

VESSEL

ORSON SCOTT CARD

PAULIE HARDLY KNEW HIS cousins before that first family reunion in the mountains of North Carolina, and within about three hours he didn't want to know them any better. Because his mom was the youngest and she had married late, almost all the cousins were a lot older than Paulie and he didn't hit it off very well with the two that were his age, Celie and Deckie.

Celie, the girl cousin, only wanted to talk about her beautiful Arabians and how much fun she would have had if her mother had let her bring them up into the mountains, to which Paulie finally said, "It would have been a real hoot to watch you get knocked out of the saddle by a low branch," whereupon Celie gave him her best rich-girl freeze-out look and walked away. Paulie couldn't resist whinnying as she went.

This happened within about fifteen minutes of Paulie's arrival at the mountain cabin that Aunt Rosie had borrowed from a rich guy in the Virginia Democratic Party organization who owed her about a thousand big favors, as she liked to brag. "Let's just say that his road construction business depended on some words whispered into the right ears."

When she said that, Paulie was close enough to his parents to hear his father whisper to his mother, "I'll bet the left ears were lying on cheap motel pillows at the time." Mother jabbed him and Father grinned. Paulie didn't like the nastiness in Father's smile. It was the look that Grappaw always called "Mubbie's shit-eatin' smile." Grappaw was Father's father, and the only living soul who dared to call Father by that stupid baby nickname. In his mind, though, Paulie liked to think of Father that way. Mubbie Mubbie Mubbie.

Late in the afternoon Uncle Howie and Aunt Sissie showed up, driving a BMW and laughing about how much it would cost to get rid of the scratches from the underbrush that crowded the dirt road to the cabin. They always laughed when they talked about how much things cost; Mubbie said that was because laughing made people think they didn't care. "But they're always talking about it, you can bet." It was true. They hadn't been five minutes out of the car before they were talking about how expensive their trip to Bermuda had been ha-ha-ha and how much it was costing to put little Deckie into the finest prep school in Atlanta ha-ha-ha and how the boat salesmen insisted on calling thirty-footers "yachts" so they could triple the price but you just have to grit your teeth and pay their thieves' toll ha-ha-ha like the three billy goats gruff ha-ha-ha.

Then they went on about how their two older children were so busy at Harvard and some Wall Street firm that they just couldn't tear themselves away but they brought Deckie their little accident ha-ha-ha and they just bet that he and Paulie would be good friends.

Deckie was suntanned to the edge of skin cancer, so Paulie's first words to him were, "What, are you trying to be black?"

"I play tennis."

"Under a sunlamp?"

"I tan real dark." Deckie looked faintly bored, as though he had to answer these stupid questions all the time but he had been raised to be polite.

"Deckie? What's that short for? Or are you named after the floor on a yacht?" Paulie thought he was joking, like old friends joke with each other, but Deckie seemed to take umbrage.

"Deckie is short for Derek. My friends call me Deck."

"Are you sure they aren't calling you duck?" Paulie laughed and then wished he hadn't. Deckie's eyes glazed over and he began looking toward the house. Paulie didn't want him to walk off the way Celie had. Deckie was two years older than Paulie, and it was the important two years. Puberty had put about a foot of height on him and he was lean and athletic and his moves were languid and Paulie wanted more than anything to be just like Deckie instead of being a medium-height medium-strong medium-smart freckled twelve-year-old nothing.

So naturally he tried to cover up his stupid duck joke with an even lamer one. "Have you noticed how everybody in the family has a nickname that ends with ie?" Paulie said. "They might as well hyphenate that into the family name. You'd be Deck Ie-Bride, and Celie would be Ceel Ie-Caswell."

Deckie smiled faintly. "And you'd be Paul Ie-Asshole."

Paulie stood there blushing, flustered, until he finally realized that this was not a friendly joke, this was Deckie letting him know that he didn't exist. So Paulie turned and walked away from Deckie. Did Celie feel like this when she walked away from me? If she did then I'm a rotten shit to make somebody else feel like this. Why can't I just keep my mouth shut? Other people keep their mouths shut.

Later he saw Deckie and Celie hanging around together, laughing until tears ran down Celie's face. He knew they were talking about him. Or if they weren't they might as well be. That was the kind of laughter that never included Paulie, not at school, not at home, not here at this stupid family reunion in this stupid forty-room mansion that some stupid rich person called a "cabin." Whenever people laughed in real friendship, close to each other, bound by affection or mutual respect or whatever it was, Paulie felt it like a knife in his heart. Not because he was particularly lonely. He liked being alone and other people made him nervous so it wasn't like he suffered. It hurt him because it was exactly the way people were with Mubbie. Nobody liked him and he still kept joking with them as if they were friends, even Mother, she didn't like him either, any idiot could see that, they were probably staying together for the sake of "the child," which was Paulie of course. Or rather Mother was staying for Paulie's sake, and Mubbie was staying for Mother's money, which was always useful for tiding him over between sales jobs, which Mubbie always joked his way into losing after

having piled up an impressive record of lost sales and mishandled contracts. I'm just like him, Paulie thought. I joke like him, I make enemies like him, people sneer at me behind my back the way they do with him, only I'm not even studly enough to get a rich babe like Mom to bail me through all the screw-ups that lie ahead of me in life.

