chapter one

The summer of 1931 was a season of dying trees. Had we talked to any of the farmers who lived nearby, we would've understood that this blight wasn't a curse or an omen, simply the habit of a beetle and the fungus it carried. But in the particular stand of woods where we lived there was no talk of Dutch elm disease, nor any of the other plagues that preyed on bark and leaves. Instead, we took the dying trees as a personal insult, an emblem of our lives: the house in Cleveland deserted, Father out of work, and Mother going blind. The trees became a permanent feature of our landscape; stark, implacable teachers instructing us in broken dreams, admonishing us, despite the promise of better times, that most of what we hoped for in life was impossible, that to believe otherwise was impractical, even dangerous. Most things that die wither away or we put them underground, but trees stay standing, rows of barren trunks that creak and moan until the onslaught of rain and snow finally brings them down. Trees return slowly to the earth, and so the stubborn shadows of their dissolution darkened our childhood games.

Everyone we knew told us not to climb in dying trees, but Phil went up anyway, ignoring the brittle limbs, cursing when a tree refused to hold his weight. Defiance was his will. When Miss Dossin told him to stay in out of the rain at recess, he went out without his slicker. When Mother complained that too much reading was clouding her eyesight, he gathered all her books and burned them. When we lived in Cleveland, he raised rabbits, and when a rabbit got sick and died, he kept the carcass in our room

until Father forced him to bury it. In those days my brother broke rules and crossed boundaries. He gave no ground. He pushed against everything, even death.

We heard the story over and over again, first from Lethea, the midwife, and then from my mother, until every detail became part of the family history. Lethea said that my brother and his twin sister were conceived under a full moon. "Men spring from the sun," she said, "and women from the earth. But the gift of twins, when twins are man and woman, comes from the moon, because the moon partakes of both the sun and the earth." My mother couldn't remember if she conceived her first two children beneath a full moon, but she said that Lethea possessed a time-tested wisdom, and that we'd do well to listen to anything she had to say.

What my mother remembered was that the month of June in 1915 was unseasonably hot; scant afternoon showers provided nothing more than an evening steam bath, and her twin-filled belly felt overripe, ready to burst. "Twins mean good luck," said Lethea. "Twice the light for a dark world." But my mother knew that something was wrong. The days of kicking and turning had just begun when, in a rare moment of peace, she felt something inside her drop like a stone. Her heart had fluttered and she experienced a sudden shortness of breath. Nothing more had occurred, but when the labor pains began, she felt it again, something hard turning inside her.

Lethea arrived at dusk. The contractions came at regular intervals but the twins were stubborn. "Unwilling," said Lethea. "Ornery and unwilling." She put a thin piece of wood between my mother's teeth, but took it away when it cracked and splintered, drawing blood.

Lethea talked and prayed and rubbed my mother's legs and feet. My mother screamed and wept and pushed. And then my brother dropped his

head and shoulders into Lethea's waiting hands, and when Lethea cut him free, he wailed to tell the world of something he had seen.

And then came my sister with less struggle, smaller, the umbilical cord around her neck. Lethea covered the child with a towel, but my mother felt the truth, she felt it when the stone dropped inside her, and now she felt its hardness pass from her body. "Philip was born of tragedy," Mother said. "At the moment of his awakening, he lost his second self."

I WAS BORN eighteen months later, without struggle or tragedy, on a winter night noteworthy only for its calm. I was the second surviving child of what would soon be four children. My sister Margie followed me, and then Myron.

We lived in a rented house on a street named Joy, and my first memories go back to the room I shared with Phil and his pets. He kept turtles, frogs, fish, butterflies, grasshoppers, mice, and rabbits. I liked the rabbits because they were fast and mischievous, jumping off the twin beds and hiding behind the closet door.

Phil looked after his rabbits like a missionary after his flock; he tended the sick, cleaned cages, and provided fresh food with an evangelical fervor. Some of the rabbits were sold as house pets to families uptown. Others ran away or we gave them away. In winter most of the rabbits stayed in the attic, but during hot summer months they moved under the back porch where the ground was cool and the latticework kept them safe.

Being younger, I failed to understand the full measure of Phil's devotion. My mind couldn't grasp the fierceness of his loyalty. I didn't even know that it was blood when Phil ran crying into the house, hands and face smeared, shirt and trousers stained. I thought it was berry juice. Or maybe the red across his forehead was rage. That would explain his tearing into Father's closet and taking the rifle that we were told never to touch.

I followed him outside and we crawled under the back porch. It was mossy and dark, but I could see the broken lattice and a pile of bloody fur, and then another, larger this time, and then more piles, some with something half-chewed still moving. Phil crawled from pile to pile, cursing loud enough for the neighbors to hear, laying his hand on whatever remained until he was certain that it was dead. He would not let me help him. He would not let me touch anything living or dead. When we came back into the sunlight, we didn't speak. Phil sat down next to the broken lattice, the rifle on his lap.

