
Opening Extract from...

If I Knew You Were Going to Be This Beautiful

Written by Judy Chichurel

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IF I KNEW YOU WERE GOING TO BE THIS BEAUTIFUL, I NEVER WOULD HAVE LET YOU GO

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ONE

summer wind

So she" says to me, 'Young man, you got maniacs hanging around your store,' and I tell her, 'You're right, lady, you're a hundred percent right. I got maniacs outside my store, I got them inside my store, I got maniacs on the roof,' I tell her."

Desi flicks a length of ash into the ashtray we're sharing. The end of his cigar is slick with saliva. He shifts it to the side of his mouth and continues. "What am I gonna do, argue with her? Kill her? I mean, please, some of these people should maybe look in their own backyards before they come around here making comments. There's an old Italian saying, 'Don't spit up in the air, because it's liable to come back down and hit you in the face.'"

"I have no idea what that means," I said.

"It means what it means, man," Mitch called from the other end of the counter.

"Everybody's everything. Can you dig it?" He had a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon under the arm with the rainbow tattoo and was taking a Camel non-filter from a freshly opened pack he'd just purchased. He tapped his cane twice against the counter and then winked at me before hobbling out the door. Mitch lived at the opposite end of Comanche

Street, in one of the rooms at The Starlight Hotel that looked out over the ocean and smelled of mildew and seaweed. This was the third six-pack of the day he'd bought at Eddy's; he had to make separate trips because he could only carry one at a time. It was close to the end of the month, when his disability check ran out, which was why he was buying six-packs instead of sitting on the corner barstool by the jukebox in the hotel lounge.

Desi shook his head, mopping up a puddle of liquid on the counter. "Yeah, yeah, just ask peg leg Pete over there," he muttered, as the door closed behind Mitch.

"Don't call him that, man," I said. "I thought you liked him. I thought you were friends." I felt a vague panic that this might not be so.

"Hey, hey, did I say I didn't like the guy? I love the guy," Desi said, wringing out the rag, running it under the faucet behind the counter. "But he's not the only one sacrificed for his country. A lost leg is not an excuse for a lost life. And besides, he only lost half a leg."

"Desi, Jesus—"

"Don't 'Jesus' me, what are we, in church? And what are you, his mother? Half a leg, no leg, whatever, he don't need you to defend him. He can take care of himself." He shook his head. "You kids, you think you know everything."

"I don't think I know everything," I said, wearily. Most of the time, I didn't think I knew anything.

"Yeah, well, you," Desi said, moving down the counter to the cash register to ring up Mr. Meaney's ***Daily News***. "You're different from the other kids around here. You want my advice? Get out of Dodge. Now. Pronto." My stomach winced. I was glad no one else was around to hear him; Mr. Meaney didn't count. I'd been hanging around Comanche Street for three years and there were still times when it felt like I was watching a movie starring everyone I knew in the world, except me. The feeling would come up on me even when I was surrounded by a million people: in school, on the beach, sitting at the counter in Eddy's.

Desi owned Eddy's, the candy store on the corner of Comanche Street and Lighthouse Avenue in the Trunk end of Elephant Beach. The original Eddy had long since retired and moved to Florida, but Desi wouldn't change the name. "Believe me, it's not worth the trouble," he said. "Guy was here, what, twenty-five years? I pay for the sign, I change the lettering on the window, and then what? People are still gonna call it Eddy's." He was right. They did.

Sometimes in February, I'd be sitting in Earth Science class or World History, and outside the windows, frozen snow would be bordering the sidewalk and the sky would be gunmetal gray and I'd start thinking about having a chocolate egg cream at Eddy's, and suddenly summer didn't feel so far away. If I thought hard enough, I could taste the edge of the chocolate syrup at the back of my throat and it would make me homesick for sitting at the counter, drinking an egg cream and smoking a cigarette underneath the creaky ceiling fan that never did much except push the stillborn air back and forth, while everyone was hanging out by the magazine racks if the cops were patrolling Comanche Street, or sitting on the garbage cans on the side of the store where, when it was hot enough, you could smell the pavement melting. Sometimes Desi's wife, Angie, would open the side door and start sweeping people away, saying, "Look at youse, loafing, what would your mother say, she saw you sitting on a trash can in the middle of the day?" And Billy Mackey or someone would say, "She'd say, 'Where do you think you are, Eddy's?'" Then everyone would laugh and Angie would chase whoever said it with the broom, sometimes down to the end of the block, right up to the edge of the ocean.

