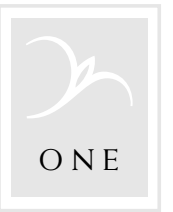
Baker Towers

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ONE

Softly the snow falls. In the blue morning light a train winds through the hills. The engine pulls a passenger car, brightly lit. Then a dozen blind coal cars, rumbling dark.

Six mornings a week the train runs westward from Altoona to Pittsburgh, a distance of a hundred miles. The route is indirect, tortuous; the earth is buckled, swollen with what lies beneath. Here and there, the lights of a town: rows of company houses, narrow and square; a main street of commercial buildings, quickly and cheaply built. Brakes screech; the train huffs to a stop. Cars are added. In the passenger compartment, a soldier on furlough clasps his duffel bag, shivers and waits. The whistle blows. Wheezing, the engine leaves the station, slowed by the extra tons of coal.

The train crosses an iron bridge, the black water of the Susquehanna. Lights cluster in the next valley. The town, Bakerton, is already awake. Coal cars thunder down the mountain. The valley is filled with sound.

The valley is deep and sharply featured. Church steeples and mine tip-

ples grow inside it like crystals. At bottom is the town's most famous landmark, known locally as the Towers, two looming piles of mine waste. They are forty feet high and growing, graceful slopes of loose coal and sulfurous dirt. The Towers give off an odor like struck matches. On windy days they glow soft orange, like the embers of a campfire. Scrap coal, spontaneously combusting; a million bits of coal bursting into flame.

Bakerton is Saxon County's boomtown. Like the Towers, it is alive with coal. A life that started in the 1880s, when two English brothers, Chester and Elias Baker, broke ground on Baker One. Attracted by handbills, immigrants came: English and Irish, then Italians and Hungarians; then Poles and Slovaks and Ukrainians and Croats, the "Slavish," as they were collectively known. With each new wave the town shifted to make room. Another church was constructed. A new cluster of company houses appeared at the edge of town. The work—mine work—was backbreaking, dangerous and bleak; but at Baker Brothers the union was tolerated. By the standards of the time the pay was generous, the housing affordable and clean.

The mines were not named for Bakerton; Bakerton was named for the mines. This is an important distinction. It explains the order of things.

Chester Baker was the town's first mayor. During his term Bakerton acquired the first streetcar line in the county, the first public water supply. Its electric street lamps were purchased from Baker's own pocket. *Figure the cost of maintaining them for fifty years,* he wrote to the town bosses, *and I will pay you the sum in advance.* After twenty years Baker ceded his office, but the bosses continued to meet at his house, a rambling yellow-brick mansion on Indian Hill. A hospital was built, the construction crew paid from a fund Baker had established. He wouldn't let the building be named for him. At his direction, it was called Miners' Hospital.

The hospital was constructed in brick; so were the stores, the dress fac-

tory, the churches, the grammar school. After the Commercial Hotel burned to the ground in 1909, an ordinance was passed, urging merchants to "make every effort to fabricate their establishments of brick." To a traveler arriving on the morning train—by now an expert on Pennsylvania coal towns—the hat shop and dry-goods store, the pharmacy and mercantile, seem built to last. Their brick facades suggest order, prosperity, permanence.

On the seventeenth of January 1944, a motorcar idled at the railroad crossing, waiting for the train to pass. In the passenger seat was an elderly undertaker of Sicilian descent, named Antonio Bernardi. At the wheel was his great-nephew Gennaro, a handsome, curly-haired youth known in the pool halls as Jerry. Between them sat a blond-haired boy of eight. The car, a black Packard, had been waxed that morning. The old man peered anxiously through the windshield, at the snowflakes melting on the hood.

"These Slavish," he said, as if only a Pole would drop dead in the middle of winter and expect to be buried in a snowstorm.

The train passed, whistle blowing. The Packard crossed the tracks and climbed a steep road lined with company houses, a part of town known as Polish Hill. The road was loose and rocky; the coarse stones, called red dog, came from bony piles on the outskirts of town. Black smoke rose from the chimneys; in the backyards were outhouses, coal heaps, clotheslines stretched between posts. Here and there, miners' overalls hung out to dry, frozen stiff in the January wind.

"These Slavish," Bernardi said again. "They live like *animali*." At one time, his own brothers had lived in company houses, but the family had

improved itself. His nephews owned property, houses filled with modern comforts: telephones and flush toilets, gas stoves and carpeted floors.

"Papa," said Jerry, glancing at the boy; but the child seemed not to hear. He stared out the window wide-eyed, having never ridden in a car before. His name was Sandy Novak; he'd come knocking at Bernardi's back door an hour before—breathless, his nose dripping. His mother had sent him running all the way from Polish Hill, to tell Bernardi to come and get his father.

The car climbed the slope, engine racing. Briefly the tires slid on the ice. At the top of the hill Jerry braked.

"Well?" said the old man to the boy. "Where do you live?"

"Back there," said Sandy Novak. "We passed it."

Bernardi exhaled loudly. "*Cristo.* Now we got to turn around."

Jerry turned the car in the middle of the road.

"Pay attention this time," Bernardi told the boy. "We don't got all day." In fact he'd buried nobody that week, but he believed in staying available. Past opportunities—fires, rockfalls, the number five collapse—had arisen without warning. Somewhere in Bakerton a miner was dying. Only Bernardi could deliver him to God.

The Bernardis handled funerals at the five Catholic churches in town. A man named Hiram Stoner had a similar arrangement with the Protestants. When Bernardi's black Packard was spotted, the town knew a Catholic had died; Stoner's Ford meant a dead Episcopalian, Lutheran or Methodist. For years Bernardi had transported his customers in a wagon pulled by two horses. During the flu of '18 he'd moved three bodies at a time. Recently, conceding to modernity, he'd bought the Packard; now, when a Catholic died, a Bernardi nephew would be called upon to drive. Jerry was the last remaining; the others had been sent to England and

northern Africa. The old man worried that Jerry, too, would be drafted. Then he'd have no one left to drive the hearse.

