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Opening extract from

Accidents of Nature

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Prologue

In the middle of North Carolina, there is a beach that has no ocean. Eons ago, the land faced the sea and the actions of surf and wind built up huge dunes. Then the waves withdrew, foot by foot, behind silt the rivers laid down. Today a coastal plain over a hundred miles wide separates the sand hills from the ocean that made them.

Now the soft rolling land is overlaid with golf courses and planned communities. Before the real estate boom, it was thought best suited to timber. Camp Courage was built on a forty-five-acre tract that had been planted in pine forty years before. Once planted, the trees were left alone by absentee owners.

With active management, the trees would have been thinned at regular intervals. The weaker ones would have been taken. The others, judged more likely to thrive, would have been nourished. The result would have been

a regiment of uniform, straight trunks, ideally suited for the market, with just enough space between them to bring in machines when it came time to turn them into logs.

With neglect, however, the pines grew dense. Roots plunged deep to find the water that filtered through the sand. Trunks twisted toward the sun; limbs became so entangled that it would be hard to say where one tree ended and another began. Low to the ground grew a struggling crowd of seedlings, waiting for their chance to take over when wind or disease took down the big trees. Some made it. Young pines shot up amid the old growth.

In the deep shade below the lowest branches grew a hardy crop of weeds: nameless grasses, leaves, and vines not planted by design but accidentally sown by wind and animals. The weeds could do without sun. Their short roots found nourishment enough in the musty layer of decaying plant matter. They got their living from their own remains.

Most of the tract was covered with those woods. A single dirt road cut through the trees and brush and wound up and down and around the dunes. Not counting the lake, Camp Courage occupied about three acres. There the underbrush had been cleared away and the pines thinned. The remaining trees had room to thrive. Periodically, they were inspected, trimmed, fertilized, and protected from parasites. However, at this stage no amount of management could change their basic nature. Thin and thick,

twisted and shapely, bent and straight, they remained. Unrehabilitated.

They were products of what is called the natural law of survival of the fittest. But their fitness was not defined by human needs, or market forces, or any grand design. In truth, they did not survive because they were fit. Rather, they were proven fit because they survived. They survived by accident.

Day One

An arrival necessarily implies a departure from the place previously occupied.

My shoulders are sticky with my father's sweat where I took his arm to get out of the station wagon. We're met by a tall brunette in Bermuda shorts. "I'm Sue, the senior counselor in Jean's cabin. Carole's around here somewhere."

"Pleased to meet you." My parents speak in unison so perfect that someone really ought in some manner to express amusement. But instead Sue and Dad shake hands and my mother accepts a clipboard loaded with forms, while I sit, silent, beside the car. The sun beats down on my head.

"Has Jean ever spent a night away from home?"

My dad says, "No."

"Well," Mom adds, "only with us with her, on family trips and whatnot." She's working on the forms on the hood of our station wagon. Inside my sister Cindy is sprawled across the backseat.

Sue says, "We have a lot of first-time campers this time. Jean'll fit right in."

Mom's smile is a little rigid. "Well, I know she will. She always does. You know, she's in public high school. Going to graduate next year."

"With honors, I might add. Beta Club. Key Club. I-Don't-Know-What-All Club. And perfect attendance for seven years in a row—" Dad's habitual grin goes up a wide notch.

"At any rate," Mom says, "we thought it would be good for her to have an experience away from home. Away from us too. She needs to find out she can survive without us. She's never let cerebral palsy hold her back."

I shrug. I feel no need to prove anything, but if this is what my parents want, I can indulge them. While I'm at camp, my family will be sleeping in a tent on the beach.

"I know she'll have a great time. You're not nervous, are you?"

It takes me by surprise, her turning from my parents to me without warning, and I'm not ready to talk. I'm struggling to get words out, and I realize I don't even know what words I'm going for. There's no way out when it gets like this.

Sue jumps back in. "Hey, that's a really cute outfit." It's a culotte suit in a funny print—the words NO NO NO NO NO repeated all over.

