

NONA CASPERS

*Country Girls*

The picture on the cover of the dairy magazine was of a middle-aged farm woman, about forty, smiling directly, yet shyly, into the camera. She wore five blue ribbons around her neck. Her skin was clear, almost translucent, and her eyes were lovely and innocent, not the innocence of the religious devout or a child—she was a grown woman—but the sure-footed innocence of a herdswoman. The woman in the picture was once my friend—that is why my father sent the magazine—and for a moment I felt transported against my will back to my parents' home, the air too thin, the rooms too small, me pacing the short hallway from my bedroom to the living room window, and I felt a wave of the deepest longing I had ever known, a longing too large for the body, almost cartoonish unless you are the one living it, and you are fourteen, and then it is deathly serious.

In the spring of 1974, my parents moved from Saint Cloud, Minnesota, where we had been living since I was born, to a dairy farm north of Melrose near Cedar Lake. My father had been hired as the Melrose County Dairy Cow Inspector and Milk Tester. My mother, who had grown up in the area, didn't want to live in town so they rented a beat-up farm house on the land her sister and her family farmed. My parents had planned to move in the summer so my brothers and I could finish our school year, but I had been unhappy in the junior high in Saint Cloud, skipping classes and drinking, and my parents decided not to wait but to pull me out of school for the rest of the year, which was partly a relief. They left my two older brothers behind with the parents of friends.

For the first time in my life I spent a lot of time alone, walking through the unplanted black fields and semi-wooded pastures around our new house. Mornings I would hike deep into the pasture in my rubber boots and dig up cow bones that I hauled back in paper grocery sacks. I stacked the bones up against the back of the house. On warm afternoons I sat back there in my sweatshirt and bandanna, painting the skulls, jaws and femurs bright psychedelic colors, oranges and purples. In the back of my mind I thought I'd send them to my friends in Saint Cloud. I laid the bones on the

grass to dry, the colors clashing with the quiet yellows and greens of the countryside.

One afternoon I hiked across the barley field, down a short hill that led to Adley Creek. I sat on the yellow grass and smoked a Kool Menthol. Adley Creek cut through the meadow and divided the land that came with our house and my Aunt Katie's farm. Aunt Katie was my mother's sister. She and her three kids were farming the land we lived on as well and I knew they planned to keep some of their dairy herd in our empty barn. I took a long drag on my cigarette and blew out smoke rings, something I had learned to do in the parking lot at school. The rings floated up and as I watched one float up I saw across the creek a girl with long gold hair. She was standing perfectly still with both arms at her sides examining a fence. She walked over to the wire fence and shook it, bent down and fiddled with the bottom wire. A heifer walked up to her and she grabbed a handful of its neck and pushed the cow away. Not in a mean way, but with a sense of authority.

A few days later, on a Sunday morning, I was eating breakfast with my mother and father at the kitchen table and my Aunt Katie pulled up our gravel driveway in her pick-up. From the table we could see her jump out with a basket wrapped in a dishtowel. She wore a plaid wool coat open over jeans and she moved like someone who had been up and working for hours. She knocked on our kitchen door and walked in.

"Yackety yack," my father said and moved his hand like a lobster claw as he reached for another one of my mother's homemade rolls. Though he didn't dislike Aunt Katie, he usually pretended he did; perhaps on mere principle that talking was a vice, something that should be contained, or perhaps because he liked her too much.

"You don't need to be so critical of me already," Katie said. She plopped the basket on the table. "It's eggs and I would have been over sooner but we've had a horrible flu, and if one of the kids isn't throwing up it's another. The one out there still has the fever but she's got a hard head and wouldn't stay home." She turned to me and shook her finger. "I suppose because she wants to see Miss At-The-Crick here. You stay away from her, though, or you'll be the next one heaving your guts out."

I was grateful that my aunt had not told my parents what I was doing at the creek and looked away from the table out the window.

From where I sat I could see the girl in the passenger side of the truck. She was sitting quietly staring at our house. I had not seen Aunt Katie's kids for two years, which felt like a long time to me; I could barely remember one from the other, except they were shy and spoke with German accents like my aunt and like my mother, only my mother's accent had faded from living in the city. The girl got out and stood next to the truck. She was dressed a lot like Aunt Katie: blue jeans and a thin plaid coat, not wool but cotton and one of the pockets was ripped out. She was dragging the heel of her tennis shoe in the dirt.