"There it is," the boy said, pointing. "That's my house."

Jerry slowed. The house was mean and narrow like the others, but a front porch had been added, painted green and white. One window, draped with lace curtains, held a porcelain statue of the Madonna. In the other window hung a single blue star.

"Who's the soldier?" said Jerry.

"My brother Georgie," said Sandy, then added what his father always said. "He's in the South Pacific."

They climbed the porch stairs, stamping snow from their shoes. A woman opened the door. Her dark hair was loose, her mouth full. A baby slept against her shoulder. She was beautiful, but not young—at least forty, if Bernardi had to guess. He was like a timberman who could guess the age of a tree before counting the rings inside. He had rarely been wrong.

She let them inside. Her eyelids were puffy, her eyes rimmed with red. She inhaled sharply, a moist, slurry sound.

Bernardi offered his hand. He'd expected the usual Slavish type: pale and round-faced, a long braid wrapped around her head so that she resembled a fancy pastry. This one was dark-eyed, olive-skinned. He glanced down at her bare feet. Italian, he realized with a shock. His mother and sisters had never worn shoes in the house.

"My dear lady," he said. "My condolences for your loss."

"Come in." She had an ample figure, heavy in the bosom and hip. The type Bernardi—an old bachelor, a window-shopper who'd looked but had never bought—had always liked.

She led them through a tidy parlor—polished pine floor, a braided rug

at the center. A delicious aroma came from the kitchen. Not the usual Slavish smell, the sour stink of cooked cabbage.

"This way," said the widow. "He's in the cellar."

They descended a narrow staircase—the widow first, then Jerry and Bernardi. The dank basement smelled of soap, onions and coal. The widow switched on the light, a single bare bulb in the ceiling. A man lay on the cement floor—fair-haired, with a handlebar mustache. A silver medal on a chain around his neck: Saint Anne, protectress of miners. His hair was wet, his eyes already closed.

"He just come home from the mines," said the widow, her voice breaking. "He was washing up. I wonder how come he take so long."

Bernardi knelt on the cold floor. The man was tall and broad-shouldered. His shirt was damp; the color had already left his face. Bernardi touched his throat, feeling for a pulse.

"It's no point," said the woman. "The priest already come."

Bernardi grasped the man's legs, leaving Jerry the heavier top half. Together they hefted the body up the stairs. Bernardi was sixty-four that spring, but his work had kept him strong. He guessed the man weighed two hundred pounds, heavy even for a Slavish.

They carried the body out the front door and laid it in the rear of the car. The boy watched from the porch. A moment later the widow appeared, still holding the baby. She had put on shoes. She handed Bernardi a dark suit on a hanger.

"He wore it when we got married," she said. "I hope it still fits."

Bernardi took the suit. "We'll bring him back tonight. How about you get a couple neighbors to help us? He'll be heavier with the casket."

The widow nodded. In her arms the baby stirred. Bernardi smiled stiffly. He found infants tedious; he preferred them silent and unconscious, like this one. "A little angel," he said. "What's her name?"

"Lucy." The widow stared over his shoulder at the car. "*Dio mio.* I can't believe it."

"Iddio la benedica."

They stood there a moment, their heads bowed. Gently Bernardi patted her shoulder. He was an old man; by his own count he'd buried more than a thousand bodies; he had glimpsed the darkest truths, the final secrets. Still, life held surprises. Here was a thing he had never witnessed, an Italian wife on Polish Hill.

That morning, the feast of Saint Anthony, Rose Novak had gone to church. For years the daily mass had been poorly attended, but now the churches were crowded with women. The choir, heavy on sopranos, had doubled in size. Wives stood in line to light a candle; mothers knelt at the communion rail in silent prayer. Since her son Georgie was drafted Rose had scarcely missed a mass. Each morning her eldest daughter, Dorothy, cooked the family breakfast, minded the baby, and woke Sandy and Joyce for school.

Rose glanced at her watch; again the old priest had overslept. She reached into her pocket for her rosary. *Good morning, Georgie,* she thought, crossing herself. *Buongiorno, bello.* In the past year, the form of her prayers had changed: instead of asking God for His protection, she now prayed directly to her son. This did not strike her as blasphemous. If God could hear her prayers, it was just as easy to imagine that Georgie heard them, too. He seemed as far away as God; her husband had shown her the islands on the globe. She imagined Georgie's submarine smaller than a pinprick, an aquatic worm in the fathomless blue.

Stanley had wanted him to enlist. "We owe it to America," he said, as

if throwing Georgie's life away would make them all more American. Stanley had fought in the last war and returned with all his limbs. He'd forgotten the others—his cousins, Rose's older brother—who hadn't been so lucky.

Rose had resisted—quietly at first, then loudly, without restraint. Georgie was a serious young man, a musician. He'd taught himself the clarinet and saxophone; since the age of five he'd played the violin. Besides that, he was delicate: as a child he'd had pneumonia, and later diphtheria. Both times he had nearly died. If America wanted his precious life, then America would have to call him. Rose would not let Stanley hand him over on a plate.

For a time she had her way. Georgie graduated high school and went to work at Baker One. He blew his saxophone in a dance band that played the VFW dances Friday nights. When the draft notice came, Stanley had seemed almost glad. Rose called him a brute, a braggart—willing to risk Georgie's life so he'd have something to boast about in the beer gardens. At the time she believed it. The next morning she found him gathering eggs in the henhouse, weeping like a baby.

