
Opening Extract from...

The Next Time You See Me

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For my mother, Ruth;
in memory of her mother, Evelyn Elizabeth Ezell, 1917–2011

Part One

Chapter One

1.

Emily Houchens watched as Christopher Shelton, who sat in a desk two rows up and one over from her own, leaned back and smoothly slid his notebook over his shoulder, so that the boy sitting behind him could read what was written there. This second boy, Monty, began to quake with suppressed laughter. The notebook retracted; an open hand took its place, waiting expectantly, and Monty softly gave him five: *Good one.* Mrs. Mitchell, who was pacing in her predictable way up and down the aisles while the students worked, had missed the whole exchange, and Emily tucked her chin into her chest to hide the smile on her face. Christopher had the easy luck of an action hero in a movie. Things always worked out for him.

"Five more minutes," Mrs. Mitchell announced, and Emily dragged her attention back to the sheet of paper on her desktop and the meager lines she had written in response to the prompt. It was a Friday, the day their English class focused on test-taking strategies, which everyone hated—even Mrs. Mitchell, Emily suspected. The prompt read:

> *Painters, like writers, use images, tone, and even characters to convey a theme or emotion in their work.*

a. Select an important emotion or image communicated in the novel A Separate Peace.

b. Imagine how a painter might render this same emotion or image on a canvas. Describe this imagined painting, detailing how and why this emotion or symbol is conveyed by choices related to space, color, texture, and shape.

"It's all bullshit," she had heard Christopher tell his friends at lunch one day. She had taken her usual seat—not at the popular table but at one nearby, where she could eat with her back to the group and listen, unbothered and unnoticed, to its conversation. Lunch immediately followed English, and so the subject of Christopher's diatribes was often Mrs. Mitchell, perhaps the only teacher in the seventh- and eighth-grade wings who seemed unimpressed by the charming, handsome boy who'd moved to Roma, Kentucky, last year from Michigan. "I never got a B in Ann Arbor. And that was *Ann Arbor.* How can some English teacher from the boonies give me a B? You don't even speak English here."

The kids at the table had laughed agreeably.

Now, as Mrs. Mitchell resumed her place at the front of the classroom, Emily brought her paragraph to a hasty conclusion and set her pencil down. Her underarms prickled with heat, and a lump of anxiety formed in her throat. Stupid, stupid to let herself get distracted again by Christopher. The open-response questions were for a grade.

"Cross your t's and dot your i's," Mrs. Mitchell said. The chairs squeaked as students shifted, and there was a chorus of sighs. "Let's read some of these aloud today and discuss them. Can I get a volunteer?"

Emily let her hair hang over her face. *Not me, not me, not me,* she willed.

She heard snickering and peeked through her bangs. Monty was poking Christopher between the shoulder blades with the eraser end of his pencil, and Christopher jerked in his seat. His hand shot up.

Mrs. Mitchell looked at him warily. "Yes, Christopher?"

"I'll read mine," he said, shooting a satisfied glance back at Monty, who put his head down on the desktop as if a game of Seven-Up had started. Emily could hear him wheezing with laughter.

"Go ahead," said Mrs. Mitchell.

Christopher stood and held his notebook in front of him like an orator. "In *A Separate Peace,* Finny decides to wear a pink shirt. Some say this is an expression of individuality but I see it as a sign that he is gay. Pink shirt equals gay. Also the name Finny: very gay. So my painter would paint a picture of a gay man in a pink shirt symbolizing one hundred percent gay."

There was a stunned silence. The students exchanged glances, delighted and disbelieving, then shifted their attention back to Mrs. Mitchell, primed for the inevitable explosion. Her face had gotten very red, as it always did when she was flustered, and her hands were shaking. Emily ached with secondhand embarrassment.

"Go to the back of the room and take a seat," Mrs. Mitchell said in a quavering voice. "Stay there. Don't leave when the bell rings."

Christopher's neck glowed suddenly with its own bright heat, and he moved as if to hunch down and grab his books from beneath his desk.

"Go on," Mrs. Mitchell said. "Leave your books."

