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Arrival

The summer when I was thirteen years old changed everything for me. Looking back on it now, I can fill in the gaps with what I learned later, but at the time it seemed like a story unto itself, and that is the way I want to tell it. When I got back to school in September, I thought to myself, "I've been through hell this past month, and not one of you knows a goddamn thing about it." I'd picked up swearing that summer, but it wasn't the worst thing I had picked up, and it wasn't the most lasting. What I like to remember best are the mornings in Uncle Kurt's room when he would regale me with tales of the war. But what I remember most vividly is a bright patch of flames surrounding something so horrible I couldn't bear to look at it. That comes at the end. I will take my time getting there.

It began on a train. My mother and I were traveling up to Maine from New York at the beginning of June, riding a series of day trains. I always hoped uselessly for one long ride on a sleeper, but the view through the windows still offered plenty of fodder for my imagination. At thirteen I was short, stocky, and brown-haired. My round face refused to lengthen into manliness, though my mother claimed she could see cheekbones; to me it seemed unpleasantly chubby. My limbs were only just beginning to replace baby fat with muscle. The combination made me appear bulky but tough, and I had withstood much friendly roughhousing from bigger boys at school. My eyes were too small, and one limp frond of hair drooped over them and tickled my nose. My aunts told me I had a cherubic smile.

I spent nearly the entire trip from New York to Maine in a state of euphoria. My mother and I were traveling alone. My father was staying in New York and planned to remain there for the rest of the summer, a situation that only my mother pretended to object to. He was a stern, humorless lawyer; I was frightened of him and didn't like being near him. Now, years later, I feel the same way, though for different reasons. At the time his death-grip on life unnerved me, and now that death is coming to grip him instead, I prefer not to stand in its way. My mother, however, was an angel. She let me sit on my own, stationing herself several rows behind me, and as I looked out the window I imagined myself an explorer heading into the unknown, either on the back of an elephant or at the bow of a steamship as the mood struck me. For some reason being on a train, exciting as these vehicles were whenever I wasn't riding in one, never seemed thrilling enough from the inside.

We were headed up to Shorecliff. It was the old family place; not the Killing family—that murderous surname had been given to me by my father—but the Hatfield family, my mother's clan. My mother had four sisters and, originally, two brothers. All but one of the sisters had children, and all of the families were coming for the summer. It was the first time we had all gathered in one place for an extended period. My Aunt Rose had put her foot down some months before and said that the fact that we had never before spent time at Shorecliff as a complete, united family was a crime. This summer, she announced, was the perfect opportunity to remedy the situation. Her sisters agreed. With varying amounts of difficulty, they convinced the men involved that fighting the combined forces of the Hatfield women would be futile once they had decided on a course of action. As a result, here we were.

I had traveled to Shorecliff many times before—my mother took me up for a week or two every summer—but we were often the only visitors, and I had never encountered more than a few family members at a time there. Now the thought of months with all of my cousins and aunts and uncles made bursts of pleasure explode in my stomach. I, Richard Killing II, had no brothers or sisters. My father approved of one son and heir, no more and no less. But I had inherited my mother's love of large families, and since I had no other option, I adopted my cousins as members of my immediate family. The fact that I rarely saw them, and that they were all older than I was, didn't stop me. Depending on my mood, I was either the hero or the chronicler of my family. Their exploits, created by my own fancy for the most part, filled my imagination year in and year out, at school, at home, and most of all when I was trapped in my father's study.

The personages of the sprawling Hatfield family will drift into the story as they please, but I must mention Uncle Kurt now, before the others appear. Uncle Kurt was my mother's only surviving brother. Harold had been killed in the Great War, but Kurt had returned home swathed in laurels. He had been a private, a sailor, an ambulance driver, a pilot… It was a mystery to me how he managed to cover so many branches of the U.S. military, but I could not believe that he made up all the stories for my benefit. Some of them, maybe, but surely not all of the hundreds he spun for me that summer.

Uncle Kurt was tall and handsome, with brown hair slicked back in the soldier's fashion and an upright posture that put my stubby figure to shame. I remember him in khaki; whether or not he really wore it I can't say, since my youthful imagination surrounded him with the splendor of war. What is certain, however, is that he was exciting and lighthearted and unfailingly kind to me. He was by far the friendliest male I had ever encountered. I adored him

without reservation, and on the rare occasions when I saw him, I followed him around like a puppy. My mother claimed that Uncle Kurt lived like a mallard duck, gliding through life and letting all its miseries slide off his back. Before that summer at Shorecliff, I thought so too.

The train ride was long, so long that after we changed in Boston my excitement wore off, leaving a dull residue that threatened to turn into disappointment before we had even arrived. I tried to keep my anticipation alive, but eventually I moved back to sit next to my mother and went to sleep, soaking up her reassurance without speaking. We arrived at last in the evening, after a final change in Portland onto a tiny local train, and I woke up to my mother pointing out the window.

"There's Aunt Margery with the car," she said.

Margery Wight was one of her many sisters, and the most important thing about her, as far as I was concerned, was that she had a daughter, Pamela. Pamela and I felt an automatic affinity because we were the closest to each other in age. She was thirteen that summer too, due to turn fourteen in September. I had turned thirteen in May, and therefore, though I thought of her as being my own age, she thought of me as being nearly a year younger than she was. Usually she didn't let the gap interfere with our friendship, however. I was grateful to her for being the one person in the family I could justifiably call a playmate. She had two older brothers, both objects of fascination for me, and an older sister, Yvette, with whom she shared a bedroom at Shorecliff.

Pamela had come with Aunt Margery to pick us up in the old black rattletrap that was the only means to get to Shorecliff. Pensbottom, the nearest town with a railway station, was a shabby, boring, colorless place, miles inland from the coast. I remember almost nothing about it. Uncle Harold had once said that the town was as obscene as its name, and since the statement had quickly become a family legend, we tried to spend as little time as possible within the town's boundaries. Shorecliff was a half-hour drive from the station, well away from Pensbottom's obscenity and cleansed by the sharp air that blew in off the ocean.

My mother and I stepped off the train, and Margery, a heavy, full-figured woman, thudded forward to embrace my mother with a cry of "Caroline!" that made the other people on the platform turn their heads. Margery had been blessed with an enormous bust, and the men in the family joked that she had kept it all to herself. The other sisters were thin and agile, built like fine china

and so flat-chested that the low-slung dresses of the era made them look like boys. My mother, I had always been proud to note, either possessed a more womanly figure or else dressed well enough to seem more feminine than most of her sisters did. However she did it, she looked like a proper woman. Aunt Margery, in contrast, needed no help at all. She crowded the rest of her sisters out. Each year I looked expectantly at Pamela's upper body, waiting for her to follow suit, but she remained as obstinately flat as all the other women in the family.

She was standing by the car. While Aunt Margery smothered me with her bosom, I craned my neck to see the slim figure leaning against the rattletrap's door. Pamela was wearing a blue dress, reminiscent of a sailor suit, and her blond hair was pulled back with a ribbon on top and flowed halfway down her back. She claimed it was boring, but in the sunlight aureoles of gold would form around the ribbon. I loved to walk behind her and marvel at how round and luminous her head was. The day we arrived was cloudy, but I could see even from within Aunt Margery's embrace that Pamela's hair was glinting with light from somewhere.

Her greeting was notably less effusive than her mother's had been. "Hello," she said, moving away from the door.

"Hello," I said.

