

## Lakefront Property

“Definitely a scraper,” Leslie Broadbent said to me as she peered at the red-shingled cabin. She paused. I paused. Gulls made their tiresome cries overhead as we studied water from the deck of the cabin. Waves slapped the rocky shore of Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater lake east of the Mississippi—a fact that was catechism for all Montana schoolchildren. Motorboats zigzagged white trails across the blue water, sailboats listed westward.

“I mean, look at it, Anna,” She touched my arm and the two of us turned back to look at the cabin. “It needs paint, the deck looks like hell, the windows are single-pane, and God knows what they’ll find in the attic: it if isn’t squirrels, it’ll be vermiculite.”

“You’ll have to remodel,” I said. “No doubt about it. The paint, the deck—they’re gone.” Accentuate the negative I’d learned with clients like this. If you didn’t, they suspected you were withholding something. And if you were withholding something, they wanted it.

What was I going to say anyway? That she didn’t have to do this? That she could learn to adjust, love that fact that the cabin was weather-beaten, that it had a history, that it was like a hundred places at this lake, built on long weekends by locals on hopes and prayers. And that once, places like this—with toilets instead of outhouses and siding instead of logs—were the fancy ones. The tire swing was gone. So was the Ponderosa, though aspen and a few straggly tamaracks remained. Gladys and Harold had given me the house but I’d sold it immediately, seeing it only as a way to spring me into my future: the move to the big town Missoula, a realtor’s license, a new me.

Of course I’d never say any of that. I was the real estate agent and the fact that I stood to make a cool \$60,000—six percent of \$1.2 million from this cabin perched on the edge of a glacier-carved lake—made my words dry up and blow away like dandelion fluff.

And, let's face it, the cabin *was* shabby: peeling paint, crumbling stone fireplace, and gardens dense with binder weed and Scottish bells, gardens where gladiolas once stood like frilly swords next to the bushes of yellow and red roses and blue delphiniums that grew six feet tall, where Gladys worked weekends while Harold, with his flattop mowing the lawn each week in exactly the same way, starting on the left and going around, then finishing off by mowing diagonal strips across the lawn. Afterward, I joined them on the porch where I sat on an old chair that smelled of mildew and pine, where Gladys brought us iced tea and Harold told her it tasted like god-damned Kool-aid, that if she had any sense she'd buy some decent cheddar cheese not that Kraft shit. "Harold," Gladys would say and hold up her hand like a traffic cop. "Warning." And he'd stop, go silent.

"Remodel or start over," Leslie nodded. She looked down at her hands—as if they were calculators—then back at me.

*You could leave it alone*, I thought. I spent a lot of time here, swinging on that tire swing, sailing out over the blue glittering water, watching the lazy trails of rich people in motorboats trailing water skiers, imagining the lake monster rising up and gobbling them up like Cheeze-Its, one by one.

But these people never left things alone. Outliers—lawyers and doctors and the people who worked remotely (whatever that meant) from Chicago and Los Angeles and points West—bought property, rolled in, and remade the world as they saw fit. I've sold them acres of forest, cabins, old family homes—only to return to find ragged stands of old-growth tamarack tamed into tree parks, meadows turned into prize-winning drought-resistant gardens full of "native" plantings I'd never seen before. Then there were those who moved in, bought massive four-wheel trucks and cowboy hats and Appaloosas and decorated their houses and lawns with stuff we used to throw away—harness ropes, rusty plows, worn-out tools— as if they were teaching us what being western was about. I—we—sold them everything, pocketing the dollars, and buying package trips to Hawaii or our own second homes in more remote areas where we bait fished and drank beer.

“Hard to say what you should do,” I said. I pressed the pads of my fingers together. “It’s really up to you, Leslie.” *Invoke the personal when closing the deal.* “We could look at more properties. There’s a beautiful cedar-sided in Wood’s Bay.”

Leslie took off her glasses and squinted out at the water rolling to shore.

I had to make this sale. Business had been slow, and I had a family to feed. It was time to spin the fantasy. “Do you see Marty, out on the lake, in a new motorboat—one of those Sea-Doo jet boats, you next to him, the spray reaching out behind you?”

“Marty and his boy toys.” Leslie shook her head. She looked dubious.

I felt her mentally calculating the cost of a dock, motorboat, jet skis, water skis.

