

GURALNICK


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The sick child down the road, Letty, had a habit of waving with her toes instead of her fingers, perhaps because her legs were stronger than her arms. She did it every time I came into the yard. She also made a sweet, strange, gurgling noise in her throat when I came running at her. I pretended I was going to attack, then swung her up and turned her carefully upside-down in the air.

When I moved into the area it was Letty's family, the Tisdales, that I traded with first, on credit—mine—to clear the rotting cow carcass, the pile of dead dogs, and the pool of sewage out of my backyard. Their children helped to drive snakes out of the house. They beat from the raveling, braided rugs in the living room the damp smell of sheep or maybe pig.

This was in Minnesota, on a wooded northern part of it, two hundred miles east of the North Dakota plains. I had come to live on a place I had bought from a man in Wyoming, without having seen a picture of it. He said a strong young man would be able to farm there, but the most I ever raised on that land was a small herd of cattle and two crops of hay a summer, only one of which I kept. The other I traded for a winter's worth of wood. I would also trade cows, one by one, for planks, vegetables, fish, furniture, house painting, and truck repair, so that after I had bought the cattle and seed that first year, I hardly used any money at all—a good thing, because I almost never had it. I was thirty-five years old. Both of my parents

were dead of heart attacks, and I had two sisters in cities in California, where we had grown up. I wasn't sure if I had the right addresses for them anymore.

When I first came to my new place, I pulled in in the middle of the night. The property was out in the country, about halfway between—ten or twelve miles on each side—two small towns, of three hundred sixty-five people. The place was almost two miles north of a main road, six miles south of a big lake. The land was flat and very green in the summer, and even when you were in a field, deep timber—the tallest of pine, poplar, and birch, with a thick tangle of undergrowth, black willow, and wild raspberry—was never more than some acres away. When upturned, the earth was very dark, sticky, and rich. There were thousands of birds: pheasant, swallows, killdeer, grouse—even seagulls, when you had just tilled. The land was always wet, and sometimes soaked, especially in the spring, when feet upon feet of melting snow made the steep, wide ditches run so fast and full and hard that water lapped out over the gravel. In the spring the air smelled of wet grass and leaves, and sometimes burning peat, and in the winter it smelled of woodsmoke and cold.

That first night, there was a small car in my new driveway. A dog began to bark in the house, and my border collie Mike answered beside me. There was not supposed to be anyone there. I got out of the truck and looked around. I left Mike in the cab. It was late March, and still winter there, very much so, the piles of snow from shoveling the long dirt drive still over three feet high. The weather was warming up, though; tonight it had to be in the fifties, and the snow would do a lot of melting the next day. For now, the piles made a sort of tunnel to walk through. I saw the house over one of these walls of packed snow and ice: big, strangely shaped, colored white, green, and tan, with multiple roofs. It looked like two houses that had been stuck together. The garage leaned at about ten degrees. Farther back, by the yellow-orange yardlight, I could see a tall, straight barn, a long, low building, and two small ones, shed-sized. Pine trees over forty feet high edged the yard, which was heavily drifted with snow. In the sideyard stood a great ash tree, some of its branches so long and drooped that they

were partially buried in the ice crust of March; this I did not see until the morning.

No other animals called out. No lights went on in the house, but soon the door opened, and a short skinny man stepped out onto the porch and looked warily in my direction. "Hello," he called out. "What is it?"

"Hello," I said, and moved forward. Mike whined in the truck. "I've bought this place," I said.

There was quiet from the porch as he ducked his head back inside, then murmuring, and another voice. As I came closer a woman said, low, "Is it the oil? If it's the oil, tell him—" I looked at the long white tank along the side of the house.

"I'm not about the oil," I said, "but I've bought this place." I stopped about five feet short of the porch, but still I caught a whiff of someone unwashed. The man slid back into the house, the door slammed shut, and I was alone again. The dog inside had not stopped barking. I had been by myself for two or three minutes when finally I shouted in, "How about I'll leave for a while. I'll be back tomorrow morning about ten o'clock." There was no answer. I drove off with Mike, then, and went about a mile away. The man I had bought this place from had told me how to find the turn-off into the property, sixty acres of fields and forest. In my headlights, the wire fence sagged crookedly, and beyond it the tips of tall brown stalks poked out of the snow. I pulled in here, and slept, curled up with Mike. When I came back to the house late in the morning, the people were gone.

