Book One

ISBN

1

THE SUMMER I TURNED FIFTEEN, hornets infested the maple tree shading Bolero's doghouse. No creature—not the cicadas that chattered into the bark of weeping willows, not the seventeen-year locusts that chewed holes in sassafras, nor the spotted ticks that grew the size of filberts—had ever advanced upon Jake's Poultry Farm like those wide phalanxes of disciplined hornets. Our property on the outermost rim of the Jersey Pine Barrens was as trusting as a girl, and anyone with the inclination could have trespassed at will. The farm had no steel-mesh gates or wandering lines of fence posts. Except for the game hunters in hunting season, nearly everyone else heeded the weathered "No Trespassing" signs posted on trees throughout the woods. So it was exciting on that morning fifteen years ago to see those audacious bees ignore my mother and father's prohibitions for outsiders to keep away.

It was nine o'clock by the time I got downstairs, and as usual, the danger was already under control. Outside, my father was motioning to Charlie, the black farmhand who lived in the sagging annex to our house, to move the ladder away from the tree. Every wave of his four-fingered hand assumed that compliance would follow, but soon he began to alternate commands in English and Yiddish when his emphatic gesturing failed to make the point. As Charlie lifted the ladder, a fat blue vein inside his dark temple pulsated out of sync with his slow walk, and his eyes took in only the slope of his own cheeks. I thought of ways to distract Charlie, so he would trip

or fumble the ladder. Then maybe my father would demand my participation, and I, too, could have a chance at heroism. But even though my parents often whispered to each other about Charlie's shaking hands and about the bottle of Cold Duck in his room, Charlie's arms held steady as he leaned the ladder against two wooden sawhorses.

With my father's spray of Black Flag insecticide, the hornets rose en masse from the head of the maple, as if the tree's hair had buzzed and stood on end. And then, one by one, thousands of hornets swooned downwards, hitting the ground practically dead. The yard chickens had long since huddled under the pear tree a safe distance away. But the cats saw potential sport as the hornets batted their transparent wings against pebbles and brown grass, and our mutt Bolero and his mother, Duchess, thinking they were in for a meal, rooted through the weeds. At once the animals felt the hornets' wrath. Cats dispersed in all directions and crouched under the truck and coop, pawing their faces to soothe the pain. The dogs, banking on human sympathy, whimpered and ran sidelong to my mother and my younger sister, Perel, now policing the driveway lest an egg or chicken customer drive off the highway quite literally into a hornets' nest.

For a while the hornets popped up and down, as if collectively hiccuping. As a last-ditch protest, one of the smallest dived into my father's face. Papa smacked his cheek hard and flung the hornet to the ground, killing it along with the others.

Farm children labor under a lot of myths. People think we grow up with an intuitive knowledge of harvests, seasons, the properties of water. The births of kittens and baby chicks supposedly teach us about regeneration; the slaughter of chickens, the predacious zest for survival. To herald our maturity,

we claim a wedge of property as our own and plant cucumbers. Children of livestock farms, not numerous in south Jersey, dote on favorite horses and cows, with names popular eighty years ago, and show them at 4-H fairs. During summers entire families pick, wash, and package tomatoes, and depending on their moods, children grumble or sing happily. But my sister, Perel, and I merely tended to our chicken hospital and our petunias, and spent most of the summer playing with dolls and inventing fictional characters.

Mind you, the kids we knew at the regional high school were busily spending their summer vacations getting devirginized, smoking pot, and tripping for the first time. As removed as Long-a-coming was from city influences, a few of them were even grooming themselves to be flower children and understood politics well enough to distinguish between peace and war. But for Perel and me, summers meant a kind of quarantine. Of course we relied on *Time* and *The Today Show* to keep us in dim contact with the world outside Jake's Poultry Farm; and that's how we learned that revolutions, protestors, and burning cities competed for top billing in the world that mattered. Given—oh, given a lot of factors, but given mainly the demands of the chicken business, my life and Perel's resembled the little glass-domed winter scene my mother once bought me from the Long-a-coming Farmer's Market and Auction. Life inside that dome never changed, even if you turned it upside down to shake the snow and the glass grew hot in your hand. As a result, we never much stretched beyond the habits of childhood.