Eddy's was open only in summer, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, sometimes until the end of September if the weather stayed warm. Desi and Angie and their kids, Gina and Vinny, moved down from Queens to Elephant Beach and lived in the rooms over the store, where they had a faint view of the ocean. On Sundays, when Vinny or Angie worked the counter, Desi would walk down to Comanche Street beach and put up a

red, white and green umbrella ("the Italian flag") and stretch out on a lounge chair, wearing huge black sunglasses, a white cotton sun hat, polka-dot bathing trunks that looked like underwear, and white tennis shoes because once he'd cut his toe on a broken shell and needed stitches. He'd lie out on that lounge chair like a king, smoking a cigar, turning up his portable radio every time a Sinatra song came on. If any of us tried talking to him, even to say hello, he'd say, "Beat it. Today I'm incognito."

"I'll tell you what the trouble is with you kids," Desi said now, walking back to where I was sitting. He took my empty glass and started mixing me another egg cream. He squirted seltzer and chocolate sauce into the glass and stirred it to a frenzy. He slid it back across the counter and I tasted it and it was perfect.

"The trouble with all a youse is you don't know how to shut up. I mean, who am I, Helen Keller? I can't see or hear what goes on the other side of the counter? It's sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll all day long and mostly sex, and now it's not just the guys talking." His voice dropped a shocked octave lower. "It's the girls. The ***girls***. 'So-and-so got so-and-so pregnant,' 'So-and-so had an abortion,' I mean, please, what do I need to hear this for? Look at that little girl, what's her name, the one got knocked up didn't even finish high school, waddling in here like a pregnant duck. Nothing's sacred, ***nothing***. And then you wonder why." Desi shook his head. "Believe me, there was just as much sex around when your mother and I were young. Thing is, we weren't talking about it. We were doing it."

We both looked up as the door banged open, and then just as quickly banged shut. Desi shrugged.

"False alarm," he said.

He opened the ice-cream freezer and the cold heat from the freezer melted into the air. He began scooping ice cream into a glass sundae dish, vanilla, coffee, mint chocolate chip, and then covered the ice cream with a layer of chocolate sauce, then a layer of marshmallow topping, and finally a few healthy squirts of Reddi-wip. He picked up a

spoon and casually began digging in. Angie hated that Desi could eat like that and never gain an ounce. She said that all she had to do was look at food and she gained ten pounds. Desi says she does a lot more than look, but only when Angie isn't around.

I glanced up at the Coca-Cola clock behind the counter, wondering where everyone was. I'd left the A&P where I worked at three o'clock and figured I'd hang out at Comanche Street until it was time to go home for dinner. It was one of those dirty, overcast days in early summer and no one was at any of the usual places. They were probably at somebody's house, in Billy's basement, or maybe at Nanny's. I thought about calling but the taste of the egg cream, the whoosh of the overhead fan, Desi's familiar gluttony were all reassuring. Part of me was afraid I might be missing something, but I was always afraid of missing something. We all were. That's why we raced through family dinners, snuck out of bedroom windows, took dogs out for walks that lasted three hours, said we had school projects and had to hang out at the library until it closed at nine o'clock at night.

The way I felt now, though, unless Luke was involved, there wasn't that much for me to miss. Part of me was hoping he'd come into Eddy's to buy cigarettes or the latest surfing magazine. Something. I'd only seen him once since he got back from Vietnam last Sunday, right here in Eddy's. I hadn't been prepared, though; I hadn't washed my hair or gotten my tan yet, and I hid in one of the phone booths in back until he left. Since the summer before tenth grade, I'd been watching Luke McCallister, from street corners, car windows, in movie theaters, where some girl would have her arm draped around his back and I'd watch that arm instead of the movie, wanting to cut it off. I'd comfort myself that she was hanging all over him, that if he'd really been into her, it would have been the other way around. Luke was three years older, his world wider than Comanche Street and the lounge at The Starlight Hotel, all the places we hung out. But I was eighteen now, almost finished with school and ready for real life. It was summer, and anything was possible.

"Mystery," Desi said, and I jumped a little, thinking he could read my mind. That's exactly what I was thinking about Luke, that he was more of a mystery now than before he'd left for the jungle two years ago. I looked at Desi, who was scraping the last little bits of marshmallow sauce from the sundae dish. He pointed the stem of his spoon toward me.

"You gotta have mystery, otherwise you got nothing."

I slurped the remains of my egg cream through the straw, making it last. Then I lit a cigarette. "I still have no idea what you're talking about," I said. "Speaking of mysteries."

Desi sighed. He carried the sundae dish over to the sink and rinsed it, then set it in the drain on the side. He came over to where I was sitting and put his palms flat down on the counter and stared at me, hard. "Here's what I'm talking about," he said. "A girl comes in here, she's got on a nice blouse, maybe see-through, maybe she's not wearing a bra, I don't know. I look, I'm excited, I start imagining possibilities. But a girl comes in here topless, her jugs bouncing all over the counter? That's it for me. I'm immediately turned off. Why? Because now I got nothing. There's nothing left to my imagination. There's no mystery, you see what I'm saying here?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right. Like some girl would come in here topless and sit down at the counter and you'd have no interest." But I could see that Desi wasn't listening. He was just standing there, leaning against the counter with this dreamy little smile on his face.

