

Repeating Second Grade

Inscribing *Ms. Hanson* on the blackboard in standard hand, Elizabeth thought she might have made a mistake to take a job teaching second grade. This was not her handwriting. This was not her name. Her name was Lizzie: “Oh Lizzie, my Lizzie,” as Jerry had been wont to whisper night after night in the city, delirious with scotch and the world that he, at a not so distinguished forty-five, continued to believe lay before him. But God invented charm for a reason. Which was?

She’d fled the city to figure that out. And to rid herself of whatever’d made her waste two whole years on Jerry Windhoven. She’d ended up not in some inner city saving the world as well as herself but here in a private school on the gold coast of Connecticut, where her lack of teaching credentials faded to nothing in light of the chaos caused by a virulent cancer appearing in the lung of the scheduled teacher two weeks before school was to begin. *Wednesday, October 9*, she looped on—an entire month in Connecticut and the glory of Time Warner’s editorial floor hadn’t even called her to say Lizzie, my Lizzie, come back from the wilderness.

Solomon was shuffling through the door, and she turned to a large blond boy whose head contained 162 unreachable IQ points. With careful placings of his tongue he said, “I br-ought my s-nake.” Nobody knew why Solomon couldn’t read or write. The remedial phonics teacher hazarded that maybe he saw too finely: for Solomon an *A* leaning slightly to the left could look quite different from an *A* leaning slightly to the right. The boy’s mother blamed herself for expecting Solomon to be as successful as his brother. The snake was Mom’s idea, to help Solomon make friends. Elizabeth accepted the tin can and looked cautiously in at a small black snake, wishing Solomon had worked his way up Darwin to the birds.

“Ms. Hanson!” Frances called, spinning plumply into the room in the constant one-act starring herself. “My parents left me last night! The minute they were out the driveway, I put my head on my pillow and cried and cried!”

“When are they coming back?”

“Saturday.”

The parents at Suburban Day could afford to spin off to Paris for a couple of nights. Sometimes she felt like Jane Eyre, without her Mr. Rochester.

“Good morning, Ms. Hanson.” Here was Ivar, an entirely competent child. You could send him to play in the demon-infested Black Forest and he would return unharmed and on time for supper. He placed his long, warm hand in hers, left it there. Last week, she’d actually dreamed of him, grown, and in her bed. “Not glad to have you aboard anymore,” Dr. Wakefield would say, crumpling the contract he’d offered her out of a desperation equal to her own.

Gradually seventeen children made their way into the room, leaving only one missing. Elizabeth began by introducing Solomon’s snake, and the tin can was making its way from desk to desk when Arthur finally appeared at the door, swinging a navy blue jacket like a cape over small wide shoulders. “I’m Superman,” he called, jumping into the room. “Disguised as . . . Arthur Peterson!”

So they were assembled, eighteen answers to the same question. Who am I? The

day could begin.

“See here,” Elizabeth said with excitement a few weeks later, as she drew little marks on the board. She’d figured out how to make learning more fun. Goodbye standard handwriting, goodbye rote arithmetic. Today she’d shake them into radical thought. “Pretend you’re an ancient shepherd. One sheep goes through the gate and you make a mark for it. Another sheep goes through the gate and you make another mark. See?” They didn’t see. Halfway to the shepherd’s miraculous discovery of place value and the decimal system, Ivar stopped her.

“Would you start over again, Ms. Hanson, please?”

If Ivar didn’t get it, nobody did. Elizabeth put her chalk down and returned to the addition sheets Dr. Wakefield had supplied. Maybe grade two was not for shaking up. Maybe grade two was for laying down the grooves. After all, this was conservative territory, the Gold Coast.

When the bell rang, arithmetic flowed out and spelling in. The class quieted enough that Sue Ellen’s damp, deep struggle for breath became audible to everyone. The coming hour Elizabeth intended to use to enhance Sue Ellen’s existence among the children who shunned her. Willy nilly across the board, she wrote the week’s spelling words, as her own second grade teacher had done in the cul de sacs of Waltham, Massachusetts. “Now watch,” she said. “One word will vanish.” Erasing a word, she walked to the back of the room and to get the popular kids out of the way first called out “Frances!”