I took another tack. “Think of you, Marty, and the girls, waking up to the sound of the lake lapping, trees whispering, that handsome husband of yours so relaxed. But I don’t know, Leslie, are you the country type?”

“Well, at least Marty would be in my bed for a change,” Leslie said. “That’d be a plus.”

“It *is* lakefront,” I added. This was the moment to press in, lightly. “Of the last five places, Leslie, this one has the best beach. You’re often paying either for the land or the house. And look at this: you have a view of Wild Horse Island, a serviceable dock, neighbors that you can’t see, and that water. That blue-green water. Cleanest lake in the world, according to the Flathead Lake Biological Station. And the monster, of course, is thrown in for free.”

“The monster?”

“The Flathead Lake monster, of course. Supposedly a giant sturgeon that lives hundreds of feet down in a lake trench and comes up only between April and May. It’s rumor, but kids love it. Big bulbous head. Slithery body about forty feet long. The captain of the lake steamer that first saw him at the turn of the century said he had big, dark glittery eyes.”

## Small Town Girls

Crows pepper birch trees. The morning paper thumps the porch. You are in your bed, the whisper of pages, turning, turning. Watery light sinks into a valley that was once an inland sea. The distant, incessant bark of a dog interrupts and pervades your dreams, your silences. Streets with names stamped in the cement curbstones: Ronald, Gerald, Evans misspelled Evens and the wonder of walking over that mistake year after year to grade school, high school, university. The thunk of suitcases on the stairs when the aunts arrive each summer.

The word town derives from the Dutch word *zaun* that means fence. A town was a village that literally could not afford to build a wall around itself.

Instead of fences, you have aunts. Aunts who arrive each summer and unpack their shorts and sachets, veins like small purple explosions on backs of their knees. The California aunt with her beef liver and kelp pills. The Texas aunt with cigarettes, highballs and stories about your great-grandmother who killed a mountain lion with a heart shot. The Wyoming aunt with her stories of birds and blizzards.

So many aunts, so much advice: You must get an education. You must not go out of the house without lipstick, clean underwear, brushed hair, gloves. Gloves? Make your own clothes, have a nest egg. Waste not, want not. Don't marry the first boy who turns your head, but find his stomach and you'll locate his heart. Do not talk to strangers. Walk with a straight carriage, head high, past the nice man who teaches

school and feels up his daughters, past the red-faced boy who mooches off his bent-backed mother, and the dentist who recites the Gettysburg Address as he drills your cavities, past abandoned dogs, stray cats, and on down to the railroad tracks where the Milwaukee freight trains rumble by carrying cattle, wheat, and logs west and east and back again.

You must not climb trees, even though, from your perch in the mountain ash, you feel this valley belongs to you, from the Clark Fork River to the mountain named for a circus elephant to the ditch where a hobo was found dead once. You must get straight A's. You must not speak out. You are never smarter than a boy (*though we all know who really wears the pants*). You must always let the boy, the boyfriend, the brother, the fiancée, the husband, be the star. Flatter him! Ask him about himself! Show an interest in his car! What kind of car is it? You stand at the window on summer night, heady with the perfume of the lilac bush below you, thinking how you would like to lie down on the grass under that violent scent and be kissed, the long slow meeting of lip on lip. Then your father cuts the lilac down because he is tired of mowing around it. You must not think about touching yourself and that pleasure washes up from between your legs and engulfs you. You must practice piano: scales, arpeggios, trills, Bach inventions, Mozart sonatas. Look at you go! Back straight! Feet on the pedals! Fingers flying across those ivory keys.

You know that if you step on the sidewalk cracks, you'll break your mother's back. Sometimes you want to break your mother's back. But you'd never say that!

Because you--a lily white non-sweating, non-smelling girl – would never have an evil thought like that. No one likes an *angry* girl! When the paperboy takes you into the playhouse and asks you to show him your “thing” and you tell him no. Then that other boy, the son of your parents' friends, comes into your room during their bridge game and makes you touch him, again and again, the door opening and closing, no sound, no sound at all. That's better. No sound at all.

Then there are the other girls: The girl who teaches the class *the secret: i before e except after c*. The fat girl. The hippy girl. The girl who smells. The girl who is a little slut. The girl with the jaundiced skin. Girly girls with their ruffled anklets and taffeta slips like upside down umbrellas. The girl, your aunt tells you about, who got pregnant and died of “an accidental death while cleaning a firearm.” The Blackfeet girl who teaches you to skip Bible School and the delight of swearing as you tromp across a plowed field: *Shit Piss Fuck Screw*. The tomboy girls who climb trees and play kickball – too loud, too physical, too messy to be real girls, so they have a lot of sex later to make up for this deficiency. The girl called whore, bedded by her father, bedded by her stepfather, who lay her arms down across the table saw and cut off her hands.