"What?" I asked, finally.

"Nothing," he said, after a moment. "I was just—" He picked up his cigar from the ashtray and relit the stub. "There was this girl, see. Back in Howard Beach. Before I started going with Angie. She used to wear this sky-blue sweater when she came around the corner." He took a long pull from the cigar. "Little teeny, tiny pearl buttons, all the way up to her neck." Embers spilled from the cigar stub and showered the counter.

"All those buttons," Desi said, gazing through the smoke, as if he

was watching someone walking toward him. He put the cigar back in the ashtray and sighed again. He picked up the rag and began wiping the dead embers off the counter.

"Ah, you kids," he said. "You think you invented it. All of it! Everything. You think you invented ***life***."

TWO

babies

Everyone was waiting for Maggie Mayhew's baby to be born. It seemed as though she'd been pregnant forever; walking down the aisle of St. Timothy's Church last winter, her belly already starting to swell under her paisley granny gown. She'd cradled against her breasts a bouquet of tall lilies, which left rust stains that never washed out of the bodice of her wedding dress. Now she was past due, and the fat joints that Matty, her husband, had rolled and saved to hand out instead of cigars had long been smoked.

"You're so big, does that mean a boy?" Nanny asked, when we stopped by on our way to the beach. Maggie was her cousin, a couple of years older than we were; she was already working as a secretary in Manhattan, at an advertising agency on Madison Avenue.

Maggie smiled. "That's so sexist," she said gently. "Girls can be big, too. Girls can do big things. My girl will." She patted her belly, rippling with life underneath her peasant blouse.

"Someone should ask her if girls do such big fucking things why she sits in the house every night while Matty's out with the boys," Liz said later, when we were walking up the block to where the Buick Skylark her father had given her as a graduation present was parked. It was June,

and up and down Comanche Street, shuttered bungalows were being opened by families coming down from the city for the summer. "I wouldn't put up with that shit."

"He really loves her, though," Nanny said. "You should have seen at the wedding, the minute the priest finished, Matty grabbed her and gave her this, like, earthshaking kiss. He wouldn't let her go."

"You think this home birth was her idea, or Matty's?" Liz said. "I think it was his. I think she'll do anything he tells her to do."

Maggie and Matty lived in a bungalow at the end of Comanche Street, with her brothers, Raven and Cha-Cha. At night, you'd see Matty and Raven walking to the beach to get high before heading out to the bars, huddled into their faded jean jackets against the late spring chill, while Maggie sat on the sagging steps of the bungalow, hands resting on the rising slope of her stomach.

"You should have heard Aunt Francie," Nanny said. "She was over our house ranting the other day, saying she screamed until her lungs hurt that they had to go to the hospital, this was the twentieth century, for chrissake, but Maggie stood her ground for once, told her, 'Ma, it's my baby, I'll have it however the hell I want.' I don't know if she's really brave or just plain crazy." Liz and I had grown up in Elephant Beach, but Nanny and all her cousins were originally city people, from Washington Heights, way up at the tip of Manhattan. Their parents had moved them to Long Island to escape the gangs and the drugs and other bad influences, but the kids had brought it all with them.

"Well, women did it for years," Liz said. "Years and years. Of course, the attending physicians weren't a bunch of stoned potheads and a speed freak. But I'll tell you the truth, when my time comes, it's gonna be, give me the drugs, man, give me the drugs."

I heard a crackling sound and blinked. Liz was snapping her fingers in front of my eyes. "Earth to Katie, earth to Katie," she chanted. "Spacewoman, where are you?"

"Just thinking," I said, and was saved by Mitch coming down the

street from the opposite direction, his bad leg stuttering behind his good one. He was singing "It's All Over Now." Mitch was a Stones freak; he played "Satisfaction" and "You Can't Always Get What You Want" on the jukebox at The Starlight Lounge about twenty times a night. He was carrying a paper bag from Eddy's.

"Hiya, handsome," Liz said, and we all waved and whistled.

Mitch laughed out loud. "Hey, little foxes," he said, grinning broadly. He twirled his cane outward with a flourish and bowed from the waist, almost falling over but saving himself just in time. He blew us a kiss and kept walking down Comanche Street, singing.

"Man, what a waste of skin," Liz said, when he was past us.

"Guy loses his leg in Nam, gets the Purple Heart, you call him a waste of skin?" Nanny always gets emotional about the war; her cousin, Sean, died in Vietnam just last year, and another cousin, Quinn, was in the army but so far hadn't been out of Fort Worth, Texas.