Frances bounded up, reinscribed the missing word, erased another, and called “Arthur!” Everyone had the same crush. Forward lunged Arthur, his shoulders high as a quarterback’s. That was very much the way Jerry Windhoven had walked down the center of Manhattan at midnight, stopping traffic with a confident hand, on his way to a bar where patrons cheered his arrival.

When Arthur chose Ivar, Elizabeth interrupted him. “Wait up. I forgot to say that today we’ll have boys call on girls and girls call on boys.” With ten boys and eight girls, someone would have to name Sue Ellen. Yet minutes before the end of the period, the girl remained unchosen, and Elizabeth’s plan was in danger of failing. Danny, the ninth boy, slid to the board, erased a word, chanted, “Frances!”

Elizabeth fought back. “Frances has had her turn.”

Defeated, Danny slung the eraser to the chalk tray and mumbled, “Sue Ellen.”

Despite the half-hearted invitation, Sue Ellen rose and walked to the board with assurance. She stood with her back to the class and looked down at her feet. She checked to make sure that her shoes were in absolutely perfect alignment. Not satisfied, she readjusted them. Only then did she reach up to the board to write the missing word. The kid was a contender. The bell rang as Sue Ellen was calling out “Arthur!”

At recess, Elizabeth reminded Arthur that he must stay in to practice carrying numbers from column to column as he added them together. His distraction, Dr. Wakefield had explained in September, stemmed from the summer drowning of his older brother. She set some problems before him saying, “Use your mind now.”

“Oh, I will.” The sweat of effort gathered at Arthur’s hairline and inspiration hit, “But it’s not a gold mine!”

She, too, succumbed to Arthur daily.

Making her way down the corridor, she entered a crowded teachers' room that smelled of smoke and broken hearts, a far cry from the bawdy odor that had greeted her every morning in the big office building in Manhattan. By now Jerry would be at his desk in the windowed office drinking coffee to sober up his aging brain cells. Already the Wellesley graduates in their lipstick and tall shoes would be hanging over him. What made Jerry and Arthur so winning? Ivar so self-sufficient? How could the half-ruined Sue Ellen have stood so intact at the front of the room? And how could she, Elizabeth, repair her dented heart and return to Manhattan as a grown-up, instead of as a sidekick to a charismatic senior editor?

During reading, Elizabeth sat on a chair so tiny that her knees stuck out high while Christine, the academic star, pronounced with feeling every word in the story about pioneers. There was nothing Christine didn't do well. The trees she drew were completely articulated—branches of diminishing girth, leaves at various stage of furl and unfurl. She seemed a miniaturization of a certain researcher back at *Time*, the terribly perfect Natalie. Elizabeth preferred stragglers.

"Danny?" She called now.

"What?" Lax-lipped, he drifted in from a foreign state.

"Read."

When the circle was done, she called Danny to her desk. His mother was a Sunday School teacher who insisted her son be given extra books with no reference to fighting or guns. Elizabeth pulled one from her Danny stack.

"How about this one? It's about famous people and what they did when they were younger."

"No."

"George Washington—in a book all by himself?"

"No."

"Thomas Edison?"

"No."

"Think it over. He invented the electric light."

"No."

"Well," she said, lifting the book she knew he'd crave. "Here's one on Helen Keller. She was blind and deaf and dumb."

"That's the one!" The lips muscled in. Desire entered the brown eyes.

Lunch was dreary. During it, round, dapper Dr. Wakefield gave a too cheerful speech on table manners to a large room filled with disinclined children and quite a few cooked peas. In the classroom, the afternoon ran quickly to the departure bell, for which the children lined up in front of the chalkboard. At this time of day the boys were eager to kick at each other's kneecaps and the girls to declaim in loud voices the names of their best friends. Elizabeth warded off these violences by explaining what it looked like inside a polling booth and what the word Democrat meant. Afterwards, she waited for Sue Ellen's mother and rehearsed Dr. Wakefield's warning that, as a totally untrained teacher,

she must steer clear of all controversy.

Mrs. Wharton's straggly hair was blonded and her whiskey voice gave off the self-trust of those who have set out—and managed—to marry for money. "What does Sue Ellen do when she comes home from school?" Elizabeth asked.

Mrs. Wharton told all. "She runs up to me and throws those pitiful, scabbed arms around me. I make her sit down and rest. I have the girl bring her a glass of ginger ale. You should have seen her sister when she was that age, beautiful blond curls and not a problem in the world."