Aunt Margery opened the back door for us—the front seat was taken up with Shorecliff's weekly food supply—and we got in, Mother first, then me, then Pamela. Pamela looked out the window for most of the trip. Her habit of remaining silent and keeping her gray eyes averted always puzzled me—I could never decide whether the silence masked deep thought or mere serenity. Sometimes I suspected awkwardness, but if that was the case she veiled it masterfully. Whatever its cause, her reserve made her a perfect listener. I could talk at her for hours, and she would sit quietly, nodding at times and wandering over my face with her big, solemn eyes. When I finished she would decline to give me a single word of advice. If I was lucky, I might get an opinion. Needless to say, she sometimes exasperated me, but for the most part her quietness was well suited to fascinating an impetuous, imaginative boy like me, who rarely had anyone with whom I could share my innumerable ideas.

Pamela said nothing on the car ride, but Aunt Margery talked incessantly from the driver's seat. "Everyone else is already here. You two are the last to arrive except for Tom, who's still down at Harvard. He's going to join us after the seventh. I heard, you know"—here she turned around and attempted to speak

over the seat, the car swerving—"that he barely made it through his first year. Naturally Rose is keeping quiet. She always was closemouthed about her children, which I think is unnatural when you're talking to your own sister. But that's what Isabella said, and if she doesn't know the truth about her brother, who will? The other children are here, and the men have already gone off on a hunting trip. Thank the Lord we women get at least part of the summer to ourselves! If you can say 'ourselves' when we're stuck with all the children in a lunatic house—that's what Edie calls it. Just imagine, we counted it all up last night: with you here now, we'll have nineteen people in the house! When Tom comes it'll be twenty. It's beyond me how Charlie has no trouble being where his father and I want him to be, while Tom is always causing a fuss. He's inherited Rose's stubbornness if you ask me."

Aunt Margery had a knack for talking rubbish that only avoided being intolerably boring by referring constantly to people we knew. Any news of the cousins was nectar to me, and Tom's exploits at college rose before me full of potential, though in fact I never heard anything about them. On she talked, on we drove, and within half an hour we were approaching the towering white front of Shorecliff.

The house itself was a massive clapboarded box, with a little box built off of one side that contained the kitchen, a morning room, and some closets. The big box contained everything else—bedroom after bedroom, parlor after parlor, a library, a study, a dining room. It was a gargantuan mansion that had ceased moving forward in time at some point before the turn of the century, and I loved every inch of it. My favorite places were the telephone booth in the front hall and my little bedroom in the attic. We had no servants, the Hatfield money having been lost long before I was born. But the advantage of this was an array of bedrooms in the attic that had been fobbed off on us children. I had the last one, the original nesting place of the under-kitchen maid, no doubt. It was small, dark, musty, and cramped, but I had it all to myself, which was more than most of the other cousins could say.

Outside Shorecliff, at its front and sides, was a large, open expanse of grass. We all pretended it was a rolling lawn, but since the cliff for which the house was named dropped to the ocean only forty yards north of the building, the grass on the supposed lawn was salty and sea bitten, more dune grass than lawn grass. It cut our feet raw when we first came, but by the end of the summer those of us who had persevered in running barefoot had developed calluses able to withstand, for a few moments at least, the heat of a campfire.

There was nothing else around Shorecliff. The road stopped twenty feet from the front door, and a stretch of split-rail fence marked its end. I never understood that fence. It had perhaps five or six posts in all, and it kept nothing out and nothing in. There was no conceivable purpose to it, but it served as an excellent lookout post and climbing site. Away to the west, following the meandering line of the coast, was a stretch of woods, and if you walked through it for twenty minutes, you would pass first a little cottage and then the boundary of our property. Beyond the woods came civilization in the form of hayfields and cow barns. To the east of Shorecliff, after ten minutes' walk through brambles and blueberries, came the shore again—more inviting, though still rocky and wave-battered, and the place where we did all our swimming. Shorecliff was truly a desolate place, a long way from any policeman, any doctor, any prying eye or gossiping mouth.

I saw the house first, over Pamela's shoulder, and shouted with joy. All the enthusiasm in me that had expired on the train rose to life again. "There it is!" I cried. "I see it! We're here, Mother, we're really here!"

"Isn't it wonderful," sighed my mother.

"I saw it before you, didn't I, Pamela? You weren't watching for it, were you?"

"But I'd seen it before, Richard."

"Before me right now?"

Pamela did not respond.

That was a typical conversation between us. I was an irritating little boy—at least my father often said so. On the other hand, Pamela was infernally silent. She had no sense of debate.

Because my grandfather's funds had run out before a carriage house for Shorecliff could be built, the rattletrap lived in a cleared patch of dirt at the end of the road. Rain pelted it, snow covered it, heat warmed it, cold cracked it. It was miraculous that it hadn't fallen apart completely, that it still chugged its way successfully down the long, lonely road to Pensbottom and came back loaded with the week's supplies every Monday afternoon, year after year. My mother told me that she remembered her father buying the car when she was a girl, as a last extravagance after the family fortune had been lost. Despite endless questions on my part, she remained vague on the details of this catastrophe, but she loved telling me about the sunnier aspects of her youth.

She said that when her father had bought the rattletrap in 1908, it had been a gleaming new automobile, the first Model T in Maine, a marvel in its time. The only reason no one had sold it later to pay the family's debts was that her father had put his foot down. "I won't let any of you touch it," he said. "It's for the girls to ride in and the boys to drive. We can't afford a horse and carriage now to replace it—it's all we have. And God knows anyone who arrives at Shorecliff wants to be sure there's a way to escape."

The walk from the car to the house was heaven. I was carrying all my own luggage—a suitcase, a valise full of adventure stories, and a telescope. Pamela and Aunt Margery helped Mother with the other things. I ran ahead. Shorecliff soared above me, the white walls like the stones girding a castle. The paint on the clapboards was peeling, and I indulged the urge many a time to chip away at it with my fingernails. Beneath it the wood was hard and knotty. I often contemplated it, thinking how many storms it had survived. The door opened, and that achingly familiar smell wafted out at me. For a moment my excitement blossomed into a delightful pain. Here I was…

The hall was dark because umbrella stands and heaped coats always obscured the strips of windows on either side of the door. I flung down my suitcase, books, and telescope and ran through the archway to the left into the main parlor—another dark, little-used room. Considering our numbers, it was strange that we lived so determinedly in the back of the house where the kitchen was. I jogged through the parlor without a glance; the furniture might as well have been shrouded in dustsheets. Onward to the addition, airy and light when the rest of the house was swamped in darkness.

Crossing the morning room (majestic in name only—it was an empty anteroom signaling the beginning of the lived-in portion of the house), I heard raised voices from the kitchen. A second later came a cry of impatience, unmistakably issuing from the lungs of Francesca Ybarra. We had arrived in time for an argument.

In fact, as my mother said later, battle royal was raging in the kitchen. The aunts sat at the table, and lined on either side of them, leaning on the stove, kicking the chairs, were my illustrious cousins. They had been separated by sex—I didn't know why. Three boys glowered by the left wall; five girls fumed by the right. It was an overwhelming array, and I realized that it had been well over a year since I had seen most of them. Even the ones I most often encountered, the Wights, had grown older and more distant, and the mysterious Ybarras and Robierres were so different from the way I had remembered them as to be almost unrecognizable.

Pamela, when she came in a few minutes later, hovered in the doorway as I did. We were too young to be in on the feud, but we were old enough to listen to it with our hearts thumping and our eyes shining. With a beginning so dramatic, the summer could not fail to be as thrilling as I had imagined.