"Can I just say hi?" I asked.

My mother nodded.

"Stand upwind to avoid germs," my father said.

I went out the kitchen door and through the garage. It was chilly out and I was still in my pajamas. She looked up from dragging her heel and stuck one hand in her coat pocket and the other in her jeans pocket. She had thick, long, gold hair, not yellow gold but dark gold like oat stems or rope. She looked like Aunt Katie, high cheekbones in a flat oval face and wide green-blue eyes. A chill shot through me and I rubbed my arms.

"How come you have your nightclothes on?" she asked me.

"Just woke up."

She laughed as if I'd told a joke.

"No, I'm serious. I just woke up. What time did you get up?"

She shrugged. "We milk at six."

She was the only girl my age I'd seen for weeks and I wanted to impress her the way I had impressed kids in Saint Cloud, mainly by bull-shitting or by guzzling moonshine and jumping over fires at quarry parties outside town. Cynthia was shy but eerily self-possessed; she had the feeling of grass or wheat or stone. I know now that these qualities are not entirely unusual for farm girls, especially those who worked the farm as much as Cynthia did, but at that time she seemed like a rare and haunting creature.

"Want to see my skulls?" I asked. "I'm going to send them to my friends in Saint Cloud."

She nodded. I brought her around the side of the house to the back where my metal chair sat facing out toward the barley field. Her eyes got big and she took a step back, as if I'd shown her dead bodies themselves.

I had laid the painted bones out on the patches of dirt and grass that went up the field. Now I walked around them and picked out one purple skull with orange eye sockets. I held it up to her.

“Here,” I said. “You can have one.”

She kept her hands in her pockets and looked at the ground.

“Maybe you want to paint one,” I said.

She shook her head.

“Why not?”

“I like them plain, like these.” She picked out a long femur from my stack against the house and she squatted and dragged the tip of the bone through a patch of dirt.

“I have two milking cows,” she said.

I looked at her to see if she was serious. She gazed up at me with a face plain and straightforward. I threw the orange painted bone high up over the field and watched it drop. I could feel her watching me so I threw another one. The bone sailed over the yard, over the field, and landed in the dirt. I looked back at her but she looked away. My Aunt Katie walked up from the side of the house.

“Looks like you’ve been cleaning the fields,” she said. “Time to hit the road,” she nudged Cynthia, who laid the bone back where she’d found it and smiled at me.

That evening my mother told me that Cynthia had had some trouble in school early on learning to read, but that she had a knack for fixing things, fences, broken carts, machinery. She also had a knack for animal husbandry and was starting her own chickens and a dairy herd. Back at my old school, I would have thought this was ridiculous; my friends and I would have joked about it. But that night, from my bed, I kept wondering what my mother would say I had a knack for, besides getting drunk. I looked out my window at the still grass, the wheat, the sky, and instead of feeling trapped or bored I felt a quiet excitement, a new kind of racing inside me. I closed my eyes and saw Cynthia’s wide, green-blue eyes.

Monday morning I rode along with my father on his work route. This was part of my rehabilitation, but I liked it. My father sat in his big white truck and counted silos as he drove from farm to farm and gleaned samples of unpasteurized milk from the galvanized tanks in the milk rooms. He inserted a thin, sterile hose into the tank and filled small glass tubes with milk. He also sampled individual cows

when they had sores, patches of missing fur, or swells. Then he labeled and stacked the tubes in a metal tray and placed them in a stainless steel refrigerator half full of dry ice in the back of the truck. At the end of the day he delivered the samples to the laboratory in Sauk Centre where they tested for quality of protein, unusual bacteria, and infectious viruses.

While my father set up his equipment, I would pull on my black rubber boots and walk up and down the stalls writing down the tag numbers for his records and noting if any cows had signs of infection or illness. Then I'd step outside the barn to see if any cows were what my father called "acting strange" in the pasture. Sometimes, if the farmer came out and they got to talking, I'd kick around the barn—climb up into the hay loft or pet the calves, running the flat of my hand from their nose to the groove between their ears.