In the backyard, the body of the cow was partially covered by snow. It was mostly hide and bone. The animal had fallen on its side as it died. There was also the decaying carcass of a dog, and this body might have stayed hidden for a few more weeks of thawing if the just-stiffening body of another German shepherd, probably the dog that had been barking the night before, had not been dumped over the first one this morning, its warmth melting some of the snow. The second dog had been shot in the head, even though it looked as if it had been healthy and young. The dog that had been longer dead still had shreds of hide frozen across the skull, but its eyes were gone; the

other dog's eyes, iced over, stared off into the fields. The Tisdales later helped me to clear the animals away, eased them with shovels onto a heavy wooden square that they hauled behind a decrepit tractor, and took them up into the woods where we buried them under rocks—because the ground was too frozen to dig in. But before they did, Mike, a few times, came up to lie beside the dogs and sleep. I thought it was too bad about the second dog especially, because Mike might have gotten on fine with her.

The Tisdales were a big family, and they lived in a sort of commune just down the road. They slept in all sorts of things around the place: an old trailer, a few vans, a delivery truck—and the best of them a cabin, or shack, depending on how forgiving you are. Gretchen, the woman who took care of them all, was the grown-up child of the oldest member, her father. She was crippled, and walked slowly with a cane.

To say that only one family lived on their place is not quite right, though, because one of Gretchen's daughters had a husband she lived with there in the trailer. This woman was Molly, and she was about thirty years old. She was hefty and slow-headed, her face faintly Mongoloid. She was Letty's mother. Letty, despite the obvious problems of her mother and grandmother—as well as the stranger, unidentifiable disorder cast over the whole place, on the sons, daughters, aunts, brothers, cousins, at least fifteen of them in all, the number sometimes changing—had, of the lot of them, been asked to bear the most. She had cerebral palsy and bad asthma, her eyes were severely hyperopic, and she could hardly hear a thing. What had to happen for a child to be born who would suffer like that? She could bear to walk only one or two steps, in a hunkered gait oppressively pigeon-toed. Usually they pushed her in a special stroller built for a growing child, or she was draped over her mother's pillowy front like a monkey, her eyes artificially gawking behind a bulk of dusty lens—the glasses Molly's husband had picked up at the bank in town, where they had been left in a cardboard box for the Lions Club—with her long white-blond hair. When you spoke to her she smiled brilliantly, even as she heard nothing of what you said.

Molly's husband was a Guralnick. I think one of his brothers may have lived on the place, too, from time to time. I never knew the husband's first name, and it did not seem important, because he called almost all of his neighbors and relations by nicknames or curses, as they came to him. He was black-haired like his wife, but thin like all of the men there, including the eldest, the patriarch of them all, who had lost all of his teeth; from this old man I hardly ever heard a word, except for a few times in town, when he was hobbling behind his daughter, the lame Gretchen, as they all did—even Guralnick—in a strange slow line, and the old man would reach forward to pull his daughter's sleeve, and mutter, "Hung-y. *Hung-y!*" Gretchen would look back at him, and tap his hand like a piano key: "Okay, Pa..."

Guralnick, like the others, did not bother much with bathing, but he was the first to smell what was wrong with my bathroom, and he was also a great help to me with the well. I had an artesian well. The people who had been squatting there had not known to keep a fire going in the wellhouse, so when I first went out there, the run-off had built in front of the tank a three-foot wall of ice. Guralnick helped me to set up a little wood stove in there. Water began flowing to the house again.

The squatting couple had had only one tiny oil stove to heat the whole house; it was a miserable, dangerous, leaking thing, and I hauled it away. They had managed to trick the oil company into thinking they had a right to be here, and the oil man had kept coming to fill the white tank until they'd stopped paying. This I heard from the Tisdales. I had been living in the house for a week or so, and had installed two other stoves in the living room and kitchen, so I wouldn't freeze to death, when the extra heat began to thaw the house out. Guralnick came in one afternoon and said, "Goddamn, you son of a bitch, it smells like shit in here, don't it?" In the bathroom we moved the bathtub and discovered underneath a thick layer of sewage. I had to pull out that tub and get a new one, so I could not afford to put new carpet into the living room, and lived for a long time with the stink of the squatters' goats.

Beyond the backyard, but in front of the fields, marked off by a fence, was a middle ground of bluestem and cheatgrass, where there

were the remains of old cars, combines, tractors, and a corral. When the snow melted, I even found three little school desks there, with wooden seats and black iron legs.

