ADAM ROBINSON ACQUIRES GRANDPARENTS AND A LITTLE SISTER

Tuesday

After the cab turned off East Capitol onto 8th Street, Noah Robinson saw further evidence that trees were disappearing from Washington. Where were all the oaks and maples and birches, even the odd pear, apple, or peach tree, that had been there in the time when he did not yet know himself and the city seemed always as green as his grandparents' idea of Heaven? Even when he had become responsible for a wife and children, the trees had still been there, reminding him year after hard year how far he had to go and how far he had come. Now the landscape of the city, high and low, seemed barren, no grand trees for children playing hide-and-go-seek, no spreading refuge for old people out in the fire of summer. Why had he not noticed the death of the trees before, at age forty, at fifty-five, at sixty? When he was seven, and his family first arrived in Washington, he'd had a teacher at Stevens Elementary School who taught her students about the trees of the city. Mrs. Waters hung her eyeglasses on a pink string around her neck and told them how lucky they were to have trees in Washington. The boy loved the teacher and he loved learning about trees, and he loved the way the trees told him

through the teacher's words that he, pining for South Carolina, might yet be happy in this new world.

The cab now bumped its way over potholes up 8th Street. The tree devastation had extended even to the modest showy trees, the trees that the other Washington, known for facade and neglect, might have endeavored to save. That world liked to talk only about the biggest showoffs, the trees they gave all the care to—the cherry trees. "The blossoms are coming, the blossoms are coming!" went their hallelujah each spring. But the young man Noah, ever a student of Mrs. Waters's, had known the beauty of the black locust and the paulownia, flowering away their magnificent hearts in April, May, and June. And they did so without school bands and beauty queens and tourists, without the articles in the newspapers that year after silly year heralded the cherry trees. The apartment of the woman with whom he had committed adultery was in a building that had oaks in the backyard, and once, lying with her, he had heard acorns falling and mistaken them for footsteps. And he had stayed away from the woman for weeks. His son had appreciated the trees of Washington, but his girls had found more joy in rosebushes and Queen Anne's lace, and even goldenrod, perhaps because they didn't have to climb to admire the blossoms. His son loved to climb trees and call down to his father, "Watch me!" When people died, Noah Robinson's people dreamed of them, and so far there had been no dreams about his son, the baby of the family. His son might yet be alive.

The cab approached H Street, N.E. He could see that box after box meant for trees existed now only to support litter. Between the parked cars, Noah could see that the city government people had thrown up the occasional young tree, like the one in front of his apartment building. Most of those trees had few leaves—frail generic things propped up with wooden supports. They would not live out the year. "Root, little pig, or die," his father and grandfather liked to say.

The cab turned onto H Street. Noah forgave that street for being virtually treeless, for that had always been its way. He had courted Maggie up and down H Street, with all its stores and gritty life, one symbol of a people used to doing much with less. The darkness of the Atlas Theater on H had given him the courage to lean over and kiss Maggie's cheek that first time. She had not yet seen sixteen, and he still had the gentlemanly quality of the countrified South about him. Someone, some adult in a nearly empty theater, watching them the way adults once watched over all the children in Washington, saw the quick kiss and told Maggie's father, and he forbade her to see Noah for two months. Now, as the cab went along H Street, Maggie Robinson took her hand from Noah's knee and placed it over his open hand resting on his thigh. She sighed, frustrated, a woman who had had time for only half a cup of coffee that morning. "I am satisfied now. I am done with having your children, Noah," she had said to him the day after Caleb's birth. Caleb who might yet be alive.

"Remember," Noah said now, observing the stained and indecipherable zone map on the back of the cab's front seat, "when you couldn't walk down a D.C. street without trees jumpin in your way and makin a nuisance of themselves?" He had been a pallbearer at Mrs. Waters's funeral. Because she had been a great woman and teacher, the mayor had been there, with a mouthful of expensive teeth and a manufactured brand of camaraderie that the elite schools had taught the mayor's kind to pass off as charm among the common people. The mayor's limousine had got lost on the way to the funeral, because it wasn't used to going to Anacostia. In Noah's youth, most of the politicians had confined themselves to their pen on Capitol Hill.

"I remember," Maggie said.

"I'm sure you do." He looked at her and winked. One tree was as good as another to her, a woman with more than two hundred years of Washingtonians behind her. He squeezed her hand and raised it and kissed it once, then once again. He had waited forever for that woman with whom he committed adultery to show up on his doorstep and tell his wife, "I laid with the father of your children." He was still waiting.

He let go of Maggie's hand. They had been married forty-five years. Last year, to celebrate that anniversary, their friends had given them a king's catered dinner at the Elks Club and so many gifts that it took two cars to get the gifts home. A month later, their two-year-old granddaughter—no mother, no Caleb for a father—had come to live with them. That first night, as their granddaughter, Elsa, slept in the bed beside Maggie, he had sat most of the night in the darkened living room, looking over at a Waterford vase, one of the gifts presented at the Elks dinner. It had cost more than his grandfather earned in two years of plowing behind a mule. With no light to bounce off it, the vase sat dull and uninspired on the table beside the couch. So many of the descendants of slaves had done well in Washington, for themselves and for the flesh of their flesh, but his own son had failed as a father, the first to do so in a long, long line of good and righteous fathers. "Yes, ma'am, I'm talkin bout your Noah, father to your children. I laid with him." Could a man, even one worshipped by his children, be considered a good father if he was an adulterer and had hurt the mother of his children? Had he in fact been the first in that line to fail and thus doomed his own son?

Months before their granddaughter came to them, they had gone to Kenya. Oh, but he had loved Kenya! What would seeing the rest of the world have done for him? After Maggie fell asleep that first night in Kenya, he had stood in his robe at the hotel window for a long time, but all the sounds and smells of Nairobi couldn't lull him to sleep. That was the way it was for most of their twelve nights there. But he had so adored Kenya. They had planned to see Africa and the world in their retirement. He knew now, though, that his two grandchildren, first Elsa and now Adam, would cost him the rest of Africa and the world.

The cab came to a stop at North Capitol Street. The traffic light was out again, and the city government people had sent a policeman to do the work of the light. Noah turned his head and saw a black man with banana-yellow hair standing in the small crowd waiting at the corner.

The man was bobbing his head to a tune that came through his headphones. Noah and the yellow-haired black man looked at each other, and after a second or so the man raised his hand to greet Noah. Noah slowly raised his hand. "You know him?" Maggie said. "I think I did once," Noah said. "I don't remember. I do know it ain't long after ten o'clock in the morning and already he's made twenty white people happy."

