

Chances of Survival · *Melanie Rae Thon*

CALVIN WAS AGAINST MOVING to Arizona from the start. In Idaho, he made his father stop the car, got out, and announced he was walking back to Montana. Dad let him go. He let Cal walk one, maybe two miles, gave him time to think and get hungry, time to figure out that if he kept a steady pace and didn't sleep, he could be home in two and a half days. Cal had the opportunity to review his resources: after rooting through all four pockets and fingering every fold, he came up with half a ticket to a movie, a key to a metal box he no longer had, a stick of gum that had gone through the washer, and twenty-seven cents. That might be enough for six candy bars if some lady behind the counter of a family grocery store in Sandpoint felt sorry for him and gave him two for seven. But even six candy bars wouldn't get him home. He knew he'd end up trying to steal a can of sardines or a package of hot dogs, and the fat lady would step in front of him as he tried to dart through the doorway. He saw the woman, just like she was somebody he already knew. He saw her flabby arms quiver as she put her hands on her hips, and he saw the outline of her huge thighs through her dress as she stood with her back to the sun. No way she was going to take pity on a kid she didn't know who claimed he was walking to Montana.

By the time Calvin heard the car slow down behind him, he felt he didn't have a chance. Arms swinging, he kept pumping like he meant to march all the way. His pants worked their way down his butt, and every twenty steps or so, he had to reach back and give them a yank. Cal wished his parents would make him get in the car. He imagined his mother sitting there saying, "Why won't that boy wear a belt?"

Finally, Dad pulled up beside him and Mom rolled down her window. In the back seat, his two sisters pressed their faces to the window, flattening their lips and noses against the glass. Mom said, "Cal, it's almost two hundred miles to Bigfork, and once you get there you're going to find another family living in our house."

Cal squinted to keep from blinking and said, "I know that. Don't you think I know that?"

When he got back in the car, he made himself a cave on the floor by wedging a suitcase between the front and back seats. That's where he rode

for three days, curled up and cramped in the dark.

Calvin's sister Dora wasn't happy either. The problem started with her hair. Mother said Arizona was hot and the kids would be in the pool all the time. She wasn't about to spend half the day untangling snarls. Two days before they left Montana, Mom took the girls to the beauty parlor and Dad took Cal to the barber.

Cal's hair was so short he could see his scalp. His ears stuck out too far and his neck was just plain skinny — there wasn't any other way to describe it. He didn't care; he didn't have to stare in the mirror. Allison's fine red hair looked very stylish, cut a little longer in front than it was in back so it curved in a pretty way around her jaw. But Dora's wasn't right. The pixie cut gave her cowlicks new determination. With sheets she'd torn into strips and colored with crayon, Dora made two braids and pinned them inside her baseball cap.

The apartment building in Scottsdale was low and flat, finished with the same sandy pink and gray speckled stone siding as every building as far as Cal could see. From the window of his attic bedroom in Montana, Cal had looked out at the jagged, violet peaks of the Mission Mountains and the stand of pines just behind the yard. Here he gazed at a string of apartments along an endless strip of road, three-sided rectangular structures surrounded by hot cement. He imagined that in the courtyard of each one he would find a brilliant turquoise pool, glittering like a gawdy gem set in a dimestore ring.

Back home, Cal had often walked out onto the dock in the evening to stare across the dark, bottomless lake as the sun sank. He had ridden his bike along a logging road that took him deep into the hills. If some teenagers came rumbling along the road, he heard their jeep minutes before it appeared, and had plenty of time to pull his bike into the bushes and crouch behind a rock. There was no need to see anyone. He had his own room and a lock with a key that worked.

He didn't want to ride his bike in Scottsdale. There wasn't a tree worth climbing; they were all dainty, flowering things with fragile limbs. The paved, dusty streets buzzed with cars: long, sleek Cadillacs and Buicks with the windows rolled up to keep the cool air inside. The only water was the tepid little pool, an unforgiving mirror of the blank sky.

