Also by Dorothy Allison

The Women Who Hate Me

Skin: Talking About Sex, Class & Literature

Bastard Out of Carolina

Two or Three Things I Know for Sure

Cavedweller

TRASH

Stories by

Dorothy Allison

PENGUIN BOOKS

"Do you hear from Temple?" my mama, my cousins, my aunts always ask. I am the one she writes to, and if I have not heard from her then no one has. Sometimes I do not answer, I fall into Temple's white-eyed memories, the silence of her flushed cheeks, her thin face and hot eyes. The wolf in my neck bares his teeth, stretches, lays one paw on the other, dreaming of fire and sparks raining down, myrtle leaves blackening in the heat.

I fight the wolf, fight him with my love for Temple. I hug to myself the warmth and stillness of her porch, the certainty that she does not fear the wolf as I do, the wolf in her, the wolf who hides his teeth but watches, watches out of her eyes.

Notes: Lupus: Any of various skin diseases; especially a chronic tuberculosis disease of the skin or mucous membranes; a particularly dangerous disease of metabolic origin—incurable but sometimes controlled by steroid drugs—which exhausts the energies of its victims and necessitates an extremely careful restricted life.

Lupus: A wolf, from "eating into the substance of"; cancer.

Compassion

In the last days Mama's mouth cracked and bled. Pearly blisters spread down her chin to her throat. The nurses moved her to a room with a sink by the bed and a stern command to wash up every time you touched her.

"Herpes," Mavis, the floor nurse, told me. "Contagious at this stage."

I held Mama's free hand anyway, stepping away every time the doctor came in to wash with the soap the hospital provided. Mavis let me have a bottle of her own lotion when my fingers began to dry and the skin along my thumbs split.

"Aloe vera and olive oil," she told me. "Use it on your mama, too."

I took the bottle over to rub it into the paper-thin skin on the backs of Mama's hands. She barely seemed to notice, though a couple of her veins had leaked enough to make swollen, blue-black blotches. Mama's eyes tracked past me and even as I rubbed one hand, the fingers of the other reached for the morphine pump. That drip, that precious drip. Mama no longer hissed and gasped with every breath. Now she murmured and whispered, sang a little, even said recognizable names sometimes—my sisters, her sisters, and people long dead. Every once in a while, her voice would startle, the words suddenly clear and outraged. "Goddamn!" loud in the room. Then, "Get me a cigarette, get me a cigarette," as she came awake. Angry and begging at the

same time, she cursed, "Goddamn it, just one," before the morphine swept in and took her down again.

That was not our mama. Our mama never begged, never backed up, never whined, moaned, and thrashed in her sheets. My sister Jo and I stared at her. This mama was eating us alive. Every time she started it again, that litany of curses and pleas, I hunkered down further in my seat. Jo rocked in her chair, arms hugging her shoulders and head down. Arlene, the youngest of us, had wrung her hands and wiped her eyes, and finally, deciding she was no use, headed on home. Jo and I had stayed, unspeaking, miserable, and desperate.

On the third night after they gave her the pump, Mama hit some limit the nurses seemed determined to ignore. Her thumb beat time, but the pump lagged behind and the curses returned. The pleas became so heartbroken I expected the paint to start peeling off the walls. The curses became mewling growls. Finally, Jo gave me a sharp look and we stood up as one. She went over to try to force the window open, pounding the window frame till it came loose. I dug around in Jo's purse, found her Marlboros, lit one, and held it to Mama's lips. Jo went and stood guard at the door.

Mama coughed, sucked, and smiled gratefully. "Baby," she whispered. "Baby," and fell asleep with ashes on her neck.

Jo walked over and took the cigarette I still held. "Stupid damn rules," she said bitterly.

Mavis came in then, sniffed loudly, and shook her head at us. "You know you can't do that."

"Do what?" Jo had disappeared the smoke as if it had never been.

Mavis crossed her arms. Jo shrugged and leaned over to pull the thin blanket further up Mama's bruised shoulders. In her sleep Mama said softly, "Please." Then in a murmur so soft it could have been a blessing, "Goddamn, goddamn."

I reached past Jo and took Mama's free hand in mine. "It's OK. It's OK," I said. Mama's face smoothed. Her mouth went soft, but her fingers in mine clutched tightly.

"That window isn't supposed to be open," Mavis said suddenly. "You get it shut."

Jo and I just looked at her.

Mama's first diagnosis came when I was seventeen. Back then, I couldn't even say the word, "cancer." Mama said it and so did Jo, but I did not. "This thing," I said. "This damn thing." Twenty-five years later, I still called it that, though there was not much else I hesitated to say. That was my role. I did the talking and carried all the insurance records. Jack blinked. Jo argued. Arlene showed up late, got a sick headache, and left. In the early years it was Jack who argued and that just made things harder. Now he never said much at all. For that I was deeply grateful. It let us seem like all the other families in the hospital corridors—only occasionally louder and a little more careful of each other than anyone at MacArthur Hospital could understand.

"Who do they think we are?" Jo asked me once.

"They don't care who we are." What I did not say is that was right. Mama was the one the medical folk were supposed to watch. The rest of us were incidental, annoying, and, whenever possible, meant to be ignored.

"I like your mama," Mavis told me the first week Mama was on the ward. "But your daddy makes me nervous."

"It's a talent he has," I said.

"Uh huh." Mavis looked a little confused, but I didn't want to explain.

The fact is he never hit her. In the thirty years since they married, Jack never once laid a hand on her. His trick was to threaten. He screamed and cursed and cried into his fists. He would come right up on Mama, close enough to spray spittle on her cheeks. Pounding his hands together, he would shout, *"Motherfuckers, assholes, sonsabitches."* All the while, Mama's face remained expressionless. Her eyes stared right back into his. Only her hands trembled, the yellow-stained fingertips vibrating incessantly.

Gently, I covered the bruises on Mama's arm with my fingers. Jo scowled and turned away.

"They should be here."

"Better they're not."

Jo shoved until the window was again closed. When she turned back to me, her face was the mask Mama wore most of our childhood. She gestured at Mama's bruises. "Look at that. You see what he did."

"He didn't mean to," I said.

"Didn't mean to? Didn't care. Didn't notice. Man's the same he always was."

"He never hit her."