First, the dolls. None of them was in good shape, partly from overuse, partly from having had their plastic or cloth bodies wrapped with torn nylon stockings to simulate fashionable coiffures and bustlines. None of the dolls was Jewish, either, but usually Catholic orphans awaiting adoption in

Perel's bedroom. We could have practiced the piano downstairs, could have read a book as my mother always encouraged us to do, could even have studied the different varieties of moss in the woods. Now and then, we did. But the fact is, Perel and I could not help ourselves, just as we couldn't help but domesticate kittens by locking them in chicken crates until they licked our fingers with gratitude. We simply took care not to perform any of our scenes in front of open windows where travelers on the Pike could see us.

The dozen voices of imaginary people were mainly Perel's creations. She was generous in seeing them as our joint effort, but my sister, not I, had the talent for parody, for exaggerating an element of a singer's style or the intonation of a gas station attendant's speech. One of her most cherished inventions was Luster, a redneck with a deranged Georgian leer. Another favorite was Pop, a calico kitten who passed the last days of his life slumped in the hole of a cinder block. Perel loved Pop for his insufferable agony, and outfitted him with a plaintive, cowed whine—a cross between a blond country-western croon and the earnest voice of a five-year-old child—and a sensitive heart that sympathized indiscriminately with victim and con artist alike.

I couldn't have been more than ten or eleven when we invented Sparsely and Saucer. We were convinced that "sparsely" and "saucer" were not genuine English words, but aberrations of Camden County language. To us they were nonsense syllables representing two hail-fellow-well-met south Jersey pals with voices like those of untrained opera baritones. We modeled them after Bill, the man who delivered the tanks of propane gas needed in the slaughterhouse. Bill was tall, wore a Poindexter crew cut even when the style had long passed out of popularity, spoke slowly, and prefaced most sentences with an "uh" that jiggled his Adam's apple. By our

reckoning, Sparsely and Saucer were real Americans. They worshiped in the Long-a-coming Presbyterian Church Sunday mornings, bowled with their league Wednesday evenings, ate pancakes for breakfast, and participated in town meetings. They were respectful to women, whom they referred to as "honeys," because women were dizzy when it came to machinery and finance. Perel and I engaged them to Carnation and Anita, who suspected they were duds.

Our cast of characters also included literal renditions of people we knew, like Rodney MacDuff, our tall, emaciated, effeminate former piano teacher, who lived with his cousin in a white Civil War–era mansion in town, and who had tried, with varying degrees of success, to teach Perel and me some Beethoven. From him we picked up a laugh like a death rattle way down inside his throat, and the walk of a monstrously oversized praying mantis on its toes. And to illustrate anything exotic, Perel imitated the high school French teacher, whom we named Mrs. Barbarian. Mrs. Barbarian doused her hourglass figure with French cologne and consistently wore three items: a black dress, a red sweater nubbed with lint, and a gold bracelet. To amuse herself, Mrs. Barbarian frequently tittered, "Don't fight; just kill each other."

In retrospect, our time would have been better spent packaging sugar cookies and frozen fish fillets in Hammonton, or doing volunteer work at the Melody School for Emotionally Handicapped Children in Long-a-coming. Or if my parents had sold the farm and bought a guesthouse in Atlantic City, as they talked of doing, Perel and I might have spent that summer spinning cartwheels in front of Convention Hall. Or if my parents had enrolled Sheiye in a Brooklyn yeshiva, as they had occasionally threatened . . . In the past fifteen years I have considered a hundred ifs; as if all my concentration would grant me mastery over that summer.

What a laugh! I'm not much different from my mother and father after all. As a child, I could never tolerate their maniacal review of the past: What happened in 1942? Why did the Nazis send my father's family to such and such a camp as opposed to such and such a camp? (I could never remember the names.) And why did Papa only eat potatoes in July . . . until I would stomp out of the kitchen, furious with my parents, not the Nazis.

