

Miracle Boys · Patricia Foster

“IT STINKS,” my brother says, sniffing the air.

The acidic odor of Perma-Straight stings our nostrils, reddens our eyes, but my sister and I giggle as we comb the straightener through his curly blond hair. Our sixteen-year-old brother (legs jutting out on the smooth blue tiles) sits trapped before us, fidgeting on the side of the tub. His hands knot and unknot against football-muscled thighs. We know that what he’s doing—straightening his hair—is somehow shameful, secretive, his vanity shifting from its tough masculine detachment to this feminine desire. If his buddies find out, they’ll stuff brassieres in his locker, write *BABE*, *SISSY*, or *LITTLE MISS MUFFIN* across the back of his jersey. It’s because of this that my sister and I laugh, relieved that he’s vulnerable, ridiculous, not all muscle and bone.

“I don’t know what’s so funny,” he says. His razor straight mouth twitches at the corner; he’s trying not to grin. If he laughs, it will be an admission, an alliance with us. My sister and I watch closely, waiting for the soft unbending of his will. But he only closes his eyes and tightens his lips as if swallowing something tart. “Hurry up,” he says, flexing his shoulders so that muscles bunch beneath the skin. He leans towards us, grimacing, his chest a thick slab of force.

We live right smack in the middle of the 50s—the Age of Oedipus, where sons fight fathers for social control and daughters wait on the sidelines like prey, about to be seized. But we’re not aware of this, of cultural control. We’re middle class Americans, and whatever happens in our lives—failed cheerleading tryouts, twirling contests—seems private, familial, not part of any social masquerade. Although the double standard rules us, its force is muted by constancy, a silent regulation of our lives. Mother still irons Daddy’s underwear, serves everyone fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and field peas before fixing her own plate. On Saturdays, my father and brother spread out on the sofa to watch college football games on TV, their bodies tense figures of awe like astronauts glimpsing the rough contours of the moon. It never occurs to us to comment. It’s just the way things are, like watermelon in summer and our neighbor, Lily Fairchild, who swears she’ll *die* if Robert Heilmier doesn’t give her a diamond engagement ring. Right now the house is asleep, our mother and father snuggled in their voluptuous

king-sized bed. The air conditioner hums and knocks like a phantom lover lost in the walls. Outside, a muffler blurts its angry gasp as a lone car speeds down Sand Hill Road towards the black part of town. If Daddy wakes, we'll hear him cough and have time to hide our brother behind the shower curtain. Then we'll yawn, put a roller in our hair, whisper, "Hurrying," to our father's, "Get back to bed."

Pragmatically, my sister sets the timer while I slide a plastic shower cap over my brother's head. "How long?" he whispers, squinting at us. With the shower cap on, he looks like a pinhead, his features too blunt, too ordinary to arouse much interest. I think with satisfaction that he wouldn't make a pretty girl.

"Thirty minutes," my sister says, suppressing a grin. Despite his control, my brother groans.

At the opposite end of the room, I stare into the full length mirror at this image of my brother: head bowed in the plastic shower cap, he looks undignified, absurd. Yet my imagination resists such a thought as if it can't comprehend the male's purgatorial descent. I don't allow myself to see him as a human form, to wonder about his sexual organs (that strange salami with its accompanying sacs, "like a weenee too big for its buns," I think in school girl slang), his appetite, his need for sleep. To me he's already something preserved, unchangeable, like a dinosaur in a display case at the museum. After all, my brother has a history, an image in the world. By age fifteen, he'd become a hero, a star, an idea so remote, so untouchable, it vibrates beyond me at a dizzying height. Through circumstances still whispered about in hallways at school, he emerged triumphant in that all-American game of chance: football.

It was the second game of the season, a hot September night, the southern breeze blowing its humid breath down our throats. Cheerleaders sweated in their gold wool sweaters while the water boy ran constantly to the surge of players coming in off the field. I sat with Martha Kay Hawkins, my chubby next-door neighbor, who ate Reese's Cups and peanuts constantly, screaming, "Kill'um," her mouth full of mush. The whole town was watching, even Charlie Petry, the one-armed taxi driver who sat on the 50-yard line, and Mr. Ulitzsch, the watch repairman who barely spoke English and made guttural grunts of outrage when the other team scored.