Night was worse than day. Mom promised they wouldn't stay in the

tiny apartment long, but two weeks passed and then a month; one by one, the boxes were unpacked. The apartment only had two bedrooms, so Calvin had to sleep with his sisters. Dad built him a wall of bookcases, but the barrier was only five feet high. When Cal had to be alone, he pulled a chair into his tight, airless closet and sat reading under the light of a bare bulb.

Each night, it took him longer and longer to fall asleep. He listened to Dora's heavy breath on the other side of the bookshelves. She rocked back and forth in her bed; springs creaked; a short, high moan was muffled by a pillow. Allison said, "Don't baby; you're getting yourself all sweaty."

In the room on the other side of the wall, Cal's parents whispered. The thin walls seemed to disappear at night, to stand like flimsy shadows between the rooms. He knew his parents' tones. Sometimes their murmurs floated with the rhythm of a song, a sweet duet, but tonight Cal heard hushed hisses, arched words flung like stingers in the fuzzy darkness.

"Shit," his father said, and the single sound was a stone falling. "How could you be?" He made no effort to speak softly.

"You know damn well how." Mother's voice was shrill, unguarded.

"Well it's lousy timing."

"I didn't plan it."

"Obviously."

"And I didn't do it alone, either."

"I know that. But you should have . . ."

"I should have? I should have what?"

"Been more careful."

"It's hard to be careful when . . ."

"Say it."

"Let go of me."

"No. I want to hear you say it."

"You'll wake the children."

"Fine," Dad said, the word hard as a cuss. "Use the children. You always do."

Two doors slammed: first the bedroom, then the bathroom. Mom was too old to sit in her closet. Cal heard the water running in the tub for a long time. Finally Dad knocked on the door and said, "Come on, baby. I didn't mean it. Let's go to bed. Baby?" But Mom didn't answer and the water didn't stop.

Years ago, after a fight like this, Mom had packed a bag and said she was

leaving. All three children lined up by the couch and begged her to stay. Dora was too small to understand, but Calvin and Allison thought they must have done something unforgivable to make Mommy want to run away. They couldn't figure out what it was, so they cried, choking out a dozen *sorry's* until Mom was kneeling and crying and wiping their faces. Now Cal realized the bag she had had was only big enough for a nightgown and two pairs of underwear, a toothbrush and a comb. They should have let her go, just so she'd know she could.

The water stopped at last, but Mom didn't come out of the bathroom. Cal had to pee. The more he thought about it, the worse it was. He had to go soon, or he wouldn't be able to walk.

He rapped on the door.

"Go away," Mom said. "Just let me have a few minutes to myself."

"Mom, it's Cal. I have to pee."

She opened the door, and Cal squinted at the glare of the fluorescent tube of light. The window was opened wide; the bathtub was full. Mom sat on the toilet, smoking, with her robe wrapped around her. The soapdish was full of white filters. Dad wouldn't let her smoke in front of the children. Many nights she sat by the bathroom window, watching the red pulse of the traffic light at the corner and smelling the cactus breeze that drifted off the desert after dark.

She stood up and lifted the lid of the toilet. "Go ahead," she said. "I won't watch."

"I can't go if you're listening."

Mom ruffled his hair and pulled the plug in the bathtub. "I'm too tired to sit up anyway," she said.

At first Allison wouldn't believe Cal when he told her Mom was pregnant. She said Mom was too old and that Dora was eight. A woman didn't get pregnant when her youngest child was already eight. Cal thought Allison was right. He couldn't think of any exceptions, but he knew what he'd heard, so he waited until his mother's belly began to swell and harden; he waited until she stopped wearing lipstick and her shoes didn't fit. Then Allison acted like she'd known it all along. By June, Mom looked eight months pregnant instead of four. Her ankles grew thick and she slept most of the afternoon. Dora pretended not to notice. When

people mentioned the baby, Dora tilted her head and stared at them the same way she stared at the worms on the sidewalk after a hard rain.