If I could just learn to keep my mouth shut.

He even tried it for the next couple of hours, being absolutely silent, saying nothing to anybody. But of course the moment he wanted to shut up, that was when all the aunts and uncles and the older cousins had to come up and pretend to care about him. No doubt Mother had noticed that Paulie was by himself and told them to go include Paulie. People did what Mother said, even her older brothers and sisters. She just had a way of making suggestions that people started following before they even had a chance to think about whether they wanted to. So when Paulie tried to get by with nods and smiles, he kept hearing, "Cat got your tongue?" and "You can't be that shy" and even "You got something you shouldn't in your mouth, boy?" to which Paulie thought of about five funny answers, one of which wasn't even obscene, but at least he managed not to say them out loud and completely scandalize everybody and make himself the humiliated goat of the whole reunion, with Mother apologizing to everybody and saying, "I can assure you he wasn't raised that way," so that everybody understood that he got his ugly way of talking from Mubbie's side of the family. Of course, Mother would no doubt end up saying that sometime before the week was over, but maybe Paulie would get through the first day without having to hear it.

Dinner was bad. The dining room table was huge, but not big enough for everybody. Naturally, they had to have Nana, Mother's grandmother, at the table, even though she was so gaga that she had to be spoonfed some poisonously bland gruel and never seemed to understand anything going on around her. Why didn't they send her to the second table with the little children of some of the older cousins, nasty little brats with no manners at all and a way of whining that made Paulie want to insert silverware really far down their throats? But no, that was Paulie's place.

Deckie and Celie were assigned to that table, too, but they ducked off into the kitchen to eat there, and bad as it was with the brats, Paulie knew it would be worse in the kitchen where he hadn't been invited. So he had to sit there and try to listen over the noise of the brats as Uncle Howie at the other table bragged about Deckie's tennis playing and how he could turn pro if he wanted, but of course he was going to Harvard and he'd simply use his tennis to terrorize his employees when he was running some company. "His employees won't have to try to lose in order to suck up to Deckie," Uncle Howie said. "They'll have to be such damn good tennis players that they can give him a good game. And that means his best executives will all be in top physical shape, which keeps the health costs down."

"Till one of them drops dead of a heart attack on the tennis court and the widow sues Deckie for making him play."

The whole table fell silent except for one person, who was laughing uproariously because after all, he made the joke. Mubbie, naturally. Paulie wanted to die.

After the dead silence, punctuated only by the laughter of one social corpse, Mother turned the conversation back to the achievements of the other children. It was a cruel thing for her to do, since naturally the others asked her about what Paulie was doing, and naturally she answered with offhand good humor, "Oh, you know, he gets along well enough. No psychiatrists' bills yet, and no bail money, so we're content." The others laughed at this, except Paulie. He wondered if maybe some of the older cousins had been to shrinks or had to be bailed out of jail, so that maybe Mom's little joke had a barb to it just like Father's did, only she knew how to do it subtly, so that even the victims had to laugh. But most likely nobody in this scrupulously correct family had ever been in a position where either a shrink or a bail bondsman was required.

Paulie ate as quickly as possible and excused himself and went to the room that had Deckie's stuff in it too, piled on the other twin bed, but mercifully Deckie himself was off somewhere else being perfect and Paulie had some peace. His mother made him bring some books so when he was off by himself she could tell the others he was reading, and Paulie was smart enough to have packed books he already read at school so that when the adults asked him what he was reading he could tell them what the story was about, as if they cared. But the truth was that Paulie didn't like to read, it all seemed pretty thin to him, he could think up better stuff just lying around with his eyes closed.

They must have thought he was asleep, must have peered in the door and decided he was dead to the world, or they probably wouldn't have held their little confab out in the hall, Mother and her brothers and sister. The subject was Nana. "She's already got all her money in a trust that we administer," Mother was saying, "and she can afford a round-the-clock nurse, so what's the problem?"