He was strict with the children, with Georgie especially. Only English was to be spoken at home; when Rose lapsed into Italian with her mother or sisters, Stanley glared at her with silent scorn. Yet late at night, once the children were in bed, he tuned the radio to a Polish station from Pittsburgh and listened until it was time for work.

She left the warmth of the church and walked home through a stiff wind, wisps of snow swirling around her ankles, hovering above the sidewalk like steam or spirits. The sky had begun to lighten; the frozen ground was still bare. Good for the miners, loading the night's coal onto railroad cars; good for the children, who walked two miles each way to school.

At Polish Hill the sidewalk ended. She continued along the rocky path, hugging her coat around her, a fierce wind at her back. Ahead, a group of miners trudged up the hill with their empty dinner buckets, cupping cigarettes in their grimy hands. They joked loudly in Polish and English: deep voices, phlegmy laughter. Like Stanley they'd worked Hoot Owl, midnight to eight; since the war had started the mines never stopped. Rose picked out her neighbor Andy Yurkovich, the bad-tempered father of two-year-old twins. He had a young Hungarian wife; by noon her nerves would be shattered, trying to keep the babies quiet so Andy could sleep.

Rose climbed the stairs to the porch. The house was warm inside; someone had stoked the furnace. She left her shoes at the door. Dorothy sat at the kitchen table chewing her fingernails. The baby sat calmly in her lap, mouthing a saltine cracker.

"Sorry I'm late. That Polish priest, he need an alarm clock." Rose reached for the baby. "Did she behave herself?" she asked in Italian.

"She was an angel," Dorothy answered in English. "Daddy's home," she added in a whisper. She reached for her boots and glanced at the mirror that hung beside the door. Her hair looked flattened on one side. An odd rash had appeared on her cheek. She would be nineteen that spring.

"Put on some lipstick," Rose suggested.

"No time," Dorothy called over her shoulder.

In the distance the factory whistle blew. Through the kitchen window Rose watched Dorothy hurry down the hill, the hem of her dress peeking beneath her coat. People said they looked alike, and their features—the dark eyes, the full mouth—were indeed similar. In her high school graduation photo, taken the previous spring, Dorothy was as stunning as any movie actress. In actual life she was less attractive. Tall and round-shouldered, with no bosom to speak of; no matter how Rose hemmed

them, Dorothy's skirts dipped an inch lower on the left side. Help existed: corsets, cosmetics, the innocent adornments most girls discovered at puberty and used faithfully until death. Dorothy either didn't know about them or didn't care. She still hadn't mastered the art of setting her hair, a skill other girls seemed to possess intuitively.

She sewed sleeves at the Bakerton Dress Company, a low brick building at the other end of town. Each morning Rose watched the neighborhood women tramp there like a civilian army. A few even wore trousers, their hair tied back with kerchiefs. What precisely they did inside the factory, Rose understood only vaguely. The noise was deafening, Dorothy said; the floor manager made her nervous, watching her every minute. After seven months she still hadn't made production. Rose worried, said nothing. For an unmarried woman, the factory was the only employer in town. If Dorothy were fired she'd be forced to leave, take the train to New York City and find work as a housemaid or cook. Several girls from the neighborhood had done this—quit school at fourteen to become live-in maids for wealthy Jews. The Jews owned stores and drove cars; they needed Polish-speaking maids to wash their many sets of dishes. A few Bakerton girls had even settled there, found city husbands; but for Dorothy this seemed unlikely. Her Polish was sketchy, thanks to Stanley's rules. And she was terrified of men. At church, in the street, she would not meet their eyes.

Rose laid the baby down. Every morning she carried the heavy cradle downstairs to the kitchen, the warmest room in the house. From upstairs came the sounds of an argument, the younger children getting ready for school.

She went into the parlor and stood at the foot of the stairs. "Joyce!" she called. "Sandy!"

Her younger daughter appeared on the stairs, dressed in a skirt and blouse.

"Where's your brother?"

"He isn't ready." Joyce ran a hand through her fine hair, blond like her father's; she'd inherited the color but not the abundance. "I woke him once but he went back to sleep."

"Sandy!" Rose called.

He came rumbling down the stairs: shirt unbuttoned, socks in hand, hair sticking in all directions.

"See?" Joyce demanded. She was six years older, a sophomore in high school. "I have a test first period. I can't wait around all day."

Sandy sat heavily on the steps and turned his attention to his socks. "I'm not a baby," he grumbled. "I can walk to school by myself." He was a good-humored child, not prone to sulking, but he would not take criticism from Joyce. His whole life she had mothered him, praised him, flirted with him. Her scorn was intolerable.

Joyce swiped at his hair, a stubborn cowlick that refused to lie flat. "Well, you're not going anywhere looking like that."

He shrugged her hand away.

"Suit yourself," she said, reddening. "Go to school looking like a bum. Makes no difference to me."

"You go ahead," Rose told Joyce. "I take him." He couldn't be trusted to walk alone. The last time she'd let him he'd arrived an hour late, having stopped to play with a stray dog.

He followed her into the kitchen. Of all her children he was the most beautiful, with the same pale blue eyes as his father. He had come into the world with a full head of hair, a silvery halo of blond. They'd named him Alexander, for his grandfather; it was Joyce who shortened the name to

Sandy. As a toddler, she'd been desperately attached to a doll she'd named after herself; after her brother was born she transferred her affections to Sandy. "My baby!" she'd cry, outraged, when Rose bathed or nursed him. In her mind, Sandy was hers entirely.

Rose scooped the last of the oatmeal into a bowl and poured the boy a cup of coffee. Each morning she made a huge potful, mixed in sugar and cream so that the whole family drank it the same way. In the distance the fire whistle blew, a low whine that rose in pitch, then welled up out of the valley like a mechanical scream.

"What is it?" Sandy asked. "What happened?"