Elizabeth had a sister like that, Deidre, Deidre the wife, mother, and corporate lawyer. "Does Sue Ellen complain to you that the girls don't play with her?"

"Now and then."

"What do you say to her?"

"I tell her to get down on her knees and pray to Jesus. He got left out a lot, too." Elizabeth could think of no allowable reply before Mrs. Wharton went on. "If she doesn't have friends by spring, I'll take her to Bermuda for a month or two. And in the fall she can repeat second grade."

Elizabeth forgot to avoid controversy. "But you can't! She does good work!"

In a modest neighboring town, Elizabeth sat in her second-floor apartment at a wicker table bestowed upon her by her mother, a nurse. In the family photograph album her mother posed on ever-improving couches while her father, a doctor, appeared in blurred movement, approaching or departing, until finally there were no more approaches.

Elizabeth finished her pasta. She corrected papers. There didn't appear to be a single dateable man in this entire town of married people. At least it wasn't a weekend. Last weekend she'd spent thirty hours sitting in a chair reading her way through Camus. After washing her plate in the kitchen, she crossed her bedroom to stand at the back window and look out over the small white birches she'd seen on the day of the hurricane, when she'd driven up to meet Dr. Wakefield. She'd stood here with the landlady, and they'd looked out at the birch trees that moved like flowers in the passion of the storm. "I'll take it," she'd said. Now she whispered *move* to the birches and nothing happened.

Here she was, stuck in Connecticut in the wrong career and without a man. Career, marriage, children: she wasn't anywhere on the ladder. It was ten o'clock. By now Jerry would be sitting by himself in the enormous, neon-blinking building. He'd take his poems from his bottom drawer and work on them till midnight and then stride across Sixth Avenue, bringing cars to a halt. In a dingy downtown bar, he'd recite Yeats or Blake. *Till I the Prince of love beheld who in the sunny beams did glide*—until some woman gave him a signal. Hey, try to remember, he's old, alcoholic, and a skirt chaser.

In the common bathroom on the landing, her neighbors' frayed towels hung dolefully. Through the wall, she could hear the man and the woman arguing as they seemed to every night. Back in her narrow bed, she opened her book to the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. *My own heart let me more have pity on*, she recited to the empty room where no one welcomed her or cheered her on. *Let me live to my sad self hereafter kind, charitable.*

January, she wrote on the board, and the hill behind school iced over. The children slid

down on the seats of their expensive snowsuits. Elizabeth stood guard in a snowy field: 116 days in Connecticut. Friday evening she boiled some frozen lobster tails for her friend Inez who was coming up from the city.

At the table Inez shook her ash blond ponytail and flexed her agile fingers to attack the tails, announcing, "I'm going to marry Mike."

"No kidding. When did you change your mind?"

"At Christmas. My parents. You know."

She did know. Christmas in Waltham had been filled with Deidre's kids and her mother's frequent reiteration: *Don't you want some kids of your own, honey?* She wasn't sure what to say to Inez since she'd been witness for so many years to her wavering and gravity-prone affair. "Well, yeah. I mean, that's good. It's great." They talked about weddings, and later she asked, "How's Jerry? Does he ever ask—?"

Inez cut her short. "He's going around with Natalie."

"Natalie!"

"I told you not to leave."

Beautiful, dark-haired Natalie with her red nail polish and her gemstone rings and her soft silk blouses.

The next morning Elizabeth dropped Inez off at the railroad station and returned to find her quarrelling neighbors loading a mattress into a Hertz Rent-A-Truck. Upstairs, she made corn chowder, leaving her door ajar so she could say goodbye to them. You didn't have to get married anymore. You could have a baby yourself. If she got to be thirty-five without anybody, she'd do that. Unless her heart were already filled up with other women's children. This was a danger. She was already falling in love with them. Solomon had told her his dream: *I saw a ball. Wherever I looked, the ball would go wherever my eyes would go.* Danny had written a report: *I have learned that God lived in a cemetery and didn't have a car. He walked around on naked feet.* Looking up from the stove, she saw a short person standing outside the door. His forehead looked as damp with involvement as Arthur Peterson's.

"I'm Jake," he said. "The one you'll be sharing the bathroom with."