Now and then, I have thought that when my mother was pregnant with me, she replayed the images of her Polish-Yiddish youth in her mind so often that she transfused that endless, answerless style of investigation to the child sucking a thumb inside her. By the time I was six, I was already instructing myself to remember what I looked like at five; how I felt after I read my first book; who my teachers had been. Scraping my nails on the past, testing my foothold in the future, was habit with me by the time I was ten. All I needed was a personal holocaust to twirl around in my mind, and then I could carry my parents' obsessiveness with me into my generation. That's what my fifteenth summer gave me. And now it seems all I ever do is live in 1968.

A few days after the hornet incident, Perel and I took a walk to the woods. Neither one of us liked to go alone because of the dragsters and garden snakes. It always struck me as a little odd how scared we were of rural life. What did we expect to see in the fields and woods? Wild dogs, maybe, or another forest fire. Once, I remember, our whole family and Charlie drove out to Atsion Lake to watch the trees of the Wharton Tract burn down to charcoal. Fire engine companies from Long-a-coming, Loudon, Chesilhurt, and Elm drained half the cedar lake trying to extinguish the flames. Hundreds of local residents stood about transfixed, drinking beer and

flirting with each other. For the first time in my memory, I saw my mother crying, as raccoons, field mice, chipmunks, opossums, weasels, all kinds of birds, and trees too, it seemed, straggled out of the woods on broken wings and singed paws. I felt confused because I knew my mother didn't even care much for cats and dogs.

Ruthlessness seeded the Long-a-coming woods. What looked like the calm rotation of seasons was actually the advance of pines throughout the field, choking the soil so that my father had to move his vegetable garden near the slaughter-house cesspool. Rural beauty, too, often seemed just one of nature's whimsies. The black-eyed Susans, which broke the green and brown monotony of south Jersey scrub with an arresting jumble of yellow every Memorial Day, were dead by July Fourth. And while the forests of the New World were fair game for rabbits and not runaway Polish Jews, an image of a stalked child accompanied me on my trips there. Little wonder I feared the Jersey Devil, a mischief-scheming creature, part bat, part kangaroo, that reputedly dominated the Pine Barrens.

Perel and I usually took Bolero along as our guardian. The three of us and Duchess had established a ritual: Seeing us head for the woods, Bolero skidded as far as the chain allowed, running all his weight into the leather collar around his neck, yelping desperately. Duchess lifted herself up heavily and whimpered, unsure if she was responding to danger or excitement. Bolero's mother was a canine octogenarian and so inert that she had won the right to stay unchained. Overcome by blindness and confusion, she flopped down in the driveway and napped. "Wanna go for a run, 'Lero?" Perel asked. It was my duty to restrain our mad dog while Perel undid the chain. Unleashed, Bolero crashed past our thighs and sped down the

path to the woods. "Okay, 'Lero," Perel shouted. "Take us for our run!" We were off behind him.

Once past the coops, Perel abruptly stood stock still, called Bolero, stuck out her hand like a traffic cop, and began swiveling her chubby hips. "Stop! In the name of love!" she warbled, in the honey-coated voice of a Motown singer. Perel curled her thin lips and batted her naturally long-lashed eyes behind her glasses as if they were leaden with mascara. "Sing it, sister!" I encouraged in my Sparsely and Saucer voice. Perel tapped her brow, shook her head up and down slowly, more like a rabbinic sage than a singer from a black girl group, and finished with, "Think it oh-over!"

"Haven't I been good to you?" chorused Pop, weakly.

The Motown singer repeated talmudically, "Think it oh-over!"

A horsefly buzzed around our ears, and we tore off towards the railroad tracks to outrun it. "Bzzz," went Perel, zigzagging the fly's route with her hand and landing on my nose. "Ow!" cried Sparsely, in his wounded-bear voice. "That hurts!"

Perel hung her head down like a child assessing how much to cry. She buckled the corners of her mouth, looked at me sideways, and pealed off a wail in Pop's voice. "Waaah! I'm sorry! Please forgive me. I'm just a little cat and I don't know any better!"