But the others had all kinds of other arguments; which in Paulie's mind all boiled down to one: Nana was an embarrassment and as long as she remained in the Bride mansion in Richmond their family could never return to their rightful place among the finest families of Virginia. Paulie wanted to speak up and ask them why they didn't just put her in a bag, weight it down with rocks, and drop it into the James River, but he didn't. He just listened as every one of Nana's grandchildren except Mother made it plain that they had less filial affection than the average housecat. And even Mother, Paulie suspected, was opposing them because whoever ended up in that mansion would be established for all time as the leading branch of the family, and Mother couldn't stomach that, even though by marrying Mubbie she had removed herself from all possibility of occupying that position herself. At home she talked all the time about how her brothers and sisters put on airs as if they were all real Brides but the spunk was gone from the family after Mother and Father died when they went out sailing on the Chesapeake and got caught in the fringes of a spent hurricane. "Nana is the only remnant left of the old vigor," she would say.

"Drooling and grunting like a baboon," Father would always answer, then laugh as Mother ignored him.

"She still understands what's going on around her," Mother would say. "You can see it in her eyes. She can't talk or eat because Parkinson's has her, but it's not Alzheimer's, she's sharp as a tack and I have no doubt that if she could write or speak, she'd wipe my brothers and sisters right out of the will. And since she can't do that, she does the only thing she can do. She refrains from dying. I admire her for that."

"I refrain from dying every day," Mubbie would say, every time as if he hoped it would be funny if he just got to the right number of repetitions. "But you never admire me for that." At which Mother always changed the subject.

The conversation in the hall went the rounds until finally Aunt Rosie said, "Oh, never mind. Weedie's never going to bend" -- Weedie was Mother, who preferred the nickname to Winifred -- "and Nana can't live forever so we'll just go on."

They went away and Paulie wondered how Nana would feel if she could hear the way they talked about her. Didn't it ever occur to any of them that maybe she would be just as happy to be rid of them as they would be to be rid of her? Paulie tried to imagine what it would be like, to be trapped in a body that wouldn't do anything, to have to have somebody wipe your butt whenever you relieved yourself, to have to have somebody feed you every bite you ate, and know that they hated you for not being dead, or at least wished with some impatience that you'd just get on with it.

And then, drowning in self-pity, Paulie wondered whether it was really different from his own life. If Nana died, at least it would make a difference to somebody. They'd get a house. Somebody would move. People would have more money. But if I died, who'd notice? Hell, I probably wouldn't even notice. Not till it was time to eat and I couldn't pick up a fork.

It was dark by now but there was a full moon and anyway the parking lot around the so-called cabin was flooded with light, especially the tennis courts where the thwang, thunk, thwang, thunk, thwang of a ball being hit and bouncing off the court and getting hit again rang out in the night's stillness. Paulie got up from his bed where maybe he had fallen asleep for a while and maybe not. He walked through the upstairs hall and quietly down the stairs. Adults were gathered in the living room and the kitchen, talking and sometimes laughing, but nobody noticed him as he went outside.

He expected to see Deckie and Celie playing tennis, but it was Uncle Howie and Aunt Sissie, Deckie's parents, playing with intense grimaces on their faces as if this were the final battle in a lifelong war. They both dripped with sweat even though the night air here in the Great Smokies was fairly cool.

So where were Deckie and Celie? Not that it mattered. Not that they'd welcome Paulie's company if he found them. Not that he could even be sure they were together. He knew Deckie was out somewhere because his stuff was still piled on his bed. And the sounds of tennis had made Paulie assume he was playing with Celie. But for all he knew, Celie was in bed with the little girl cousins in the big attic dormitory. Still, he looked for them because at some level he knew they would be together, and for some perverse reason he always had to push and

push until he forced people to tell him outright that they didn't want him around. The school counselor had told him this about himself, but hadn't told him how to stop doing it. In fact, Paulie was half-convinced that the counselor had only told him that as an oblique way of letting him know that he, too, didn't want Paulie around anymore.

There wasn't a sound coming from the pool, though the lights were on there, so Paulie didn't bother going in. He just walked the path around the chainlink fence that kept woodland animals from coming to drown in the chlorinated water. It wasn't till Celie giggled that Paulie realized they were in there after all, not swimming but sitting on the edge at the shallow end, their feet in the water, resting on the steps going into the water. Paulie stood and watched them, knowing that he was invisible to them, knowing he would be invisible even if he were standing right in front of them, even if he were walking on the damned water.

Then he realized that Celie was only wearing the bottom part of her two-piece swimming suit. Paulie's first thought was, How stupid, she's only eleven, she's got nothing to show anyway. Then he saw that Deckie had his hand inside the bottom of her swimsuit and he was kissing her shoulder or sucking on it or something, and that's why Celie was laughing and saying, "Stop it, that tickles," and then Paulie understood that Deckie liked it that she didn't have any breasts yet and he knew just what Deckie was and in that moment relief swept over Paulie like a great cleansing wave because he knew now that despite Deckie's beautiful tan and beautiful body and charmed life, Deckie was the sick one and Paulie didn't want to be like him after all.