“It’s too much!” Francesca was saying. Francesca was the daughter of Aunt Loretta, the wild one of my mother’s generation who had married a Spanish fugitive named Rodrigo Ybarra. We never learned how he had earned the title of fugitive, only that he had been running from the Spanish law. He and Loretta were married in Paris and lived there until Rodrigo died in a train accident during the war. Their youngest child, Cordelia, had been only five years old at the time. Loretta had moved back to America when the war ended, the wildness apparently crushed out of her. She brought three dark-haired, fiery children with her. It was impossible not to place them highest in my ranks of fascination, and Francesca, twenty-one years old, with cascades of nearly black hair and dark, glowing eyes, had the power to fell me with a single glance. When I entered the room she was stamping her foot, her hands clenched and her fine eyebrows drawn low over her eyes. Francesca in a rage was a sight to see.

“It’s too much!” she was saying. “We’re stuck in this godforsaken dump all summer like sardines in a can. There’s no one to see and no place to go. And now we’re not even allowed to drive into town. How do you expect us to live?”

The argument, I quickly divined, was about driving rights and the rattletrap. Thus far the adults had had sole use of the automobile. My grandfather’s decree that the women would ride and the men would drive had been broken the day after he died, but I’m sure he would have been pleased at the strictness with which the next generation was kept from the steering wheel.

“Even if Francesca can’t drive it,” my cousin Charlie said, “there’s no reason why I can’t, and Tom too when he gets here.” Charlie was the oldest of the Wight children. A more different family from the Ybarra clan could not be imagined. Aunt Margery had married Frank Wight, a carpenter from upstate New York, and their four children were all blond and blue-eyed. Their two sons, Charlie and Fisher, had been raised in their father’s workshop, and each was handy with an ax and ingenious with a chisel. Charlie was twenty and muscular and exhibited his father’s red-faced shortness of breath, though in all other respects he was handsome. After two years at Cornell he had earned his stripes on the college football team, but what interested me far more was that some months earlier I had overheard his mother telling mine that Charlie

“could never turn down a dare.” This, I thought, heralded great things for the summer.

Charlie’s three siblings were all slender and graceful—mysterious attributes when one looked at their parents, though the Hatfields traditionally run thin. Eighteen-year-old Yvette, a pale and lofty girl I rarely had the courage to speak to, came after Charlie. Fisher, at sixteen, was equally skinny and sprite-like. He liked his father’s workshop, but he preferred to carve intricate scenes in blocks of wood while Uncle Frank taught Charlie the rudiments of furniture-building. Fisher went around perpetually in a dream, but the dream did not prevent him from picking up details with his misty blue eyes. Like Pamela, the youngest of the four, he soaked up information with quiet astuteness.

“None of you will be driving anywhere,” Aunt Rose declared. She was the oldest aunt, with the voice of a general and a demeanor to match.

Aunt Margery added, “Don’t you understand it’s not safe? Uncle Kurt has had years of practice, and I learned from him.”

“Safety be damned,” Aunt Loretta growled. The one trace of wildness that remained in her was a tendency to swear, and her deep, sultry voice slid into a sailor’s bark when she was angry. “It’s not a matter of whether they’re able to drive the thing—it’s whether they’re allowed. And they’re not. Francesca, you can stamp all you like, but rules are rules. You’re here for the summer, and you might as well enjoy it.”

“You realize we’ve got nothing to do,” said Francesca. She pressed herself against the wall, drawing herself up to her full, glorious height. Masses of dark hair curled out around her head. “We’re stuck here on top of each other. You all think of it as a fine holiday. You can chatter with each other all day, and the little ones, well”—she tossed us a look of contempt—“they’ll be satisfied with anything. But we older ones, what are we supposed to do? We’re a million miles from civilization. All we have is each other. Do you expect us to stand here for the next three months staring each other down?”

There was a moment of silence, during which Francesca fixed her gaze on the aunts and the rest of the cousins followed her lead.

Then my Aunt Edie entered the fray. Edie was the maiden aunt of the family, and she lived the part with a vengeance. She was angular, bony, and long-nosed. Her black hair, parted down the middle, was always knotted at the back of her head. None of us had any difficulty understanding why she had never

married—no man in his right mind would come within ten yards of her. She had no mercy, her morals were lifted from Victorian guides to proper etiquette, and she saw the worst in everybody and everything. But the sheer force of her will made her remarks carry weight in family discussions.

Now she looked down her nose at the three boys—Charlie, Fisher, and Francesca's brother, Philip, who was eighteen, black-haired, and invariably aloof. Then she examined the five girls—Francesca, Yvette, Tom's sister Isabella, and the two Delias, whose story must be saved for later. Even Pamela and I were not exempt from Aunt Edie's scathing glance; for an instant her nose pointed at us, and we felt the impact of an unknown accusation. Then she made her proclamation. "This house," she said, "is primed for incest."

Incest. What did it mean? I had never heard the word before. Even in my ignorance, though, I sensed a scandalous undertone. The rest of the family—with the exception of Pamela, who also didn't know what it meant—dissolved into laughter. Without meaning to, Aunt Edie had ended the fight. There were a few minutes of hilarity, in which I saw Francesca raise her eyebrows at Charlie with an expression that combined humor, disdain, and mocking salaciousness. Aunt Edie caught the last of it and shouted, "Heathens!" which redoubled my cousins' laughter.

My mother, who had come in for the last of the argument, laughed with the rest of them and then sent me up to my room with my luggage. The other mothers shooed their children off too. They wanted a chance to discuss the situation among themselves before dinner. I went upstairs with my bags, lagging behind the others. We passed straight through the second floor, the forbidden kingdom of adult sleeping quarters. Each of the seven bedrooms there housed an adult or two. As the oldest cousin, Francesca had demanded a room on the second floor. It alarmed me to think that she could now be counted as an adult—it made her seem capable of anything.

Philip lived in the room next to mine on the third floor. For the moment he was alone, since his roommate, Tom, had yet to arrive. Though they were both eighteen, Philip had not yet started college. I didn't understand why, and no one ever bothered to explain it to me. When I passed his room he called to me from inside, and obediently I barged in, my valise of books banging against the doorframe.

"How are you, midget?" he said, looking me over.

Philip seemed the most Spanish of the Ybarras, and I imagined Rodrigo as an older version of him. He wore his black hair slicked back from his forehead, and he had low eyebrows and dark, glowing eyes like Francesca's. He read constantly, but whereas I devoured boys' adventure novels, he read philosophy and incendiary texts. There was a hint of secrecy in all his actions that I admired and appreciated—he once told me that he thought of himself as an anarchist. This meant he had little time for humor, but if you caught him in an off moment, he could be friendly in a biting sort of way.

"What does 'incest' mean?" I asked him.

Philip let out a burst of laughter. "You want to join the fun, do you?"

"I just want to know what it means."

"Well, it means a lot of old busybodies clucking over other people's business. That's what it ends up meaning anyway."

I dropped my bags on the floor and dug through the valise for my dictionary. In a way this was my most precious book, since without it I wouldn't have been able to understand half of what my family members said. It was an ancient, beat-up volume that my mother had given to me long ago. When I looked up "incest," I found "indecent relations between blood-relatives."

"My God, how old is that thing?" Philip said. "It's a lie anyway. Sisters and brothers, my friend. That's the only thing that counts. All of us cousins—we're safe. So you don't have to worry."

"Don't have to worry about what?"