Dad's still grinning, and I know what's coming. "Like I told her this morning: Just look at those clothes to

remember what to tell the boys at camp!" He rubs my head the same way he rubbed it this morning when he made the same joke, the same way he always rubs his best dog. He always makes dumb jokes, and I always laugh. I laugh now, but I hope the talking will end soon and they'll get me out of the sun.

My mother hands Sue the clipboard. "Did I do everything right?"

Sue shows them where to sign. They sign. Along with the intake forms, I'm handed over in the sandy parking area. Mom bends down. I tilt my head up for a kiss that smells like face powder and feels like lipstick. Dad gives me a noisy smack on the forehead and a friendly slap on the back. "Now try to behave yourself, girl. Do us proud."

I wonder if it will be this hot the whole time.

That's it. I should have a spaz attack, but I don't. There should be a strong emotion of some kind, but there isn't. Ever since that August in 1970, I've pressed hard to squeeze something out of my memory, but I always find it dry. I have to accept it. When I lean back to receive good-bye kisses from my mother and father, all I feel is hot.

The doors *thunk* shut and the engine rumbles. Dad waves through the window and honks good-bye. I can't see, but I know Cindy is lolling around and Mom is worrying. Mom does so much worrying that I never have to worry about anything.

Sue lays the clipboard on my lap. "Jean, I'm going to take you to the lodge now." She pushes me toward a low building framed in natural timbers with a steep pitched roof.

"Since this is your first time at camp, I know you're wondering what it's like, and I can tell you you'll have a great time. You'll make all kinds of friends. There's a lot to do." Her voice fills the space behind and above my head. Below, my casters scrape through sand that's too loose for traction.

"I think Carole's down at the cabin. She's the other counselor. I'm sorry your folks didn't get to meet her." She doesn't give me time to talk. Maybe she thinks I can't.

"Almost everyone's here now. We have eight girls in the cabin—a full house—and we'll mix with other cabins for activities. . . ."

The one-sided conversation doesn't bother me. She means well. We get past the sand and roll onto the pavement in front of the lodge. In the heat I can smell the blacktop.

Dolly and I have been properly introduced, and she's sitting right beside me at the end of this long metal table, but clearly there's no point in trying to have a conversation with her. She's talking CP talk. I can't understand at all.

So I sit here and watch my eyes get adjusted to the inside darkness. In deep shade under the eaves, with

open screens all around, you'd expect it to be cool here, but instead it's just a different kind of heat. Outside, the heat was hammered into my head; here it oozes into me from all sides. At the other end of the table I see another girl, sitting stiff and tense on the edge of a metal folding chair.

Dolly keeps on talking. She doesn't seem to care whether I understand or not. A geyser of meaningless vocalization shoots from a contorted throat toward the beams overhead. I'm not really trying, but I start catching phrases. "*The Tonight Show* . . . Johnny Carson . . . at the earliest . . . you know what I mean . . . never before midnight . . . to bed with the chickens . . . hate to complain . . . my novella . . . PRETTY RISQUÉ. . . ." Saliva bubbles up, and her right arm shoots out with force that startles me.

"I work on it constantly . . . well, you know . . . pretty steamy in spots. . . ." Her body has slipped down, almost off the chair seat; it fights against straps that are supposed to bind her waist but instead mash into the flesh under her arms. The right knee punches into her rib cage, and the left foot is pinched between the aluminum footrests of the wheelchair. It looks painful. "But here lights out at ten P.M. . . . *Tonight Show* . . . Doc Severinsen. . . ." Tangled shorts and tank top barely cover the essentials. She should wear a bib to catch all the drool.

I try not to listen, try not to look. That rigid girl at the far end of the table is tapping one eyebrow with the tips of

two fingers. Her thin face is pasty white, and her hair, as short as a boy's.

"Pretty explicit. . . ."

I see a plump young woman on a stretcher, lying on her stomach, propped up on her elbows like a sunbather. She is talking to a blind girl, who gently sways from side to side.