Only then did it occur to him that even though Celie was laughing, what Deckie was doing to her was wrong and for Paulie to stand there feeling relieved of all things was completely selfish and evil of him and he had to do something, he had to put a stop to it, then and there, if he was any kind of decent person at all, and if he didn't then he was just as bad as Deckie because he was standing there watching, wasn't he? And letting it happen.

"Stop it," he said. His voice was a croak and between the crickets and the breeze in the leaves and the thwang, thunk of the tennis match, they didn't hear him.

"Get your hands off her, you asshole!" Paulie yelled.

This time they heard him. Celie shrieked and pulled away from Deckie, looking frantically for the top of her swimsuit, which was floating about ten feet out. She splashed down the steps into the pool, reaching for it, as Deckie stood up, looking for Paulie in the darkness outside the chainlink fence. Their eyes met. Deckie walked around the pool toward him.

"I wasn't doing anything, you queer," said Deckie. "And what were you doing watching, anyway, you queer?"

The words struck home. Paulie answered not a word. They were face to face now, through the chain link.

"Nobody will believe you," said Deckie. "And Celie will never admit it happened. She wanted it, you know. She's the one that took off her top."

"Shut up," said Paulie.

"If you tell anybody, I'll just look disgusted and tell them that you and I quarreled and you warned me you'd do something to get me in trouble. They'll believe me. They know you're a weasel. A sneaking weasel queer."

"You can call me whatever you like," said Paulie. "But you and I both know what you are. And someday you'll mess with somebody's little girl and they won't just call the cops so your family lawyers can get you off, they'll come after you with a gun and blow the suntan right off your face."

Paulie said all that, but not until Deckie was on the other side of the pool, walking into the poolhouse. By then Celie had her top back on and was climbing out of the water. She didn't even turn to look at him. Paulie had saved her, but maybe she didn't want to be saved. And even if she did, he knew that she'd never speak to him again as long as he lived. He'd seen the wrong thing, he'd done the wrong thing, even when he was trying to do the right thing.

He didn't want to go to bed, not with Deckie lying there in the next bed. He thought of taking a swim himself, but the thought of getting in the water they had been using made him feel polluted. He walked away into the brush.

It got dark immediately under the trees, but not so dark he couldn't see the ground. And soon he found a path that led down to the stream, which made that curious rushing, plinking sound like some kind of random musical instrument that was both string and wind. The water was icy cold when he put his bare feet into it. Cold and pure and numbing and he kept walking upstream.

The trees broke open over the stream and moonlight poured down from almost straight overhead. The water had carved its way under some of the trees lining the banks. None had fallen, but many of them cantilevered perilously over the water, their roots reaching out like some ancient scaffolding, waiting for somebody to come in and finish building the riverbank. In the spring runoff or during a storm, all the gaps under the trees would be invisible, but it was the end of a dryish summer and there wasn't that much water, so the banks were exposed right down to the base. If I just lay down under one of these trees, when it rained again the water would rise and lift me up into the roots like a fish up to an octopus's mouth, and the roots would hold me like an octopus's arms and I could just lie there and sleep while it sucked the life out of me, sucked it right out and left me dry, and then I'd dissolve in the water and float down the river and end up in some reservoir and get filtered out of the drinking water and end up getting treated with a bunch of sewage or maybe in a toxic waste dump which pretty much describes my life right now so it wouldn't make much difference, would it?

The bank was higher on the left side now, and it was rocky, not clay. The stone was bone dry and shone ghostly white in the moonlight, except for one place,

under a low outcropping, where the rock was glistening wet. When Paulie got closer he could see that there was water flowing thinly over the face of the rock. But how could that be, since all the rock above the overhang was dry? Only when he stooped down did he realize that there wasn't just shadow under that outcropping of stone, there was a cave, and the water flowed out of it. When the stream was high, the cave entrance must be completely under water; and the rest of the time it would be invisible unless you were right down under the overhang, looking up. Yet it was large enough for a person to slither in.

A person or an animal. A bear? Not hibernation season. A skunk? A porcupine? Maybe. So what? Paulie imagined coming home with spines in his face or smelling like a skunk and all he could think was: They'd have to take me away from here. To the doctor to get the spines out or back home to get the smell of me away from the others. They'd have to ride with him in the car all the way down the mountain, smelling him the whole way.

He ducked low, almost getting his face into the water, and soaking his shorts and the front of his T-shirt. He was right, you could get into the cave, and it was easier than it looked at first, the cave was bigger inside than it seemed from the size of the opening. The spring inside it had been eating away at the rock for a long time. And if there was an animal in here, it kept quiet. Didn't move, didn't smell. It was dark, and after a while when Paulie's eyes got used to the darkness it was still pitch black and he couldn't see his hand in front of his face, so he felt his way inward, inward. Maybe animals didn't use this cave because the entrance was underwater so much. Bats couldn't use it, that was for sure. And it would be a lousy place to hibernate since there was no getting out during the spring flood.