"Indecent relations," he said, grinning.

"Which doesn't he have to worry about?" said another voice at the door. It was Yvette Wight. She reminded me of a ghost: her hair was much whiter than her siblings', more of an ash-blond than a gold, and her lips and eyes were equally washed out. She moved to fit her appearance, gliding from room to room without any noise. One of her favorite occupations was interrupting conversations in this fashion. "Should he not worry about the indecency, or the relations?" she asked.

"Why, Yvette, what are you suggesting?" Philip said. He lay back on his bed and lounged, and there was something challenging in his attitude.

“I’m not suggesting anything. I was just wondering which you meant.”

“Well, which would you have meant?”

“Neither,” she sniffed. “I’ve read *Mansfield Park*. Besides, we didn’t grow up with each other. I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

Philip sat upright. “Yvette!” he exclaimed. He was still joking, but I heard a note of surprise in his voice. “That’s practically a proposition!”

“Don’t be stupid, Philip,” she said. She glided away, and I retired to my own bedroom. It had been a typical conversation between cousins, a tossing sea on which I strove to keep afloat. I had no idea what they were talking about, and probably they didn’t either. All of them enjoyed throwing the ball of innuendo around their circle, keeping it aloft for as long as possible. I stood outside the group, watching and listening. The first thing I did in my room was look up “proposition.” The dictionary defined it as “a suggestion or proposal,” which didn’t help at all.

The idea of a web of attractions between relatives was less shocking than it might have been to my Hatfield cousins because, as Yvette had pointed out, we hadn’t grown up together. I saw Pamela regularly because my mother was closest with Aunt Margery, and she believed that Pamela was a good playmate for me. But even so we spent time with each other only two or three times a year, when our two families visited Shorecliff or when the Wights came down to New York City. Most of the year they lived in upstate New York, in Uncle Frank’s hometown. The Ybarras lived near us in Manhattan, the original home of the vast Hatfield tribe, but we never visited them, and my mother once unwisely let slip that this was because my father disliked them, thereby confirming my theory that he had not a scrap of human feeling in him. Tom’s family, the Robierre clan, lived in Boston so that his father, Cedric, a professor of paleontology, could be close to Harvard. Uncle Kurt moved around the country at will—at least that’s how it seemed to me. Aunt Edie lived in Saratoga Springs, plaguing the nearby Wights. I never knew where my Great-Uncle Eberhardt resided when he wasn’t stalking around Shorecliff like an enormous predatory bat. I suspect New York. At any rate, the various branches of the family rarely saw each other, and for the older cousins it must have seemed as if they had been locked for the summer in a cage of strangers—the kind of long-known stranger one can rely on as a lifetime fixture without really understanding at all.

There came now an inevitable letdown. I sat on my bed and thought, “What now?” There was still half an hour before dinner. My clothes were unpacked, my books lined up on the desk tucked into the gabled window. My telescope lay on the table next to my bed. I had made all conceivable preparations, and now I had to find something to have prepared for. From down the hall I heard the rise and fall of cousinly voices. That sound, as steady as the ocean crashing against the cliff, formed the background of my summer at Shorecliff. Always around the corner, up the stairs, in the distance, those voices sparred and tangled, speaking of things I half understood and yearned to know more of. It took excruciating courage to approach them, to appear in the doorway of whichever bedroom or alcove the group had chosen as a headquarters.

This time they were in the room occupied by Isabella Robierre. All of them were there except Yvette, Pamela, and Philip—the Wight girls had a way of making themselves scarce, and Philip generally disliked group discussions. The others had piled onto the two beds—Isabella, like me, had a room to herself, but hers had been furnished to house two people, and the spare bed served as a useful lounging place. Together the cousins formed a physical barrier as intimidating as their conversation. When I appeared before them, the talk died and they all looked at me. The pressure from those six pairs of eyes! They seemed twice as many. Then Isabella extricated herself from the pile and swooped down on me.

Isabella. She was the one cousin to whom no description of mine could do justice. All the others could be categorized in one way or another: Philip the revolutionary, Charlie the athlete, Francesca the blazing beauty, Tom the student, Fisher the dreamer, the two Delias identifiable in tandem. Isabella was not like the others. She was not as beautiful as Francesca nor as graceful as Yvette. She could be awkward and blunt. Sometimes she didn’t know what to say. But there was an energy in her that surpassed all the others, an openness, an abandon. She was the only cousin who had ever hugged me and tousled me and tossed me around, and I had loved every minute of it—which made it all the more crushing this summer when she flung herself toward me, took in at a glance how much older I had grown since our last meeting, and stumbled to a halt with her hands still open, trying too late to pretend that there was no awkwardness in her movements. She felt, I suppose, that I was too old now to be cuddled, that I was no longer a child—though I wouldn’t have minded. I would have relished the contact.

That summer, at seventeen, Isabella was recovering from a recent growth spurt and moved like a baby giraffe, all long legs and spindly arms. She was not as tall as Francesca, but she was taller than most of us, and her body was

especially noticeable because it was so gangly. She had light brown hair, as all the Robierres did. It was straight and uninteresting, and she tied it back at the nape of her neck, letting a few wisps frame her face. Her hands and feet often gestured in unexpected directions, demanding to be noticed. Whenever the cousins were in a group, the two who stood out irresistibly were Isabella and Francesca.

Isabella stood in front of me now, not touching me but grinning her goofy, all-consuming grin. “Look at our Richard!” she cried.

I stared back at her, smiling like an imbecile.

“Don’t make such a song and dance.” Charlie yawned. “He won’t know how we should entertain ourselves any more than we do.”

Isabella laughed and beckoned me to the foot of her bed. I sat next to her and remembered how she used to hold me in her lap, even when I weighed nearly as much as she did. Now it seemed that not only her lap but all parts of her body were forbidden territory. I pondered this change, trying to ignore the snooty looks I kept receiving from the two Delias, who were seated on the other bed and clearly thought I should be kept from the room.

The two Delias’ story shows the Hatfield tendency to create feuds out of thin air. When Aunt Rose and Aunt Loretta were pregnant with their last children, they got into a discussion of baby names. Rose had gone over to Paris to visit Loretta, who was still living there with Rodrigo. The two sisters’ relationship was uneasy at best. Rose had raised the loudest cry against Rodrigo, and Loretta had always objected vociferously to Rose’s high-handed control over the Hatfield family. Yet in many ways they were the most similar of the Hatfield sisters. They didn’t like to admit it, but when they were together and managed to avoid fighting, they often laughed louder and harder than with anyone else.

The question of baby names was a serious one with the Hatfields. A host of preferences and responsibilities had to be taken into account, and it was only with these two last children that Rose and Loretta finally felt they had free rein. Loretta had taken care of Rodrigo’s requirements with Francesca and Philip. For Rose, Tom had been my grandfather’s name, and Isabella was the name of Cedric’s favorite sister. Now a clear horizon lay before them. The two women drank their tea, ate their croissants, patted their stomachs, and tossed names back and forth. Loretta suggested Delia. Rose glommed onto it like a

snake snatching its prey—at least that is Loretta's version of the story. Rose herself claims she thought of it first, but none of us has ever believed her.

"I love it," she said. "I want that one. It's mine."

"I came up with it!" Loretta protested.