"He never had to hit her. She beat herself up enough. And every time the son of a bitch hit us, he was hitting her. He beat us like we were dogs. He treated her like her ass was gold. And she always talked about leaving him, you know. She never did, did she?"

"What do you want?"

"I want somebody to do something." Jo slammed her fist into the window frame. "I want somebody to finally goddamn do something."

I shook my head, gently stroking Mama's cool clammy skin. There was nothing I could say to Jo. We always wanted somebody to do something and no one ever did, but what had we ever asked anyone to do? I watched Jo rub her neck and thought about the pins that held her elbow and shoulder together. There was my shattered coccyx and broken collarbones, and Arlene's insomnia. At thirty, Arlene had a little girl's shadowed frightened face and the omnipresent stink of whiskey on her skin. I had been eight when Mama married Jack, Jo five, but Arlene had been still a baby, less than a year old and fragile as a sparrow in the air.

"What is it you want to do? Talk? Huh?" Jo rolled her shoulders back and rubbed her upper arms. "Want to talk about what a tower of strength Mama was? Or why she had to be?"

My shrug was automatic, inconsequential.

A flush spread up from Jo's cleavage. It made the skin of her neck look rough and pebbly. Deep lines scored the corners of her eyes and curved back from her mouth. In the last few years, Jo had become scary thin. The skin that always pulled tight on her bones seemed to have grown loose. Now it wrinkled and hung. I looked away, surprised and angry. Neither of us had expected to live long enough to get old.

For all that we fight, Jo is the one I get along with, and I always try to stay with her when I visit. Arlene and I barely speak, though we talk to each other more easily than she and Jo. There have been years I don't think the two of them have spoken half a dozen words. In the ten weeks since Mama's collapse, their conversations have been hurt-filled bursts of whispered recrimination. At first, I stayed with Arlene and that seemed to help, but when Jo and I insisted that Mama had to check in to MacArthur, Arlene blew up and told me to go ahead and move over to Jo's place.

"You and Jo—you think you know it all," Arlene said when she was dropping me off at Jo's. "But she's my mama too, and I know something. I know she's not ready to give up and die."

"We're not giving up. We're putting Mama where she can get the best care."

"Two miles from Jo's place and forty from mine." Arlene had shaken her head. "All the way across town from Jack and her stuff. I know what you are doing."

"Arlene . . ."

"Don't. Just don't." She popped the clutch on her VW bug and backed up before I could get the door closed. "Someday you're gonna be sorry. That's the one thing I am sure of, you're gonna be sorry for all you've done." She swung the car sharply to the side, making the door swing shut. If it would have helped, I would have told her I was sorry already.

Jo put me in the room where her daughter, Pammy, stashes all the gear she will not let Jo give away or destroy—shelves of books, racks of dusty music tapes, and mounted posters on the

wall over the daybed. I fell asleep under posters of prepubescent boy bands and woke up dry-mouthed and headachy.

Jo laughed when I asked about the bands. "Don't ask me," she said. "Some maudlin shit no one could dance to—whey-faced girls and anorexic boys. All of it sounds alike, whiny voices all scratchy and droning. Girl has no ear, no ear at all."

Pammy had been picking out chords on the old piano Jo took in trade for her wrecked Chevy. She spoke without looking up. "You know what Mama does?" she asked in her peculiar Florida twang. "Mama sits up late smoking dope and listening to Black Sabbath on the headphones. Acts like she's seventeen and nothing's changed in the world at all."

Jo snorted, though I saw the quick grin she suppressed. She kicked her boot heels together, knocking dried mud on the Astroturf carpet. That carpet was her prize. She'd had her boyfriend Jaybird install it throughout the house. "She's eleven now," she said, nodding in Pammy's direction. "What you think? Should I shoot her or just cut my own throat?"

I shook my head, looking back and forth from one of them to the other. They were so alike it startled me, thick brown hair, black eyes, and the exact same way of sneering so that the right side of the mouth drew up and back.

"Hang on," I told Jo. "She gets to be thirty or so, you might like her."

"Ha!" Jo slapped her hands together. "If I live that long."

Pammy banged the piano closed and swept out of the room. My sister and I grinned at each other. Pammy we both believed would redeem us all. The child was fearless.

"We need to talk," I told Arlene when she came to the hospital the day after I moved in with Jo. Arlene was standing just inside the smoking lounge off the side of the cafeteria, waiting for Jack to arrive.

"She's looking better, don't you think?" Arlene popped a Tic Tac in her mouth.

"No, she an't." I tried to catch Arlene's hand, but she hugged her elbows in tight and just looked at me. "Arlene, she's not going to get any better. She's going to get worse. If the tumor on her lung doesn't kill her, then the ones in her head will."

Arlene's pale face darkened. When she spoke her words all ran together. "They don't know what that stuff was. That could have been dust in the machine. I read about this case where that was what happened—dust and fingerprints on X-rays." She tore at a pack of Salems, ripping one cigarette in half before she could get another out intact.

"God, Arlene."

"Don't start."

"Look, we have to make some decisions." I was thinking if I could speak quietly enough, Arlene would hear what I was saying.

"We have to take care of Mama, not talk about stuff that's going to get in the way of that." Arlene's voice was as loud as mine had been soft. "Mama needs our support, not you going on about death and doom."

Sympathetic magic, Jaybird called it. Arlene believed in the power of positive thinking the way some people believed in saints' medals or a Santeria's sacrificed chicken. Stopping us talking about dying was the thing she believed she was supposed to do.

I dropped into one of the plastic chairs. Arlene's head kept jerking restlessly, but she managed not to look into my face. This is how she always behaved. "Mama's gonna beat this thing," she'd announced when I had first come home, as if saying it firmly enough would make it so. She was the reason Mama had gone to MacArthur in the first place. Jo and I had wanted the hospice that Mama's oncologist had recommended. But Arlene had refused to discuss the hospice or to look at the results of the brain scan. Those little starbursts scattered over Mama's cranium were not something Arlene could acknowledge.

"We could keep Mama at home," she'd told the hospital chaplain. "We could all move back home and take care of her till she's better."

"Lord God!" I had imagined Jo's response to that. "Move back home? Has she gone completely damn crazy?"

The chaplain told Arlene that some people did indeed take care of family at home, and if that was what she wanted, he would help her. I had watched Arlene's face as he spoke, the struggle that moved across her flattened features. "It might not work," she had said. She had looked at me once, then dropped her head. "She might need more care than we could give, all of us working you know." She had dropped her face into her hands.

