth and her sisters teasing each other and telling their inside jokes. His father-in-law, Nathan, in his chair at the head of the table, his mother-in-law, Alicia, sitting just barely on the edge of her seat, tense as a cat, ready to jump up and get somebody butter or salt or more ice. All of them pretending they don't miss him, that he never existed, that they're better off now without him.

He knows the food they've been eating because he's had Thanksgiving at this house practically every year for the last ten years and it's always the same food, yams with the marshmallows on top, homemade stuffing with cranberries and pecans. Kyle always got a drumstick. He got one and Nathan got the other, because they were both dark-meat men. "A real man likes the dark stuff," Nathan would say, and it made Kyle happy, knowing that his wife's father thought of him as a real man. He's always tried hard, tried his best to be the kind of man he should be. He'd be lying if he said all the effort to seem cheerful and focused and strong hadn't worn him down a little, but he'd been willing to do it for her. For them. For all of them, the whole family. And what good has it done him? All they do is listen to Beth and her side of the story, her little tales she tells: Kyle did this, Kyle did that, like she's Little Miss Innocent, like nothing's her fault.

And now she gets to sit there at the table like she never did anything wrong and he's left alone, parked in his car two blocks from their house, abandoned on Thanksgiving by the family that said they were his, the family that says they're all charitable and kind, but really they were just waiting for him to slip up. Waiting for a mistake so they could pull out the rug and watch him rattle to the floor and say, see, you never were good enough for us, we never asked for you, we measured you and found you wanting.

Like at Stella's baby blessing last month, his own daughter's baby blessing, he comes and wants to be a part is all and everybody's so hung up about his clothes, how they're not appropriate for church, but what do they expect when his own wife leaves him, abandons him to fend for himself in their little apartment, and he has nothing, no money, no love, who wouldn't show up in shorts and a t-shirt if not just to make a statement, so they could see what they've reduced him to? And then, when he goes up to the podium to speak and keeps talking, pouring out his heart about his sweet little daughter and his wife who has left him and her family who has betrayed him, the bishop takes him by the elbow in the middle of it all to lead him away from the microphone and he looks down and there's Beth, sobbing, crying, holding his beautiful little daughter in her beautiful white dress and he's thinking, what does she have to cry about? Why is she the one crying when she's kept everything for herself and left her own husband with nothing?

She keeps telling him, just get back on your medication and then we'll talk. Get back on your medication and then, maybe, then, some day, then, then, then, but he tells her, they're poisoning me with it, he can feel it in his blood, eating at his cells, chewing little holes in his molecules to let the poison inside. Sometimes he thinks she's in on it. Beth, her family, the doctors, all of them, plotting together to poison him with those innocent-looking pills. He's even said to her, are you trying to kill me? That's what he said the night she left him. Are you trying to kill me? All she could do is say Kyle, please, Kyle, please, the baby carrier hooked over her arm, Stella crying inside, her father, Nathan, waiting for her in the car on the street to carry her away.

But they can't get rid of him so easy like that. He's earned his place. He has a right. They were there at the temple, they can't have forgotten when he was bound to their daughter—and so, yes, to them, to all of them—eternally. Meaning: Forever. Meaning: Without end. They're hoping he won't show up, of course, hoping he just burns himself out and dis-

appears like a curl of smoke up into the sky. But he is a father, a husband, a member of this family. They cannot cut him off like a dead branch on a tree and leave him out in the street. And he will show them. He will behave. He's ironed his clothes and brought flowers for his mother-in-law and he's planned what he'll say to Beth—"You look beautiful, as always"—and then they will see that they shouldn't be afraid of him.

*Beth: Uncoupled*

My older sister Marnie and I are putting up Thanksgiving leftovers. We're in our parents' kitchen and all three of her boys race past us screaming.

"These kids are running circles around me!" she says. She's not being metaphorical. Her boys are screaming good-natured screams, screams of joy, you might call them. But still.

I am putting up the pies. I take slices from each leftover pie and squeeze them together into one tin, pumpkin and French silk and lemon meringue side by side.

"They should sell pies this way," I say. "It makes more sense. The variety. People would snap them up."

"Well, there you go," Marnie says. "Your million dollar idea."