"I'm not talking about his leg," Liz said. "Please, what do you take me for? His leg I can deal with. But he's, like, three sheets to the wind and it's not even noon yet."

"Which makes him so different from everyone else around here," I said.

"Yeah, but we're still young, we'll outgrow it," Liz said. "Mitch is, what, pushing thirty? That's old to still be drinking your breakfast. But he's so sexy, right? He reminds me of Clint Eastwood in that movie we saw last year, what was the name of it? Where he plays a Yankee soldier whose leg gets amputated—"

"***The Beguiled,***" I said.

"Yeah! That's the one," Liz said. "You don't think he looks like Clint? A Clint who's fucked up most of the time? Those eyes, and he has the sexiest wrists—"

"Wrists?" Nanny rolled her eyes. "What, are ***you*** three sheets to the wind?"

"I noticed it one night when I was standing next to him at the bar,"

Liz said. "He was lighting a cigarette, and I swear, if I wasn't so into Cory—"

Nanny and I looked at each other. Cory McGill was Liz's big love, but how he felt about her was another story.

I was glad that Mitch had come along though, so I didn't have to tell them I was thinking about Luke. Even my best friends didn't know how I felt; I didn't want it all over the earth before anything happened. His brother, Conor, said that Luke was not himself, that he stayed in his room all day and then went out late at night and must have walked the beach because the floor of his room was covered with sand. He slept most of the time, or gazed out the window, smoking. One night, Conor came home and found Luke sitting by the window. When he asked if something was wrong, Luke said, "Nothing, man, just happy to be home," and told Conor to go to sleep. The windowsill had been filled with cigarette butts. His bags were still stacked by the closet door, waiting to be opened. "My brother's messed up for sure, man," Conor said, worriedly. But I wasn't overly concerned. Luke had just come back from a war, which was bound to make anyone act weird. Besides, real summer hadn't started yet; it wasn't even the end of June, and he had to come out sometime. At night, smoking my last cigarette in front of the mirror, I'd practice the things I would say when I saw him. Words that would make him take notice, wonder where I'd been all these years.

Then I thought about Maggie, of how peaceful she looked, sitting there on the steps, as though she didn't want for anything in the world. I wondered how it would be to carry Luke's baby inside me, to have that weight against my skin, beneath my heart.

God, can you believe it, we're finally getting out of this dump?" Nanny said.

"Really," I said, though walking the halls of Elephant Beach High

School made me feel like crying. I hadn't loved school since I graduated from sixth grade, but every morning when my alarm clock went off at seven, at least I knew what to expect.

"I can already hear my mother, when they give out the awards and all that shit," Liz said. "'Look, Dick, none of Liz's friends won the Regents scholarship. None of Liz's friends were named Athlete of the Year.'"

We arrived at the main office and walked underneath the banner that stretched across the doorway and read, "Best of Luck, Class of '72." Mrs. Cathaway was handing out boxes and crossing names off a sheet of yellow lined paper. "Here you go," she said, handing Nanny the box that held her cap and gown. She ran a red pencil through Nanny's name with a flourish.

"Gonna miss us, Mrs. Cathe—Cathaway?" Liz asked sweetly. We smothered our smiles; she'd almost slipped and called her Mrs. Catheter, which everyone called her behind her back. Mrs. Cathaway was the secretary to the principal, Dr. Steadman, and sat sentry outside his office like a guard dog. Whenever she said, "Dr. Steadman will see you now," it always sounded as though you were getting an audience with God and should consider yourself blessed.

"Good luck, girls," Mrs. Cathaway told us, then clamped her lips shut tight as a purse.

We left the office and walked down the hall to the South Wing bathroom, where all the Trunk kids hung out. It was in this very bathroom that Liz and I had first become friends. Nanny came later, when Liz started bringing me around, and she saw that it was safe for us to be friends. It was back in the fall of our sophomore year, right before third period when Barbara Malone had started pulling the hair right out of my head because she thought her boyfriend had winked at me in study hall. Liz had jumped on Barbara's back and rode her around the bathroom, threatening to dunk her in the toilet bowl if she didn't leave me the fuck alone. I was surprised, because Liz and I had only ever spoken in the one class we had together, World History, or to bum cigarettes from each

other in the bathroom. I had no idea why she'd plucked me from the shadows to come to my defense. But I was excited when she extended the invitation to come hang out on Comanche Street the Trunk was an exotic, forbidden place, older and rougher than other neighborhoods in town, where kids stood on street corners doing secret, forbidden things out in the open. Whenever we drove through there on the way back from my grandmother's house in Brooklyn, I'd watch them from the windows of my parents' car, wondering at the ease with which they slouched against the walls of the shabby bars and candy stores that lined the dark, narrow streets. I wanted that for myself. I wanted to feel sure of something that no one could take away from me. Besides, it was a lonely time for me; Marcel, my best friend since junior high school, wasn't around much because of family troubles and I didn't know where I belonged anymore.