"OK. *God,*" he said. He made a jaunty about-face, mouth set in a smirk, and stuck his fingers into the front pockets of his jeans, so that his thumbs rested easily on his narrow hipbones. He sauntered down the aisle between his row and Emily's, and she couldn't help but watch him. His skin, which hadn't yet lost its summer color, was golden against the white cuffs of his oxford shirt, and a lock of his thick, dark brown hair hung over his eye, so that he had to cock his head to shake it out of his vision. He had always been kind to her—that is, unlike others in their grade, he had never been cruel to her. They'd shared a table for a semester in seventh-grade science class, both of them smart enough and serious enough to complete Mr. Wieland's assignments successfully, with time left over for catching up on homework due in the next period. He'd even helped her with

her science project, "The Effects of Ultraviolet Light on Tadpoles," staying after class with her a few times to look at the tadpoles getting exposed to the UV lamp, cracking jokes about tadpole fricassee and tadpoles with suntans, helping her sprinkle fish food into the water and take notes in her logbook. She ended up winning second place at the regional science fair.

His eyes were bright blue. She had never seen such blue eyes.

He stopped by her desk, the little smile still playing on his lips, and leaned toward her. Her heart skittered, and her mouth got very dry. She tried to wet her lips, but her tongue had gone numb and stupid, and she prayed that she would be able to speak back if he spoke to her, that she would say the right thing.

"Stop staring at me, creep," he whispered, but not so low that the students close by them failed to hear it. There was more muted laughter.

"What was that?" Mrs. Mitchell called from the front of the room.

"Nothing," Christopher said innocently.

The tears started to spill before she could stop them. She put her head down as Monty had before, wiping her eyes on her forearms. *Not real. This isn't happening.*

He plopped down in the desk behind her and shoved his feet roughly into the storage cubby under her seat.

"You can all use the rest of the class as a study hall," Mrs. Mitchell said. "Anyone who makes a peep will be joining Christopher after class on a trip to Mr. Burton's office. Got it?"

A few heads nodded.

Mrs. Mitchell put a hand unconsciously to her cheek, which was still blotchy with color. "Pass in your papers."

Emily ripped the sheet with her response on it out of her notebook and held it out tentatively, so that it just grazed Missy Hildabrand's shoulder in front of her. Missy grabbed it, huffing as if Emily were always passing her papers, so many papers that she couldn't get a thing done.

Christopher murmured in the rustling, so softly that only Emily heard him this time: "Crybaby. Go home and cry some more, crybaby."

2.

That day—the day she would find the body—was October 28, 1993. It had long been Emily's habit to go on solitary walks in an undeveloped area near her family's subdivision; she thought of this area as the woods, but it was little more than a tangle of trees and construction runoff stretching like a cocked thumb between neighborhoods, a place where gravel roads started and mysteriously stopped and concrete slab foundations had lain dormant for coming up on a decade. A ghost town, but for a place that had never even come to exist. Emily couldn't remember it any other way, and she had rarely seen another soul on her walks, though the paths she followed were old and well worn.

After getting off the school bus, she went home only long enough to stow her backpack in her bedroom and greet her older brother, Billy, who rode the short bus and always arrived sooner than her. "Off to Tasha's," she called to her mother, the necessary lie, and managed to slip out the back door unseen. Otherwise, her mother would want to know why her eyes were so red and swollen. *You're not coming down sick, are you?*

On Washington Lane, Mr. Powell was changing the oil on his car. He had straddled the wheels across the ditch in his front yard so that he'd have more room to slide under, and he pulled himself to a stand as Emily passed, mopping his face with a dirty shop cloth and adjusting his ball cap. He worked at the electric motor factory with Emily's father.

"Hidey," he said. He waved.

Emily lifted her hand and hurried past.

Her journey always took her to the end of Washington Lane, which her mother called "the dead-end street" with such formality that Emily had thought this was its name until she'd learned to read. Where the road stopped she had to navigate a small runner of space between two chain-link fences, the one to her right penning in the Calahans' mutt, a big, bad-tempered dog that looked like some kind

of pit bull mix and always charged her as soon as he caught her scent. Today as always, the dog followed the length of the fence, snarling until his mouth foamed, docked tail pulled down tightly and whipping back and forth with a deceptive cheeriness. Emily hated the animal. But the dead-end street was her closest path to the woods, and circumventing the dog struck her as an important part of the ritual, as though she were required to prove her worth each time she passed from the world she knew into the world she'd created for herself.

And the reward, always, was the immediate transition from frenzy to quiet. The dog was only interested in Emily as long as he could see her, so when she reached the trail opening and disappeared behind a row of trees, the barking stopped almost at once, leaving in its stead a silence so near perfect that Emily's eardrums hummed. Here she paused and closed her eyes, marveling at the unnatural warmth of the October day. She was searching for words, for an image so bright and true that she could build a story upon it. This was how her private games of make-believe began.

