

Last Child

by Elizabeth George

It was 1932, the second to last day of that year, before sunrise. My sister Katherine, then nine, my brother Isaac, eight, and I, six, were huddled together in the hay barn where Aunt Stel had sent us so we wouldn't hear the sounds coming from our parents' bedroom and be frightened by them, while Mary Lou, who was always trying to act older than the eleven years she was, was inside running around and fetching things to help our aunt, the only nurse in the small farm town where we lived, in the delivery of Mother's fifth child. We wished they would hurry. Daddy had done his best bundling us up in whichever coats, scarves, and blankets were nearest at hand, but of course he hadn't been able to see very well what he was doing, it being three in the morning then, so the cold had found its way in through the loose folds of fabric and within the first hour of waiting we were numb through and through.

That, and we were all curious to know what a newborn baby looked like—Isaac had been too young to remember me when I was born, Katherine too young to remember either of us, and I, of course, had no one to remember.

I don't know what time it was when Mary Lou finally called out across the cornfield for us to come back inside, only that there had been, on the horizon before us, the faintest red glow, and that we ran towards our little farmhouse caught up in that glow, the wind cutting at the parts of our faces we had unwrapped in the barn so as to breathe easier. One strong gust of wind knocked me into Katherine, who shoved back hard like she meant it but then laughed.

The front door opened straight into the dining room; from there a short narrow hall and a left turn at the end of it would bring you to our parents' bedroom. Mary Lou was standing at the door when we arrived. Her thick dark hair was coming unbraided and wisping all over the place, and I remember distinctly the look on her flushed face and in her eyes, how it was not terror of what she had seen that I saw in them (though she was still, I think, a little shaken by it all), nor even the faintest trace of the usual pride and self-satisfaction that appeared whenever Mary Lou had gotten to prove, once again, how very mature she was for her age, how very much older than the rest of us. Rather, there had been a kind of absence there, a quiet awe, like what she had just witnessed was nothing short of a sacred event, and that she had not quite come back from it yet, but was still there, reckoning with it. She said nothing, but cracked the bedroom door open for us to file in. She entered last, behind me, with a hand just brushing the back of my head to keep me moving forward.

Mother lay in the light of the oil lamp under the patchwork quilt she had made for herself in the many bold and clashing colors she loved, exhausted but smiling, her neck with the strands of dark tangled hair stuck to it glistening, green eyes glistening, all of her glistening, triumphant. Aunt Stel had had her concerns about Mother having yet another child at her age, all of eleven years after delivering her first (though she was only twenty-one when she had Mary Lou), but Mother had gone and done it again anyway. When we walked in, she was lying back looking deeply pleased with herself about this, about how perfectly events had transpired in spite of her sister-in-law's or anyone else's reservations.

Daddy stood at Mother's right side murmuring Esther, my star, over and over into her ear, and when he glanced up at us, his whole face was filled with light. He said not a word, but beckoned us with a wide wave of his hand, and as he did, Mother extended her arms just slightly so that the face of the new baby would be visible to us. When we children were lined up on her left side, me last and having to press hard against the other three to secure myself a place at Mother's elbow, Mother told us in a whisper that the baby's name was Henry Lee. In the dimness, from the corner of my eye, I saw Mary Lou smile—she liked that he had a double name, just like she did—and hang on tighter to the head of the bed, using it to lift herself up to look over Mother's shoulder at him. Katherine, Isaac and I likewise raised ourselves up on tiptoes, resting our fingertips on the edge of the mattress for balance, and peered into our brother's face.

I didn't know what to make of such a face at first. It hardly looked human, with its too-puffy cheeks, its wet, heavy, droopy lower lip, its shadows for eyebrows. I'd almost wanted him to have flossy blond hair like mine, but he didn't, it was dark like Mother's and pretty thickly grown-in for a newborn. But then Mother shifted his body in her arms so he would be in a more upright position, and Henry Lee opened his eyes. They were gray like what the people on Daddy's side of the family have—gray like mine.

Please, I want to hold him, I said. The words were out of my mouth and my arms had sprung out to receive him before any thought of why I wanted him, why so urgently, had formed itself properly in my mind. But Mother said not yet, and that she would rather me be sitting down so I could set him in my lap, that it would be safer that way. Then Aunt Stel, standing a few steps behind Daddy in the dark back corner of the room, said that what a newborn needs is peace and rest, not to be passed around between his siblings, and anyhow I was in her opinion too little to have any business holding any babies at all.

I was stung by the tone in which my aunt had spoken to me, because while Mary Lou was her clear favorite out of the four of us, she still seemed plenty fond of Katherine, Isaac, and me, as well. But then, the Aunt Stel I knew had always been a bit rough around the edges like that, would tell you exactly what she was thinking without much concern for how she might come across. Daddy said she had been different when they were younger, but that service as an army nurse in the Great War had made, if not an especially bright or inventive woman of her (he never said this part, but others who knew her had), then a hardened, pragmatic one. You do whatever you've got to do to get by, that was the rule Aunt Stel not only lived her own life in accordance with, but tried to make others whose lives she had a stake in live in accordance with as well—my father in particular.

There was a long, chilly pause. Then, I still say there's something not right with that baby, Aunt Stel said quietly, turning back to my father. I think you ought to let me take him on out to the hospital, get him looked at.