Dora and Calvin chased lizards at the playground behind the apartments. When Cal grabbed one by the tail, it fell off in his hand and the stubby lizard skittered away. Dora snatched one around the middle and stuffed it in a shoe box. Cal was twelve, four years older than Dora, but she was quicker. Cal blamed it on the fact that he was wearing his long bathrobe, and it slowed him down. He nabbed three tails and gave up. Dora asked him if the lizards would die without their tails, and he told her no, not to worry, that they'd grow new ones in a few days. She made him show her the tails. Already the heat had twisted and shriveled them. She said she didn't think the tails would grow new bodies, so Cal threw them in the shrubs and the children trotted home with the five lizards Dora had caught.

In a green lounge chair by the pool Allison sat painting her toenails. She didn't want to see what her brother and sister had in the box. Even though Calvin was born ten months before Allison, everyone said she was more mature.

When each nail was pink and perfect, she pulled her sunglasses down over her eyes and leaned back in the chair. Her hands hung limply against the metal armrests. It's a poor family that can't afford one princess, Cal thought; that's what Mother always said.

Before noon, they usually had the pool to themselves. Later, the three Scofield boys took over, diving and splashing and raising such a ruckus that there wasn't room for anyone else. Cal didn't like them. For one thing, he couldn't keep them straight. They had interchangeable names: Mark, Paul, John. Their yellow hair was tinged green from the chlorine. Once he heard them ask Allison how a girl like her ended up with a brother who looked like the missing link. Allison didn't know what they meant, of course, but Calvin knew because the first day they met, the shortest Scofield boy had named him "Monkey Ears."

When the Scofields wore themselves out, the ladies often appeared, their white clouds of hair floating around their dark faces. There were three of them too. Cal didn't know their names so he called them each "Ma'am," and they liked that. To his face, they called him "young man," but when they whispered between themselves, they said "that sweet boy."

If Calvin peered at the ladies from the window of the apartment, they looked like slim girls with very pale hair; but if he came out on the deck to talk to them, he could see a thousand fine wrinkles criss-crossing their brown skin. They put lotion on one another's back and legs. Cal watched them, thinking of crumpled paper bags smoothed flat with oil.

No one would come yet. Cal glanced at the sun: eleven o'clock. He padded up behind Allison's chair, and his shadow fell over her. Without raising her glasses she said, "Please don't block my sun, Cal. I'm timing this." She pointed to the black travel clock beside the chair. "Fifteen minutes from each angle. If you stand in my light, I won't be even."

Calvin didn't answer Allison, but he moved to the other end of the lounge chair and stood at her feet so his shadow dropped into the pool. Dora sat a hundred feet away, in the shade, taking her lizards out of the box one by one and setting them free in the short grass. Cal's fingers moved in the pocket of his robe, pacing back and forth like tiny legs. The folds of the cloth were gritty with sand from the lizard tails. He wished he had caught one whole lizard so that he could let it go now.

In the hard, white light, Allison's pink toenails gleamed like sticky berries. Cal's fingers jumped in his pockets. He pinched sand between his fingers and flung both hands high in the air. The fine grains fell from his fingertips, sparkling like snowflakes in the sun and clinging to the bright polish. Allison bolted up, jerking the sunglasses from her face. "You little shit," she said. She leaped for Cal, close to flying, and heaved them both in the water.

They struggled as they sank. Allison clawed at her brother's back, but the heavy bathrobe protected him. With his arms clamped around the girl's waist, Cal dragged her towards the bottom of the pool, thinking of himself as a great stone tied to her body. His cheeks were puffed fat with air; he believed he could last a long time. The robe floated up, billowing above his thighs, like the skirt of a dancer as she spins and twirls.

Allison stopped fighting. Cal thought they might both be dancers, that they would waltz down here together where their bodies were so light and graceful. But Allison's mouth gaped open, and her head jerked from side to side. Cal let her go, disappointed that she didn't try harder. He gave her a push towards the surface and watched her shoot away from him.