One night in that first November I sat down and wrote a long letter to my younger sister, who had at least one baby now, and told her about my place: the water pipes that had been buried too shallow and always froze; the beautiful boggy fields of alfalfa and foxtail, and the deep stands of timber; the bear and gray wolf and the moose that sometimes blocked the narrow wild road; and my wicked red bull, with his heavy horns. The letter came back, with the rubber stamp outline of a hand, its finger pointing to my name. I was going to take the letter out, cross out Sally's name, and address it to my older sister; but winter came then, with a whole new set of challenges, and I did not ever get to it.

A year after I came, Letty turned five. That April the Tisdales began to talk of whether or not she would go to school in the fall. Molly wanted her to go. She had not been able to stay in school herself, because the district had said they did not have the resources to teach such a child (if you could believe Molly; I suspected the family might have taken her out, to spare her from the teasing). Letty, though, was as bright as any child her age. Someone on that place—I marveled over it—had even taught her how to read, and she would do it silently, slumped in Molly's lap in the yard, out of a picture book. I tested her one day, to see if it was really true. I brought a new book over that I had gotten out of the children's section in the library in Boucher. I sat her in my lap, to read aloud to her, on the metal steps of her mother's trailer. She could hear you if you read loudly, and directly into her ear.

The other children shrieked in the back, playing Police. For guns they had small tubes of cheap handcream, which they shot onto the grass. A pack of barn cats wandered between the Tisdales' place and mine, between the Ludtkes' to the north, and the Schües' to the south, and these animals trailed behind the children and ate the ribbons of white lotion. Some of the men and women were hanging out laundry, on a rope strung between the red-and-white delivery truck and a tall

birch in the middle of the yard. Gretchen was in the cabin, which was on the edge of the yard, closest to the woods. She sang loudly in there. The air smelled wet, both growing and dead, messy and clean. Letty's blond hair blew oily against the skin of my arms. She felt like an unwieldy sack of sticks in my lap. On the second page of the book, I began to ignore the real words and make up my own... Letty howled and honked and slammed her head as much as she could into my chest. I squeezed her and laughed. "I'm sorry, honey," I said. "I'll do it right this time, how's that?" But she was mad, and wouldn't giggle over the silly parts, even when I tickled her. When I left that day, she frowned her goodbye. Guralnick pinched her toe gently and said, "What's up your butt?" But I was afraid I had really made her angry; and when I came back the next afternoon, bringing her a roll of mints, I was relieved when she beamed as dazzlingly as ever, and wrapped her scrawny arms around my neck.

Gretchen and Molly took Letty to the school in Boucher to see what they would be able to do with her. The school said they could teach Letty, although her mobility would be a problem. An aide could carry or push her around all day, but Molly could not bear the idea of it being done by a stranger (I had known the Tisdales for three months before Molly would even let me pick Letty up). Then the kindergarten teacher got squeamish and balked when Molly suggested that she or some other member of the family could do it. So Letty would have to have a wheelchair, Molly decided, and a motorized one, because she was not strong enough to push the wheels. A school nurse said that with hearing aids, it might be possible for Letty to hear almost as much as a normal child. So, Molly said, the family would have to get their hands on some of those, too.

Between the school's restrictions and Molly's, it was going to be hard to get anything done. Despite all of the problems, though, Molly was ecstatic at the prospect of school for Letty within her reach. I was there when she told Guralnick. I was helping him, and Molly's three pale-haired brothers, to put up a flimsy lean-to of greasy particle board onto the house where Gretchen lived with her father. I could see through the window of the cabin a bed and a mattress, a black wood-

stove, and a crock pot with no plug for its cracking brown cord. The old man slept on the bed under a quilt, despite our hammering. The trailer, which was also what Gretchen hooked to a pickup and used to haul her pile of scrap iron to craft fairs and flea markets, was the only dwelling with a cook stove. “Hey, hon,” Molly said, and came to stand in front of Guralnick. Her hands were on her hips.