But Rose refused to back down. The talk developed into an argument and then an out-and-out fight. At last Rose flounced off and soon after returned to America, swearing that she would send the government a birth certificate first. That was exactly how it came about. Alas for Loretta, though she was due first, Rose gave birth prematurely (deliberately, Loretta claimed) and chose the name Delia while crowing in triumph. Two weeks later Loretta gave birth to her own baby and lay there in the Paris hospital bed, arguing with Rodrigo over the morals of also naming their daughter Delia. Rodrigo disapproved of sibling rivalry. At last Loretta said, "*Cor*delia then," and lay back exhausted on the pillows. From that point on the second Delia's name was always pronounced in that strange way, with the emphasis on the first syllable, for no one ever used her full first name except to distinguish her from the other Delia. Loretta rejected Cordie as a nickname, and so, despite Rose's exaggerated shock, the Hatfield family contained two Delias.

At fifteen, the Delias were inseparable. They had clung to each other from the first moment they met, and different though they were, we thought of them as a pair. Delia Robierre had light brown hair cut in a bob. She was stocky and freckly—more so than either Tom or Isabella—and easily pleased, with an infectious giggle that rang through the house. Delia Ybarra was destined to be nearly as great a beauty as Francesca. She had black curly hair as short as a boy's, a swanlike neck, snapping black eyes, tiny feet. There was more mischief in her than in Delia Robierre, though she presented a more serious front. Combined, they were a dangerous formula, not least because, as nearly the youngest cousins, they were constantly trying to prove themselves. I thought the two Delias owed Pamela and me a debt of gratitude—it was only because we were there to be excluded that they were allowed in on the colloquies of the older cousins. They knew this, but for them it required resentment rather than gratitude, so I avoided them as much as possible. In any case, they were small fry. Neither of them counted in comparison with the glorious older cousins.

I don't remember what they were all saying at that first meeting. Francesca was probably leading them in declarations of discontent. Coming from Manhattan where, according to Philip, young men often lined up outside the Ybarra residence to see her and where Aunt Loretta—despite raised eyebrows

from the more cautious mothers in their set—let her gallivant through the streets with these eager escorts until after midnight, Francesca undoubtedly thought of Shorecliff as a desert wasteland. Her aunts said she was spoiled and, believing in education for girls as well as boys, frequently asked why she had not gone to college. But Loretta was skeptical of the value of a formal education, and she was proud, besides, of her own adventurous past. The lessons of real life, she was fond of saying, taught more than any college professor could imagine. When Francesca refused flat-out to consider Barnard or any other college, Loretta accepted her refusal without a murmur, and she stood by that decision in spite of the fact that Yvette was bound for Bryn Mawr in the fall and Isabella had been looking forward to Radcliffe since she was ten years old. Francesca defiantly took the route of the debutante, and though Loretta could barely afford her evening gowns, let alone the expense of hosting parties, she helped Francesca hide the difference between our Hatfield shabbiness and the fortunes of the New York elite. When her sisters remonstrated with her, Loretta said that she refused to deprive Francesca of the thrill of youth simply because of a lack of money.

Given the dazzling whirl she had been forced to abandon for the summer, it was hardly surprising that from the beginning, at Shorecliff, Francesca was determined not to enjoy herself except by means of rebellion. But that did not mean that she sulked or snapped or made life miserable. On the contrary, though she painted the summerhouse as a prison, she made it come to life for all of us.

Eventually, that first evening, she indicated that the audience was over, and we all filed out, in spite of the fact that the meeting had taken place in Isabella's room—Francesca instantly became queen of any room she entered. We were bunched up at the door, and I looked back to find Francesca nodding knowingly on Isabella's bed. "Wait until Tom comes," she said, half closing her eyes. "Then you'll see. Wait for Tom."

Wait for Tom was exactly what we did. He didn't come for a week, and during that week two events of importance occurred. The first was that Aunt Loretta left. The announcement was made on the second night, when we were all crowded around the long table in the dining room, a room used only once a day for our immense dinners. When Loretta said, "I'm going to return to New York tomorrow," I was baffled. She was prone to these sudden moves—apparently it was one such move that had taken her to Europe in the first place. Even so, the adults were clearly as mystified as we were. There was some talk about business needing to be taken care of, a financial situation

gone awry, but that seemed insufficient reason for her to abandon our precious summer vacation.

Only her own children were unaffected by the news. Francesca gave her mother a look I found hard to identify; it was a strange, stony glance that seemed to combine resentment with empathy. Of course, I was always on the alert where my older cousins were concerned, and I was particularly alive to Francesca's expressions. To me she was a prophetess for nearly all of that summer, and I might have endowed her face with more subtlety than it really expressed. While she glowered, Philip continued to eat without any change whatsoever. Neither asked Loretta why she was going, which seemed to me to be filial negligence on a criminal level, excusable only because of Philip's secret mental life as a revolutionary. As for Cordelia, she was wrapped up in something Delia Robierre was saying. She looked up for half a second and said, "Oh, don't go, Mommy!" and then turned back to Delia. This was more negligence, and I wondered what the children's relationship with Aunt Loretta could possibly be like.

Certainly it was nothing like the relationship I had with my own mother. She, as the flipside of my father, had always been a warm and sheltering haven. She was not an assertive person—any loudness she might have had had been drained out of her long ago by the browbeating of six strong-minded older siblings—but she possessed a wordless determination that filled me with relief and admiration. When my father snapped at me or shooed me away, she would hold open her arms and with that gesture express not only her love for me but her disapproval of my father's behavior. Even when I was little, I understood her meaning and prayed that he did too. Now that I'm older, I know he did understand it. Sometimes I can find it in my heart to pity him—not often, though. My mother did not play a large role in that summer at Shorecliff, at least not an ostentatious one. Nevertheless, she was there, acting as my subterranean rock of security. Had she been absent, I could not have done half the daring things I carried out in the company of my wild cousins.

The second important event was the return of the uncles—Frank, Cedric, and Kurt—from their first hunting trip to the woodlands northwest of Shorecliff. Great-Uncle Eberhardt had not been on this trip. He did not approve of guns, nor of killing animals for sport, nor of conversing with other humans unless it was with Condor, the groundskeeper at Shorecliff. Condor was Uncle Eberhardt's constant companion, and Eberhardt spent many long days at Condor's cottage in the strip of woods separating Shorecliff from the surrounding farmland. When the other men were away on their hunting expeditions, Eberhardt moved to the cottage entirely, appearing at the house

only occasionally for meals. He said that the company of women and children without respite was too much for any man and a death recipe for an old man like himself. As a result, he appeared to return when the rest of the men did, though in fact he had been within reach all the time.

Fantastical though it may be, I remember Uncle Eberhardt wearing a black cape. It seems impossible now that he actually wore one in that day and age, in the middle of the summer, but that is my memory of him. Thus Uncle Eberhardt stalked through the back door into the kitchen with the rest of the men, his back bent so that the cape swung over his shoulders and cast a shadow around his feet. He had a rough, hair-dotted face that never failed to scare me, beetled brows and squinting eyes, the remains of a white head of hair, and gnarled, bony hands. He was a gruesome creature from a child's fevered dream, but for all that, he was our uncle, and in our way we appreciated him. He tolerated nothing and approved of nothing; he was Aunt Edie times ten. They did not get on well together.

"How was Condor, Uncle Eberhardt?" Rose asked. It gave me great pleasure to see her, the tallest and most imposing of my aunts, quelled by Eberhardt's lightning gaze.

"Condor's well enough, girl," Eberhardt growled.

Aunt Margery and my mother smiled behind Rose's back. As with most of my family members, Eberhardt for them was simultaneously a terror and a joke. He knew it as well as anyone and chuckled as he made his way out of the room.