"I'm Liz. I'm incredibly quick in there."

"Oh, I'm quick, too." He stood on tiptoe, making himself taller. "And I'm still growing." He backed across the hallway to his door. "Say, I'm giving a spaghetti dinner tonight. Sort of a house warming. Won't you join in?"

Elizabeth accepted and shut her door. She'd always wanted a kid brother. Out her front window, she could see a red sports car and her landlady's fourteen-year-old daughter peering into it.

There were no other guests. The spaghetti he'd made was gone and her glass empty again. She had drunk too much, thinking of Jerry and Natalie. Jake was his name. This boy. Jake. He was twenty-one and at the community college. Isn't that what he'd said?

"Now I'm making coffee," he informed her from the stove. "Everything's going to be fine."

She smiled, feeling dizzy, distant. He moved well and seemed to fit all the way out to

the skin of his compact body. A wrestling champion, he'd said, in school. He couldn't have meant high school, could he?

Into two cups he poured steaming water from a white enamel pan. "That was my specialty."

She didn't reply; she hadn't been following.

"The scissors hold." He brought the cups to the table.

He was sitting very near her and smelled so good.

"Here," he moved a cup toward her along the table.

"Thanks."

"I like that, the way you make your hair turn under." He moved his head near hers. "How do you do that?"

"You hold the dryer in your—left hand, and you hold the brush in your—right hand."

"Show me."

She let go the warm cup and held her left hand up behind her head and ran the fingers of her right hand through her hair, "Like this."

"I see." He reached for her hair and put his fingers through it. "Like that?"

"No. Turn your hand around."

He stood. He moved behind her. "You mean like this?"

"Yes." She leaned her head against his arm. He bent and kissed her.

"Stand up." His breath was warm on her neck. She stood, a little unsteadily; her hips were higher than his, their lips level. "You want to see it?"

"What?"

"My scissors hold?"

Drinking, drinking, drunk. Do you see me, Jerry? Imitation is the purist form of— But Jerry had left her. She had to leave him sometime. "Sure."

The bed was in the other room.

In the morning the sun shone onto his night table. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor talking to a blond woman who was hosting an exercise program on TV. His undershirt lay wrinkled on the bedside table beside his car keys and his license. She looked at the license. He was only nineteen years old, five years older than the landlady's daughter and ten years younger than her.

That must be her problem in the world, something about age, adoration, and maybe alcohol? She had the A syndrome.

Little lamb, who made thee? Dost thou know who made thee? "Good morning, Ms. Hanson. I'm rereading *Black Beauty*." Ivar pronounced his consonants in the careful manner of Chaucerians. Danny had gone on to Aztec tortures. Frances wore her hundred-dollar Swiss sweater. Christine drew a perfectly naked February tree. Arthur touched Elizabeth's hand with his soft, cartilage-filled fingertips and told her that his mother was going to have a baby. Dr. Wakefield brought her a new boy, Bobby T. He couldn't read or tell time. Dr. Wakefield had ordered tests. What Bobby T. did almost continuously was draw pictures of birds with large feet. During penmanship, Solomon raised his hand. "Would you puh,

would you please give that last letter again, Ms. Hanson?” “JAY,” Elizabeth said, instead of juh-ay, blending the sounds rapidly, the way the phonics teacher said to. Light came into Solomon’s face and he bent to write. So we go, slowly. *Dost thou know who made thee? Gave thee such a tender voice, making all the vales rejoice?*

“Ms. Hanson, my dear.” At the wicker table, Jake ran his thumb along her lower lip. “How about another game of strip poker?” They dealt the cards on her mother’s old porch table and Jake cheated, hurrying to lose his clothes; she loved to see his body emerge from its wrapping of sweaty cloth. Tossing off a last shoe, he came to her. “You’ll want me before I count ten,” he whispered into her ear. “Ms. Hanson.” He liked to play student to her teacher.