Gretchen stood back with the stroller, and with Letty in it, asleep. Gretchen wore dark pink sweat pants and a plain sweatshirt of the same color. She was hefty like her daughter and wore her hair in a dark, frizzy bun. When she stayed in one position too long, her cane began to sink into the soggy ground, and she had to pull it out again like a root. Molly had on an old blue-and-white checked dress with a large brown stain like rust near the hem. They had Letty in a little dress, too, yellow, and it fit on her thin, disjointed body like a too-heavy coat slung unevenly over a flimsy hanger. One of the other women, a cousin of Molly’s, I think, came and lifted Letty out and took her into the trailer, which Gretchen had parked in its usual place on the lawn, across the yard from the cabin, and on the other side of the drive. Letty made a small sighing noise in her sleep and her glasses slid down her nose.

Molly’s three brothers stepped back from the lean-to, and I went with them, toward the west wooded edge of the place. We were in the shadows of the trees now, and it was chilly there. One of the brothers, the middle one, a few years older than Molly and shorter than all the other men, watched after Letty as she was carried across the yard. To the east was my alfalfa field. I could look out over it and see my house and cows from here. Guralnick turned to face Molly, who squinted in the sun. “What is it,” he said.

She told him what the school had said and what she had decided about it, in her halting, loud way. As she talked she sliced her plump hands in the air like a politician. Her mother spoke up when she got things wrong. When Molly came to the part about a wheelchair costing nearly four thousand dollars, and her hands went higher, above her head, and she began to stomp her foot, too, to emphasize, Gretchen broke in to say, “Two thousand, Molly,” and Guralnick swore.

“Fucking-A, Molly,” he said. “What are you even thinking about? We don’t have no fucking two thousand dollars.” Molly stared at him for a moment with her mouth open, then narrowed her eyes. Guralnick turned back to the lean-to and looked at the three blond brothers, who watched Gretchen and waited for her signal; she did not give it, and Guralnick slumped back around to face the women. “Your mama don’t have no two thousand dollars,” he muttered.

“That’s why—you gotta get a *job*.” Molly’s narrow plump mouth hung open.

The cousin who had attended to Letty came out of the trailer, shut the door quietly, and sat on the ridged steps. A few of the other women and children sat around it in patches of sun and washed laundry in black plastic tubs. There were still dirty piles of snow on the sopped flat brown grass. Across the yard to the north, two of the other men worked on a car, and one little girl, wearing only a white sweatband and blue jeans, stood on a wood block and looked into the engine. Every few minutes one of them would drop a tool with a thunk on the grass. One of the men whistled “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” Beside me, Molly’s youngest brother crouched down to rest his legs, his fingertips pressed into the shaded wet ground, and began to snicker. There was the small quick scramble of a squirrel or rabbit in the brush. Guralnick stood quiet and still, his eyes on Gretchen’s feet, for so long that finally Gretchen tapped Molly’s shoulder and led her away.

Guralnick frowned as we nailed the rest of the rotting boards into place and said almost nothing. Usually it was hard to get him to be quiet. Only one time did he say something about what had happened, and he directed it to me, ignoring Molly’s brothers: “Hey, dickhead, it’s not like—right?—that I could make that much even if I worked at Linnet’s for a goddamn year.” Linnet’s was the wood treatment plant in Auchagah, about thirty miles away.

I straightened up and stared at him and grinned. “That’s just—of course it would—goddamnit, Guralnick, a *year*?”

Guralnick only laughed with his mouth wide open, closed his eyes, and plugged in a nail that way.

But Molly did not let it alone. A week later she was sewing a blue school dress for Letty, out on the lawn, and she came up to Guralnick where he and I were crouched in the driveway, drawing out a plan in the dirt for my vegetable garden. She stuck him in the arm with her needle. “Mom says she won’t be needing the pickup for anything today, so you should take it to see about going to Linnet’s,” she said.

Guralnick said, “For fuck’s sakes, Molly!” and held his arm, in a green-and-black flannel shirt, where she had pricked it. But he was not talking back to her much. I was surprised, because I had seen him give it to her before. Guralnick liked to call Molly fat and dumb, and a few times when I’d run into them in town I’d seen him trying to humiliate her in stores, by attempting to engage the high-school girls who worked there. It was hard to shame Molly—but usually he tried, and picked at her whenever he could. When Molly left us this time I tried to talk more to Guralnick about rows versus hills, onions and pumpkins, marigolds to keep the bugs away, but after a while he threw down the stick he had been sketching with and stalked off into the woods.

One of the older children had Letty out in the driveway, and he was trying to see if she could walk any better yet. He walked behind her, holding her arms like a toddler’s, then let her go. One of the Schüie boys rode by on a four-wheeler on the road and kicked up mud and water, but Letty did not even turn her white-blond head. She fell onto the drive and slumped there until this cousin, or half-brother, or uncle, came and gathered her up. I said goodbye to Gretchen, who was sitting at the little metal table in the trailer with her chin in her plump hands, staring off into space.

