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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANN PATCHETT is the author of seven novels and three works of non-fiction. She has been short-listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction three times; with *The Magician's Assistant* in 1998, winning the prize with *Bel Canto* in 2002, and was most recently shortlisted with *State of Wonder* in 2012. She is also the winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award and was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2012. Her work has been translated into more than thirty languages. She is the co-owner of Parnassus Books in Nashville, Tennessee, where she lives with her husband, Karl.

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THE
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HOUSE

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B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G
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This book is for Patrick Ryan

Part
O N E

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST TIME our father brought Andrea to the Dutch House, Sandy, our housekeeper, came to my sister's room and told us to come downstairs. "Your father has a friend he wants you to meet," she said.

"Is it a work friend?" Maeve asked. She was older and so had a more complex understanding of friendship.

Sandy considered the question. "I'd say not. Where's your brother?"

"Window seat," Maeve said.

Sandy had to pull the draperies back to find me. "Why do you have to close the drapes?"

I was reading. "Privacy," I said, though at eight I had no notion of privacy. I liked the word, and I liked the boxed-in feel the draperies gave when they were closed.

As for the visitor, it was a mystery. Our father didn't have friends, at least not the kind who came to the house late on a Saturday afternoon. I left my secret spot and went to the top of the stairs to lie down on the rug that covered the landing. I knew from experience I could see into the drawing room by looking between the newel post and first baluster if I was on the floor. There was our father in front of the fireplace with a woman, and from what I could tell they were studying the

portraits of Mr. and Mrs. VanHoebeek. I got up and went back to my sister's room to make my report.

"It's a woman," I said to Maeve. Sandy would have known this already.

Sandy asked me if I'd brushed my teeth, by which she meant had I brushed them that morning. No one brushed their teeth at four o'clock in the afternoon. Sandy had to do everything herself because Jocelyn had Saturdays off. Sandy would have laid the fire and answered the door and offered drinks and, on top of all of that, was now responsible for my teeth. Sandy was off on Mondays. Sandy and Jocelyn were both off on Sundays because my father didn't think people should be made to work on Sundays.

"I did," I said, because I probably had.

"Do it again," she said. "And brush your hair."

The last part she meant for my sister, whose hair was long and black and as thick as ten horse tails tied together. No amount of brushing ever made it look brushed.

Once we were deemed presentable, Maeve and I went downstairs and stood beneath the wide archway of the foyer, watching our father and Andrea watch the VanHoebeeks. They didn't notice us, or they didn't acknowledge us—hard to say—and so we waited. Maeve and I knew how to be quiet in the house, a habit born of trying not to irritate our father, though it irritated him more when he felt we were sneaking up on him. He was wearing his blue suit. He never wore a suit on Saturdays. For the first time I could see that his hair was starting to gray in the back. Standing next to Andrea, he looked even taller than he was.

"It must be a comfort, having them with you," Andrea said to him, not of his children but of his paintings. Mr. and Mrs. VanHoebeek, who had no first names that I had ever heard,

were old in their portraits but not entirely ancient. They both dressed in black and stood with an erect formality that spoke of another time. Even in their separate frames they were so together, so *married*, I always thought it must have been one large painting that someone cut in half. Andrea's head tilted back to study those four cunning eyes that appeared to follow a boy with disapproval no matter which of the sofas he chose to sit on. Maeve, silent, stuck her finger in between my ribs to make me yelp but I held on to myself. We had not yet been introduced to Andrea, who, from the back, looked small and neat in her belted dress, a dark hat no bigger than a saucer pinned over a twist of pale hair. Having been schooled by nuns, I knew better than to embarrass a guest by laughing. Andrea would have had no way of knowing that the people in the paintings had come with the house, that everything in the house had come with the house.

The drawing-room VanHoebeeks were the show-stoppers, life-sized documentation of people worn by time, their stern and unlovely faces rendered with Dutch exactitude and a distinctly Dutch understanding of light, but there were dozens of other lesser portraits on every floor—their children in the hallways, their ancestors in the bedrooms, the unnamed people they'd admired scattered throughout. There was also one portrait of Maeve when she was ten, and while it wasn't nearly as big as the paintings of the VanHoebeeks, it was every bit as good. My father had brought in a famous artist from Chicago on the train. As the story goes, he was supposed to paint our mother, but our mother, who hadn't been told that the painter was coming to stay in our house for two weeks, refused to sit, and so he painted Maeve instead. When the portrait was finished and framed, my father hung it in the drawing room right across from the VanHoebeeks. Maeve liked to say that was where she learned to stare people down.