He often felt a momentary dizziness with the high-blood-pressure pills he took after rising in the morning. Get the hard work done and over, like the extended exercises he had started with Elsa's coming. There had been no dizziness this morning. Perhaps his body knew it might have to clank off to battle and had no time to waste on dizziness. Where had he gone wrong with Caleb? Was the woman the beginning and end of it all? To have failed with one child, with a boy, even. It did not matter that he had succeeded with three girls. Caleb cried out in somebody's wilderness, and he was crying Noah's name. Perhaps that woman had knocked on the door of their lives and only God had heard her, and God from his Heaven had reached down and punished with the tip of one of his fingernails.

The taxi crossed into Northwest D.C. H Street seemed to have become blocked with potholes, and somehow, to avoid the potholes, the taxi ended up on Massachusetts Avenue, where the city government people never failed to battle the pothole problem because the senators and congressmen went back and forth on that street to Capitol Hill. At 7th Street they turned left. Farther down the street was Lansburgh, a once-upon-a-time department store that white people in the past few years had made into a building of expensive apartments. His father had bought him a fifteen-dollar blue suit at Lansburgh when he was thirteen. He was wearing a suit now, as was often the case with men of a certain age, from a certain age, black men who had grown up comfortable with such attire because their fathers and grandfathers had done it that way. They wore suits out into the world the way knights had worn armor; they wore suits even to baseball games and to shoeshine jobs.

Elsa, his granddaughter, had cried to see him leave that morning. She had a good vocabulary for a three-year-old who had been so long around the city government people and their foster families, but she could not say "Grandpa." "Grandma" was no trouble. She had begun to cry as soon as she saw him put on his tie, one that his own father had worn. He had picked her up and her teary face had fallen into the crook of his neck.

Before the cab turned back onto H Street, Noah asked his wife, "What do you think he eats?"

"Little-boy food," Maggie said, and tapped the knobby knee of a man who could do a hundred deep knee bends.

The city government people made a show of putting their offices all about the city. "We Are Where You Are," their signs proclaimed. The building in Chinatown at 622 H had only five stories, though a city government woman in another part of the city had told Noah on the telephone that they could find Adam on the eighth floor.

They found Adam on the fifth floor, where a man in front of the building smoking two cigarettes at once had told them "they keep all the boys." The piece of paper on the door said "824." The paper was flapping though there was no wind in the hall. The boy, their grandson, was sitting on an orange plastic chair beside a majestic desk, his back to them, his feet unmoving, a foot or so up from the floor. He was six years old, and they had last seen him when he was but seven days old, wrapped in one of the three blankets Maggie had bought for him at Hecht's. A hatted black policeman looking at a magazine with pictures of naked women sat at the big desk. He was facing them, and when he saw Maggie and Noah, he pointed at them and Adam looked around the side of the chair. The policeman and the boy were alone in the large room filled with nothing but telephones and chairs and huge desks. The policeman had on headphones under his hat and there was a radio playing on his

desk. When Noah came closer and the policeman took off his hat and headphones, Noah could hear that the music on the radio was different from the music seeping out of the headphones.

Adam got down from the chair and stood very close to it, his arms at his sides. His hands were empty, wide open, one finger twitching. There was something coming, his body seemed to say, and he had best face it head-on. It was the middle of July, and the city government people had dressed him in corduroy pants and a long-sleeved black shirt, which reminded Noah of gangsters in the movies. He was the son of Maggie and Noah's only son, and Elsa's brother, and anyone in the world who knew their son Caleb could see that. Caleb—along with Adam's mother, Tamara—had disappeared out in that world and no one had seen them for hundreds upon hundreds of days. Maggie went to the boy and knelt, pulled him to her. There was a shopping bag near the boy, and someone had penciled his name on it and that someone had misspelled it. There was nothing else with him, and it was the nothing else that made Maggie pull him closer. At six, Caleb Robinson had had a trunk full of toys, a teacher mother, three sisters who treated him like a prince, a father who commanded a good wage because even blindfolded he could repair any car. Maggie continued to hold the boy and Adam's arms stayed at his sides.

"You know who I am?" she asked him, pulling back a bit and then kissing him.

"Yes," he said, but that was not true. A yes was always easier, safer, than a no. The no's were always trouble for some reason, and the boy was sick and tired of trouble.

"I'm your grandmother, and I'm taking you home for good."

Adam looked up at Noah, who smiled down and cupped the boy's chin. "That's your grandfather. Forever and ever," Maggie said. Adam said, "Yes."

The policeman put down his magazine open to the page he was studying and stood up. He reached out his hand to Noah, but Noah ignored

him and took up the handles of the shopping bag. When they learned that Adam was not with his mother's people, they had paid five hundred dollars to a man who, though on the D.C. payroll, spent half his workdays as a private detective. "I'll find that boy," he had assured them, but he had never gone looking. Three months ago, the city government people called out of the blue to say they had their grandson, "one Andy Robinson of an unknown age." But when Maggie and Noah went to the Southeast address to pick him up, the city government people did not have him. They lined up five teenage boys for the couple, but none of the boys would answer to the name Adam, despite all the pleading from the city government woman. "That ain't me. How many times I gotta tell ya, lady? That just ain't me," the smallest of the five kept insisting. Adam had stayed lost until the city government people called again, two days ago, at four on a rainy Sunday morning. "Why you call so early?" Noah asked. "I got nothin better to do, mister."

They took the stairs, because the elevators refused to go down when there were people in them. Outside, Noah rolled up the boy's sleeves and pants legs and Maggie held tight to Adam's hand. He did not turn his head to look left or right but stared only at where he was going. It was a busy street, H, and yet he seemed to have willed himself not to be curious about what was going on.

"You hungry, Adam?" Noah said.

Adam said Yes. The people he had come upon in and out of the city government had taught him that they could not hear him shaking his head. Shaking or nodding the head was as bad as a no to them. And yes was preferred, not yeah. "Good black children never say 'Yeah.' You ain't back down on some slavery plantation, boy."

"You like Chinese food?" Noah said, looking up and down H at all the restaurants.

"Yes."

Noah and Maggie looked at each other. "Oh," Noah said. "You like their corned beef and cabbage, huh?"

"Yes."

"We'd better find a McDonald's or something," Maggie said. "I think he'd drink hemlock if we put it before him."