Dora leaned over the water, reaching out her hand to Allison, but

studying Cal. He waved. She waved back — not a joyful, glad-to-see-you wave, but a tight, formal signal — then she dove. The jolt knocked her hat and cloth braids from her head, and they bobbed on the water as she swam down to her brother.

Bubbles poured from her mouth. Cal drew circles; she pointed towards the sky. The boy's chest was tight, as if the water made a wall in front of him and a wall behind and he was slowly being pressed between them. He nodded; yes, it was time to give up. He admitted to himself that he needed to breathe. Dora embraced Cal, and he went slack in her arms, glad to let something happen to him, to be rescued. He felt the force of Dora's kicks, felt her fight against her lack of breath and his dead weight. Above him, the water looked hard, a wavy sheet of clear metal they would have to break. The blaze of light blinded him. When he closed his eyes, he saw a scatter of red squares on black. Then he was gasping, gulping down air. The water wasn't shattered: it closed around their shoulders, a comforting thing.

Underneath Allison's lounge chair, the alarm clock jangled, reminding her it was time to turn over. The children were all out of the pool, but no one moved to quiet the frantic black box.

"Shut that damn thing off!" Mother yelled from the doorway. She waddled towards her children; her bare feet slapped the pavement, and her back arched with the strain of her belly.

"What are you doing?" she said to Dora. "I told you not to wear your clothes in the pool. And I told you why. The chlorine takes all the color out. You've ruined those shorts." The blue dye was bleeding from the cloth and running in rivulets down Dora's thighs. "Where is that clock?" Dora pointed to the chair, her face blank as an egg. "Well turn it off, will you?"

With thick, slow steps, Dora moved like a person who was still submerged. "Today, Dora," Mom said, "today."

When the buzzing stopped, Mother turned to Calvin. "And what are you up to? Are you going to wear that robe in the pool too? Well you'll drown if you do and you'll have no one to blame but yourself."

Mother peered at first one child and then the next. "No one is going swimming today. Do you hear me?" She was yelling; everyone in the whole apartment building probably heard her. "I don't care if it gets up to a hundred degrees today. I don't care if it gets up to a hundred and twenty."

“Well, Calvin,” she said, “you may as well give me that robe to wash. It’s soaking wet. You can’t wear it anyway.” She’d been trying to get the robe from him for six weeks: “Just for an hour, Cal; it’s filthy,” she’d say. Finally she made a deal with him instead—he had to produce one pair of undershorts a day, and she washed them faithfully even after Allison informed her that Cal cheated and gave her clean ones sometimes.

Just the night before, Cal’s father had had one of those talks with him about the robe. “I’m sure you have your reasons, Cal, but you’re driving your mother crazy. It’s such a small thing; can’t you give up the robe?” But it wasn’t a small thing at all—wearing the robe was part of the most important thing in the world, and it was all tangled up now so he couldn’t explain it. He told his father that Mother didn’t care. Cal thought of her by the sink, the dirty soap suds dropping from her hands onto the floor as she said it: “I don’t care, Cal. Do what you want. Do whatever you damn well please.”

Cal plopped down on the lounge chair. “I don’t need to take it off,” he said. “It will dry out.” In the middle of the pool, Dora’s hat and braids sank slowly.

The children couldn’t have gone swimming anyway. By afternoon, a stiff breeze whipped itself into fierce gusts, churning the sand to dust demons. The desert wind drove the heat deeper into the lungs and under the skin. When the squall died down, a gray scum had settled on the pool.

All day, Calvin’s robe stayed damp, but he didn’t take it off. He wondered what would happen to him if he stopped wearing it now. The robe wasn’t the beginning, or even the main thing—using it just happened along the way, and now it seemed necessary, irreversible.

Cal thought the whole idea started when he was still in Montana. Dad said they had to go to church one last time: that was the right thing to do even though they hadn’t gone for three months, not since Christmas. The girls complained. Mother said she had too much to do to get all dressed up. But Cal didn’t mind. He liked church; he thought of it as a contest: How straight can I sit? Can I hear my own voice when everyone around me is singing louder? How long can I hold my breath? Usually Reverend Sykes’s sermon was a drone that filled Cal’s chest, the hum of a thousand bees, wordless and wise. This day was different. Cal listened to the words so hard that his toes curled tight inside his stiff shoes.

