

A COURTSHIP

Ellen Bayles decided against phoning him again. She'd waited out the morning already—seated in the first of two wicker chairs with a tall pile of clothing next to her, a portable fan going from the top porch railing. At one point she had gone inside—to fill her water glass—and another time, because the sun had moved, she'd brought both chairs to a cooler spot by the kitchen window. Interested but busy, that's how she imagined herself. A woman who could shoulder two concerns at once. When her neighbors waved she offered a faint smile in return, her hands crouched in her lap as her mind played scenes from services the next day. By then she'd be everyone's topic of conversation. One mouth guaranteed a town full of listeners, and she could all but guess what they'd be saying about her. Behind a screen of whispers, they'd argue that a woman was supposed to wait more time before inviting over another man.

Originally, she'd planned to see him after church again, precisely to avoid such attention. But when her son came home yesterday with his pants split open and his collar hanging loose like a rabbit ear, her first impulse had been to phone John Niles for help.

"I'll come tomorrow," he'd said after a pause.
"Tomorrow morning?"

She explained that keeping Whitney indoors all day Saturday would be a chore unto itself. "Yes, I'll allow that's true," said Mr. Niles. More silence, followed by a throat clearing. He was sorry, the best he could promise was to arrive by noon, an offer Ellen quickly accepted before it could be withdrawn. Next thing she told her son. She hoped the idea would grow in his mind as it had in her own, but when at long last the green Buick pulled into her driveway, she could've kicked herself for her stupidity. All she'd done was put him on alert. From as far away as the front porch she could hear his footsteps, charging down the staircase and out the back door, just a few precious seconds before Mr. Niles stepped from his car.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "The morning disappeared before I

knew it." In one gesture he tipped his hat and blotted out the drops of sweat on his forehead.

"I'm afraid we've missed him," she said. She lay her sewing on the armrest and stood up. "It's that car that tipped him off, I told you he's a bit protective."

Mr. Niles hooked a thumb in each front pocket. "Yes, well—" he said, but he came up short of another apology. He'd gotten at least two weeks behind in his yardwork, he told her. He had to get things taken care of before the sun made it impossible. He took his hat off and held the brim with both hands like a steering wheel. They were square hands with large, even-length fingers and closely trimmed white nails. Some women remarked that he was handsomely gray, with fine touches of black still nesting in his short hair. "How about a drink?" she said, already moving toward the front door. "Since you've come so far." He stood on the bottom step and fanned himself, eyes roaming along the porch as if intrigued by its dimensions. Two squirrels jockeyed up her maple tree, and from the hood of leaves came the defensive cry of a swallow. "Okay," he said finally, but he seemed to work his feet up every step as if unsure about the wood. It was Ellen who held the door open.

Inside, the living room curtains were pulled shut but still drew a pulse from the open screens, an occasional tide of light pouring through. Mr. Niles sat by the cool stone slabs of the fireplace, hat in his lap. After services last week she'd first approached him in the privacy of the parish office, telling him something of Whitney's problems with the other school children. These were boys whose own parents pushed them make to make trouble. She kept waiting for the problem to go away, and yet she had to admit that Whitney himself shared in the blame. "He's like his father," she said almost smiling. "Never taught to put his fists down." But that was it, she didn't say anything else about her late husband. Mr. Niles had never met him, and it was hard to figure what he'd already heard through other people.

To his credit, he had a reputation for being a good listener. He was an honest man of the church, not the type to borrow ideas from someone else. Last week he had stood by quietly to the very end of what she'd had to tell him. She remembered the thick water stains on the office ceiling. The only light was from a small window overlooking the back garden. After nodding his head with deep concern, he told Ellen not to lose faith.

"Oh, that's easy," she answered, "I pray day and night for the boy."

His face clouded strangely. Before she saw it he'd reached a hand to her shoulder and said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for it's they who'll be comforted."

Her eyes withdrew. "Yes, I've heard you say so," she said. But when his hand remained on her shoulder another second, the weight of possibility felt too heavy to ignore.