Daddy sighed, half-exasperated, half-fretful. Why, Sis, he said, I just don't see what for. I know I don't know near as much about medical matters as you do, but it seems to me that he's breathing fine, and... well... and he was doing a fine job of crying, just a little bit ago. Daddy paused, pressed his lips. And I should think I've seen enough babies born in my time to know that much, he concluded, looking quickly at Mother and then again at his sister. When he next spoke, his tone was a good deal more fretful than before—Aunt Stel must have been working the

shadowy notion of there being something the matter with Henry Lee into his head all morning. So, what is it you see that Esther and I don't, Estella? he said. Could you at least tell us that?

Aunt Stel blinked slowly, a few times, before answering, as if the explanation were complicated and she had to think of how to simplify it so that anyone could understand, even someone without the kind of medical background and training that she had. It's his circulation, she said finally. To the extremities, the hands and feet, you know. Why, they're simply *freezing*.

I hadn't thought so, said Mother, slipping two fingers under the swaddling blankets for confirmation. No, they still feel fine to me.

Well, that's only because your temperature is still so high from the birth, said Aunt Stel. The heat you're feeling isn't from him, Esther, it's all your own.

Well, his hands felt just fine to me, too, when I was holding him, said Daddy.

Aunt Stel looked over at her brother, smiling faintly. Oh, Adam, she said, of course they do. You always had cold hands yourself, even in the summertime. It used to worry Mother so, remember? So anything cold is going to feel warm to you, when it isn't really. You see, Aunt Stel continued, stepping out of her corner and taking hold of one of Daddy's hands. Why, even now they're cold.

Daddy drew his hand back to himself. Then hadn't I better go to the hospital, too—go and check on *my* circulation? he said with a smile I think he had wanted to look natural, but that seemed more strained and lost-looking than anything.

Aunt Stel turned away, looked down at Henry Lee.

We-ell, said Daddy, drawing the word out long to fill the silence, I don't much like the idea of it, the outside temperature being what it is. I certainly do not like it. But if you really think it's what we need to do, then he'll go. Another long pause, this time with a look to Mother, inviting her to have the final word, if she wanted it, before the debate closed.

Mother frowned thoughtfully. Is there really nothing more we can do for him here? she said to Aunt Stel.

Aunt Stel shook her head.

You're sure? said Mother. It seemed Aunt Stel had been working worrisome thoughts into Mother's mind all morning as well, had perhaps started in on her before she had Daddy.

I'm sure, Aunt Stel said gravely. I know a complication when I see one, she said.

It's settled, then, Daddy said. I'll take him.

Aunt Stel gave a little twitch as if Daddy had shouted instead of spoken in that soft solemn voice of his and startled her. You don't think that old car of yours is liable to break down on the way? she asked in an uncharacteristically anxious manner. "That old car" of ours hadn't been driven or even started for the better part of two years on account of our not being able to afford the gasoline.

You wouldn't let me borrow yours? said Daddy. Aunt Stel was one of the few people in town who still had the means to keep her car in working order, and she drove it just about wherever and whenever she pleased. You know I'd take good care of it, Daddy added.

No, said Aunt Stel sharply. Then her voice softened. No, Adam, I know you would. But your place is here with your wife, taking care of her.

I'm all right now, though, Mother said in a quiet voice, the kind of quiet that makes everybody else in a room turn and hold their breath. You're *certain* that all this is necessary, Sis?

(my older siblings remember that Mother used to call Aunt Stel "Sis" often, but this was the one and only occasion that I remember hearing her do so). There's got to be *something* we can do for him here at home, at least until the weather improves, Mother said.

I reckon not, Aunt Stel said, shaking her head. It looks rather bad to me. It's only been a dozen or so babies I've delivered in my lifetime, but believe me, I have come to know a complication when I see one. A pause as Aunt Stel stepped past her brother and reexamined Henry Lee's hands—though not very closely, only at arm's length, one finger hooked under his tiny palm, lifting it towards the red dawn light from the window. Certainly looks to me like a circulatory condition, but I'm not educated enough in such things to tell you what that condition might be, or what to do about it. The best thing to do would be to take him in to Dr. Brightling.

Mother opened her mouth, but Aunt Stel, anticipating what she was about to say, hastened to add, Oh, I know, his office isn't the closest, but look, it's the difference between a half-hour's driving and twenty minutes, and frankly, I don't trust a one of those other doctors 'round here, not a single one. A pause. Of course, we *could* have telephoned him, Aunt Stel said, looking pointedly at my father, and had him come around to us, if you or those Napiers would *ever* get around to having one installed. Mr. and Mrs. Napier were our nearest neighbors, farmers like us who lived a quarter mile up the road.

Let's not have that discussion just now, Estella, said Daddy in a low voice. What she really meant with the telephone remark, which of course had gone over my head at the time, was that if Daddy had been a little bit smarter with his money, we could have been able to afford this piece of technology—as if there was more that Daddy or we, as a family, could have done to save and make money that we weren't already doing.

Of course, there is the telephone at my house, said Aunt Stel, but then again, who knows how long it would take Dr. Brightling to get out here? And that's assuming he doesn't get lost on the way or have other patients to attend to first. Any place more'n half an hour from his office he more'n likely won't know how to get to directly. Are you sure *you* know the way, Adam? It gets tricky, nearer you go to downtown. No, no, I know the city better than you, I'll take him.