"I've been saved!" I say, and she laughs. I haven't told her about my money mess—well, Kyle's money mess, but since he's my husband, it's mine, too—but I know that she knows. My mom's a talker and my sisters are worse. Secrets are hard to keep. For example, I know that Marnie's husband Mike makes \$94,000 a year in his job as some kind of finance guy for General Mills. When Marnie heard I'd left Kyle, she was nice enough to call me up and ask if I wanted to come stay with her in Minnesota for a while—"Get away from it all," she said—but I told her no. First of all, I'd feel in the way. Second of all, I don't know if I could stand it, really, living with their cute little family in their brand new house, watching Mike swinging in the door from work at the end of the day and Marnie kissing him on the cheek. At least that's the way I imagine life at Marnie's house goes, and I don't know how much of it I could take.

"I don't think that child has made a peep in twenty minutes," Marnie says, pointing a spoon at my baby, Stella. "I've got to order myself one of those."

Stella sits propped in the crook of the couch, gumming on a board book. She's a good baby, wide-eyed and calm. A lap-sitter, Marnie calls

her. She's six months old and has yet to roll over back to front, but they tell me not to worry, so I don't.

"The mysteries of genetics," I say, and Marnie knows what I mean. You take Marnie and Mike—obedient, even-tempered types, both of them—and all three of their boys started screaming as soon as they left the womb and haven't stopped since. And then you have me and Kyle and you'd think we'd be in for it, but we end up with this sweet baby girl, as even-keeled as they come. She's been sleeping through the night since she was four weeks old.

"You deserve your Stella," Marnie says. "She's lucky to have you."

Of course she's not, I want to say. Don't be ridiculous.

"See?" Marnie says, and I look where she's looking, at Stella's round face. "See how she watches you, wherever you go? She can't take her eyes off of you."

I know, I know. Children see everything.

"Open your eyes and look at me," he'd say when we'd fight. He wouldn't let me turn around, walk away, glance at the floor or the sky. The last time we fought, before I left him, he grabbed me by the shoulders, tight. Shook me a little. "Look at me!" And I did: his green eyes lit with fury, his skin tight across his cheeks. Even then, a handsome man.

We are almost finished with the silver. Marnie stands at the sink with her arms in the hot soapy water and I stand beside her, rinsing and drying.

Mike comes up behind Marnie and wraps his arms around her waist.

"Naptime?" he says into her ear.

Upstairs, their boys are thumping and jumping. I keep listening for howls of pain.

"Ha," Marnie says. "Right."

"I think Grandpa's been looking pretty anxious to go to the park, don't you? Give me five minutes and we'll have ourselves some quiet."

I hear him kiss her on the neck. I pretend I am not there.

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I am in a house of couples: halves of wholes, yings and yangs, eternal pairings. Marnie and Mike are here today. Tina and Jimmy. Aunt Eileen and Uncle Rob. Even my little sister Amanda has a boyfriend, a long-faced physics major at the U named Gavin, and who knows if he'll stay around

for long but he's here today, celebrating Thanksgiving with all of us, skimming along the edges of our conversations. Amanda can't keep her hands off him.

Everybody's touching each other, even my mom and dad. Alicia and Nathan. I've heard it so many times it's almost one name, Alicianathan, like something you'd call a beautiful Indian princess. They seem to be touching a lot lately. I swear they hardly touched at all when I was a kid, or at least I didn't notice it, but now I see them all the time. Like now: his hand resting lightly on the small of her back, her head tilted against his arm.

I'm lucky I have Stella to hold on to. My Aunt Eileen keeps telling me, "Why don't you put that child down?" She says I just might spoil her. But I need her weight on my hip, her skin on my skin. She is mine and I am hers. Her heaviness keeps me from floating away.

A few weeks ago my mom caught me crying in the bathroom. "Oh, hon," she told me. "You'll feel better in time. You've made the right decision. A hard one, but the right one. You deserve to live your own life. You and Stella, together, you can make a good life."

I didn't answer her back. I just nodded as if I agreed with her, mainly so she wouldn't worry. She thinks I should divorce him. She hasn't said it in so many words, but I can tell it's what she wants me to do. I can't talk about it, myself. Don't even like to think about it.

But I have abandoned him. My husband for eternity, and I've left him to himself. There are times I think I'm a terrible person. My mother tells me, "There's only so much you can do." She says, "You've got to think about your daughter." And I do. Constantly, constantly. I think of Kyle and I think of my daughter and I think of myself. I stay up half the night in my old twin bed at my parents' house, listening to Stella in her crib, breathing and sighing, and I wonder if I've ever made a good choice in my life.

