

EXCERPT

Sweet Sally Ann



a novel

Roger Ladd Memmott



A Gemstone Book



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◆ CALIFORNIA / MICHIGAN ◆

LIMITED EDITION

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REVIEW of *SWEET SALLY ANN*

BookSurge

Jeff Schwaner, Editor

Sweet Sally Ann is a wonderworks combination of tall tale, murder mystery, dysfunctional families and magic beasts lumbering just at the edge of our vision. The story and the language are a joy. The book has, in the beginning, a quality of stepping into the unknown from a place that is already not quite familiar, similar to reading King's Talisman books; yet the language is obviously of a higher order (as if King had been reading Rushdie and maybe even some George Saunders); and the careful way that information is distributed throughout the plot, like breadcrumbs, lets the reader experience first the surprise of the unknown—why are the school windows rattling yet nobody seems worried?—then bit by bit receive the information that helps them understand.

Stylistically, the novel is a wonderful affair, and the quality of the writing is inclusive even when the reflection it casts now and again seems oblique or more of a refraction. That's part of the magic of the thing. Certain insistent repetitions of phrase make the reader more aware of language and the power of language.

The characters are very well drawn out, realistic and archetypal at the same time, and although on occasion the children speak like characters in a Greek tragedy, the effect contributes to the overall tone and adds a touch of the fairy tale to the whole thing. Just when you think you have the plot nailed, a new element slips in but doesn't detract from the overall motion of the story. Fleeting glimpses of Cody's Monster—not the beast at the bridge, but the monster of meaning—float in almost inconsequentially. The pills Cody is taking, how they echo the colors of those in the ribbons of Sally Ann's hair, help impress upon the reader the same disorientation that Cody feels when meaning seems to be making itself known, "if meaning there is."

This is a strange story, the kind that, after you finish it, you still carry the book around for another week or so, as if a new chapter might pop up if you just give it the chance, and you can start reading again. It's one of those books where if you shake it a certain way the ending might change, or some additional insight might clatter out of its pages, like a toy from a Cracker Jack's box.

All in all, *Sweet Sally Ann* is a very satisfactory reading experience, outdoing the blurbs on its book jacket for insight and amazement.

STATISTIC:

The U.S. Bureau of Missing Persons reports that every year over 300,000 people disappear without a trace...leaving no solid clues, only a space in the lives of their friends.

“...I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all—”

—T.S. Eliot

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”



WHATEVER IT WAS came out of the woods and stood at the side of the road, its shadow long on the sedge. Neither woman nor man, certainly not child. The crest of its scalp folded back in wonderment, and the fall light fell about and wizened what appeared to be some wolfish yet humanlike snout, the whole of it sleek as an icon hulked down in a foul steaming hide. When it moved, it moved within the shape of itself, its own darkness seeming to rise up and touch back the sun. But for the cicadas the woods had gone mute, and after a while those insects, too, ceased. The thing did not return along the creekbed but took its bearing against the diminishing light, what faint light remained in the west. It lumbered back close to the trees and labored away, its every movement confusing the dusk. In time, night fell long and cool throughout the woods, and the spectral quietude deepened, as if something were about that even crickets and nightbirds might dread.

Spied upward through the narrowed brisket of spruce, the glaciated cone of the mountain, at first obscured in shadow and diffused by a quantum of light through the trees, soon put back the night and gathered light from the outcoming stars, nevertheless shivering in the heat of itself and casting off stones—perhaps a portent of sorts—like some palsied wraith. In time, the mountain grew still and the night fell complete, both dark and starblown, leaving but the breadth of imagination to sort out this sound from that—whether wail or sorrowless howl—together with a pair of figures in tandem, horseborn from the looks of it, the behind one streaming a long skein of hair, riding just beyond the ridge of that pale clad peak and up close to the moon.

Below, some nightthing, whatever it was, stalked back toward that forest of dreams, leaving but the weight of its impression sunk in the loam.

*Regarding a question posed
to the Sixth Grade class.*

1

GLASS PANES RATTLED in their frames and the center drawer in Miss Dibble's desk chattered open, bouncing pencils to the floor.

one
two
three

The walls sagged and then stopped.

Dora got up from her desk and swung down the aisle. She squatted so the backs of her legs wouldn't show and we all watched as she gathered the pencils—one, two, three—from the floor to the drawer. She hurried back to her desk, kiss-closed her mouth, and tucked at her hair.