The part about getting around in the city was true enough: Daddy had only had occasion to go there a handful of times, and that had been a while before, back when circumstances were better. At least have one of the children go with you, Daddy said. They could hold him while you drive, make sure he doesn't get bounced around too much, and that he stays warm.

Just then Henry Lee, who we all thought was sound asleep, stirred and made a noise, a low little moan, as if he knew he was being spoken about and wanted to get a word in on his own behalf. It was the first sound I had heard from him.

I drew nearer, peered over Mother's shoulder at him. His gray eyes were open. They shifted, met mine. He looks just like me, I thought. Or he would, in a couple of years, the dark hair notwithstanding. There was no reason at all to think so; I just *felt* that it would be so, that it had to be, in some way or other. He was so much younger than me, and a boy, but somehow I also knew that we would understand each other completely, in a way that none of my other siblings did one another or me, that I would keep him from all harm and loneliness in this world, and that in time, he would do the same for me.

Those were the strongest convictions I have ever felt in my life, strong as only the convictions of children can be.

But Aunt Stel shook her head firmly. No, she said, it's too cold for them to be outside now, even in the car. Then they'll get sick too, just as bad or worse. Which hadn't made sense to me, standing there as I was with my legs still slightly numb from sitting for hours in the cold hay barn where Aunt Stel herself had sent us. But I didn't think to question her, and Katherine or Isaac neither. No one did.

Too cold, Aunt Stel said again, ruminating on the subject as if it were one of deep philosophic interest for her. And none of them is old enough for it.

Two heads over from me, I saw Mary Lou look up across Mother at our aunt, saw the flash in her cattish gold-green eyes. *I'm* old enough, she said. Her voice trembled. I wasn't sure exactly what it was Aunt Stel thought none of us were old enough for, whether it had really to do with the cold or with keeping hold of our brother, or something else. I don't think Mary Lou knew either, but it didn't matter. It was the general sentiment, and her not being exempted from it, that mattered. Mommy, Daddy, tell her, said Mary Lou. Tell her I'm old enough. What, *aren't* I old enough? After all *this*? She waved a hand around to indicate what "all this" was, though of course we knew what she meant.

Oh, honey, said Aunt Stel, her tone, however, betraying her impatience at having to placate Mary Lou. You know I didn't mean it like that. It's just that right now your mother needs your help more than I do. So you'd best stay here, do what you can for her, you understand?

I really am all right, Mother said. She can go if she wants to.

But on this point, too, Aunt Stel was adamant. I'll just tuck him into my coat, she said, and it'll be all right. Done that with the Gradens' boy, too, when he came out with that awful rattling in his chest. And their boy's doing just fine now, isn't he? So, the sooner we quit this arguing and I can get going, the better it'll be for this one. Not once in the conversation, I noticed, had Aunt Stel said my brother's name.

Daddy and Mother still weren't completely at ease with the arrangement, but in the end they let it go, Mother because she trusted Daddy's judgment, and Daddy because he trusted his sister's. There was, after all, the Gradens' boy to consider, and the dozen or so other newborn boys and girls—four of them being Mother and Daddy's own—whom the old nurse had delivered healthily into this world. In medical situations, at least, Aunt Stel knew what she was doing.

We passed the morning in a state of restless anticipation of our brother's return, but it was not an uncomfortable state, suffused as it was with a kind of quiet joy and wonder at what had happened that morning, the arguing with Aunt Stel aside. It was even better than Christmas, I said, and my siblings agreed. Katherine declared, with an air of wisdom that was entirely unconscious and even funnier for that, that birthdays were the best holidays of all, and Isaac, the odd one who strong emotions of any kind rendered splutteringly inarticulate, bobbed his head vigorously at the both of us.

We then spent some time pestering Mary Lou for details about the birth. She told us a few small things, like about the heap of blankets and sheets and such that she had had to carry off to be washed, and that the way Henry Lee's first cry sounded, you'd have thought it was a whole litter of kittens and not a single human baby being born. It was *so* funny, she said.

But there was also a lot of the story she wasn't telling us. This was not an unusual thing for Mary Lou to do, withholding the most exciting details of stories from us, and that with an air of smugness, teasing us with the special knowledge that only she had. Only, it wasn't like that the morning Henry Lee was born.

It was really scary at first, Mary Lou began, and that was how we knew she wasn't just being coy with us: Mary Lou *never* admitted fear. Because you always have to wonder, she said, in a voice we almost had to strain our ears to hear. Because even when everything seems to be going like it's supposed to, anything could happen, and you can never really tell... Mary Lou trailed off, raised both her hands to her face and cupped her own cheeks. After a long moment, she continued. She told us that Mother was moaning a lot and four or five times had screamed, and that she, Mary Lou, had known that the pain and the screaming was normal, because Mother and Aunt Stel had told her so before it started, but she had been scared for our mother anyway. Then she had gotten to feeling like she should not have been there in the first place, seeing our mother in that condition, hearing her like that. But then I looked at her face again, Mary Lou said, Mother's face, and I realized...

She lingered for several seconds on the word, till Katherine said something small to prompt her: You realized what, Sis?

Mary Lou smiled faintly at her, shrugged and let her hands fall to her sides. That it was all right, Mary Lou said finally, her eyes resting for a moment on each of ours. Be concerned, but don't be afraid, Mary Lou said, repeating what Mother had said earlier in the month as she was explaining to us, in language that was plain and straightforward and that glossed over nothing, what was going to happen to her soon, around the end of the year.