I signed off on the bills where the insurance didn't apply. For the rental on a wheelchair and a television, I used a credit card. Jo laughed at me when she saw them.

"You are a pure fool," she said. "Send back the wheelchair, but let's keep the TV. It'll give us something to watch when Arlene starts going on about how *good* Mama's doing."

Mama had had three years of pretty good health before this last illness. It was a remission that we almost convinced ourselves was a cure. The only thing she complained about was the ulcer that kept her from ever really putting back on any weight. Then, when she was in seeing the doctor about the ulcer, he had put his hand on her neck and palpated a lump the two of them could feel.

"This is it," Mama had told me on the phone that weekend last spring. "I'm not going back into chemo again."

She had been serious, but Jo and I steamrolled her back into treatment. There were a few bad weeks when we wondered if what we were doing was right, but Mama had come through strong. I convinced myself we had done the right thing. Still, when afterward Mama was so weak and slow to recover, guilt had pushed me to take a leave from my job and go stay at the old tract house near the Frito Lay plant.

"We'll get some real time together," Mama said when I arrived.

"You need rest," I told her. "We'll rest." But that was not what Mama had in mind. The first morning she got me up to drink watery coffee and plan what we would do. There was one stop at the new doctor's office, but after that, she swore, we would have fun.

For three days, Mama dragged me around. We walked through the big malls in the acrid air-conditioning in the mornings and spent the afternoons over at the jai alai fronton watching the athletes with their long lobster-claw devices on their arms thrusting the tiny white balls high up into the air and catching them as easily as if those claws were catcher's mitts. I watched close but could not figure out how the game was meant to be played. Mama just bet on her favorites—boys with tight silk shirts and flashing white smiles.

"They all know who I am," Mama told me. I nodded as if I believed her, but then a beautiful young man came up and paused by Mama's seat to squeeze her wrist.

"Rafael," Mama said immediately. "This is my oldest daughter."

"Cannot be," Rafael said. He never lifted his eyes to me, just leaned in to whisper into Mama's ear. I was watching her neck as his lips hovered at her hairline. I almost missed the bill she pressed into his palm.

"You give him money?" I said after he had wandered back down the steeply pitched stairs.

"Nothing much." Mama looked briefly embarrassed. She wiped her neck and turned her head away from me. "I've known him since he started here. He's the whole support of his family."

I looked down at the young men. They were like racehorses tossing their heads about, their thick hair cut short or tied back in clubs at their napes. Once the game started they were suddenly running and leaping, bouncing off the net walls and barely avoiding the fast-moving balls. All around me gray-headed women with solid bodies shrieked and jumped in excitement. They called out vaguely Spanish-sounding names, and crowed when their champions made a score. Now and again one of the young men would wave a hand in acknowledgment.

I turned to watch Mama. Her eyes were on the boys. Her face

was bright with pleasure. What did I know? Where else could she spend twenty dollars and look that happy?

When later, Rafael jumped and scored, I nudged Mama's side. "He's the best," I said. She blushed like a girl.

Mama was not supposed to drive, so I steered her old Lincoln town car around Orlando.

"You are terrible," Mama said to me every time we pulled into another parking space. It was an act. She played as if I were dragging her out, but every time I suggested we go back to the house, she pouted.

"I can nap anytime. When you've gone, I'll do nothing but rest. Let me do what I want while I can."

It was part of being sick. She wasn't sleeping, even though she was tired all the time. She'd lie on the couch awake at night with the television playing low. Every time I woke in the night I could hear it, and her, stirring restlessly out in the front room.

It was awkward sleeping in Jack's house. The last time I had lain in that bed, I had been twenty-two and back only for a week before taking a job in Louisville. Every day of that week burned in my memory. Mama had been sick then too, recovering from a hysterectomy her doctor swore would end all her troubles. Jo was in her own place over in Kissimmee, an apartment she got as soon as she graduated from high school. Only Arlene's stuff had remained in the stuffy bedroom; she herself was never there. At dawn, I would watch her stumble in to shower and change for school. She spent her nights baby-sitting for one of Mama's friends from the Winn Dixie. A change-of-life baby had turned out to be triplets, and Arlene spent her nights rocking one or the other while the woman curled up in her bed and wept as if she were dying.

"They are in shock over there," Mama had told me. "Don't know whether to shit or go blind."

"Blind," Arlene said. The woman, Arlene told us, was drunk more often than sober. Still, her troubles were the making of Arlene, who not only got paid good money, she no longer had to spend her nights dodging Jack's curses or sudden drunken slaps.

"I'm getting out of here, and I'm never coming back," she told me the first morning of that week. By the end of the week, she had done it, though the apartment was half a mile up the highway, and even smaller than Jo's. I saw it only once, a place devoid of furniture or grace, but built like a fortress.

"Mine," Arlene had said, a world of rage compressed into the word.

Lying on the old narrow Hollywood bed again, I remembered the look on Arlene's face. It was identical to the expression I had seen on Jo when I was packing my boxes to drive to Louisville.

"We'll never see your ass again," Jo had said. Her mouth pulled down in a mock frown, then crooked up into a grin.

"Not in this lifetime."

All these years later I could look back and it was exactly as if I were watching a movie of it, a scene that closed in on Jo's black eyes and the bitter pleasure she took in saying "your ass." I know my mouth had twisted to match hers. We had thought ourselves free, finally away and gone. But none of it had come out the way we had thought it would. I hadn't lasted two years in Louisville, and Arlene had never gotten more than three miles from the Frito Lay plant. Twenty years after we had left so fierce and proud, we were all right back where we had started, yoked to each other and the same old drama.

"Take me shopping," Mama begged me every afternoon, as if no time at all had passed. I had looked at her neck and seen how gray and sweaty the skin had gone and known in that moment that the chemo had not worked out as we hoped.

"Tomorrow," I had promised Mama, and talked her into lying down early. Then gone back to curl up in bed and pretend to read so that I could be left alone. Every night for the two weeks I stayed there I would listen to Jack's hacking through the bedroom wall. Every time he coughed, my back pulled tight. I tried to shut him out, listening past him for Mama lying on the couch in the

living room. She talked to herself once she thought we were asleep. It sounded as if she were retelling stories. Little snatches would drift down the hall. "Oh James, God that James . . ." Her voice went soft. I listened to unintelligible whispers till she said, "When Arlene was born . . ." Then she faded out again. In the background, Jack's snoring grated low and steady. I curled my fists under the sheets until I fell asleep.