On the first day I had gone out with my father I saw Alquin Schultz, a tall, thin man with a sorrowful face, leaning over a cow in the barn and talking quietly into that groove, as if he were telling the cow secrets. Then that same week my mother told me his wife moved out of their house and in with a mechanic in Sauk Centre. "People get carried away with themselves," my mother said, with little sympathy for either party, though she was not a harsh woman. At the end of the day I asked my father to stop at Aunt Katie's farm. We pulled up in the drive just as the sun went behind their barn, which softened the air. My dad went into the house but I stayed outside. Most of the herd lay in a clump far away under the shade of an elm tree, but in a separate corral behind the barn stood two half-grown heifers. They looked different from the rest of Aunt Katie's herd; they had black faces and solid white bodies, except for spots of black on their legs. They reminded me of panda bears. And they were clean: no bits of dirt and manure crusted on their haunches and tails, no fur coarse with dust.

I climbed on the corral fence and watched the cows watch me. In a little while I heard the house door open and close and Cynthia walked up to the fence where I sat. As soon as she stood near me, my breath calmed, as if the water and bone and air inside me were mirroring the dirt and sky outside.

"These are Black-faced Angus, here," she said, putting her hands on top of the fence and giving it a shake. "Eda and Classic. Most

of my mom's herd is Holsteins, which are easy milkers but so are Angus. You can go in there if you want."

The hay in the pen was fresh. Cynthia went into the barn and came back with a bucket and two brushes. "You go like this," she said, and gave Classic two hard strokes up her side against the fur line and then a long softer stroke down.

I started brushing Eda. Short white hairs spun up into my nose. The cows stood still as rocks, except every once in a while they'd twitch and a white ripple would cross their backs as if a snake were running under their hides. And they were warm. Cynthia showed me how to groom their legs and backside and tails, and I built up a sweat that made my skin itch under my bra and my face go hot, which felt good against the cooling evening air.

"This here," Cynthia said, patting the cow between the ears in the deepest part of the groove, "is its soft spot. Just like a baby's. Once I seen a farmer get mad and hit a cow hard in that spot and the cow dropped over dead in an instant." She stared at me. I put my hand on top of her hand. My arms were thin and freckled like my father's and Cynthia's arms were thick and white like the bones.

"That's where the farmers' secrets go," I said, and then I moved my hand from the cow's head to Cynthia's head where the groove would be and pressed down. Cynthia gripped my shoulders and wheeled me away from Classic's sudden step forward.

"She don't like that," she said.

Holding me in front of her, she looked at me for what seemed like a long time, though it was probably only a few seconds. She looked at me the way no one had or has ever looked at me since—with unabashed curiosity and attention.

"You are Nora Hellerman," she said.

"Nora," my father called from his truck, smiling. "Daylight's burning."

My mother was standing by the stove talking with Katie on the phone when we got home. The table was set with fried potatoes, sausage, green beans. She hung up and gave my father a look that meant food's cold, but also something else, a buried hurt or resentment. Though I believe my parents loved each other and that my father was faithful, I also know that on occasion he became smitten with other women. Once, about six months before we'd moved, I overheard my mother on the phone say "his mind's drifting into

something again.” During these times, my father would stay up late and pace the house; sometimes he’d sleep in a chair in the living room.

There was a towel draped over my mother’s shoulder and now she pulled it off and used it to lift a covered pot off the stove. She set the pot on the table with a bang and the table shook, which made her immediately remorseful. Her face turned pink in embarrassment. My father looked out the window, pretending not to see.

“So, Cynthia’s teaching you to be a cow girl,” my father said to me as we sat down.

“Yep,” I said.

He tried a few more questions but I didn’t see any point in answering. He complimented my mother on the potatoes and filled his plate and smacked his lips.

“Try to keep your food in your mouth, Carl,” she said.

“Oh, yeah. Good idea,” he said and smacked some more, but she didn’t laugh.

Upstairs my bedroom was still full of the heat from the day. I opened my window and pulled a cigarette out from the pack taped to the back of my dresser. On top of the dresser were pictures of my friends from Saint Cloud that I’d planned to put up; I threw the pictures in a drawer. Then I stuck the cigarette pack in my jeans pocket and headed back out the door and across the field to the creek, and then beyond the creek. At the edge of poplar trees that bordered Aunt Katie’s yard, I cupped my hand around my eyes and peered inside the house. The lights in the kitchen were on. The rest of her house was dark, except for the top left window. Cynthia was sitting at a desk, her thick hair lying down her back. I sat at the base of a poplar tree on the grass and lit up. I imagined what she was doing, writing a letter to someone, or would she keep a diary. I smoked five cigarettes until my throat swelled up and head pounded and I felt familiar to myself again.