They went to the McDonald's on E Street across from the fortress that was the FBI headquarters. Maggie and Adam sat at a place near the window while Noah got the food. "I got five dollars," Adam said while they waited. Don't you know food cost money, boy? Don't you know that? Black children gotta learn the value of money.

"Oh?" Maggie said. "You're rich." He looked puzzled and said, "I got it from a lady who used to be my mother." Sometimes they liked the truth.

"Tamara? You got it from Tamara?" Wherever his mother was, she was not with Caleb. The grapevine had told Maggie that Tamara and Caleb had come to despise each other toward the end, not long before Elsa was born. Dope fiends, Noah began calling them. But worse than that, he continued, they were bad parents who had flung their flesh and blood to the winds. Root, little pig, or die. "You got the money from Tamara?"

"No," Adam said softly. "The other lady who was my mother. Miss Joyce. She wasn't even my mother no more, and she gave me five dollars. I had baths with millions of bubbles. She gave me five dollars when Miss Billie was my mother. Miss Billie hit this man in the head with a fryin pan and made blood pop out his head." Adam tapped the top of his head several times with his knuckles. "He fell down and went to sleep. She hit him again." He continued tapping, then rested the hand on the table, the edge of which came midway up his chest. "Miss Joyce had a big house. Bubble time."

Noah came with the food. He sat across from them, his back to the window. He spread out napkins for a place mat for Adam, unwrapped a hamburger for the boy, and popped a straw through the top of a chocolate-

milk-shake container. Adam watched his grandfather's hands. Noah tore open the cardboard box with the French fries sticking out and squirted little packets of ketchup over them. It was nearing noon and the sun was high and they were shaded where they sat.

Adam put his hands in his lap. There had been one city government mother who made him and the rest of those at her table say a five-minute prayer to Jehovah Our Loving Master before and after meals. "Eat, boy, eat," Noah said. "There's plenty more where that come from." Adam ate. Each time someone came near them he leaned forward, hunched over his food, and when the person had passed he sat up straight again.

Noah ate little chunks of chicken. "Why'd you get that?" Maggie said. "The fish would have been better for you."

"I read in the paper where the fish was worse. Somethin bout how they make it up, what they put in it. And all that sauce. With chicken I kinda know what I'm gettin. You have to do a lot to a chicken after you wring his neck before you turn it into a mystery meat." He looked at Adam. "Right?"

"Yes."

"He's rich," Maggie said. "He's got five whole dollars. His mother gave it to him." She looked hard at Noah to make certain he got what she meant. "Not Tamara. Miss Joyce."

"I got it in my shoe."

"Don't tell people where you got your valuables, baby," Noah said. "It's okay with us. But don't tell other people, baby."

Maggie put down her hamburger. "You do know," she said to Adam, "that you are coming home with us?"

"Home to Mama Wilson?" He stopped eating. "Goin home?"

"No, to our place," Noah said. "You live with us now. We're your people, we're your family." Noah pointed at Maggie and then at his own chest. Just a week before, a retired friend of Noah's had got on his boat and sailed off with his fourth wife around the world. A black man and woman on the wide blue sea.

Adam resumed eating, but they could tell that whatever joy he had found in the food was now gone. "Yes," he said after a bit. "Yes, ma'am" or "Yes, sir" was disallowed more times than allowed. People sometimes thought a "ma'am" or a "sir" made them seem old. "Dontcha put me in my grave before I'm ready," one city government man had warned him. "I just won't have livin in my grave before the good Lord calls me."

Their granddaughter, Elsa, stood tiny and eager when Maggie opened the door. She ran and grabbed Maggie's leg, then she put her arms around Adam and reached up and kissed his cheek, though she had never laid eyes on him a day in her life. Adam, having known some good children in his life, giggled. Finally, Elsa went to Noah and he picked her up with an arm that could do seventy-five push-ups, dropping Adam's shopping bag just inside the door. Elsa kissed his mouth.

"I thought she'd have a conniption fit waitin for yall," said Mrs. Battle, a neighbor from downstairs. "It was 'Grandma' this and 'Grandma' that. She kept pointin at that picture of yall on the side table. But she settled down after a while. If you start tellin a child how to pick cotton, they go quiet. How you go up this row and down that row, pickin them little bugs outa your cup of water. Talkin bout pickin cotton is like a mother's lullaby. A child will calm down and drift along."

Noah said nothing. Maggie introduced her to Adam. "A full house now, huh?" Mrs. Battle said. "My, my." She had nine grandchildren and three great-grands, but they all went home in the evening after visiting. And if she allowed one to stay the night—for she loved all of them more than she let on—the child's parents had to come get him or her before noon or she would put the child in a cab bound for home. Before the taxi arrived for the pickup, she would pin an enveloped note to the child's blouse or shirt: "I raised one set and I don't plan on raising another."

Adam watched Mrs. Battle leave and then stood beside his shopping bag. It was all wrong because it was all so perfect. The way the carpet

soothed his feet even with his tennis shoes on. The table of many flowers in front of the window, a clean window with the ever so blue curtains fluttering in the wind from the machine that cooled everything. The thousand photographs of grown-ups and children who had more right to stand where he was standing, because they were family. The girl's doll sleeping on the floor against the couch, waiting for another go-round. He had known perfect before, but there had always been a tilt, and that tilt told him that this was home, however temporary: Music all the time, even in the middle of the night. A big dog gnawing at a chair leg and turning its head to eye him. Whatcha lookin at, boy? A finger in his face to emphasize a thousand rules. Mustard-and-ketchup sandwiches. Cigarette smoke curling around his nose before it dashed in. Even in Miss Joyce's big house there had been unlit corners that whispered, Stay away. The basement.

Whatever this was, it was not home in the way he had been taught. He put his fingers around the shopping bag's handles. "When I'm goin home?" he said at last in as submissive a tone as he could muster.

"What?" Noah said. He put Elsa down. Maggie was adjusting the thermostat. "You are home," Noah said. Adam blinked but didn't release the handles. Noah reached out his hand to the boy and Adam took it, dragging the bag along. Noah led him into the first bedroom of the apartment. "That's gonna be your bed." The man pointed to one of the twin beds on either side of a window adorned with a green curtain. The bedspread was beige and covered with cartoon people Adam remembered from a television in a city government home in Northeast. "And that's your teddy bear there, waitin for you to give him a name." Adam had once seen a dog named Cecil tear open the stomach of a teddy bear. The brown bear on this bed sat propped against two pillows, one on top of the other, and the bear's arms were wide open.