Then it was over, Mary Lou said, and Mother and Daddy looked so happy—you saw.

We three sensed that there was still more to the story, just one thing more that our sister was not telling us, or was not able to tell us, which we knew had to be the most important thing, the thing that had changed her. But this time Mary Lou really could not say more, no matter how much Katherine and I begged and Isaac spluttered. All she could do was smile distantly, shrug helplessly, and tell us that she couldn't explain, that we just would have had to have been there to know.

Whatever Mother needed in the hours after the birth, we would race each other to get it. Daddy got up from his place beside her exactly one time, and that was to put out the oil lamp, though it had long been light enough outside that we no longer needed it. Otherwise, he just sat there, talking to Mother about nothing in particular, but smiling so much that he began to rub his cheeks and complain, through a chuckle, that they had gotten sore. We were all convinced that, even if there was something in Aunt Stel's concerns about Henry Lee, nothing at all could be seriously wrong with him, because nothing bad ever happens on mornings that look the way this morning had looked, the scarlet sunrise going golden and winking at us off the snow on the ground and the ice in the linden trees outside our house, and then the sky arriving blue and absolutely clear as early morning grew late.

But when afternoon came and Aunt Stel still wasn't back with Henry Lee, we began to get nervous. Even so, the worst explanation we came up with was that Aunt Stel was having trouble getting her car started (which served her right for being so self-satisfied about having one), which was nothing someone at the hospital couldn't help her with. Probably Henry Lee

was inside asleep in a bed or a nurse's arms while an orderly or even a doctor with no other patients to attend to at the moment—perhaps the esteemed Dr. Brightling himself!—was outside helping Aunt Stel with her car. Or, there might have been nothing wrong with the car at all: it might simply have been that Aunt Stel was waiting for the temperature to reach a high point before setting off for our home again, in which case she and Henry Lee were probably on their way back to us as we were speaking of them.

Right around three o'clock in the afternoon, Aunt Stel's car came lumbering to a stop in front of our house, exactly where she had parked it earlier that morning. She got out, took up the white bundle in the passenger seat with what seemed to me an almost offhanded manner, and proceeded briskly up to the house. Isaac opened the door for her, closed it behind her.

For a moment Aunt Stel just stood there in front of the door, saying nothing. And though I thought Henry Lee must have been upset with the cold and all the trundling about in the car, not a sound from him, either. A fold in the blanket had been laid over his face, and my first thought was that Aunt Stel had done it to shield it some from the cold and the bright afternoon sunlight.

Well, and what did Dr. Brightling say? said Daddy.

Aunt Stel shook her head. Didn't say a thing, she said slowly. I tried, Adam. I drove as fast as it was safe to do, and I made sure he stayed bundled up tight, but he...

Then she drew the edge of the blanket back and showed us his face, which was gray and hard like stone. Five minutes out from the hospital in the city she had checked on him again, she said, but he was already gone. It was that poor circulation of his, Aunt Stel said, had to have been, but keeping him in the house wouldn't have been any better, because if the cold hadn't gotten him, then the lack of proper flow of blood and oxygen throughout his body would have done him in by nightfall. She had done everything she could, she said.

Nobody cried at first, hardly able to believe what we were seeing and hearing. Mother, who had come into the front room on Daddy's arm upon hearing Aunt Stel's car pull up outside, asked only to hold her son, and we children, standing side by side, only turned our heads to watch as our aunt passed before us and handed the bundle to Mother. She pulled the blanket further back to expose Henry Lee's whole head, held two fingers under his nose, then touched them to his chest, then shook her head, then lowered it, her long dark hair falling over her face and his whole body, veiling them both from the rest of us. Then Daddy, a devout Presbyterian who never permitted himself to use intemperate language even in front of other grown men, murmured the words, Goddamn it, twice, with a long pause between each utterance, which somehow made them sound more like prayers than curses—but injured, angry prayers. He was the first to cry. He did it without a sound, just closed his gray eyes and wiped furiously at them.

To this day, I have no idea what possessed Aunt Stel to say the thing she said next, or what she had meant to achieve by saying it. All I can figure is that she was a woman not accustomed to holding her tongue on any subject, so perhaps she was only thinking aloud, but at the same time not really *thinking* when she said, It's just as well. These are difficult times to be having so many children in. I just don't know what you all would have done with a fifth one.

At this my father, pale Irishman that he was, turned paler still. Say, what was that we learned in Sunday School, Estella? he said quietly. He waited a moment, and when she didn't provide the answer, he did: That the Lord does not give His people any more than they can handle. He raised his right hand, ran it hard along his jaw. Yes, I do believe that was it.

Well, there you go, then, she said.

Not another word, Stel, Daddy said, his voice wavering, one of the few times I had ever known him to lose control of it. Not one more word from you.

Stone cold, Mother said suddenly, looking up at Aunt Stel. You let my son go stone cold. You couldn't at least have gotten him home to us before that?