"Thank you, Dora." Miss Dibble turned her back to the class, put the chalk to the board, and made a single indistinguishable mark. "Is our world more or less real," she asked, "than one in which giants roam the land and fair maids are lost to monsters in the woods?"

Only one student raised his hand and it was a girl. Sally Ann Rogers, known for neck dirt and a melodious lisp, not your prettiest girl in school, and she had immediately begun to weep. We all

turned our heads to watch her. She made gurgling sounds in the back of her throat, as though about to break into song, and her new breasts jiggled when she sucked for air. Tears and mascara muddied her cheeks as though she'd eaten a raw onion, and her nose began to bleed. To this day, I have no idea why the bloody nose, and she never got to answer the question before Miss Dibble rushed to the door, cried for help, and had Sally Ann dragged to the Nurse's Station by a team of soccer stars.

Throughout the ordeal, I sat at my desk stealing glances at Jessie, thinking hard, and trying not to look. Jessie came to school each morning and plopped herself down next to me, I mean day after day to the scent of freshly oiled boards and brisk morning light, but now it was she who smelled sweet and the flesh in her cheeks had taken a glow and right before my eyes, day after day, I watched the shape of her change. She looked at me with a sense of alarm and her look surprised me more, I think, than Sally Ann's bloody nose, and all of a sudden I could see her damp mouth and the ridge of her teeth and how her hair and the side of her face caught in the windowpatched sunlight brightened her eyes while Sally Ann bled. She glanced from Sally Ann to that indistinguishable mark on the board and then at me, her mouth a confused unanswered hole, and I had to turn my face away. Sally Ann hadn't ever done anything like that before to upset the class, a quiet girl, slight in the frame, and then I sometimes thought that perhaps she'd met some giant somewhere known only to her or maybe, on her way to singing practice at the Grange, encountered her own nightmares in the guise of some fanged creature hobbling through the woods.

You can never be sure.

I sought Waxman who sat slouched and spilling from his desk on the other side of the room, eyes agog, thinking maybe the same I bet. When he caught my eye, he poked a finger in his mouth and made as if to puke. Through the window behind him, the sky rose bright as a bead, and I could see the mountain itself, the blue glaciers toward the top, a lenticular cloud there, and the cone of Shastina off to the

side. I counted the windows again and then the glass panes. Jessie looked at me and I looked away. I glanced from Letty, whose clothes were too tight, to Geneva Lee, whose clothes were too loose, and then at Jessie again, her lemon-colored hair beribboned in red. Poor Sally Ann. One of the soccer girls tugged at her and said something soft, and Miss Dibble had a hanky at her nose and brushing the tears. She got Sally Ann in the cradle of her arm, head tipped back, the group of them huddling her away down the hall while the rest of the class sat stunned and lightly abuzz. Jessie watched them depart and then turned to me and said something I didn't quite hear.

"What?"

She leaned toward me and put a hand on my arm and said it again as Geneva Lee squeezed up close listening in. Their leaning showed me some things, were I to look, showed me how grown up they'd become, how all of us had.

"I don't know," I told her, working to keep my eyes on her face, knowing however I answered would likely be wrong. "How d'you think it might be, that world instead of this?"

"I don't know," she said, and those sunbrightened eyes studied my bones. "You can never be sure."

"You can never be sure," Geneva Lee dittoed. "I mean of monsters and such." I saw a speck of dirt in her eye as she batted her lid—mascara, perhaps. She opened her mouth around the gap in her teeth and, shifting away, re-crossed her legs. She didn't pull at her skirt or even act like her legs were any different than mine.

Something so simple, something so odd.

"What?" Jessie examined me by tilting her head. "Did you say something?"

"Strange people," I announced to them both. "People are strange. I am the strangest of all."

Geneva Lee blinked. "What'd he say?" She let the tip of her tongue ebb at her lips and turned an ear. "What'd he say? Strangest of...what?"

Glass panes rattled in their frames, the floor groaned, and a map fell off the wall.

A week later when she turned up missing, Sally Ann, my suspicion began to take shape—and half the community's, too, though none would speak a word of what they feared by the terror of their hearts. A vagabond, maybe, traipsing through the woods when Sally Ann came around a tree, that's what they said. An itinerant, a tramp, perhaps, who'd buried her body in the foothills or on the mountain itself, but nothing extraordinary or out of this world, certainly not legend nor mention of beast. The search for her turned from hours to days and then into weeks, but not so much as a spot of blood, a fragment of clothes, or even a hair.