The subject of much of her make-believe was Christopher Shelton. In the woods, it was he she imagined by her side, holding her hand, steadying her when she walked across logs or rocks; Christopher who listened to her talk about her day and told her not to worry about Leanna Burke or Maggie Stevenson, those popular girls who knew only how to tease and shun; Christopher who leaned in sometimes to kiss her, the touch so real that she could feel the texture of his lips (they had looked a bit chapped at school that day) and the cool burn of his peppermint gum. The Christopher she brought with her down Washington Lane and past the Calahans' dog was more real to her than the boy who had teased her today in Mrs. Mitchell's English class, and it never once occurred to her to amend her make-believe, to find another object for her interest.

Despite the unseasonable heat, it was late enough in the year that the air didn't hum with cicadas and birdsong, and the trees were in their last stages of shedding the summer's leaves, a few bright stragglers fluttering in the breeze like pennants. Emily followed her familiar path,

the one she had spent years rutting, feeling freer and more herself with every step. In the summer, when the temperature sometimes broke 100 degrees and the humidity settled like a damp, napping beast in the valley of town, Emily found her gaze drawn close and downward, to the strange little universes tucked under rocks or in puddles of rainwater. She had started a rock collection, though the pickings here were limited: shale, limestone, sandstone, the occasional chunk of flint. Once she had found a jagged piece of drywall, puzzled over it, then dropped it back into the creek bed. She was more likely to happen across a rusty nail in these woods than an arrowhead.

But autumn was a good time for exploring, the poison ivy and sumac and the clouds of midges dead and disappeared, the way ahead clearer, the sun bright and reassuring overhead, confirming for Emily that she was headed consistently eastward. She knew that the woods were narrowest to the east and west, and she could keep moving in a straight line and eventually resurface on Grant Road, where they were finishing work on the new rich-person development. *Bankers and doctors and lawyers, oh my,* her dad would chant, tediously, every time they drove past it. She had walked to the construction site a few times to pick through the detritus and gotten hollered at during her last visit, when someone saw her using a cast-off two-by-four as a tightrope between cinder blocks. She wasn't used to being noticed by adults, much less chastised, and so she had run off and not been back since.

To the south, the land climbed steeply toward Harper Hill and the site of the new town water tower. She hadn't gone there much—that way was longer and harder, crossing an invisible threshold from where she felt justified roaming. But now she halted, conjuring Christopher in her mind's eye, imagining the brush of his shoulder against hers. "What do you think?" she said aloud. Her words vibrated thrillingly in the silence. There were days when the sound of her voice, real and irrefutable, killed the delicate illusion. But on others, like today, when her spirits were at their lowest, it could provoke in her an almost physical pleasure, a kind of drowsy vibration. Her eyes blurred, so

that the treetops looked painted against the sky, and she spoke again, enjoying the sound even more: "Which way?"

"Let's climb," Christopher said. "Maybe we'll see the sunset."

She turned right, southward, and started at a brisk pace toward town, already feeling the grade pressing up against the soles of her sneakers. Her rambling had not made her athletic—she was big enough now that last autumn's pants pulled painfully at her hips and crotch, pushing up the soft flesh between her waistband and bra band so that it stood out from her body, tubelike, visible beneath anything but the loosest-fitting T-shirts. Christopher's presence at her side was so real to her that she registered embarrassment at the visibility of her exertion, and she couldn't help calling up the look on his face when he had stopped by her desk that day at school: the disgust, so evident in the curl of his lip, and the spat word, *creep,* said as though he were ridding his mouth of a foul taste. She felt the press of fresh tears (*crybaby*) and pushed herself harder, wheezing as the grade steepened. She was climbing now, grabbing the long, tangled grass for purchase, and the light overhead was slightly less golden than before, the sun starting to bleed into the horizon on her right.

Then she fell, turning her ankle as she went and throwing up her left arm in time to shield her face from a jutting branch. The breath was knocked out of her. Stunned, she flopped onto her back, getting her first good look at how far she'd ascended. She'd nearly reached the top of the hill, so the land rolled away beneath her steeply, offering her an unimpressive view of the woods, her woods, and the homes infringing on them both ways. In the distance, Highway 68-80 wound past the rock quarry toward Bowling Green. Much closer, only a hundred feet or so away, was the outer perimeter of Sheila Friend's property; a ragged barbwire fence penned in a few goats, small enough to be mistaken for dogs at a distance. She sent her mental fingers out for Christopher, as though she could catch the shirttail of the illusion she'd constructed, but he was gone, winked out. All that remained was an emotional residue, like a bad taste. A kind of sneering, hateful feeling, a whispered word: *creep*.