So this is what I tell myself. Kyle and I, our story, it's like this news report I remember from last winter about a skier who got lost in the mountains. For days, the whole community was looking for him. They had search teams, helicopters, police dogs. But then a big storm came and blanketed any clues they might find with a fresh layer of snow. The temperature dropped. They held a press conference and said, We're calling off the search, we'll have to wait for springtime, for the thaw. The lost skier's father stood up in front of the cameras with his eyes all full of tears and

said, it's the hardest thing I've ever done, because I know he's buried out there somewhere, but it's much too dangerous for a person to venture out in these conditions.

I think of Kyle, my Kyle, buried deep, surrounded by cold and blinding white. I've been digging and digging. I don't know how long I'm supposed to keep digging until it's okay for me to stop trying to find him.

*Alicia: Intuition*

Alicia stands by the front door holding Eileen's coat.

"Thank you so much for having us," her sister-in-law says. "The meal was delicious. Everything, perfect."

"Well, I wouldn't say perfect," Alicia says.

"Yes! Perfect!" Eileen leans in. "And no surprise guests," she whispers, conspiratorially, in Alicia's ear.

Alicia can't wait for Eileen to go home. It's been a peaceful day. Uneventful. Nothing like the blessing last month, when Kyle barged in during the sacrament, his hair all disheveled, his eyes wild and frightening. She's sure her extended family has spent many entertaining hours dissecting that whole scene, and she's glad today hasn't provided Eileen with any more material.

When Beth moved back home with the baby this summer, Eileen had called her, breathless for details. Almost giddy. "Bipolar?" she'd said. "Isn't that the disease you see on television movies where people have all the different personalities?" Alicia could hardly bear answering, Eileen could be so deliberately clueless. "No, Eileen," she told her. "It's the disease geniuses sometimes get. Van Gogh. Virginia Woolf. It's a struggle particular to the sensitive and the intelligent."

Today Eileen has tried to bring up Kyle and his situation at least half a dozen times. During dessert, she told Alicia she had gone online and Googled "lithium," and she said, "It doesn't sound all that bad to me. It's a wonder why he won't stay on it!" Luckily, Beth had been out of earshot, upstairs nursing the baby.

Eileen's husband, Rob, is outside waiting in the car. Alicia hears him rev the engine.

"You've got a lot on your hands," Eileen says. "I don't envy you. A distraught daughter *and* a baby at home! I don't know how you do it."

"We'll be fine, Eileen. Don't you concern yourself with us."

Rob honks the horn.

"That's my cue!" Eileen says, then reaches over to kiss Alicia on the cheek.

Eileen scuttles to the car, her arms heavy with Thanksgiving leftovers. Alicia walks out onto the porch and waves as their Buick rolls around the corner and out of sight. The air is cool against her naked arms. The trees are bare; the ground is brown and dry. She thinks, November is a terrible month.

She wonders if Kyle is hidden somewhere, spying on the house, watching her. She wouldn't be surprised if he were. And it wouldn't frighten her, either. It would mostly make her sad. She wishes she could go back in time ten years to when Beth and Kyle met, during their sophomore year in high school. Maybe, if she had known what to look for, Alicia could have seen the signs. She could have warned her daughter. Instead of agreeing with Beth, seeing Kyle as interesting and brilliant and emotional, she would have had the good sense to recognize he was more than just a passionate kid. But she was almost as swept up as Beth had been.

Here was this boy who came skidding into their lives at full tilt, so smart, so funny, so full of ideas. He'd help Alicia with dinner, do crazy things like adding Tabasco to the spaghetti sauce and then saying, "Isn't this the best spaghetti you've ever had in your life?" And they'd all agree that yes, yes it was. On Mother's Day he would always send her a card, even before he and Beth married. Sometimes he would write, "Thank you for bringing Beth into this world." Other times, "You're the mother that I never had." Although he did have a mother: a tight-lipped, angry woman who'd raised Kyle all alone. That's where she'd told Beth he should go today.

"He has a mother," she said to Beth. "It's not like we're all he has."

"Yes, we are, Mom," Beth had answered. "And you know it."