I remember Miss Dibble's return. She gazed at Sally Ann's desk and made a face like a damaged squash, as if she had lain herself down among the vines and been mistakenly trod on one moonless night, the perfect print of a boot heel creasing her brow. She had a wad of damp paper towels in her hand and she stooped and hunkered and knelt to dab at the mess around Sally Ann's desk. Quackenbush slouched by, silly as a character in a comic book, overweight and furred as an ape on top of his head, chewing his pin; he offered me a snort of cinnamon powder, that or an Alka-Seltzer—my choice—but I shook him away, and he went back to his desk, the general stink of him wafting behind. The kids laughed a little and buzzed, and Waxman was across the room working up a spitwad barrage. Miss Dibble said, and the class got low while she scrubbed and scrubbed until there was hardly a trace. When she stood, she sighed and the pale sheen of her face drained away to something more pink and then she turned to the class once again and shrugged and said she hadn't a clue.

"Monsters?" asked Letty, waving her hand. Through the sleeveless gap of her blouse, you could see the cup of her bra, a sprig of pink fray confusing the rim. "Giants?"

An aftershock shuddered the floor.

"How our world is more or less real—" Miss Dibble turned aside

and caught her sneeze with a hanky, mixing Sally Ann's blood with her snot. She opened the hanky and looked at the stuff with alarm. "My God," she said, and she flung the thing toward the waste can where it missed and lay on the floor like a broken-winged dove for the rest of the day. Letty's hand was still hovering aloft, just a wedge of the filigreed cup there, decidedly pink, while Miss Dibble brushed at her skirt and attempted a smile, her polished teeth a complement to the nine bone-white buttons marching down her starched blouse. She pointed a broken chalk at the board. "In five hundred words," she said. "And due at the end of the term." Then she scrawled the assignment in words with a click and occasional shriek of the chalk. "There, now. Due, I said, by the end of the term."

I still have my own essay tucked away in a shirt box on the top shelf of my closet, B-, with a few scribbled notes, but I wouldn't read it for money, marbles, or chalk. Not now. I would have to rewrite it with footnotes and addenda, the length of a book. Starting with Sally Ann and her nosebleed in class, then on to the discovery of bones.

Poor Sally Ann.

Now, when I think of it, that old nursery rhyme, "The Cow Jumped Over the Moon," is not so far-fetched, except maybe for the part about the dish running away with the spoon. If you don't think so, consider my point-of-view, ahorse with Jessie and galloping up close to the stars. You might consider, too, whether I'm a good person or bad. Whether good or bad, I suppose this is the tale I would have to tell: lightning itself singeing my bones, so steeped in the magma of love and out of this world, secure in the prospect of fathering generations to come, like a god of something great, yet reduced to the freakish subject in a sidebar on page 197 of the latest edition of *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* A magician, you think? Savior to some? My own worst nightmare, perhaps, falling out of

my head like a dream from a rock. Just a remnant of the pitiful dead, some ghostly essence looking back on his handiwork and mistakes. Hey diddle-diddle, you think, and helplessly turn your face to the moon. Poor Sally Ann! If only, I sometimes think...how our world is more or less real. When you live in the shadow of a mountain with trees all around, it's always best to be good. After all, what do you have in the end but yourself?

*When expecting a zag
you should look for a zig.*

2

I WANT TO TELL you something quick, about the rabbit and me. I think about it now and realize there is nothing practical in the matter. Except to think about it, put it down like you should everything else before it slips toward the abyss of oblivion. Sometimes, if you think hard enough, you can make sense of a thing, though out of whack with the rest of the world it may be.

It was in the spring, the following year after Sally Ann disappeared, and I was into painting, knocking, and fletching my own arrows. Mom and Pop had given me the equipment the Christmas before, and I would come from my room after laboring over the shafts, down the stairs to dinner, with the smell of seared feathers in my hair. It was a good, bold smell, and I knew I'd done well, with another half-dozen arrows in my quiver. Pop or Dallas might say, "Let's see," and handle one gingerly with a grin of approval. I was fastidious in painting the shafts. First I would fill a ½" by 30" pipe about half up with either varnish or white glossy paint and then dip each end of the shaft into the pipe. I lined the painted shafts up in rows—four, five, six—the tops resting against the wallpapered wall, spread newspaper to catch the drips. The following day, after the varnish or paint had dried, I would use Pop's lathe to paint colorful rings

around the shafts. When the rings dried, I knocked and feathered the shafts and burned the feathers to shape and fitted either broadheads or target points.