When she took me shopping, Mama bought me things she said I needed. She made me go to Jordan Marsh to buy Estée Lauder skin potions. "It's time," she said. Her tone implied it was the last possible day I could put off buying moisturizer. I submitted. It was easier to let her tell me what to buy than to argue, and kind of fun to let her boss around the salesladies. I even found myself telling an insistent young woman that, no, we would not try the Clinique, we were there for Estée Lauder. Afterward, we went upstairs to do what we both enjoyed the most—rummage through the sale bins.

"I need new underwear," Mama said. "Briefs. Let's find me some briefs. No bikinis, can't wear those anymore. They irritate my scar." She gestured to her belly, not specifying if she meant the old zipper from her navel to pubis, or the more recent horizontal patches to either side. I sorted the more garish patterns out of the way, turning up a few baby-blue briefs in size seven.

"Five now," Mama muttered. "Find me some fives, and none of those all-cotton ones. I want the nylon. Nylon hugs me right, and I hate the way cotton looks after a while. Dirty, you know?"

Sevens and eights and sixes. I kept digging.

"Excuse me." The two women at Mama's sleeve looked familiar.

"Mam," the first one said, pushing into the bin. "Excuse me." She reached around Mama's elbow to snag a pair of blue-green briefs. "Excuse me," she said again.

The accent was even more familiar than her flat grayish features and tight blond cap of hair. Her drawl was more pronounced than Mama's, more honeyed than the usual Orlando matrons. It was a Carolina accent, and a Carolina polite hesitation, too. The other woman reached for a pair of yellow cotton panties, size seven. Mama moved aside.

"So I told him what he was going to have to do," the first woman said to her friend, continuing what was obviously an ongoing conversation. "No standing between me and the Lord, I told him. We've all got a role in God's plan. You know?"

Her friend nodded. Mama looked to the side, her eyes drifting over the woman's figure, the pale white hands sorting underwear, the dull gold jewelry and the loose shirtwaist dress. That old glint appeared in Mama's eyes and a little electrical shock went up my neck. I moved around the corner of the bin to get between them, but Mama had already turned to the woman.

"I know what you mean." Mama's tone was pleasant, her face open and friendly. The woman turned to her, a momentary look of confusion on her face.

"You do?"

"Oh yes, there is no fighting what is meant. When God puts his hand on you, well . . ." Mama shrugged as if there were no need to say more.

The woman hesitated, and then nodded, "Yes. God has a plan for us all."

"Yes." Mama nodded. "Yes." She reached over and put both hands on the woman's clasped palms. "Bless you." Mama beamed. This time the woman did frown. She didn't know whether Mama was making fun of her, but she knew something was wrong. Her friend looked nervous.

"Just let me ask you something." Mama pulled the woman's hands toward her own midriff, drawing the woman slightly off balance and making her reach across the pile of underpants.

"Have you had cancer yet?" The words were spoken in the softest matron's drawl but they cut the air like a razor.

"Oh!" the woman said.

Mama smiled. Her smile relaxed, full of enjoyment. "It an't good news. But it is definite. You know something after, how everything can change in an instant."

The woman's eyes were fixed and dilated. "Oh! God is a rock," she whispered.

"Yes." Mama's smile was too wide. "And Demerol." She paused while the woman's mouth worked as if she were going to protest, but could not. "And sleep," Mama added that as it had just occurred to her. She nodded again. "Yes. God is Demerol and sleep and not vomiting when that's all you've done for days. Oh, yes. God is more than I think you have yet imagined. It's not like we get to choose what comes, after all."

"Mama," I said. "Please, Mama."

Mama leaned over so that her face was close to the woman's chin and spoke in a tightly parsed whisper.

"God is your daughter holding your hand when you can't stand the smell of your own body. God is your husband not yelling, your insurance check coming when they said it would." She leaned so close to the woman's face, it looked as if she were about to kiss her, still holding on to both the woman's hands. "God is any minute pain is not eating you up alive, any breath that doesn't come out in a wheeze."

The woman's eyes were wide, still unblinking; the determined mouth clamped shut.

"I know God." Mama assumed her old soft drawl. "I know God and the devil and everything in between. Oh yes. Yes." The last word was fierce, not angry but final.

When she let go, I watched the woman fall back against her friend. The two of them turned to walk fast and straight away from us, leaving their selections on the table. I felt almost sorry for them. Then Mama sighed and settled back. With an easy motion, she snatched up a set of blue nylon briefs, size five. She turned her face to me with a wide happy smile.

"God! I do *love* shopping."

"Wasn't she from Louisville, that woman had the sports car? The one with those boots I liked so much?" Jo and I were folding sheets. We had cleared about a month of laundry off the bed,

shifting sheets and towels up onto shelves, and stacking the T-shirts, socks, and underwear in baskets. Jo's rules for housekeeping were simple; she did the least she could. All underpants, T-shirts, and socks in her house were white. Nothing was sorted by anything but size—when it was sorted at all. If I wanted to sleep, I had to get it all off the bed.

"No," I said. "Met her after I moved to Brooklyn."

"Sure had a lot of attitude. And Lord God! Those boots. What happened to her, anyway?"

"Got a job in Chicago working for a news show."

"Oh, so not the one, huh?" Jo made a rude gesture with her right hand. "You talked like she had your heart in her hands."

"For a while." I shook out a sheet and began to refold it more neatly. "But when I moved in with her, things changed. Turned out she had Jack's temper and Arlene's talent for seeing what she wanted to see."

"That's a shock." There was a sardonic drawl in Jo's tone. "Didn't think there was another like Arlene in the world."

"There's a world of Arlenes," I said. "World of Jacks, too, and a lifetime of scary women just waiting for me to drag them here so you can talk them out of their boots."

"Well, those were damn fine boots."

Jaybird came in then, dragging his feet across the doorsill to knock loose the sand. Jo waved him over. "You remember the red boots I bought in Atlanta that time?"

"They hurt your feet." Jay took a quick nibble on Jo's earlobe and gave me a welcome grin.