But Kyle is not the boy she remembers. The tall, handsome, laughing boy who took her child to the prom, dressed up so strikingly in his dark blue suit, who served a mission, came home, and said to her and to Nathan, "I would like your daughter's hand." She can't say when the obvious changes started. A year after Beth married him? Two? The doctors told them, diseases like this, they sometimes come on in early adulthood. There's no way you could have known. But she *should* have known. She feels betrayed—by her own intuition, by God—that she somehow hadn't sensed disaster.

She looks down her normally deserted street and counts the cars



lined up along it. Over a dozen, bunched up in front of her neighbors' houses. And who are the people who her neighbors have let inside? Grandparents with Alzheimer's, alcoholic uncles, mean-spirited sisters. She knows her neighbors, knows their stories. She knows they have opened their doors on holidays to all sorts of difficult people who come underneath their family umbrellas. But she can't. Not this time. She has kept her door deliberately closed.

The worst part is, she doesn't feel guilty for doing it. Because first and foremost, she is a mother. And a mother must protect her child.

*Beth: Romantic*

From my upstairs bedroom window, I can see my mother, coatless, standing on the porch. She keeps looking up and down the street. I can't help thinking that she's watching for him. Waiting. I told her, chances are, no matter what we say, he'll still show up. But I don't think he'll dare if she's standing right there. He's afraid of her. Only her. Even at the height of his mania, she can stop him dead in his tracks.

My mom is a beautiful woman. Prettier than me. She's kept her hair long, just past her shoulders, and she colors it to the same deep reddish brown it was when she was my age. I used to feel sorry for her, that she married my dad. Isn't that funny? I thought she'd sold out. He was a good dad, sure. Steady, dependable. Nice. But he seemed like an awfully average husband. When was the last time he swept her away on a romantic trip? Wrote her a poem? When I married Kyle, I even wondered if she was jealous.

Kyle's latest romantic gesture was to buy us two one-way tickets to Australia. A few weeks after I had Stella, he came bursting in the door.

"It's a place of mystery! Full of excitement! We can live by the ocean. Live off the land!"

That's when I knew he'd gone off his medication again. I didn't even ask him how he'd paid for the tickets or if we could get a refund. I just silently nodded my head and decided, I don't think I can do this anymore.

*Nathan: Direction*

Nathan wants to get away from the house. It's not that he doesn't love them—his daughters, his sons-in-law, his wife—but by nature he's a solitary man. A lover of quiet. Even now, late in November, he tries to get

outside and walk at least once a day. So when Mike asks him if he'll take the grandkids to the park down the block, he doesn't feel like he's doing any favors. He puts the boys in their coats and lets them bolt out the door. He keeps them in sight as they tear down the street, but he doesn't call out to them to slow down or wait or hold hands. He lets them go. He thinks, boys need to run.

It's when he rounds the corner to the park that he sees him: Kyle, in his dusty red Honda, sitting. The engine is turned off and Kyle is just staring, immovable, his eyes fixed off in the distance. The boys are at the park now, clambering all over the jungle gym, shrieking on the swings; and even though Kyle is parked just across the street, he gives no indication that he sees them or hears them. His profile stays frozen. Nathan feels suddenly nervous and ashamed, like he's sneaked up on somebody, like he's in a place he's not supposed to be. He's unsure if he should gather up the boys and head home. Pretend like he never saw him. But he has seen him. And even though Kyle hasn't so much as tilted his head in his direction, Nathan's sure that Kyle has seen him, too.

Nathan sits on the cold metal bench near the swing set. Marnie's boys are hollering, "Grandpa! Watch me slide!" and they don't even recognize their Uncle Kyle sitting across the street in his car, listening and not listening. Watching and not watching. The afternoon sun hangs low in the sky and the wind sends dry leaves skittering across the sidewalk. It's getting chilly. Nathan wonders how long Kyle's been sitting without the car turned on. He wonders if the boy even realizes he's cold.

He's got to go to him. There's no getting around it. No matter what Kyle has done—all the ways he's hurt Beth, all the lies he's told, his stubborn refusal to stick with his therapy and at least try, at least *seem* to try, to get a hold on this illness that started strangling him so slowly that no one in the family thought to notice it until it was out of control—no matter what, he is responsible for this man. He opened his door to him when he was still a kid. Watched as he burrowed himself deep into their family. And he let him do it. Encouraged it, in his own way. And now he is responsible.

He walks toward the car, his eyes on Kyle's unmoving face. He comes up to the window. Taps it. He can see the shine of tears across Kyle's cheeks.