When Mother and Father came home, I told them what had happened. Father went out the back door with a resolute expression on his face, but he came back into the house without his rifle. Phil refused his dinner that night. He refused to sleep. He stayed out all night waiting for whatever it was that had done the killing. He waited three nights, but it never came back.

"It killed 'em for fun," he said.

Then he sold the cages, burned five or six bags of wood shavings, and handed Mother the eyedropper and water bottles. By October, he gave away or set free every creature in our bedroom. I pleaded for the frogs and whined about the turtles for almost a week. "Forget it," said Phil. "And don't ask me again."

THE WINTER months were slow with only people in the house, and Mother noticed the change. "It feels empty," she said. "Less trouble, I suppose, but empty."

My mother was an expert seamstress commissioned by uptown families to hem curtains or embroider tablecloths. That winter, though, the demand for her skills dwindled until in February her one order was a christening blanket for a neighbor down the street. In that same month my father

brought home less money. “Customers won’t come out,” he said. “Streets are bad. All the ruts are frozen.”

We hoped that spring would bring opportunities for work, and when the snow finally melted, Phil and I made the usual rounds, looking to rake winter-killed grass from the big lawns, but we found no employers. And then the unimaginable happened. Fred’s Radio & Repair, the shop where my father worked, shut its doors. Father made the announcement at dinner. Even Phil, the least naïve among us, was caught off guard. “But you told us,” said Phil, “that everyone needs the shop and always will.” Father made no reply. He looked at Mother, and then at the floor. Fred’s Radio & Repair was the cornerstone of our world; its collapse suggested that the strongest foundations were vulnerable.

What followed was the first of several visits from the man my father referred to only as the landlord. Mother sold everything of value, including the silver candlesticks that came as a wedding gift from Grandmother. She sold our console radio. My father refused to leave the house for several days; he moved silently from room to room, his face pale and helpless, as if he were a condemned man.

Then, after a blur of packing and hasty farewells, Cleveland became the place my family hailed from, a memory of better days that we cherished and embellished over time.

We moved into a large tent on a half-acre lot that Father bought for twenty-five dollars. The lot was seventeen miles from Cleveland in a place called Mayfield. We had to clear trees and build an outhouse, live without electricity and running water, but the property bordered a meadow, and it sat on the high side of the Chagrin River.

Mayfield was the first great adventure of my life, exploring the woods with Phil, running barefoot across the meadow that dropped down to the

river. On the border between the meadow and woods stood a line of scruffy bushes heavy with giant blackberries. Our fingers turned dark red, then purple, picking the sticky fruit. The abundance was overwhelming. We ate while we picked, until stomach cramps made us stop.

Phil and I would stay well away from the tent, keeping it out of sight, returning only when wind drove the rain in our faces or when mosquitoes rose up from the river at dusk. I didn't think about Mother and Father, their struggles or fears. I left them alone to take care of Margie and Myron. I gave them time to plan the family's return to Cleveland. My mind, filled with the mystery and wonder of the woods, didn't anticipate the coming seasons, the shorter days, and the inescapable dangers of living without money. Phil knew something about these things, and depending on his mood, he sheltered me or taught me, tried to explain that the world was both arbitrary and just, a contradiction that to his mind made perfect sense.

We made up all sorts of outdoor games, and our unrivaled favorite was the weekly ambush of the bakery wagon. We sat next to the dirt road and listened for the first echoes of the trotting horse. "Jesus, if we only had a nickel," said Phil.

"You say that every time."

His eyebrows came together.

We crouched in the tall grass as the horse and driver rolled by, and then we bolted into the road, running behind the wagon to get the delicious smells. The air danced and swirled, wrapping us in eddies of fresh bread, butter, cinnamon, raisins, and doughnuts. The smells were stronger, even sweeter, as we got closer to the wagon. I imagined myself a bandit then, plundering the wagon's payload of ruby red jelly and golden cakes. Phil and I ran until we were out of breath.

"Next week," I said. "Let's bring Myron."

"He's not fast enough," said Phil.

"I could pull 'im."

"You'd bite the dust. You'd break your arm and he'd break a tooth. Then I'd be stuck carrying both of you back to the tent."

"You always spoil stuff."

"I do not."

"You do! You always spoil my fun. You never do anything I wanna do."

"That's not true," said Phil, cracking his knuckles. "We went swimming yesterday."

"It doesn't matter. Most of the time we do what you want."

"That's because I'm older."

"Yeah, I know, I know. Older and smarter."

"You're not stupid," said Phil. "It's just that some of your ideas are stupid."

"Why?"

"Because half the time you miss what's right in front of your face."

"I see plenty."

"You see those trees?"

"Which ones?"

Phil pointed. "That stretch we walked through to get here."

"What about 'em?"

"They're all dying. Some of 'em are dead."

"They are not."

"For Christ's sake. Look! Can't you see the green turning yellow? Some of 'em are standing without half their leaves! Who ever heard of leaves going yellow — or leaves falling by the bushel — this time of year?"