"Shit," Nanny said, looking at herself in the smeared mirror. The blue graduation gown was billowing around her like a tent. "You could fit two of me in here, it's so friggin' big. Ginger could have worn this and no one would've ever suspected she was pregnant."

"She wasn't going to graduate, baby or no baby," Liz said, stuffing her gown carelessly back into the box. "She cut out so much in junior year that when she came up to withdraw, they didn't even have her name on the list, man. They didn't even know who she ***was***."

Nanny was tearing the cellophane off a fresh pack of Marlboros. "What do you think?" she asked. "One for the road? I mean, what are they gonna do three days before graduation, suspend us?"

"Suspend us, right," Liz said, taking out her own pack. "You think they want us back here next year?"

"Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke," I said, lighting up. I looked around at the puke-green walls and faded green-and-black tiles. Would I miss this? Any of it?

Nanny started to say something, but Liz held up her hand for silence. She closed the door to the bathroom, then turned back to us. "I got

something to tell you guys and I don't want any interruptions," she said. "And you have to swear on your mother's life you won't breathe a word to anyone, ever. No shit."

Nanny and I nodded, trying to keep our faces straight. It was Liz who had the big mouth; she couldn't keep a secret to save her life.

Liz sat back down on the edge of the sink, lit another cigarette. The smoke streamed into the filtered sunlight coming through the window. She smiled in a way I'd never seen her smile before.

"Me and Cory did it last night," she said.

We looked at her. In the mirror I could see Nanny's eyes bugging out. Cory McGill was a couple years older than us and worked at Liz's father's dealership on Merrick Road, where Liz was working for the summer. They did a lot of wisecracking at work and had made out a couple of times in the parking lot when Liz's father wasn't around, but he'd never even asked her out.

"So, you mean, like—"

"Yep," Liz said, nodding smugly. "That's exactly what I mean." She leaned back against the tiles and closed her eyes, smiling.

"But when?" I asked. "How did it—"

She opened her eyes and turned toward us, waving her cigarette like a wand. "I went to work yesterday, right, and I looked really hot even though I can't wear halters and shit because of my father, and I had on my new Maidenform, the off-white one with the cream lace. So we were kidding around, and he kept looking for excuses to get close to me, you know, hanging around the reception desk, the kitchen whenever I went in to make fresh coffee, like that. You know Thursday's our late night, we close at nine thirty, he comes up to me, he says, 'I'm taking the Dodge out for a test run up Sunrise Highway, you wanna come for the ride?' And I'm like, yeah, sure, he never asked me to come out on a run before, right? In the Dodge Challenger, forest green, my lucky color. So I'm like, there, man, I'm totally psyched.

"So we barely pull out of the lot and he turns into a friggin' octopus,

he's like all over me at the red lights, and then all of a sudden he pulls up behind this boarded-up White Castle on Sunrise Highway, and he says, 'Let's get in back.' So now we're in the backseat, and it's getting, it's getting really hot, I mean, like the windows are fogging, and I tell him, I say, 'Cory, Cory man, I'm a virgin,' and he says, 'Liz, I swear on my mother's life I'll handle you with kid gloves. I'll make it the most beautiful night of your life,' and then it's, like, it all happened at once, man. Like, everything."

"You are blowing my freakin' mind," Nanny said.

"Wait a minute," I asked. "What about your father? Where was he?"

Liz made a face. "Thursday night's his poker night, he lets Cory close up," she said. "Where'd you think he was, man? In the car with us?" She laughed. "Not that it would matter, you know he never pays me any attention."

"What did it feel like?" Nanny whispered.

Liz leaned forward. "I don't know where all the hearts and flowers and violins come in," she whispered back. "All that bullshit they tell you. Because it hurt like hell. I was in brutal, brutal pain, it's like I got welts and bruises all up and down my back, on my ass."

"What about—I mean, did you use something? Did he—"

"***I got rhythm, I got music,***" she started singing.

"Liz, man—"

"You don't know what it's like," she whispered, closing her eyes again. "When I felt him come inside me. It's like this—this total rush, when you make a guy come." She started rocking, gently, against the wall behind the sink, that smile playing on her lips. "That was the best part of the whole thing. It's like—it's so intense, man, it's like you're living and dying, all at once." A slight shudder went through her body, and then she opened her eyes wide and looked around the bathroom as though she'd never seen it before.

