one

Addie didn't stoke the fire in the stove but let the embers turn to ash. She didn't light a single candle when the blackness settled over everything the way it always did so far away from town. She only half remembered fixing her eyes on the windowpane above the sleeping loft, where stars pricked with fevered sparks, and how she'd crooned to herself, in a voice so shrill and unfamiliar, so like an animal's cry, she hardly recognized it as her own. The two quilts she'd pulled around herself couldn't make her warm or stop the shaking, and she sank into the blackness at last, not stirring until Demetry gave his morning crow. There was such cheer in it that she ran screaming from her bed and barefoot through the yard, flapping her arms at the rooster, and stopping only when she felt

the biting cold creep under her nightgown and saw that more snow had fallen in the night.

It startled her to see how the snow crypt, in morning light, appeared to be just a little hill that Jack could play on. For a moment she didn't think of him and Mama so cold and still inside it. For just a moment. And then the whole unimaginable day ahead, the terrible weeks just past, cast such a heavy pall over the present that she seemed unable to move. Why hadn't she been able to save them? Because Addie had always been the one to bring down Jack's fevers in the past, Papa had once called her a healer and claimed she was descended from a healing tradition. If it was true, why had she been powerless in the face of this loathsome illness that had claimed so many?

A low painful mooing from the barn reminded her she hadn't milked Fleur for two days. With no calf to feed, the poor heifer would be engorged with milk. Only the cow's urgent need propelled Addie back into the house for shoes, a coat, and a clean pail. Even when Mama and Jack had been most sick, she hadn't neglected the cow, whose sweet milk had at times been all the food that Jack would take. Warm from the animal, it had helped to keep up her strength as well. She couldn't let the cow get sick.

As she pulled on the teats with slow, even strokes, she allowed her mind to go where it continued to be drawn — to

the hardest part, when closing first Mama's eyes, then Jack's, had shut the window on their souls. Now she thought how there had really been no spirit left in their empty blue stare, eyes so alike in life, identical in death. This closing was a thing she'd also seen the women do, and although she probably couldn't explain it, she now knew the reason.

But she hadn't expected how small and light Jack's body had become. She was accustomed to the weight of him in games of piggyback and when she'd swung him around in circles; in death, his slack form within her arms was inert as a bag of flour. Mama seemed to have shrunk and was curled into a fetal pose, which Addie had to straighten some before she stiffened, in preparation for the box she'd need to fit in. Addie had carried her fragile form, wrapped in a clean sheet, with a strength she hadn't known she could summon. That she had obeyed Mama's wishes not to allow a stranger's hand upon either of them was very little consolation.

She felt as if Mama and Jack were just waiting now—waiting for a proper place to rest, away from all the elements and threats of wild animals, such as that fox that sauntered by the henhouse at summer's end. Mama'd shot at it to scare it off. She'd only just learned to use a rifle, and Addie'd been amazed to see her, such a small, frail woman, wield it in this way, as if she'd always handled firearms. Addie thought how she couldn't have known then how soon she'd need this same

skill and wished her mother had taught it to her. There were many things she now wished that she knew how to do—things she either hadn't had the patience to learn or that Mama didn't know herself or hadn't had the will or patience to teach. Even before Mama took sick, their nearest neighbor, Mrs. Tower, would sometimes come by to help her sew a dress or kill and clean a hen. And though she'd learned to weave and embroider while still a girl, she rarely encouraged Addie's awkward attempts at either.

After milking Fleur and feeding the chickens, the hours of the day had hovered about her, colossal and blank, like tremendously large saucers that needed to be filled. But with what? She seemed to have lost the key to ordinary days.

"I do have a plan," Addie said into the empty house. "I do. I know what has to come next."

Hearing her own unwavering voice both surprised and reassured her. She went over in her mind again how tomorrow she would take her sled into town before the sun was up. She'd travel an ancient Agawam Indian trail that snaked along the fields where there'd most likely be deep morning mist, thick as sea smoke when the river froze, to shield her from the eyes of anyone awake. And soon she'd have to find how to get her letter to Father on his way to the California goldfields on the schooner *Metropolis*.

