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Opening Extract from...

South of Broad

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CHAPTER 1

June 16, 1969

Nothing happens by accident. I learned this the hard way, long before I knew that the hard way was the only path to true, certain knowledge. Early in my life, I came to fear the power of strange conveyances. Though I thought I always chose the safest path, I found myself powerless to avoid the small treacheries of fate. Because I was a timid boy, I grew up fearful and knew deep in my heart the world was out to get me. Before the summer of my senior year in high school, the real life I was always meant to lead lay coiled and ready to spring in the hot Charleston days that followed.

On June 16, 1969, a series of unrelated events occurred: I discovered that my mother once had been a Roman Catholic nun in the Sacred Heart order; an Atlas moving van backed into the driveway of a nineteenth-century Charleston single house across the street from ours; two orphans arrived at the gates of St. Jude's Orphanage behind the cathedral on Broad Street; and the *News and Courier* recorded that a drug bust had taken place on East Bay Street at the Rutledge-Bennet house. I was eighteen, with a reputation as a slow starter, so I could not feel the tectonic shift in my fate as my history began to launch of its own volition. It would be many years before I learned that your fate could scuttle up behind you, touch you with its

bloody claws, and when you turn to face the worst, you find it disguised in all innocence and camouflaged as a moving van, an orphanage, and a drug bust south of Broad. If I knew then what I have come to learn, I would never have made a batch of cookies for the new family across the street, never uttered a single word to the orphans, and never introduced myself to the two students who were kicked out of Porter-Gaud School and quickly enrolled at my own Peninsula High for their senior year.

But fate comes at you cat-footed, unavoidable, and bloodthirsty. The moment you are born your death is foretold by your newly minted cells as your mother holds you up, then hands you to your father, who gently tickles the stomach where the cancer will one day form, studies the eyes where melanoma's dark signature is already written along the optic nerve, touches the back where the liver will one day house the cirrhosis, feels the bloodstream that will sweeten itself into diabetes, admires the shape of the head where the brain will fall to the ax-handle of stroke, or listens to your heart, which, exhausted by the fearful ways and humiliations and indecencies of life, will explode in your chest like a light going out in the world. Death lives in each one of us and begins its countdown on our birthdays and makes its rough entrance at the last hour and the perfect time.

I awoke at four-thirty that June morning, threw on my clothes, then rode my bike to the northeast corner of Colonial Lake, where a *News and Courier* truck was idling in the darkness waiting for my arrival. I began folding a huge pile of papers and placing them tightly wrapped with rubber bands into one of two capacious bags that hung from my shoulders. It took

fifteen minutes for me to get the bike right for the morning run, but I was fast and efficient at what I did. I had been a newspaper boy for three years. In the light of the truck I watched Eugene Haverford writing down the addresses of new customers or complaints from one of my regulars. Already, he was on his second Swisher Sweets cigar of the morning, and I could smell the Four Roses bourbon on his breath. He thought the cigar smoke masked his early-morning drinking.

"Hey, Leo, my distinguished Charleston gentleman friend," Mr. Haverford said, his voice as slow as his movements.

"Hey, Mr. Haverford."

"Got two new subscriptions for you. One on Gibbes Street, one on South Battery." He handed me two notes printed out in large letters. "One complaint—that lunatic on Legare Street claims she has not gotten her newspaper all week."

"I hand-delivered it to her, Mr. Haverford. She's getting forgetful."

"Push her down a flight of stairs for both of us. She's the only customer to ever complain about you."

"She gets afraid, living in that big house," I said. "She's going to need some help soon."

"How in the hell do you know that, Charleston gentleman?"

"I pay attention to my customers," I said. "Part of the job."

"We bring the news of the world to their front doors, don't we, Charleston gentleman?"

"Every day of the year, sir."

"Your parole officer called me again," he said. "I told her what I always tell her—that you're the best newspaper boy I've seen in my thirty years with the company. I tell her the *News and Courier* is lucky to have you."