Just then, Cynthia leaned back in her chair and looked out the window. I stood up but I didn’t step out of the trees. She moved her chair in front of the window and seemed to look right at me; she must have seen the smoke. She stood up and came closer to the window and knelt with her hands on the sill. To this day I believe she saw me there—that we were looking at each other—but it’s possible she didn’t see me. It’s possible she was just looking into

the trees like she did every other night of her life. I thought about calling up to her, trying to get her to come down and smoke with me. And finally I got so uncomfortable, I started to feel a little crazy and I turned and ran across the field and creek back home.

On the days when I worked with my father, we'd stop at Aunt Katie's house. Cynthia and I brushed Eda and Classic, while my father went into the house and talked with Aunt Katie. Her husband had died two years ago. When Cynthia and I would go inside the house for a glass of water, they would be sitting at the kitchen table talking about baseball games or the weather or sometimes arguing about politics. Katie did most of the talking. My father's red cap would sit on the table and one leg would be on a chair—comfortable the way he hadn't looked at our house for a while. Aunt Katie would be leaning forward holding her coffee cup in both hands. They didn't pay much attention to us, except Aunt Katie would say "Don't get into trouble." And once, when my dad was in the bathroom, she looked right at me and said, "None of this" and put her two fingers up to her mouth like she had a cigarette.

My father didn't talk a lot about his youth, but I knew that before he'd married my mother, my father had dated Aunt Katie—that's how my mother and father met—and there was some story about the way they broke up. My brothers told me they had once found a picture in Dad's business closet of my dad and Katie sitting on top of a Buick kissing.

One afternoon when we were testing cows I asked him. "Why did you marry Mom and not Katie?"

"I married the woman I loved," he said. "Besides, your mother talked less."

"No, really, were you in love with Katie?"

My father handed me the thermometer and started washing his boots. His face was serious, thoughtful. "Not love," he said. "But something else."

At the corner of our barn was my favorite chicken, favorite because it had a lopsided body and a patch of feathers missing on one side as if someone had plucked them, and because it followed me around when I was setting out my bones behind the house. Early on I had dressed the chicken in an old doll shirt and tatters of the pink collar

still hung around its neck, just the sort of thing Cynthia would hate, but for some reason I didn't understand that.

"Cluck, cluck," I said, and pet the chicken. I squatted to look into the chicken's red eyes. "I love you," I said. The chicken jerked its head. "More than anything," I said. I picked it up and started walking toward the field; I had a vague notion that I would give the chicken to Cynthia, and that she would cure it. Or maybe I just wanted to show her how much the chicken loved me. At the bottom of the hill a toad scrambled under my foot and I took it to mean I was on my way to the right thing. The chicken pulsed under my arm but didn't put up a fuss—another sign.

I stood on the porch outside Cynthia's house. Between the screen and aluminum door a fly was trapped. I let the fly out. I could see into the kitchen; fabric laid out across the table, green with rose print. Aunt Katie came out of the back room in a big blue shirt, no pants. The shirt hung down to her knees; her legs were skinny but her knees were blubbery.

"You again," she said, picking the scissors off the table.

"Me," I said.

"How long you been here? You have a chicken for me today?"

I put the chicken on the porch and circled my fingers and thumb around my eye like a mask. "Hoo. Haa," I said. She laughed, but it was more a laughing at. "You are a funny kid," she said. "Odd."

"Is Cynthia home yet?"

"No, she's not home. You need to get another hobby."

I sat down on the porch with my chicken. A car that looked familiar, but that I hadn't noticed when I came up, was in the driveway behind the shed. After a few minutes Aunt Katie opened the door wearing pants and yelled out, "If you're gonna sit there, Miss city pants, why don't you work."

"What do you want me to do?"

She pointed me toward a shovel that looked new on the porch and then toward the chicken coop.

The shed had a foot of straw and chicken poop on the floor and iron poles lying on it. I stacked the poles behind the shed and started shoveling the dirty straw into a wheelbarrow I found in the barn. The sun was coming in the door and warming my legs as I worked, and soon I could feel my sweat and then I could feel a shadow over

me—someone standing in the doorway watching me. I shoveled for a while more slowly and then I went out.

She was sitting up against the coop chaining dandelions.

“I brought you a crazy chicken,” I said, but she didn’t answer. I sat in front of her. Something was different about her face, a bluish hue on her cheekbone.