If he knew the truth, she was certain he'd either find some way to leave this expedition that meant the world to him or else she'd be sent to live with any stranger who'd agree to take her in. Addie'd seen it happen to another girl at school. A smart girl, too, she hardly came to lessons anymore, too busy tending someone else's house and family. Another child had been moved to a neighboring town to help care for children not much younger than himself. Recently, the ailing Mrs. Spinny, who lived just across the field, had been looking for a hired girl, and she'd relish getting one for free. Addie felt downright revulsion at the thought of tending that lady of many complaints and her bossy husband, passed out most evenings from the effects of his own corn liquor. Hadn't Mama, time and again, warned about the interference of strangers until Addie had an outright fear of even those who happened by just to be neighborly?

"Go up into the loft, Addie," Mama would say before she'd open the door even a crack. Or, "Run out the back and tend to the chickens."

Mama had even resisted sending Addie to school. It was Mrs. Tower, her mother's only real friend, who had finally convinced her to.

"Emmaline," Addie'd heard one day from the stoop where she was sitting as the two women conversed inside the house.

"You've got to let the child get book learning. She's such a clever little girl. You can teach her a few"—she cleared her throat—"of the homely arts, but they won't be enough for her to get on in life."

Mama's low protests had been almost indistinct. But Mrs. Tower had continued. "She'll be all right. You'll see. Children are so accepting."

Afterward, Addie had asked her mother what the word *accepting* meant. Mama chided her for listening in, but then had said, "It's just one of those big words Mrs. Tower likes to bandy about. You know how she is." But she did, reluctantly, begin to send Addie to school.

On her way there or on Addie's infrequent forays into town with Pa, the sideways glances of most townsfolk had made her feel—how could she describe it?—a little different from the people hereabouts. She was never quite sure why. Living so far from the clusters of small houses that ringed the center, the only time she saw other children besides the sprawling nearby family of Towers was at school or on her rare visits to church with Pa. He would attend from time to time, but Mama liked to say that she "communed with the Divine" in private. Addie didn't know just when she did that or what divinity she conjured up. Papa's seemed to be a distant God who sat up in the clouds; Mama's was apparently too deep inside her to glimpse.

Still, Addie was convinced there was a force at work within her life much bigger than she was, so powerful that it had been able to turn her whole world around in just a space of weeks. She had no image of this force, no catechism lessons to draw upon like the Tower children, who could earn a holy card for answering such a question as "Who made you?"

Papa liked to say how God didn't cause bad things to happen. How He just allowed them. She wondered what kind of God could have allowed such a terrible thing to happen to her just when her father had left on such a distant journey that he couldn't be reached.

"Adelaide," she remembered him saying on the very day he'd made the decision to buy passage on the *Metropolis*, joining a small group of gold-rush speculators on a copper-fastened vessel fitted for a two-year cruise. She'd long been aware that he liked to use her full name when he was feeling important. He then explained how they'd be leaving on November 15 in this year of 1849. "It's an investment. If we hit it rich, I can buy your mother the life she wants—a big house, a buggy. One day I may even be able to commission the building of a schooner of my own and take command of it myself."

In the wooded area they had been passing through, red and gold leaves swirled from the trees, and evergreens poked through the changing landscape like winter emissaries. Addie

and her father were walking across the fields together and had climbed to the top of a hill that offered the best view of Ipswich Bay. He rubbed the stubble on his chin, and she thought how it was growing in darker than the hair on his head and would soon be a full beard that she wouldn't see for a long time. His eyes had looked away to the horizon and fastened there. His mouth had grown as soft as his words. "It's an absolute dream come true."

She remembered feeling a creeping fear rather than the excitement he seemed to expect and wondering how they would manage on their small homestead without his help. Her mother—never very strong since Jack had been born, and given to long silences and sick headaches—had grown up in the big house of a merchant in the city of Salem. If coaxed, she'd sometimes tell of the life she'd led before her own father's "reversal of fortune," how she'd had a governess, learned French, and filled a hope chest with linens and laces and fine china, some of which were now, unused and dusty, on the shelves that Papa'd built for their small house in Essex. As Addie tried to think of some argument to keep him from leaving, she looked down at her own hands, which were small replicas of her father's large capable ones. She thought of how she had his dark hair and eyes as well, which often caused second looks from strangers when she was out with

her fair-haired mother and brother. At twelve years old, she could already tell that she was going to be tall like him, too.