Then Uncle Frank and Uncle Cedric filed in, shuffling like delinquent schoolboys. Frank Wight was the carpenter who had married Margery, and he looked the part. A bigger but more subdued version of Charlie, he was brawny and blond, the sort of man who both pleased children and annoyed them. He was forever swinging me around, ruffling my hair, slapping my shoulder in what was meant to be a friendly pat. It was irritating to be manhandled, but at the same time he never talked down to me. He treated me as a miniature human rather than as a member of a different species, and I appreciated his matter-of-fact tone. That day he even let me look at the rabbit carcasses, which I had an extreme urge to do until the moment before he took them out of the bag, at which point I felt an anticipatory nausea and fled.

Cedric Robierre, the paleontologist from Boston, was utterly different from Frank. He was not an absentminded professor but rather a tall, businesslike

man with an air of competence. He gave the impression of wearing a suit, though naturally during the summer he preferred linen trousers and an open-collared shirt, and on hunting trips he invariably wore a red plaid jacket. It was clear that his true home was in the esoteric chambers of Harvard. I liked Uncle Cedric much more than Uncle Frank because with Cedric, as with Philip Ybarra, I could sense a mighty brain pulsating behind his forehead. I loved the feeling that the minds of the people around me were working all the time, thinking new thoughts, turning over old ideas, pushing unknown boundaries.

Behind Frank and Cedric strode Uncle Kurt, the best uncle of all. When he came in he spied me before anyone else, even though I was the shortest, and said, "How's my youngest soldier!" Then he hugged me. How well I remember the feel of that crisp khaki against my skin! When he let me go I stared at him, breathless, while he leaned against the doorframe—a figure bathed in light, my personal war hero.

Three days later the day came. Tom Robierre, a celebrity by default because he was the last to arrive, the last unknown who might catapult excitement into our lives, was arriving by the 6:30 train into Pensbottom. The town was so small that it merited only two trains a day from Portland, one early and one late. All of our arrivals thus took place in the evening, necessitating a late dinner. The plan was that while my mother stayed behind to cook, Aunt Margery would drive the rattletrap to the station with Aunt Rose, Tom's mother, in the front seat and his sisters Isabella and Delia in the back. There was a momentary upset, however, when Delia announced that she had no interest in meeting the train.

"Don't you want to see your own brother?" Aunt Rose asked.

"I'll see him when he gets here," Delia said, shrugging. "Besides, Delia and I are going to the shore—can we?"

"Alone?"

"We'll be with each other." That was the Delian answer for everything. Behind her, Delia Ybarra erupted into giggles. "Seriously," Delia Robierre went on, adopting the solemn voice she found effective when negotiating with her parents, "of course I want to see Tom, but I know Philip is much more interested in meeting him at the station."

This was true. Philip and Tom had a bond that I envied and admired. I tried to emulate their offhand interactions, and for years afterward I would catch

myself thinking, “What would Tom do?” or “What would Philip think?” It was unusual for Philip to come out of his lair, mental and physical, with enough vigor to state that he wanted something, but in this case he did step forward and say, “I want to meet him.”

The aunts were suitably impressed. Now that Loretta was gone, the Ybarra children had become hopelessly mysterious to the other aunts. My mother, of course, was intimidated by nothing and no one, but she rarely intervened in situations like this one. As far as I was concerned, she was a Buddha, sitting quietly in her chair with a calm smile on her lips, hoarding all the answers. Aunt Rose was the one who dealt out decrees. She often reminded me of an admiral inspecting a ship, shouting orders, pacing the decks, directing her crew with unerring confidence. Aunt Margery, the family fussbudget, was more hotheaded and impulsive, though she also did most of the work in the house. She talked nonstop and often worked herself into states of half-hysterical emotion—I don’t know how Yvette and Fisher and Pamela, with all their unflappable poise, could have come from her and Frank. As for Aunt Edie, her antiquated ideas of proper behavior made her as alien to us as we were to her. They were a disparate family, the Hatfield girls.

Aunt Margery, Aunt Rose, Isabella, and Philip rattled off to meet Tom. From my vantage point on the furthest fencepost, I could see Isabella turning to say something to Philip, then his elusive gleam of teeth, then her fit of laughter. I hadn’t wanted to go meet Tom before, but now that Isabella and Philip were enjoying a private party in the backseat of the rattletrap, I was filled with jealousy. There were so many of us that moments with only one or two others were precious, no matter who those others were, and Isabella and Philip were the *crème de la crème*. I spent the hour until they returned daydreaming on the fencepost about what they were saying, deaf to Pamela’s remark that I would get splinters on my behind. She departed with the others, and I was thus the first to see the little cloud of dust that signaled the approach of the old black car. In my excitement I tried to stand on the post. A shriek came from behind me—Aunt Edie had witnessed my antics. The whole crew came tumbling out the front door, and I was deprived of my sentinel’s prize. But it didn’t matter, for the rattletrap was chugging toward us with three young heads in the back now, Tom sandwiched between Philip and Isabella. We waved and shouted. Uncle Kurt stood next to me and held me steady on the post, laughing his contagious, gunfire laugh. Tom was getting a Hatfield Special.

The rattletrap pulled to a halt, and the rear door closest to us flew open, creaking on its hinges. There was a moment when all we could see were

Isabella's endless arms and legs, flailing like a trapped octopus as she tried to get out before her brother. In the end she scrambled almost into the dust before finding her footing and scooting to one side. Her mouth was stretched in a grin that seemed to cut her face in half—she didn't mind making a fool of herself as long as she knew why people were laughing. Philip, meanwhile, had emerged on the far side with his usual serpentine dignity. We ignored him.

Tom was luxuriating in this imperial arrival. He had enough dramatic sense to wait a second or two before following Isabella. Then he slithered out feet first. He was still wearing his student's outfit of white shirt and tweed suit. We fell silent. I was leaning against Uncle Kurt's shoulder. Tom stood next to the car, squinting from the sun. Like Isabella and Delia, he had light brown hair that sat atop a comfortable, snub-nosed face. But he, much more than his sisters, had inherited his father's handsomeness. He was magnetically attractive, and now he stood before us, allowing us to drink in the sight of him.

"Hi, everyone," he said, waving a sheepish hand.

Such casual words—and yet, to me, they were the beginning of everything.

2

Croquet

The morning after he arrived, Tom proved our theories about his talent for action by suggesting a family tournament of croquet. We were all in the kitchen, eating breakfast in the Hatfield fashion, which was to come at will and linger for as long as the food held out. My mother and Margery usually prepared the meals, Rose being too lazy and Edie too pernickety to do well in the culinary realm.

"Is there a croquet set here?" Charlie asked. "I've never seen one."

"You've never looked," said Aunt Margery. "Of course there's one. We played croquet all the time when we were young, didn't we, Caroline?"

"I remember perhaps one or two games," my mother replied, smiling.

We found the set in one of the closets by the kitchen, a forgotten hideaway filled with antique sports equipment. Charlie crowed over an ancient baseball bat, and I located a bag of heavy balls that no one could identify. A few days later I asked Uncle Kurt about them, and he said they were bocce balls. He

offered to teach me how to play but never did, so they remained a mystery until much later in the summer. Tom, of course, found the croquet bag, a big, unwieldy, canvas sack full of sharp wickets and clattering mallets. In uncovering the bag he threw a pile of litter into the room behind him, and Delia Robierre picked up an ancient kerosene lantern, stained with age. "What's this?" she asked, amused to find a reminder of the age of gas lighting—which, in those days, was not so many years in the past. But Tom had no time for distractions, and the lantern was returned to the closet with all the other paraphernalia.