Daddy was gone for most of the rest of the day arranging a Christian burial for Henry Lee with the minister at the Presbyterian church we belonged to. Mother held his body for hours, rocking it in her arms as she would never get to do in the months and years to come. She gave us children each the choice whether to look once more at him or not. One by one, we each looked. Mary Lou got a little bit teary, but like Daddy she did not make a sound. Katherine wept open and ugly, and Isaac in numb incomprehension. Funnily enough he was the only one of us to speak, asking, with considerable difficulty, if we would get to see our brother in Heaven even though he had not been baptized before he died. Mother bit her lip. Evidently the question had been weighing heavily on her mind as well. But as she had never believed in there being matters too mature for discussion with children—only appropriate and inappropriate ways of discussing them—she told us plainly what she was thinking.

I don't know, she said. I'd like to think so. I'd like to think there are a good many things that a good many people and churches do not understand about the Lord and His ways.

When it was my turn to look at Henry Lee's body, I only stared, unable to reconcile the lifeless vessel in front of me with the infant whose bright gray eyes had looked into mine only a few hours before. Had he died with his eyes open and no one closed them for him, it might have been different. Mother was surprised, I think, by the way I seemed to be taking things, but she was a wise woman and I felt that somehow, she understood me.

The next day a freak turn of nature warmed the weather to the low-40s, and the minister said he could meet with us that day instead of on New Year's Day, as we had planned. We buried Henry Lee with few formalities, with only us and Aunt Stel in attendance, for her and Daddy's parents were both dead long before any of us children were born, and Mother's lived too far away to come on such short notice. Even there I did not cry, only shuddered a little and hurt my father by not allowing him to comfort me. He had touched my shoulder, I had pulled away from him violently and stopped shuddering at once, and it wasn't till years later that I was able to tell him why I had done what I did and ask him to forgive me (which he had already done long ago, as we were still standing over my brother's grave, he had said). It was just that I had realized, on some level, that my loss was fundamentally different in nature from theirs, and with that realization had come the irrational but overwhelming sense that our two sorrows must not ever touch, or else something terrible, something uncontainable, would happen.

We returned home in the late afternoon. I hadn't made a sound all that day. But that night, lying awake in bed after my siblings (all four of us shared a bedroom) had gone to sleep, it occurred to me that I had only looked at my brother, but never actually reached out and touched him—and now I never, never would. Then something in me shifted, snapped. I got up at once and ran out of the house without stopping to grab a coat or anything, ran for the hay barn, where I wept fiercely and all night long and then never again for the rest of my childhood years.

About a week after we buried Henry Lee, I woke up at dawn to see, through the bedroom window, old Mr. Napier walking briskly down the road to our house, though the weather was still unseasonably mild and comfortable, the kind he liked to take his time and enjoy strolling through. He didn't seem to be enjoying himself that morning, though, with his hands in his pockets and a grim expression on his face.

I liked Mr. Napier, he was like the grandfather I never had, so instead of turning over and trying to sleep for another hour, I got out of bed quietly, so as not to wake my siblings, and went into the front room to meet him. Mother was in the kitchen counting eggs, which Daddy must have brought inside from our hens just a moment or two before, as he was still wearing his lightweight coat. He stood in the front window, head cocked, peering out at the fast-approaching figure of Mr. Napier, whose visit, I realized, my parents were not expecting.

I don't know why I did it, but instead of revealing my presence to them, I snuck through the front room while both of their backs were turned to me and darted into the family room, where I figured Daddy would take Mr. Napier if they needed to sit down and discuss something. I hid behind the far end of the worn gold-and-cream striped sofa, which I realize now was stupid because either one of those men might have decided to walk around the sofa to the end of the room and discovered me there.

But that's not what happened. What happened was that after a brief greeting, condolences from the old man, and Mother's offer of coffee, Mr. Napier asked simply if he could speak to Daddy, and Daddy led him into the family room like I knew he would. Mr. Napier said he had just put two and two together. Your boy died the day before New Year's Eve, isn't that right?

Yes, sir, that's right, said Daddy. Born and died that morning.

That when your sister got back to you with the news? Was in the morning? Strange, but he sounded to me almost hopeful as he asked this.

No sir, my father said, it was afternoon when she got back.

Well, Adam, said Mr. Napier, his calloused and weather-cracked hands rasping against each other, that settles it then. Yes, to my mind that settles it. Beause it was that *morning*, you see, at around eight or nine o'clock, that my wife gone into town on an errand, and she could have sworn it was your sister's shiny ol' car parked along the street outside the diner, and the lady herself inside warmin' up with a cup of coffee, though she wasn't sure, my wife, you know how her vision's been getting worse by the year. But just settin' there, your sister Estella, not a care in the world it seemed, all by herself. 'Course, my wife didn't think to go and look at the inside of that car—and why would she have? We didn't know anything yet about... well... A heavy silence. But I think you know where I'm goin' with this, Adam, Mr. Napier finished. Then, just to be sure, Mr. Napier told my father, in terms simple enough that I, too, could understand them, exactly where he was going with this talk about Aunt Stel and my brother, and the car, and the cold.

When Mr. Napier finished, I expected that Daddy would say something angry like *goddamn it* again, or perhaps that I would feel, through the side of the sofa I'd pressed myself tight against, him sitting down heavily in it, but he didn't do either of those things. All he did was thank Mr. Napier for coming and speaking to him. It didn't occur to me then, but later I realized that Daddy already suspected the thing Mr. Napier had come to tell him, and that Mother, wise woman that she was, must have suspected, too—perhaps that was what I had

sometimes heard them conferring about late in the night, those first few days after Henry Lee's death.