So one day you step out of the fence.

You hop a freight train with a young man you met in the library. As the train rises through the mountains, through the thick forests of Douglas fir and Ponderosa Pine, you drink beer and eat slices of cheese the man cuts with a hunting knife. At railroad crossings, you stand in the doorway and wave at cars and laugh at the looks of

surprise on the drivers' faces. The mountains are dark, thick with snow, and you can feel the rise of the continent, the clattering of wheels on rails, the cool breeze fanning your face as your old life falls away. Something new is in your blood, something thrilling and true, and you and the man make love on your sleeping bag as the train crosses the Continental Divide and plunges down into land scoured of vegetation by the repeated flooding of a glacial lake. At the Columbia River, you hang on the open doorway of the boxcar as the train snakes along the river, watching the houselights ripple in the dark water, the skies spackled with stars, smelling the raw open smell of the ocean approaching, of your future churning forward.

Nothing in your life will equal this: the peering ahead into the darkness, wind whipping your hair, the lights on the river – and this will bear you up in the years ahead over all those fences, past all those aunts who whisper in your ear, cheek to cheek, *do not, do not*.

Immediately afterward, you feel triumphant. When you return home, your freight-hopping boyfriend breaks up with you. When you tell your family about your adventure, your mother wrings her hands and says, *Oh my God, Oh My God*.

The next summer, you sit at the breakfast table as your father turns opens the Sunday *Missoulian*, turning past the front page to the features section. Underneath the story, "The Rider to Nowhere," about a man named Slim who had hopped freights for

27 years, is another article, "The Happy Hopper." There you are: the "fresh clean Missoula native," who appeared in the rail yard in Pasco in braids and a backpack, carrying orange skis on your back – giving advice about yard dicks and the unsafe Milwaukee trains: "dress down..You can't look like a little rich girl when you ride."

You wait for your father's chiding laugh.

It does not come.

One aunt is so angry she will not talk to you, but ignores you as she talks to your younger sister everything about life in the marching band, every once in a while saying things about being a "good role model for our younger sister." She is doing, what the Apache call, "shooting you with stories." When you are cleaning out her things, you find in her foundation's drawer – among the bras, corsets and elbow-length gloves – a yellowing copy of "The Happy Hopper."

Of course, you have more adventures: hitchhiking across the country, riding a bicycle ride across America, cabin-dwelling in Alaska, child-bearing, all in preparation for the adventure of a lifetime: locking yourself in a room with a computer and unwinding the stories inside you while you are back in the same town, the town you hated and condemned and left, where too many people go hungry and too many children die by their own hand, but it is your town and you are bound to it by your love and your hate and the history that once strangled you now comforts you, and young restless ones are your teenagers, with their outrage and joy, and their footsteps tripping



up and down your heart. The lilacs send up perfume, and the freight trains sing love songs, the morning paper thumps the porch, and your anger boils true and green as snowmelt that floods the river each spring.

## Chapter Fourteen

Mary and Bob were in sudden, close proximity after weeks of moving from hospital to home and back again. Through the roar of the Buick's heater, Bob heard Mary's breathing, could see her fingers moving as she tucked the blanket around the baby, adjusted her scarf, pulled down the rearview mirror to check her lipstick. The infant murmured, shifting in her bundle of blankets. They had picked her up in the nursery and moved on to Cecil's office, signing papers for her release, papers that recognized them as parents, and papers that recognized the child as a ward of the Stone Home for the Mentally Retarded, even negotiated the awkward moment when some fool woman stopped them – mistakenly identifying them as a happy young couple heading home from the hospital with their newborn and began to gush, "Let me see the little darling," and Mary looked at her sharply and Bob said, "We're in a hurry, ma'am," and they rushed past the hurt on her face and out the door to the shock of the below-zero, snowbound world and into the upholstered intimacy of the car.

The child's face screwed up and she was about to cry when she was startled quiet by the grinding sound of the car starting. Bob shifted into first, pulled away from the curb, but as he headed toward the highway that would take them up over Beavertail Pass to the place that would house this child for the rest of her life, he felt suddenly

panicked, as if he'd left something behind. He patted his pants for his wallet. His keys were in the ignition. Mary was beside him. He glanced over at the child's dish-shaped face, the slanted eyes. This was it. He had to be ready now.