"Outside, everyone!" he ordered. He had a way of taking command that made us forget how short he was, how slender and insignificant his boy's figure appeared as he strode onto the lawn. Only next to Uncle Kurt, who was so obviously a man, did his leadership falter. Kurt would have played, I was sure, but he was still in bed, recovering from the hunting expedition, which, according to Uncle Cedric, had been tiring for all concerned. That hadn't stopped either Cedric or Frank from being present at the opening of the grand tournament, but, in typical fashion, they said they would sit by the sidelines and produced lawn chairs to carry out this plan.

"Lemonade for our parched throats, sun hats for our balding heads, lawn chairs for our tired legs—it's all we need," Uncle Frank declared.

"Anyone would think you were two twittering old aunties," Francesca said.

"I don't believe any child coming from the Hatfield family should describe an aunt as a twitterer," Cedric replied. He had a dry monotone that perfectly set off his careful jokes.

Francesca laughed and turned around to demand the first mallet.

"There are only six," Tom said.

"Play in pairs," my mother suggested. "We often did that."

"We don't want to play," the Delias said. They spoke in unison with uncanny frequency, standing next to each other, pale and dark, stocky and skinny, straight-haired and curly-haired, and each grinning the same Cheshire-cat grin, as if between the two of them they were hiding a raft of secrets.

"That's fine. Caroline and I will play," Aunt Rose announced.

"And me?" Aunt Margery asked. "What will I do?"

“Sit with the uncles,” Rose said, nodding over at them.

“That’s all right. Margery can play for me,” my mother said.

“But you’re much better than Margery,” Rose objected, frowning.

“We’ll switch off,” said my mother. “There’s nothing wrong with three to a mallet.”

Aunt Edie appeared at the door, and Isabella said at once, a smile twitching her lips, “Here comes Aunt Edie. She’s a mean hand at croquet, you know. Back in her glory days, she would play in the nationals. They used to call her Edie the Invincible. But sometimes they called her Edie the Skunk.”

“Be careful,” Aunt Margery said. “You’re closer to the truth than you know. Edie used to beat us every time we played. Even Kurt—he used to be absolutely furious when she skunked him across the lawn. He would dedicate the game to getting his revenge, and so, of course, he always lost.”

“Croquet, is it?” Edie asked, sweeping over the lawn. She wore a blue skirt and a strange green jacket, short and old-fashioned. Her nose traveled well before the rest of her body. “Is there a free mallet?”

“The older generation can battle it out over the blue mallet,” Tom said. “But the rest go to us. Who wants green?”

We paired off: Francesca with Charlie, Tom with Isabella, Philip with Fisher. Yvette was given a mallet to herself, which indicated not so much that the other cousins were being generous as that no one wanted to put up with her acerbic comments. Pamela and I got stuck with the crooked yellow mallet, identified by Tom as the runt of the litter. The wood of its handle had warped, and whenever you hit a stroke with it, the ball inevitably curved left.

“But we’ll lose!” I protested.

“Just take the warp into account,” said Tom, dismissing me.

“What does it matter?” said Pamela. “We would have lost anyway. This way we have an excuse.”

Just as we were beginning to play, Uncle Frank asked, “Shouldn’t Kurt have made an appearance by now? It’s unlike him to miss something like this.” From that point on, though Isabella had only just made the first stroke, my

interest in the game was overshadowed by a stronger interest in Uncle Kurt's whereabouts. When would he come? I played with one eye on the door leading into the kitchen and flubbed my shots even more than I would have because of the warp.

"We'll never get anywhere if you play like that," Pamela pointed out, her serenity undiminished. "Would you like me to play it all the way through?"

"No, I want to play." I was determined to be visibly part of the game when Uncle Kurt appeared.

Tom and Isabella, the only sibling pair, soon took the lead. Isabella told me later that all the members of their family were fanatical players down in Boston and that she and Tom had devoted hours to improving the accuracy of their shots. They didn't mention this at the time, though—they gave the credit to natural talent. "Never picked up a mallet before in my life," Isabella said, flexing her thin arms. Neither Aunt Rose nor Uncle Cedric saw fit to contradict her.

Charlie swooped up from behind and hit their ball with his. "Watch out—you're going to be skunked," he warned.

"Let me do it," said Francesca. "You hit her. I get to skunk her."

"You don't know how."

"Of course I do! I've played before. My mother taught us, and she's better than any of you." Francesca put one dainty foot on her own ball and raised the mallet.

"You'll knock your foot off," said Charlie. "Let me help you." He wrapped his arms around her and put his hands over hers on the mallet. With one massive toe he nudged her foot off the ball.

Francesca's laugh rang out from within his embrace. "Charlie, we're in public!" she exclaimed, and the aunts' eyebrows rose. Then she said, "Get off me, you big bear," and all the cousins began to laugh. A few glanced toward Aunt Edie. It was the undying joke of the summer, with just enough flavor of reality to give it punch.

Aunt Edie was trying to dominate the blue mallet and finding strong opposition in Aunt Rose. My mother and Aunt Margery had dropped out after

the first round. “What’s the use?” Margery said, near to fuming. “They’ll just shove us to one side when they think they can make a better shot.”

Yvette, who could play a game with complete indifference or with competitive zeal but never with anything in between, had set her eyes on victory. It took her at least five minutes to prepare for every shot, and she ignored the shouts and groans of the other players. She would bend over her mallet, her blond hair falling in a curtain beside her face, her concentration like a fish cutting a line through a stream. Most of the time her shots were accurate, but she was still no match for Tom and Isabella.

The kitchen door remained obstinately shut, and Uncle Kurt did not appear. At last I asked my mother about him. “Why won’t he come out? Doesn’t he want to play with us? I thought he loved croquet.”

“Well, you know, dear,” she replied, “he’s working on writing something this summer. I think he finds it hard to concentrate with all of us here, and that’s why he has to lock himself in his room during the mornings. You mustn’t bother him when he’s working, but he’ll find time to play with the rest of us, don’t you worry.”

“What is he working on?” I asked, intrigued.

“Oh, he’s just writing something up. About the war, I think.” My mother waved her hand vaguely. She didn’t like to think about the war because it reminded her of Uncle Harold. The two of them had been very close, and when he died in the war, she had been so upset that she left my father and me for a time. At three years old, I felt her absence vividly, but I couldn’t miss Uncle Harold because I had never met him. He is another famous Hatfield figure, one whose legendary status can never be dimmed by the mundanity of a long life.

Uncle Kurt, then, was consigned to his room. The croquet game suddenly held less interest for me, and I spent most of my time trying to figure out which window was his.

Though he never appeared, there was still a late entrant to the match. Our surprise was doubled because the latecomer was a stranger, and her arrival cost Tom and Isabella the game. Tom had just lined up their ball for the last shot before a certain victory when I, happening to look at the woods, saw a solitary figure walking toward us through the grass.

“Who’s that?” I asked, pointing.

Everyone stopped and turned around. It felt so strange to have anyone in our midst who wasn't related to us that we all stood still.