She smiled when I came in. I stood with one foot on the steps and the other on the main floor of the trailer. The air smelled of cigarette smoke and soap and cologne. I shut the door behind me but not all the way, so that a line of sunlight shone from the ceiling to the floor. “Gretchen,” I said, “please don’t—but I wonder, what do you all live on out here? I mean—how do you buy peanut butter and things?” As soon as I had asked it, I felt miserable. It was a rude question, and none of my business at all. But how strange, it seemed to me, that I had

known these people for a year now, and had never figured it out—nor even wondered, really. Gretchen did not seem offended, or surprised. She tipped her head and closed her eyes for a moment, with an odd solemn smile.

“Well,” she said, “well, one thing—we’ve got Pa’s pension. He was in the army. Didn’t you—it surprises me that no one’s ever told you. The boys are all awfully proud of it.” I didn’t know if I thought they really were or not. But that was a peculiar moment—to realize that that decrepit, seemingly worthless old man had been, all this time, supporting them all, on a sum probably meant for only one person, but doled out, I was also beginning to understand, to all his descendants—and to whomever they brought into the family—by Gretchen. I wondered if the old man was even aware of it: eating whenever they brought him something to eat, sleeping all day in his bed.

I left them to see about the cows, and dinner, but I came back later to spend the evening. It was nine or ten o’clock and the sky over the pines and the scrubland was a strange dark blue, a deep beautiful color. As I walked over, the brush wolves started their delicate howling. Whenever one of those little wolves came in on the same pitch as another, the first wolf lifted or dropped its voice to make it sound as if the pack were growing all the time. At the house Mike joined in with them. I was eating a piece of red licorice and I stopped chewing, and walking, to listen, and laughed. He did pretty well. I might have thought he was a little coyote, himself, if I hadn’t known different. But then the timber wolves came in, and in their cries there was something so low and wild and grave that the adult coyotes dropped out immediately, and only their pups continued, undaunted, in their fervent yipping; and poor Mike, too; it was as if he couldn’t help himself. But he could not even hope to catch that fullness, the chilling, wavering notes—he barked and gulped like a seal. I had just been laughing, but now it made me want to cry to hear him. I jogged back home and brought him over to the Tisdales with me.

That night Molly had gotten wild about the whole thing with Letty. She may have even had something to drink. The children had built a fire for marshmallows. Near it Molly’s black hair was wild,

and her broad resolute face flushed and sweaty, as she railed on Guralnick. When I came up the drive with Mike, she was saying, “I would do it—I would do it, in a minute I would do it, but I need to be here to watch her.” She was stalking a circle around the fire. No one said—they did not need to—that no one at Linnet’s would trust Molly with a saw, or a machine, or even a can of varnish. Guralnick sat on the ground with his legs out, pointed toward the fire, his back against a blackened stump. When Molly came by him, she would step over his feet but kick back at them with her heels before going on. Her three brothers, and two of the other men, were also at the fire, back a little from it to avoid Molly’s path, and all of the six children—minus Letty—were so close to it I was afraid they would burst into flame. Their whittled green poplar sticks were turning black. I gave them each a piece of licorice. Two of the children dropped their pointed sticks when they saw Mike, and ran off to chase him in the dark. The flaming marshmallows smoldered, then went out. When I picked one of them up it burned my fingers and charred sugar flaked off. It was too hot to eat and I dropped it again on the lawn. Two bats swooped, but stayed high above our heads. Over the spit and pop of the fire, I could hear the first of the peepers, thin and young and high in the marshy land across the road. In a few weeks they would fill the night.

Guralnick was looking at his hands, and did not notice I had sat down until about five minutes after. When he finally looked up and saw me sitting a few feet away, I moved closer to him. “What do you think about that crazy bitch?” he said. He only glanced at me, before studying again the flames, which sent out tiny sparks that I ground into the grass with my boot. Molly heard him, and grunted like a bear on the other side of the fire, clenching her fists.