I had my favorites and kept them hidden from Dallas and Pop behind the stoker in the furnace room. Only on my solitary hunts would I bring them out. The nights were long with anticipation, but the mornings were bright and brisk and the days unaccounted for, seemingly dazed by themselves. Up toward the mountain, rags of snow still patched the ground, and I can find myself now, like a snapshot, standing there with the dog amid thought and feeling, Jessie but a rumor in my heart, and the notion of Sally Ann beside the point. Lava rock hunched all about the meadow, some clothed in vests or scarves of snow, like a field of geriatrics crippled in the throes of some unstudied work. The sun was well up and the bracken along the slope steamed in the rising warmth. Some mornings I have seen herds of elk, having threaded their way through the northern pass, driving the deer before them—such ineffable grandeur sleeking down a bitter wind. Franny heeled and lowered her haunches; she pricked her ears and panted clouds of moisture in the air, the both of us reconnoitering the meadow at large. Clouds of moisture froze and warmed in the sun and dampened my mouth with every breath, and I could tell for sure I was alive. The world on such mornings as you stand to observe seems to put itself together piece by piece: first the empty blue void overhanging it all, falling about the rocky monoliths up toward the peak, down to the spruce on a far away ridge, to the wash, to the glen, to the glade, as if the mere act of observing has drawn them all into the existence of you. On such mornings it's in the bone and flesh and blood of you, the prospect of life, and you very nearly think you can enter the woods and come back whole.

I see myself alone there, at the edge of the muddy lea, contemplating the only world I knew before the rest of it to come, before Jessie and Sally Ann and Nurse Ellie, and before Dallas and Josh, not to mention Marybeth on the catwalk high above the earth. How strange

to be caught in this moment of now when all else is moot. Perhaps heaven, I sometimes think, is forever the presence of memory, and we exist happily in our pasts, never inhibited by future mistakes. I said down low, and Franny stayed. She raised a paw and pointed her nose, steady as a dog-thing cast in bronze. I notched my favorite broadhead and split my fingers against the string, holding the bow down and away as I moved through the scrub—and that was the beginning of the rabbit and me. It was too cold even for rabbits, perhaps, and she was a sluggish old thing, crouched and hiding against the pattern of snow on the ground. When I saw her, her ears were up and her bullet eye refused to blink. She hopped and stopped then hopped and stopped, her own shadow thrown long on the snow like a slack manacle holding her loose. And this is how I thought of it. Were she to break for the trees, I would lead her maybe half a dozen lengths, as I'd done without an iota of luck hundreds of times before. I would release and she would forever zag this way instead of that. For all I knew, maybe there was only one rabbit in the world, though I had seen her in multiples from time to time. But if every moment is a universe itself, separate and apart from memory and expectation, such worlds of illusion are nothing new, and I had known this, or suspected it at least, since the first thought I had. Run, I said to her without words and kissed for the dog. I beat the bush a little, but she only hopped and stopped. If there was another simultaneous moment in the universe greater in importance than this rabbit and me, I couldn't tell you what it was and would forever argue for the sake of mine. She unhinged a leg to move and stopped. "Go on," I said, but just a whisper, for we were near the trees. Franny stayed, and I sulked closer a bit. Stupid rabbit, I thought, you want me to shoot you where you stand?

"Go on."

I had the arrow notched and the string drawn to the lobe of my ear. I could feel the weight of the pull in my back and every thought I had converged to the unsettled glint in her witless eye. She gave a single bound, her un-hobbled shadow leaping too, and I released

and watched her zig instead of zag. To my surprise, the arrow met her at the throat. She made a rabbit sound, uncommon to any other animal I know, and leapt and ran, and I could see how the arrow's shaft had stalled. Not what I expected, feathers on one side, broadpoint on the other, like a comic's headpiece with an arrow running through the funny man's ears.

"Wait," I cried, and the dog was off.

We ran after her toward the trees, I like a man chasing down a cab, Franny bounding like the dog she was. All around me light began to melt, and I knew then what it meant to be chewed inside, to murder the undefiled. I knew, too, how the absence of Sally Ann might fit in the world. Between every breath I cried for her to stop. Between every breath she cried. She looked back, I know she did, and in that look I could see she saw me for what I was and might forever be.