“What happened to your face?” I asked.

“My mom.”

“Why’d she hit you?”

Cynthia kept chaining. “The reason don’t matter,” she said. “She just gets mad and swats because she can’t make things how she wants.”

“What does she want?”

Cynthia finished off the chain and looped it over the chicken’s head, which I think now must have been a bit of a concession. “She wants love,” she said, looking at me. “And someone to stay on the farm with her. My brothers want to sell.”

“What would you do then? Where would you go?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be for a while and I don’t know. I guess I’d be married by then.”

“Oh,” I said. As it turned out, in five years her brothers would sell and Cynthia would marry a farmer in the area, not anyone I knew, but then the idea sounded entirely foreign to me; still I felt slightly threatened. My heart beat faster and I wiped a drop of cold sweat from my lip.

As Cynthia and I talked, I heard the low hum of a car driving out onto the road and I saw Alquin Schultz’s thin face behind the wheel. The sky was doing something funny now. The wind was starting to push the clouds together in a bunch and they gathered even more darkness, like a crowd of people coming together against the blue.

We walked to the creek. Cynthia’s legs were skinny like her mother’s, the backs of her knees doughy and unglamorous and I liked that. I liked looking at her. We sat down and the dampness from the morning seeped through my jeans.

“You’re looking at me,” she said, not in a coy or irritated way, but like she was pleased.

A piece of grass or dandelion stem stuck to her chin. Her mouth seemed like a gate to something, but it wasn’t due to beauty—her lips were often red and chapped. It wasn’t the outside I wanted,

or at least that's how it seemed. I wanted to see down Cynthia's throat, to see the inside of Cynthia. I told her stories about my old school, and I told her how lonely I'd been there and until I said it I didn't even know it was true. Cynthia watched me attentively while I spoke, her mouth slightly open. At the time, I believed Cynthia felt the way I felt—I didn't question it. But now I can see that Cynthia had compartments inside her, a groove where she kept her secrets, a certain country girl hard headedness and heartedness that passed as practicality, as good sense.

For the rest of Spring, when I didn't have to work with my dad, I'd show up at Cynthia's barn at eight a.m. when milking was finished. I'd help her wash the milk machine, sweep out the barn, pick rocks. Sometimes we'd bicycle up and down the road or walk the fields and gather bones, cow bones but also bones from possums or raccoons: femurs, jaws, skulls. We would haul the bones over to my house and bleach them and lay them out on the hill and lay ourselves on the grass, or when the grass was wet borrow a blanket from my mother's closet in the basement. We lay with our heads in the shade and our bodies in the sun. Cynthia had a heavy breath. I have always been afraid to really let myself breathe—I think the sound gives me away—but Cynthia had no such self-consciousness. I could hear her lungs filling up and her breath sliding against her teeth.

"What do you like?" I asked her once.

She looked at me as if she were trying to see if I were really listening. "I like to hike around."

We fell asleep on the blanket and dreams swept in. Blackness behind the lid, white arms reaching toward me.

"What sound do you like best?" I asked her another time.

"The sound of the barn door opening in the morning. This isn't a sound but I like the smell of our kitchen drawers."

One afternoon while we were hiking, Cynthia found a circular piece of bone—maybe a piece of squirrel skull—and she slipped it onto her finger like a ring, holding her hand up to the sun and saying "I pronounce myself Mrs. Bone." Later, when we were standing at the edge of her field under the poplars saying goodnight, I asked if I could have the ring. Leaning close and looking into my eyes, Cynthia took my wrist and held my hand out and slipped the bone on my finger.

I think these times with Cynthia were my first feelings of sexual desire and longing. When I wasn't with Cynthia, when she wasn't in my view or I couldn't hear her, I began to feel panicked, a fractured buzzing in my head, a restlessness in my legs. Sometimes Cynthia would stay for supper at my house and more often I'd eat at hers, and Aunt Katie started to tease me. "Better watch out," she'd say, "You're starting to look like me." A few times I slept at Cynthia's house and we'd stay up late talking and then I'd stay up later, listening to her breathe, watching her. I didn't want to touch her—probably later everyone thought I did and that's what riled them—but that wasn't the point, consummation of desire wasn't at the center of my feelings. I was happy to feel her near me, to sit next to her at the kitchen table and cut fabric for her mother, or to pick rocks behind the cart and tractor her brother drove, and, occasionally, to sit next to her while she drove the tractor.