Elsa was now standing in the doorway.

"And here," Noah said, leading him across the room to a chest of drawers. "These two drawers up here belong to you." He pulled out the

drawers and picked Adam up to show him the shirts and pajamas and underwear in both drawers, the result of Maggie's quick trip downtown the day before. "And this here middle one you can share with Elsa for socks and whatnot. Okay?" He pulled the drawer out and pointed to the boy's socks on the left side. "See?"

Adam said, "Yes."

"You do know that Elsa is your sister, don't you?"

"Yes."

Noah noticed that the yeses were piling up and weren't amounting to even a speck of caring or understanding. He put the bag on the floor beside the bed and sat on the bed, taking Adam between his legs. "I know how bad this might be right now, but you'll see. It'll work out." Noah did not believe that. The second bank had yet to call back about cashing in one of his retirement funds, money that would have paid for a trip to China when they were seventy. "Can you trust me? Can you trust your grandma and me to do the right thing by you?" Noah opened his hands, made a bowl of them, and offered it to the boy. Adam put one of his hands into the bowl. Elsa came up to them, standing very close to Adam. She said nothing, but watched the man and the boy. Adam looked at her and she put her face hard against his arm. He remembered her from somewhere, and as he kept his hand in his grandfather's, he thought that if he could remember her he would be home again, at Mama Wilson's, and everything would be jim-dandy.

Thursday

For five weeks, Noah had been tending a new, frail tree in front of their two-story apartment building. He took the children out that evening with his can of water. The tree box was now eight straight days without debris, a record. There was an oak about midway down the street, the 1500 block of Independence Avenue in Southeast. It was sturdy, maybe owing to the prayers of the

three older women who lived in the house facing it. Across the street, down near 16th, were the remnants of a catalpa that refused to die.

Noah handed the can to Adam. "Give it some," he told the boy, and Adam watered the tree. "Now let her." Adam gave the can to Elsa, who had trouble with it and got most of the water on the sidewalk and in the gutter. Adam looked at Noah and Noah winked knowingly at him. Girls, Noah mouthed, and rolled his eyes.

His car, a year-old Toyota, was parked a few yards beyond the building. Noah opened the front passenger door and let Adam crawl into the driver's seat. He sat in the passenger seat with Elsa on his lap. He waited for the boy to pretend to drive, the way all boys did, the way Caleb did, but Adam just looked out the window. "Go on, take us somewhere," Noah said. Adam said, "Where?" "Anywhere you want," his grandfather said and took Adam's hands and placed them on the steering wheel. "Why don't you take us home?" "Home," Elsa said. Without a word, Adam moved his hands slowly about the wheel. Noah said, "That's what I'm talkin about." "Talkin bout," Elsa said.

"You been in a airplane?" Adam said, not looking at his grandfather and still moving his hands on the wheel.

"Yeah," Noah said. "A whole lotta times. You been in one?"

Adam did not answer.

"We'll take you up in one. We'll go see your aunt Charlene, in Chicago. Surprise her before she comes to see us. We'll drive to Baltimore to see your aunt Laverne and your uncle and your cousins. And we'll go across the river to see your aunt Imogene."

The boy put his hands in his lap and looked out the window. Jesus Christ, Noah thought. Now what did I say? What had done it, he wondered, talking about the airplane, Aunt Charlene, Chicago? "You ain't thinkin bout goin home again, are you?" Adam said nothing. Noah took one of the boy's hands and placed it back on the wheel. "Drive us some more, Adam," he said. "Take us somewhere."

Saturday

While Noah did the dinner dishes, Maggie bathed the children. There were two quite noticeable scars on the boy's back, a superficial one of some two inches at his left shoulder and a more profound one of less than an inch down near the base of his spine. She did not yet have the courage to ask about them. "We have to fatten you up," she said, squeezing warm water from the washcloth over his back. "Make you as fat as a little piggy." He told her he knew a bath song, and he started singing a bunch of nonsense words. Elsa, her back to the spigot, joined in. Her back was unblemished.

Later, after the children had watched one of two dozen videos their youngest daughter, in Virginia, had sent, Noah sat between them on the couch and read from a fairy-tale book. He had not been a good reader until he met Maggie. After Mrs. Waters, he and school had not got along, he once told her. Not three weeks after Elsa came to them, he had sat her on his lap for a simple bedtime story. She pointed to magazines on the coffee table, and he had to suffer through three copies of *Ebony* as she asked about every picture in them. Hundreds of pages and thousands of pictures. "What this?" she asked as she pointed to each picture. "Thas a doggy." She certainly knew a man and a dog and a woman when she saw them in her everyday life, but for some reason she needed him to make the connection between what was in her mind and the colorful pictures in the magazines. "What this?" "A truck." And she needed him to connect them over and over. He started cheating with the third magazine, turning five and ten pages at a time. "What this? What this?"

Adam fell asleep before the fairy tale had ended, leaned over against Noah's arm, his open mouth forming a very small O. His grandfather carried him to the bed where the teddy bear was waiting. "He sleepin," Elsa said as Noah went out of the room. "Now you," Maggie said, picking the girl up.

On the couch, Noah put his arm around Maggie. "I don't want no more hanky-panky with my daughter," her father had said to Noah after he had been exiled because of the Atlas Theater kiss. Her father had guided fifteen-year-old Noah by the neck around to the side of the house. An ancient elm straddled the properties of Maggie's family and the people next door. "I can't help that Maggie wants to see you, boy, but I can help how many of your teeth I knock outa your head." The elms had not fared well in other cities, Noah had heard, but all the ones he had seen in Washington had been thriving. "Open your mouth, boy. Open it wide. Thas one I'll get. And them two teeth over there, I'll knock them out, too." He had eulogized his father-in-law, named his son after him. "This is the saddest day of my life, cause I come here to bury one a my fathers," Noah had said in that church, with a thousand people looking on.

"You want some more cake?" Maggie said.

"Naw, I'm done for the night." He squeezed her shoulder. "Want some TV?" He had struggled on through his last year of high school, hoping that that would impress her father.

"What's on?" Maggie asked. She had a Ph.D. His three daughters had four Ph.D.s and an M.D. among them. He and Caleb had only high-school diplomas. "What am I gonna do with you, Noah?" her father had said the day Noah asked to marry Maggie. Falling acorns had a way of sounding to an adulterer like the footsteps of a father-in-law.

"Let me turn it back on and see." He reached for the remote control, but she pulled his arm back.