"Just about crippled me. But you sure liked the way they looked when I crossed my legs at the bar that weekend."

"You look good any way, woman," Jay said. "You come in covered in dog shit and grass seed, I'll still want to suck on your neck. You sit back in shiny red high-heeled boots and I'll do just about anything you want."

"You will, huh?" She snagged one of his belt loops and tugged it possessively.

"You know I will."

"Uh huh."

They kissed like I was not in the room, so I pretended I was not, folding sheets while the kiss turned to giggles and then pinches and another kiss. Jo and Jaybird have been together almost nine years. I liked Jay more than any other guy Jo ever brought around. He was older than the type she used to chase. Jo wouldn't say, but Mama swore Pammy's daddy was a kid barely out of junior high. "Your sister likes them young," she complained. "Too young."

Jay was a vet. He had an ugly scar under his chin and a gruff voice. Mostly, he didn't talk. He worked at the garage, making do with hand gestures and a stern open face. Only with Jo did he let himself relax. He didn't drink except for twice a year—each time he asked Jo to marry him, and every time she said no. Then Jay went and got seriously drunk. Jo didn't let anyone say a word against him, but she also refused to admit he was little Beth's daddy, though they were as alike as two puppies from the same litter.

"To hell with boots," Jo joked at me over Jay's shoulder. "Old Jaybird's all I really need." She gave him another kiss and a fast tug on his dark blond hair. He wiggled against her happily. I hugged the worn cotton sheet in my arms. I'd hate it if Jo ran Jay off, but maybe she wouldn't. Sometimes Jo was as tender with Jay as if she intended to keep him around forever.

Arlene lived at Castle Estates, an apartment complex off Highway 50 on the way out to the airport. It looked to me like Kentucky Ridge where she was two years ago, and Dunbarton Gardens five years before that. Squat identical two-story structures, dotted with upstairs decks and imitation wood beams set in fields of parking spaces and low unrecognizable blue-green hedges. Castle Estates was known for its big corner turrets and ersatz iron gate decorated with mock silver horseheads. It gleamed like malachite in the Florida sunshine.

When I visited last spring, I went over for a day and joked that if I wanted to take a walk, I'd have to leave a trail of breadcrumbs to find my way back. Arlene didn't think it was funny.

"What are you talking about? No one walks anywhere in central Florida. You want to drown in your own sweat?"

In Arlene's apartments, the air conditioner was always set on high and all the windows sealed. The few times I stayed with her, I'd huddle in her spare room, tucked under her old *Bewitched* sleeping bag, my fingers clutching the fabric under Elizabeth Montgomery's pink-and-cream chin. Out in the front room the television droned nondenominational rock and roll on the VH-1 music channel. Beneath the backbeat, I heard the steady thunk of the mechanical ratchets on the stair-stepper. Since she turned thirty, Arlene spends her insomniac nights climbing endlessly to music she hated when it was first released.

The night before we moved Mama into MacArthur, the thunking refrain went on too long. I made myself lie still as long as I could, but eventually I sneaked out to check on Arlene. The lights were dimmed way down and the television set provided most of the illumination. The stair-stepper was set up close to the TV, and my mouth went dry when I saw my little sister. She was braced between the side rails, arms extended rigidly and head hanging down between her arms. I watched her legs as they trembled and lifted steadily, up and up and up. A shiver went through me. I tried to think of something to say, some way to get her off those steps.

Arlene's head lifted, and I saw her face. Cheeks flushed red; eyes squeezed shut. Her open mouth gasped at the cold filtered air. She was crying, but inaudibly, her features rigid with strain and tightened to a grotesque mask. She looked like some animal in a trap, tearing herself and going on—up and up and up. I watched her mouth working, curses visible on the dry cracked lips. With a low grunt, she picked up her speed and dropped her head again. I stepped back into the darkened doorway. I did not want to have to speak, did not want to have to excuse seeing her

like that. It was bad enough to have seen. But I have never understood my little sister more than I did in that moment—never before realized how much alike we really were.

Jack has been sober for more than a decade, something Jo and I found increasingly hard to believe. Mama boasted of how proud she was of him. Her Jack didn't go to AA or do any of those programs people talk about. Her Jack did it on his own.

"Those AA people—they ask forgiveness," Jo said once. "They make amends." She cackled at the idea, and I smiled. Jack asking forgiveness was about as hard to imagine as him staying sober. For years we teased each other, "You think it will last?" Then in unison, we would go, "Naaa!"

Neither of us can figure out how it has lasted, but Jack has stayed sober, never drinking. Of course, he also never made amends.

"For what?" he said. For what?

"I did the best I could with all those girls," Jack told the doctor, the night Arlene was carried into the emergency room raving and kicking. It was the third and last time she mixed vodka and sleeping pills, and only a year or so after Jack first got sober, the same year I was working up in Atlanta and could fly down on short notice. Jo called me from the emergency room and said, "Get here fast, looks like she an't gonna make it this time."

Jo was wrong about that, though as it turned out we were both grateful she got me to come. Arlene came close to putting out the eye of the orderly who tried to help the nurses strap her down. She did break his nose, and chipped two teeth that belonged to the rent-a-cop who came over to play hero. The nurses fared better, getting away with only a few scratches and one moderately unpleasant bite mark.

"I'll kill you," Arlene kept screaming. "I'll fucking kill you all!" Then after a while, "You're killing me. You're killing me!"

It was Jo who had found Arlene. Baby sister had barely been breathing, her face and hair sour with vomit. Jo called the ambulance, and then poured cold water all over Arlene's head and shoulders until she became conscious enough to scream. For a day and a half, Jo told me, Arlene was finally who she should have been from the beginning. She cursed with outrage and flailed with wild conviction. "You should have seen it," Jo told me.

By the time I got there, Arlene was going in and out—one minute sobbing and weak and the next minute rearing up to shout. The conviction was just about gone. When she was quiet for a little while, I looked in at her, but I couldn't bring myself to speak. Every breath Arlene drew seemed to suck oxygen out of the room. Then Jack came in the door and it was as if she caught fire at the sight of him. For the first and only time in her life she called him a son of a bitch to his face.

"You, you," she screamed. "You are killing me! Get out. Get out. I'll rip your dick off if you don't get the hell out of here."