My mother stood on a chair throwing coats and belts and gloves out of a hall closet. My father sat in the living room.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Out, out," I said.

"Out out to Cynthia's out," she said. "You've been out all day with Cynthia; why don't you help me sort this stuff."

"I'm meeting Cynthia at the creek—I'll sort tomorrow."

She threw out a hat, which had been mine in third grade, a dirty white fur hood with fur balls on the ties that kids and some silly adults wore in the late sixties. I picked it up and put it on—the hat was too small; it perched on my head, the balls swinging.

"Your head used to drown in that thing," my mother said, looking down at me from her chair. All spring, since we'd moved, she'd had a worried look about her; her eyebrows furrowed, her forehead creased. She had been distracted and I had been going around as if I were invisible, which suited me. But now she was looking at me and her forehead was smooth, but sad, or maybe disappointed; I couldn't say exactly with what.

My father walked through to the kitchen. "You're not going out," he said, and I could tell they had talked about it. "And you're coming with me tomorrow."

I took off the hat.

“Your Aunt Katie doesn’t have to feed you every night,” my mother said.

“She doesn’t mind,” I said.

“Of course she doesn’t mind,” my mother said. “But it’s no good to push a good thing. And there are other kids around too,” she added in a weak voice.

“Okay. Okay,” I said, and batted the fur balls to make her smile, but inside me something choked. I felt as if my mind were thrown against my forehead. My mouth became dry. I helped my mother sort through the stuff on the floor and went to bed.

That night I lay awake and felt a wheel turning in me. Cynthia’s face was in front of me, her wide, blue-green eyes and then her white arms. I could feel this longing, but it wasn’t soft the way it had been. It pulled at me. I got up and went downstairs. My father had fallen asleep in a chair in the living room, like a guard at the foot of the stairs. His shoes lay on the floor under his foot stool. I hadn’t really looked at him for a long time it seemed. I didn’t even know if he liked living here, liked his new job, though he seemed happy enough. His head lay to one side and his jaw hung slightly open—he had a lopsided face that scared me. Later, after he had a series of small strokes and the left side of his face slackened, making him look dopey, less harsh, less the centurion, I would remember how he looked that night.

I put my hand out and touched the bagged up part of his sock. I couldn’t understand that I would pass through this new internal state. The panic took me over, like a flu. I stepped through the kitchen and stood on the steps outside the house, looking toward Cynthia’s house, wondering if the light was on in her bedroom. I tiptoed into the kitchen and picked up the phone quietly.

“Who is this?” Aunt Katie’s groggy voice.

I hung up, but even in that moment I felt closer—through the phone line I could feel the air and smells in Cynthia’s house, hear her footsteps going up her stairs.

When I turned around my father was standing in the kitchen door, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hand. He had been watching me. I am trying to see the look on his face now. Embarrassed, confused. And I think I saw pity.

My brothers arrived a week before the town's summer festival, which included a parade and a German accordion band and polka dance. My parents decided we would, as a family, help build the platform for the dance on Main Street, along with ten people from town, and a few neighbors. Alquin Schultz worked beside me, looking thinner and more miserable than he had when I'd seen him talking to the cow. We hammered and sawed and sanded wood. When we got home I was put to work in the house helping my mother clean or cook or put up shelves. The house had filled with boxes and my brothers' noise, running in and out for food and water. They set up tents in the yard and when they weren't working they threw footballs and basketballs and softballs to each other. They teased me about my skulls and my cigarettes—"Nora we adora but your breath's a horra"—and they especially teased me about my overalls that Cynthia had given me and which I wore everywhere now.

During the day I was distracted enough, but every night I sneaked down the stairs and called Cynthia's house. If Aunt Katie answered, sometimes I'd hang up. Often Cynthia would answer and we'd talk about anything, Classic and Eda, what we did that day, what we ate. Once I asked, "Do you miss me?" and she laughed.

Sometimes I'd sit in the corner of our kitchen and hold on to the phone after she'd hung up, listening to the silence. We had made plans to meet at the dance on Sunday and that week I was waiting and in the waiting I began to feel I didn't exist. I did my chores, I painted the dance platform with my brothers, who watched me out of the corners of their eyes, and I fed and groomed the six-month heifer my father bought me from Aunt Katie's herd that I named Eda Two. But all through it I thought of Cynthia's breath and the sound of her voice. In the middle of the night I'd get up and pace the hallways and then stand on our porch looking into the blackness toward her house.