From the kitchen she got two clean glasses and a pitcher of ice water, and on the way back she thought about how little she knew about this man. She'd heard he used to box in the old days. He was nearing fifty but his stomach lay flat beneath the uplift of his chest muscles. When he'd moved to Warrenville back in January—for the better climate, he'd said—he joined right up with the First Presbyterian and became usher. On his first Sunday he'd made an immediate impression. The Jasper boy was clowning in back, and when his parents wouldn't shush him it was Mr. Niles who plucked him by the ear and dragged him screaming from the pew. He marched straight toward the back and out the door, the boy's neck straining to keep up with his stretched ear. While everyone was whispering, her husband Gabe had leaned over and said, "The guy's got real rocks in his pants." His eyes went straight at Whitney when he said this.

Back in the living room, she tried to imagine if Gabe's hands were larger than those of Mr. Niles. Two months had passed since he died, but his fingers were still vivid in her memory. Instead of being bone-white when they'd found him, or even blue with cold, they'd turned out to be a sickly yellow. This was in the middle of February, when the nights were known to dip below freezing. Gabe had been drinking again. After safely locking Whitney in the bathroom, the most she'd dared was to throw a wool coat over her husband's shoulder, and for this he took a swing at her, the coat sliding off as he ran away. Eight hours later he was discovered in the woods by Mr. Stewart's dogs, his body curled in a ball as his fingers—or so she'd been told—threaded together in his pants. It was as if he were somehow trying to save the last of his heat.

Mr. Stewart had called the doctor. With her permission, he also

called the neighbors for help, and the men delivered Gabe to her house and set him down on the knitted rug by her fireplace. He was still in a fetal position. His hands had come apart and fallen out of his pants while he'd been carried over. The men stood back a respectful distance, the doctor ran a stray foot along the floorboard. They looked in every direction but at her husband's body. Someone asked if he could smoke a cigarette. Another volunteered to make coffee. In that moment they all looked the same to her: Their faces showed a disturbing calm, like they were willing to take part in something so unpleasant but would wipe their feet of it as soon as they left her house. Or at least they'd pretend to. Around here, no one ever killed gossip with such a high street value.

As she poured water her hands grew jittery with the memory, and she accidentally spilled onto the low oak table in front of the sofa.

Mr. Niles stood from his chair. "Ellen—" he said.

"Oh, it's no great fuss." She laughed while handing him his water, but after sipping up the spill with a small towel she felt ready to break down again. "You know yesterday," she said, "after his teacher broke things up, she found a knife in one of his pockets. Can you believe it? And of all things she thought I'd given it to him. I said, No ma'am, I couldn't very well keep track of him in school, but whatever help they gave would be appreciated."

She sat back in the sofa and held her drink in her lap. The curtains bloomed beside the open windows, a shape mimicked by the light falling on the floorboards.

"I'll come back," said Mr. Niles, raising his hat as though suddenly rushed. Ellen didn't look at him. She scratched the felt cushion a lighter color, then rubbed it shiny in the other direction.

"I know where he is," she said, and took a sip of water.

Mr. Niles put his hat down. He told her how hot it was to stand around in, let alone go for a walk.

"That's true," she replied. The end of March had brought its usual turnaround. In her memory April always felt closer to June and July than it did to the months preceding it. Thoughtlessly, she asked him if they got a good spring up in Indiana.

"No, not really," he said. Where he was from, there'd be snow

every third year. Sometimes the rain lasted well until the end of May. She nodded suddenly with great interest. Her legs were crossed, her free hand flat on the sofa. She almost mentioned the bugs they missed in Indiana but decided against it.

"Well, if I came along he'd just run away again, but I'm sure he'd speak to you alone, John. He admires you so." She traced another line in the cushion, watching him hold the glass in both hands as he churned away the condensation. His feet sat close together and his eyes were downturned. Before the moment passed, he asked how far away the boy might be.

"Oh, he's just behind the Stewarts'," she said, rising from the sofa, barely containing what she felt. She tried but couldn't remember the last time she'd been visited with such joy. It was the rarest kind for her, born only out of charming someone of the opposite sex.