The water from the spring made a pool inside the cave, not a deep one, but pure and cold. The cleanest water Paulie would ever find in his life, he knew that. He dipped his hand into the water, lifted it to his mouth, drank. It tasted sweet and clear. It tasted like cold winter light. He crawled farther into the cave, looking for a place where he could lie down and dream and remember the taste of this water straight from the stone heart of the earth.

His hand brushed against something that wasn't rock, and it moved.

Paulie knelt there, hardly daring to breathe. No sound. No alarm. No movement of any kind. And he could see, just a little bit, just faint dark grays against the black of the background, and there wasn't any motion, none at all. He reached out and touched it again, and it moved again, and then tipped over and thudded softly and now when he handled it he realized it was a shoe, or not really a shoe but a moccasin, the leather dry and brittle, so it broke a little under his hand. Something clattered out of the moccasin when he lifted it up and when he cast around to find whatever it was, he realized it was a lot of things, small hard things, bones from somebody's feet. There was a dead body here. Someone had crawled into this cave and died.

And then suddenly in the darkness he could see, only he wasn't seeing anything that actually lay there. He was seeing an Indian, a youngish man, broad cheekbones, nearly naked, unarmed, fleeing from men on horseback, men on foot,

running up the stream after him, calling and shouting and now and then discharging a musket. One of the musket balls took him, right in the back, right into a lung. Paulie almost felt it, piercing him, throwing him forward. After that he could hardly breathe, his lung was filling up, he was weak, he couldn't run anymore, but there was the cave here, and the water was low, and he had strength enough to climb up under the overhang, taking care not to brush against it and leave a stain of blood from his back. He would lie here and hide until the white men went on and he could come back out and go find Iris father, go find a medicine man who could do something about the blood in his lungs, only the white men didn't go away, they kept searching for him, he could hear them outside, and then he realized it didn't matter anyway because he was never going to leave this cave. If he coughed, he'd give himself away and they'd drag him out and torture him and kill him. If he didn't cough, he'd drown. He drowned.

Paulie felt the moment of death, not as pain, but as a flash of light that entered his body through his fingertips and filled him for a moment. Then it receded, fled into some dark place inside him and lurked there. A death hidden inside him, the death of a Cherokee who wasn't going to leave his home, wasn't going to go west to some unknown country just because Andrew Jackson said they had to go. He held inside him the death of a proud man who wasn't going to leave his mountains, ever. A man who had, in a way, won his battle.

He knelt there on all fours, gasping. How could he have seen all this? He had daydreamed for hours on end, and never had he dreamed of Indians; never had the experiences seemed so real and powerful. The dead Cherokee's life seemed more vivid, even in the moment of dying, than anything in Paulie's own experience. He was overwhelmed by it. The Cherokee owned more of his soul, for this moment, than Paulie did himself. And yet the Cherokee was dead. It wasn't a ghost here, just bones. And it hadn't possessed Paulie -- he was still himself, still the bland nondescript nothing he had always been, except that he remembered dying, remembered drowning on his own blood rather than coughing and letting his enemies have the satisfaction of finding him. They would always think he got away. They would always think they had failed. It was a victory, and that was an unfamiliar taste in Paulie's mouth.

He stretched himself out beside the skeleton of the Indian, not seeing it, but knowing where the bones must be, the long bones of the arms, the ladder of the ribs, the vertebrae jumbled in a row, the cartilage that once connected them gone, dissolved and washed out into the stream many years ago.

And as Paulie lay there another image crept into his mind. Another person splashing through the stream, but it wasn't a sunny day this time, it was raining, it was bitterly cold. The leaves were off the trees, and behind him he could hear the baying of hounds. Could they follow his scent in the rain? Through the stream? How could they? Yet they came on, closer and closer, and he could hear the shouts of the men. "She went this way!"

She. Now Paulie became aware of the shape of the body he wore in this memory. A woman, young, her body sensitive to the chafing of the cloth across her small young breasts. And now he knew what she was fleeing from. The master wouldn't leave her alone. He came at her so often it hurt, and the overseer came after

him as soon as he was gone, until finally she couldn't stand it, she ran away, and when they found her they'd whip her and if she didn't die from the lash then as soon as she was half-healed they'd come at her again, only this time she'd be kept chained and locked up and she wasn't going back, never, no matter what.