"Let it come on by magic," she said. "Let's see it come on by magic." In Rome they had turned on the television, but none of it made sense because they did not know the language. It rained a lot in Paris their first days there, and they would sleep until eleven or so in the morning. "I will see you again, Kenya," he had said, buckling his airplane seat belt. "I'll see you before the by-and-by."

Monday

In the newspaper's obituaries, he saw, for the hundredth time, a name that he thought could be that of the woman, but he could not be certain, because he had long ago forgotten her name. They, he and the woman, had started what they had nearly a year before Maggie became pregnant with Caleb. "What's the use a eatin your lunch in this dirty old garage?" the woman said to him the day she brought her broken-down Chevy in and saw him sitting on a stool eating a tuna-salad sandwich that Maggie had made. Maggie's coffee still hot in the thermos. "I got a nice table and chair just waitin to be used." Maggie had asked him once what he thought of having just one woman for the rest of his life, and he had innocently thrown it back at her and asked what she thought of having but one man for the rest of hers. She said she was fine with that. Just fine, thank you very much. That was when they had had only one child, and it was nighttime when she asked and right then that one baby girl started crying for more of everything and he never got to answer her and she never asked the question again. One baby, two babies, three babies . . . He waited two days after the woman's offer of the chair and table and got her address from the work order, told his fellow workers, Big Tiny and the rest, he was taking lunch in the park. Big Tiny said, "Dontcha get into any fights with them sassy trees in that park, y'hear?" "I knowed it was you even before I opened the door," the woman said after his two knocks—knocks so soft they wouldn't have awoken a sleeping baby. It was a few days after Palm Sunday and she had palms sticking out between her bedroom mirror and the wall. The wind came through the window and disturbed the palms, and when the wind stopped, the palms on the bottom were the first to come to rest. The top ones took a while, as they held on to the memory of wind for a longer time. "I'm Catholic," the woman said when Maggie was five months pregnant with Caleb. "Catholic on my mother's side. Pure dee Catholic. On my father's, I'm straight up and down Baptist."

At home, his daughters continued to worship him, and his wife grew big with Caleb. When Caleb was two weeks old, Noah told the woman he would not ever come back. The woman shrugged. "Easy come, easy go. A tree has more leaves than I can count. Why cry bout just one leaf fallin away?" He came back before Caleb was two years old and would always believe that it was the return that had doomed him and his boy. God told the Israelites that he would punish men who stole grapes by setting their children's teeth on edge. Oh, that God. God and his long, punishing fingernails . . . Before Caleb was two and a half, Noah said good-bye to the woman again. Caleb took sick the night of that good-bye. In the ambulance, he held Caleb as the boy shivered and shook, and all the way to the hospital Noah thought his boy would be fine if only the siren would hush and give them some peace. "Can't you stop that noise?" he said to the driver. "That noise tells folks your son is somebody important, mister," the woman said.

Wednesday

For many nights after Adam's arrival, Noah had managed to get some three hours of sleep. But Tuesday night he slept for no more than two hours. After lying with his eyes open for an hour and trying to will himself back to sleep, he got up at about two and went quietly out of the room. Maggie had always been able to fall asleep within five minutes of putting her head on the pillow. A woman who had never committed adultery. He stood in the little hallway until his eyes adjusted to the dark.

At the door of the children's room he heard nothing, but he felt that Adam was awake.

He took one step into the room and said, "Adam?"

"Yes?"

"You should be sleepin." Adam was sitting up in the bed. "You need a lotta sleep."

"Yes."

"Then why don't you try to get some?" Adam lay down. The man stood for more than fifteen minutes, but the boy did not go to sleep. The air-conditioning began to chill Noah and he finally went to the couch and sat and covered himself with a throw his daughter Laverne had given him for his sixty-fifth birthday. Maggie had been taking Elsa to church each Sunday, and she was planning to take Adam again that Sunday. "It won't hurt them," she had told her husband. Noah had not been to church in three years. Would a grandfather going to church give a grandson just a little peace at night? Would God let him live until the children were grown? Could God forgive the adultery? Could God manage that?

About three he put his feet up on the couch. At four he went to the refrigerator and got a slice of cheese, the throw around his shoulders. At four-thirty he went in and saw that Adam was asleep. At five he went back for two more slices of cheese and folded them and dipped them into the mayonnaise jar. At a quarter to six the deliveryman dropped the newspaper at his door and Noah opened the door and stood at the threshold with the newspaper in his hand and looked at the metal stairs that led up to the roof. Noah had a lodge brother who seemed to sin every day of his life and nothing bad had ever happened to him. He had died at eighty-five in his sleep beside his seventh wife, in a big house, with his thirteenth child, an infant, sleeping nearby. Noah had been a pallbearer at his funeral. He read the headlines on the front page and heard someone downstairs drop a pan. It was hard thinking about God playing favorites all the time. At the threshold he read the obituaries.

Tuesday

Noah rose about six-thirty and yawned as he took in the *Washington Post*. He had been retired three years, as had Maggie. Coffee with the newspaper alone in the morning kitchen was one thing he looked forward to.

He wasn't much for sports, just liked to read the front and Metro sections to see what bad things the world had done to people. The door to the children's room was cracked, and as soon as he opened it all the way he saw Adam standing before him, holding the shopping bag. The boy was a heartbreaking sight. He still had on the pajama top, but he was wearing the corduroy pants and tennis shoes of that first day. Noah could see that the shoelaces weren't properly tied. Adam had an odd alertness about him, as if he had been standing there all night, just waiting for someone to push open the door. "When I'm goin home?" the boy said. He put a little more pep in the words than he had the day before.

"You tryin to rile me this early in the mornin, boy? I told you yesterday that you were already home. Thas your room, thas your ceiling, thas your closet, thas your sister, thas your floor. This your grandfather. All yours."

Adam looked about, convinced of nothing. Elsa was sleeping.

"Put down that bag." Noah wanted to shout, thinking that loud words might sink in better than soft ones. "Put it down right now. Put down that bag, I say, and come get some breakfast."

Adam let go of the bag's handles.

"Where your slippers at?" Noah said. Adam looked over to the bed. The slippers were resting neatly together on the floor at the side of the bed. There had been a little boy's attempt to make the bed and the thing was all lumpy. "Put on them slippers. A man can't enjoy breakfast in his street shoes." Adam changed and came back to stand before his grandfather. "Come on and les wash up." Elsa slept on.