Mary stared straight ahead, her profile etched against the frost-crusting side window, inscrutable.

Bob launched the car onto the highway behind a logging truck, loaded with Douglas fir, correcting for the skid. They headed east into the ice-bound, unblinking morning.

The road was rutted, glittering here and there with black ice. As they drove, they passed cars scattered this way and that in the ditches. An ambulance tore past them at Bonner, heading for the hospital they'd just abandoned. They slowed when they came to the wreck—a head-on between a Chevrolet van and a Ford truck, its load of hay now spilling across the embankment. With a shudder, Bob saw the driver's side smashed flat.

At Beavertail Hill, a whiteout. Bob inched the car forward. The snow blew directly into the windshield, each flake large and hypnotizing, flying into them as if from some deep, bottomless well. Bob kept moving his eyes from the rearview mirror to the road to the side mirror to keep from feeling dizzy, to keep from feeling he would fall into a dream and off the side of the road, a dream where the sun was shining and the road was clear and his wife was beside him, glowing, with a baby with rounded cheeks.

When the snow cleared a moment, Bob saw, in a nearby meadow, trees that had lived a lifetime in wind, bent and gnarled.

“This is a terrible storm,” Mary said. It was the first thing she had said since Bridger. “You can barely see the road. Should we turn back?”

“No,” Bob said. “Let’s just keep moving.”

As if she could sense their nervousness, the baby whimpered. Her eyes opened. Her face flushed red, and then her cry blossomed into the furious, bleating, skin-crawling sound of a newborn.

The windshield fogged.

Bob tried to drive as he polished the glass with his leather glove, leaning close to the windshield to try to make out the shadows ahead of him. Were they cars? Trucks? Were the three of them going to be crushed, another road fatality, like so many in storms like this, family of three killed on ice-bound road in head-on?

*Ah-ahhh. Ah-ahhh.* The baby kept crying, her face changing from red to light violet.

Mary took over clearing the windshield. The baby grew quiet and Mary looked down at her, just as the child screwed up her face and wailed until her fists shook. *Ah-ahh. Ah-ahhh.*

“Can’t you do something, Mary?” He patted the bundle in Mary’s arms. “Shh, baby. Shhh.”

The child cried harder.

It was as if their entire world had shrunk down to this sound: *ah-ahh, ah-ahh*.

A logging truck passed them, in a *whoosh* immersing them in a cloud of blinding snow. The child began to scream.

“Oh my God,” Mary said. “I can’t take it.”

The baby’s cries now were desperate, two-punch, her tiny face moist with tears.

“Bob. I’m going to lose my mind,” Mary said, her voice quiet with panic. “We have to stop this crying.”

Heart pounding, Bob turned on the blinkers and eased the car over to the side of the road, praying that someone didn’t come barreling up behind them to send them into the ditch. He looked at the rearview mirror glanced back at the road shrouded in clouds behind them.

“Can you be fast?” He looked at Mary.

Mary cradled the child in her arms, swinging her from side to side like a rocking cradle. “Tsk, tsk,” she said. “There, there.” The baby stopped and sniffed. Then Mary held up the child to her nose and sniffed.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, she’s dirty. Turn the heat up, I’ve got to change her,” she said. “I can’t believe I’m so dumb.” Mary hauled out the diapers and the dry towels. She laid the baby out on her coat on the seat beside her. Her hands moved quickly to unsnap the safety pins and the wet diaper. Suddenly, the naked child was on the leather seat between them, startling with her slender blue-veined body, her pink vagina, her fists curled, her blue-veined legs pulled tightly to her stomach. She cried her wet, braying cry, and Mary was talking to her, saying, *now-now, it’s all right, it’s going to be all right* as she folded the soft clean diaper across her belly, where the black stump still adorned the child’s belly button, pinning up one side, then the other. She guided her arms and legs back into the fuzzy yellow sleeper, snapped it up, wrapped her tightly in the blanket decorated with red and blue and green elephants, embroidered by a neighbor, and set her pink cap on her head. As the smell of urine filled the car, one car appeared out of the clouds on the highway moving toward them. It edged slowly past them, then became a dark shape, disappearing into the flurry of snow behind them, honking as if to ask, *why would anyone in their right mind stop here?*

Mary pulled a bottle from a diaper bag, a shower gift sent over from Warm Springs by Bob’s mother, crooked her arm, settled the baby, and fed her a bottle. Suddenly, mercifully, the car was filled with the rhythmic kiss of the baby’s sucking, her eyes flickering.