"I don't know." Rose stared out the window at the number three tipple rising in the distance. She scanned the horizon for smoke. The whistle could mean any number of disasters: a cave-in, an underground fire. At least once a year a miner was killed in an explosion or injured in a rockfall. Just that summer, a neighbor had lost a leg when an underground roof collapsed. She crossed herself, grateful for the noise in the basement, her husband safe at home. This time at least, he had escaped.

She filled a heavy iron pot with water and placed it on the stove. A basket of laundry sat in the corner, but the dirty linens would have to wait; she always washed Stanley's miners first. Over the years she'd developed a system. First she took the coveralls outdoors and shook out the loose dirt; then she rinsed them in cold water in the basement sink. When the water ran clean, she scrubbed the coveralls on a washboard with Octagon soap, working in the lather with a stiff brush. Then she carried the clothes upstairs and boiled them on the stove. The process took half an hour, including soak time, and she hadn't yet started. She was keeping the stove free for Stanley's breakfast.

"Finish your cereal," she told Sandy. "I go see about your father."

She found him lying on the floor, his face half shaven. The cuffs of his

trousers were wet. This confused her a moment; then she saw that the sink had overflowed. He had dropped the soap and razor. The drain was blocked with a sliver of soap.

She watched the hearse disappear down the hill. A neighbor's beagle barked. For three days each November it was taken buck hunting. The rest of the year it spent chained in the backyard, waiting.

She had prepared for the wrong death. A month ago, before Christmas, a car had parked in front of the Poblockis' house to deliver a telegram. Their oldest son was missing, his body—tall, gangly, an overgrown boy's—lost forever in the waters of the Pacific. Since then Rose had waited, listened for the dreadful sound of a car climbing Polish Hill. Now, finally, the car had come.

In her arms the baby shifted. From the kitchen came a shattering noise.

"Sandy?" she called.

He appeared in the doorway, hands in his pockets.

"What happened?"

He seemed to reflect a moment. "I dropped a glass."

The baby squirmed. Rose shifted her to the other shoulder.

"Where are they taking Daddy?"

"Uptown. They going to get him ready." She hesitated, unsure how to explain what she didn't understand herself and could hardly bear to think of: Stanley's body stripped and scrubbed, injected with alcohol—with God only knew what—to keep him intact another day or two.

"They clean him up," she said. "Change his clothes. Mr. Bernardi bring him back tonight."

The boy stared. "Why?" he asked softly.

"People, they want to see him." She'd been to other wakes on Polish Hill, miserable affairs where the men drank for hours alongside the body, telling stories, keeping the widow awake all night. In the morning the house reeked of tobacco smoke. The men looked unshaven and unsteady, still half drunk as they carried the casket into church.

Sandy frowned. "What people?"

"The neighbors. People from the church."

The baby hiccuped. A moment later she let out a scream.

"I go change your sister," said Rose. "Don't touch that glass. I be back in a minute."

Sandy went into the kitchen and stood looking at the jagged glass on the floor. He'd been filling it at the sink when it nearly slipped from his wet hand. A thought had occurred to him. *If I broke it, it wouldn't matter.* He turned and threw the glass at the table leg. It smashed loudly on the floor. He had knelt to examine it. It was dull green, one he'd drunk from his whole life. Now, laying in pieces, it had become beautiful, the color deeper along the jagged edges, brilliant and jewellike. When he reached to touch it, blood had appeared along his finger. Then his mother had called, and he'd jammed his hands in his pockets.

Now he looked down at his trousers. A dark spot in his lap, blood from his finger. He looked at the clock. School had already started; he'd heard the bell ringing as he ran across town for the priest. *Tell him to come right away,* his mother had said, tears streaming down her face. He'd seen her cry just once before, when Georgie left for the war. *Tell him your father is dead.*

Sandy straightened. The spot on his trousers was brown, not red as he would have thought. His mother would know he'd touched the glass.

He took his coat from its peg near the door. Joyce would know how to

get rid of the spot. He ran out the back door, across the new snow, down the hill to the school.

They'd met standing in line at the company store on a summer day. Friday afternoon, miners' payday: men spending their scrip on tobacco and rolling papers, wives buying sugar and coffee and cheap cuts of meat. Behind the counter, McNeely and his wife filled the orders, writing down each purchase in a black book. Rose's mother had sent her with a block of fresh butter wrapped in brown paper. Rose churned it herself, to trade each week for cornmeal or sausages or flour for pasta. When her turn came, Mrs. McNeely would weigh the block on a scale. *Scarponi, butter, four lbs,* she'd write in her book.

Rose held the butter in her apron. Already it had begun to soften in the heat. Behind her two miners waited in line, speaking what sounded like perfect English. The taller man spoke quietly, low and resonant. The oak counter beneath her elbow vibrated with his voice. She sensed the closeness of him, his length and breadth; but it was his voice that thrilled her. Even before she turned to look at him, she had fallen in love with his voice.

He'd been a soldier, like all of them. From his size and his blondness she guessed that he was Polish. This explained why she hadn't seen him before. The Poles had their own church, their parochial school. They were hard workers, serious and quiet. Nothing like the Italian boys, handsome and unreliable; *disgraziati* who loitered in the town square, sharply dressed, smoking cigarettes and watching the people go by. The Italian boys called after her—after all the girls, she'd noticed: even the plain ones, the heavy, the slow. Rose did not respond. In these boys she saw her un-

cles, her brothers, her own father, who tended bar at Rizzo's Tavern and drank most of what he earned. He'd kept his hair and his waistline and his eye for women, while her mother grew hunched and fat, shriller and angrier with each passing year.

Rose looked for the Polish man everywhere: in the street, the stores, the windows of the beer gardens she passed on her way home from work. She lingered at the park where the local team played. Her uncles were crazy for baseball, and that year the Baker Bombers led the coal-company league. On Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays, the ballpark was filled with men.