He buttered a piece of toast for Adam and set a bowl of Cheerios before him. "Your daddy liked Wheaties," Noah said, sitting across from Adam and spooning sugar into his coffee. "We bought you some Wheaties just in case."

"The yellow box is nice," Adam said, pointing to the Cheerios box.

"Well, don't pick a cereal cause of the box. A pretty box could be holdin poison. Get a cereal you like. You like Cheerios?"

"Yes."

"Tell me somethin—where is this home you keep talkin about? Whose house is this thas so good you don't want to be here?"

The boy looked at the space next to the plate with his half-eaten toast. "Mama Wilson," he said. "But I guess she already got some other boy for my bed." He put down the spoon.

"Sooner or later you're gonna have to learn to trust me and your grandmother. We won't take away your bed."

"I had a nice bed over her house," Adam said, finally looking at his grandfather. "She a good mama."

Noah said nothing. Was it too late to find Tamara's people and give him to them? Why couldn't Adam be more like Elsa and go along with the program? He had read in the newspaper where all kinds of orphans never got over what had happened to them. Once adopted, they threatened their new siblings and their new parents with death by stabbing. Death in the night. Adoptive parents put locks on their bedroom doors, they took turns staying awake and guarding the door. The children became teenage criminals, even murderers, and drifted off into their own kind of night, never to return to that good new home. In the newspaper, the parents said they still loved the children, but there was relief between the words. "Good riddance to bad rubbish," an old white woman Noah knew in South Carolina liked to say about bad people way over there in another county.

"It sleeps good," Adam said of the bed. "She givin it to some other boy right now." In the end, Noah said, "Eat," and pointed to the toast and the cereal. Adam followed his grandfather's hand as the finger pointed and as it retreated and picked up the coffee cup. When the hand was resting in his grandfather's lap, the boy picked up the toast.

Friday

The man awoke after a half hour of sleep and sat up in bed, orienting himself. In two months he would be sixty-eight. He got to his exercises,

managing seventy-seven push-ups but only thirty sit-ups before something told him to stop. As his sweat dried, he pruned the bonsai tree he kept in a special compartment in one of the bedroom windows. The compartment allowed the tree to be in the room and then, with just a turn of its wooden platform, to be outside. And with the press of a button a transparent covering emerged from the side of the compartment to cover the tree outside. The bonsai was a gift from his youngest daughter, who lived in the suburbs of Virginia, where trees with all the life of plastic had been put up to decorate the new developments. Someone had warned him that bonsai trees in people's homes did not live very long, but his had gone on for more than six years, and it had given him unimaginable pleasure. The tree was so small that he could cover it with both hands. A booklet that came with the tree said it had been "trained" for thirty-five years. He had waited the first two years for the tree to wither and die, but it went on and on. Now he believed that it could live forever. In the National Arboretum he and Maggie had seen bonsai trees that had been living—"trained"—for three hundred, four hundred, five hundred years. If them, why not his own?

After washing up, he changed from his pajama top to a T-shirt. He peered long into the bathroom mirror, at his father's and his grandfather's face. His father had died at seventy-five, and his grandfather had made it only to sixty-six. He turned his face this way and that to see if he wanted to shave right then. Last week Elsa had fallen in the playground and cried as if her world were falling apart. He decided to shave because his granddaughter liked smooth cheeks. He left the bathroom and stood just outside the children's room and listened to them playing. Adam was pretending to be a dog for Elsa. "If you give me a biscuit, I'll jump over here," he said. He barked. If only he could be like that all the time.

He found Maggie at the stove, singing. The coffee was waiting. He stood watching her. The newspaper was on the edge of the table. A man on the radio was telling him the news. The window was open and he could hear a man and a woman talking.

"Why you always so cheerful with all this?" he asked and fanned his hand to indicate all that was wrong, including Adam.

She placed bacon on a plate covered with paper towels and put another towel over it. Then she danced over to him and did three slow twirls. "Because I have you," she said and twirled back over to the stove. "Don't you see, Noah, how easy it would be if you were married to you? Your days would be good. See me? Watch me. I'm standing on your shoulders." She raised herself up on the tips of her toes and looked over as if from the edge of a mountain. She called down into the valley from the mountain, "Nooooaah, thank you." She settled back on her feet, swaying her hips. "Two eggs or three?" She took an egg in each hand and danced over to him, with her hips still swaying. She kissed him. He put his arms around her and kissed her with such passion that one egg cracked in her hand and she had to place the other one on the newspaper before it, too, cracked.

They did not move. She rested her cheek against his chest. He had got lost on his way to the woman's place that first time. "I'll have to give you a map for the next time," she said.

"Two eggs, then," Maggie said. She leaned to the side and found the children watching them. "Hey," Elsa said. Noah did not move. Adam was holding Elsa's hand. "Hey yourself," Maggie said. Elsa pointed to the egg Maggie had crushed against the back of Noah's robe. "He's pretty messy that way," Maggie said to Elsa. Boys, her grandmother mouthed.

Sunday

In the newspaper he read about a mother across the Anacostia River whose eight-year-old son had disappeared. The police told her to go home, that the boy would find his way back. "He's not a runaway and he stays close to home," the mother told them. "He's a good son. He's a good student. Something must have happened to him." When the police

refused to help, she and her neighbors looked for the boy but could not find him. Finally, with night coming on, a group of former convicts at the neighborhood halfway house—the Light at the End of the Tunnel—gathered to search for the boy. The men found the boy in a little piece of woods with a man who was holding him under a blanket. "I ain't doin nothin," the man was reported to have said as one former convict pulled the boy free and another punched the man in the mouth, knocking his jaw far off track. "This is all some big misunderstandin," the man said through a broken jaw before he was kicked once in the head and twice in the chest. "I can clear this whole mess up." That was Washington now, Noah thought, that was the world now—people forced to get criminals to do police work.

In the evening, the reverend, Colbert Prentiss, called to say he had missed Noah that morning at church. "Saw Maggie and the children," he began, "but I didn't see you." Noah and Colbert had grown up together, had first met at Stevens Elementary. Colbert had also been a pallbearer at Mrs. Waters's funeral.

"I'll try to make it next time, Colbert."

"You better. I don't wanna have to stand up in the pulpit and talk about you."