As she ran up the stream she saw the outcropping of rock and happened to stumble just then and splash on all fours into the icy river and then she looked up and saw that there was a cave and almost without thinking she climbed up into it and lay there shivering with the bitter cold, hardly daring to move, fearful that the chattering of her teeth would give her away. She slid farther up into the cave and then her hand found the half-decomposed leg of someone who had died in that cave and she shrieked in spite of herself and the men outside heard her but they didn't know where the shriek came from. They knew she was close but they couldn't find her and the dogs couldn't catch her scent so she lay there by the corpse of the dead Indian and shivered and prayed that the spirit of the dead would leave her alone, she didn't mean to bother him, she'd go away as soon as she could. In the meantime, she got more and more numb from the cold, and despite her terror at every shout she heard from the men outside, their voices got dimmer and dimmer until all she could hear was the rushing of the water and she got sleepy and closed her eyes and slept as the stream outside rose up and sealed the entrance of the cave and her breathing drew the last oxygen out of the air so that she was dead before the cold could kill her.

As before, the moment of her death came into Paulie's fingers like an infusion of light; as before, the light filled him, then receded to hide within him; as before, her last memories were more vivid in his mind than anything he had ever experienced himself.

I should never have drunk the water in this cave, thought Paulie. I've taken death inside me. It's a magic place, a terrible place, and now I'm filled with death. What am I supposed to do with this? How am I supposed to use the things I saw and felt and heard tonight? There's no lesson in this -- this has nothing to do with my life, nothing to teach me. All that's different is that I know what it feels like to die. And I know that there are some people whose lives were worse than mine. Only maybe that's not even true, because at least they accomplished something by dying in this cave. They had some kind of small victory, and it's damn sure I've never had anything like that in my life. Since I'm the source of all my own problems, blundering and babbling my way through the world, who can I run away from in order to get free? This girl, this man who died here, they were lucky -- they knew who their enemies were, and even if they died doing it, at least they got away.

He must have slept, because when he woke he was aware of aches and pains all over his body from lying on stone, from sleeping in the cool damp air of the cave. Fearless now of the dead, he felt around until he had traced the Cherokee's whole skeleton, and then, crawled farther in until he found the bones of the girl, the crumbling fabric of her cotton dress. He took a scrap of the dress with him, and a piece of the brittle leather of the Cherokee's moccasin. He put them in his pocket and crawled back to the entrance of the cave. Then he slid down, soaking his pants and shirt again.

The moon was low but it didn't matter, dawn was coming and there was enough light to find his way home, splashing through the stream until he came to the place where he had left his shoes. He wondered if his parents had even noticed he was gone. Probably not. It was damn sure Deckie wouldn't have told them he was missing. If Deckie even went to the room. Still, if they did notice he was gone, there might be some kind of uproar. He'd have to tell them where he was and what he was doing and why his feet and shirt and shorts were wet. He was still trying to think of some kind of lie when he came into the cabin, through the back door because there was a light on in the living room and maybe he could sneak into bed.

But no, there was someone in the kitchen, too, though the light was off. "Who's there?"

Reluctantly Paulie leaned into the kitchen door and saw, to his relief, that it was the nurse who looked after Nana. "I'm making her breakfast," the woman said, "but she's fretful. She moans when she's like that, unless somebody sits there with her, and I can't sit there with her and make her mush too, so would you mind since you're up anyway, would you mind just going in and sitting with her so she doesn't wake everybody up?"

The nurse was all right. The nurse wouldn't get him in trouble. He could hear Nana moaning from the main floor bedroom that had been given over to her so nobody had to carry her frail old body up and down the stairs. The light was on in Nana's room and she was sitting up in her wheelchair, the strap around her ribs so she didn't fall over when the trembling became too strong. Paulie could see the cot where the nurse slept. It was silly, really -- the nurse was a large, big-boned woman and the cot must barely hold her, not even room enough to roll over without falling out of bed. While tiny Nana had slept in a huge kingsize bed. It would never have occurred to them, though, that Nana should get the cot. The nurse was of the serving class.

I am of the serving class, too, thought Paulie. Because I have more of my father's blood than my mother's. I don't belong among the rich people, except to wait on them. That's why I never feel like I'm one of them. Just like Father never belongs. We should be their chauffeurs and yard boys and butlers and whatever. We should wait on them and take their orders in restaurants. We should run their errands and file their correspondence. We all know it, even though we can't say it. Mother married down, and gave birth down, too. I should have been on a cot in someone's room, waiting for them to wake up so I could rush down and make their breakfast and carry it up to them. That's how the world is supposed to work. The nurse understands that. That's why she knew she could ask me to help her. Because this is who I really am;

Nana looked at him and moaned insistently. He walked to her, not knowing what she wanted or even if she wanted anything. Her eyes pierced him, sharp and unyielding. Oh, she wants something all right. What?