“Go on. Get ’em. Take ’em apart,” the crowd yelled as if they were watching a live war zone, each advance or loss bringing jubilation or despair. Football was the only sacred ritual in this small southern town, our communal way of shaking loose the boredom of everyday routine. In the stadium you could yell and hiss. You could see and be seen. You could work off a week’s worth of humiliation and fury. In the stands, romance and repentance sat side by side.

“Here, have a Reese’s,” Martha Kay said, dropping one in my lap. “Save it for the next touchdown.”

That night, my brother (in ninth grade, but on the varsity squad), sat silently on the bench as Lou Riggins, the senior fullback, ran the ball down the center, then faked to the right, gaining five yards, not seeing the runaway opponent who would in the next minute snap him to the ground. When he fell, it was almost private, secretive, a chance meeting with the grass. Others fell on top, a human mound, arms and legs thrust out like planks from a falling building. When they emerged from the pile, Lou didn’t move. He lay moaning, a battle victim, his stillness striking terror in our lungs. As they carried him off the field, his leg broken in two places, the crowd, regaining its voice, stood up and cheered.

While they cheered, no one noticed my brother, #53, run out to take Lou’s place. Instead, there was a sense of mourning, defeat. For the first quarter, Lou had steadily plunged through the defensive line, beating pathways between elbows and knees, more lion than agile tiger, inching his way forward with deliberate force. The second string senior had a pulled hamstring and sat mooning on the bench. Now it was my brother’s turn. The crowd again seated, was nervous, edgy. They knew Lou Riggins, knew his square, hefty body (“a real fireplug,” he was called), had followed him religiously for the last three years. My brother was a newcomer, a youngster without any past. We waited, expectant, our heads bunched together like trees in a forest. Remembering how he looked at the breakfast table—sulky and still—I took the Reese’s Cup and squashed it in my fist. Yet when the ball was snapped, my brother shot forward like a human missile, dodging and faking his way across the field while arms reached out to stop him, tugging at his jersey. Each time he wrestled free and ran on, a tornado of speed while the wind ruffled the streamers clasped in our hands. The lights beamed out heat, and sweat trickled down our collars. Flushed with pride, I forgot that my palms oozed a chocolate mess as I thrust them

high in the air. Then the stands went wild as he covered sixty yards, a human dot emerging as free as a god between those spikey goal posts. In that moment his fate was sealed. For the rest of the game he was electric, a mythic figure of speed and dancelike dodging, escaping as deftly as Houdini from his opponents' traps. He played first string for the rest of the season, made All County, All State. By the end of ninth grade there was no question where he stood: he was the leader of the pack.

"Get this stuff off," he says, jerking at the cap.

"Ten more minutes," my sister replies, her eyes on the timer.

"Ten more my butt." He yanks the shower cap off of his head and leans over the sink, his large frame jutting out before us, demanding attention. "Just wash it," he says in his commanding voice.

"You'll ruin it," my sister says, "and it won't be our fault." But already she is lathering his hair. We both know better than to openly defy him. I watch, holding the towel, as her hands soap with suds. Leaning over the sink, my brother's strength seems atrophied, still, and I have unexpected feelings of anger and loss. Much later I'll wonder if Delilah felt this when Sampson sat before her, stone blind and quiet.

After the neutralizer is applied, my brother refuses to remain in the bathroom. He says he'll wash it out himself after the required five minutes. Dismissed, my sister and I brush our teeth and slip quietly into bed. Yet in the dark, some twin of my brother appears before me: in his football uniform, he trembles and shakes, his body out of control. He undresses, throwing off his helmet, his jersey, and finally his pads like an animal shedding its skin. Weight and muscle seem to collapse with the costume until he's skinny as a scarecrow stuck clumsily in the dirt. In this condition I'm not afraid of him. Like me, I realize, he's a prisoner of masks, a mimic, an imposter. I watch intently as he becomes aware of himself—his real body a frayed connection to the world, so vulnerable, so small, it embarrasses him. When he looks as if he might cry, my world tilts violently. I hide under the covers until a black velvety sleep takes me in its grasp.