Mr. Niles set his glass down on the table. "Fine, then," he said, and agreed to go, but at the front door she couldn't help stopping him again. She told him there'd be lemonade when he came back. It sounded risky, but by now she'd begun to believe her own words to him on the front porch, when she said he'd already come this far. "We'll see," he answered on his way out, though he glanced at her a long second down the porch steps, and one more time as he continued past his car.

He'd decided to take the long way. To go around the pasture was at least three times as far, but he wouldn't climb that barbed wire fence like some twelve-year-old boy, or like her strong young husband—dead young husband—whom he'd seen but never shaken hands with at church. He was acting foolishly, anyone could see that, but with the situation now before him it was too difficult to turn back. He headed along the south side of the pasture that brought him to the Stewarts' house and the metal tractor shed. The door to the shed stood open and he heard someone clanging around inside. The sun slanted toward two or thirty, the mares feeding in the corner nibbled out of their own shadows.

"Mr. Niles—" He turned to see Mrs. Stewart on the far side of the house, hanging up her washing. "What brings you out on a Saturday? You ought to get inside, you're turning red."

"Have you seen Whitney around here?" he asked.

"Wait a minute." She dug into her basket and clipped another T-shirt to the line. The string sagged and the shirts stood still like paper dolls.

"Why not let the sun go down a little? You and Lee could get acquainted," she offered.

"It's kind of you." He heard more clatter from the shed and peered in that direction, but Mrs. Stewart didn't take her eyes off him.

"You know he never goes that way," she said finally. "He just cuts through the fence and sits by himself in that poor spot, the one where Gabriel died." She wiped her hands on the side of her apron. "You ask me, the child shouldn't be allowed there. Best to put those things behind you, else they stay with you as an adult. Don't you think?"

"Yes," he said nodding, but she kept staring at him as if she expected more. As she approached the fence, her eyes cut quickly to the shed.

"Lee's warned me not to talk," she said in a whisper. "A few days ago his bowie knife walked away. Neither of us thought much about it then, but this morning he discovered his buck knife's gone, the one he leaves hanging by a string in the doorway. Too much coincidence, Mr. Niles. From now on, we'll keep that shed locked good and tight when no one's around."

She wrung her hands together as she turned her head both ways. A slight breeze stirred the blossoms of her dogwoods and redirected the weathervane on her roof. "It's a smart thing," said Mr. Niles, but even still she continued to look beyond him. When her eyes finally resettled, he knew exactly what to make of it. She wanted more from him. He might as well have said nothing at all, someone who was purposely uncooperative. Well, so be it. Mr. Niles refused to say any more on the subject. He didn't care to win her approval that way. The wind had died down, he noticed, and just as suddenly he became aware of the silence coming from the shed. "Mrs. Stewart," he said, making sure his voice carried, "I agree with you wholeheartedly. The man's in peace now, just like you said—so let's not be the ones who resurrect him." He passed a friendly smile and tipped his hat, and with that he wished both her and her husband a good day.

By the time Mr. Niles rounded the far corner of the pasture, his shirt had turned a damp, sticky gray. Resting, he observed the row of

houses lined up on the other side, Ellen's behind these, invisible except for the side gable. He remembered the plain camisole she wore and the light cotton skirt, the lazy hemline riding above the knee. A year or two under thirty, that was the most he gave her. Still she had another ten good years left. The thought of lemonade brought a smile to his face, but he knew, more importantly, what she'd meant by it. She'd set a task for him. He had to find Whitney first, and the importance of it caught Mr. Niles by surprise. Years ago, he had finally decided he was too old to get married. It had been the easiest way to make peace with being alone.

As he approached a grove of elm trees he slowed down again. The grass rose in foot-muffling patches and he feared twisting an ankle or bruising his foot. That's when he saw Whitney. The boy sat dead still, knees in his chest and his back to a tree. His hands rested comfortably on his kneecaps, with the self-assurance of royalty. Mr. Niles shuddered. The boy must've been watching him this entire time.

"Mind if I rest?" he said. He took out his handkerchief and came a step closer. Whitney shrugged and pulled a stalk of grass from between his tennis shoes. He stuck it in the corner of his mouth.