A girl had come out of the woods. She looked to be about sixteen, with thick, light brown hair that fell in appealing waves on each side of her face. As she came forward she watched us intently, her eyes wide—and her eyes were enormous to begin with, their irises an unusual mixture of speckled blue and gray. They were her most noticeable feature, aside from the paleness of her skin. None of us could understand, once we learned who she was, how someone in her situation could be so fair. Her skin was not simply untanned but truly alabaster—there was not a freckle anywhere to mar its whiteness, and on the inside of her arms the blue veins were clear under the surface. When she first walked toward us she looked frightened, as if she were an animal drawn to something it knew was a trap.

At last she gave us a cautious smile. Isabella was the first to speak. "Hello!" she called. "Who are you?"

The girl waited until she had come nearer. Then, standing with her hands behind her back as if to present herself, she said, "Hello. Do all of you live here?"

"We're the Hatfields," Aunt Rose said. "This is Shorecliff, our family home. Where have you come from?"

"My name's Lorelei," said the girl. "I live on the farm beyond the woods, and I heard voices when I was walking. I thought maybe the house had been sold or rented for the summer."

"It's still our house, but you're right—we're only here for the summer," Isabella said. "During the school year we live in all different places."

"Do you mean you live at the old Stephenson place?" Aunt Edie broke in.

"I'm Lorelei Stephenson," the girl said, smiling shyly at Aunt Edie.

"Fred's daughter?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I used to play with Fred when I was a girl," Aunt Edie said.

“You minx,” Tom whispered. Isabella and I were the only ones who heard. I looked up “minx” later in my dictionary—the definition was “a deceitful woman.” I assumed from this that Tom thought Aunt Edie hadn’t actually played with Fred.

“How many of you are there?” Lorelei asked, glancing around at us.

“Eleven cousins, eight adults,” Tom said. He had stepped to the front of the small crowd that surrounded her. “We’re playing croquet. Do you want to join us? You can play with me.”

She looked at him, and it was as if we could see her heart fluttering in her chest. She was so transparent, physically and emotionally—so different from the Hatfields. “I’d like that very much,” she said.

“You don’t need to play anymore, Isabella,” Tom said over his shoulder.

Isabella put her hands on her hips and opened her mouth to retort, but her eyes flickered to Lorelei, and she said nothing. That was one of the things I loved about her—she never did anything that might hurt someone else’s feelings. When she said the wrong thing, which was often, it was usually because she was too enthusiastic or too confident that everyone would agree with her. But when she read situations correctly, she was always compassionate. “Go ahead,” she said, nodding to Lorelei. “The game’s almost over, but you can have a few shots.”

“I’ve never played before,” Lorelei said, raising her eyes to Tom’s as he handed her the mallet. “I don’t even know the rules.”

“That’s all right,” he said. “You’re just trying to hit this ball here through that wicket there with this mallet. That’s all.”

They were like two actors in a play; we were all watching them. Lorelei hit the ball feebly, and it bobbled off at an impossible angle. Charlie, who had no compunction about taking advantage of others’ mistakes, roared with delight and plunged in to skunk the ball.

Philip and Fisher ended up winning the game. Their partnership was a strange one, though typical of their personalities. Philip always wielded the mallet, but Fisher would scout out the distance to be covered and the angle at which the ball needed to travel. He would stand next to Philip like a surveyor and murmur advice to him: “Try to put a left-handed spin on it” or “Be careful of the tussock halfway to the wicket.” Philip and Fisher were the two quiet brains

of the family, and their respectful friendship was one of the most understandable among us.

Charlie's thirst for glory having led him astray, the combined calculations of Philip and Fisher brought their ball to the stake, and the aunts, forgetting their own battle over mallet rights, congratulated them. Charlie stomped on his mallet with a good-natured bellow. Francesca, with an imperious toss of her hair, laid all the blame on his shoulders. As for Tom, he was still standing with Lorelei at the place where she had mishit the ball. Isabella, from a distance, watched them.

I wandered over to her, wanting her opinion on the new arrival.

"I think we've lost him," she said, speaking before I could say anything. "What do you think of her?"

"I think she's nice," I said. It delighted me that Isabella was treating me as someone with a worthy opinion, so I tried to sound grave. "But she's not like us."

"No, she's not like us."

Lorelei came often after that day, but we never knew when she would arrive or leave. Tom insisted that we hold croquet tournaments regularly, and he played with his head turned toward the woods. Being Tom, he continued to win often, in spite of being so obviously distracted, except for the times when Lorelei appeared. Then he would claim her as his partner and smile as she condemned him to second or third place. After that first tournament, the games were mostly between only five or six of us at a time. Pamela played only rarely, and the Delias usually bowed out. I tried to claim a mallet in every game but was frequently pushed aside by Philip or Francesca or Isabella. The aunts, probably because they knew how silly they had looked fighting over the mallet, never played again, though I often caught Aunt Edie observing our games with a gimlet eye.

For the most part, Lorelei remained for me a character in the distance, a figure complemented by Tom standing possessively beside her. Once or twice, though, I got to speak with her alone. One morning Tom slept late, and so we weren't dragged out onto the croquet field. I was on the lawn—by myself, since Pamela had opted to remain at the breakfast table—and, for lack of anything more interesting to do, I drifted in the direction of the woods. Lorelei appeared the way she always did, as if out of the grass. I waved and ran toward

her. She wore clothes that emphasized her countryness—starched white blouses and skirts that flared out to well below her knees. Sometimes I thought they made her look old-fashioned, but most of the time she just seemed foreign—foreign to our family, our customs, our whole way of thinking.

"Hello, Richard," she said. She had needed to hear our names only once, and afterward she remembered them perfectly, never mixing any of us up.

"We're not playing croquet," I said, coming to a halt beside her. "Tom wanted to sleep late."

"That's all right," she said. "I'm not good at it anyway."

"Yes, you are. You're very good," I said dutifully.

"Liar," she replied, smiling at me. Even when Lorelei said things like that, she seemed to be asking permission to say them, showing with her big eyes what a harmless creature she was. She never told us much about her life, but the aunts had interrogated her early on and established that during the school year she went to a girls' boarding school in New Hampshire and that she wanted to go to college. My mother in particular was pleased that Lorelei was being "properly educated," but to me and I suspect to the rest of the cousins, including Tom, she seemed entirely unsophisticated and natural. Aunt Edie called her, with some sarcasm, "Tom's wood nymph."

"Do you think your family would mind if I came into the kitchen for a moment?" Lorelei asked. It was the first time she had ever requested anything or volunteered a wish of her own, and I was the one she had chosen to ask. This filled me with pride.

"Of course you can come in. We'll be happy to have you." With which grandiose remark I led her into the kitchen to exclamations of delight from its inhabitants. She stayed for several hours that day before flitting away, refusing offers of lunch, shy of wearing out her welcome.

All the cousins seemed to like her, though I sometimes thought Isabella begrudged her presence. I asked her about it once, having crept into her room when no one else was there. She was lying on her bed, looking at the ceiling, something she often did when she wanted to think. I sat at the foot of the bed and distracted her with idle chatter. When I mentioned Lorelei, a slight frown appeared on her face.

“Don’t you like Lorelei?” I said.

“Why? Is she downstairs or something?”

“She and Tom went for a walk along the cliff.”

Isabella propped herself on her elbows. “Yes, I like Lorelei,” she said. “Don’t you? She’s friendly and modest and sweet. I like her a lot.”

“Really?”

Isabella looked over the top of my head, which was usually the signal that she was going to unveil her innermost emotions. “The truth is, Richard, I like her a lot for herself, but I’m not sure I like her being here. It sort of takes Tom away from us, don’t you think? He’s preoccupied with her, and now he’s having this big adventure, and we’re…well…”