Reverend Sykes said, God thinks about man all the time, and that is why we have life and breath on this good earth. But man hardly thinks about God at all. Every time a man stops thinking about God, that man is in danger, and God is in danger.

It was just a small part of the sermon. At first Cal was surprised people didn't stand up and make the reverend stop to explain exactly what he meant. But like most things in church, a lot of folks missed it. Dad's head drooped and a flutter of air escaped between his lips. Allison sat with her white-gloved hands folded in her lap, a perfect little lady, but she wasn't thinking about what the man had just said; she was thinking about herself, about what a good girl she was to sit there so still, her lips a soft, unsmiling, angelic curve. Dora swung her feet back and forth. She had learned the whole alphabet in sign language and was talking to herself with her hands. Only Mother heard what Reverend Sykes said, and she saw that Cal heard too and that he thought it was a remarkable thing. She put her hand over his and looked at him as if to say, yes, Cal, that's all of it: thinking about God.

All the way to Arizona, Cal tried to figure it out. He was afraid to ask anyone. The way Reverend Sykes had said it, so casually, on his way to saying something else, Cal thought maybe everyone except him knew all about it. Sometimes after dinner, Cal noticed his father gazing at a bare spot on the wall, and he would ask Dad what he was thinking. But the answer was never what Cal hoped: Dad was always thinking about the wiring of the bank he was designing or whether or not he'd remembered to mail the insurance check. Cal got the same kinds of answers from Mom: Do you want tuna casserole for dinner tonight, or would you like cheese dreams? He had the idea that hardly anyone knew how critical it was to think about God.

If God stopped thinking about him, Cal knew what would happen. He would vanish, not just disappear, but cease to exist. He would have no past, and no one would remember him — not even Mom and Dad. But he didn't have to worry about that because God's mind was bigger than the whole world. God kept all of the people in his thoughts at once, and it wasn't a struggle: it was a comfort, and he was glad to do it.

A man's mind was pitiful compared with God's. A person had to concentrate just to keep a few ideas in his head at once. He was so busy worrying about what to put in his stomach or what he and his wife might do

later that night when the kids were in bed that he didn't have room in his brain for anything else.

Cal wondered what would happen if a whole lot of men forgot to think about God for a long time. God took care of the people, but who kept God alive? Since men's minds were so small and so easily cluttered, it must take thousands of people to keep God from vanishing.

Cal tried to do his share, but he had a hard time: he thought about himself too much. While he lay awake at night, Cal tried to concentrate on God, but the whispers beyond the wall and the moans of his sister on the other side of the bookcase made his mind wander. He knew that prayers should be offerings and not requests; still he found himself asking God to let him sleep. Dark circles formed under his eyes and made him look like an old man. One day, he decided he wasn't well enough to get dressed; he was weak and his head was fuzzy, so he wore the heavy maroon bathrobe all day. He wore it the next day and the next. A strange thing had happened. He realized that if he wore the robe, he thought less about himself, as if the parts of his body that were covered couldn't distract him anymore and only the useful parts were left: his feet for walking, his hands for helping, his head for thinking about the one important thing.

He wasn't perfect. Sometimes he used his toes for picking up pennies off the floor; his hands strayed: he shuffled cards. He thought about the white-haired ladies and wondered if their sheets were soaked with the oil they put all over their bodies. He thought about his father swearing in the dark and his mother's baby. He imagined what Dora was doing when she made the bed squeak night after night. He was getting better though, and the robe helped. Just the weight of it and the scratchy cloth on his neck reminded him to clear his mind.