"Thanks," I said. "I go off probation soon. She won't bother you much longer."

"Your old lady made her weekly pain-in-the-ass call too," he said.

"Mother'll probably call you the rest of her life."

"Not after what I told her yesterday. You're eighteen, Leo, a man as far as I'm concerned. Your mother's a stiff bitch. Not my kind of broad. But she asked me if you were fulfilling your duties properly. Her exact words, by the way. Listen up, Leo. Here's what I told her: If I ever have a kid, which I won't, I'd like him to be exactly like Leo King. I wouldn't change one thing. Not one thing. My exact words, by the way."

"That's so nice of you, Mr. Haverford."

"Quit being so naïve, Leo. I keep telling you that. Quit being so open to the world's shitting all over you."

"Yes, sir. My naïve days are over."

"You goddamn Charleston gentleman."

With a squeaking of wheels, he drove off into the darkness, his cigar glowing like a firefly in his cab, and I pedaled my bicycle forward.

Heading south on Rutledge Avenue, I lobbed a rolled-up newspaper on the first piazza of every house on the street, except for Burbage Eliot, who was famous as a tightwad even in penny-pinching Charleston. He borrowed his paper from Mrs. Wilson. She read it over her breakfast of soft-boiled egg, stone-ground grits, and chamomile tea, then recycled it to her stingy neighbor by tossing it onto his back porch.

I could lob a newspaper with either hand. When I turned left on Tradd Street, I looked like an ambitious acrobat hurling papers to my right and left as I made my way toward the Cooper River and the rising sun that began to finger the morning tides of the harbor, to dance along the spillways of palmetto fronds and water oaks until the street itself burst into the first flame of morning. The lawyer Compson Brailsford awaited me in his

yard and got down in a wide receiver's stance as I neared the serene stillness of his family's mansion. As I passed, he sprinted out in his seersucker suit, elegant as a Swiss Army knife, and ran a quick button-hook pattern in the trimmed grass. On the days when I was good, the paper was already in the air when he turned and made his move back toward the imaginary quarterback at The Citadel; he was an All-Southern Conference end. On this morning his movements were letter-perfect and efficient, and my pass arrived at the precise moment. It was a game that had begun between us by accident, but it continued every day unless he was out of town or the weather too inclement for a well-dressed Charleston lawyer.

The gardens of Charleston were mysteries walled away in ivied jewel boxes emitting their special fragrances over high walls. The summer had proven good for the magnolias that had bloomed late. I passed one old forty-foot tree that looked as though a hundred white doves had gathered there in search of mates. My sense of smell lit up as the temperature rose and the dew started to burn off the tea olive and the jasmine. My armpits moistened, and I began to offer my own scent back to the streets where coffee began brewing in hidden kitchens and the noise of the newspapers hitting the soft wood of the verandas sounded like mullets jumping for joy in giant lagoons. Turning right on Legare, I was hitting my stride; moving fast down the center of the street, I arched my longest throw of the morning at the mansion behind the Sword Gate House, putting it on the third step. At the Ravenel house toward the end of the street, I made my first real misfire on what had been a morning of machinelike precision, and hurled a paper into a mass of oversized camellias. I stopped the bike, skipped through the gate, retrieved the paper from the top branches, and sailed it up to the front door. The small dark nose of a King Charles spaniel

named Virginia poked through the bottom of the fence across from the Ravenels', and I hurled a paper to the far corner of the yard, where the exquisitely tricolored dog retrieved it in a flash and carried it in triumph to its master's doormat. I followed that throw by tossing a small dog biscuit into the same yard, which Virginia would then walk down to retrieve with great dignity.

When I'd taken the job three years earlier, all the arrayed stars of my life had been aberrant and off course. So I promised myself I would do this job well. If I heard of a customer rummaging around in the garden hunting for their morning paper, I always called to apologize. A good paperboy was a study in timeliness and steadfastness and accuracy, and that's what I wanted to bring to my customers. It was what Eugene Haverford had growled at me during my week of orientation.