At the breakfast table the next morning, my brother's hair is straight. Not flyaway straight or poker straight, but the curl is relaxed, with just the hint of a wave so that it dips in front like a comma. He doesn't look at us, but stares sullenly, a martyr, at the three strips of bacon, two eggs, and two

pieces of toast Mother has put on his plate. Three different colored vitamin pills sit like worry beads beside his ten oz. glass of milk.

“Don’t forget your protein drink,” my father says, looking over the sports page at my brother, not noticing his hair. My brother nods, but his expression doesn’t change. In the morning, he’s a silent thunder god, Thor, staring almost viciously at the food he must eat. My father, beside him, is the opposite, a small, red-headed squirt. The fringe of curly hair on his head makes him look like Howdy Doody. Next to him, my brother’s panther body seems seductive, saintly, an impossible dream. My father’s feet, tidy in black lace-up shoes, could be an eighth grader’s feet, so small, they’re almost delicate, feminine, hardly an anchor for his weight. “What was your time yesterday?” my father asks, dragging the corner of his paper through his scrambled eggs. A small yellow clump attaches itself like a snail.

“Nothing to brag about,” my brother mutters, gazing up under sleep-hooded lids. But there is pride in his motion as nimbly he flicks the egg back onto my father’s plate.

“Well, take another vitamin,” my father says as he crunches on toast, crumbs drifting like dust across his lap.

My father bumps into doors, drops ice cubes, knocks over glasses full of water with a nervous agitation. Whatever grace in motion my brother has achieved, is unthinkable for my father; as a result, my father is assiduously proprietorial of my brother’s skill—everything must go towards his athletic development. Nothing, in my father’s eyes, is too great to sacrifice. Our family, after all, deserves a star. We ache in secret for fame, for the rewards of talent—adulation, protection. We will sacrifice everything, time and energy, family outings, for my brother’s career. After my brother’s meteoric rise in our small southern town, it never occurs to me that he might fail us, might twist like a sly fish right out of our grasp. Ambition glows from his pores and I can’t see the stiffening inside, emotional needs stifled, repressed, hardening to a fossilized core. What I see instead is what I long for myself—masculine glory.

During the ride home from school, I watch my brother from the back seat, wondering if anyone in his class has noticed the difference in his hair. Boys, I believe, notice nothing but big breasts—hooters, jugs, gazongas, they call them, their eyes lit up like pinball machines—while the female gaze, always on the prowl, scans everything. If this is true, my brother is lucky. Women

won't reveal his secret; they know better than to tell, know better than to gossip openly about a star. Instead they'll titter in the bathroom between cigarettes, then crush the giggles down their throats when my brother comes into view. I watch as he hangs his elbow out the window, careless, assured. What remains of last night's ambivalence has been buried, a quick-frozen dream, not to be thawed. I stare beyond him at the grey sheet of sky where nothing moves. Not a cloud. Not even a branch. I wonder if he feels like that, a grey sheet of emotions, with football the only way to vent his fury at the world.

That evening after I've changed into a T-shirt and shorts and come to the kitchen for a snack, my brother's best friend, Danny DeVanzo is there. With Danny, my brother comes alive, makes music with his smile alongside Danny's teasing grin. Unlike my brother, Danny pays attention to us. He's a wicked flirt with a roving eye. He notes my shorts without saying a word, only pursing his lips as if he's about to whistle. Unlike my brother, he makes me feel like a girl, or what I imagine a girl to be: someone admired by men, noticed for her sex, a 20th century Ginevra Fanshawe in short shorts and a teased bubble hairdo. With my brother, I feel as if I'm passing, mimicking the female role I've seen others perform. I hug, I kiss, I squeal at appropriate moments, but privately I'm much more like Charlotte Brontë's reflective, reticent Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. I'm too serious for the seductress's role.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the laundry door left open, my brother's jock strap hanging like a limp rag over the pencil sharpener just inside the door. Danny's gaze follows mine. He grins. "What's that?" he asks in mock surprise. He's a year older than my brother, shorter, darker, a beautiful tenseness to his body when he moves, like a cat stalking prey. He loves to tease, loves to catch my sister and me in a loop of lies about bodies and sex. He feeds us misinformation—calling football "fartball" while winking at us, then laughs with my brother about "that enema-bag guard." We love him for this, for including us in the game.