We crossed a fissure in the earth, down and up, where diapers of steam rose and crawled about the rocks and mud, my shadow clinging fast to egg me on. Next thing, I had passed beyond the line of trees, the dog not far ahead, my shadow now growing faint and then altogether gone. The ground rose and slipped beneath my feet, shivered some as if trying to shake bad dreams away. The sky darkened and fell in bands and patches throughout the thickening woods, like Henny Penny's sky, perhaps. A cold wind sucked among the evergreens, rowing their weary fronds.

"My arrow," I cried.

I could see a dart of rabbit ears, there, then swallowed by the trees. *There.*

I stopped. I stood. I breathed, counting each breath I took. I hardly thought to pray, not thinking prayer might change the course of things.

The woods grew dark. Now I could not see the forest for the trees. The cold air stung and teared and dried my eyes. I called Franny back and called again and I could feel my breath drawn tight.

When she came panting and nosing and wagging her way between the trees, a little sheepish in the eyes, I felt glad.

“Franny, old girl.” I put my face down and let her lather me up, used a sleeve to wipe away the chill.

With Waxman or Dallas I might have continued on, attacked the ascending terrain, thrown caution to the wind. But then, at thirteen years old, maybe three miles from home, I knew at once I’d gone too far. Was there movement, there, where sunslant and shadow ripened some willowy stance between the trees? I hushed the dog. I thought then it might have been Sagroth or some anemic goblin stumbling through the woods. Franny ceased to breathe. Was that a doe sneaked forward a single step, her fawn behind? Such deer are cautious and curious, but I have seen and been awed by their disdain for fear. Even with danger pacing close, they coolly snuff beneath the leaves, unafraid, their mouths full of berries, their eyes soft with pleasure. But now she tested air and flicked her ears. I waited, holding my empty bow athwart, my breath stoked low, the watery world about so dim it might have been a troubled sleep. But I could feel the sting of wind and tears. Dusty light poured amid shade and in silence the deer together stepped away. Just deer, I thought. My best arrow in that rabbit’s neck. Old rabbit, what have you made me do? The woods all about, the stinging wind and weeping trees. How I wished to take it back. I reached and drew an arrow from my quiver and nocked it to the string. So still, I could hear the mountain groan.

When I turned to go, Franny stayed.

“Just deer,” I said, unsure.

She cocked her head and softly whimpered to tell me things. “C’mon,” I said, but she insisted and turned her head to force my look and nosed the ground. I cast about to see, and there, toward the base of the blackened trunk, I beheld the mask, upturned by wind and rain, fixed against the snow. It grimaced like an artifact waiting to be dug, both recognizable and unknown. The flesh had shriveled back against the skull, the eye sockets daubed with leaves, but I could see the mouth and how the jaw swung down as though to make a

point. A single fleshless hand was raised, raised, now clawing at the air. I stooped to get a look and felt the look I stooped to get sudden in my heart. I felt it shrink my flesh.

You sometimes think what kind of girl Sally Ann would have grown to be. Would she have lived with a troubled heart all her life or lived to trouble hearts? Who might she have come to love, and how much seed in her unaccounted womb? How so begrudgingly would she have nestled in some hero's arms? And her, the heroine to whom? Often, the gangliest, gawkiest elementary school girl grows to be an adolescent dream. I have seen it in the magazines. I have heard it on the news. Poor Sally Ann. And who but I would stand so contemplative over those mummified remains?

Thus, the weeping rabbit brings.

To mark the spot, I thumbed a triangulation of trees and rock, a simple knoll. I culled a broken limb, black and huge as a rhino's leg sprouting grafts, dragged it up the hill, and stubbed it in the snow. I called the dog. We crossed the meadow and glanced back to reassure ourselves. It stood like some crucifix in memoriam, not the blackened limb itself but the shadow it cast against the snow. I thought I heard the rabbit cry. Some darkened form rose there, like a gatekeeper, not deer this time, and I felt my flesh begin to creep. Across the flat, maybe fifty yards from where I'd entered the forest's fringe, it moved to and fro, black among the latticed light. It moved in silhouette between the pines, dropping back against the snow and *there!* into a shadowed fold of blue yet touched with spurious light about the head, moved I hardly thought in some nameless black ballet. Between us, a gust of wind spangled snow against the sun, and the whole world went bright. I wanted off the mountain fast.