Like I said, Aunt Stel was not an especially intelligent or imaginative woman, not one to know all that much about cover stories or covering one's tracks. But she was pragmatic, and in the end she had still been clever enough with her words and our trust to accomplish what she had set out to accomplish.

From that morning on I became a strange child, and strange and impossible I stayed for a period of almost three years. For one thing, I became frightened of my own reflection in mirrors: there was something wicked about the expression on my face, a nasty, knowing smile and look in the eyes that I tried but could not make go away. Aunt Stel said the Devil himself must have gotten into me, and with the way I acted toward her and everyone in my family, I suppose I can't blame her for wondering.

True, after Henry Lee's death my parents never again invited Aunt Stel over just to visit like they used to, but only when one of us children was sick enough to need her care. Yet the fact that Mother and Daddy still called upon her at *all*, could still face her and be civil and not cast her out of our home and our lives forever, was something I did not understand, possessing as I did only the most rudimentary, black-and-white understanding of human relationships. I had thought it a sign of cowardice in my parents, their continuing a relationship with Aunt Stel, and so a hateful cycle began in which every time Daddy had Aunt Stel come over to care for one of us, I would punish him and Mother both with bouts of sullen and defiant silence which lasted for days, during which that ugly, eerie smile would appear—the one that came unwilling, that terrified me, that simply refused to release into a more natural expression even when I wished it would.

I played other stupid games, but my favorite was the deaf-dumb game, in which for as long as Aunt Stel was in the house I would pretend to be a deaf-mute and would neither speak when spoken to nor respond at to any noise at all. Katherine and Isaac (mostly the latter, as Katherine was already beginning to grow out of such play) would attempt to spoil my game either by shouting in my ear all the funniest or cruelest things they could think to say, or by sneaking up behind and trying to startle me. Neither tactic worked, in part because I played my games with the utmost seriousness, so that laughter was a physical impossibility for me, and in part because neither of them was as funny or cruel or sneaky as they thought they were.

Later this became the deaf-dumb-blind game, in which on top of pretending to be a deaf-mute, I would relax the muscles in my eyes so my vision would go all fuzzy and pretend I was blind as well. This was something I had learned to do by accident when I was seven and daydreaming in the schoolroom; the trick helped somewhat when Katherine and Isaac would try to spoil this version of the game by waving their hands in front of my face or doing other things to make me look at them. I wasn't as good at the playing-blind part of the game, though, and often resorted to closing my eyes, pretending I had sewn them shut or had lost them somehow.

The one time Aunt Stel tried to give me medicine during this period, for a cold or something like that, I refused it, ran my chin into the spoon and spilled the contents pretending I had no eyes to see the utensil in front of me, several times, until Mother administered the

medicine herself instead, that day and every other time I'd needed medication. That was the one piece of insolence my parents ever let me get away with.

The nastiest thing I can remember doing was a certain performance at a family reunion in June. I had turned eight two weeks before, and the reunion was Aunt Stel's first opportunity to give me my birthday present—she still gave presents to us children every Christmas and birthday. I could be unfair and say that the gifts were only formalities, given more to make herself feel good than us, but the truth is, I believe Aunt Stel still cared for us, in a distant but no less genuine way, and that she gave those gifts out of true affection for us children.

I never played the deaf-dumb-blind game at reunions, as there would have been serious consequences had I behaved in such an unseemly way before all of Daddy's side of the family—serious enough for me to actually pay them mind. Silently, then, I accepted Aunt Stel's gift, given to me in a box without wrapping, and at the prompting of her and some ancient great-aunts, I set the box down on a picnic table and lifted the lid. Inside was a bisque baby doll with blue enamel eyes and long ash blonde curls—not an expensive doll, but not a cheap one, either. At the sight of it, pretty little thing that it was, all thought of the consequences of evil behavior (first the pain from a belting, then the unbearable shame that always came with a talking-to from Daddy) dissipated. With one hand I lifted the doll out of its box by the heels. With the other, I tapped its face with my fingernail, heard it ring like real bisque. Then I looked right at Aunt Stel and let both my arms go slack, slamming the doll's face into the edge of the wooden picnic table, letting the body of the doll fall onto the dry, hard dirt and the pieces of its own shattered face. It was a heavy-handed gesture, I know, but children are like that when they want to make a point about something.

It was a long and terrible night that followed.

The biggest part of why secret knowledge made me not proud like Mary Lou, but malicious, was that I had wanted so much to tell my siblings what Aunt Stel had done to our baby brother. I wanted to make them understand that being evil to her was the only way we were going to get any justice for Henry Lee, since Daddy and Mother weren't doing anything to get it for him themselves, weren't *brave* enough. But I couldn't tell my siblings that, couldn't trust a single one of them not to turn around and tell our parents about it—then Daddy would find out I'd been eavesdropping on him and Mr. Napier, and there any trust he had in me would go.

So, I tried to tell them without telling them, through obscure references and hints to that day which I myself would not have picked up on were I in their place. Katherine and Isaac hadn't the faintest idea what I was getting at, and no amount of hinting could put the idea into their heads. As far as they were concerned, Aunt Stel was still nice to them and they still loved her, and the new and profound disquiet between her and our parents simply never registered. It made me so mad, their obliviousness, so that I became a devil to them, too, calling names or storming off and refusing to acknowledge them for days (it is both remarkable and deeply troubling, now that I think of it, the length of time I could sustain anger at that age).