So there I was, a delivery boy making my rounds in a city where beauty ambushed you at every turn of the wheel, rewarded every patient inspection, and entered your pores and bloodstream from every angle; these images could change the way the whole world felt. It was a city that shaped the architecture of my memories and dreaming, adding cornices and parapets and the arched glooms of Palladian windows every time I rode those streets, full of purpose and duty. I threw missile after missile of pages chock-full of news as well as art show openings on King Street and sales taxes making their way through senate committees in Columbia, a total eclipse of the sun due in the fall, and a terrific sale at Berlin's clothing store entering its last week.

When I started the job, my life was at a standstill, my choices down to one, and my opportunities barren on the vine. From the day I took the job, I was watched over by the South Carolina Juvenile Court, a child psychiatrist connected to Roper Hospital,

my worried and overarching mother, and a gruff hillbilly from a North Charleston trailer park, Eugene Haverford. I looked upon this paper route as a source of redemption, a last chance to salvage a childhood ruined by my own baffling character and one unspeakable tragedy. When my share of the world's cruelty struck, I was nine years old. It would take a great portion of my time as an adult before I realized that tragedy was hurled freely into everyone's life as though it were a cheap newspaper advertising porno shops and strip shows thrown into an overgrown yard. I was an old man by the time I turned ten years old, and I caught the terrible drift of things many years before my number should have been called.

But by age seventeen, I had come through the bad times intact and functioning, leaving friends behind in the impersonal mental wards of my state whose eyes stayed opaque with a milky, nameless rage. I had loved the faces of the hopeless up close and held them trembling through hallucinations that never left them a minute's peace. Living among them, I discovered I was not one of them; yet they hated me when they saw a calmness return to me years after I found my beloved older brother, his arteries severed, dead in the bathtub we both shared, my father's straight razor on the tiles of our bathroom floor. My screaming brought a neighbor running to the house through a first-story window and finding me, in hysterics, trying to pull my brother's lifeless body from the tub. A serene, uneventful childhood ended for me that night. When my parents returned from the Dock Street Theatre, Steve's body lay in an unnatural peace in the downtown morgue. The police were trying to calm me down to question me. A doctor administered a sedative by injection, and my life among drugs and needles and psychological testing and shrinks and therapists and priests began. It was a time that I believe to this day ruined both my parents' lives.

When I turned my bicycle left on Meeting Street, the sun was high enough on the horizon for me to cut off the bike lamp. Meeting was spacious and cocky, with mansions on both sides of the street, a showboat of a street in a city brimful with them. Here, I zigzagged from one side to the other, taking dead aim at front doors heavy and sumptuous enough to be the entrances to the residences of kings. The traffic was still light, and if my rhythm was true, I could service the length of the street all the way to Broad in five to seven minutes. Taking a right at Broad Street, I hit the doorways of a dozen lawyers' offices, sometimes three at a doorway, four at one, and six at the Darcy, Rutledge, and Sinkler law firm, the largest in the city. At Church and Broad on the southeast corner, there were several fresh piles of newspapers waiting for me. I stopped to reload, not losing my rhythm while noticing the increasing traffic of ambulatory lawyers picking their way to favorite restaurants and cafés. The street began to smell of coffee and bacon frying on grills, and a slight wind from the harbor told of buoys and ship hulls brined by the tides and the years; the awakening of gulls followed the first freighter making the turn toward the Atlantic, and the bells of St. Michael's answered the puny, half-human cry of the gulls. Working fast, I loaded up with the last hundred newspapers of my route and blasted down Church Street, my arms whirling again in the eccentric morning dance of paperboys.