"It takes up a lot of my time . . . novella . . . risqué in places . . . for adult readers . . . MOST definitely. . . ."

A quadriplegic is driving his electric wheelchair with his mouth. Whirring and clicking.

"Not at all what I'm used to . . . Taps . . . And I can't seem to fall asleep . . . one or two in the morning . . . Johnny Carson every night. . . ."

A boy camper and a good-looking boy counselor are talking in sign language. That eyebrow tapper across the table is still at it.

Dolly's talk swirls and spirals, around to the novella, back to staying up to watch Johnny Carson. Bedtimes and sex scenes. Dolly's voice merges with other voices, other sounds. In the high rafters, big fans churn the air, folding the smells of sweat and bug spray into sweet odors sucked in from the kitchen.

I summon the positive attitude that always serves me well. I look at Dolly. She's the worst CP I've ever seen. If the counselors can take care of her, I'll be no problem at all. I'll do fine. I always do fine—better than fine. I'm the

only crippled student, ever, in my school; I'm the only crippled person in my hometown. When I was four, I was a regional state poster child; of course, at age seventeen I'm no longer so adorable as to stop traffic, but I still have my blond hair and blue eyes and skin that tans just right. I look down at my lap.

NO NO NO NO NO.

"I'll be back for y'all in a minute." Sue is taking Dolly and the eyebrow tapper away, leaving me with a ten-ounce bottle of Coke and yet another girl in a wheelchair.

"I'm Sara." She acts like I should have heard of her already. "I see you've met Dolly." She rolls her eyes. Her head, which looks fairly normal, barely reaches the tabletop; it seems shoulders and arms sprout right from her seat. "This is my eighth year here. How about you?"

"My first time." I speak carefully, separating each syllable. If I take my time and people pay attention, I'm not that hard to understand.

I hear a boy's voice behind me. "Hey, Sara, I just found out you're here."

Her sharp eyes crinkle with delight. "Willie. You're a sight for sore eyes. Or perhaps—more accurately—I should say an eyesore."

"You're just as sweet as you've always been."

He steps in front of me, and the sight of him hits like an explosion of ugliness. He's skin and bones; a shocking

lack of flesh in general, but with big knots of flesh on random places. Misshapen shinbones bowing over high-top sneakers. Khaki shorts flopping above giant knobby knees. A camp T-shirt, hanging loose at the waist and chest, stretched tight over a hunchback. Skin and bones. How does he move?

But it's the face— I can't look at it, but yet I see lips stretched like putty over twisted teeth, fish eyes, too far apart on his head, one sticking out, one almost buried by a bulging lump of something, flesh or bone, I don't know—

The face is just too much.

My panicking eyes jump back to Sara, Sara who now represents a place of safety. But she has no thought of me. Her eyes are locked on his, glowing gladness. "Meet Jean. It's her first year. Jean, Willie's been at camp about as long as I have. He's just finished his first year of college."

His voice speaks polite words of welcome, and I wonder what I ought to say. He must be so brave, to go to college, to face everyone looking like that. People say I have courage and determination, but he—

Does he want to hear that? I don't know. It doesn't matter, I guess. I can't talk with all these shock waves still rumbling through my body.

"She's been getting an earful from Dolly," Sara says.

I manage to shrug. Maybe I can pull myself together.

"It's okay to ignore Dolly," he says. "If you don't, she'll drive you nuts."

Sara pitches her head back and tells the rafters, "I'm writing a novella!" It's exactly like Dolly, I mean, like Dolly if Dolly were coherent. "An incredibly steamy sexy lurid pornographic novella for adult readers only! Based on my own experiences very very very very late at night, after lights out, with Johnny Carson!" I try not to, but I choke. The thought of Dolly and Johnny—

"Sara, you're awful. Be on your guard, Jean. She gets the greatest joy from making people spaz out." He drags a chair to Sara's other side and leans on her armrests in a familiar kind of way. I'd say he's getting comfortable, but how could someone like him get comfortable? "So what's the plan this year?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't act innocent. I've been around too long. If the plan's a secret, just say so. At least tell me who you've got."