"What about your job in the yards?" Addie asked. "What about the two dollars a day you've been promised?" He'd been so proud of his recent raise in pay.

"I'm speaking of a possible fortune, Addie. A fortune in gold." His eyes held a peculiar glint that made her uneasy. He caught strands of her glossy windblown hair in his hand and held them away from her face. "If I do fail—and I won't—there'll always be jobs for dubbers and caulkers like me in a shipbuilding town like Essex. We've nothing to lose."

Today Jack's toys, Mama's loom, Papa's books—books by men such as Bronson Alcott and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau, who preached about survival in the woods and the simple life—stood out like intruders that had no real reason to be there. Papa had been reading the slim Alcott book to Addie, *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*, in the days before he went away, and there was a ribbon marking his stopping place. Now, just before dusk, the weak winter light threw important shadows of even the smallest objects across one wall of the largest room. Addie moved into the only corner where they couldn't find her

and where she could, even for a little while, be hidden away from all the things she feared were bound to come.

She kept the fire going in the stove this second night and made a bed on the hard floor in front of it, holding Matilda close. Tears soaked her pillow between snatches of sleep. Every small sound that had once been woven through the warp of her nights punctured the dark like a sharp stick. A passel of dry leaves blown against the door was the scraping of a ghost's bony hand; the scavenging raccoon outside the privy mimicked the shuffle of a stranger's feet through soft snow.

While the waning moon seemed caught in the branches of an aspen, and before a pink dawn began to show through the transom, she was awake and dressed, fastening the buttons of her knee-high winter boots and pulling Papa's old woolen watch cap over her long dark hair to both hide it and keep her warm. She put on the trousers she wore for mucking the horse stall and hoped she'd be taken for a boy if anyone saw her about the fields so early. So tired she wasn't sure how she was going to complete the task she'd set, she wished she'd searched for the sled yesterday. It had been such a long time since she or Jack had used it, and she wasted precious minutes before she finally discovered it hanging from the wall of the shed. As she took down the cumbersome thing, she thought how she'd have to move quickly through neighboring fields before

anyone was awake and could notice her, before, as Mama liked to say, prying eyes could turn into wagging tongues.

Even without a passenger, the sled was heavier than she remembered. Always before, she had pulled Jack, as he laughed and urged her to go faster, or they'd both lain on their stomachs so she could help him steer down a slope. Now the weight of her heart and the high snowdrifts made it difficult going even on flat land. Just as she'd hoped, the mist was thick—thick enough at times to obscure certain landmarks she was counting on. As she pulled her scarf over her nose and mouth, she looked up to see the edge of Henry Dunbar's paddock and realized with a start that she must have passed by Mr. Crocker's stile already. She'd have to watch closely so as not to miss the turn she'd need to take across Bullock's field. If she failed to see that, it would be miles before there'd be another place where she could cut over the road.

Though the mist was clearing in places, it settled, abundant and white, into the shallow valleys and ditches along the way. She was focused on one such cloudy mass straight ahead when it began to rise into the air, geyser-like, to become a gauzy figure with arms outstretched, long flowing hair, and an aura of golden light. For minutes it seemed as if the snow had been lit on fire. Addie jolted backward into the snow, dropped the sled's rope, and put a hand over her mouth to stifle her cry. Her disbelieving eyes could not close, however, until she'd made

sense of this apparition, which was surely from another world. When it seemed to take on features—eyes and a mouth, large ears—and when the cavernous mouth began to speak, she fully expected some message from her mother on the other side.

"Feather and shell," Addie thought she heard the voice say. Its words were laden with years and intoned like a dirge. "I have kept your feather and shell," it seemed she heard then, though this second time the words were more fuzzy and indistinct and the figure was already moving away from her. A vision, she reasoned, would simply fade from view. This was something solidly human and alive.