She looked up at him and started trying to raise her hands, but they trembled so much that she could hardly raise them. Still, it seemed clear enough that she was reaching out to him, staring into his eyes. So he held out his hands to her.

Her hands smacked against one of his. She could no more take hold of him than fly, so he took hold of her, one of her hands in both of his, and at once the trembling stopped, the effort stopped, and the unheld hand fell back into her lap on the wheelchair. "The nurse is fixing your breakfast," Paulie said lamely.

But she didn't answer. She just looked at him and smiled and then, suddenly, he felt that light that was hidden within him stir, he felt the pain in his back again from the musket ball, and now the death of the Cherokee swelled within him and filled him for a moment with light. And then, just as quickly, it flowed out of him, down through his fingertips just the way it had come. Flowed out of him and into her. Her face brightened, she dropped her head back, and as the last of the Cherokee's deathlight left him, she let out a final groan of air and died, her head flopped back and her mouth and eyes wide open.

Paulie knew at once what had happened. He had killed her. He had carried death out of the cave with him and it had flowed out of his hands and into her and she was dead and he did it. He sank to the floor in front of her and the weariness and pain of last night and this morning, the fear and horror of the two long-ago deaths that he had witnessed -- no, experienced -- and finally the enormity of what he had done to his greatgrandmother, all of this overwhelmed him and when the nurse came into the room she found him crying silently on the floor. At once she took the old woman's pulse, then unstrapped her, lifted her out of the chair, and laid her on the bed, then covered her up to her neck. "You just stay there, son," she said to him, and he did, crying quietly while she went back to the kitchen and rinsed the dishes. It occurred to him to wonder that her response to death was not to waken everybody but rather to wash up after an uneaten breakfast. Then he realized: That's what the serving class is for, to clean up, wash up, hide everything ugly and unpleasant.

Hide everything ugly and unpleasant.

I didn't kill her, or if I did, I didn't mean to. And besides she wanted it. I think she saw the death in me and reached for it. I brought her what she couldn't get any other way, release from her family, from her body, from her memories of life unmatched by any power to live. Nobody will be sorry to see her dead, not really. Somebody can move into the Richmond mansion again and become the main bloodline of the Brides. The nurse will get another job and everything will be fine. So why can't I stop crying?

He hadn't stopped crying when the nurse went to waken Mother even the nurse knew that it was Mother who had to be told first. And even though she held him and murmured to him, "Who could have guessed you'd be so tenderhearted," he couldn't stop crying, until finally he was shaking like the girl in the cave, shivering uncontrollably. I have another death in me, he thought. It's dangerous to come near me, there's another death in my fingers, the cold death of a slavegirl waiting in some cave in my heart. Don't come near me.

Mother and Father left that morning, to take him home and make funeral arrangements in Richmond. Others would take care of arranging for the ambulance and the doctor and the death certificate. Others would dress the corpse. Mother

and Father had to take their son who, after all, had found the body. No one ever asked him what he was doing up at that hour, or where he had spent the night, and if anyone noticed that his shirt and pants were damp they never asked him about it. They just packed up his stuff while he sat, tearless now, on the sofa in the parlor, waiting to be taken away from this place, from the old lady who had drawn death out of his fingers, from the people who had jockeyed for position as they waited years for her to die, and from the children who played dark ugly games with each other by the swimming pool when no adult could see.

At last all the preparations were done, the car brought round, the bags loaded. Mother came and tenderly led him out onto the porch, down the steps, toward the car. "It was so awful for you to find her like that," she said to him, as if Nana had done something embarrassing instead of just dying.

"I don't know why I got so upset," said Paulie. "I'm sorry."

"We would have had to leave anyway," said Mubbie, holding the door open for him. "Even the Brides can't keep a family reunion going when somebody just died."

Mother glared at him over Paulie's head. He didn't even have to look up to see it. He knew it from the smirk on Mubbie's face.

"Paulie!" cried a voice. Paulie knew as he turned that it was Deckie, though it was unbelievable that the older boy would seek a confrontation right here, right now, in front of everybody.

"Paulie!" Deckie called again. He ran until he stopped right in front of Paulie, looking down at him, his face a mask of commiseration and kind regard. Paulie wanted to hit him, to knock the smile off his face, but of course if he tried to throw a punch Deckie would no doubt prove that he had taken five-years of boxing or tae kwan do or something and humiliate Paulie yet again.

"Celie and I were worried about you," Deckie said. And then, in a whisper, he added, "We wondered if you stripped off the old lady's clothes so you could look at her naked, too."