"It so happens, I do have Margie again."

"Useful. Very useful. I've got the quad."

"Well, well. Good work. The only real talent in the whole camp."

"C'mon, give me a hint. I don't see how you're going to top the pie in the face."

"I didn't do that."

Willie turns to me, but I know he's doing it for effect, for Sara. "She never does anything. She has henchmen."

"No I don't."

"Like people with IQs under forty-five. If someone leads them astray, they don't get punished. They're incompetent. Untouchable."

"Now, I'm not admitting anything, you understand, but I have heard that if you take time to prepare an Untouchable, and prepare her well, she'll accomplish the mission to perfection and will never rat on whoever put her up to—whatever it was."

I still can't get my words together. Even my thoughts are stuttering.

He touches a gnarled hand to her skinny shoulder. "I'll see you later. Time to sneak off to my cabin."

"How about handing me that stuff from the middle of the table?"

"All that?" I ask.

"Yeah."

I figure I'll try. I reach out and rake over a tangle of Magic Markers, plastic string, and wood pieces. Sara extracts a marker and a sawed-wood disk. With her teeth she uncaps the marker and then sets to work on the wood with small, precise movements.

"Camp's pretty weird. The teenage session isn't really set up for non-MR people, but I keep coming for some reason." I look around again. MR must mean mentally retarded. There are lots of them around.

She concentrates on threading string through holes

drilled in the wood. Her long dark hair is crimped in waves like it's just been unbraided. She's wearing big round glasses, a baggy dress, and sandals. Her legs aren't shaved. What? A crippled hippie? The crippled people I've seen have been at the telethon. There we all wear our Sunday best.

Not far away, a black MR girl is peering at us sideways, over her shoulder. Sara notices her just when I do. "Margie! Hey! Guess what? I got you switched to my cabin. We're going to be cabinmates again!" The girl just stares at her feet. "Listen, Margie, do me a little favor. You see that knife up there on top of the trophy case? Can you get it for me?" She points with one thin finger. "You see? Up on top."

"Should we mess with the knife?" Margie asks.

"It's okay." She speaks with considerable authority. "I'll take full responsibility. Just pick it up by the handle, the black part. Don't touch the sharp part and you won't get cut."

The MR girl makes sure no one is looking, then reaches for the knife, lays it on the table, and skitters away.

"Margie's just a little tiny bit shy—at times." She takes the knife and, with a little grunt, scrapes the string across the serrated blade. Then she cuts a second piece.

"So what do you want your name tag to look like?"

I am puzzled.

"I'll give you some options." On a scrap of paper from the pile of supplies, she writes *Jean* three times. In block capitals, then a neat capital *J* and *e-a-n* in lowercase, and then in round cursive letters, just like the smart girls who take notes for me in school. I look around; all the name tags I see are in block capitals. That's how the counselors are making them.

"I like the last one."

She sets back to work. "Do you go to school?"

I say, "Yes." Very distinctly.

"Where?"

"Near Cha-pel Hill."

"Where exactly? Butner, maybe? You'd know Dolly."

Butner! All over North Carolina people tell jokes about "going to Butner," the place for the criminally insane and mentally retarded. When I was three years old, our family doctor urged my parents to send me. "But there was no way I could send my baby off" was how my mother told it, so proud, on the telethon. "I just kept her at home. Then I wanted her to go to school. At first they said no, but then they said they'd give her a try if her daddy built a ramp. We always treated her just like a normal girl. We didn't know what else to do."

I've started stuttering again. Sara is looking at me with an inquisitive face, waiting for me to answer her question. I drop whatever got me stuttering and start over.

"I've ne-ver been to But-ner."