The cement was so hot it burned the bottoms of Cal's feet unless he ran. He saw it all, right after the sand storm, saw the three Scofield boys knock a bird nest out of the tree on purpose, so the chicks would fall on the sidewalk and their stomachs would burn. The baby finches weren't dead yet, but Cal couldn't pick them up because their unfeathered flesh stuck to the blistering pavement. The mother flew in circles, railing, giving Cal steady abuse as he crouched beside her floundering offspring.

Cal's mother followed him. "It's no use to watch; come inside," she said. When the boy didn't move, she put her hand on his head and he

twisted away. He didn't let her touch him anymore; this was one of his rules, and he had to be especially careful because sometimes, when he was hot or tired, nothing felt better to him than her dry cool fingers on his forehead or cheeks.

She shuffled inside, but in a few minutes she returned to try again. Cal had found something. He knelt in the shade with his hands cupped. As Mother came closer, he held his hands up to her, an offering, a puny-winged, bald fledgling with its eyes glued shut.

"This one's alive," he said. The chick was so light in his hands, so round and pink, nearly featherless; she wasn't like a bird at all, more like a small peeping heart. "She was in the grass," Cal whispered.

Mother looked at the other baby finches; they were dead now. "It doesn't have a chance, Cal," she said. "It's too young; it needs its mother."

"Then we'll fix the nest and put it back in the tree," Cal said.

"The mother won't take care of it now, not after a person has touched it."

"I had to," Cal said. "How else could I . . ."

"I'm not blaming you," Mother said. "She couldn't have gotten it back to the nest by herself anyway."

"Then we have to try. It won't hurt just to try."

She couldn't make him leave it in the grass, not while its wings still fluttered and its feet twitched, so they made a bed of grass for it in Dora's discarded shoe box.

Dad didn't say a word when he looked over Cal's shoulder to see what he had in the box. Mom was in the kitchen, cutting vegetables; Cal could see her from where he sat in the living room. Allison skipped down the hall, leaping at Dad to be crushed in one of his bear hugs. "How's my girl?" he said. He looked behind her. "Where's your sister?"

Allison cocked her head. "She's in the bedroom. She lost her braids in the pool, and she hasn't come out all day."

Dad snorted and sauntered into the kitchen. He put one hand on Mother's hip and reached for a carrot with his other hand. "Rough day?" he said, massaging the lowest part of her back. She nodded. He muttered, "What the hell is he doing with that bird?"

"Shush, Stan, he'll hear you."

Dad stopped rubbing and leaned against the counter. "I mean for him to hear me. What were you thinking, letting him bring it in the house? Birds carry all sorts of diseases."

Calvin was only twelve feet away. His parents had gotten into the habit of talking about him that way, as if he were deaf or senile. One night not long ago, Cal was standing at the window and they were sitting on the couch behind him. Mother said, "I'm at the end of my rope. I don't know what to do with him these days. If he doesn't straighten up by August, I think we should consider a special school." Dad asked her what she had in mind. "Well, I was wondering," she said, "about a military school. He'd have some rules, you know, and learn some discipline." Calvin stared at the window, but not outside; he studied his own reflection: the narrow, pale face, the ears and hands that were too big for the boy who stood there with his shoulders hunched beneath a dark robe.

In the kitchen, Dad wouldn't let up about the damn bird. He made it sound like it was all Mother's fault and she'd done a stupid thing, letting Cal bring it inside. But his voice wasn't rough anymore, and he inched closer to her, so close that she must have felt his breath on her neck as she chopped the last stalk of celery. He was reaching for her again, his hands were almost on her shoulders. Cal tried not to watch.

Mother whirled, slicing the air under Dad's nose with the paring knife she held clutched in her hand. "What would you have done?" she said. "It's the first thing he's cared about since we got here."

"And what's he going to care about tomorrow when he finds the putrid thing stiff in its box?" Dad had jumped away from her and was halfway across the room, shouting now.

Allison stood in the shadows of the hallway, waiting, and Dora opened her door an inch to listen. The children knew that if Mom and Dad kept at it, there wouldn't be any dinner. Dad would have to pile them all in the car and take them out for burgers; Mom would go to her room for the rest of the night and wouldn't answer no matter who knocked. Calvin froze. This was a trick he'd discovered. If he stayed perfectly still, time didn't pass and nothing happened. Mother said, "I don't know what he'll care about if that pathetic bird dies. I'm hoping for this one small miracle." Her voice was weary, defeated, a thin white flag waving in the dull heat.