"She's gone completely crazy," Jack told everyone, but it sounded like sanity to me.

The psychiatric nurse kept pushing for sedation, but Jo and I fought them on that. Let her scream it out, we insisted. By some miracle they listened to us, and left her alone. We stayed in the hall outside the room, listening to Arlene as she slowly wound herself down.

"I did the best I could," Jack kept saying to the doctor. "You can see what it was like. I just never knew what to do."

Jo and I kept our distance. Neither of us said a word.

By the third morning, Arlene was gray-faced and repentant. When we went in to check on her, her eyes would not rise to meet ours.

"I'm all right," she said in a thick hoarse whisper. "And I won't ever let that happen again."

"Damn pity," Jo told me later. "That was just about the only time I've ever really liked her. Crazy out of her mind, she made sense. Sane, I don't understand her at all."

"What do you think happens after death?" Mama asked me.

She and I were sitting alone waiting for the doctor to come

back. They were giving her IV fluids and oral medicines to help her with the nausea, but she was sick to her stomach all the time and trying hard not to show it. "Come on, tell me," she said.

I looked at Mama's temples where the skin had begun to sink in. A fine gray shadow was slowly widening and deepening. Her closed eyes were like marbles under a sheet. I rubbed my neck. I was too tired to lie to her.

"You close your eyes," I said. "Then you open them, start over."

"God!" Mama shuddered. "I hope not."

Jo was a breeder, Ridgebacks and Rottweilers. A third of every litter had to be put down. Jo always had it done at the vet's office, while she held them in her arms and sobbed. She kept their birth dates and names in lists under the glass top of her coffee table, christening them all for rock-and-rollers, even the ones she had to kill.

"Axl is getting kind of old," she told me on the phone before I came last spring. "But you should see Bon Jovi the Third. We're gonna get a dynasty out of her."

After her daughter Beth was born, Jo had her own tubes tied. Still she hated to fix her bitches, and found homes for every dog born on her place. "Only humans should be stopped from breeding," she told me once. "Dogs know when to eat their runts. Humans don't know shit."

Four years ago Jo was arrested for breaking into a greyhound puppy farm up near Apopka. Mama was healthy back then, but didn't have a dime to spare. Jaybird called me to help them find a lawyer and get Jo out on bail. It was expensive. Jo had blown up the incinerator at the farm. The police insisted she had used stolen dynamite, but Jo refused to talk about that. What she wanted to talk about was what she had heard, that hundreds of dogs had been burned in that cinder-block firepit.

"Alive. Alive," she told the judge. "Three different people told me. Those monsters get drunk, stoke up the fire, and throw in all

the puppies they can't sell. Alive, the sonsabitches! Don't even care if anyone hears them scream." From the back of the courtroom, I could hear the hysteria in her voice.

"Imagine it. Little puppies, starved in cages and then caught up and tossed in the fire." Jo shook her head. Gray streaks shone against the black. The judge grimaced. I wondered if she was getting to him.

"And then"—she glared across the courtroom—"they sell the ash and bone for fertilizer." Beside me Jaybird wiggled uncomfortably.

Jo got a suspended sentence, but only after her lawyer proved the puppy farmers had a history of citations from Animal Protection. Jo had to pay the cost of the incinerator, which was made easier when people started writing her and sending checks. The newspaper had made her a Joan of Arc of dogs. It got so bad the farm closed up the dog business and shifted over to pigs.

"I don't give a rat's ass about pigs," Jo promised the man when she wrote him his check.

"Well, I can appreciate that." He grinned at us. "Almost nobody does."

"How'd you get that dynamite?" I asked Jo when we were driving away in Jay's truck. It was the one thing she had dodged throughout the trial.

"Didn't use no dynamite." She nudged Jaybird's shoulder. "Old Bird here gave me a grenade he'd brought back from the army. Didn't think it would work. I just promised I'd get rid of it for him. But it was a fuck-up." She frowned. "It just blew the back wall out of that incinerator. They got all that money off me under false pretenses."

Every time Jack came to the hospital, he brought food, greasy bags of hamburgers and fries from the Checker Inn, melted milk shakes from the diner on the highway, and half-eaten boxes of chocolate. Mama ate nothing, just watched him. The bones of her face stood out like the girders of a bridge.

Jo and I went down to the coffee shop. Arlene, who had come in with Jack, stayed up with them. "He wants her to get up and come home," she reported to us when she came down an hour later.

Jo laughed and blew smoke over Arlene's head in a long thin stream. "Right," she barked, and offered Arlene one of her Marlboros.

"I can't smoke that shit," Arlene said. She pulled out her alligator case and lit a Salem with a little silver lighter. When Jo said nothing, Arlene relaxed a little and opened the bag of potato chips we had saved for her. "He's lost the checkbook again," she said in my direction. "Says he wants to know where we put her box of Barr Dollars so he can buy gas for the Buick."

"He's gonna lose everything as soon as she's gone." Jo pushed her short boots off with her toes and put her feet up on another seat. "He's sending the bills back marked 'deceased.' The mortgage payment, for God's sake." She shook her head and took a potato chip from Arlene's bag.

"He'll be living on the street in no time." Her voice was awful with anticipation.

Arlene turned to me. "Where are the Barr Dollars?"

I shook my head. Last I knew, Mama had stashed in her wallet exactly five one-dollar bills signed by Joseph W. Barr—crisp dollar bills she was sure would be worth money someday, though I had no idea why she thought so.

"Girls."

Jack stood in the doorway. He looked uncomfortable with the three of us sitting together. "She's looking better," he said diffidently.

Arlene nodded. Jo let blue smoke trail slowly out of her nose. I said nothing. I could feel my cheeks go stiff. I looked at the way Jack's hairline was receding, the gray bush of his military haircut thinning out and slowly exposing the bony structure of his head.

"Well." Jack's left hand gripped the doorframe. He let go and

flexed his fingers in the air. When the hand came down again, it gripped so hard the fingertips went white. My eyes were drawn there, unable to look away from the knuckles standing out knobby and hard. Beside me Jo tore her empty potato chip bag in half, spilling crumbs on the linoleum tabletop. Arlene shifted in her chair. I heard the elevator gears grind out in the hall.

"I was gonna go home," Jack said. He let go of the doorjamb.

"Good night, Daddy," Arlene called after him. He waved a hand and walked away.