They drove on, inching their way over the Garnet Mountains and across the wide plains at Drummond where Bob had to steer against the wind. He saw the grey shapes

of cows, barns, and houses in the sheeting snow and wondered if this is how the child would remember them – dark shapes looming over her like those cars passing them on the highway.

“Worst I’ve ever driven in,” Mary said finally. “At least the baby’s asleep.”

“Thank God for small miracles.” Elizabeth Finch Carter, Bob thought as he looked at the child, asleep in Mary’s arms, her fingers relaxed, her lips fluttering, and he felt a hand close around his heart.

At the sign for the Stone Home, just after Butte, he felt weak with relief.

“I feel like I’ve aged ten years,” Bob said. “That was a hellish drive.”

“Let’s just get through this,” Mary said. Her mouth was set. The child was sleeping in her arms. She sat, erect, in the seat next to him, but she might as well have been miles away. “I never thought I would be doing this,” she said. “Never.”

“You know what Cecil said,” Bob replied.

“Yes, I know what Cecil said,” she snapped. “But I’m not Cecil. Cecil didn’t just give birth and have to give up a baby now, did he?”

Bob skidded to a stop at the stop sign.

“We don’t have to do this,” he said. “Are you changing your mind?”

“No.” Mary tipped her chin up. She looked down at the baby. She lifted her up and smelled the top of her head. Then she looked back out the window. “Let’s go, Bob.”

They passed slowly through Stone City, past a small café, where a small girl with long braids stood in the window looking out at the snow, licking a large ice cream cone. Why wasn’t she in school? Bob wondered. Why didn’t she have a sweater on? The thought of eating something cold in this weather made him shiver, even inside his thick wool coat. They drove slowly, looking for a sign that would direct them to the Stone Home. The baby woke and began to fuss. At last, as they passed the low brick buildings of the downtown and headed out of town, they saw the entrance gate for the Stone Home.

Mary stayed in the car, engine running, with the child. Bob walked into the building, past a receptionist with large dark circles under her eyes. The room was bright and warm, a fire crackling in the fireplace, some potted ferns, and a few landscape reproductions on the walls, the air greyed. Was he imagining that? Was it the lack of fluorescent lighting, which they were putting in all the buildings now in downtown Bridger? Bob was aware of the sounds of people from other floors, murmurs, and he was relieved when a nurse dressed in a white starched uniform with a white nurses’ cap perched on her head came briskly down the hallway and asked him if he needed assistance.



When Bob explained who he was and that he was looking for Doctor Oetzing, she knew immediately what it was about. Her tone softened and she asked him to wait. She asked if he was alone – or did he want to bring his family inside?

“I have to get my wife and the child,” he said, and hurried outside.

Inside the cocoon of the fogged-up Buick, Mary held the bottle upright, as the heater hummed and the baby nestled in her arms. Bob opened the door and slid in next to them.

“They’re ready for us,” Bob said.

Mary looked at him. “Okay.”

She held the child to her, pulling the swaddling blanket close around the child’s face, and bent down and kissed the top of her head.

Mary pulled on her hat. She draped her coat over her shoulder and buttoned it up around the baby, the arms hanging limply at her sides. She slid across the seat, opened the door, and got out. As she stood, her black hair snaked out into the wind, and she bent down and hurried toward the door.

In the sudden warmth of the lobby, Bob lifted the coat from her shoulders before he took off his own, hanging them on wooden hangars before he and Mary settled in large leather chairs to wait for the doctor. There was a large carved oak fireplace, with an oil portrait of a certain Frau Holtzmeier, a benefactor of the Stone Home, dressed in

green silk with a broad, imposing chest. Bob held his hands out to the fire as it popped and crackled, his fingers tingling. The child started to cry. Mary bounced it, holding it close, as she walked over to the fire and stood there, swaying.

“She’s cold,” she said to Bob. Her face was drawn. He knew that Mary was telling him something. What was it? That none of this was her idea? That they had time now to change their minds – to turn around, take the baby and run?