The waiting was like an aura around me. An intensity. In the kitchen, my mother had pinned light, happy sayings on the refrigerator that irritated me: "Smile and the World Smiles Back." "His Love Will Save You."

Two nights before the dance, I stepped into the backyard and hauled a bucket of grain from my father's shed to the trough my brothers had built for Eda Two. The air cooled and I combed the cow's bristly hair. I clipped off the dirty long sections so the new

hair could grow in clean and shiny the way Cynthia had taught me. I ran the flat of my hand down the groove in the top of her white head to the cool soggy black nose. "Smile and the world smiles back," I whispered into her groove. "Love will save me," I said.

The dance stand was like a fifty-foot gold raft floating in the middle of Main Street. Cynthia was already dancing with Aunt Katie and when she saw me she ran over and grabbed my hand, and then she pressed her sweaty forehead and nose into mine.

I had dressed in my new baby-blue hip huggers and white shirt. I had combed my hair for an hour. Cynthia was wearing blue jeans and a blouse Aunt Katie had sewn from the rose and green print fabric. The colors set off her gold hair and blue-green eyes; her cheeks were blotchy and rosy, so rosy I now think she may have been drinking.

"Follow me," she said, and she pulled me to the middle of the dance floor. "Alls you do is this, watch. One, two, three, hop. One, two, three, hop."

I stumbled through the first few dances, but then I felt the rhythm in my legs and feet. Only about ten other people were dancing and we whirled around the floor in big circles, stomping our feet on the wooden platform, the polka band blaring.

"I love this," I shouted into Cynthia's ear and she laughed.

More people must have arrived slowly, because I remember bumping into people. I remember bumping into Aunt Katie dancing with Alquin Schultz, and my mother and father. I remember whirling off, whirling and whirling with the pressure of Cynthia's hand in the middle of my back and Cynthia's breath against my temple. I could feel the squirrel-bone ring against my thigh in my pocket—I had my plans. The sky, which had started out dusky blue, deepened in color, and the evening air chilled and in the growing darkness and cold I began to feel an elation. The shapes of things started to soften and now the sky and the chickens and cow skulls and creek were inside me. I slipped my hand up Cynthia's back between her shoulder blades and she looked into my eyes and I saw our future; Cynthia and I living together like man and wife. I didn't know what that meant exactly, but I married Cynthia with every feeling in me, with every sound I had heard in my fourteen years, with every breath and eyelash, with everything I knew. I married Cynthia Hinnencamp

under that darkening sky, with the Melrose band thumping, the smell of sweat and corn cobs and mowed church grass in the air. I married her I married her I married her.

I must have dropped to my knees. I must have dropped and folded my hands, like a declaration. I got the ring out of my pocket and took Cynthia's hand.

And, at first, they must have thought something was wrong, that I was ill or had hurt my ankle. The people around us stopped dancing, and then people around them stopped and on and on until a hush formed and the band stopped playing and I was on my knees looking up at Cynthia and I couldn't get up. Someone shifted on the wood. Someone coughed. A crow cawed.

I must have said her name out loud. I must have said something like, Cynthia, will you marry me. There was blackness at the sides of my eyes and Cynthia's wide face above me. I was on my knees looking up at her, holding her hand and trying to put the ring on it but my hands were shaking. Her mouth was open and I could see the edges of her white teeth and a sheen of sweat on her forehead and above her lip that glistened in the light. I have replayed that moment over and over across the years and still I can't see the expression on her face. At the time I thought it was love, but it could have been something else: shock, or fear, or denial. Cynthia looked down at me steadily. The twilight behind her like a frame, a deepening blue.

My father pulled me up. For a while, when I was older and telling the story, I would say it was one of my brothers, but it was my father. And Aunt Katie was standing behind him. He pulled me up by the shoulders and took my arm and dragged me off the golden platform. He walked me down the steps, past my brothers who looked away, past Alquin Schultz who looked right at me for the first time, as if he had just discovered I existed and his curiosity pulled him out of his misery for just a moment, past a line of people waiting to buy beer. As I moved past people a quiet rushed in. They must have thought something had happened from the look on my father's face and my face; they must have thought I was hurt and being taken home. And so they did what anyone would do. They stared at me.