"If you'll be my *hantekh,* I'll forgive you," I said. Sometimes Perel and I pretended to be some inanimate object. To atone for being a fly, Perel had to let me dry my hands on her as if she were a hand towel.

"All right," Pop whined. I ran my hands across the dewy weeds and rubbed them on Perel's arm. When I touched her, her whole body became as stiff as Papa's wood chicken catcher.

We walked on until we got to the tracks, stopping every

few feet to whisk ticks off our sneakers and Bolero's paws, or to examine some purple weed we had never seen before. At the railroad tracks, a perpendicular path intersected the farm's. The right fork eventually led to Long Avenue, Long-a-coming's main street. Had we lived in town, we would have thought Long Avenue dull, with its Ambler's Grocery, Marnie's Five-and-Ten, the Freihoff School of Dance atop Humble's Supermarket, the fire hall, library, American Legion, Rodney MacDuff's mansion, the post office, First National Bank of Long-a-coming, and Strawb's clothing store for men. But because our visits to Long Avenue were limited to July Fourth to watch the local parade, or to Saturday evenings, when my father bought the *Philadelphia Inquirer,* all those commonplace buildings with their humdrum activities were as dramatic as uncharted tundra. The left fork continued on to a clearing in the woods and a power station made entirely from silver-gray steel and rubberized wire, like an ominous set of monkey bars. I was always a little surprised to see it in the woods, waiting with criminal patience for the destruction of the surrounding trees.

Bolero decided which direction we would take when he darted off towards the station. We followed the dog a few yards, when I noticed some sassafras leaves fall to the ground. Somebody was standing there in the woods, dressed in a white sailor's uniform, the sole of his shoe flat against a tree trunk. In spite of the dusty path, his outfit was spotless. The sun shone full in the guy's face as he shielded his brow with his forearm and met my stare. In that instant, his half-concealed face made me think it was my brother Sheiye, playing a trick on Perel and me. I squinted, and in the next second I thought he must be from some other era, maybe a decent boy come home from battling Japanese subs.

His decency notwithstanding, I immediately considered

the possibility that the sailor would murder us. How many times had my parents warned my sister, brother, and me that treachery lurks everywhere but in your own home? Most people, they implied, had a secret thirst to kill. A sailor on dry land—suspicious. I should have known, what with the blue sky as a decoy, that this ordinary day would end in death. Soon my blood and Perel's would spatter the sailor's whites. . . . Sheiye would be left an only child.

The sailor looked sullen, all right, but only because Perel and I had startled him. Suddenly, Bolero bounded up behind my sister and me and careened into my ankles. Affecting a blasé air, I bent down and patted Bolero's head. Life on a chain had dulled his senses, and he did not growl until the sailor cleared his throat and said, "I always was kinda scared of dogs." Bolero divined a threat in the sailor's voice and, frantic, raced back to the farm in a cloud of dust.

Bolero's betrayal dissolved my spellbound passivity, and I said softly to Perel, "Let's turn around and walk away, real normal-like." I figured that if we started running, we would frighten the sailor into attacking us. But he resumed his original pose, apparently indifferent to our presence. Perel and I sauntered off, and after a few steps, I had calmed down enough to be furious at Bolero. And soon I was furious at my predicament as a child on that farm. Bolero was no different from anyone else in my family. We were cowards, including my parents who settled on a south Jersey chicken farm and mined it with Orthodox Judaism, exploding little bombs of Sabbath and Passover, incapacitating their children so they couldn't function properly anywhere outside the farm. Hiding in the Polish woods from the Nazis, from Christians, and now hiding in America. A habit. All they know how to do is hide, and now that's all I know how to do.