When she had nearly given up hope, he appeared in the unlikeliest place: the seamstress's shop where she worked. He was getting married in the fall, he explained. He would need a new suit.

Rose measured his chest, his arms and neck. He did not speak to her, only smiled, bending his knees helpfully so that she could reach his shoulders. Kneeling before him, she took his inseam, then recorded the numbers on a sheet of paper: chest forty-four inches, waist thirty-three. For three weeks she worked on the suit, cutting the fabric, piecing together the jacket and vest. All the while she imagined his wedding, the lovely blond-haired bride—all the Polish girls were blond. Tenderly she assembled the dark wool trousers, the silky inner fabric that would lie against his skin.

The leaves changed color. The suit waited on its hanger. Still the Polish man did not appear. In November, after the American holiday, the seamstress wrote him an angry letter. Finally, on a snowy afternoon just before Christmas, he came.

"Forgive me," he said, handing the seamstress a check. "I forgot the suit. My plans have changed." His cheeks were red—from cold or embarrassment, Rose couldn't tell.

Her fingers shook as she handed him the hanger. He covered her hand with his. That Friday he took her to a Christmas dance at the town hall, and a month later he wore the suit to their wedding. The reception, a raucous affair at his uncle's house, lasted three days and two nights. For reasons Rose didn't understand, a pig's trough had been brought into the house, and Stanley's older brother had danced a jig in it. Her wedding night was spent in the uncle's attic. By the end of the festivities she was already pregnant.

She gave birth in the house on Polish Hill, helped by a neighbor woman trained in the old country as a midwife. Stanley considered his own name too Polish, so they called the baby George: the name of the first president, the most American name they knew. Like all company houses, theirs had three upstairs rooms; from the very beginning, the baby had one to himself. To Rose, raised in a cramped apartment above Rizzo's Tavern, the place seemed cavernous. Her mother had shared an icebox and a clothesline with two other families. The narrow yard had been worn bare by her own chickens and children, and those of the Rizzos and DiNatales.

Dorothy was born a year later, shocking the neighborhood. Nobody had guessed Rose was pregnant; she had gained only a few pounds. For months she'd felt consumed from within and without: the girl baby growing inside her, the boy baby hungry at her breast. Later a neighbor took her aside and explained what all the Polish women knew: secret ways of delaying pregnancy; times in the month to push a man away; special teas that brought on bleeding if a woman was late. The Polish children were nursed for years; in some mysterious way, this delayed the return of a woman's monthly bleeding. Without such precautions, Rose was told, she'd give birth once a year, until she turned forty or dropped dead from exhaustion. Some women took these methods to extremes. May Poblocki nursed her sons until they started school, for reasons obvious to all: she

was a handsome woman, and her husband drank. The women joked that May's son Teddy, stationed overseas in England, came home on furlough just to nurse.

Rose followed the advice strictly, and her babies came at longer intervals. Three years after Dorothy, she miscarried; the baby dissolved quietly, a soft mass of tissue and blood. Two years later, Joyce was born. Sandy was to be her last child; nursing him, she waited for forty, the age of freedom. Each new baby required time she couldn't spare, space and money they didn't have. The mines were slow then; at times Stanley worked only three days a week. In summer the children went barefoot. In winter they lived on dumplings made from stale bread, peppers and tomatoes she'd canned in September. The girls wore petticoats she sewed from flour sacks. Each day after school, Stanley took the older children to pick coal at the tipple; when the shuttle cars were unloaded, there was always some scrap coal that fell by. At suppertime they came back with a wagonload, enough to heat the house for a day.

By her fortieth birthday she had four children—a small family, by the standards of Polish Hill. She and Stanley celebrated her freedom. By then he was working Hoot Owl; each morning he washed up in the basement while she sent the children off to school. Afterward, the house empty and quiet, they climbed the stairs to their bedroom.

She'd been surprised when her cycles stopped. "It's the change," said May Poblocki, who'd gone through it herself. The heaviness in her breasts, the strange dreams, the waves of sadness and joy—according to May it was all part of the change. Then, one afternoon as she staked tomatoes in the garden, Rose felt a stirring inside her and knew she was pregnant again.

The baby was born in November, a month after her forty-third birthday. The labor lasted an entire day. Rose scarcely remembered it; later the

midwife told her she'd nearly died. Finally Stanley had called the company doctor, who cut her and took the baby with forceps. By then Rose was barely conscious. She remembered light in the distance, the angels coming to get her. When she awoke, the midwife brought her Lucy.

Miss Viola Peale ate lunch at her desk. She disliked the noise of the faculty lounge, its lingering odor of coffee and tobacco smoke. A few of the younger teachers ate in the student lunchroom, a fact Miss Peale found astonishing. Each day she brought the same lunch to school: celery sticks, a tuna sandwich and a boiled egg, prepared each morning by her sister Clara. The prospect of revealing to a pupil the contents of her lunch bag—the distinctive odors of fish and egg—was, to her, unthinkable. It struck her as exposing too much of herself, like coming to school in her slip.

Until that fall she hadn't so much as sipped a glass of water in the presence of a pupil. Then Joyce Novak asked permission to stay in the classroom during lunch period. She had a chemistry test that afternoon, she said, and she needed a place to study. The boys in the lunchroom made too much noise.

The request took Viola by surprise. Chemistry was a subject few girls studied, one she herself had avoided at the state teachers' college.

"Please?" said Joyce. She was a fair-haired girl with narrow shoulders and a sharp, birdlike face. The other sophomore girls wore lipstick and tight sweaters—in Viola's opinion, outfits entirely too sophisticated for girls of fifteen. Next to them Joyce Novak was slender as a child; yet her intelligent gray eyes were oddly adult.

"But what will you eat?" Viola asked.