"Kyle," Nathan says.

Kyle closes his eyes. He keeps his chin set firm.

"Can I just talk to you?"

Slowly, Kyle turns his face to Nathan. He opens his eyes. They are tired eyes, bloodshot and sunken. Weary. He doesn't move to roll the window down.

"What do you want to say?" Kyle asks. His voice is quiet, muffled through the glass.

Nathan considers how to answer this question. That he's afraid for him? Afraid of him? That, somehow, he wishes he would disappear and wonders how to save him? That he doesn't know what to say?

Behind him, he can hear his grandsons' voices, clear and brittle in the air.

"Grandpa!" they're calling. "Push us!"

"I just want you to know that you're not alone," Nathan says.

Kyle leans his head back and lets out a short burst of laughter.

"Really?" he says. "You think so? Well, you could've fooled me."

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It isn't until Nathan and the boys are almost back to the house that he hears the engine rumble. He doesn't know what it means, if Kyle is leaving or coming. And he doesn't know what he wants it to mean.

He has always been a man of direction. A giver of advice. "Here," he likes to say. "Do this, follow these directions, one, two, three." Then, what had been broken could be fixed. What had been complicated could be understood. He remembers when Beth was a child, how easy it had been to rescue her. If she fell off her bike, he could scoop her up, dust off her knees, and kiss her head. Tell her, "Keep trying, keep doing your best, it will get easier." But not anymore. She is beyond him. Her life, her story, no longer his.

But he prays for her. For Beth and Kyle and little Stella. They are a family. He asks God to be gentle. It's all that he can do.

*Kyle: Electric*

He turns on the car and thinks, stay or go, go or stay, claim your life or run away. Always he's thinking like this. In little poems. Little songs. He's been writing a lot of them down in a notebook that he's brought to show Beth, because sometimes she has such a hard time listening to him, really *hearing* him, and he remembers the way she used to love his poems, way back when. He would give them to her and she would cry and say things like *I love you*, like *What would I do without you*. It has been months

since he has kissed her, months since he has touched a girl, even, any girl, and he thinks his skin might be starting to go electric with unused tactile energy. He's almost afraid to touch her now. Zap! What if he touched her and an electrical current shot out from under his skin and got her? Zip zap! Maybe it would make her more afraid, or maybe it would make her remember the powerful kind of love they shared, the very real and, yes, shocking kind of love they have between the two of them. He's always said she's scared because their love is too strong and he is too real, that's why she wants him on that medication, because he's just too real without it, but he's tried to explain that it's the real him she fell in love with anyway and there's no way she'll ever love the other him, the sad, slow, fat, dull, lurching mannequin he is on those pills. She'll leave him anyway if he takes them. He knows it.

So if she would just take a chance, take a dive with him, go for a ride with him, let her hair flow free and wild with him and love him like she used to, like he knows that she still can. He thinks of Nathan, his face in the window, his sad, pale face. He said, you're not alone. Not. Alone. If anyone could still be in his corner, it would be Nathan, a good man, a man who maybe sees beyond the surface of things. A kind man. The only father he has ever known. When Stella was born, he told Nathan, I want to be a father just like you, but he was on his meds back then and he kept trying to be a father just like Nathan and he didn't have the energy, wouldn't have the energy unless he got rid of the pills, and maybe Nathan understands that.

When he goes to the door, he hopes Nathan answers, or Beth, but not Mike, that Minnesota son-in-law with his buttoned-down shirts and his big meaty handshakes and his questions: you got yourself a 401(k)? An IRA? You heard about that IPO? Last time Mike asked him a question like that Kyle spelled out his answer, N-O, which he thought was pretty funny and flustered that Mike for a minute. If Alicia answers the door, he's brought her the flowers. White roses, her favorite. He doesn't know what he'll say to Alicia, just hand her the flowers and look in her face and hope she recognizes that it's only him, only Kyle, the boy who loves her daughter and loves her family and just wants them to give him a chance.

*Beth: Idling*

When my dad came home from the park, he told me right away. "I thought you should know," he said. "He doesn't look well."

I keep thinking, how long? How long has he been around the corner, sitting in his car? All day? Since before the rest of us were even awake? I wouldn't be surprised if he pulled up at four o'clock in the morning. Some nights he only sleeps two, three hours; he gets an idea in his head and he can't stop thinking about it, can't keep himself from jumping out of bed and doing it. But then, in a way, I knew he was out there, too. I could feel him from the minute I woke up.