"What is it?" he repeats.

"A hat for his crotch," I say, though I know this is stupid. It's the stupidity of embarrassment, of circumstance. He's making me undress my brother, and my brain responds with a small arms fire. Of course I already know that my brother wears this strange object when he plays football, but

I don't know why. I don't know much about male anatomy, only that the penis is wrinkled and dangling (it's clear that Freud never asked a twelve-year-old girl what she thought about male sex organs). To me, a jock strap is the equivalent of a brassiere, a harness to keep you from jiggling. I wonder idly who teaches boys about such things, who fits them, shows them how the body should look. Do they get fitted as girls do for bras, staring eagerly at themselves in the mirror of some dressing room while the saleslady says, "Let yourself fall into it, honey," or is it more regimented, sterile, almost generic, one size fits all? I don't ever ask this question. Like most pre-teen girls, such a query is stifled, aborted before it ever reaches my mouth.

"It's a hat, all right," Danny says, his gaze like a pulse. "But not for a Sunday School picnic."

When he laughs, I feel the sting of green lemons in my throat.

By the time my brother is a junior in high school, college recruiters come regularly to our house dressed in tweed sport coats, dark pants, their college pamphlets and maps spread out on our dining room table like four-color travel brochures. *Where do you want to go? Who do you want to be, be, be?* The younger ones often bring wives as if this were a social call, the men talking football as if it's world affairs, while the women serve hors d'oeuvres and drinks, moving quietly in the background like Oriental shadow dancers. Occasionally, a recruiter stays for dinner, his big knuckled hand carving into Mother's roast beef. On such nights, the men discuss films of the Vigor game, the Satsuma game, the Grand Bay game, the Escambia game while they butter their Brown-and-Serve rolls and smile dimly at my sister and me. The time I remember best is the October night the scout from the University of Alabama, Stan Johnston, came to town, a young, nice-looking man, dark and barrel-chested with tinted glasses. Behind him at the door was his pretty wife, dressed in emerald green wool, her chestnut hair short and perfectly coifed, sweeping away from her ears like wings.

Coach Johnston arrived on Thursday in time for afternoon practice. Immediately afterwards, he talked with my brother, the two of them huddled together over the dining room table as if there weren't enough room to spread out. My father was ecstatic, fevered by hope that his son would play for the Almighty Bear Bryant. It was his dream that my brother would be "at the top of the heap."

Yet it was the wife I was interested in, this statuesque brunette who looked like a Miss America contestant with her painted red nails, her cinch-waist dress, her talk of shopping in Tulsa, Memphis, and Baton Rouge. While the recruiter pumped my brother full of football lore from the University of Alabama, my sister and I watched the wife, who sat perched on one of our kitchen stools, talking easily and briskly with my mother about the cities she'd visited while married to "the Coach."

"You know they have ducks in the fountains at the Peabody," she said to us, "and they walk every night to the elevators on red carpet just like royalty. Imagine that!"

I knew intuitively that what she had was style. She seemed charmed by all that was around her, even our small, flat, motionless town. Of course, she was from the city where they had trained beauticians and department stores, not out-of-work factory women who sent off for a hair products catalogue, then went to work at the order department at Sears. Instantly, I wanted to be like her when I grew up, and I worried this might never come true. I suspected that people would take one look at me and guess I was from a hicktown, as if there were a smell at the base of my throat which conjured up straight, treeless roads, dirt alleys, a muddy swimming hole.