"But Liz," I said. "I mean, shit—"

"And he said the most romantic thing," she said, her eyes shining.

"After, he said, 'Baby, if I knew it was going to be your first time, I would have taken out the Cadillac sedan instead of the Dodge.'"

"Liz—"

Liz leaned over and patted my thigh. "That's okay," she said. "You just don't understand the way passion works. Anyway, it's safe, my period's due in a couple days, I can feel it. My tits are killing me, man, it's like they're gonna pop off and hit the fucking ceiling any minute."

Nanny snorted. "That's what my cousin Maggie thought and look what happened," she said. "That's what everyone thinks. I mean, look at Ginger, man. If you're going to see him again, you should—"

"What do you mean, if I'm going to see him again?" Liz said, staring hard at Nanny. "Guy just took my virginity and I'm not going to see him again?"

"If you're going to see him again," Nanny said patiently, "you should think about going on the Pill."

Liz shook her head. "Uh-uh," she said. She cupped her breasts in her hands. "No way. I don't want these babies getting any bigger."

"Well, what are you going to do?" Nanny asked, exasperated. "You gotta do something."

"I don't have to do anything," Liz said, smiling. "I don't have to do a fucking thing."

Nanny and I stayed silent. When Liz got this way over a guy, it was like she was high on angel dust or something, her brain riffing bullshit. "Delusional" didn't even begin to cover it.

"So when are you going to see him again?" I asked, finally.

"Tonight," she said, smiling her new smile. "I'll see him tonight at work."

"I mean," I said, "I mean, are you going to—did he say anything, like—"

"Oh, grow up," Liz snapped. "The whole thing just happened, what's he going to say? I mean, he had to get the car cleaned after, he probably

paid for it out of his own pocket. He put his job in jeopardy for me, what more does he have to say?"

I looked at Nanny and shrugged: ***I give up.***

"And besides," Liz said, sounding suddenly aggrieved, "you guys, you're like freaking me out, man, all these questions, I mean, you should be happy for me, being with Cory, knowing how I feel about him, after all this time—" She jumped off the sink, started walking toward the door.

"It's not like we're not happy for you," Nanny said.

"It's just, we don't want you to get hurt, is all," I finished lamely.

But Liz wasn't listening. She had stopped in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection.

"Do I look different?" she asked. "I feel different." She ran her hands down her breasts, over her stomach. "What if I'm pregnant?" she whispered.

Nanny's eyes grew huge with alarm. She looked at me. Suddenly I felt depressed and I didn't know why.

"Is that what you want?" I asked.

Liz just smiled her new smile, her eyes staring at us backward through the mirror. "Wouldn't that be a trip, man? Walking down the aisle at graduation with Cory's baby inside me?" She turned sideways, her hands clasped over her womb. "Wouldn't that just be something else?"

It seemed as though the car was flying, but we were only doing around sixty, and that was safe on the Meadowbrook Parkway.

"Ginger called me," Nanny said, from the backseat. "I wanted to go with her, but she said the cab was already honking in the street and she had to run."

"She took a ***cab***? To the ***hospital***? Where was her mother?" I asked.

"Oh, Mrs. Shea, mother of the year?" Nanny said. "She wasn't around, surprise, surprise. You got that lighter, or should I start rubbing two sticks together?"

Liz cruised into the right lane, cutting off a white Mustang. The driver began honking frantically. "Your horn blows good, how about your mother?" Liz yelled as we passed him.

"God, it's so lonely even thinking about, taking a cab to have your baby," I said, passing the lighter back to Nanny. And it must have cost a fortune, since Ginger was going to County instead of Elephant Beach Hospital. She had to have the baby there because she didn't have any money or health insurance and she was only seventeen years old.

Liz patted my thigh. "That's why we're here, sweetie," she said. "For moral support. It's too bad we couldn't have taken her there ourselves, but—" Liz shrugged. She'd been just getting off work when Nanny called, and she was the only one of us with a car.

"Jesus, what if she had the baby in the cab?" Nanny said. "You think that could have happened? I saw a movie once, the woman was stuck in traffic, right, and her water broke—"

"This isn't a fucking movie," Liz said, racing a blue Volkswagen bug to get into the exit lane. "Things like that don't happen in real life. She's probably still in labor, won't have the baby for hours."

But Ginger's baby had already been born, so quickly it was like he was sliding down the water chute at Coney Island, out and about in less than an hour after she arrived at the hospital. "That's the way it always is with your kind," the nurse told her, before she scooped the baby up and took him away. Now Ginger was sitting up in bed, her breasts hanging over her belly inside the thin cotton smock, looking wiped out. A strange woman was sitting at her bedside, talking in low, serious tones and trying to push some papers into her hand.