"Franny!"

And down the wash, trudging and looking back and back, a lashing branch...my bleeding lip. In wild flight, I attacked the slope; the dismal trees now grim and ghastly forms that reared like shapeless dread. Long and long, the scrub oak clawed me down, at first to knees and then to hand. I struggled up and blundered on, flailing

with the bow, boot soles sliding on the frozen leaves beneath, my breath a curdled roar. Around this stump and through the rill, slogging ice and spray. Looking back, now so low, my aching lungs, I could see above the trees, beyond, toward the cone, the lava tubes grown thick with shrub, a depthless gouge oozing steam and maybe wink of flame. Above, the frozen sky a mercury blue, a little crabby, I thought, and thinking, felt a shudder pass beneath my feet. How like a lover in the throes of something charged, I hoped. Then some wolf-thing moaned, shuddered out a howl as if to drag the day to night.

Sweat-drenched beneath my clothes, I nearly stumbled and jabbed the arrow in my thigh. I wonder now if I'd dipped it in poison how long I'd have lived and what stories then would I have to tell: those weathered bones. I continued in full flight, floundering between malign and baleful shapes of stone and shrub, a cold claw raking upward through my chest. I glanced back again, already farther than I realized below the flat, the sky gone dull. I leapt and stubbed my boots and leapt again, every leap a downward dash, leapt through mahogany and around the ledge: my throbbing thigh...my lip. A swallow flashed between the trees, its plumage jeweled green and violet, to soar and swoop against the sky. My sobbing heart. How we wish for wings.

Panting, I came out on a stone slurry where lava a hundred and fifty years ago had mowed down trees. To the south, shades of cloud moved up the mountain slopes like water flowing against itself, brushing back the spruce from green to gray. Franny wagged a path along the slope above then quartered down and led me by and by through some wildflower garden—a scattered mix of lupine, Indian paintbrush, inflamed foxgloves, and fireweed, all anchored cheerfully in coarse gray rock amidst the ice and snow. Willow and alder trees reached skyward, the latter sometimes tall enough to shade our twisting path. Clumps of manzanita greened the snow. A melting stream drooled its way across the rock and carved a sodden niche below. I leapt and stood. Looked back. The entire mountain seemed to loom. Still, through a gap in the trees I spied the ridge above and

what appeared to be a stone kettle hewn in the mountain's shadow where some colossal wraith stirred a witch's brew, the smoke and spume seething like an unfulfilled eruption, black mist languid in the cuts and trenches as if lava had resumed its flow, creeping bleak among the palisades of rock rising in the high-shored rim of spruce and snow.

I could hear, I thought, something, and looked again to see, but it was only breath and the pounding of my heart...three, four, five. Then something cracked. I could see the blue glaciers draped high against the cone. I limped through sage and oak, fighting my own flight, half wanting to flee every molecule of flesh about my bones. When finally I saw the highway, yet far below, I stopped and worked my lungs. Taste of pennies on my tongue. Again that crack, like thunder, though dampened in the void, as if trees were being uprooted and the earth torn about, and I knew as knowing goes in one so young that it was some monster's rant over my discovering that little girl's bones. And then all went quiet except the breeze, and out of the breeze a warning bird, its call like the sound of a watch being wound, as if something were about to begin.

I gazed across the steaming glen, but nothing seemed real. Overhead, the scudding clouds began to close the sky. Beyond the highway, still far below, the cauldron of the water tower winked. Rooftops shimmered bright and melted against the green...seven, eight, nine. I put my hand to my heart, there, to still where it boomed in the wilderness of my otherwise childish breast. Below and through the trees I could see the tiled roof, fluted columns, and granite portico of the Grange. Something so simple, something so odd. I could see the route Sally Ann might have gone.

When I came out on the highway, I slowed, stamping mudclots from my boots all in an effort to feel my feet, looked both ways for oncoming traffic and jogged across. There, I took a moment to appraise myself, soggy and mudspattered, twigs and burrs clinging to

my waterdark jeans like some hydroponic experiment gone disgustingly bad. I stooped to unroll the gobs of ice from my cuffs and pull up my half-frozen socks. Inside my boots, I could feel the chafe of a blister, and the strained cords of my ankles from trudging the slope. I could feel a dull ache where the arrow had jabbed my thigh, something of blood dried to my jeans. I started up again, negotiating the steep of the barrow pit with limping half-hearted steps, my boots cutting edgewise along the muddy terrain. Overhead, a sprawling cloud sponged light away and gathered back the cold, the sky now dense and dull.