Halfway back to the farm, Perel cried out, "Duck! A

car!" Occasionally, souped-up cars and motorcycles rumbled down the path from the Long-a-coming drag strip or from overgrown forest trails. But I knew it wasn't likely that a car should be coming from our house. Few local people disregarded the property rights of Jake's Poultry Farm, pulling off the White Horse Pike to use our driveway as a shortcut to the lovers' lane by the railroad tracks. In an instant, I saw our green flatbed truck lumbering towards us, carrying pails of chicken slop to the manure heap near the tracks. Perel and I jumped off the path and flagged it down as a startled rabbit hopped away to a protected clover patch. "I hope it's not Sheiye," Perel said, too distraught to hide behind one of her voices. Immediately, I insisted, "Not a word of that sailor to anyone, okay?" Drawing herself up like Rodney MacDuff, Perel wheezed, "Of caws not!" as if any intelligent person understood that the unpredictable does not tolerate discussion.

As the truck drew closer, Sheiye's face, rich with inscrutable connivance, floated above the steering wheel, bobbing in time with the toy bulldog's head that some butcher had long ago affixed to the rearview mirror. In the passenger's seat sat Charlie, his bloodshot eyes scanning the dry field and his brown arm on the window casing. Neither Charlie nor Sheiye altered his expression when they spotted Perel and me. I was sure they hadn't said a word to each other since they had gotten into the truck. Their silence, probably born out of incompatibility, seemed complicitous to me nonetheless.

Sheiye braked to a stop. "Can we get on?" I called to him through Charlie's window. Sheiye motioned with his hand to the back of the truck. "Only if you help us unload," he said. Spoiled as my sister and I were, we really did enjoy some farm chores, and only our lack of responsibility had made our offers to help so sporadic. We clambered onto the tires and over the sideboards and nestled between buckets of chicken guts. Sheiye

started with a lurch, and Perel and I grabbed onto the cabin's metal backing. "Bastard," I muttered. I knocked on the rear window to get the men's attention. Sheiye looked at me through the rearview mirror and crimped his mouth so that indentations pocked his chin. Charlie turned his head a scant thirty degrees, the vein in his temple counting a beat for every whir of the truck's engine. I waved. Charlie's lips twitched and he smiled. Perel craned her neck, chewing on an imaginary rope of chicken gut like a cat, complete with gagging.

At the manure heap, Perel and I shoved the slop buckets to the edge of the truck bed, while Sheiye and Charlie overturned them. The heap, a misshapen tepee, rarely shrank below six feet; and even though many of the buckets were already teeming with newly born maggots by the time they were loaded on the truck, I still liked to watch the pile grow dense with feathers and multicolored innards. The manure glistened in the dead of midday.

As always, Sheiye dangled a chicken head before our eyes, sliding his voice up and down with a ghostly "ooooh!" "Stop flinging that ghastly chicken head around, you little twerp!" Perel groaned like Rodney MacDuff, exaggerating Rodney's limp wrist. I squinted at my brother and tried to deny the face I saw before me. It was the sailor's, then my brother's, then the sailor's, back and forth like those double-image postcards of Jesus sold in the Long-a-coming Farmer's Market and Auction. The picture of Sheiye menacing two girls with a chicken head awoke me to a realization: Any intimation of unmanliness rubbed against Sheiye's nerve. I understood why even back then. Our parents wouldn't let any of us date non-Jews, which meant we dated no one. While their dictum made Perel and me unpopular in school, it utterly desexed my brother. I was sure he would have hurled a bunch of chicken guts at us if Charlie hadn't been there. But we were all shy

around Charlie, humbled into restraint by his blackness and averted eyes.

Charlie patted the tobacco pouch inside his shirt pocket and eyed Sheiye scraping muck off his boots. Even after eight years with us, Charlie was still a mystery. For example, a few minutes after the destruction of the hornets, I had sidled over to him where he stood with his back against the gray cinder blocks of the slaughterhouse. He was rolling himself a cigarette, an activity I loved to watch. Charlie's hand shook as he folded the pouch into his shirt pocket and lit the cigarette. I wanted to ask him if the hornets had scared him, if that's why his hand was shaking. Instead, curiosity shaped a non sequitur, and I asked, "Charlie, you married?"