"I'm not hungry. I'm too nervous to eat."

"All right," said Viola. "Just this once."

Joyce returned to her desk and opened her textbook. Viola reached into her lunch bag and nibbled timidly at her celery. Finally she'd unwrapped her sandwich. The fishy odor seemed especially strong. She wondered if Joyce noticed.

She ate in silence until the final bell. When it rang, Joyce closed her book. "Thank you, ma'am," she said politely.

"You're quite welcome." Viola had stopped short of peeling her egg, but she had eaten the sandwich and disposed of its wrapping in the dustbin. As far as she could tell, the child hadn't once looked up from her textbook.

"Joyce," she said as the girl rose to leave. "I know chemistry is a difficult subject. You're welcome to spend the lunch period here whenever you need to study."

Joyce, it turned out, was always studying—chemistry, history, plane geometry. Soon she spent nearly every noon hour in Viola's classroom. To Viola's relief, she never asked for help with her lessons. Viola could play the piano; she read and wrote French and commanded a vast mental catalog of memorized poems, but math and science were impenetrable to her. At normal school she'd graduated near the top of her class, but she'd never possessed the acumen she saw in Joyce Novak. She wondered where it came from; in nineteen years of teaching coal miners' children she had never encountered such an intellect. Often, watching her pupils struggle with Latin declensions or subjunctive tenses, she sensed the worthlessness of what she offered them, the cruelty of teaching geography to children who would never leave Saxon County. And what use was Latin grammar a hundred feet underground?

Joyce Novak was that rare pupil who stood to make use of what she'd

been taught, who might do something more with her life than marry a coal miner and raise his children. Viola had witnessed it a hundred times: promising young girls (without Joyce's ability, but promising still) who married the week after graduation and were never heard from again. Their hard lives—the brutish husband, the endless succession of babies—seemed to swallow them completely; and those, everyone knew, were the success stories. No one spoke of the girls who stood at the altar six months pregnant, or the young mining widows left with more children than any sane woman could have wanted in the first place. Once, in the corridor between classes, Viola had glimpsed Joyce in conversation with a boy. *Be careful,* she wanted to say. Someone, she felt, ought to offer the girl some guidance. But guide her toward what, exactly, Viola couldn't imagine.

Her own path in life had been set from the beginning. Her father, a cousin of Chester and Elias Baker, had worked as their bookkeeper. When the mine prospered, the Peales had prospered, too. Viola's older sister was simpleminded and hadn't finished school, so Viola received an education for both of them. At twenty she graduated from normal school, returned to Bakerton and was hired as a primary teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in a rural township. She rose each morning at dawn and walked the five miles to school, where she fired the furnace and, in winter, shoveled a path from the unpaved road to the door. She taught all eight grades in a single room, to children whose first language was often Hungarian or Polish or Italian. Later she'd transferred to the high school, hoping to teach the literature and art history she'd learned at normal school. She'd been astonished to find that half the pupils quit before junior year, when elective courses could be taken; that those who remained chose home economics and metal shop rather than French. Each day Viola taught one section of Latin and five classes of English grammar. She delivered the grammar lessons with an urgent sense of mission, like Florence

Nightingale dressing a wound. The children's English was deplorable. Nothing could be done about their diction—*dolwers* for *dollars, far hole* for *fire hall.* A victory was breaking them of *ain't* and the ghastly *yunz,* the Appalachian equivalent of the Southern *you all.* Their reading skills were poor; they could barely sound out the words on the chalkboard. Pupils who might someday, at most, read the Sunday paper or the United Mineworkers' monthly newsletter.

Then came Joyce Novak.

Viola made inquiries. According to Edna O'Shane, who taught art and music, Joyce could neither draw nor sing; but otherwise she was gifted in all subjects. She had a brother in the service and an older sister Viola vaguely remembered, a shy, dark-haired girl who'd watched her with terrified eyes and wouldn't speak in class. That the older Novaks had shown no special promise confounded her; she'd long observed that intelligence ran in families. (Her own excepted: her sister's slowness had a medical cause, a high fever she'd suffered as a child.) But like all the others, Joyce Novak was a coal miner's child. Her aptitude could not be accounted for.

That afternoon they sat in their usual spots—Viola at her desk, Joyce at her smaller one in the front row—eating slices of a lemon cake Viola's sister had baked. Viola had forgotten to pack forks. Giggling a little, she and Joyce ate the cake with their fingers.

"It was a cinch," said Joyce, when Viola asked about her geometry test. She sat erect in her chair, a white handkerchief spread across her lap; someone had taught her excellent table manners. "The first proof I wasn't sure about, but I got the others right."

They ate in companionable silence. Through the closed door Viola

heard the hum of voices from the lunchroom down the hall. Most pupils went home at noontime. The few who remained were farm children who lived miles away.

"We had a letter from Georgie," said Joyce. "He's coming home on furlough." She spoke often of her older brother; indeed, he was the only family member she mentioned. The war seemed to fascinate her. She was better informed about the latest battles and casualties than Viola was.

"How wonderful," said Viola. "Your parents must be pleased."

Joyce didn't respond. She never spoke of her mother or father; when Viola asked after them, she answered in monosyllables. Still, Viola tried.

"Your mother must be busy with the new baby," she said.

"I guess so."

Viola waited for more. She wouldn't have known about the baby at all if, a few months back, Joyce hadn't missed several days of school. When Viola asked if she'd been ill, Joyce said she needed to be on hand in case the baby came. "But this could go on for weeks," said Viola. Her cheeks burned; she felt slightly ridiculous. *As if I know anything about childbirth.*

"Can't your mother simply phone the school when the time comes?" she asked. Joyce had blushed a deep red, and only then did Viola understand that the Novaks didn't have a telephone.