“Danny,” my father said when finally he turned, looking like he expected us to be exactly where we were. “Come say hello to Mrs. Smith.”

I will always believe that Andrea’s face fell for an instant when she looked at Maeve and me. Even if my father hadn’t mentioned his children, she would have known he had them. Everyone in Elkins Park knew what went on in the Dutch House. Maybe she thought we would stay upstairs. She’d come to see the house, after all, not the children. Or maybe the look on Andrea’s face was just for Maeve, who, at fifteen and in her tennis shoes, was already a head taller than Andrea in her heels. Maeve had been inclined to slouch when it first became apparent she was going to be taller than all the other girls in her class and most of the boys, and our father was relentless in his correction of her posture. *Head-up-shoulders-back* might as well have been her name. For years he thumped her between the shoulder blades with the flat of his palm whenever he passed her in a room, the unintended consequence of which was that Maeve now stood like a soldier in the queen’s court, or like the queen herself. Even I could see how she might have been intimidating: her height, the shining black wall of hair, the way she would lower her eyes to look at a person rather than bend her neck. But at eight I was still comfortably smaller than the woman our father would later marry. I held out my hand to shake her little hand and said my name, then Maeve did the same. Though the story will be remembered that Maeve and Andrea were at odds right from the start, that wasn’t true. Maeve was perfectly fair and polite when they met, and she remained fair and polite until doing so was no longer possible.

“How do you do?” Maeve said, and Andrea replied that she was very well.

Andrea was well. Of course she was. It had been Andrea’s

goal for years to get inside the house, to loop her arm through our father's arm when going up the wide stone steps and across the red-tiled terrace. She was the first woman our father had brought home since our mother left, though Maeve told me that he had had something going with our nanny for a while, an Irish girl named Fiona.

"You think he was sleeping with Fluffy?" I asked her. Fluffy was what we called Fiona when we were children, partly because I had a hard time with the name Fiona and partly because of the soft waves of red hair that fell down her back in a transfixing cloud. The news of this affair came to me as most information did: many years after the fact, in a car parked outside the Dutch House with my sister.

"Either that or she cleaned his room in the middle of the night," Maeve said.

My father and Fluffy in flagrante delicto. I shook my head. "Can't picture it."

"You shouldn't try to *picture* it. God, Danny, that's disgusting. Anyway, you were practically a baby during the Fluffy administration. I'm surprised you'd even remember her."

But Fluffy had hit me with a wooden spoon when I was four years old. I still have a small scar in the shape of a golf club beside my left eye—the mark of Fluffy, Maeve called it. Fluffy claimed she'd been cooking a pot of applesauce when I startled her by grabbing her skirt. She said she was trying to get me away from the stove and had certainly never meant to hit me, though I'd think it would be hard to accidentally hit a child in the face with a spoon. The story was only interesting insofar as it was my first distinct memory—of another person or the Dutch House or my own life. I didn't have a single memory of our mother, but I remembered Fluffy's spoon cracking into the side of my head. I remembered Maeve, who had been down the

hall when I screamed, flying into the kitchen the way the deer would fly across the hedgerow at the back of the property. She threw herself into Fluffy, knocking her into the stove, the blue flames leaping as the boiling pot of applesauce crashed to the floor so that we were all burned in pinpoint splatters. I was sent to the doctor's office for six stitches and Maeve's hand was wrapped and Fluffy was dismissed, even though I could remember her crying and saying how sorry she was, how it was only an accident. She didn't want to go. That was our father's other relationship according to my sister, and she should know, because if I was four when I got that scar then she was already eleven.

As it happened, Fluffy's parents had worked for the VanHoebeeks as their driver and cook. Fluffy had spent her childhood in the Dutch House, or in the small apartment over the garage, so I had to wonder, when her name came up again after so many years, where she would have gone when she was told to leave.

Fluffy was the only person in the house who had known the VanHoebeeks. Not even our father had met them, though we sat on their chairs and slept in their beds and ate our meals off their delftware. The VanHoebeeks weren't the story, but in a sense the house was the story, and it was their house. They had made their fortune in the wholesale distribution of cigarettes, a lucky business Mr. VanHoebeek had entered into just before the start of the First World War. Cigarettes were given to soldiers in the field for purposes of morale, and the habit followed them home to celebrate a decade of prosperity. The VanHoebeeks, richer by the hour, commissioned a house to be built on what was then farmland outside of Philadelphia.