I never asked her to confirm it, but I think Mary Lou suspected our aunt of some kind of wrongdoing as well, especially after having a year and then two to think about it. I spent inordinate amounts of time wondering about the sudden coolness and awkwardness I sensed between her and Aunt Stel, why she seemed sort of confused under Aunt Stel's caressing hand

when she had never been before, and why she wouldn't chatter with her like she used to, but just stood there with a sort of helpless smile as Aunt Stel, between caring for whomever was sick in the house, braided her hair or admired the outfits she cobbled together for parties at friends' houses.

One time only did Mary Lou and I, as children, ever speak of Aunt Stel. It was after a family Christmas gathering, the second since Henry Lee's death. Katherine and Isaac were sleeping like stones and I was still shuddering with shame and anger at myself over the harsh talk my father had had with me about my generally disgraceful behavior (not bad enough this time to earn me a belting as well, but the kind of talking-to that made me feel so ashamed of myself that frankly, I'd rather have just had the belting), when Mary Lou came over to my bed and whispered, You know, I see your point, being the way you were today with her. But listen, kid: if anyone's got the right to be like that, it's me. Because I'll bet you anything that if she had at least let me ride with her that morning, it wouldn't... she trailed off.

Well, don't think you're so *espessional*, Mary Lou, I shot back (at eight I was always trying to say words that were too big to fit my mouth, words I'd heard Daddy or Mother or Mary Lou use). I could've done that just as well as you. I wouldn'ta let nothin' touch him—not the cold, not... not *anything*. I took a shaky breath, looked down, then looked back at my sister. His eyes were just like mine, I said. Did you see *that*, Mary Lou?

Mary Lou held a hand up over my head to hush me, as my voice was rising. Were they really? she said after a moment, and that time when she spoke to me, her voice had changed, softened. She looked at me—for the first time she *really* looked. No, I hadn't seen that, she said. She turned to gaze out the window, at the moon and the stars and the silhouettes of the linden trees. The word is *exceptional*, dear, she said absently. And no, you're right, I am not exceptional. With that she rose and went back to her own bed.

I don't know why, but something about that last statement, or maybe just the way she said it, made a profound impression on me—so profound that when, about six years ago now, her son called to tell me she had died (peacefully, in her home in the next town over from where we grew up, at the age of ninety-five), it was this moment, out of all the others I might have thought of, that the news sent me back to. I even thought I could hear her saying again those words, "I am not exceptional," as clear as if she were thirteen again and right there in front of me. Which brought to mind what that conversation had been about, which of course got me thinking of our brother and Aunt Stel, the whole story, and which, with the days of my life as slow and repeating as they are anymore, I haven't stopped thinking about since.

Sometimes I wonder if it was like that for Katherine and Isaac, too; wondered how often events like Mary Lou's passing sent them back to our childhood years, and ultimately, inevitably, back to our lost brother. I had thought of asking them at her funeral but did not, and now I never will, for both of them are dead, too, my brother only last week.

That in turn reminds me of what Elsie, my only child's only child, said one Memorial Day (this was several years ago now, she was still a teenager, fifteen or sixteen) as she, Laura and I were standing before the gray granite headstone of their infant uncle, the new one Mother and Daddy had made in the 50s when they had some money to spare. Now the thing with Elsie is that her father's mother died when she was two and a month—that I remember from her once

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telling me that had she been just a few months older, she might have had just one memory of her other grandmother that was hers alone, not a hand-me-down. An image, a scent she would know to associate with her, anything would have done. Even I knew her father's folks better than Elsie did, from his and Laura's wedding and from Elsie's first and second birthday parties, and that wasn't right, that wasn't how things were supposed to be, we both know it. And that awareness of the dead and gone, the people she almost got to know, but never would, did more to shape Elsie's mind than I think most other people in her life realize.

So there Elsie was, fifteen or sixteen at the grave, a multicolored shiny plastic pinwheel to decorate her baby great-uncle's grave in her hand, staring at the single date on his headstone with a hard, thinking look on her face, and out of the blue she said, 1932 wasn't all that long ago, was it? To think I could have known him. Or at least Mom could've, if, you know, he'd died before I was born. At least you could have, Grandma, if he only lived a few years more. Elsie shrugged. And she thought she was thinking of the future, she said. Well, I guess old Aunt Stel never thought of that, huh? Never thought of *me*, did she?

This was fifteen, sixteen years of accumulated thought, of standing at the grave of a child, once herself a child, five, four, three years old, and only she knows which Memorial Day she first became aware of this fact, of the wrongness of it, knowing as she did the story I repeated to her and her mother every year, standing before that granite stone.

By March of 1935 it was evident that Mother was pregnant again, that she had been for something like two months already, and that this pregnancy was different from the others. She'd had morning sickness for the first time in her life, and she couldn't do half the work she normally could at that point carrying the other five of us—not that we let her try even as much as half, racing each other to fetch whatever she needed or finish the spring and summer chores for her.

But the main thing was that Mother was growing much bigger, much faster, than she ever had before.