"Maybe those cold nights we had —"

"It hasn't been that cold."

"Well, maybe they're just old."

"Some of those trees aren't much taller than you or me. I say there's something after them. And whatever it is doesn't make a sound. It's not like at night when you wake up and hear things — like a ticking or a rustling, sometimes a snarl. Something quiet is after those trees."

When we were kids, my brother talked to me, the edge in his voice already sharp, and he frequently described a world that I did not want to accept. At the same time, his ability to see what others overlooked bound me to him. It gave him a strange power over the people he loved, and it gave me the wisdom to know that any story involving me was really my brother's story.

Phil was the first to see those dying trees, and the truth of their dying loomed larger the longer my family lived on that half-acre lot. He was the first to see that Father was an affable fool, that we would be lucky to escape the army surplus tent that Mother called our temporary home. And he was the first to see that Mother was going blind.

My mother cast a spell over men and boys. At church socials in Cleveland her dance card was the first one filled, and I remember her laughter, her blushing face, and the lush folds of her skirt swirling as she danced with Father, his friends, and sometimes Phil or me. Her body was lean and muscular, almost masculine, but still voluptuous in its movements and generosity. Every action conveyed confidence, what my father called good, old-fashioned, Midwestern self-reliance. There was a purity about her, a promise that her body and soul were safe haven, a place of healing, a sanctuary where sons and lovers could drop their defenses and perhaps show themselves to be something more than men. Maybe it was the long hair that she wore well past middle age. Maybe it was the way she turned her head, the way she curved her slim hand toward her breast or drew her legs up, sitting by the fire, and let her bronze hair stream about her knees. Maybe it was the grief of the girl in her eyes. Men loved her with a poetic passion; she stirred a tenderness in them that living forced them to forget.

Phil was my mother's first child, and he laid claim to the largest part of her heart. Not even Margie, with her piercing blue eyes and a limitless capacity for unqualified love, could displace my brother's privilege. I

thought for a long time that my stillborn sister formed the bond between Phil and my mother; but I began to see that of all the children, Phil was the least like my father, and this was the wellspring of my mother's affection. She adored Phil's stubbornness and determination, and so she held him closer, doted on him, tried to temper his strength with a love for kindness and beauty.

My mother adored flowers, pressing roses and lilies and fleabane and sow thistle between sheets of soft ivory paper. She sewed the sheets together, using thick cardboard for covers, and when we packed the house in Cleveland, she gave the book to Phil.

"Why'd she give it to you?" asked Margie.

"She can't see the flowers anymore," said Phil.

"Sure she can," I said.

"She told me," said Phil, "that the littlest ones go fuzzy around the edges."

"Will you let me look at the book sometimes?" asked Margie.

"Sure," said Phil.

And he did. Anytime Margie wanted to see the book Phil sat down with her and turned the heavy pages, trying to name the different flowers that Mother knew so well. We all found wildflowers when we lived in the woods, and we gave them to Phil and he sorted and pressed them.

One afternoon Mother tried to see what we had found, squinting through her thick glasses, until Phil closed the book in frustration. "Don't you dare think of it," she said then, her face sharp with disapproval.

Phil handed me the book, and my mother's words took me back to a day in Cleveland, a day with the first smell of autumn in the air, a day filled with waiting for my mother, waiting for the news she would bring from the doctor who forced bright beams of light into her brown eyes, who made her read a strange and shrinking alphabet on distant charts. She came home at dusk saying that the doctor discovered what was wrong. "It's eye

strain," she lied. "Your mother is just tired. The doctor says that if I do less reading it'll probably clear up."

Phil took her at her word and ran through the house picking up her books and magazines. Her reading material amounted to a large box of old novels, copies of *The Saturday Evening Post,* and a few yellowed newspapers, and when Phil came running down the steps, he tripped, tumbling in a waterfall of white pages to the foot of the stairs.

Father slammed the refrigerator. "What in God's name is that boy up to?"

"Philip," said Mother. "Come here this instant."

Phil picked himself up and collected the contents of the box.

"Philip, those are my things. Put them back where you found them."

Phil kicked open the front door. Mother jumped to her feet and followed him outside. We were all outside by the time Phil dumped the books at the curb.

"I'm telling you, Jessie," Father said, "that boy's a hellion."

"Pick up those books right now," said Mother.

Instead, Phil took a small bottle from his pocket and poured its liquid on the books. Mother, seeing the match, tried to grab his arm, but it was too late. She pulled him back from the burst of flames.

Father took off his belt. "I'll teach you to burn your mother's property." But Mother held him off, protecting Phil with her body.

"Jessie, you're spoiling the boy," yelled Father, waiting for her to step aside.

"It's his way."

"I know. He shows no respect."

"He's trying to help."

"You call this help? Pretty soon the whole damn neighborhood'll be out here. It's crazy—"

"It's not! It's what the doctor said."