Jo twisted around in her chair. "You are such a suck-ass," she said.

Arlene's cheeks flushed. "You don't have to be mean."

"I can't even say his name. You call him Daddy." Jo shook her head. "Daddy."

"He's the only father I've ever known." Arlene's face was becoming a brighter and brighter pink. She fumbled with her cigarette case, then shoved it into her bag. "And I don't see any reason to make this thing any worse."

"Worse?" Jo twisted further in her chair. She leaned over and put her hand on Arlene's forearm. "Tell me the truth," she said. "Didn't you ever just want to kill the son of a bitch?"

Arlene jerked her arm free, but Jo caught the belt of her dress. "He an't got shit. He an't gonna give you no money, and he can't hurt you no more. You don't have to suck up to him. You could tell him to go to hell."

Arlene slapped Jo's hand away and grabbed her bag. "Don't you tell me what to do." She looked over at me as if daring me to say something. "Don't you tell me nothing."

Jo dropped back in her seat and lifted her hands in mock surrender. "Me, you can say no to. Him, you run after like some little brokenhearted puppy."

"Don't, don't . . ." For a moment it was as if Arlene were going to say something. The look on her face reminded me of the night she had screamed and kicked. Do it, I wanted to say. Do it. But whatever Arlene wanted to say, she swallowed.

"Just don't!" She was out the door in a rush.

I took a drink of cold coffee and watched Jo. Her eyes were red-veined and her hair hung limp. She shook her head. "I hate her, I swear I do," she said.

I looked away. "None of us have ever much liked each other," I said.

Jo lit another cigarette and rubbed under her eyes. "You an't that bad." She pulled out a Kleenex, dampened it with a little of my black coffee, and wiped carefully under each eye. "Not now anyway. You were mean as a snake when you were little."

"That was you."

Jo's hand stopped. An angry glare came into her eyes, but instead of shouting, she laughed. I hesitated and she pushed her hair back and laughed some more.

"Well," she said, "I suppose it was. Yeah." She nodded, the laughter softening to a smile. "You just stayed gone all the time."

"Saved my life." I laced my fingers together on the table, remembering all those interminable black nights, Jo pinching me awake and the two of us hauling Arlene into the backyard to hide behind the garage. Bleak days, shame omnipresent as fear, and by the time I was twelve, I stayed gone every minute I could.

"You were the smart one." Jo looked toward the door. I watched how her eyes focused on the jamb where his hand had rested.

"You were smart, I was fast, and Arlene learned to suck ass so hard she swallowed her own soul."

I kept quiet. There was nothing to say to that.

"I dreamed you killed him." Mama's voice was rough, shaped around the tube in her nose.

"How?" I kept my voice impartial, relaxed. This was not what I wanted to talk about, but it was easier when Mama talked. I hated the hours when she just lay there staring up at the ceiling with awful anticipation on her face.

"All kinds of ways." Mama waved the hand that wasn't strapped down for the IV. She looked over at me slyly.

"You know I used to dream about it all the time. Dreamed it for years. Mostly it was you, but sometimes Jo would do it. Every once in a while it would be Arlene."

She paused, closed her eyes, and breathed for a while.

"I'd wake up just terrified, but sometimes almost glad. Relieved to have it over and done, I think. Bad times I would get up and walk around awhile, remind myself what was real, what wasn't. Listen to him snore awhile, then go make sure you girls were all right."

She looked at me with dulled eyes. I couldn't think what to say.

"Don't do it," she whispered.

I wanted to laugh, but didn't. I watched Mama's shadowy face. Her expression stunned me. Her mouth was drawn up in a big painful smile, not at all sincere.

"Did you want to kill him?"

I turned away from the black window, expecting Jo. But it was Arlene, her eyes huge with smeared mascara.

"Sure," I told her. "Still do."

She nodded and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

"But you won't."

"Probably not."

We stood still. I waited.

"I didn't think like that." She spoke slowly. "Like you and Jo. You two were always fighting. I felt like I had to be the peacemaker. And I . . ." She paused, bringing her hands up in the air as if she were lifting something.

"I just didn't want to be a hateful person. I wanted it to be all right. I wanted us all to love each other." She dropped her hands. "Now you just hate me. You and Jo, you hate me worse than him."

"No." I spoke in a whisper. "Never. It's hard sometimes to be-

lieve, I know. But I love you. Always have. Even when you made me so mad."

She looked at me. When she spoke, her voice was tiny. "I used to dream about it," she whispered. "Not killing him, but him dying. Him being dead."

I smiled at her. "Easier that way," I said.

Arlene nodded. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah."

That evening Mavis stopped me in the hall. She had a stack of papers in one hand and an expression that bordered on outrage. "This an't been signed," she said. Her hand shook the papers. I looked at them as she stepped in close to me. She pulled one off the bottom.

"This is from Mrs. Crawford, that woman was in the room next to your mama. Look at this. Look at it close."

The printing was dark and bold. **"Do not resuscitate." "No extraordinary measures to be taken."**

I looked up at Mavis, and she shook her head at me. "Don't tell me you don't know what I mean. You been on this road a long time. You know what's coming, and your mother needs you to take care of it."

She pressed a sheaf of forms into my hand. "You go in there and take another good long look at your mother, and then you get these papers done right."

Later that evening I was holding a damp washrag to my eyes over the little sink in the entry to Mama's room. I could hear Mama whispering to Jo on the other side of the curtain around the bed.

"What do you think happens after death?" Mama asked. Her voice was hoarse.

I brought the rag down to cover my mouth.

"Oh hell, Mama," Jo said. "I don't know."

"No, tell me."

There was a long pause. Then Jo gave a harsh sigh and said it

again. "Oh hell." Her chair slid forward on the linoleum floor. "You know what I really think?" Her voice was a careful whisper. "I'll tell you the truth, Mama. But don't you laugh. I think you come back as a dog."

I heard Mama's indrawn breath.

"I said don't laugh. I'm telling you what I really believe."

I lifted my head. Jo sounded so sincere. I could almost feel Mama leaning toward her.

"What I think is, if you were good to the people in your life, well then, you come back as a big dog. And . . ." Jo paused and tapped a finger on the bedframe. "If you were some evil son of a bitch, then you gonna come back some nasty little Pekingese."