Charlie shook his head slowly, his reserve impenetrable, and dragged on his cigarette. I guessed he was an "old bachelor," or an *alter bucher,* as my parents referred to him in Yiddish. But in Charlie, bachelorhood was the consequence of decision, not failure, and not, as little Pop would have sniffed, insecurity.

The buckets unloaded, the four of us settled back into the truck: Perel and I pressed against the backboard, peering through the cabin window to pester our brother; Charlie in the truck's cabin with Sheiye. My brother stared lazily at the ignition key, probably to prolong our contact with the smelly slop buckets. Charlie, perennially unmoved by the pastimes of the Szusters, merely glanced at my brother from the corner of his eye and patted his tobacco pouch. I had first seen that look of unconscious contemplation on Sheiye a day or two earlier, when I found Mama lecturing him about something—sex ethics, I assumed—in the kitchen. Sheiye looked cruel, and I believed he was humoring Mama for the moment but planned to debauch as many south Jersey maidens as he could lay his hands on when he started college in the fall.

Once the truck began moving and the drone of the engine provided cover, Perel nudged me and sang "My Secret" by the Platters, in a powerless, tuneless voice: " 'Nobody knows the thrills and the glows, the ebbs and the flows, whoa, I've got a secret—' " I shook my head to cut her off. "Not a word about that," I reminded her, nodding in the direction of the railroad tracks. "Oh, honey!" Saucer chided. "I know!"

Why was I so intent on keeping that episode a secret? I had the same reaction to the sailor as I had had to anti-Semitic insults from some boys at school. I never mentioned them to anyone, not to my parents and not even to Perel, in whom I had always confided. Why talk about something shameful? My parents were tight-lipped about the Nazis, and I was tight-lipped about my classmates. I puzzled over those comments time and time again, wondering what I had done to elicit them. I never laughed too loudly, rarely tattletaled, and used the word "nigger" once to accommodate my friends. I figured that if I passed my social studies tests and raved over the Beatles, no one could ever differentiate me from the rest of the group. When someone insulted me, I assumed I had slipped up. And now I had the notion that if Perel and I hadn't wandered to the railroad tracks, the sailor wouldn't exist. Or he would simply be a tiptop fellow hiking to the power station, returning later to his God-fearing Christian home on Auburn Avenue for Monday-night ham. My eyes turned innocence into depravity.

Perel and I smiled at each other, anticipating our favorite part of the ride. My brother (or father, when he drove) would always floor the gas pedal as he approached the weeping willow tree about four hundred feet from the house. My sister and I would stand up, hold on to the metal backing of the cabin, and feel the dizzying smack of the summer wind on our faces. The green and yellow arms of the tree drooped onto the

windshield, completely obscuring the bend in the path, and we had to stoop not to get lashed by them. The test of bravery, however, was to hold out long enough to feel the first whip of the branch against an arm. That moment—just before the willows slapped the hood of the truck—more than any other on the farm, sent a flash of pleasure down my spine, where it rippled a few seconds against the bottom vertebrae.

But this time, after the bend, Sheiye didn't slow down. He was supposed to, as my father always did, fearing that one of us might be coming up the path. I remember Perel and I stood up again and yelled for Sheiye to watch for the cats and dogs in the driveway. Perel started pounding on the cabin window. Out of spite, it seemed, Sheiye wouldn't brake. I don't know what Charlie was thinking. He stared out his window, indifferent to the racket Perel and I made, brushing off dragonflies and chicken feathers that fluttered against his sweat-beaded forearm.

When Sheiye hit the brake, the truck was going at least forty miles an hour, which felt half again as fast on the rutted path. I know he had had enough time to see Duchess lying in the driveway where Perel, Bolero, and I had left her a half hour earlier. It wouldn't have taken much dexterity to avoid her, and he wouldn't have overturned the truck, as he claimed would have happened, if he had swerved. And why had the accelerator pedal never gotten stuck, as Sheiye swore was the case, when my father drove?

The right front tire rolled directly over Duchess's round body, and once the truck was upon her, Sheiye turned the steering wheel so that the vehicle's high chassis passed over her without another scratch. The truck did end up tipping slightly but caught its balance a few yards farther on. In my panic, I feared that Sheiye would gun the truck straight into the White Horse Pike and kill us all.