She busies herself with her little project. I stare at my Coke bottle, study the green glass neck, observe the cold smoke rising. I've been left with eyebrow tappers and babblers and all kinds of strange people, left to stay for ten days at this place—a place where it seems Butner is normal and Crosstown High is unusual. Can this be an outpost of Butner? A dress rehearsal? My nerves spark with silent terror. But as soon as the terror becomes conscious, I will it away. Ridiculous. I'm not the kind of person who goes to Butner.

I draw in some Coke through a plastic straw and feel it burn cold in my throat. I listen to all the sounds around me. The voices. Strange voices. That big roaring fan.

Sara holds up my name tag. Against the fresh sawed wood, the smart-girl cursive looks cheerful. She runs the string through the holes, ties a knot, and lays it on the table. Then she lowers her head and puts on her own name tag. It has Gothic letters in green ink. This wasn't among the options she offered me, but no matter. I'm no show-off.

"So what school do you go to?"

"Cross-town." She clearly doesn't understand. I spell, *"C-r-o-s-s-t-o—"*

"Oh, Crosstown. Crip school or Norm school?"

Puzzlement spreads across my face.

"Do you go to a crippled school or a normal school?"

"Nor-mal. It's a small town. There is no crip-pled school

there. Just one high school. I am a ris-ing sen-ior. Do you go to nor-mal school?"

"Not yet. I've been in Crip school, but at the end of this past school year, my teacher told my mother she can't teach me anymore, so I'm out. The public schools don't take Crips, so I'm going to a private school. An all-white private school, no less. You know, our crippled school has been integrated for years, maybe always. I figure they don't care enough about us to bother about segregating us. Or maybe they figure we're our very own race, like the Chosen People, except no god has ever promised us anything that I know of.

"I don't like the idea of a Segregation Academy, and neither do my folks. But what can I do? This private school is taking me because my mother has a friend on the faculty. I guess I should be grateful. Maybe I'll like it. I don't know. They have serious teachers and a library and even a language lab. But Crip school is great because we're all crippled—it's truly bizarre—and there's only one Republican in the class!"

My parents voted for Nixon in the last election and for Goldwater before that. But that's none of her business.

"Maybe you can give me some lessons on how to be a Crip in Norm school. I'll have to start figuring that out, I guess."

"I don't think of my-self as crip-pled. I'm like eve-ry-one else."

"Aw, come on. You're a Crip. Otherwise you wouldn't be in Crip Camp. Say it loud, 'I'm crippled and proud!'"

I can't argue. The James Brown imitation, so unexpected, sets me off again.

I'm still choking when the counselors come back. "Oh, good, someone made your name tags," Sue says. She picks up the knife and mutters, "Oh dear, did I leave this here?" Sara gives me a conspiratorial look. No one has to take responsibility.

Sue puts the knife back, then bends down behind me and slaps off my brakes. The other counselor, Carole, takes Sara, and side-by-side we ride past the flagpole, into the pine woods.

The camp looks like a normal camp, or what I imagine a normal camp might look like, except maybe a normal camp wouldn't have blacktop on the narrow paths that wind through the woods. The asphalt makes the ride nice and smooth. It's so quiet I think I can hear our axles ringing, two faint notes in odd harmony with each other and with the song of a distant bird. The bird goes quiet and stillness surrounds us. We roll forward. Our damp skin breaks through the wall of air that was undisturbed until we came.

Midway down, a chunk of the hill has been lopped off to make space for four cabins. We veer toward one that hangs suspended on piers over the hill's downward slope.

"Hooray! We're on stilts," Sara says. "The other cabins don't cool off even at night."

Her hard little casters rattle over the planks of the gangway. Following right behind, my wide back tires roll across the boards with a calm drumbeat. Just as I catch a quick look at the sudden drop below, I feel Sue pressing my tip-bar with her foot to smooth the bump at the threshold. It's an experienced foot.

"Oh, that's awfully cute," Sara says. A homemade sign—PRIVATE! COUNSELORS ONLY! KEEP OUT!—is posted on plywood that separates one corner from the rest of the cabin. In the open space, eight army cots are lined up with eight footlockers. My bed, in fact every second bed, is made upside down, pillow at footlocker. Why?