Jo laughed then, a quick bark of a laugh. Mama joined in weakly. Then they were giggling together. "A Pekingese," Mama said. "Oh yes."

I put my forehead against the mirror over the sink and listened. It was good to hear. When they settled down, I started to step past the curtain. But then Mama spoke and I paused. Her voice was soft, but firm.

"I just want to go to sleep," she said. "Just sleep. I never want to wake up again."

The next morning, Mama could not move her legs. She could barely breathe. There was a pain in her side, she said. Sweat shone on her forehead when she tried to talk. The blisters on her mouth had spread to her chin.

"I'm afraid." She gripped my hand so tightly I could feel the bones of my fingers rubbing together.

"I know," I told her. "But I'm here. I won't go anywhere. I'll stay right here."

Jo came in the afternoon. The doctor had already come and gone, leaving Mama's left arm bound to a plastic frame and that tiny machine pumping more morphine. Mama seemed to be floating, only coming to the surface now and then. Every time

her eyes opened, she jerked as if she had just realized she was still alive.

"What did he say?" Jo demanded. I could barely look at her.

"It was a stroke." I cleared my throat. I spoke carefully, softly. "A little one in the night. He thinks there will be more, lots more. One of them might kill her, but it might not. She might go on a long time. They don't know."

I watched Jo's right hand search her jacket pockets until she found the pack of cigarettes. She put one in her mouth, but didn't light it. She just looked at me while I looked back at her.

"We have to make some decisions," I said. Jo nodded.

"I don't want them to . . ." She lifted her hands and shook them. Her eyes were glittering in the fluorescent lighting. "To hurt her."

"Yeah." I nodded gratefully. I could never have fought Jo if she had disagreed with me. "I told them we didn't want them to do anything."

"Anything?" Jo's eyes beamed into mine like searchlights. I nodded again. I pulled out the forms Mavis had given me.

"We'll have to get Jack to sign these."

Jo took the papers and looked through them. "Isn't that the way it always is?" Her voice was sour and strained. The cigarette was still clenched between her teeth. "Isn't that just the way it always is?"

"Mama's pissed herself," Arlene told me when I came back from dinner. I was surprised to see her. Her hair was pushed behind her ears and her face scrubbed clean. She was sponging Mama's hips and thighs. Mama's face was red. Her eyes were closed. Arlene's expression was unreadable. I picked up the towel by Mama's feet and wiped behind Arlene's sponge. Jo came in, dragging an extra chair. Arlene did not look up, she just shifted Mama's left leg and carefully sponged the furry mat of Mama's mound.

"Jo talked to me." Arlene's voice was low. Without mascara she

seemed young again, her cheeks pearly in the frosty light that outlined the bed. Behind me, Jo positioned the chair and sat down heavily. There was a pause while the two of them looked at each other. Then Mama opened her eyes, and we all turned to her. The white of her left eye was bloody and the pupil an enormous black hole.

"Baby?" Mama whispered. I reached for her free hand. "Baby?" she kept whispering. "Baby?" Her voice was thin and raspy. Her thumb was working the pump, but it seemed to have lost its ability to help. Her good eye was wide and terrified. Arlene made a sound in her throat. Jo stood up. None of us said a thing. The door opened behind me. Jack's face was pale and too close. His left hand clutched a big greasy bag.

"Honey?" Jack said. "Honey?"

I looked away, my throat closing up. Jo's hands clamped down on the foot of the bed. Arlene's hands curled into fists at her waist. I looked at her. She looked at me and then over to Jo.

"Honey?" Jack said again. His voice sounded high and cracked, like a young boy too scared to believe what he was seeing. Arlene's pupils were almost as big as Mama's. I saw her tongue pressing her teeth, her lips pulled thin with strain. She saw me looking at her, shook her head, and stepped back from the bed.

"Daddy," she said softly. "Daddy, we have to talk."

Arlene took Jack's arm and led him to the door. He let her take him out of the room.

I looked over at Jo. Her hands were wringing the bar at the foot of the bed like a wet towel. She continued to do it as the door swung closed behind Arlene and Jack. She continued even as Mama's mouth opened and closed and opened again.

Mama was whimpering. "Ba . . . ba . . . ba . . . ba . . . ba . . . ba."

I took Mama's hand and held it tight, then stood there watching Jo doing the only thing she could do, blistering the skin off her palms.

* * *

When Arlene came back, her face was gray, but her mouth had smoothed out.

"He signed it," she said.

She stepped around me and took her place on the other side of the bed. Jo dropped her head forward. I let my breath out slowly. Mama's hand in mine was loose. Her mouth had gone slack, though it seemed to quiver now and then, and when it did I felt the movement in her fingers.

Across from me Arlene put her right hand on Mama's shoulder. She didn't flinch when Mama's bloody left eye rolled to the side. The good eye stared straight up, wide with profound terror. Arlene began a soft humming then, as if she were starting some lullaby. Mama's terrified eye blinked and then blinked again. In the depths of that pupil I seemed to see little starbursts, tiny desperate explosions of light.

Arlene's hum never paused. She ran her hand down and took Mama's fingers into her own. Slowly, some of the terror in Mama's face eased. The straining muscles of her neck softened. Arlene's hum dropped to a lower register. It resounded off the top of her hollow throat like an oboe or a French horn shaped entirely of flesh. No, I thought. Arlene is what she has always wanted to be, the one we dare not hate. I wanted Arlene's song to go on forever. I wanted to be part of it. I leaned forward and opened my mouth, but the sound that came out of me was ugly and fell back into my throat. Arlene never even looked over at me. She kept her eyes on Mama's bloody pupil.

I knew then. Arlene would go on as long as it took, making that sound in her throat like some bird creature, the one that comes to sing hope when there is no hope left. Strength was in Arlene's song, peace its meter, love the bass note. Mama's eye swung in lazy accompaniment to that song—from me to Jo, and around again to Arlene. Her hands gripped ours, while her mouth hung open. From the base of the bed, Jo reached up and laid her hands on Mama's legs. Mama looked down once, then the good eye turned back to our bird and clung there. My eyes followed

hers. I watched the thrush that beat in Arlene's breast. I heard its stubborn tuneless song.

Mama's whole attention remained fixed on that song until the pupil of the right eye finally filled up with blood and blacked out. Even then, we held on. We held Mama's stilled shape between us. We held her until she set us free.