By the time my parents ran outside to determine the source of the noise, I had leapt off the truck to check Duchess, Perel was kicking at Sheiye's door, and Charlie was leaning against the black-patched fender, shaken, wiping his brow with a rumpled white handkerchief. Duchess jerked her hind legs several times and squealed like a baby pig. Her fat girth, previously clumped against her ribs after years of desultory old age, was now oozing out a hole near a dried-up nipple. I touched her side gently, hoping that through her pain Duchess would feel a love I had never really had for her. She could bear neither the additional pressure nor my insincerity. She stopped wriggling and died.

With Duchess dead at my feet, I could not imagine hating anyone more than I hated Sheiye. Perel scooped up loose pebbles from the ground and hurled them at him, while he parried her attack with a raised elbow. Despite his undeniable responsibility for Duchess's death, he would not tolerate our abuse, but improvised phony karate slaps to drive us away.

My parents, though shocked, looked relieved. After all, it was only Duchess, the old dog who got underfoot, and who forced customers to detour around her sleeping body. Neither Mama nor Papa was the type to ask "What happened?" when the obvious stared them in the face, so they made very little comment. Most important was the never-ending work of the farm. It required resourceful solutions, which Papa began dispatching at once. *"Hehr awf!"* Papa yelled at Sheiye, still assailing Perel. My father looked at Charlie, and I thought he might demand an explanation from him. But Charlie had been quick to separate himself from our family council, and had busied himself with rolling empty slop buckets off the truck bed.

"What're you gonna do about *him!*" Perel cried, throwing one last stone at Sheiye.

"Gey avek!" Papa warned Perel and me. "Beat it!" As Papa saw it, Duchess's death was a regrettable but trivial episode, no matter how it had come about. And with chickens waiting to be fed, now was no time to press for judgment. It was useless to argue. Perel and I stormed off to the house, screaming that nobody's parents were as unfair as ours. I did not fail to notice Mama's embarrassment as she contemplated some way to hide her children's latest brawl from Charlie.

Even before we reached the front door, I felt something steam up through my fury. It was a recollection of my mother responding to a question I had once asked: "What people do you hate?" "I don't hate people," she had answered. "I only hate murderers." How did that jibe with her present indifference to Duchess's death? Moreover, I knew my parents would not subject Sheiye's crime to scrutiny. Mama and Papa did not brood openly about alternatives; they did not suffer for hours on end before choosing a course of action. So I wondered if their dismissive attitude boiled down to a matter of necessity: Could Sheiye get away with murder because he was indispensable to the farm? Or was one more dead animal on a chicken farm a big to-do over nothing? I only knew that if Mama and Papa had wanted to punish Sheiye, they would have done it at once.

Our appeals to justice exhausted, Perel and I tore out of the kitchen, back to the driveway. Mama was taking dry laundry off the clothesline; Papa had stalked off to the left-field coop. Unbeknownst to us, Sheiye had parked the truck under the maple tree, dismantling the scene of the crime. Meanwhile, Charlie still labored at shoveling the dog's body into a bucket. As my sister and I ran past, I was struck by the blur of sweat from his armpit to his lower back. The absence of a like stain on his other side gave Charlie an asymmetrical look.

We heard Sheiye fiddling around with wrenches or screwdrivers in the coop feedroom, a place about which Perel and I were superstitious. A few years earlier, she, Sheiye, and I had sealed four live baby chicks in an empty Danish cookie tin, which we then abandoned on a rafter beam. A year or two later, when my sister and I worked up enough courage to open the tin, we found nothing inside, not even dust. Sheiye swore that he had never freed the baby chicks, and explained that bacteria had worn them down to nothing. "You and Perel killed them," he accused when we questioned him. Even though Sheiye had shared in our experiment, we accepted his accusation. I thought the feedroom was a fitting place for him to hide out, for now our brother could throw this old crime up in our faces.

"I hope you're looking for a shovel," Perel laid into Sheiye. "'Cause you're gonna bury Duchess."