"Anyone got a cigarette?" Ginger greeted us. We all started shoving packs at her, and the strange woman said, "You really shouldn't be smoking so soon afterward."

"The baby's born," Ginger said, her voice weary. "And this cigarette isn't going to do anything to me the last six thousand haven't done."

"If you'd only see your child, I'm sure you'd—"

"Who is she?" Liz asked.

"Who are you again?" Ginger asked the woman.

"My organization represents young girls like yourself, who get in the family way and can't care for their children," the woman said, facing Ginger. "We help them to—"

"How long since you gave birth, Ginger?" Liz asked.

Ginger shrugged tiredly. "About an hour. Doc said it was like dropping kittens, and I told you what the nurse said, the bitch."

"So the labor took about an hour, and now you're here—let's make it two hours," Liz said, checking her watch.

"Yeah, about that," Ginger said, sinking back against the pillows, her eyes closed.

"And you come around, bugging her about mistakes?" Liz asked the woman. "What were you, waiting outside the delivery room?"

The woman flushed over her stiff mouth up to her veiled eyes, but she still didn't move off the bed. "My organization wants to help girls like—er—what did you say your name was?" She riffled through the papers she was holding, frowning, impatient.

"You want to help her so much, you don't even know her name?" Nanny asked. "I think it's time for you to hit the road, Jackie."

"I don't think—" the woman started, but we moved in on her, practically crushing her off the bed as we sat down.

"Right. Don't think," Liz said. "Just make like an egg and beat it. Before we beat you."

In a flash, the woman was off the bed and out the door.

"Thanks," Ginger said, opening her eyes. "I thought she'd never leave. I mean, I told her I was giving the kid up, what more does she want?"

"Screw her," Liz said, lighting a cigarette. She handed it to Ginger. "How you feeling?"

"You want anything, Ginge?" Nanny asked, gently. "Something to eat? A Tab, maybe?"

"Here's some water," I said, pouring from the pitcher on the side table into a plastic cup. I held it close to Ginger's lips while she sipped, and put my other arm around her. She leaned against me. "Thanks," she whispered, and closed her eyes again.

On the way out of the hospital, we stopped to see the baby. He was in a glass cubicle, a big baby boy, fast asleep, like his mother had been when we left her.

"He's a bruiser," Nanny said, peering through the glass. "You think he looks like anyone we know?"

"He was just born, for chrissake," Liz said. "They don't look like anybody then, and the eyes change color after a few weeks."

Rumor had it that Allie D'Amore was the father; he and Ginger had been together on and off since eighth grade. But after they'd broken up the last time she started hanging out with a lot of guys, and Allie wouldn't even look at her when she came around Comanche Street, barefoot, wearing a man's oversize white tee shirt that strained against her belly. Then he flipped out after doing some beat acid and now he was in a psych ward somewhere out on the Island and no one had seen him for weeks.

"I'm glad she didn't see him," Nanny said. "The baby, I mean. She might have changed her mind and kept him."

"That might not have been such a bad thing," Liz said. "Maybe then Miss Ginger would have to do something else besides get high and fuck the world."

"Don't talk about her that way," Nanny said, her hazel eyes huge with tears. She and Ginger had grown up together, when their families only came down to Elephant Beach for the summer and they used to buy cough syrup at Coffey's Drugs and drink it to get high behind the old umbrella factory. Liz shrugged and lit a cigarette directly beneath the "No Smoking" sign in the hallway.

Ginger told me she'd thought about keeping it, one night when we were going to the bathroom behind the dunes on the beach. That's where all the girls have to go, since the public restrooms closed after six o'clock. We called it the Elephant Hole. She said she was afraid she'd be like her mother and her sisters, who'd all had babies out of wedlock. "It's in the blood, Kate," she said, zipping her jeans only halfway over her ballooning belly. "You can't escape what's in the blood." I wondered if that was true. I thought of my own mother, the one who'd given me up for adoption. Did she decide one night, while zipping up her jeans at an Elephant Hole of her own? Had she been like Ginger, who, the whole time she was pregnant, never stopped getting high, or smoking, or any of the things you hear expectant mothers shouldn't do, though she did drink a lot of chocolate malteds at the counter at Eddy's. "Good for the baby," she'd say, patting her stomach, while Desi shook his head, ringing up the cash register.

The ride home was quieter. I was sitting in the backseat, smoking, listening to Rod Stewart belt out "Maggie May" on the radio, thinking about Luke. Conor said he was still hanging out in his bedroom, taking walks late at night, sitting up smoking when he should have been sleeping. Conor said he was quiet, still, more quiet than before he went away. Even when Ray Mackey, his best friend, came over to see him. "It was way weird, man," Conor said. "I mean, Luke and Ray were like brothers, tighter than him and me, being the same age and all. I could tell Ray was, like, hurt, man. He pulled me aside after, asked me if Luke was like this with everyone since he got back."