Early on, I could feel the redemptive powers of hard work, and I basked in the praise of Mr. Haverford and my customers who lived on this island of the peninsula city. My predecessor had been born to great privilege and lived in one of the houses I now served, but the hours proved too early for him and the labor too intrusive on his late-night social life. He was soon let go, not fired, because of his family connections that traced back

to the actual founding of the colony. When the upper management of the *News and Courier* decided to take a chance on me, it was a nod of approval and gratitude to my parents' distinguished life as educators in the city as well as a way to pull my entire family back from the brink after the death of my brother. Steve's death had wounded the city in some profound, inchoate way. I was granted the job not because of who I was, but because of who Steve had been.

And what a boy Steve had been, I thought, as I took a right on South Battery, bringing the sweet-smelling papers onto the steps of what I considered the prettiest row of mansions in the city. Steve would one day have lived in one of those houses, after marrying the most comely and glittering debutante in Charleston, after graduating from Harvard and coming back to South Carolina for law school. In my mind, Steve would always remain eighteen months older than I would ever be, a natural leader known for his great wit and charm. Many people thought he would ripen into one of the best athletes ever raised in Charleston. In the summer he turned into a new color of gold, his hair a shade of blond that reminded one of the tawniness of Siamese cats. His eyes were bright blue and emotionless and almost textureless when you saw him sizing up a new person or situation. All of Charleston agreed that he was the last boy on earth who would take a razor to his arteries and fill up a bathtub with his own blood. He was so dazzling in both presentation and personality that the city could not come to terms with the violent self-hatred suggested by his death. On the other hand, I was exactly the melancholy, apprehensive kind of child, a Venus-flytrap type of boy overshadowed by his rosy-cheeked, overachieving brother, who could commit such a terrible crime to himself and to the image the city had of itself.

Ahead of me, I saw Miss Ophelia Simms watering her flower

boxes in front of her house. Stopping the bicycle, I handed a newspaper to her. "How's that for service, Miss Simms?"

"I should think it approaches perfection, Leo," she said. "And how are we today?"

"We are fine today." I was always thrilled that Miss Simms referred to me in the lordly plural. "And how are our flowers today?"

"A little piqued," she would always say during our rare encounters among her phlox and impatiens. To me, Miss Simms was a knockout, and I knew that she had celebrated her fiftieth birthday that year. I hoped that I would one day marry a girl in her twenties half as lovely as Miss Simms. But that probably was a long shot, and I was reminded of it every time I looked at myself in the mirror. Though I wouldn't call myself ugly, it wouldn't surprise me if I heard that someone else had said it. I blamed it on the black horn-rimmed glasses my mother had bought me, but I was so nearsighted that the lenses looked like they could have served as the portholes of ships. My eyes held a fishlike cast that those lenses managed to overemphasize, and had been the butt of much teasing among my peers, unless my brother was around. Steve was overprotective of his baby brother as he hovered over me, patrolling the cruel airways above the school playground like a red-tailed hawk. Fearless and sharp-tongued, he let no one bully his little brother. Steve's obvious superiority caused me some discomfort and even resentment as a child, but his fierce championing and unwavering love of me made me feel special. My brother was so handsome that I could sense my own mother's disappointment every time she looked at me.

Zigzagging through the smaller streets and alleys south of Broad, I would finally reach the coast guard station and pause to rest for a minute or two. I could make this run blindfolded,

and I also prided myself on hitting certain corners at the correct time. I always checked my watch to see how I was doing, panting from exertion and the good pain I felt in my thigh and arm muscles. Putting myself into high gear again, I pushed off with the sparkling Ashley River to my right, a river I could hear beating against a seawall on stormy nights near my house. The Ashley was the playground of my father's childhood, and the river's smell was the smell my mother opened the windows to inhale after her long labors, bearing my brother, and then me. A freshwater river let mankind drink and be refreshed, but a saltwater river let it return to first things, to moonstruck tides, the rush of spawning fish, the love of language felt in the rhythm of the wasp-waisted swells, and a paperboy's hands covered with newsprint, thinking the Ashley was as pretty a river as ever a god could make. I would start the last sprint of my route, flinging papers with confidence and verve, serving the newer houses built in the filled-in corpses of saltwater marshes as I headed due east again. Running past White Point Gardens, I would turn north when I saw Fort Sumter in the distance, sitting like a leatherback turtle in the middle of Charleston Harbor. I would service the really big mansions on East Bay, then Rainbow Row, take a left at Broad and do both sides of the street, weaving through traffic and still more strolling lawyers, young hotshots and old lions alike; the Riley Real Estate firm; the travel agency; ten for city hall; and the final paper of the morning I sent crashing into the front door of Henry Berlin's Men's Store.