At the end of this night, my brother glowed. It was as if a magic carpet had been thrown at his feet, as if he'd no longer have to do so much as breathe. We could all feel the excitement in the air, the way the scout coach had complimented him, had played to his desires. "You just let me know when you think you're ready," he said, "and I'll have you up there before you can blink." For me, it was as if my brother had already entered another world, one I couldn't participate in, couldn't even imagine. What else was said in private to my brother I'll never know. All I saw were the outside tests: the increased vitamin intake, longer practices, less home visibility. It's all serious business: heat and know-how.

During his eleventh grade year, my brother and Danny function as a team, the miracle boys, impervious to danger, nourished by the hot lick of speed. At home, their legs tremble with impatience, but on the field, my brother runs the ball through impossible gridlocks while Danny catches a pass so low he bends like a ballerina in a sweeping *pas de deux*. They are always together, magnets to each other. Elvis's "Hound Dog" blasts from my brother's room on weekends echoed by their laughter, their hoots of defiant surprise.

Suddenly it is springtime, almost summer. The azaleas have bloomed and died. The heat wraps around us all, like a glove, tightening its grasp. Everybody sweats though it is only late April. Danny's upper lip sprouts moisture; my brother's hair has relaxed back into crinkly curls. My sister and I have thrown away our training bras and crisp white shirts for bright colored loose knit tops with stretch band waists. We all sit at the dining room table, a watermelon before us, one of the first of the season, its cold, red fruit making us pant with anticipation. Mother is getting knives and plates, but Danny and my brother don't wait; they pull off hunks with their fingers, the juice dripping freely from their mouths to the table.

"Mother said *wait*," my sister says, watching the juice puddle then disappear into the wood.

Danny grins. "No shit," he whispers, pointing a finger at my sister. "But you won't tell."

We love it when they curse, including us in their lives. Usually they're all jock talk, all insider jokes, girlfriends, and rolling eyes.

"No shit," my sister says louder as my mother enters the room.

Mother pretends not to hear as she distributes knives and plates. Newspaper—which most of our friends use for watermelon—is too primitive for Mother, even though it might save the table from our mess. Instead she asks Danny what we all suspect to be true. "I guess you're getting excited about going to Tulane next year?"

Danny flashes her his no shit grin. "Yes, ma'm," he says, all white teeth and summer tan.

But it's my brother's face I watch. Enjoyment retreats behind a scowl so furious, so brief, I wonder that no one seems to notice but me. That scowl is the beginning of a punishing stare, but who gets punished? Not Danny. He's happy-go-lucky, football's Peter Pan. It's only later that I understand, later that I see the connection between Danny and my brother. Together, the game is more than competition, more than a means to an end. Without the interference of adults, it's still a game, a ritual of danger and discovery. But now Danny is defecting, leaving my brother to the lions and tigers, leaving my brother alone with my father's ambition. Alone he must push. Alone, he has no choice but to succeed.

But there are moments when even he is released. In the summer when my parents travel to Atlanta for a convention, my brother and Danny plan a

party, not just an average party, but a three county jamboree with women from the beach, from the Junior College, from the city schools in Mobile. The house throbs with people, girls giggling in our bedroom as they drop cigarettes on the floor and re-tease their hair; muscle-bound football players cruise the halls, squat awkwardly on Mother's Queen Anne chairs as they pop open beers. Music from Chubby Checker, Elvis, Lou Rawls, the Beach Boys hangs in the air. My sister and I float through this crowd invisible as spies. We are in heaven, thrilled at the hairdos of the girls, hair which doesn't even move when they throw up in the toilet.

"Their hair is so per-fect," I whisper to my sister, my voice gurgling with enthusiasm as if I have fish bubbles in my brain. I see a woman lying on my bed, her skirt hiked up to reveal the thick band of a girdle. Yet even passed out, the shape of her hairdo is intact. It surrounds her snoring face like a helmet, the two sleek side curls plastered to her cheek like giant commas, the bangs shifting only slightly to reveal a smooth, untroubled brow. I wonder if she wraps it in toilet paper at night.