He wanted to remind her about what the doctor said. He wanted to remind her about the law. He wanted to remind her about how they really didn’t have much choice. In fact, when he thought about it, choice was their enemy here. Black and white. Right and wrong. It was a simple decision. It was the law.

Mary patted the baby on her shoulder as she moved about, her galoshes squeaking. The baby’s cries echoed off the high walls.

The beginning of a headache drummed against Bob’s temples.

The receptionist was talking on the phone, her lips curving, red, as she laughed at something, her hand over her mouth, eyes cast politely away from them.

Mary walked over and stared Bob in the face, and he could see her red lipstick and black hair and dark eyes, how lovely, how startlingly beautiful she was as she offered him the child, saying simply. “I have to use the ladies’ room.”

“Okay,” Bob said and stood there.

“That means, Bob,” she said, using both hands to offer him the child, “that you need to hold the baby.”

He reached out and took the child into the crook of his arm, and listened to the dimming click of Mary’s heels.

“*Sh-sh,*” he said to the screwed-up face, the purple vein pulsing in the forehead. “Don’t cry.” Bob smelled the child, the dewy, slightly decayed smell like overripe fruit. He saw the black hair feathering her head, the tiny purple-tinged fingers gathered in a fist, the narrow eyes, tilted. The child turned her eyes toward his voice.

“Oh God,” Bob said. He walked, around and around, jiggling her, feeling the bulk of her six pounds, two ounces wriggling, the weight of a large file: Northwestern Insurance/Donatello Logging.

“Please don’t cry,” Bob said, his heart pounding as he walked and jiggled and wondered where Mary was and what was taking her so long and whether she was applying her lipstick, perhaps she was enjoying sounds of the baby’s cries ratcheting up higher and higher, cries that were building like psi in his brain and his skull and his spine.

He glanced again at the receptionist, who was also clearly ignoring him. “Of course you feel that way,” she cooed softly into the phone. “She was *soo* wrong to do that.”

Well, Bob thought. I'm not going to give her the pleasure of watching me suffer. He looked for someplace quiet, someplace he could get away, when he spotted a phone booth and headed over to it. He sat inside, folded the doors shut, the baby in his lap. "Okay, kid," Bob said, looking at the child in his arms. "We're in this together and we've got to make the best of it." He put the child to his shoulder and patted its bottom. The child kept crying. "'Ain't she sweet. She's a walkin' down the street.'" His mind went blank: he couldn't remember the words.

The baby arched its back and shrieked.

His mind turned red. Where was Mary? He looked out into the room. It was empty.

"Okay, princess. So how about, 'Cigarette holder, which wags me.'"

More crying, but a curious change in tone.

"'Over my shoulder, she digs me.'" He turned sideways as he patted her back, taking in the blue eyes, the flat face. "'Out caddin', my satin doll.'"

The fists gripped, the body clenched as he patted the baby's flannelled back.

"'Baby shall we go, out steppin', Careful Amigo, you're flippin', out caddin' –'"

Suddenly, miraculously, Elizabeth Finch Carter hiccupped. Bob turned her over to face her – holding her along his forearm – as her eyelids fluttered, and as quickly as she was consumed with fury, she was consumed by sleep.

“Good girl.” He placed her back on his shoulder. “Good taste.”

When he emerged from the phone booth, the receptionist arched her eyebrows at him. “The doctor will see you now. Your wife is already in there.”

“Duke Ellington,” he said to her.

Another office, another doctor, this one surrounded by built-in shelves of medical books with titles like *Afflictions of the Mind*, the *Psychology of Dementia*, and *Mongoloidism Explained*. On top of the bookcase was a pair of scales, used in early-day Montana to measure gold dust. The physician’s name was Doctor Oetzing, but he told Bob and Mary that most folks just called him “Dr. O.”

As Bob held the baby, heavy with sleep, and Mary sat next to him, her back not touching the chair, rigid as a tamarack, Dr. O told them what would be done for the child, and how she would have a nurse who would tend her in the nursery, and when she was older and able she would learn the basics of toileting and dressing herself, the most that could be hoped for.

Mary’s face was drawn, only a muscle in her cheek twitching. She unbuckled the jacket of her suit. She’d worn a red sweater over her skirt as her stomach was not quite back to its usual flatness. Her sweater had some decorative pom-poms on the collar, and, through her rubber galoshes, Bob could see the faint outline of her black high heels.