With the last paper nesting against Berlin's doorstep, Charleston ceased to be mine, and I released ownership to the other early risers who had a greater claim on it than I ever would, a boy at ease in darkness.

*

In my three years of high school, I had become a familiar, even famous, sight on the early-morning streets south of Broad. Later, people told me they could set their watches when I passed their houses before and after first light. All of them knew about the death of my brother, my subsequent breakdown and disappearance, and all would later tell me how they rooted for me during my long penitential season of redemption. When I made my monthly collection runs for their subscriptions, the adults appreciated that I came to their doorsteps in a sports coat, tie, and white shirt, penny loafers impeccably shined. They admired the correctness, if not the stiffness, of my manners, and they appreciated my inarticulate attempts to initiate conversation and that I always brought treats to the families owning cats and dogs; I always remembered the names of these animals. I asked about their kids. They accepted my painful shyness as a kind of initial calling card, but most households remarked that my confidence gradually grew as I grew comfortable approaching their front doors. When it rained, they loved it that I rose an hour earlier to hand-deliver the newspapers to dry porches I was not sure I could reach with my usual toss. They assured me, later, of their certainty that I was well on my way to becoming both a charming and a fascinating young man.

But on June 16, 1969, as I rode my bike the two short blocks between Berlin's and the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, my portrait of myself was of a natural-born loser who at eighteen had never been on a date or danced with a girl, nor had a best friend, nor had ever received an A on a report card, nor would ever cleanse his mind of that moment when he discovered his carefree, one-of-a-kind brother in a bath of his own blood. In all the days since that unkillable day, neither my mother or my father, nor any shrink or social worker, nor priest or nun, nor relative or friend of the family, could show me the pathway to

a normal productive life with that ghoulish entry visa affixed to my passport. During the rosary for my brother's funeral, I had retreated to the men's room and locked myself into a stall where I wept silently and out of control because the inconsolable nature of my grief seemed selfish in the face of my parents' complete devastation.

From that moment I marked the time when the earth opened up to swallow me whole. I left simple grief on the road behind me and held madness at arm's length as it stormed the walls of my boyhood with its tireless regiments coming at the most tender parts of my psyche in wave after unappeasable wave. For three years, I entered the country of the pit viper. Every dream contained poisonous snakes lying in wait for me—the cottonmouth moccasin coiled against the cypress root, the coral snake beneath the hollowed-out log, the copperhead invisible in a bright carpet of autumn leaves, and the eastern diamondback with its deadly warning rattle serving as the lone musician composing the debased libretto of my distress, my fury, and my helpless sadness. The doctors called it a nervous breakdown, terminology I found to be correct. I came apart. Then, with the encouragement of some good people, I put myself together again. The snakes acknowledged my returning health by their silent withdrawal from my dreaming life and I was never afraid of snakes again, acknowledging that even they had played a necessary role in my recovery. Because I had long feared them with my body and soul, their mordant shapes, their curved fangs, and their venom, they kept my brother's face out of my night world and I awoke to his permanent residence in my psyche only at daybreak. When I look back, I see that my tragedy was that I could never summon Steve in all his apple-cheeked, athletic good looks and ornamental charm. Once he had died and I had found him, I could never pull my brother out of that horrible tub.