When the party is over, the house looks drooped, deflated, like the leftover skin of an animal. Danny and my brother make attempts to clean up, and though they re-arrange furniture, wash dishes, and vacuum rugs, they can't seem to rid the house of odors, of spilled beer and perfume. But my parents are not furious, at least not in the way we expect. My mother sighs at the stained places on the rug, and my father says in a short, jerky voice, "Don't you see what you've done? You could have *ruined* your chances." Only that word hangs like punishment in the air.

During my brother's senior year, more recruiters come. From Georgia Tech, Tulane, F.S.U., University of Florida, Georgia, even Harvard and Yale. Their desires and pledges scream above us like ambushes, hoarse cheers of fate. *Come to us. Play for us*, the voices demand. The air crackles with excitement. My brother is pursued, seduced. I wonder if he feels like a woman tantalized by offers, each one seeming better than the first until they all become irrelevant, trivial, too many beats away from his heart. Who is to say that too much is better, is less frightening than too little? When I look at the hardness of my brother's face, I know there's nothing light or airy about becoming a star. Most often I see him after practice, slumped exhausted into the reclining chair, his face puzzled, then empty as if he can no longer remember the point.

Maybe what my brother sees is a long dark tunnel of fear. A Halloween trap. Blood mixed with laughter, a wicked wind howling above his head. Maybe his life doesn't feel blessed as everyone suspects. Maybe becoming a star is more than hard work and talent; maybe it cuts off a lifeline somewhere deep within so that as you expand, you also contract: a creature flattened against the wall of your shell. I don't know that any of this is true. I only know that there are moments when his face shouts resistance, a fury too large to hold inside. I know that no one talks to him about what he *wants* to do, about what frightens him, challenges him. Instead, he's like a tree caught in a hurricane, pulled along without question, a primal struggle without any choice. No one assumed in the early 60s that a young talented male might not want to be a college football star, that there might be other means of success. Nor did anyone question the limitations of such a role. It was expected that after college a football player naturally developed his connections, collecting favors, monopolizing on the power of his name, reminiscing about his body in motion as if that were his badge of honor to redeem.

When I see my brother withdrawing from this trap, I love him with a fierce curiosity as if he's a geographical mass I have explored with hands and feet, but have never seen. In the dark for the first time I see him: he's bruised and weeping. His hands dangle uselessly at his side as he moves towards me, a child. But it's his eyes that have changed, those eyes that can out-glare my meanest stare. Those eyes, I think, have seen ugliness and memorized its spite. Now they are frightened, wide with terror, with the approach of nakedness and collapse. Yet he walks by me, unseeing, mute. Neither of us speaks. I too am a shadow in the dark.

By the end of spring the recruiters are putting on pressure, flying him to campuses all over the south. One weekend, he's in Atlanta, the next in Knoxville, a third in Tuscaloosa, then over to New Orleans to see Danny. Yet there seems little choice in his decision since at every turn, my father whispers, "Alabama! Bear Bryant!" in a hypnotic trance. It's at the height of Bear Bryant's career when Alabama streaks triumphantly across TV screens all over America. My brother, it's believed, can become one of those prancing giants. With such an investment, we'll surely become more rooted in the world, a star shining above our heads while we lie back, grateful, transfixed, the light from my brother illuminating us all. And

what better way to earn it than through the capable hands of a taskmaster, a patriarch who can mold you, shape you until you give forth your best like an offering, a gift? “Bear Bryant,” the air whispers. “Bear Bryant.”