I thought about Luke sitting by his window, staring out at the ocean, as if he was seeing new worlds across the water. I wanted him in this world. I wanted him in Elephant Beach, living with me in one of the bungalows that lined Comanche Street. I thought about standing in front of our bungalow, waiting for him to come home at night, rocking our daughter in the misty twilight until she slept. She would have eyes like mine and Luke's, and honey-colored hair as silky fine as beach grass

when it first starts growing, slender stalks that bend slightly in the wind. She would look like the best of us and grow up laughing. Her laugh would sound like silver bells when we lifted her in and out of the shallow waves at the shoreline.

Maggie Mayhew was having her baby at last. There would be no interference of relatives or hospitals where everything was white and sterile. Beth Fagan, Maggie's best friend, was the midwife; she'd just completed her first term of nursing school. If the baby was a girl, they were naming it Joni; if it was a boy, Donovan.

We were all crowded in front of the bungalow, inside the chain-link fence, where we could see the glow of white candles through the windows. It was after supper but still light out and everyone was milling around. It was what we did every night, but now there was a purpose. I searched the crowd of faces for Luke's, but he wasn't there.

Inside the bungalow, Maggie let out a scream. "What are they, beating her with chains in there?" Mr. Connelly called over the fence. He was sitting on his front steps, drinking a Budweiser. You couldn't hide anything on Comanche Street; the houses were so close together, the neighbors could hear every cough, every moan during the night. They often ended up in one another's dreams by mistake.

"Really, man," Mitch said. "I mean, giving birth's a trip all right, but it's not like she's in a fucking rice paddy in the middle of the Mekong Delta, for chrissake."

"Yeah, like you'd know what giving birth is like," Liz said.

Nanny banged out of the bungalow, slamming the screen door behind her. "Fuck it, I'm calling Aunt Francie," she said, heading to the pay phone by the entrance to the beach.

"I feel like we should go to church, light a candle," Liz said.

"Fuck that," Billy Mackey said. He lit a match and held it high.

"Here's our church, man. Right here. It's the church of life, man! Light your matches. Lift your matches to the sky for the baby." He was so stoned his eyes looked like they were about to fall out of his face.

Everyone took it up. It was a clear night, no wind coming off the ocean. The sunset fell in ribbons across the sky. Soon, the air was filled with matchsticks and lighters; when the matches went out, we lit others to take their place. People held cigarettes to the sky until they glowed down to stubs.

"It's like a Dead concert, man," Timmy Jones said, ecstatic. He was a real Dead Head and followed them around the country, hitchhiking to wherever they were playing.

"No, man," Billy said, solemnly. "It's like the concert of life."

Mrs. Connelly came out of her bungalow next door with a large plastic bag in her hand. She looked over at us, and then shook her head pityingly. "Assholes," she said. She put the bag in the trash can near the fence, waddled back inside and slammed the door behind her.

We heard the sirens come screaming up the street. Aunt Francie pulled up behind the ambulance in her silver Toyota. She didn't look at us as she ran into the house behind the ambulance crew. Nanny followed her inside.

Minutes later, everyone emerged. The medics carried Maggie on a stretcher, her eyes closed. Matty and Beth were on either side of her, and Beth was leaning down, whispering. Nanny came behind them, shaking her head. "No show, yet," she said. Raven and Cha-Cha followed, with Aunt Francie bringing up the rear, beating them around their heads and shoulders with her handbag. "You were breathing with her?" she screamed, swatting at Raven. "What the hell were you going to do if she stopped breathing, stop with her?" She marched to the ambulance and jumped in back with Maggie, then looked out at her sons one last time, shaking her head. "If youse had two brains, you'd both be half-wits," she said. The medic closed the doors and the ambulance raced up the block.

Everyone on Comanche Street applauded as the ambulance pulled

away. Once it turned the corner, we all started drifting toward the lounge at The Starlight Hotel. I thought of Maggie, so sure she would have a daughter. I thought about Luke, staring out his bedroom window, looking sad enough to cry. You had to be prepared for anything in this life. I wanted him to stay here, but if he couldn't, then I would go with him. Maybe we would live in the mountains for a while. Maybe our baby would be born in the mountains. The beach had been my life, but I was growing tired of Comanche Street, the drinking, the drugs, everyone falling asleep in the sand with lit cigarettes between their fingers. Waiting for something to happen, night after night.

I decided that if he wanted to, Luke and I would leave Elephant Beach together. We would find a cabin at the foot of a mountain and at night we would sit by the firelight. Our daughter would lie at our feet, swaddled in a brightly colored quilt, and the sound of her laughter would run over us like a clear, bright stream.