They arrived a month early, in September. Twins—oh, to see again the look on Aunt Stel's face when she first found out that *that's* what she'd be delivering. I was nine years old and feeling, for the first time in quite a while, something other than the spitefulness that had as good as consumed me: I was scared for Mother. Twins sounded dangerous, especially since, at thirty-six years old, Mother really was past the best and safest age to be having children. "Premature" was a troubling word as well. I'd gathered its meaning from listening to Aunt Stel talk about the complications that often came with it, and so was scared for the twins, too. I didn't think Aunt Stel was a good enough nurse or midwife or anything to handle their birth, especially if they came early, as indeed they did. I would rather it have been someone like Mrs. Napier, whose medical competence (or lack thereof) I had absolutely no idea about, but Mrs. Napier had died the year before, suddenly, of cancer. So, in the end, as it was before, Aunt Stel was all we had.

This time around, as long as Isaac and I stayed well out of Aunt Stel's, Mary Lou's, and Katherine's way, we were allowed to remain in the house and even, if we wanted, in the very room where the twins would be born. Our family was open like that, and Mother had faith that all four of us were grown up enough not to be frightened by what we would see and hear if we stayed, grown enough to understand what Mary Lou had understood at eleven: that what was

happening to Mother was a painful, but perfectly natural process and therefore nothing to be afraid or ashamed of, only careful, watchful.

Tommy came first, in the early evening. Mary Lou, a most capable girl at fourteen, swiftly cleaned, swaddled, and handed him over to Daddy. But when Joy came just four minutes later, and easily, giving our mother no trouble, Daddy suddenly became as nervous and giddy as if these were the first births he had witnessed and not the sixth and seventh. Cassandra, Cassandra, *here!* he cried, and gently but firmly plunked Tommy into my arms. There wasn't any particular reason he had chosen me—I was simply the child who happened to be nearest at hand, standing, as I was, with my head almost underneath his bent right elbow.

Tommy was a blond boy and when he opened his eyes they were gray, but I didn't think he looked anything like me. Joy, neither, who for the record had fair hair all her life and Mother's merry green eyes. But of course I loved him. I loved them both at once.

When Joy too was clean and nestled in Daddy's arms, and the two oldest girls were looking after Mother, Aunt Stel leaned back against the wall and sighed. She was a tired mid-forties (whereas Daddy, despite all the trials in his life, was still a lively man at thirty-nine) and for a moment this was all Aunt Stel could do, was lean back and look at us. I felt her watching me before I looked to see that she was. After the nearly three years of evilness I had shown her, we were fierce enemies, and I was certain that she hated me, maybe even as much as she had hated Henry Lee and all that he had stood for in her mind, or must have, to do what she had done to him. But it wasn't a hateful look my aunt was giving me just then. For a moment, the look of grim displeasure she had worn for the past two months straight, knowing her brother's family was about to gain not just one, but *two* new mouths to feed, was gone completely. It was like somehow, seeing the new blond baby in my arms, she was seeing me for the first time, and was impressed, in spite of herself, by what she saw.

And somehow it was in witnessing that change in her expression that I finally began to understand something about the ties that bind, about how Daddy and Mother and Aunt Stel could all go on seeing and speaking to one another, existing in the same spaces, and how hard it must have been for Daddy, to go on loving his sister when love should not have been possible, when that one act of hers was enough to break any bond, even that between brother and sister, yet had not. I also began to understand something of tolerance, which was really all there was between my mother and her sister-in-law, and how this was not a weakness in Mother, but rather, the surest sign of strength in her, just as leaving their children out of the silent strife between themselves and Aunt Stel proved the strength in Mother and Daddy both.

Only when I understood these things as they really were, and accepted them for what they were, did I have the right to reject them all in my own life. There was no giving back the knowledge I had come into so early about how Aunt Stel had, with full intent, left Henry Lee outside in her car to freeze to death because four children were enough for her brother to have to provide for, as far as she was concerned. I did not have to *tolerate* Aunt Stel's presence in my life, being old enough to find someplace else, away from her, to go in the midst of a family gathering or within the little town where we all lived. Nor did I *have* to love her because she was relation or had taken care of me before I was of an age to say whether I wanted her there or not. And if God Himself had made me in such a way that I could not forgive Aunt Stel for what she

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had done to my brother, for what she had taken from us—from *me*—then that was that and it was no use compounding sin on sin by lying and telling myself I had forgiven her.

Cassandra, said Aunt Stel. She straightened up from the wall and took a step closer to me. Can I hold him? she said, but the way she held her arms out I could tell that this was not really a request or even a question.

I think I startled everyone, not with the reply itself, but with the quickness and flatness, the utter lack of emotion with which I replied, No, you cannot. Not because there was any conceivable danger to it, as there was no way Daddy or Mother were going to let Aunt Stel out of their sight with either of their twins, even on a night as warm as the one they were born on. No, something else made me say what I said to her, and in the way that I said it.

Aunt Stel took another step forward regardless, her outstretched right hand almost brushing Tommy's blanket, but I pulled away, held him carefully closer against my chest. She had gotten to touch him once already, while delivering him, and for as long as I could help it, that was all she was going to get.

Cassandra, let me hold him, Aunt Stel said.

I shook my head. Here, too, a simple no would have sufficed, but the word that came to my lips that time was Never. Once I said it, in a low, level voice, it felt so right that I said it again, kept saying it: Never, never, *never!* And neither Daddy nor Mother spoke up to say whether this was right or wrong.