Tuesday

"Listen," Noah said, sitting on the floor, "why don't we get rid of this old shoppin bag?" Adam had just asked about going home and had a grip on the edge of the shopping bag. Noah gently shook the bag loose. It was already coming apart and wouldn't have survived a trip beyond the apartment. Noah tore the bag down to the bottom, right through Adam's name that someone had misspelled. And at the base of the bag he tore some more. Adam sat down, apprehensive. "I'll tell you what," Noah said. "You can have one of my suitcases if it makes things easier. If you need something for your things, I'll give you one a mine. I got one I took

to Africa. Your bag only been to D.C. My suitcase been cross the sea and back again over and over."

There were still two shirts in the bag, both shirts at least two sizes too big for the boy. "Mama Wilson gave me this one," Adam said, picking up the blue shirt.

"Well," Noah said, taking the shirt and tossing it over his shoulder toward the door, "we don't need somebody else's shirt, do we?" Adam looked at the shirt. He wanted to go to it, pick it up.

"No," Adam said. He got out the white shirt. "They had this in the home. Another boy got it outa a big box. He got one and he gave me one. It's a church shirt." He reached into the muddle of things in the bag and pulled out a clip-on tie. He placed the tie over the front of the shirt lest Noah not know what he meant.

"I like the tie, so we'll keep that. But the shirt . . . the shirt."

"It's a church shirt," Adam said.

"All right, we'll keep it for like two years from now when you've grown into it." Noah threw it on top of the blue shirt. Adam said nothing. He was thinking of the phrase "two years from now." Noah tossed the tie up onto the chest of drawers.

Adam went into the bag. "I got this truck at Mama Joyce's," he said, and ran a green Matchbox truck back and forth a few inches over the floor. He shook the bag, spreading the things about. He was looking for something, but he couldn't find it. "She gave me three of em," he said. "I had two, but this big boy took one, said it was his. But I guess I lost the other one. They ran real good. See?" He gave the green truck to Noah and bade him move it about. Noah did. "Yeah," the man said. "It runs real good."

Adam pulled a tiny wooden box from the bag. He began tapping on its sides. "It's a secret box, and it won't open if you don't do the secret." After the tapping, he raised the lid slowly, and inside was a desiccated june bug. "We caught this and Bobby put this lady's thread on his leg and we flew him. *Whoosh-whoosh!*" He picked the bug up. He offered it

to Noah, but Noah shook his head. "It won't hurt you," Adam said, putting the bug back in the box. "It won't hurt. It's dead."

For the next half hour or so, the boy went through all the things he had acquired, and for each one he had a story. A broken yo-yo that had belonged to a big-toothed boy with broken eyeglasses. A snapshot of him in a group of children; he pointed to each child and gave their full names. None had a parent. A tiny book with just the New Testament. He opened it to where someone had written his name and the day he was given the book. There was even the time of day—11:05 A.M. He flipped a few pages. "I can read these words right there," he said, and moved his finger along the lines. "The book of the Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Moses, the son of Abraham, the son of God." He stopped. "Thas all the far we got." He set the book aside. He picked up two gray stones, hefting them in his right hand. "You can hurt somebody with these. You can make em leave you alone. Here," and he gave them to Noah, and Noah hefted them and dropped them into his shirt pocket.

Adam went on and on, and in the end his grandfather said he would build him a shelf for all he had acquired.

"You got a picture of your mama and daddy?"

"I think I did," Adam said, and he looked out the window, trying to remember a woman he had last seen walking away from him. He had no memory of Caleb, but in the boy's mind his father was always smiling, because that was what fathers did. "But I think somebody took it. Maybe Oscar Tremont. He already had a mama and a daddy picture, but he wanted another one." Noah came to him and put the boy in his lap and they looked out the window together. Adam said, "I ain't never goin home, huh?" Noah was silent.

Friday

Noah did eighty-four sit-ups and a hundred and five push-ups, then lay down where he was beside the bed, his arms folded under his head.

Maggie came into the room and saw him, waited a long time for him to move. He was still. The life insurance was paid up, but she could not remember if the policies were in the apartment or if they had returned them to the bank's safe-deposit box. She began to count the seconds, and still he did not move. If she could survive picking out his casket, then maybe she could make it until after the funeral. There would be no end to the men who would be proud to be his pallbearers, to carry him home. He had been that kind of man. A good father, a good husband, a good grandfather, a good friend. Rest in peace, my love.

She went closer, and Noah stirred. She had trouble catching her breath. He turned and saw something on her face. He asked, "What's the matter, honey?"

"Nothing." She herself had been looking forward to seeing India. She knew widowed grandmothers who had been forced to raise grandchildren alone, but she had never thought she could.

Noah sat up. "Well, somethin is the matter, cause I can see it on your face."

"Stop doing all those damn exercises, Noah." She sat at the foot of the bed.

"I'm addicted, honey." He leaned back on his elbows.

"Addicted, schmaddicted. Why don't you stop?"

"Look." He rolled up his pajama sleeve and flexed the muscle. "If I stopped, who would save you from the bad guys? Answer me that. Who would save you?" He scooted closer and offered the muscle to her and she felt it, tried unsuccessfully to press down on it. Noah looked at his arm, at the scars up and down it, and he looked up to see her watching him and rolled his sleeve down. He knew how each scar came to be, could describe the day it all happened and how long the pain had been with him. She got down from the bed onto her knees and he pulled her to him and sat her sideways in the valley that his thighs made with his chest. He kissed her hard, and when they opened their eyes and looked around, Elsa was staring at them, one of her dolls in her hand. The child

was blinking but was not impressed one way or the other with what she was seeing.

Monday

At dawn he rose after only fifteen minutes of sleep, with the conversation he had had the evening before with Colbert Prentiss, the preacher, playing over and over in his head. "You ain't gonna give up on me, are you?" Noah joked. "It ain't in my nature to give up," Colbert said. "Give some thought to coming for next Sunday's grandparents' day." Noah did not have it in him to tell his friend that he did not think he would ever return to church. Noah asked before they hung up, "Didn't God have some responsibility to make nice so people would want to go on worshipping Him? Why should it be so one-sided just because He happened to be God?"

He left Maggie still asleep and went to the children's room. Adam was standing in the middle of the floor, waiting, his tennis shoes on but still in his pajamas. Noah dreaded the question, so he jumped in: "Tell me about this home you so anxious to get back to." Elsa had just awoken and lay in bed with her eyes half open. Noah stood in front of Adam. "Tell me about it. I might wanna go live there myself."