"I'm not a creep," she said aloud, lonelier than ever before.

She pushed herself up to a stand, putting most of her weight on her good right ankle, and tried shifting to her left. A twinge of pain arced up her leg from the instep of her foot, unpleasant but not excruciating. She could get home on it, and more easily if she cut across Sheila Friend's land to the road, where the rest of the going would be easier. She started hobbling toward Sheila's fence line, but as she approached it, she doubted herself. The barbwire snarled thick and furred with rust in three layers separated by only eight or nine inches, the highest strand about three feet off the ground. As she tested the spring of the barbwire under her palm, she could see two or three of Sheila's goats watching her with their black little eyes, waiting. Her parents had taken her and Billy to a petting zoo when they were small—Emily four or five, Billy eight or nine—and Billy had ruined the day, as he so often did, with one of his tantrums. "No, no, no," he'd started in a low, steady voice when the first goat came toward him and sniveled in his pockets for the treats Billy had bought from the dispenser outside. When the second goat approached, he had shrieked, then screamed. Emily remembered terror, quick movement; she remembered the swelling power of her own voice joining Billy's in affront. And then, dimly, the car ride home, and her mother's tired voice: *He's turned us all into prisoners.*

Emily backed away from the fence, embarrassed by her fear. The sun was going down, the goats silently assessing her, and her ankle yammered with increasing insistence. She needed to get home.

She hobbled downhill parallel to the fence line, moving quickly, feeling chilled as the sweat from her climb started to evaporate. At the corner of the fence she turned, prepared to follow it to the road, but no, that wouldn't work: the land sloped down steeply here into a small ravine, the barbwire in one spot grown around and even into the trunk of a maple tree. The tree itself was long dead, its roots exposed and dangling into the opening, leaving an ominous-looking hollow of darkness behind them. The gully was carved sharply into the hillside, narrowing as it ran down the grade, looking like the remnants of a

streambed, though Emily couldn't determine where a stream would have originated. Certainly it was a spot where things fetched up after hard rains: limestone, looking like bone in the low light; rotten logs; tangles of limbs and the soft down of dead leaves—a hundred dark crevices where a snake or a rat might sleep, a hundred dark crevices where a twisted ankle could turn into a broken one. Right now, the girls in her grade would be talking to one another on the phone about boys, and the boys themselves would be playing Super Mario Bros. or a game of HORSE out in the driveway. And Christopher—what would he be up to? He lived in one of the Civil War–era mansions up on North Main, his (it was rumored) three full stories tall with a ballroom, a library, and a separate servants' quarters out back, now converted into a guesthouse where Christopher was sometimes allowed to host overnights with his friends. She could imagine him out in the little building she'd only seen from the road—it was gray stone, with a copper roof—bent over a pool table or playing foosball with his friends, a lock of dark hair trembling over his right eye as he twisted his wrist or thrust his hips to the left or right. She could—

But that's when she smelled it.

She stopped, peering into the gulch. The smell didn't hit her instantaneously—she'd been sensing it for a while now on some subconscious level and attributing it to the nearby goats—but her realization of it was instant, wrenching her from the safety of Christopher's guesthouse and plunging her back into this twilight wood, where the shadows were starting to stretch and run into one another. When she inhaled again, more deeply this time, and tried to determine what it was, or identify its source, her stomach trembled. She knew this smell precisely because she did not know it, because it was too alien, too removed from her safe, familiar world to be anything but what it was. It was death. She was smelling death.

Her breaths had gotten rapid and shallow. She put her hand on her chest and forced herself to exhale slowly.

It was an animal, almost surely. A possum, a skunk. Maybe even a dog. She had seen such death before: shapeless bags of fur drawing

flies to the shoulder of the road. She had once watched a dog get run over by a car, run home to tell her mother, and returned to find only an oblong streak of blood on the faded cement. The smell was new; the idea of it wasn't.

She hesitated, suppressing a tremor of unease, and then leaned back a little, palm behind her for balance, and started working her way down into the trench. She picked her footing as carefully as she could on her bad ankle but slid on a decomposing fall of leaves, and so finally she sat and simply pushed herself downhill, aware that getting back out, scaling the other side, would be harder.