One spring morning in March when the sky looks split open, grey giving way to blue as if better times are surely coming, my brother emerges from his room looking tense, truculent. He twists the curls of his hair in a nervous gesture as he stops beside my father’s chair. My father is drinking a tall glass of ice water, a cloud of eggs spread across his plate. “I’m not going to Alabama,” my brother says quickly as if he’s trespassing on sacred ground. A hush follows these words. My father stops drinking and stares attentively at his glass. An ice cube breaks, crashing with the force of an avalanche in the Arctic Sea. “I’m going to Tulane,” my brother says more forcefully, his gaze zooming beyond my father to the outside world. It’s an astonishing choice, as if in the middle of a thunderstorm, he’s stepped out on the wing of an airplane instead of staying safely inside. I imagine in his room, he’s happy, ecstatic. In his dreams, he’ll pick up with Danny where they left off, the two of them racing like fleet-footed warriors across a smooth green plain, becoming boys again, playing cowboys and Indians, the stakes no bigger than daring each other to escape. With Danny, he’ll surely survive. He’ll surely win. There is nothing to stop them, nothing but a guilty tremor that beats somewhere deep inside his skin.

“That’s fine,” my father says as he spears his cumulus clump of eggs.

Two months later I watch as my brother stands at his window, gazing out at the park across from our house. A child swings back and forth, hurtling herself through the air with the repetitive faith of childhood. Birds fly up from a nearby bush, a wall of screeching sound. It is May, the beginning of summer, the last summer of his youth near the lazy shores of the Gulf of Mexico. In his hands he holds a letter, his latest from Danny at Tulane. He holds it tentatively as if it might scorch his fingers. “Hey, kiddo,” it says in a tightly scrawled hand. “Things are coming up bad all over. I can’t quite believe it yet, but I just talked to the dean and, well, it looks like I just flunked out.”

My brother is motionless, quiet. I think, watching him, that he needs to straighten his hair again. It is knotted and furious. It kinks like tiny fists springing up from inside his head.

For months I don't see him. In early August when it's still insufferably hot—the air a thick blanket of heat—he goes to Tulane for fall training. His room, now empty of plaques and barbells, of shoulder pads and pennants, looks like an eroded shell. Although my father travels to New Orleans in October for freshman home games, my mother and sister and I stay home, waiting for the news: they won! they lost! Then in November when we decide to visit at Homecoming, a cold excitement marches through our house. For a week, my sister and I try on clothes, discussing which outfits look best, which are most grown-up, most citified, until in despair we swear we won't go, we don't look right. Of course, we do go, marginal princesses though we are, daring ourselves to posture the perky charm of a willful Sandra Dee, a flirty Annette Funicello.

When my brother walks into our motel room in New Orleans he looks bigger, bulkier than I remember, “beefed up” as they say in football lingo, his neck thickly rooted between wide, bulging shoulders. Behind him, his roommate and suite-mates, *real bruisers*, block the light from the door. When they sit on the motel beds, the room becomes cramped with knees and thighs. They laugh at this, jostling each other, shoulder knocking shoulder as they tease each other about “killing the Gators” though being freshmen, they know they probably won't play. While the men talk their usual football voodoo—scores and statistics—my sister and I sit before the motel mirror, critiquing each other's hair. We re-roll and dry, fluff and comb until our bouffant hairdos are perfectly smooth.

When everyone else goes out to the car, my brother excuses himself to use the bathroom. We wait outside in brilliant sunshine, the clouds puffy white cotton like the kind in Disney movies stuck to a clean blue sky; my sister and I go over the contents of our purses, making sure we have lipstick and powder, Kleenex and hand cream, and I realize I've forgotten my brush. “I can't go yet!” I say and rush back inside, bouncing the door against its hinges. For a moment I'm stunned by darkness and only gradually recover my sight. The bathroom door is open and what I see surprises me: it's my brother standing before the sink, his hands gripping the porcelain, his head bowed, mouth mumbling as if he's praying to a fierce, demanding god. His body is a zigzag of tension, a coil of barbed wire. A heaviness drags my legs as I move closer. I feel helpless. Ashamed. I don't know if I should speak or keep silent, but suddenly he looks at me. I know it's not me he sees. I'm only a shadow, a spot of color, a speck in

the air. His eyes look deadened, dazed. I don't move, not even a blink until I see, just beyond his hairy arm, my brush with the stiff bristles full of blonde, tangled hair. As I shift my gaze, he wakes up, startled, aware of where he is, who I am.

“Get out of here,” he says, raising himself to his full warrior height. “Get out!”