I step outside our front door. The street is quiet. Very faintly, I hear the rumble of an idling engine. I wait for him.

*Kyle: Beautiful Stranger*

He puts the car in drive, steps on the gas, curves around the corner. Then he sees her standing on the porch, her hands stuffed deep in her pockets, her hair pulled away from her face. She is wearing lipstick, a deep red he has never seen on her before. Her lips are the only color against her pale face. She looks like a woman, like a grown-up. Kyle thinks, This beautiful stranger, she knew I was coming, she's come out to meet me, she's going to welcome me home.

*The Palmers: Patience*

Inside, the family has been warned. Nathan told them, Kyle's outside, and I think I gave him the impression it's okay to come over. Alicia has gone to her bedroom. Marnie and Tina and Amanda, the sisters, they all agree that it's for the best that he come inside. After all, what are they going to do? Lock their doors on him forever? Stella's his daughter. It's Thanksgiving. He has a right. Eileen and Rob and Grandma and Amanda's boyfriend Gavin, they've all left, so who does Mom think she needs to impress? It's only Kyle. No matter what, he is still Kyle.

The sons-in-law, Mike and Jimmy, they decide to watch football. They will tilt their hands at him, say hello. Speak if spoken to.

Beth opens the front door and leads Kyle inside. His face is flushed and spotty. In his left hand, he holds a bouquet of white roses. He raises his right hand and waves.

"The fam!" he says.

Nathan rises up from his chair, comes over, and shakes Kyle's hand.

"Good to see you," he says.

"Been a long time," Kyle answers, then laughs once, short and hard.

Marnie says, "Pie! We have pie for you. We have extra. There's plenty."

"Can I take those flowers? Put them in water?" Amanda asks.

"Actually, these flowers are for Alicia. And where is my beautiful mother-in-law? The lady of the house. Has she deserted us? Up and flown the coop?"

The sisters look at each other.

"She's resting," Nathan says.

"Or," Kyle says, "is she playing hide and seek?"

Outside, the sky is turning dark. Clouds are moving in.

"A storm is coming," Tina says.

"It will be a blessing," says Nathan. "Heaven knows we need the moisture."

Everyone nods, earnestly, eagerly. Upstairs, a baby cries.

"There's Stella," Beth says. "I'll go get her."

"No," Kyle says. "No, let me. I mean, can I?"

Beth looks across the room at her father.

"How about you come with me?" she says. "We can get her together."

They climb the stairs to Beth's old bedroom, Kyle clutching the roses in his left hand. In Beth's room, the walls are painted butter yellow. It's still decorated like a high school girl's: trophies on the shelves, pictures from school dances. In every photo, it's just the two of them, Beth and Kyle. Never anyone else. Different poses and outfits and hairstyles, but always, they're the couple with their arms around each other. Heads tilted in close.

Stella's crib has been pushed up against the far wall, the only place it will fit. The baby isn't crying loudly. Whimpering, mostly. Patient. Kyle comes to the head of the crib and looks down inside. The baby is on her stomach, struggling, pushing up against the mattress with her arms.

"Well, look at you," Kyle says.

Stella stops crying at the sound of his voice. Lifts up her head and sees him.

"Look at you so strong," he says to her, his voice gentle, sing-songy.

She breaks into a grin.

"How'd you get there on your tummy?"

Then, from the doorway, Beth.

"She's on her stomach?" she says.

She walks over to Kyle and stands beside him. They peer into the crib together.

"She really is on her tummy," Beth says. "I was starting to worry she'd spend the rest of her life flat on her back. The doctor said not to worry about her rolling. Said it would come in her own time. But I wondered."

"Sometimes you've just got to be patient."

"True," Beth says. "Very true."

Kyle slides his hand, slowly, along the railing of the crib, until his pinkie touches hers. Beth doesn't move her hand.

"When you love somebody, I mean," he says. "Especially. Patience."

\* \* \*

Downstairs, the family is happy to hear about Stella.

"What a champ!" Nathan says.

"She'll be running you ragged before you know it," Marnie tells her sister.

Amanda brings Kyle his pie. "I remembered you like pecan," she says.

Kyle sits at the table. He is the only one eating. Someone has turned off the television and the family listens as Kyle's fork clinks against his plate.

"I think I see some flurries," Tina says. "Look. Outside. It's about time."