Not until it turned and shuffled off across the field did Addie pick herself up from the snow. Her eyes followed the strange being as it grew smaller and smaller and until it ultimately disappeared.

two

It was still barely light when she reached the undertaker's home, but Addie knew she'd have to work fast before the man or his wife was up. His house and the town hearse house were right next to the cemetery that surrounded the school, and from the window near her desk, Addie had noticed how the man usually emerged late in the morning and then only on the day of a funeral or to put a coffin out back or take one inside. Though it was still foggy, she could make out three new coffins near the stairs, only one of which was large enough for Mama and Jack together. Her baby brother had been part of her mother before birth, she reasoned, and belonged with her in death.

The box was actually not as heavy as she'd feared it would be, but it was such an awkward shape—wide near the top and

narrow at the bottom—that she had a hard time balancing it on the sled. The scraping noise of wood against wood was so loud to her own ears, she felt sure someone in the mortuary must have heard it. She held her breath as a candle was lit in one room and a face appeared at a window. She bent down under the sill and didn't move for what seemed an eternity. There was a murmur of voices within, the back door squeaked open, and a large shiny nose protruded into the cold, lit by a weak shaft of early morning sun.

After a minute or two, the door slammed shut, but Addie kept her frozen pose. Not until the candle was finally snuffed out and she heard creaking bedsprings, followed soon by muted snoring, did she decide that it was safe to leave. Her feet seemed too stiff, however, to begin the long trek back. She had to set each boot down with all her will and might, and remind herself of her purpose here and how she needed to do this for Mama and Jack. And Papa. Of course for Papa. As the blood rushed into her toes, so painfully it made her groan, she dragged the sled and its cargo through the snow, under fences where it would fit and around others, and, at last, across the open meadow far away from town.

By now the sun was fully up and anyone could have seen her caravan of one sloshing through the fields. Maybe they would be curious; maybe they would think she was on some

boy's errand of no importance. She would have to hope that she was either unobserved or that she presented too insignificant a sight to be paid any mind.

She had already fed and milked Fleur and secured the empty coffin inside the shed—angled against an inside wall in order for the door to shut—when she saw John Tower loping up the road, his book strap flapping around his knees. From a distance, his mop of cinnamon hair looked like a tight-fitting cap, and as he drew closer, she could see how a ragged shock of it was sticking out from his forehead like a visor. He had the same Christmas grin he broadcasted every day of the year, especially in her direction, but today she had such a difficult time smiling back and pretending that nothing was wrong that her cheeks ached. It was Monday of another week, and she should have remembered he'd be stopping for her, but she hadn't thought past her urgent early morning errand.

"You can't go to school dressed like that," he declared when he drew closer to her. As always, his clear but speckled blue eyes flashed as if it were not an ordinary day and as if he'd come to take her on an adventure. If only he knew how un-ordinary this day and the days preceding it really were.

She released her hair from Papa's cap and stuttered a response. "I—I—I'm not going today. Mama, you know. And Jack. They still—they still need me."

"You'll get way behind," John said, scowling too deeply, she felt, and with too much concern. He shook his head, crossed his feet, and leaned on the open gate. "You've already missed the boresome studies on the China trade and a heap of fractions that are really hard. I'll tote your books back on my way home tonight so you don't come a cropper."

She tried to gather her thoughts as quickly as she could. Usually when he was bossy like this, she'd sass him right back. But she knew he was right and that if she didn't return to school soon, people would begin to wonder. And each time John came by the house to bring her lessons, there'd be more chance for him to discover the true state of things.

"It's all right," she said finally. "There's no need, 'cause I'll be in school soon enough. Mama's bound to get her strength back real quick now." This lie didn't come easily, but she was surprised that it came at all. She'd known it would be harder lying to John than to anyone else.

"But there is something you can do for me." She pulled the letter from her pocket. It was addressed to Emerson Hayden, Esquire. "You can give this to Mrs. Hardy in the shipping office. She'll know how to get it to my father on the *Metropolis*."

John worked at the yard of Epes Story after school and knew most everyone important.

"Well, of course I can," said John in a teasing way, "that is if I don't lose it first, or Bullock's dog don't tear it out of my hands when I wave it at his teeth."