A car or two whapped past, a semi going south, and after a while Josh came by in his black and white, except it wasn't black and white; it was gold and blue with a shield instead of a star on the door. He saw me and I watched the lights come on as he pulled to the shoulder, graveled mud sloshing at the underside of the car. He had the window down and I could hear the radio scratch. He held the mike to his mouth and ten-foured the dispatcher as he pulled alongside. I had my breath now, the bow slung over my shoulder, between quiver and jaw—delicately sucked my pregnant lip. He regarded first the dog, deadpan, the lights chirping away, rolling abreast slow as my limp. He consulted my appearance with a sorrowful gaze.

"Cody."

"Josh."

"Any luck?"

I shrugged and glanced across the highway to where the cupped slope of the mountain rose toward the flat, the granite peaks seared beyond a line of ghostgray spruce holding back the sun. "A rabbit," I said.

"Where is it?"

"Got away."

"That's luck?" He had a phlegmy rumble to his voice and blinked kind of fast. His head turned slow as the gun cage of an attack helicopter refining its bead, and he had a whacked look about his eyes,

red-rimmed and fatigued. His jaw was set in a bulldog clench, and now the lid of his eye stuttered like a Gatling gun on ears gone deaf.

"I got him all right."

"Where is it?"

I stopped and he stopped, the lights still flashing. The radio cracked. A shotgun racked to the dash wasn't there, but from the mirror hung a beaded garter his wife had sewn, her name MARYBETH stenciled in red. Josh'd been a Hippie once, a long time ago, and then in the war. Both interests, of course, were to save the world, and his failure at either expressed itself now as a tick in that melancholy eye. I wondered where the shotgun was.

"Right through the neck," I insisted, looking over the tops of pines and up toward the cliffs. Toward the top of the cone, a smudge pot boiled and smoked and above it you could see the glacier with avalanche scars where a cloud folded back like a wave at the beach. I had my hand on my thigh, pressing against the ache, when it should have been over my heart.

"Hurt yourself?"

"It's nothing," I said.

Josh was one of those cops who took an interest in kids, seemed to care in a genuine way, like a developing relationship between father and son. As said, he'd once worn flowers in his hair and then the smell of a burning hooch. He squinted his mouth up, giving it some thought, and took a notion to ask how my mother was doing; he called her Ma. "How's your Ma?" he said, his one eye fluttering.

"Mom?"

"What I said, didn't I?"

"She's okay," I told him. I knew what he was getting at and looked away, toward the stark relief of a chicken hawk perched on yonder pole. I stamped my boots to throw the warmth back in my feet. They'd grown up together, been sweethearts in high school, but when Josh went to fight in Vietnam, Mom married Pop. I'd seen pictures in her Year Book: the Junior Prom, a Christmas dance, Josh in a

tackle's stance ready for bear. Now he had sweats in the night, or so I'd been told, that and a Bronze Star he kept in a drawer.

"How's Marybeth?" I exchanged. But it wasn't the same talking about his wife as it was talking about Pop's. Marybeth, who had once been a Hippie herself, and even still sewed garters and things, had become a raving lunatic in the last year or so, or so the grapevine buzzed. She, who had twice climbed the water tower to feel the wind in her hair, was now hid from the streets and kept from the stores, and when you went for a visit, say to walk Jessie to school on a bright winter's day, she was but a mutter and a mumble behind the door down the hall, sometimes singing old Credence Clearwater songs. I once asked to use the bathroom while Jessie gathered her books and through the wall I could hear Marybeth complaining to Josh though I couldn't hear about what. The bathtub was still damp and a towel slung over the rack and next to the towel a training bra that would have held Jessie in place, as if at that time in life she needed to be held. I listened for words and looked in a drawer and thought of Jessie getting out of the bath. Maybe thirty minutes earlier she had stood where I stood toweling herself. If only mirror images would linger for thirty minutes or so, but the image was mine. I pocketed a barrette from the drawer and a pink feminine tube, one of the remaining six in a box. Beyond the wall I heard the lunatic rave. I washed my hands and dried them where Jessie had dried hers without disturbing the bra.

"Better see to that wound. Lip, too."

"It's nothing," I said, unable to express the wound in my heart. I took my cap off and slapped it against my thigh, a rattle of ice shaking free. "Thing wouldn't die. Feathers on one side of the throat and broadhead on the other."