"His ship stopped in the Philippines," said Joyce. "The people there eat raw fish and seaweed. It's a very healthy diet. Some of them live to be a hundred. That's what Georgie says." She finished the last bite of cake. "That was delicious, Miss Peale. Thank you very much."

"You're quite welcome." Viola crumpled up the waxed-paper wrapping and tossed it in the dustbin. At that moment there was a knock at the door. *My word,* she thought, her heart racing. She felt instantly foolish. There was no rule against eating lunch with pupils.

She opened the door. A towheaded boy stood in the hallway—hatless, in a shabby winter coat. His hands were crammed in his pockets.

"Can I help you, young man?" she asked.

"Sandy! What are you doing here?" Joyce rushed to the door. "This is my brother, Miss Peale. He's supposed to be in school."

Viola studied the child with interest. Curly blond hair, eyes unnaturally blue. His delicate mouth looked painted on, like a doll's. She glanced at Joyce: the wan complexion, the sharp plain face. It wasn't fair, the family beauty wasted on a boy.

Sandy took his hand from his pocket. "I cut myself," he said, showing it to Joyce. "I broke a glass."

Joyce examined the cut. "It's not so bad. You came all the way over here because of that?"

"I didn't go to school," he said, eyeing Viola. "I had to go find the priest."

"What for?" said Joyce.

"Come on," said the boy, his eyes filling. "We have to go home."

They drove across town in Viola's car, an ancient Ford her father had left her. Joyce had protested when Viola offered to drive them.

"It's a long way," she said. "I couldn't possibly accept."

"Nonsense," said Viola. "Of course I'll drive you."

They rode in silence, their breath fogging the windows. The boy rode in the rear seat. Joyce sat next to Viola, staring out the window. Her face was perfectly blank.

As it turned out, the Novaks lived just across town, in a company

house in the Polish section. "You can leave us at the bottom of the hill," said Joyce, but Viola wouldn't hear of it. When she parked in front of the house, Joyce opened the door almost before she could engage the brake.

"Wait," said Viola. "I'll come in with you."

"Oh, no. That's all right." Joyce stepped out of the car, red-faced. She glanced quickly at the house. *Why, she's ashamed,* Viola thought.

"Thank you for driving us. It was very kind of you."

"You're quite welcome." Viola hesitated. "Joyce, I'm so very sorry about your father."

"Thank you, Miss Peale." Joyce took her brother's hand and climbed the steps to the porch.

All day long the food came. The neighbors sent chicken and dumplings, kielbasa and sauerkraut, almond cookies, loaves of bread. May Poblocki brought stuffed cabbage. Helen Wojick sent three kinds of pirogi: potato, cabbage and prune. Years before, when Rose's mother died, the donated food had surprised her. Downtown, in the Italian neighborhood, the bereaved were given nickels and dimes to buy masses for the soul of the deceased, votive candles to burn in church.

They ate the pirogi for supper; the other dishes Rose packed into the icebox. Stanley had bought it secondhand from a butcher in town. He'd paid in installments, a dollar from each paycheck; whether he'd yet paid it off, Rose wasn't sure. Every week he gave her money for groceries; the other bills he paid by check, from a ledger he kept in his bureau. Rose had never written a check, herself. It was yet another thing she'd have to learn.

In the evening the men came, carrying bottles: beer and whiskey, elderberry wine. Some had worked the day shift; they came shaved and

showered, in Sunday vests and dark trousers. The Hoot Owl crew brought their dinner buckets; from Rose's house they would go straight to work. They sat in the parlor with the casket, drinking and speaking in low tones. Rose kept busy in the kitchen. Through the wall she heard their deep voices, hushed and somber, speaking a language she didn't understand.

"Here," she said, handing Dorothy a plate of sandwiches. "Take these to the parlor. They shouldn't drink on a empty stomach."

Dorothy took the plate, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. She'd come home from the factory at noon; since then she'd wept more or less constantly. Her eyelids looked raw and swollen, her nose shiny and red.

"What about you, Mama? You didn't touch your supper."

"Maybe later." Rose sipped a cup of tea, the only thing she'd managed to keep down all day. She detested tea but kept it on hand for such occasions, as her mother had. Coffee was for normal times, happy times. Tea was for miscarriages, mine accidents, measles, the grippe, a husband's philandering, the death of a family pet. In the Scarponi household, miseries of all kinds had been swallowed with tea.

At the table Sandy looked up from his history book. "Can we eat the cake?" It had arrived in the afternoon, a fancy hazelnut torte that Andy Yurkovich's Magyar wife had baked for her twins' birthday. When she saw the hearse parked out front, she'd sent it over to Rose.

"Later, *bello.* When you finish your schoolwork."

Sandy opened his mouth to protest, but said nothing. He had no homework to do, having missed the entire day of school. His father, he knew, would have found this excuse unacceptable. He'd made Sandy study every night after supper, spelling and history, whether he had homework or not.

He sat staring at his textbook, the letters blurring on the page. He closed his eyes and remembered the feeling of riding in the undertaker's

car: the rumble of the engine, houses and storefronts flying past at a speed that seemed magical. The teacher's car had been slower, and he had told her so. He was proud of knowing this—just yesterday he wouldn't have known the difference—but Joyce had given him a dirty look. "You were terribly rude," she told him later. "After Miss Peale was nice enough to drive us." Alone, he'd taken his sled into the woods behind the reservoir, something his father would never have allowed. His mother hadn't even noticed. Except for the homework she seemed to have forgotten him entirely.

"Do I have to go to school tomorrow?" he asked.

"Not tomorrow," said Dorothy.

"The next day?"

"The next day is the funeral." She swiped at the table with a dishrag. "Why don't you go upstairs and study? We need the table. Mama wants to set out some food."