During Science, she told the children to turn their chairs toward the clock and they obeyed. No matter what she asked, they turned their round, innocent faces to her as if they were cabbages on the floor of the Red Sea, tropic for light. Second grade was definitely not for revolutionaries. We’re here for the basics, you and me. “Now the second row. Everybody in the second row, move your chairs closer to the first row.” That was the correct pace, tongue-twistingly slow, mind-wanderingly slow but she didn’t resist anymore. The basics take time. “That will give everybody in the first and second rows a partner. Now the third row, everybody in that row—”

“What about me?” Arthur’s voice sounded oddly anxious. Due to an accident of classroom geography, the idolized boy had no partner. “You can be your own partner,” she informed him. He’d need to know the bread of loneliness before the new child was born. “Everything I tell them to do to each other, you do to yourself.”

They felt for each other’s pulses inside the wrist, shy to touch one another in so vulnerable a spot. To practice this, she’d taken Jake’s pulse in bed the night before: 76, 81, 89. “Everybody stand up now. When I say *go*, start counting your partner’s pulse silently. Ready? Set? Go!” She turned to watch the big clock’s second hand push them all further from forgotten wombs, toward what? toward whom?

“Stop! Now give me your counts.”

Christine called hers out first: “One hundred and one!” Then they all shouted numbers like Christine’s, much too high.

“Okay. Switch hands. The ones who were taking the pulses will now *have their pulses taken!*” Grasping his own wrist, Arthur began a nervous step beside his desk. “What’s the matter, Arthur?”

“You can’t expect me to stand around all day just taking my own pulse!”

“That’s exactly what I do expect, Arthur.” Her new authority pleased her.

“But Ms. Hanson, my dear,” Jake cajoled her as they stood at the bathroom mirror while she put on fresh eyeliner. “Kids *do* have faster pulses. I read it in biology. Is that how you do it, the eyelids?”

“It’s simple.” She held the tiny brush up for Jake’s inspection. He cared how she poured liquid soap into the dishwasher. Whether she sharpened pencils or let them dull into rounded points. She’d never been so adored in her life. Through sunny beams she’d lured

him to a cage she didn't want him in.

"Hey!" he said, as she turned from the cloudy, ill-lighted mirror. "Stand up, for God's sake!" He took a boxer's feint at her stomach. "Here, come on, pull it in there." She stood straighter. "Very nice." He lay his hand on her belly. If she managed to have shaved legs, glossy hair, filed nails, and to be standing straight all at the same moment, Jake would look at her with pride, as if he had produced her.

May made such a short curvy shape on the chalkboard. Ivar began *Black Beauty* for the third time. Danny finished the mysteries of the mummies and began to run around with his index finger held out like a gun, going *pku, pku, I've got you*. Bobby T's IQ arrived: ninety-three. He drew birds slightly off the ground now, their useless feet dangling, their beaks expressing worry. Solomon mastered the shifting, untrustable alphabet through *T*. And Elizabeth tried to stay awake in the teachers' room, where she was composing a note to someone she knew on *Newsweek*.

Jake drove the red car to the Cineplex at the mall and when they were seated inside took her hand sedately in his warm, square one. Oh, he was tempting, tasty, and he'd make a steady husband. On a dark leafy road home, his little car ran out of gas and he shoved it into neutral and turned the wheel over to her. At the back of the car, he amazed her by actually pushing the vehicle forward. Half a mile he pushed, and he wasn't even tired. "Ran out of gas," he said, winking at the garage attendant. Then he leaned through the open window to say, "You know what? We make a good pair." And for a tantalizing minute, it did seem so.

Sleepily, she sat in the circle of reading chairs with the spring sun warm on her neck. The wagon wheels were stilled, and pioneer corn was growing on the prairies when suddenly Elizabeth became aware of silence, darkness. She opened her eyes to find all the children staring at her. "Sleeping on the job!" Dr. Wakefield would say. After lunch she was summoned to his office. The tiny heels of her new sandals poked holes into the softened earth as she ran to the upper school building. When she reached him, he held up a contract—the very one she'd transferred that morning, unsigned, from her mailbox to his.

"But why not?" he asked.

"I guess I just want to play with kids my own age."

He offered a raise, gave up, expressed regrets, and turned to the subject of Sue Ellen. Mrs. Wharton was insisting that he hold the girl back and let her repeat second grade. "No, no!" Elizabeth objected. She could see Sue Ellen as a leftover giantess, her huge shoes pointed at Stop. "You can't! She's ready for third grade."

"Repeating a grade can be most strengthening. Believe me. Make it seem natural to her," Dr. Wakefield said, shutting his file.