"It's important, John. No fooling." Tears gave her eyes a dark shimmer and spilled down her cheeks.

"Hey, Addie. I was only funnin' with you. You know." He put a hand out as if to brush her cheek, then let it fall limply at his side.

She wiped her face with one finger, leaving a dirty streak from nose to ear, and didn't look up.

"Something the matter?" he asked.

She couldn't let him think that. With a weak little groan, she said, "You know how it is when your mama's sick, how you have to do all the chores." His mother had the flux earlier in the year and was almost fully recovered.

"Yeah," he said. "I was sure glad when my ma could get back on her feet and I didn't have to watch those porch babies Tyler and Sarah Jane and keep track of the other kids night and day. She says she's still not feeling up to snuff, leastwise she would've helped your mama more. Sometimes it's no good being the oldest. I'll bet Jack's a handful."

Jack had never been that, she thought. She wished with all her heart that he could be.

"And I almost forgot," John added. "My ma wanted me to ask if she can come by as soon as she's not feelin' so weak. She'd like to bring her pork pie if you're up to some."

"We're fine," said Addie, so abruptly she feared sounding ungrateful and turning John suspicious. She quickly added, "Mama's got no appetite as yet. Please thank your mother. Tell her we appreciate the thought." The last part was what Mama had always said to anyone she felt might want to meddle.

When Addie realized he wasn't going to argue with her, her breathing came more easily. The muscles in her face relaxed.

"All right," he said as he took the letter and put it with his books. Then he added, "Don't worry so much. I'll take care of this first thing."

But he looked at her a little too long, a little too quizzically.

She managed a smile, waved him along, then watched as he galloped down the path like a fine colt and across the same fields she had just traveled through. She thought how if he'd come by only minutes before, he would have caught her on her grim mission.

She resisted entering the empty house, but after feeding the few chickens and the mare, she needed to get out of the cold and was suddenly hungry. The soft jingle of the clamshell wind chime plucked the chord of her unbearable loneliness

and made her reluctant to go back into what had been a sickroom for so many weeks. When she stepped onto the granite stoop, her toe hit something and she quickly pulled back. Bending down, she noticed a tiny basket filled with a kind of seed she didn't recognize. Had her mother put these out for the birds before she fell ill, the seeds would have been long gone by now. And the basket. She'd never seen one like it before, so tightly woven that the sides were smooth. The compact shape of it begged to be cradled in one hand. With the other, she pushed open the door.

Matilda jumped down from the dry sink and startled Addie into nearly dropping what she held. The cat rushed past her and in minutes had darted out the door, around the henhouse, and disappeared into the fields. She hadn't eaten the food left for her, and Addie wondered if her pet was also feeling sad and confused, if she had an animal's way of knowing what had happened here.

Addie's fingers traced the faint geometric pattern on the basket before she put it on a shelf. It had no relevance to what she needed to do. As she looked around the room, she saw the space more clearly than she had in days. But things were in such disorder that she didn't know where to begin—a pile of soiled bedding in the corner; a long-un-emptied chamber pot; blankets that smelled of camphor, mustard plaster, and sickness; a cracked pitcher in a pool of

dirty water; open and broken bottles of medicine; a heap of dirty dishes and spoiled food. She leaned one hand against a smudged pane and stared at her dark fingers outlined in frost. Papa once said her fingers were long enough to play the piano. Addie'd seen one in the church once, and she'd heard about the small piano — a spinet, Mama had called it — that used to be in the parlor in Salem.

A cloud of sleep enveloped Addie as she was thinking about Mama's hands, how they were as small as a child's. It was so insistent that she curled up on the floor in her outer garments without a thought to whether it was morning or night. When she awoke, there was a fire in the grate and Matilda was snuggled against her. But the hopeless confusion of the room was apparent even in the faint flickers of light, and she was confounded as to how a fire that had grown cold could ignite all on its own. She got up to search the darkened room for a candle, and as she passed a closed window, her eyes traveled to the blackness outside it, blackness that was suddenly penetrated by the shadowy specter of a wizened face framed in wild white hair.