“Well,” I said, in a low voice, only to him, “well, it’s just that she wants—”

Guralnick straightened up and stared at me. For a fraction of a moment his mouth fell open a bit in surprise; then he tightened his lips again and glared. “Dickhead,” he said, and clapped his hands on his thighs as if he were really going to rail into me. I cringed. I wished I hadn’t said

anything, and I looked in another direction, across the fire. I was happy when he only grunted a few times but did not go on. Molly went off on a rant again, as if she guessed what we had been muttering about.

This went on almost all summer. Molly did not give up, and Guralnick was finally pressured into starting at Linnet's. He worked for about three days late in July. Then he showed up at my house in the middle of the day, to help me weed peas and till the corn. I didn't ask why he wasn't at work because I needed the help. I had planted a huge garden and I couldn't keep ahead of all the weeds. I would not be able to eat it all, either, even what I would freeze now, then thaw over the course of the winter. In this same week, we cut the first crop of the summer's hay, and left it in the sun for a few days to dry.

Guralnick worked the gas tiller while I weeded on my knees, lifting the delicate pea stems with their little white flowers. If you didn't lift the whole plant, it was hard to see where the main stalk was; you might yank it out when you got a piece of lovegrass or thistle. My knees and palms got gray. I kept taking my gloves off because my hands got so hot. I had forgotten to put a hat on, and my hair was burning up when I touched it. I moved down the row, and the hard lumps of dirt hurt my knees through my jeans. Every few plants or so, I plucked a medium-plump pod, swept the peas out with my thumb, and tipped them into my mouth, spitting out the dirt that had gotten on them. The best peas were somewhat flat, oblong, and juicy-sweet.

Behind me, through the beans with their flat, velvety leaves, and the taller pepper and tomato plants, and a row of growing corn, I could see Guralnick's wiry body shake along with the jolting tiller, as he forced the big blades of it through the black-clay earth. He wore a dark brown cowboy hat. I began to think of him working at Linnet's, of Letty—when he had shown up today, I had been relieved, grateful; I had wanted to throw my arms around him. I poured him a huge glass of red Kool-Aid instead and filled the glass with ice, and we sat down at my kitchen table and organized a plan for attacking the exuberant garden. At the same time, I felt awful about Letty. I couldn't help but think of the wheelchair, of Guralnick's choice, and how it was not one he would be able to sustain. How could a person work as he wanted

to? What wouldn't stand resolutely against him? How could he dare? Not that Molly was wrong. If Guralnick had been a different sort of man, he would have just left.

When he saw me watching him through the leaves, Guralnick grinned and flicked me off.

I didn't want to see what it would be like over at the Tisdales now, so for the next day or two, I didn't go over there, but just stayed at home. The whole house creaked and settled all the time, especially at night, but I had grown to love its doing so. There were too many rooms for me, but I wandered through them all every day, and thought of what furniture I would put where, when I could get it. I had put up insulation by now, and filled in some of the other cracks, but I still saw daddy longlegs and crickets on the floors. In the bathroom the new tub still shone. The steps going upstairs were splintery, and the ceilings there slanted down too low for my head. Mike liked to go up there, though, and stare out the small window overlooking the driveway and bark at anyone when they came in.

Guralnick came over a few more times, once with a few of the other men, so we could cut the hay. We did not talk about Letty. Another time he brought the other children with him, and I paid them a dollar each to weed one whole half of the enormous garden. It looked beautiful when they were done: black with carved green trimming.

Then one morning later that week I woke up to a noise. I lay for a while in my small bedroom off the kitchen before I thought, Well—that's somebody yelling. I went onto the porch in my bare feet to listen. One of the Tisdale children had come over to play with Mike a few weeks earlier, and his foot had gone right through the porch floor. I would have to tear the whole thing down soon.

I listened to the screaming. I knew, immediately, that it was coming from the Tisdales', and even though I had heard shouting over there plenty of times before, this time there was a frantic note in it. So it had happened; it had all come down with Molly and Guralnick. I dreaded finding out what this was going to look like. But after I had decided to do it, I put on shoes and pants in a hurry, and went over there right away.

From their yard came a thick wailing, piercing at its highest pitch, and at its lowest as resonant and keening as a big drum. It swelled between these two points like a wave, or the wheezing of a bellows. It made me want to crumple over. Except for this howling the yard was terribly quiet. I knew that scream had to be Molly's. Gretchen had her sitting in a green and white upright lawn chair when I came, and her wide short legs filled it. She cried as though she were vomiting, not with her hands over her face, but gripping the arms of the chair, with her head down and her tangles of brown hair falling over it. Gretchen leaned on her cane, her other hand pressed to Molly's head. The children sat close together with some of the other women and men, by the trailer. Letty was not with them. Molly's three brothers and Guralnick stood by one of the cars, an old blue LTD parked crookedly in the drive. There was a lump of something behind the car, with an old brown towel thrown over it.