My father's truck was parked two blocks off Main Street behind the Red Owl. He opened the passenger door and I got in. Then he

stood outside before getting in himself. We sat in the dark for a few minutes, or maybe an hour. I imagine he was trying to make sense of it, maybe feeling like he did when he discovered an infected cow in a herd. "You've got to nip it in the bud," he'd say.

Finally my father cleared his throat and started the engine.

Sometimes I dream about fields full of dead cows. I dream someone is crying. I wake up and my face is smothered in the pillow, or I'll have one hand pressed against my heart.

A few times after the dance I called Cynthia in the middle of the night. One time my aunt answered. "Is this you? Listen, honey, you have to stop this. It's too late to call and we all get up early."

"I just want to talk to her," I said.

There was a long silence and my aunt sighed.

"She doesn't want to talk to you, Nora. She doesn't want to be friends right now, but you go on and make other friends. You just go on."

I didn't believe her. Then one night I made a plan. I stayed up looking at a map and thinking out how we would leave on the Greyhound bus that stopped at the Melrose cafe. We would first travel to Minneapolis. We would rent a room and get jobs at restaurants. I had saved my money from working with my father. I pictured Cynthia and me with our suitcases, sitting close together in the vinyl seats, drawing hearts in the dust on the windows, holding hands and talking and talking.

Before the sun came up I was crossing the creek to Cynthia's house—I didn't know exactly what I was going to do.

She was standing in the doorway of the barn, her long hair twisted over her shoulder. I hid behind the chicken coop and willed her to turn her head and look at me. I believed I could will her; I was that full of my own power. She stepped onto the gravel and I could hear the light crunches of the dry dirt and grass beneath her feet.

About ten feet from the chicken coop she jerked her head up and saw me. I had frightened her. She looked at the front door of the house and at the window where I imagined Aunt Katie stood watching her, her hands wrapped in a towel or deep in dishwater.

"Tell her you have to loose a chicken from the fence," I whispered.

She shook her head no.

"It's okay," I said. "I have a plan."

She shook her head no.

She spoke into the collar of her coat and I could barely hear her. "Go away," she said.

"You don't mean that Cynthia. Katie told you you had to say that."

"Katie hasn't told me anything."

"Then my father," I said.

She shook her head no and her long hair fell loose over her shoulders. "It was a mistake," she said. "It was a stupid thing to do."

I pressed my cheek to the wood of the chicken house. Cynthia turned her head toward me then, and pulled her hair away from her face. She was showing me her face full, so I could see there were no bruises or red marks—Katie hadn't hit her; Katie hadn't told her what to say. She showed me her face so I could see it was her talking, Cynthia talking, saying what she wanted.

"I don't want you near me," she said. "Go home."

In the hottest part of summer the corn takes on sharp edges and thistles grow between the stalks though they can be avoided if you stay in the rows. I ran barefoot in my shorts straight at the cornstalks, smashing against the cobs, scraping the thistles against my skin. A sharp pain shot up my side and rose to my heart and I honestly believed I was having a heart attack, that my heart was cracking like an egg that falls out of a tree.

I ran but I had no idea where I was going. I couldn't smell the creek or find my regular trail. Finally, I lay down on my back in the corn and breathed shallowly, until my breath caught on the pain. My feet and calves were dotted with blood. Welts puffed out on my thighs.

The night before I moved back to Saint Cloud to live with friends of my parents, I stood under the bare light bulb in the bathroom and stared at my dark hair and tanned face in the mirror. It wasn't the fact that I was in love with Cynthia that bothered them most, that they couldn't accept, not really. It was that I was so forwardly in love, so passionately in love, so unabashedly in love, so presumptuously in love, so selfishly in love, so innocently in love. It made them anxious, as it would me today if someone I knew were to behave so strongly and so foolishly about another human being.

I picked up my cigarettes and headed back out our door. At the edge of trees that bordered my aunt's land, I cupped my hand

around my eyes and peered inside the house one last time. The lights in the kitchen were on. The rest of the house was dark, except for the top left window. Lit up and Cynthia sitting at her desk.

The sun dropped until it was resting on the roof of Aunt Katie's house, and then it sank. And it was dark. I could hear a groaning, not the groaning of trees settling at night, or of the land aching from the day, but groaning from within my own mind, a way of life trying to make room for me.

After a long while, Aunt Katie walked into the room and looked out the window. Maybe she saw me, sitting in a haze of cigarette smoke, or maybe she didn't. She reached up and shut the shade.