In the end she very nearly stepped on it. She was inching along the floor of the gully, wobbling from one loose-fitting stone to the next and clinging to the nimble trunks of trash trees for balance, when she slid, then overcorrected, planting her left foot against a stone and finally stopping her forward motion. She trembled with relief, her heart racing, and then she looked down at the stone she'd shifted and froze. The light was already dimmer than it had been when she first approached the crevasse—a light so low and gray that Emily could see better with her peripheral vision than she could straight on. What she thought she'd seen she didn't quite believe; she focused her eyes to the left of it, squinting, and then, still uncertain, she crouched down, her left ankle squealing now—and yes, there it was, pale and threaded with fine lines, dimpled in the center with dark soil: a human palm.

She jerked back. Then, slowly, she leaned in again. She grasped the neck of her shirt and pulled it up over her nose, but it did little good. The death smell was here, sitting atop that palm as though being held aloft, and she knew that she ought to turn away and go for help, but she also knew that she wouldn't be able to stand it later on if she didn't get a look while she had the chance. There was, along with the mounting horror within her, a curiosity, too, almost scientific: the same curiosity that drove her each day to flip the switch on that UV lamp, not because she didn't think it would kill the tadpoles, but because she wanted to know *how* it would kill them. With her

left hand still pinching her shirt tight over her nose, Emily used the right to grab a nearby stick. She poked the shifted rock; it wobbled, then fell back into place. She poked again. At last she had to hold her breath and use both hands, moving the stick like a golf club, dislodging the rock and revealing beneath it the underside of a puffed wrist, pale but bruised looking, the hollows between the prominent tendons purple as grape Kool-Aid.

She felt her neck and face break out with heat, the sensation so shocking and instant that the roots of her hair tightened. There was, in this pocket of soil below her, a hand and a wrist—and the sight of both together, joined as they should be, discolored but still recognizable as human, set her off balance in a way that the palm alone could not. Before she knew what she was doing, she started knocking other stones and leaves away with the stick, and then she tossed it to the side and pulled the leaves and soil off barehanded, and when she finished half a minute later she'd unearthed the rest of the arm, the shoulders, and the head.

The body rested loosely in the soil, as if it had been hastily covered before the rocks were set in place. There was a wrinkled elbow, grimed and whorled like a thumbprint, and a couple of inches of exposed upper arm, the flesh so bloated and tight that it strained against the sleeve of a thin white T-shirt. The shoulders and back were also swollen, the weave of the T-shirt puckered, and Emily thought of the Halloween dummies she and her mother used to construct each year, before the time some bullies from Billy's school had set one on fire as a prank. They would close the sleeves of one of her father's old flannel shirts with rubber bands and stuff so many leaves into the torso that you could see the points spilling out between buttons. This body, too, was overstuffed, the back humped, the neck bulging against the razored edge of short hair. A man, Emily thought at first—the body seemed both fat and muscular, the hair too short to be feminine—but there was some detail throwing off the image of maleness, a clue that she was grasping with the edges of her mind but not yet consciously. She crouched down and put out a trembling hand, a pointed finger,

and touched one of the fingers of the exposed hand. The nails, she'd noticed from above, seemed longish—had she once heard that they continued to grow in death? When she pushed, something gave and came free, and Emily didn't even jump this time; she just squinted in the low light, the vein in her neck pulsing with her excitement, and came as close to the object as she could stand to. It was a press-on nail, painted peach with an even white tip. It lay bright against the dark ground, like an opal.

She stared silently at the perfect, whole press-on nail, imagining the woman who would have glued it to her finger, a woman with a man's short hair and a man's plain T-shirt but the vanity to want her hands to look nice. She sat back and lifted her head to inhale, like a diver surfacing for air: a crescent of moon was etched against the night sky, so bright that when she blinked she saw its afterglow.

It was getting too dark to linger. She could make out between the trees the distant twinkle of lights from Sheila Friend's house. Higher in the sky, and brighter, was a single security lamp, marking the roadway. She started moving in that direction. Her body throbbed with an electric charge, energy that might have spilled into a sprint or a scream, but it was lodged in her, stuck, and she couldn't run on her bad ankle anyway. When she emerged at the road, she paused, nonplussed by the orderly procession of telephone lines, the reasonable graveled shoulder. Sheila Friend's mailbox was visible from here—it was tan, painted with bright cardinals and curling ivy. Emily stared at the birds, dazed. A full minute passed. Then, as if in a dream, she started hobbling downhill.