"What? Me?"

"You're the one who'll have to tell her."

The sun was bright at recess and Sue Ellen sat alone on a swing. "Want a push?" Elizabeth asked. After awhile, she gradually slowed the ropes until they became motionless

in her hand. “Sue Ellen, I want to tell you something. You’ve done very good work in second grade—”

“I know all about it, Ms. Hanson,” Sue Ellen said, scuffing her shoes on the tar. “My mother told me. I’m staying back so I will have friends and not feel sick. It’s to help my asthma.”

“Good. You know, I repeated second grade, too,” Elizabeth said, not adding *just this year*.

Yet when she turned into her street and drove up behind the little red car to find Jake demonstrating handstands on the lawn for the landlady’s daughter and her friends, she felt jealous—and as if she actually had been left behind.

“Today is special,” Elizabeth began, stalling for time, unprepared for the afternoon science class. Jake had started a model of her head for Plastic Arts 101, and they hadn’t gotten to bed till 3:30. “Today, you can ask any question about science you want. About the world around us, anything!”

Ivar raised his hand, “Like what?”

“Oh, like why is the sky blue. Like why does it rain. And,” she added, knowing they’d sell their souls for temporary glory, “anyone who knows the answer can come up front and tell the rest of us.”

One hand rose, Bobby T’s. “Why is the sky blue?” he asked. Christine hurried up front to clue everybody in on refraction.

Danny’s hand next, asking, “How did God create . . . Alaska?” Elizabeth grabbed the globe and gave him his first secular history of the universe. “And that’s what made the dry land, all of it, including Alaska.”

Silence, she thought of the Scopes trial. Then Arthur’s hand went up. “How does a mother . . . a mother elephant . . . who’s going to have a baby . . . how does the baby get out?” The class offered giggles and a communal red face. “I know!” Frances waved an arm, strode forward, squatted, and pointed between her thighs. “It comes out here!”

The children examined their desks and fingers.

Bobby T. again, his voice dropping to a coda as the bell rang: “Why do birds have feet?”

After they’d left, Elizabeth looked down at her own shoes and straightened them. *Lamb, lamb, how is it we are made to be ourselves?* I am that I am. This is the way I point my feet. Here is my snake. Even if what I am is only becoming, only slowly coming into being.

“Hie!” The words fell out of Jake’s mouth. He was standing on his head in the middle of the front lawn. Around him sprawled the landlady’s daughter and the five or six other girls who were there every afternoon now, a ragtag lot of bangs and braids crazy about Jake.

As Elizabeth climbed the stairs, she heard them screaming and clapping. Sometimes they hit Jake in mock anger, anything to touch him. Sometimes they came out to find him again after supper, screen doors slamming in the soft, unbearable twilight of puberty. Upstairs, she smelled rain coming, but instead of shutting the front window, she stood by it and watched him. He had decided to become a teacher. Already he led his own

devotees in multiplication.

“Six times seven is forty-two, yoo hoo!” A dark-haired girl shouted, and to reward her, Jake did a cartwheel. His sneakers squeaked on the grass. He picked his jacket off a lilac bush and turned toward the house to a chorus of “No! No! No!” She heard his feet on the stairway. When she turned, he was standing in her kitchen, at the threshold to her living room, jacket in hand, looking like the captain of a little league team.

“I have something to say.”

“What?”

“Let’s get married.”

“Married?”

He stayed at the door, and when Elizabeth didn’t go on, he said, “Is it because you’re older? I thought about that. Listen, you’ll be out in the yard shaking lettuce or raking leaves, and all the old ladies will be leaning out their windows. ‘She’s pretty old, yep, I betcha,’ they’ll say. But what they’ll be thinking is, ‘She must be terrific if that boy Jake wanted her more than anybody else in the world.’”

They were both silent; it doesn’t happen every day, a proposal.

A shattering sound on the stairway and the girls propelled themselves up to pound on Jake’s door across the hall. “Jake! Jake! You told us to tell you! It’s raining! It’s raining!”

“Thanks!” he called to them and ran downstairs and out to pull the hood over his car.

They didn’t talk about it at supper. Afterward she started the dishes, and he stretched into his deep knee bends before the television. At the ad break, he spoke. “Scared you’ll get wrinkled?”