I stood at the end of the drive for a minute. No one looked over at me. I looked at Guralnick, but there was something about the way he stood, with his hands in his pockets, and leaning against the car door, but more rigid than you would imagine a person to be in this posture—and the way the brothers looked straight out over the lawn, almost defiantly, at Gretchen and Molly—that made me nervous to approach them. After a moment, I jogged back around the men and the car, giving them a wide berth. I came up to the trailer, and finally one of the women looked up at me. She frowned, then quickly, consciously, blanked her face. I stopped a few steps from her and dropped my arms. "Someone hit something?" I said.

She turned from me again before she spoke, and looked where everyone was looking, at the crying woman. "They accidentally—they backed into her," she said, and one of the other women, an older one—she might have been Molly's older sister—looked at me sharply and said, "Don't call the police yet, because we're going to."

"What?" I said. "What—Letty?" The first woman who had spoken nodded. I jerked my head around at all of them. This woman had crossed her arms tightly under her breasts. She was thin and bony faced. The children looked at the ground and fiercely braided

grass. No one would look at me; finally I broke away, and ran to Guralnick. When he heard my steps on the gravel, he looked up, squinting, and then gave the line of brothers, leaning against the car, a hard sweeping look. They straightened, and looked back at him, before nodding to me. “Guralnick,” I said, and reached out a hand to him, even though the gesture felt strange, and not just because of Guralnick, of who he was, and what our relationship was like, but because of this whole situation, how odd it felt—“I’m sorry.” He nodded and clasped my hand once, quickly, before dropping it and looking at the ground. The brothers stared coolly at me. Usually they all looked at least somewhat different from one another, but at that moment I could not sort them out, tell which one was which by name or age.

I said, low, leaning in to Guralnick, “What happened?” He shook his head, and I shook mine slowly back at him. “It wasn’t you,” I said.

“No.”

I was nearly whispering when I said, “Which one?” Guralnick shook his head again, harder this time, and he stood up straight and crossed his hands behind his back, then turned completely away from the brothers to look at only me, and it may have been the last time that he did so—looked me fully in the face.

“It was an accident, now,” he said. “I don’t think there’s any fucking need for that. I think you’ll want to stop that.” His face was calm, as if he were talking to a child: his leathery, tan skin, flat, oily black moustache, and small chin. As I stared back at him, I could hardly think of what needed to be said. I wanted to repeat what I had asked before, but it was not a question one could ask again. And I knew even then—didn’t I?—that no one was ever going to tell me, because it didn’t matter, it didn’t make any difference at all, which one.

Still I went on, recklessly: “But how did she get into the driveway? What was she doing there? Who was watching her?” My hands had begun to tremble. Guralnick swore at me again, and told me to shut up; and then Gretchen was coming. One of the other women had taken over with Molly, who had not quieted yet.

“She couldn’t hear the car,” said Guralnick.

Gretchen walked as slowly as ever, but as Guralnick and I had nothing more to say to one another, we turned to watch her come. When she had, she looked at Guralnick, and then at her three sons, who stared ahead impassively, their arms all crossed. The early sun glinted orange on their pale heads. "Which one of you was it that done it," Gretchen said in a low voice, tentatively. I nodded and looked at the four men, but no one looked at me. The brothers had remained silent for a few seconds when she sighed and looked at the ground, then over at the covered bundle on the drive. When I looked at it with her, I felt my mouth fall open, then come cracking back together as my teeth began to chatter. "I do want to know," she said, trailing off. They stayed silent. Finally, she flicked a glance over at me, then at Guralnick. "All right," she said. "All right." Her voice had grown quieter with each speech. She shrugged, and as she turned away I clutched her shoulder.

"Gretchen!" I said. "What?"