Sitting down, Mr. Niles accidentally dropped his handkerchief, and when he discovered it gone he started to comb his hands through the tall grass until he saw how closely the boy observed him. His face was expressionless, like the clear sky they sat under. If his mom were here she'd no doubt be disappointed with him, a man more concerned with his handkerchief than her son.

"Gorgeous day," he said laughing. "Saw plenty of ballgames on my ride over. Everywhere you looked," he added cheerfully. Whitney kept quiet, which in turn made Mr. Niles more restless. He was happy not to be standing anymore, though the sun hit squarely on the back of his neck. "I was wondering," he said, "is it those kids who keep you out or are you just not interested?"

Whitney curled his shoelace around his pinkie. A beam of hatred flashed in his eyes but still he didn't speak. He sucked the same piece of grass without chewing.

"Hey, boy, have you started praying like I told you to?"

Whitney pulled a thick clump of grass from between his legs and let it fall through his fingers. He pulled more clumps after that. With two hands he worked hurried fingers through the grass as if in a race to sand it down.

"You always talk like a preacher," he said looking off into the trees. "But you're not." With his head turned he absorbed the slap Mr. Niles landed on his face, a clean strike like a stick breaking. The left-over mark burned in the center of his cheek, his eyes starting to blur. Then he shook it off.

"You'll pay for that," Whitney said getting up slowly.

Watching him, Mr. Niles couldn't believe what he'd done. Almost immediately he'd lapsed into dizziness, his body having lunged too fast for this heat, and the mat of sweat on his forehead moved down quick to sting his left eye. It was a hurt only made worse by rubbing. "Damn you," he said to himself, "it's not the boy's fault." He was trying to talk down his anger, yet several more times he said 'Damn' under his breath. What he believed, tragically, was that there were some misfortunes a child could never understand. His only hope would be to outgrow them.

"Whitney, blessed are those who mourn," he said, the words weakening as his own voice sounded tired to him. With his bad eye closed he couldn't see straight, and he thought it was a shank of bark the boy scooped up out of the grass. He saw the string attached, but the object didn't register until Whitney clawed open the blade and turned it on him. Mr. Niles flung his hand just in time to block the knifeblade, which ate the flesh right next to his thumb. His scream raised an entire flock of crows from the treetops.

The blood spread fast through his hairs and fingernails. He clamped down with his opposite hand and said, "Whitney, get my handkerchief!" The cracks of his skin darkened, and for a moment he wondered if a clot would be able to form.

Whitney ignored him. He walked to the fence and ducked through the top and bottom wires, only after which he turned around.

"Don't you ever touch me," he said pointing. "Or her!"

Then he bolted. He ran across the pasture without looking back, his shadow dragging behind as though part of him were still reluctant about leaving. Mr. Niles felt just as divided. His muscles thundered with adrenaline as he considered running after the boy. Never mind that Whitney was much faster—eventually Mr. Niles would catch up, and from that moment on the boy would have to worry whenever they crossed paths again. But he hung on before his anger. The gospel he mouthed every day came back in whispers, and his rage subsided as he watched the boy's fleeting shape in the distance. Guilt struck down

what he'd been feeling. Ellen Bayles's child had exposed him—if only for a brief moment in time—but the damage was done. He'd turned Mr. Niles into his own worst threat, and before he spoke to his mother again he would somehow have to make peace with himself first. He could never explain it to her. These things women simply didn't understand. As promised, he had gone to speak with Whitney, but that was it—that was all he owed her. When he wiped the blood away he breathed a sigh of relief, seeing the cut starting to dry up. It was just a surface wound. It was a warning he had made himself too vulnerable, and he renewed his vow never to let it happen again.

Ellen was seated on the front porch when Whitney came home. She heard the tight springs of the back door, and from the way his footsteps hurried up the stairs she guessed something terrible had happened. In the next moment she herself was rushing two steps at a time toward his bedroom. She stopped at his half-opened door, where she saw him lying on his stomach with a comic book folded open on the pillow.