The family looks out the window. Delicate white snowflakes are drifting, lonely, so slow a person could count them coming down.

"It seems, in my day, there used to be so much snow. By Thanksgiving time, we'd have had a few good storms. But any more even the weather's unpredictable," Nathan says. "Can't even count on the weather."

Outside, the flakes spin around in the wind. Kyle has stopped eating his pie.

"I'd like to show my daughter the snow," he says.

The family turns and looks at him.

"Does she have a coat? I'd like to put it on her. Take her outside. Show her the snow. The two of us."

The family looks at Beth.

"You want to show her the snow?" she says.

"I would like to, yes. Very much. I'm her father."

*Kyle: Snowflakes*

Kyle sits on the swing at the far end of the yard, holding the baby on his lap. He points up at the sky. The baby's eyes follow his finger. He pushes the swing with his feet, slowly. It is not too cold and the breeze is very light. The snowflakes are in no hurry. They spin and tumble and land on the baby's coat. He can't remember ever looking at a snowflake up close and they look just as they ought to, symmetrical and complicated and beautiful, the way God likes for things to be. He whispers to the baby *look*. A snowflake has landed on her sleeve. *Look how pretty*. The baby will not look. She keeps her chin tilted up into the sky. The sky is a mystery. And snow. And God. His little daughter understands this. Her tiny hands are getting cold. He covers them with his own. Leans his cheek against her head. Says, *We can keep each other warm*.

*Beth: Winter*

It is getting dark. I move out onto the patio where I can watch them better. Behind me, in the house, I hear my family. I can't pick out what they're saying. I can only hear the song of them, the rise and fall of their voices, one on top of the other. I bring my legs up and wrap my arms around my knees. Watch my breath turn to white. The swing creaks softly, marking even time.

Between Kyle and me is a path of scattered roses. He didn't drop them all at once. He made himself a trail, like Hansel. He knows I am watching. I can see his silhouette, his dark shadow, rising and falling. His back is to me. He has his arms around her tight.

I listen for Stella's voice. The smallest whisper of sound, the tiniest cry, I will hear it and go to her. The night is that silent. That still.

But then I hear, very softly, a song. It's Kyle, and he's singing:

For health and strength and daily food  
We praise thy name, O Lord.

A Primary song. A Thanksgiving song. A short one, sung in a round. I remember singing it with my sisters: Marnie and Tina, then Amanda and me.

He gets to the end of the line and takes a breath. Begins again:



For health and strength and daily food  
We praise thy name, O Lord."

I can see his face bent up to the sky. I come up behind him.

"Sing with me," he says. He doesn't look at me. He looks up, and the snowflakes land on his cheeks, his eyelids. "It's such a pretty song. But we have to sing it together."

"Kyle," I say. I reach out my arms for Stella. He keeps swinging.

"For health and strength and daily food," he sings, and waits. This is where I should come in.

"For health and strength and daily food." Again.

I can't sing with him. I listen to the moaning of the swing, the air pushing through the trees.

"Have you ever smelled her hair?" he says. "It smells just like the morning."

He is crying.

"Kyle," I whisper. "Can I have her? Can I have Stella?"

"It's not good to be alone."

"Can I have my baby?"

"I only ask for small things. The song. It doesn't sound right when you sing it alone. It's not complete. It's a very sad song when you sing it all alone."

"She's getting cold."

He stops the swing with his feet. I crouch down beside him. Stella looks at me and smiles. She reaches out her hands.

"I would give you anything, you know," he says.

"I know," I say, and grasp Stella beneath her arms. Pull her to me.

"We love each other," he says.

He turns to me. His eyes are wide and luminous in the moonlight. His face shines, smooth and white. I reach out and touch his hand. His skin is like ice.

"I've got to get her inside, where it's warm," I say.

"I remember," he says. "You've always been afraid of winter."

"You should come inside, too. You're freezing. I can feel it."

He shakes his head. "I don't feel the cold."

"Kyle."

"And the snow is very beautiful."

I leave him out on the swing. I walk with my daughter toward the

house and it's lit up and warm, a deep yellow glow against the night. I hear Kyle's voice rise up again in the air, singing, and I hear the creak of the swing and the scuff of his shoes on the hard ground. I don't look back at him. The roses have disappeared in the snow. I tuck my daughter up tight against my chest. I open the door and I take her inside.