Guralnick reached out and pushed my arm away, and I yanked it to myself and glared at him. He moved toward me as if he were going to punch; and then suddenly his body relaxed. His face sharpened out of its frenzy, and a new look came over him, like sunlight passing over the ground. "Hey, shithead," he said, grinning viciously, "hey, shithead, is it going to rain on that hay of yours today?" The sky had clouded; it had been getting grayer all morning. Guralnick pointed to blacker clouds in the east. If it did rain hard, the whole crop might mold and be ruined. I stared at him for a long time, but his face did not change. Finally I turned away and started to walk back around the car, so I could leave without having to see the small pile of cloth that was Letty. Behind me, Guralnick made a hissing noise with his lips. "We'll be over in the afternoon with the baler, shithead," he said—and he did not fail me. But after the haying was done, we did not go to see each other anymore.

Later on that morning, I heard an ambulance and then a police car come. I heard much later from the Schües that responsibility was pinned on the youngest brother, who, because he was only sixteen and the death was declared accidental—and Guralnick, the only competent

parent, did not press charges—got off with a light punishment. I did not stay close with anyone in the family.

I did go to Letty's funeral. When it was Molly's turn to go up and look into the casket, was let to do so, irresponsibly, alone; she began to fiddle with and fix Letty's dress. Then she reached in, and talked to the dead child. I realized that she was trying to sit Letty up, but the stiff body would not bend. It was the minister who came to stop her, because Gretchen could not get up fast enough, and none of the others came forward to do it. The only way there had been a funeral at all was that the church had raised the money for it. I had not given any money to the fund, because I could not spare it, and I did not go up to look into the casket myself.

After the service I bolted out, but Guralnick was there on the steps. He must have left in the middle of the service, because I had seen him come in and sit down, looking hard at his hands. I was not going to ever talk to him again, but I was so sick over the image of Letty's rigid pointy shoulders and her pale rabbit face without glasses, rising like a puppet out of the casket in Molly's clumsy grip, that I came and stood close to him on the cement steps, and said, "You put them up to it. You put one of them up to it." Guralnick was jumpy, and he moved back, looked nervously around him, and said, excitedly, his eyes sad and wild, "They had to do it," slapping his thighs in old jeans. He had on a faded Pepsi sweatshirt. "And they should have done it without me having to tell them to—those boys knew that *somebody* had to—and it wasn't *me* who—why should *I* have to—who knows which one of them it was. But she had that kid coming before I ever—" He stopped, and I did not want to hear what he had to say, anyway, and left. What difference did it make, if what he was saying about the little girl was true? It didn't matter how it had all started, only how it had ended up.

I drove home. I took a longer way now, so I wouldn't have to go past the Tisdale place. I couldn't tell, though, which hurt more: the times I didn't think, and accidentally found myself on the same old road and drawn to look into the yard, and saw them all out there, working on something; or the times I did it right, and went the long way around

on County 5, which included a stretch of blacktop and went past the Schües. The Schües were nice people, a couple in their fifties with grown children somewhere. I stopped on the afternoon of the funeral to say hello, but they weren't home. At least they didn't seem to be; it seemed there had been someone in the living room when I drove up. I thought I had seen someone. But no one came out into the yard, even when I had been standing there for five minutes or so. You didn't go up to a house and knock unless it was winter or raining. So I got in my truck and left.

I wrote to my sister.

Sally—The ground is so good here. Anything will grow if it doesn't freeze first! You can only get hay twice. I have had some trouble with some people (I am not in trouble)...

I had finished the letter before I remembered I had nowhere to send it. I stayed in that house for another year, and finally I sold it. I drove all the way to Santa Cruz, and showed up at the building my oldest sister had used to live in. She was gone. The two boys living there now had no idea where she was. They were nice enough to pretend that they had seen her while they were moving in, and that she had seemed to them like a really nice lady. Yes, there might have been a couple of children, too, now that they thought about it. But I don't think they ever even saw her. I thanked them because they were kind, and it wasn't their fault. She had moved, like people do, and there were a lot of things I could have done before she went away so that now I would know better what to do with myself.

I drove to the coast, and Mike had a great time on the beach.

In the months after the funeral, before I left Minnesota, I had sometimes seen Molly in town, with Gretchen and a few of the other women. Molly would look at the toys and clothes and pink plastic brushes for little girls. She would pick them up and croon. Finally one of the women would come to lead her away: "Come on, Molly..." They would show her something else, a picture she would like. She looked, and seemed to enjoy it, but her sadness was slow to leave, and the pleasure even slower to come. What I saw most sharply in her was the place she came to, in between—I can only compare it to the

Cheri Johnson

vacant way that children fill up their days, between meals, and chores,
and excitements, and surprises.

I would not know anything else, if someone could tell me the worth
of this.