Sandy closed his book and climbed the stairs to his room. Outside the snow was falling. His sled waited in the backyard. He would have the hill to himself while the other boys were in school. In a day the world had become larger. Twice he had ridden in a car. Now, if he was quiet—if he was careful—he might never have to go to school again.

In the parlor the men drank. They lowered their voices when Joyce came into the room. Mr. Wojick switched in midsentence from English to Polish. She avoided looking at the casket. Instead she cleared the empty bottles from beside the chairs. In the morning she would carry them to the Italian market, where the storekeeper paid a dime a dozen. She used the coins to buy Defense Stamps, which cost a quarter apiece. It

took her months to collect enough stamps to buy a War Bond, an exercise in patience.

She rarely had money of her own. At the end of each term, her friend Irene Jevic got a quarter for her report card. Joyce's parents gave her nothing, even though she earned all A's and Irene never got higher than a B. Once, timidly, Joyce had suggested to her father that her report card was worth a quarter. For a moment he'd considered this.

"No money," he said, kissing her forehead. "I give you credit."

Completely by accident, he had taught her to read. She was tiny then; every night after supper he'd sat between her and Dorothy, the newspaper spread out on the table. He had pointed at the headlines, waiting for Dorothy to sound out the words. His fingernails were black with mine dirt. He was gentle at first, but Dorothy read so slowly that he lost patience. Meanwhile Joyce—so tiny he barely noticed her—learned to read almost without effort.

Only once had she made him angry. That fall she'd decided it was time the family got a telephone; knowing he'd object, she'd gone to the Bell Telephone office herself and ordered the service. When a letter came in the mail asking for a deposit, her father was furious.

"How dare you?" he roared. He had a powerful voice, like a bear's cry. "You humiliated me in front of those English people." She had always been his favorite child; he never scolded her as he did Georgie and Dorothy. Even when he was angry, she knew how to make him laugh.

But not that day. "Daddy," she said. She could barely speak; she willed herself not to cry. "We need a telephone. Times are changing."

"This is my house," he thundered. "The times change when I say."

For days he'd ignored her, refused even to look at her across the dinner table. "Daddy hates me," she told her mother one night after supper. "He'll never speak to me again." Sure of this, she'd left her report card on

top of the radio, where he was sure to see it. In the evening he passed it around the table to Len Stusick and Ted Poblocki, who sat with him in the kitchen on Saturday nights, smoking cigars and listening to the radio. Joyce had laughed the next morning when her mother told her this. She appeared on the steps dressed for church and kissed her father's cheek.

"Good morning, Daddy," she said sweetly, as though nothing at all had happened.

Now she approached the casket. His face had changed, softened in a way that made him less handsome. *Oh Daddy,* she thought. *Where did you go?* It seemed impossible that he couldn't hear her. That he was simply gone.

His hands lay folded across his chest, holding a string of rosary beads. His skin looked smooth and waxy, but his fingernails were still black. Every morning after work, and every night before supper, he had scrubbed his hands with a stiff brush; but it never made any difference. His hands would never be clean.

The clock struck midnight, then twelve-thirty, then one. Rose lay curled on Stanley's side of the bed. She had done this for years when he worked Hoot Owl, as if keeping it warm for his return.

She lay awake, listening. Outside a dog barked. The baby breathed loudly in the cradle. Rose's stomach twisted inside her, and she remembered she had not eaten.

She crept downstairs in her bare feet, an old coat thrown over her nightgown. She needn't have bothered. The men in the parlor were passed out cold.

She turned on a kitchen light. Joyce or Dorothy had returned the

casseroles to the icebox. Rose considered heating some dumplings or sauerkraut, a plate of gray, heavy Polish food. Then she noticed the glass dome sitting on the counter: Madge Yurkovich's hazelnut torte. She removed the cover. The cake was dusted with powdered sugar, the effect somehow formal, like a bride on her wedding day. She cut herself a slice and sat at the table.

She had never enjoyed sweets. It was Stanley who'd craved desserts, who was always after her to bake a pie or lemon custard. To please him she'd learned to make prune kolacky and apricot horns; his Polish aunts had taught her to pinch the dough and fill the horns with jam. He'd loved her pizzelle cookies, flavored with anisette; he bragged that her cinnamon rolls were the best in the neighborhood. Whether it was true, Rose couldn't say. She rarely tasted her creations. She baked only to please him, to fill his house with sweetness.

She took a bite of the torte. The powdered sugar hit her palate first. Beneath it was a subtler sweetness, not sugar but cream. She counted six, seven thin layers of cake, one soaked in a dark liquor. She ate quickly, licking her fingers; then stared at her empty plate. The cake was gone before she'd really tasted it. Before she'd identified its components, understood each sweet miracle inside.

She went to the counter and cut a second slice. The complexity amazed her. Between the cake layers, more sweetness: crushed hazelnuts, grainy dates, a smear of honeyed cheese. She cut a third slice, and then a fourth. Finally she brought the entire cake to the table.

She'd been hungry before—as a girl of eleven, on the sixteen-day boat ride from Palermo to New York; in the first weeks of pregnancy, when her stomach kept emptying itself no matter what she ate. Yet she had never felt such appetite.

She would remember the feeling for the rest of her life, the intense

sweetness of the hazelnut torte, the tears running down her cheeks, her wild hunger and shame and grief. Later she would wonder what had possessed her. It seemed to her that Stanley was responsible, her husband who lay dead in the next room entering her one last time, to enjoy this glorious cake through her. She felt his presence inside her, his need for sweetness, the appetite she had never felt before.

She ate until the cake was gone.

From that night onward Rose craved sweets. She baked cakes and pies and ate them daily, grateful for what seemed to be a whole new sense, as essential and pleasurable as hearing or sight. She considered her new hunger for sweetness a supernatural gift, a final pleasure left to her by her husband.