Cal breathed again and called to Allison. "Look," he said. Allison glanced in the box. "She's better, don't you think? Watch." He showed

her how the chick tilted its head back and took water from an eyedropper. "See, she's going to be okay." Allison shifted her weight to one leg and leaned against her brother. Already the morning seemed like a long time ago, like a dream that made him stop breathing and he woke gasping for air, wondering if he might have died if he had stayed asleep a minute longer. He'd had burning dreams and falling dreams: the house in Montana was on fire, and he had to jump from his attic window. But the dreams where he drowned were the worst: he was trapped beneath a dock, and no one could see him.

The baby finch opened its gaping mouth. "She's a survivor," Cal said. "I know it."

"Sure she is," Allison said. She looked at its wrinkled skin and useless wings and Cal knew she was thinking about what Dad had said, that Cal would find the bird stiff in its box.

"Mom said she didn't have a chance, but look at her. She wants to be alive," he said. "That's why she landed in the grass instead of on the cement. I bet she flew. Can't you just see her, flapping like crazy to get to the grass?"

He knew this wasn't true. He saw the boys with the stick, the broken nest toppling out of the tree, all the warm fledglings tumbling head over tail. One lucky one landed in the shade, out of sight, so none of the boys noticed it and flung it onto the cement. Cal was afraid now, afraid to think that the chick's survival had nothing to do with flying or how much he wanted her to stay alive. He tried to understand how all that could be a matter of chance, nothing more than a safe fall and an unexpected rescue.

Mother called Allison to come set the table. Cal's sister squeezed his hand, and he didn't pull away even though it felt good. His heart beat as fast as the heart of the chick had beat against his hands. He was scared when she touched him and scared when she let go. Dora appeared in the hallway with a towel wrapped around her head, and Cal had to keep himself from laughing. But he didn't laugh because Dora had pulled him from the pool when he was too tired or too stubborn to save himself. "Come here," he said. "I want to show you something." Carefully, Dora stepped out of the shadows. The light in the living room made her stiffen, ready to flee, so Cal kept talking, reeling her in an inch at a time until she stood beside him. The finch peeped, her voice surprisingly strong.

When they sat down to dinner, Mother was still and calm, her fingers

laced across her full lap. The fan in the kitchen beat at the dead air. Dad bowed his head and said, "Father we thank Thee for these mercies." Mom said she was too hot to eat, so Dad dampened a cloth and washed her forehead and her wrists. He told her to put her feet on his lap, and he washed each toe separately right there at the table; then he told her a story about a storekeeper in Phoenix who was so afraid of pregnant women he wouldn't let them shop in his place. "What does he think," Mom said, "that they'll have their babies right there?" She laughed, thinking about the bald little man backed into a corner with his eyes closed. "Or does he think they'll sit on him?" This made her laugh harder, deep, full chuckles, loud as a man's; her huge stomach shook, and the cloth of her dress stretched so tight Cal thought she would burst out of it. Dad washed her dimpled knees and said, "I'll take you down there someday; you can give him a good scare."

"Then I better fatten myself up," Mom said, patting her bulge as if it belonged to someone else. She ate two pork chops and a mound of mashed potatoes. Dad got up again and again to run water through the cloth.

One by one, the children asked to be excused, but Cal's parents sat at the table for a long time, until the kitchen was dark, until the air drifting through the screen door was cool.

The street was quiet now, and Cal heard voices wafting across the courtyard; they were the soft voices of evening, and he imagined all the families just like his own, the arguments that had dissolved in the dizzy heat of a fading afternoon; these were the voices of people who had been pulled from the water at the last moment, the songs of the children who jumped out of the flames with their eyes screwed shut and somehow, by some miracle, still landed in the net.