I don't ask, but Sara answers anyway. "You know, they go berserk if we turn the pillows around; they say it's a fire regulation, like they measure crowding from head to head, but I don't buy it. They do it to keep us from talking at night."

It's a big screened room under a pitched roof, built entirely of pine. With no plaster or Sheetrock to conceal the structure, I can see how the pine has been reduced to planes and right angles, cut into boards of standard dimensions that fit together according to standard plans. With no paint to cover the surfaces, I can also see the wood's surviving essence, its fiber. Now exposed, flowing whorls and knots speak of when these boards were the

flesh and blood and bones of trees that drank water and ate dirt and breathed sun to grow tall in some place very much like this place where I now find myself. I like knowing that. But I also like the linoleum floor, a perfect product of chemical engineering and factory magic, shiny and hard and the color of sand.

Most of all I like the way the cabin hangs among the tops of the trees that grow from the hill below us. Now I know what a tree house is like. Turned away from the path and the other cabins, I can pretend we're far from civilization. There are no walls, just open screens; a thick tangle of trees and vines is our only drapery. Peeking through the green lace curtain, the sun plays games with light and shade. The heat has released its grip. The two oscillating fans have fresh air to work with.

"Well," Sara says, "it looks like we've got about the right mix—three wheelchairs, a one-leg amputee, two MRs, and two walkie-talkies."

"What?"

"Walkie-talkies. Campers who can walk and talk and look like Norms. Diabetics, epileptics, crazies, whatever. Some of them are more messed up than we are. Eventually it always becomes clear. They want to belong, you know."

The luggage has been brought down and is being unpacked. I grab my suitcase and throw it onto my cot.

"Not bad, Spazzo," Sara says. From across the room,

Sue gives her a stern look, but I'm not offended. She winks and keeps on talking.

"The counselors this year seem back to normal. Therapeutic recreation types. You know, in '68, we were taken over by hippies, with just a few College Republicans, enough to keep the hippies stirred up. It was a trip. On talent night we did protest songs. It was great. Then, last year, it was Jesus Freaks. They were wilder than the hippies. One of my counselors was exactly like that joke that was going around: 'I used to be messed up on drugs and sex, but now I'm messed up on the Lord.'"

I give a little snort. The joke is new to me. I work my fist around the suitcase buckles, whack them hard, and the suitcase pops open. Then, with a jerk of my sneaker foot, I flip the lid of the footlocker. Inserting fingers into a hole, I hoist up the tray and chuck it onto the bed. One by one, I slam shampoo, soap, hairbrush, and deodorant onto the tray. Hooking the strap of my camera case on my thumb, I swing it, gracefully I think, onto the ledge under the screens. A scrapbook comes next. Then I dump a UNC teddy bear on my pillow. Next I start on the clothes, but all I do is scramble them.

"Margie did a really nice job when she unpacked her stuff," Sara says, nodding toward the black MR girl. "I think she could get your clothes straight for you."

Margie looks at my clothes with the corners of her eyes, her close-cropped head bent toward her feet.

"Have you met our new Fearless Leader? I mean Camp Director," Sara asks. I shake my head no. "He looks like a pretty harmless fellow."

I'm barely listening. Sara's talking is getting a bit tiresome. Margie has crept over and is laying out my clothes on the cot, displaying their department-store newness for everyone to see. Careful brown hands smooth the bright white underwear, crisp shirts and shorts, and bouncy T-shirts and lay them in the trunk. She has a system. On the right, panties, shorts, slacks—everything for the bottom half of the body; on the left, bras, shirts—for the top half. The flowery dress befuddles her. After considerable mulling, she rolls it up. In cupped hands, she takes it up, as tenderly as she'd hold a nest of baby birds, and settles it in the gap between the two piles.

"Thank-you, Mar-gie."