The stunning success of the house could be attributed to the architect, though by the time I thought to go looking I could

find no other extant examples of his work. It could be that one or both of those dour VanHoebeeks had been some sort of aesthetic visionary, or that the property inspired a marvel beyond what any of them had imagined, or that America after the First World War was teeming with craftsmen who worked to standards long since abandoned. Whatever the explanation, the house they wound up with—the house we later wound up with—was a singular confluence of talent and luck. I can't explain how a house that was three stories high could seem like just the right amount of space, but it did. Or maybe it would be better to say that it was too much of a house for anyone, an immense and ridiculous waste, but that we never wanted it to be different. The Dutch House, as it came to be known in Elkins Park and Jenkintown and Glenside and all the way to Philadelphia, referred not to the house's architecture but to its inhabitants. The Dutch House was the place where those Dutch people with the unpronounceable name lived. Seen from certain vantage points of distance, it appeared to float several inches above the hill it sat on. The panes of glass that surrounded the glass front doors were as big as storefront windows and held in place by wrought-iron vines. The windows both took in the sun and reflected it back across the wide lawn. Maybe it was neoclassical, though with a simplicity in the lines that came closer to Mediterranean or French, and while it was not Dutch, the blue delft mantels in the drawing room, library, and master bedroom were said to have been pried out of a castle in Utrecht and sold to the VanHoebeeks to pay a prince's gambling debts. The house, complete with mantels, had been finished in 1922.

"They had seven good years before the bankers started jumping out of windows," Maeve said, giving our predecessors their place in history.

The first I ever heard of the property that had been sold off

was that first day Andrea came to the house. She followed our father to the foyer and was looking out at the front lawn.

"It's so much glass," Andrea said, as if making a calculation to see if the glass could be changed, swapped out for an actual wall. "Don't you worry about people looking in?"

Not only could you see into the Dutch House, you could see straight through it. The house was shortened in the middle, and the deep foyer led directly into what we called the observatory, which had a wall of windows facing the backyard. From the driveway you could let your eye go up the front steps, across the terrace, through the front doors, across the long marble floor of the foyer, through the observatory, and catch sight of the lilacs waving obliviously in the garden behind the house.

Our father glanced towards the ceiling and then to either side of the door, as if he were just now considering this. "We're far enough from the street," he said. On this May afternoon, the wall of linden trees that ran along the property line was thick with leaves, and the slant of green lawn where I rolled like a dog in the summers was both deep and wide.

"But at night," Andrea said, her voice concerned. "I wonder if there wouldn't be some way to hang drapes."

Drapes to block the view struck me not only as impossible but the single stupidest idea I'd ever heard.

"You've seen us at night?" Maeve asked.

"You have to remember the land that was here when they built the place," our father said, speaking over Maeve. "There were more than two hundred acres. The property went all the way to Melrose Park."

"But why would they have sold it?" Suddenly Andrea could see how much more sense the house would have made had there been no other houses. The sight line should have gone far past the slope of the lawn, past the peony beds and the roses. The

eye was meant to travel down a wide valley and bank into a forest, so that even if the VanHoebeeks or one of their guests were to look out a window from the ballroom at night, the only light they'd see would be starlight. There wasn't a street back then, there wasn't a neighborhood, though now both the street and the Buchsbaums' house across the street were perfectly visible in the winter when the leaves came off the trees.

"Money," Maeve said.

"Money," our father said, nodding. It wasn't a complicated idea. Even at eight I was able to figure it out.

"But they were wrong," Andrea said. There was a tightness around her mouth. "Think about how beautiful this place must have been. They should have had more respect, if you ask me. The house is a piece of art."

And then I did laugh, because what I understood Andrea to say was that the VanHoebeeks should have asked *her* before they sold the land. My father, irritated, told Maeve to take me upstairs, as if I might have forgotten the way.

Ready-made cigarettes lined up in their cartons were a luxury for the rich, as were acres never walked on by the people who owned them. Bit by bit the land was shaved away from the house. The demise of the estate was a matter of public record, history recorded in property deeds. Parcels were sold to pay debts—ten acres, then fifty, then twenty-eight. Elkins Park came closer and closer to the door. In this way the VanHoebeek family made it through the Depression, only to have Mr. VanHoebeek die of pneumonia in 1940. One VanHoebeek boy died in childhood and the two older sons died in the war. Mrs. VanHoebeek died in 1945 when there was nothing left to sell but the side yard. The house and all it contained went back to the bank, dust to dust.