Adam began describing the front yard, a grassless place, as it turned out, "except way over there in the corner." Elsa got out of bed and began singing and running around her grandfather and her brother. Adam then began talking about Mama Wilson's downstairs, but as he went on he had to correct himself many times, because he was confusing that woman's place with many others. "No," he said, "that big TV wasn't at Mama Wilson. She had a tiny one. No flowers, neither." He looked up at Noah, as if hoping the corrections hadn't done damage to the overall truth of what he was saying. Noah sat on the floor, and Elsa immediately began climbing about him. Adam sat. In his last weeks at

Mama Wilson's, he managed to say, he had had to share that bed with a boy who screamed in his sleep. Adam waited for his grandfather to say he had never mentioned having to share the bed. Elsa left off her grandfather and began climbing about Adam. "He wasn't such a bad little boy," Adam said, "once he stopped all that screamin." He hesitated, avoided his grandfather's eyes. "Really. He wasn't a bad little boy. Really and true." Noah did not speak. "Honest. He wasn't a bad boy after the screamin."

Thursday

A little before two that night Noah awoke after a few minutes of sleep and heard tiny voices.

At the children's bedroom door he saw Adam standing at Elsa's bed, telling her to go back to sleep, that he would keep her safe. "I tell you a story if you go back to sleep," Adam said. "All little chirren gotta be asleep." And Elsa said Yes, yes, she would sleep for a story, but not no scary story. She lay down and Adam stayed at the side of the bed, pulling the covers up to her shoulders and placing a doll on either side of her. He began telling her about a little girl and a little boy who were driving alone to the beach in a car with bird wings. Noah went into the living room, the boy's voice still all around him. He did not know which way to turn, but after a long while the voice of Adam led him to the couch. The voice bade him to lie down. Noah covered himself with the throws and listened to the story of the little boy and the little girl going to the beach. It seemed to be a trip that had no end, and Noah kept waiting for them to arrive at the beach. The boy and the girl shared the driving. Sometimes they lost their way and squirrels with cowboy hats and boots had to drop from trees onto the hood of the car and tell them which way to go. There were mothers and fathers standing in Easter baskets along the road to the beach, and other children who were going places in their own cars—

to the circus, to the movies. But no one except the boy and the girl were going to the beach. "Can they come, too?" Elsa asked. "Tomorrow," Adam said, "but not right now."

Noah began to fall asleep at the point where the girl was behind the ice-cream steering wheel and it began dripping on her new tennis shoes. "I can't drive with them dirty tennis shoes," the girl told the boy. "I can't, I can't, I can't." In a dream Noah applied cold hands to the ice-cream wheel and it froze over again. The boy thanked him and the girl thanked him, but when Noah asked about a short ride on up the road, the little girl said no. "First you," the girl said, biting into the chocolate wheel, "then all them other people will wanna ride, too. We gotta put a stop to this thing right here and now." As they drove off, the boy stuck his head out the window and said to Noah, "I come back for you way before the by-and-by. Okay?"

Noah had watched his father putting on his tie not two days after they had arrived in Washington. His father's first job was as a dishwasher at the Willard Hotel. His mother had straightened his father's tie seconds before he walked out the door. "A man," his father said as he sat his new hat atop his head, "must do what a man must do."

When Noah woke again, it was nearly three o'clock and Adam was still talking. The boy in the story was driving up a mountain. "Don't go too fast," the girl told the boy. "We gotta save on the gas. Gas expensive. Five dollars." Noah turned on his side, and in no time at all he was asleep again. He was never to know when Adam went back to bed. In the dream, Noah began begging for a ride as the car came to a stop. The girl was a lost cause, he could tell that just by the confident way she had gripped the ice-cream wheel, but Noah, turning his pockets inside out to show how empty they were, began to plead his case before the boy. "Just a short ride on up the road," Noah told the boy. "We'll come back for you," the boy said, starting up the motor, "and when we do you must be ready."

Sunday

That last Sunday in August was grandparents' day at church and Noah, at the final moment, decided to go with them. "You sure you know the way?" Maggie said before they set off. Something compelled Colbert Prentiss to depart from his text near the end of his sermon that morning. It might have been all the grandparents he saw before him, all the people who had struggled into old age only to find themselves parents once again. Clement Carson. Mr. and Mrs. Harrelson. The widow Anderson. Colbert's own sister and brother-in-law. Mr. and Mrs. Apacka. Maggie and Noah Robinson. All of them the kind of people the preacher had built his rock on. The world was turned upside down when the mature ones were forced to do what the younger ones should be doing. Indeed, it was August, so why not have it snow outside, Colbert said to the hundreds. Why not lift our eyes to the sky and see all the pigs flying with their cherub wings?

He had the grandparents and their grandchildren stand and apologized to any who might have a touch of the shyness fever. He told his congregation that the people standing would lead them all out into a better day. The people sitting applauded.

Maggie helped Elsa stand up on the seat. Noah looked at those standing. Clement's three grandsons were not wearing suits, just white shirts and ties and dark pants. They were all taller than their grandfather. He found Mrs. Anderson's granddaughter across the aisle looking at him and he smiled at her, but she did not smile back. She blinked once and looked ahead. Noah's son Caleb had had a hard time sitting still in church, was forever turning and staring at what was about him. Noah looked down at the top of Adam's head. The crown had the same tuft of hair his son's had had. The barber always had a tough time mowing it down. "Should charge you extra for that bit a hair, Noah, but maybe I'll let it slide," the barber always said. And Noah would say,

"You charge me the regular for the regular hair. Any damage after that and Caleb gonna pay."

The congregation began singing "The Blind Man Stood in the Road and Cried." The spiritual ended and everyone sat down and Adam looked up at Noah, sensing his grandfather's eyes on him. Elsa curled up in Maggie's lap and soon went to sleep, one arm stretched out to the wooden pocket on the back of the pew in front of them. The congregation sang "I Done Done What Ya Told Me to Do." Without even thinking about it, Noah pulled Adam close to him and they looked at the words in the book and Adam began to cry. The boy put one hand behind his grandfather's back and grabbed hold of his suit coat as best he could. Still crying, he went over the words in the book with his finger. It was an old trick of an old boy: if you pretended to read, maybe they wouldn't notice that you really couldn't. Adam held on to Noah's coat, for he knew it was possible for people to rise up and disappear out of his life. He could not then know that Noah had already told God that he planned to live forever. Why should eternal life be only for bonsai trees? Why should men, the greatest glory of God, come second to trees? Noah placed his hand over Adam's as it went over the words in the book. Adam grabbed more of the coat and it was then that Noah, feeling himself go light as a blossom in the wind, leaned down and anchored his lips to that difficult tuft of the boy's hair.