I'm interested to see what's coming out of the suitcases. Sara has five baggy cotton dresses and five pairs of underpants, two nightgowns, one bar of soap, one comb, one tube of sunscreen. No extra shoes, no swimsuit, no bra, no stockings, no socks. No toys. No toothbrush. But she has a sewing kit, typing paper and envelopes, two library books, a sketch pad, and a box of artist's pastels.

"It'll probably be a little duller without the Jesus Freaks," she says. "I wonder what they're doing this summer? Are they serving the Lord somewhere else, do you think, or are they born again, as non–Jesus Freaks?"

I shrug.

"So now we're back to giving outrageously healthy, preprofessional types a little real-world experience. It's a big job, but, hey."

I consider the counselors, watch them at work. Sue. Tidy and efficient. Camp T-shirt, with crutch-and-pine-tree logo, neatly tucked into her shorts, medium-brown hair looking just-brushed in a perfect pageboy. And the other one, Carole. Petite frame overwhelmed by a baggy sweatshirt from St. Andrew's College. Red hair, about shoulder length, not quite confined by multiple barrettes and rubber bands that seem to have been added at different times during the day as the need arose. Like all the counselors I've seen, they're clean-cut but not square, in good shape but not jocks. Sara's description is accurate as far as it goes, but it makes them seem like comic-strip characters when, really, they're just normal people.

I can imagine Sue, after college, working as a physical therapist or teaching MR kids. She's competent, in control. Now, Carole seems different. She catches my gaze. "Need anything? Bathroom?"

I nod. Might as well get it over with.

Six toilets, and no stalls. I'm glad no one is here but Carole and me.

"You'll tell me what to do, okay?"

With both arms, I grab the steel handrail beside the john. I press my heels hard onto the floor, and I'm up.

"Get my pants."

She gets my culottes and underpants down in one quick tug. I release one arm from the handrail and raise one foot off the floor. I pivot on the other heel and catapult myself around the rail. I land, hard, on the toilet seat. I can't believe how loud the pee is, falling in the water. Up to now, my mother has always been around to help. Now she isn't, but it's all right. I stand up and point to the toilet paper with my chin. Carole wipes. "Okay?"

I nod, and she pulls up my culottes. In an instant, I whirl back into my chair and we're laughing together with surprised relief. A clump of red hair has escaped from the ineffectual hold of those barrettes.

All through supper and evening orientation, I heard that cot calling me. Now I sit and wait my turn for help going to bed, and I ache for the opportunity to stretch my body and hand it over to sleep. It has been a long day.

It's Sara's turn. "You ready?" Carole asks.

"Sure. Just catch me." Carole's arm is waiting when Sara flops backward. "Pull my knees up in the air, way up." Carole pulls until she's stretched most of the curve out of Sara's spine. "Great."

Sara does have a torso, after all. All day it was collapsed like an accordion. Now, she lets the air fill her bellows, in

and out. Following precise instructions, Carole balls up a pillow, stuffs it under Sara's bent knees, and pulls the sheet up to her chin.

I transfer into my cot as a creaky recording of taps wails from a loudspeaker up at the lodge. Carole pulls up my sheet and thermal blanket, so slowly I could easily have told her to do something different if I wanted to. She pushes my wheelchair against the screened wall, out of the way.

Sue says, "It's lights-out. No talking."

"Unless it's a dire emergency, okay?" Carole adds.

On the last baleful note, Sue switches off the lights. I crane my neck to see the yellow bug lights go off in the other cabins. Behind me, they close the straw blinds. On the woodsy sides, they leave them up to let in the night air. It's cool now.

In the dark, I see the moon glimmer through the trees. In the silence, I hear crickets chirping. At home, we turn off the air conditioner and open the windows on nights like this. I wonder if my family can hear crickets in their tent on the beach. Do crickets live beside the ocean?

Soon the sound of crickets merges with whimpering from one of the beds. Someone is homesick; I can't tell who. Not Sara; maybe the next girl over, the MR girl, Margie. I want to ask. However, despite years of speech therapy, I am unable to whisper. There's nothing to do but sleep.