"How high up?" He put one finger in his ear and jiggled it and then gazed at the granite-peaked ridge. He spit a thin stream of saliva next to my boot, folded his elbow on the window ledge and studied my ears, translucent, I knew, with the cold...waiting.

"Big John's Flat."

He tightened his look, and his eye went to town. “Big John’s Flat.”

“Really,” I said, resetting my cap.

“All by yourself.”

I nodded. A car slapped past and coined away to a point of sound. I thought then he might have been my Dad, except for the war, although then I hadn’t come to know what I would and how ironic my thought—I mean, then, at the time.

“You’ll run into the beast that high up.” And I couldn’t tell whether he was kidding or not. “Though there’ve been sightings down low.”

“I got Franny,” I assured him.

“You got Franny.”

“But something more than that.”

He turned off the lights and looked at the radio as it chirped. He looked at me and ran a three-fingered paw over his mug. Think mug, with a kind of lantern jaw gone pudgy around the jowls, flesh all dry and pockmarked up toward the ears. Big ears and curlythick hair gone gray at the rim. Duck-gray like the decoys he carved. He carved decoys in a shed in the yard at the back of his house, and sometimes he and Pop would go hunting ducks in a blind south of the Plant. They’d get up before dawn and take Dallas and me, and one time, I remember, Jessie came, too. We’d huddle around testing our bones in the damp, listening and watching the sky. Here a chatter, there, and gliding down on their wings. Blam! Blam! Franny into the marsh with a splash. Oft times, we’d dress and pluck one right there and roast it on a wire, chortling over the coals and pinching the greasy meat from the bone, telling our lies. But he’d lost his pinky years before that and not from carving a duck; it was from playing mumblety-peg with a girl down by the river—according to legend, that is—not with a jackknife but with a Bowie, or maybe an ax, and not once had he ever described to us how it occurred or what he had done to that girl in the end, or—as Waxman might say—if in her end he had done anything at all. No, he didn’t talk much to us kids about

his life before now. Not whether he'd ever been in love. Or even his time spent in Nam. He and his wife, Marybeth, who Mom said he once loved, and maybe still did, had only one kid, and that was Jessie, of course. He pawed at his mug and re-gripped the wheel.

"Big John's Flat," he repeated, blinking and shaking his head. "More than what?"

I gazed up toward the cliffs and could hardly breathe for the thought of what I was about to say, and it must have shown in my eyes. "Sally Ann," I said.

"What?"

"The bones of Sally Ann."

He gave me a look, slow and ruminative, his eye strangely calm. He didn't say anything. He picked up the mike and snapped it.

"Lucille?"

"Sheriff?"

"Lucille, get up a posse. Hank and Jasper and a couple other of the boys and tell them to get up here to McCloud and One-Twenty-Nine. Double time. I want to get off the mountain before dark."

"A posse?"

"Sally Ann Rogers," he said. He looked at me and the daubs of his eyes went flat and black so you couldn't tell the iris from the pupil. Kill the messenger, I thought, but I didn't say it. I figured it was a matter of reopening the case, getting uncomfortable all over again. He snapped the mike then snapped it again. "Lucille? And I guess you better call the goddamned FBI."

He looked at the dog.

"I marked the spot," I told him.

"You marked the spot."

"You know where that fissure is up along the flat—"

"I don't know where nothing is, but I'll damned well know when you point it out to me."

"I'm not going back up there," I said. "I got practice at the Grange this afternoon."

“You’ll double-well see me to the top of them cliffs, practice be damned. I’ll talk to Harry. You’re only second string anyway this year. Get in, now. We’ll get you some dry clothes and head back out.”

I kissed for the dog and she followed me around the front of the car. Through the windshield I could see him whap the steering wheel with his three-fingered hand. He glanced out across the highway and beyond the pines to the rim of the crater itself, and his lips moved in silent condemnation of prospects and possibilities I had yet to learn. He opened the rear security door, and I laid the bow and quiver against the mat, next to the shotgun on the back seat, and Franny hopped in.

“Muddy sumbitch,” he said; that is, muttered more than said.

I got up front and Josh hit the siren and then the lights and before I could buckle up peeled onto the highway. Poor Sally Ann, I couldn’t help think, and I hoped in my heart that rabbit lived long enough to feel itself die and in dying its death would be slow.