I parked my bike in the rack beside the elementary school, and skipped into the back entrance of the cathedral as I did every morning, the entrance that all the insiders knew—from bishop and priests to nuns and altar boys like me. When I opened the door, the smell of the Catholic world washed over me. I walked to the room where Monsignor Maxwell Sadler had almost finished decking himself out in the sumptuous finery of a summer morning Mass. Monsignor Max had been a fixture in my family drama since well before I was born: he had taught my parents in their 1938 graduating class at Bishop Ireland High School. He had married my parents, baptized both Steve and me, placed the wafer on my tongue at First Communion. Steve and I were altar boys together when I served my first Mass. When Steve died, the monsignor hovered about our house, as ubiquitous as my mother's reading chair. When the bishop of Charleston refused to bury Steve in holy ground, Monsignor Max (Father Max then) worked through the creaky, impenetrable bureaucracy of the pre-Vatican II Church and had Stephen's body exhumed from a public cemetery west of the Ashley and reburied in the sacred ground of St. Mary's Church among my mother's people.

I was the cause of ceaseless trouble in those days, and had given up the Catholic faith in a titanic schoolboy's rage, refusing to worship my God or belong to any church. The Catholic Church had rejected the corpse of my brother. Then I entered the realm of child psychiatry and understaffed mental hospitals and yawning tutors as my poor parents tried to mend the broken boy they had on their hands after their favorite son left them. Monsignor Max remained faithful to us in our darkest days, and told me that the Church was patient and would always be waiting for me to return. It was, and so was he.

I watched Monsignor Max comb his hair with flair, making

certain that the crease on the left side of his head was as straight as a guy wire. He saw me in his mirror and said, "Leo, my altar boy called in sick. Get in your cassock and surplice. Your mother and father are out there already. And this is your mother's special day, Bloomsday."

Of all the elements of my childhood that rang a false note, I was the only kid in the American South whose mother had received a doctorate by writing a perfectly unreadable dissertation on the religious symbolism in James Joyce's equally unreadable *Ulysses,* which I considered the worst book ever written by anyone. June 16 was the endless day when Leopold Bloom makes his nervous Nellie way, stopping at bars and consorting with whores and then returning home to his horny wife, Molly, who has a final soliloquy that goes on for what seemed like six thousand pages when my mother force-fed me the book in tenth grade. Joyce-nuts like my mother consider June 16 to be a consecrated mythical day in the Gregorian calendar. She bristled with uncontrollable fury when I threw the book out the window after I had finished it following an agonizing six months of unpleasurable reading.

It took me seconds to dress in my surplice and cassock, then I stood before the radiant, comely monsignor as he admired his own image in the mirror. Ever since I had known him I had heard the women of the parish whisper "What a total waste" when their stylish movie star of a priest floated out toward the altar in all his gallant finery.

"Happy Bloomsday, Monsignor Max," I said.

"Don't make fun of your mother, young man. *Ulysses* is her passion, James Joyce the great literary love of her life."

"I still think it's weird," I said.

"One must always forgive another's passion."

"I could forgive her if she hadn't named me Leopold Bloom

King. Or my brother Stephen Dedalus King. That's taking it a little far. Have you ever read *Ulysses*?"

"Of course not. He is a flagrant anti-Catholic. I'm a Chesterston man myself."

I felt an old flush of pride as I led the monsignor out to the central altar and spotted my parents in the front row, both of them saying the rosary. My father looked up and smiled when he saw me and gave me an exaggerated wink of his right eye, the one my mother could not see. She tolerated playfulness at church not at all. At every Mass, she wore her game face for a crucifixion as though she were an actual eyewitness to the death of Jesus each time she knelt in her pew.

As he faced the small, mostly octogenarian congregation, Monsignor Max began the Mass in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. The words I heard him utter in his operatic voice washed over me like a clean stream from my boyhood, the delicate latticework of memory and language.

"I will go to the altar of God."