As the doctor talked about exercise rooms and training programs, Bob focused on a sign above the doctor's desk: Plan ahead, the letters squeezed together, the "d" dropped down on the line below. It was supposed to be funny, but it infuriated Bob.

The doctor took a yellow pad from his desk drawer and dated it: 2/15/53. He began asking questions: family names, births, deaths, strokes, heart attacks, the crazy ones, the tragic ones, the ones who just kept carrying on, holding up the branches for the rest of the motley crew. The family tree, Bob's mother's nervous breakdown, Mary's sister's suicide, the squares for the men, the circles for women, writing out, Bob could see, a family tree that looked, if you asked him, like a hangman's chart or a stick Christmas tree, hung with deaths and births and sorrows, lit with the occasional joys of babies that lived, babies that were healthy and normal.

Mary's voice grew thick as she described her miscarriages one and two. "Tell her about the sickness, Mary," Bob said. "She was pregnant, we were on a trip, and she was so sick."

"I couldn't keep food down," Mary said quietly. "We were traveling and every time I ate, I threw up."

"Acute morning sickness." The doctor shook his head. "That happens."

Bob leaned forward. "Wouldn't that be the cause of this, doctor? The child not getting nourishment? Wouldn't that affect the child this way? Is that what caused this mongoloidism, doctor?"

“Not necessarily, Mr. Carter,” Dr. O said, looking from Bob to Mary. “Mental retardation and mongoloidism are complicated. We don’t know enough about them right now – there’s a lot of new research out there and we’re trying to figure out if it is genetic or caused by something in the environment. We think it might be an extra chromosome, but we’re not sure. It’s a very interesting field.” Bob saw him write: “Get chromosomes on pt on arrival.”

Then the doctor got up and asked to examine the child.

Bob laid her on the examining table and watched as a nurse came in the room and carefully undid everything Mary had done just an hour before – the blanket, sleeper, the diaper – until the child was squirming on the starched white cloth, wriggling and crying.

Dr. O talked to her, as his fingers poked and probed her, *you’re mad, you’re mad as a wet hen, aren’t you babe*, he said, his deep voice soft as he examined her mouth, her ears, her throat, and felt her glands, and used his rubber mallet to scrape along the soles of her feet, which barely twitched.

“This is very hard,” he said, as he worked. “She has the rounded eyes and the flattened face of a mongoloid – John Langdon Down in 1866 discovered the syndrome in Surrey, England, and some think it should be called after him. But my guess, by her responses, is that the child is also very retarded.”

“How can you tell?” Mary said sharply.

“See those reflexes.” He tapped the knee, which barely jerked. He scraped the bottom of the child’s foot again. “Very little response. We don’t like to see that in babies. Of course, it is hard to say at such a young age, but I see a lot of retarded newborns, Mrs. Carter.”

“Also,” he said. “Watch this.” He waved his hand in front of the child’s eyes.

“See how slow she is to blink?” he said. “Not a good sign as well. And this loose skin—he pinched skin along the child’s belly. We associate this lack of tone with mongoloidism as well, folks.”

Dr. O put the diaper, then the sleeper printed with bunnies back on the child, his hands working slowly and deliberately around the pins and zippers. He handed the child to Mary. He put a hand on Mary’s back and patted her. “She would be a lot of work for you, Mary. A perpetual child. Here, at least, we know how to take care of retarded kids. We can train them, school them—we have classes on etiquette, reading and writing, even basic tasks, some of our folks can go on to work on the farm or in restaurants—and you can go on, have more children, get on with your life. We’re doing research here,” he said, “so perhaps one day we’ll know even more about how to help these children.”

“They deserve our compassion,” Bob said.

Dr. O and Mary looked over at him. “I’ll be in touch, Bob,” Dr. O told them. “I want to give you some time.” He left the room, the door clicking softly behind him.

“It’s best,” Bob said, “if we make this short.”



“Of course,” Mary said. She held the child, patted it, kissed her head, took a long look at her face, the blue eyes staring back. “Lizzie Finch Carter,” she said. She handed the child to Bob. “Bye, Lizzie,” he said, then he opened the door to let the nurse know they were ready.

Bob offered the child to the nurse.

The nurse’s three-cornered hat skewed sideways as she settled the child on her shoulder. She looked at both of them, but said nothing. Mary turned her face from Bob, her hands shaking as she gathered up her purse. Bob touched the flannel-clad back of the child and nodded to the nurse and whispered, “Thank you.” She opened the door and left, silent on her white rubber soles.