If Mr. Powell had still been out in his front yard as she passed it, she might have gone to him, reassured by his authority as a neighbor, as an acquaintance of her father's. But the car was pulled back into his driveway and the front door was shut tight. The light of a television flicked against the blinds of an otherwise dark corner room—probably a bedroom. Emily kept moving.

In another few moments she was home, the night around her now absolute. Her house, the small pale rectangle of it, was illuminated:

she could see the pulse and flash of their own television in the living room, her mother's shadow in the kitchen window. Her father's Ford pickup truck was parked in the gravel drive.

She went in through the back door, and as soon as she entered the kitchen and its familiar smells—the low smoke of the wall heater; the stench of stewed cabbage, fleetingly reminiscent of the horror Emily had left back in the woods—her mother tossed her dishrag on the stovetop, took a shaky breath, and said, "Where on earth have you been?" She stopped, looking over Emily from head to toe, frowning. "You're filthy. What happened?" Her hands were on Emily's face now, warm against Emily's cold skin. She put a palm to Emily's forehead, considering, and then switched to the back of her hand, and then she was turning Emily in place as though she were trying to see if her shirt and pants fit right, the way she did when Emily tried on school clothes at Sears and Roebuck. "What happened?" Hands running up and down her legs, as though she were being checked by the police for a gun. "What happened?"

Emily's father appeared in the doorway, the lines around his mouth pinched in a way that didn't yet commit to anger or concern. "Where've you been? Kelly, what's wrong with her?"

Emily said, "I tripped and twisted my ankle." It was out of her mouth before she realized she was going to say it. She hadn't decided on that walk home not to mention the body—it hadn't occurred to her that she could opt not to—but now she was being led to a kitchen chair and her father was rolling up her pant leg to examine the ankle ("It's a little swollen, but it don't look broke to me," he was saying, and her mother, breathlessly, "Are you sure?"), and her stomach was growling a little at the sight of a bag of Doritos, unopened, on the table to her left. She hadn't screamed. She hadn't sounded an alarm. She pulled the sack of chips closer and tweezed the top between her fingers, pulling, releasing the putrid-pleasant scent of corn and cheese into her face as her father quizzed her on where, and why, and how, and *What the heck are you thinking, rambling around by yourself at night?* Her mother brought her a Coca-Cola, opened, and Emily

did what she loved: she put a chip into her mouth and crunched, and while the crumbs were still circling inside her mouth, getting milled by her teeth and tongue, she chased them with a long draft of the soda, the sweet and bubbles washing it all down the back of her throat. She wiped her right hand, the one she'd used to touch that press-on nail, absentmindedly on the thigh of her jeans, then reached into the bag for another chip.

She didn't know how to begin to say what she knew, to explain what she had seen. Already her memory of the body felt unreal, like something she could not trust, and she put another chip on her tongue, considering.

"We should take her to the doctor tomorrow," her mother was saying.

"I'd have to use my sick leave. Or else get docked a point."

"I'm fine," Emily said. "I don't want to go to the doctor."

Billy came into the kitchen, arms crossed with paternal gruffness. "You were late," he said. "Dinner is at five. Mom was going to make me eat my dinner late."

Emily glared at him. Billy was tall and pear-shaped, with a doughy stomach and broad, almost womanly hips. His eyes were large and moist, with thick, long lashes, and his full lips were raw with painful-looking cracks, because he had a nervous habit of chewing, then pulling, the chapped skin. His sweetness, his simple good nature, was held in check by a strong sense of entitlement, which their parents generally obliged, and so Emily had long ago fallen into a habit of feeling irritated by him, then guilty for the irritation. She did not realize how alike they were.

"He was anxious for you," her mother said apologetically. "He just wants things to be normal."

"Normal," Emily echoed.

"Yeah, normal," Billy said with the bratty authority of a second grader.

Her parents drifted back to their familiar places—her mother to the stove, her father to the living room, where he could watch

TV—and Emily washed down another chip with a swallow of cola. Had she seen what she thought she saw? Maybe she should go back tomorrow, make sure. She was afraid—but there was also curiosity. Even possessiveness. If she told, she wouldn't be able to have another look at the body, and she realized that she wanted to. Just once more. Just to make sure.