And I went with him and let the ancient, sacrosanct rhythms of the Church seize me. When the priest called for water, I provided him with water. When he needed to cleanse his hands for the coming mystery, I emptied cruets over his fingers. When he called for wine, I supplied him with wine in the gold shine of chalices. At the moment of consecration, when he turned the wine into the blood of Christ and the bread into the body of the same God, I rang the bells that had sounded beneath altars for two thousand years. When I opened my mouth and received the unleavened bread from the consecrated finger and thumb of the priest, I felt the touch of God on my tongue, His taste in my palate, His bloodstream mingling in my own. I had come back to Him, after a full-pledged embittered retreat, after He stole my brother from my bedroom and killed him in my bathtub.

But I had come back to Him, and that is part of my story.

After Mass, we walked down to Cleo's restaurant for breakfast, a ritual of summer as ingrained in the texture of our family life as daily Mass. Cleo was a fast-talking Greek girl who ran the cash register as though she were reloading an M16 rifle for snipers. Her patter was endless and profane, until my parents walked in for breakfast and her attitude turned beatific. Both of my parents had taught her when they were at Bishop Ireland High, and she held fast to the respect that high school kids who never go to college continue to feel for the last teachers of their lives. Even the young waitresses displayed new vigor when my parents appeared in the doorway, and Cleo delivered hand signals to the kitchen staff that translated into hot coffee, orange juice, and ice water on the table. Since I was in training for football season, I ordered two eggs over light, grits with redeye gravy, and three slices of bacon. My father would dig into country ham and biscuits with a side order of hash browns. Even though it was the most celebrated day of the year for my mother, she retained the strong-willed discipline that made up every habit of her life: she ordered half a grapefruit and a bowl of oatmeal. My mother admitted to needs such as nourishment, but not of appetites. "Happy Bloomsday, darling," my father said to my mother, leaning to kiss her on the cheek. "This is your day and your every wish is our command. Isn't that right, Leo?"

"That's right," I said. "We're at your beck and call."

"Very good, Leo," Mother said. "Though you fight me on it, your vocabulary shows constant improvement. Here's your list of five words to memorize today." She handed me a piece of folded-over notebook paper.

I made a groaning noise, as I did every morning, and opened the notebook paper to read five words that no one would use

in normal conversation: *sedulous, perspicacious, ribald, vivisection,* and *tumid.*

"Do you know what any of those words mean?" Mother asked.

"Of course not." I sipped my coffee.

"Did you memorize the five I gave you yesterday?"

"Of course."

"Use two of the words in a sentence," she commanded.

"I felt a certain need to regurgitate when I cogitated on the works of James Joyce."

My father laughed, but the laughter was stifled when my mother cut her pale eyes toward him. "You heard your father. This is my special day. Bloomsday, a day celebrated all over the world by aficionados of James Joyce."

"The three of you ought to get together sometime," I said.

"His admirers are legion," she said. "Even if I walk alone in my own household."

"Leo and I are cooking you a special meal tonight," my father told her. "The menu is taken directly from the text of *Ulysses.* It was Leo's idea."

"Thank you, Leo. That's very thoughtful of you."

"I'm not going to eat it. Just cook it," I said. Although I meant it as a joke, my mother took instant offense. She could freeze me with a gaze that made the dead of winter seem like the best time for planting. From the time I could talk, I heard the men and women of Charleston praise my mother's physical attractiveness, her immaculate grooming, her stylish carriage. I could always see what they were talking about, but could never fully partake in their pleasure over her textured beauty. For me, her prettiness was easy to admire, but difficult to love. Since the death of Steve, she had rarely kissed me. Hugged me, yes, again and again. But kissed me like she used to do when I was a small

boy, no. She had taken little pleasure in my childhood, and I could read her disapproval like a page of newsprint whenever she looked at me. We played hard at looking the part of a happy family, and as far as I knew we succeeded admirably. Only three people in the world knew of our deep and hopeless despair in the company of one another.

The waitress refilled our coffee cups at the same time.