“I don’t think I could pay for your college, dear.”

“That’s mean. That’s mean and it’s stupid, Liz.” He got up from the floor, growing cheerful again. “Only a few days left to the bargain offer, you know.” He took a wet dish out of her hands and pressed his thighs against hers. “As my mother used to say, first you frig her and then you refrig-her-later.” This was his pet joke. Could she live with it?

June. At midnight she corrected papers on Jake’s kitchen table while he finished the clay version of her head in a beige material that reminded her of silly putty. He picked up a small modeling stick. “Such a wonderful nose you have, Liz. Too bad you can’t see it from where you are.”

“Jake,” she said softly, carefully. “I got a phone call today. They’re offering me a job on the research desk at *Newsweek*.”

“Liz?” His look turned from accusation to withdrawal. “You’re not going, are you?”

“I’m going, Jake, as soon as school’s out.”

Through his wide fingers, he extruded her head and they both watched it as it passed into four separate ropes of clay.

It was the last day and time for recess. The children ran out of the room for the last time to which a return would be attached. Ivar stayed with her, pulling a chair to her desk.

“I wonder if I might read to you from my book, *Black Beauty*?”

“Please do.”

“Let me first catch you up on the story, Ms. Hanson.” He proceeded to outline the idyllic early life of the horse first called Darkie, a life which took a turn for the worse when his mistress sickened. He read a few pages aloud: “The last sad day had come; the footman and the heavy luggage had gone off the day before . . .”

“Oh, Ivar, thank you,” she said when he finished the farewell section. “I bet there are a hundred books you’ll love the way you’ve loved *Black Beauty*. You’ll have a whole life to read them and to love them.”

He folded the book over a finger and stood up. He put out the hand by which he had so often claimed her. As if he feared she had missed the reason for the selection he’d read, he said, “Isn’t it sad, Ms. Hanson, to think that you and I shall not be seeing one another anymore?”

“It’s sad, Ivar. Yes, it’s very sad. I will miss you a lot.” Tears were threatening her eyes as she searched for the right mistake, the one to help him set himself free of what he adored. First, she took her hand away, then announced in rare teacherly manner, “There’s still ten minutes of recess. Why don’t you go out for some fresh air?”

He looked at the floor.

Overbearing and too fast, no better than with Jake. She must restore his pride. “Ivar, you were magnificent yesterday, winning the potato race.”

“That? That’s nothing, Ms. Hanson!” He looked up with eyes fresh from the perfect, if accidental, betrayal. “I’ve won that race every year. Don’t you know the first thing about me? In the threes, the fours, the fives, the sixes, and now in second grade!” He blinked and ran out.

Oh love, that will not— At three o’clock there came the hiatus on the other side of which would be no Ivar, no Arthur, no Frances, no Solomon, no Danny, no Sue Ellen; no Jerry, and now no Jake. She sat on a child’s chair in front of them; if only she could let them go with as gracious a goodbye as Ivar had given her. First, she must warn them of her departure. Dr. Wakefield insisted on that.

“In case some of you come looking for me next fall and don’t find me here in the classroom, I want you to know that I’m not going to be a teacher anymore. I’m taking a job with a magazine in New York City.”

A stamped-on stare from eighteen faces.

“You ought to have punished us more.” Arthur finally offered, his damp forehead marked with dirt.

“What?”

“You never shouted at us, like teachers are supposed to.” His face was red.

Oh! They thought she’d been fired.

“I don’t care! You’re the best teacher I ever had!” Frances called out, having had two.

“That’s what I meant,” Arthur confessed, head lowering.

Christine raised her hand and, trading only in facts—self-protectively, as Elizabeth saw at last and too late—inquired, “What’s third grade like, Ms. Hanson?”

Oh, my dear, if only I could tell you.

At 3:15 the children stood in a line and filed past her into the courtyard. She shook their hands as slowly as possible, feeling desperate to see that the head of the line was

already vanishing into chauffeured cars and that the tail was becoming shorter and shorter. None of them said anything except Bobby T., whose mother had apparently drilled him in a proper farewell and into whose dusty synapses the silence of communal grief had failed to penetrate. "Thank you, Ms. Hanson," he said, pressing her hand. Then she knew what to do.

Oh, thank you, thank you! she called silently after them, as, within her, hope appeared.