"You took off pretty quick," she said, breathing heavily from the stairs. She rubbed her arms together as she sat down at the edge of the bed. "I've got lemonade if you're thirsty. You can drink it up here if you like." He thumbed through the pages without taking his eyes off them. Earlier, when she'd hung his shirt up in the closet, she'd gone through a shoe box of old toys and then his dresser drawers. Somehow, not finding another knife had only made her more worried.

"Whitney," she said, and she gently shook his leg as if to wake him, "didn't you have any visitors today?" He licked his finger and skipped ahead a few more pages, then closed the book and turned onto his back, sitting up against the headboard.

"Only if you count Mr. Niles," he said. "Which I don't."

She recoiled from him, that terrible look in his eyes that she knew so well, her old fears suddenly reawakened. But she caught herself being afraid, and against her own bad habit she stood firm.

"God damn it, Whitney, do you want to see me all alone?" she said. "Imagine one of those boys brings a knife of his own next time. Don't you get it? One mistake, that's all you need. Haven't you learned anything from your father?"

Her hands were trembling. She had much more to say to him, but the way his mouth tripped open suddenly filled her with unspeakable sadness. "Oh, God," she said covering up a sob with both hands. It was the dirtiest trick a mother could pull on her child. Not deliberately scaring him, but blaming him for something his own father had never understood.

"I'm sorry," he said in a whisper, and she leaned forward to squeeze his fingers as she kissed him on the forehead. She smoothed his hair back with one of her hands. Over the years she'd seen his hair grow lighter and straighten out a good deal, so she could part it with a comb and watch it change colors as it dried.

"It's okay," she said tucking him in under the single sheet, "it'll all be fine," and she kissed him once more before leaving the room.

On her way downstairs, she blamed her own foolish hopes for trying to bring Whitney and John Niles together. She still believed it had some chance, just not so quickly. Wasn't that what people were always saying about getting sober? That it became easier over time? This she'd always wanted to believe, and yet she'd seen no proof of it with her own husband. The memory awoke her rudely. Out of embarrassment, she wished she could disappear as fast as Mr. Niles's Buick in her driveway. After Gabe had died, she'd honestly thought the load would start to lighten, but now the size of it nearly collapsed her. She clutched the banister as she fell into this terrible awareness. It was more than just a wife and son he'd left behind. Gabe had been outlived by his reputation, and she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to get out from under it.

Once more that awful morning rushed back to her. To avoid the fence the men brought him right up the front porch steps before laying him in her parlor. Nobody had said anything. Nobody dared to move. As the fire spread shadows over his body all she heard was the delicate sound of cups and saucers being set to one another. Finally she took a closer look. The smell grew worse as she approached, then all at once the odor turned her stomach, the shit thawing right there in his pants. They all had to have smelled it, yet still no one moved or bothered to say anything. Not even the doctor. But what explanation was there, after all? Everyone knew it was alcohol. What else could've made a man Gabe's size give in to hypothermia? That's what it was—a grown man dying of cold. Shitting his pants like a little boy. Well after the odor had left the room her humiliation hung around, simply

because no one had openly acknowledged it at the time. To this day no one talked about what had happened, no one except the school children, that is. They showed no mercy around her son, but at least they gave him a fighting chance to defend himself.

In the kitchen, she was pouring herself some lemonade when through the side window John Niles drifted into view. Their eyes met briefly as he approached his car, her hopefulness grown back for a brief second. But somehow he looked different to her. In a way she couldn't explain, he now seemed less than he had been before, his one hand shoved timidly in his pocket, the other waving hello with uncertainty. Whatever thought she had of asking him in was quickly shot down. Let him do whatever he wished, finally. That's how men lived anyway, she decided. In fact it was something she had always known, but only now could accept it. A woman didn't have to mourn all losses. She didn't need the comfort Mr. Niles was always speaking of. And when it came to Whitney's life it was no one's business but her own. If a mother couldn't set her own child straight then it was up to God's heaven to do it for her. This was what she decided as she went back upstairs with the lemonade, but she paused outside his bedroom, seeing that he was fast asleep. His body curled in a funny shape as he lay on the bed, his lazy arms draped off both sides. Quietly, she set her lemonade down and closed the door behind her, happy to let him rest for as long as he liked.