My father's face was baffled and amused and anxious as he witnessed the chilly interplay between my mother and me. He got dizzy with the goofiest kind of love whenever he was with the two of us, yet his solicitousness and kindness to me always remained a red flag, an arena of sudden warfare between them. My brother's death had almost killed both my parents, but it did not change my father's fundamental good nature and graceful optimism. He turned his full attention to me and tried to love me harder because I was not Steve. Unlike my mother, who handled his death in the only way she knew how, so I feared that she could never love anyone again who was not Steve.

"So," Mother said as she adjusted her lipstick in a compact mirror. That gesture was a signal to the waitress that our breakfast had ended and she was free to clear the dishes. "Your father knows the orders of the day. Leo, I want you to bake two dozen chocolate chip cookies for the new neighbors who are moving in today across the street from us, a set of twins. Your age, exactly, and they'll be your classmates at Peninsula."

"Okay. What else?" I asked.

"I got a call from Sister Mary Polycarp at the orphanage. They received two new orphans from Atlanta. Both runaways. They too are brother and sister. You will welcome them to Charleston. Then you will bird-dog them all year. Watch over them. They've had a terrible life."

"They've had great lives. Wait till they spend a year with Polycarp. What a monster! I thought they threw her out of the convent."

"Wasn't she the nun who hit that Wallace girl across the eye with a ruler?" Father asked.

"An unfortunate accident," said my mother.

"I was there," I said. "She cut her eyeball. Severed the optic nerve. Blinded her."

"She's no longer allowed to teach. The order almost expelled her," Mother explained.

"In the third grade, she hit so many boys in the face and made so many of us bleed that I nicknamed her the Red Cross."

My father chuckled, but was stopped cold by a sudden glitter in Mother's eye.

"Very witty, son," she snapped. "If only some of this wit could translate into solid achievement on your Scholastic Aptitude Test."

"Leo does not test well, darling," my father said.

"But isn't he the life of the party," she said. "This afternoon I want you to report to your principal's office and meet your new football coach."

"You are my principal, Mother," I said. "And Coach Ogburn is my football coach."

"He resigned yesterday."

"Why on earth?" Father asked. "He was so close to retirement."

"He refused to coach when he learned his assistant was going to be a black man," my mother said. "So I hired Coach Jefferson from Brooks High as head coach, and made him athletic director too. They're not pussyfooting with integration this year."

"Why do you want me to meet Coach Jefferson?" I asked.

"Because you're his first-string center."

"I've always played second-string behind Choppy Sargent."

"Choppy and three others are following Coach Ogburn to a new segregated academy west of the Ashley. Coach Jefferson wants you to try to keep any other of the white boys on the team from following suit."

I was making a mental list: chocolate chip cookies, the orphans of Polycarp, Coach Jefferson. "Anything else, Mother?"

"You've got iced tea duty after the hospital workers' march. We'll eat a late dinner." My mother gave her lipstick a final glance in her mirror, and then met my eye evenly. "Your probation hearing is set for June twenty-sixth. You're finally finished with probation."

My father added gratefully, "Your record is clean, son. You have a clean slate again."

"Not with me, young man," Mother inserted quickly. "I don't know how you sleep at night, after what you put your father and me through."

My father's voice lowered as he said, "Darling."

"Leo knows what I mean." Mother did not look up.

"Do you know what she means, Leo?" Father asked.

"He knows," my mother shot back.

"Are you talking about my hatred of James Joyce?" I asked.

"You pretend to hate James Joyce because it's an easier way to say you hate me," she retorted.

"Tell your mother you don't hate her, Leo." Father was a man comfortable with the formulas of scientific law, but lost at sea when it came to engaging the tidal forces of the emotions. "No, tell her you love her. That's an order."

"I love you, Mother," I said, but even I could measure the perfect note of insincerity I sounded.

"Meet me at my office at four this afternoon, Leo," she said. "You have your other tasks for the day."