The enormity of the accusation turned Paulie's seething anger into hot rage. And in that moment he felt the death stir within him, the light of it pour out into his body, filling him with dangerous light, right to the fingertips. He felt the terrible fury of the helpless slave girl, raped again and again, her determination to die rather than endure it anymore. He knew that all he had to do was reach out and touch Deckie and the slavegirl's death would flow into him, so that in his last moments he would feel what a violated child felt like. It was the perfect death for him, true justice. There were a dozen adults gathered around, watching. They would all agree that Paulie hadn't done anything.

Deckie smiled nastily and whispered, "Bet you play with yourself for a year remembering me and Celie." Then he thrust out his hand and loudly said, "You're a good cousin and I'm glad Nana's last moments were with you, Paulie. Let's shake on it!"

What Deckie meant to do was to force Paulie to shake his hand, to humiliate himself and accept Deckie's dominance forever. What he couldn't know was that he was almost begging Paulie to kill him with a single touch. Death seeped out of Paulie, reaching for Deckie. If I just reach out

"Shake his hand, for heaven's sake, Paulie," said Mother.

No, thought Paulie. Deckie is slime but if they killed every asshole in the world who'd be left to answer the phones? And with that thought he turned his back and got into the car.

"Paulie," said Mother. "I can't believe..."

"Let's go," said Father from the driver's seat.

Mother, realizing that Father was right and there shouldn't be a scene, slid into the front seat and closed the door. As they drove away she said, "Paulie, the trauma you've been through doesn't mean you can't be courteous to your own cousin. Maybe if you accepted other people's overtures of friendship you wouldn't be alone so much."

She went on like that for a while but Paulie didn't care. He was trying to think of why it was he didn't kill Deckie when he had the chance. Was he afraid to do it? Or was he afraid of something much worse, afraid that Deckie was right and Paulie had enjoyed watching, afraid that he might be just as evil in his own heart as Deckie was? Deckie should be dead, not Nana. Deckie should have been the one whose body shook so much he couldn't stand up or touch anybody. How long would Celie have sat still if Deckie had pawed at her with quivering hands the way that Nana reached out to me? God afflicts all the wrong people.

When they got home they treated Paulie with an exaggerated concern that was tinged with disdain. He could feel their contempt for his weakness in everything they said and did. They were ashamed that he was their son and not Deckie. If they only knew.

But maybe it wouldn't make any difference if they knew. Tanned athletic boys must sow their wild oats. They live by different rules, and if you have such a one as your own child, you forgive him everything, while if you have a child like Paulie, basic and ordinary and forgettable, you have to work all your life just to forgive him for that one thing, for being only himself and not something wonderful.

Mother and Mubbie didn't make him go to the funeral -- he didn't even have to plead with them. And in later years, as the family reunion became an annual event, they didn't argue with him very hard before giving in and letting him stay home. Paulie at first suspected and then became quite sure that they were much happier leaving him at home because without him there, they could pretend that they were proud of him. They weren't forced to compare him quite so immediately with the ever taller, ever handsomer, ever more accomplished Deckie.

When they came home, Paulie would leave the room whenever they started going on

about Sissie's and Howie's boy. He saw them cast knowing looks at each other, and Mother even said to him once, "Paulie, you shouldn't compare yourself to Deckie that way, there's no need for you to feel bad about his accomplishments. You'll have accomplishments of your own someday." It never occurred to her that by saying this, she swept away all the small triumphs of his life so far.

There were times in the years to come when Paulie doubted the reality of his memory of that family reunion. The light hiding within him stayed dark for weeks and months on end. The memory of the swimming pool faded; so did the memory of Nana's feebly grasping hands. So, even, did the memory of the death of the Cherokee and the runaway slave. But then one day he would move something in his drawer and see the envelope in which he kept the tattered fragment of a threadbare dress and the scrap of an ancient moccasin, and it would flood back to him, right clown to the smell of the cave, the taste of the water, the feel of the bones under his hand.

At other times he would remember because someone would provoke him, would do something so awful that it filled him with fury and suddenly he felt the death rising in him. But he calmed himself at once, every time, calmed himself and walked away. I didn't kill Deckie that day. Why should I kill this asshole now? Then he would go off and forget, surprisingly soon, that he had the power to kill. Forget until the next time he saw the envelope, or the next time he was swept by rage.

He never saw Deckie again. Or Celie. Or any of his aunts and uncles or cousins. As far as he was concerned he had no family beyond Mother and Mubbie. It was not that he hated his relatives-- except for Deckie he didn't think they were particularly evil. He learned soon enough that his family was, in a way, pretty ordinary. There was money, which complicated things, but Paulie knew that people without money still found reasons to hate their relatives and carry feuds with them from generation to generation. The money just meant you drove better cars through all the misery. No, Paulie's kinfolk weren't so awful, really. He just didn't need to see them. He'd already learned everything they had to teach him. One family reunion was enough for him.