"Sure you don't wanna do the honors, little girls?" Sheiye asked. "You have a knack for burying things, eh? I guess we're one for one now." He picked up a ratchet and flicked an index finger against the wheel.

"I didn't know we were in a contest," Perel snapped, the closest she would come to acknowledging the baby chicks.

Sheiye held the ratchet up to an eye, studying the tool as if it, not Duchess, were the reason for this confrontation. "Accidents happen," he said, giving the wheel another twirl. "But you little girls wouldn't know anything about accidents, would you?"

"Only turds know about accidents," I said. The fact is, Sheiye had reason on his side, tendentious though it was, and now only crude insults could bail Perel and me out.

"Well," Sheiye said, sure of victory, "I'll bury your dog for you. But you've gotta come along and watch."

Perel and I stared at Sheiye, speechless. By now I was less

repelled by Duchess's death than by Sheiye's attempt at intimacy. It always surfaced when least expected. As a rule, Sheiye picked fights with us—dragged us by our legs around the backyard, chucked rusted railroad ties at our heads. Inevitably, though, his overtures towards us turned friendly, and out of nowhere he suggested some outing together. This current one stunned me. Perel and I protested with some obligatory curses that Sheiye should burn in hell forever, but truthfully, his ultimatum was as tempting as a bribe. For one thing, Sheiye's willingness to bury Duchess was an implicit admission of his guilt; for another, we were curious about the burial of an animal in the earth.

Spade balanced on his shoulder, Sheiye ran up the dirt path to intercept Charlie, who walked slowly towards the manure heap, where Papa had ordered him to dump Duchess. Racing into the funeral procession from the field, Bolero frolicked around the slop bucket, undistressed by his mother's corpse.

Charlie turned back, and Sheiye, Perel, and I continued on to a weedy grove of trees beyond the left-field coop. Once we came to a stop, flies swarmed around Duchess's body. My sister and I swatted at them while Sheiye dug the grave. None of us spoke, not out of discomfort with each other or out of deference to Duchess, but because this unexpected gathering had a somber air of ceremony about it. When the hole was finished, I did not want to put the body in the ground. She'll get sandy, I thought, as if that mattered. I spied a torn page of the *National Enquirer* caught in some nettles, the lead story about a woman who had given birth to two hundred and fifty children. Before Sheiye dumped Duchess into the grave, I lined it with the newspaper. In a few days, I thought, I could dig her up and add more newspaper to stave off further decay. Oddly, by the time Sheiye packed the loose dirt down with

his sneaker, I was thinking no longer about Duchess but of that erratic ray of sweat down Charlie's shirt.

That night, I stroked the land between my thighs to punish God. I didn't know why cruelty should reign in my family, but it did. That night, the world's evil was centered in Sheiye. We were a family of survivors—all of us, not just my parents. I viewed us as survivors of evil. That made us good, didn't it? But what was wrong with Sheiye? I saw the look in his eye in the rearview mirror when he floored the pedal. He was bedazzled; the possibility of someone else's death excited him. He was beckoning a repeat of my parents' past, but twenty-five years later, he wanted to play the role of executioner. I thought of him across the hall in his bedroom. I bet he slept well.

In the morning, I remembered a dream. My arm was draped around the pimply shoulders of a fat anti-Semite named Kurt Harvey. Though repelled by his obesity, all I wanted was to sink my fingers into the ply of his belly. Together we lived in the ramshackle doghouse of Rocky, long dead, where Sheiye had once spent the night for not helping my parents in the slaughterhouse. With Kurt Harvey, I was fearless, not because I ambled side by side with my enemy, but because I had been transformed: I had no concept of fear. To imitate cowardice, I pretended to hide behind the left-field coop, where oversized ants crawled beneath rocks and rats heavy with chicken flesh waddled over rotted lumber. Still asleep, I saw the white light of a crystal chandelier the size of a sputnik that Kurt Harvey had installed in our doghouse. When I woke up, I knew it would be a long time before I would ever see incandescence made tangible again.