Fluffy stayed behind courtesy of the Pennsylvania Savings

and Loan, and was paid a small stipend to manage the property. Fluffy's parents were dead, or maybe they had found other jobs. At any rate, she lived alone above the garage, checking the house every day to make sure the roof wasn't leaking and the pipes hadn't burst. She cut a straight path from the garage to the front doors with a push mower and let the rest of the lawn grow wild. She picked the fruit from the trees that were left near the back of the house and made apple butter and canned the peaches for winter. By the time our father bought the place in 1946, raccoons had taken over the ballroom and chewed into the wiring. Fluffy went into the house only when the sun was straight overhead, the very hour when all nocturnal animals were piled up together and fast asleep. The miracle was they didn't burn the place down. The raccoons were eventually captured and disposed of, but they left behind their fleas and the fleas sifted into everything. Maeve said her earliest memories of life in the house were of scratching, and of how Fluffy dotted each welt with a Q-tip dipped in calamine lotion. My parents had hired Fluffy to be my sister's nanny.

* * *

THE FIRST TIME Maeve and I ever parked on VanHoebeek Street (*Van Who-bake*, mispronounced as *Van Ho-bik* by everyone in Elkins Park) was the first time I'd come home from Choate for spring break. Spring was something of a misnomer that year since there was a foot of snow on the ground, an April Fool's Day joke to cap a bitter winter. True spring, I knew from my first half-semester at boarding school, was for the boys whose parents took them sailing in Bermuda.

"What are you doing?" I asked her when she stopped in front of the Buchsbaums' house, across the street from the Dutch House.

"I want to see something." Maeve leaned over and pushed in the cigarette lighter.

"Nothing to see here," I said to her. "Move along." I was in a crappy mood because of the weather and what I saw as the inequity between what I had and what I deserved, but still, I was glad to be back in Elkins Park, glad to be in my sister's car, the blue Oldsmobile wagon of our childhood that my father let her have when she got her own apartment. Because I was fifteen and generally an idiot, I thought that the feeling of home I was experiencing had to do with the car and where it was parked, instead of attributing it wholly and gratefully to my sister.

"Are you in a rush to get someplace?" She shook a cigarette out of the pack then put her hand over the lighter. If you weren't right there to catch the lighter, it would eject too forcibly and burn a hole in the seat or the floor mat or your leg, depending on where it landed.

"Do you drive over here when I'm at school?"

Pop. She caught it and lit her cigarette. "I do not."

"But here we are," I said. The snow came steady and soft as the last light of day was folded into the clouds. Maeve was an Icelandic truck driver at heart, no weather stopped her, but I had recently gotten off a train and was tired and cold. I thought it would be nice to make grilled cheese sandwiches and soak in the tub. Baths were the subject of endless ridicule at Choate, I never knew why. Only showers were thought to be manly.

Maeve filled her lungs with smoke, exhaled, then turned off the car. "I thought about coming over here a couple of times but I decided to wait for you." She smiled at me then, cranking the window down just far enough to let in a shelf of arctic air. I had nagged her to give the cigarettes up before I'd left for school, and then neglected to tell her that I'd started. Smoking was what we did at Choate in lieu of taking baths.

I craned my head to look up the drive. "Do you see them?"

Maeve looked out the driver's side window. "I don't know why, but I just keep thinking about that first time she came to the house a million years ago. Do you even remember?"

Of course I remembered. Who could forget Andrea showing up?

"And she said that business about worrying that people were looking in our windows at night?"

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than the foyer was flooded in the warm gold light of the chandelier. Then after a pause the lights above the staircase went on, and a few moments after that the light in the master bedroom on the second floor. The illumination of the Dutch House was timed so exactly to her words it nearly stopped my heart. Of course Maeve *had* been coming to the house without me. She knew that Andrea turned on the lights the very minute the sun went down. Denying it was just a bit of theatrics on my sister's part, and I appreciated her efforts once I realized them later. It made for one hell of a show.

"Look at that," I whispered.

There were no leaves on the linden trees, and the snow was falling but not too heavily. Sure enough, you could see right into the house, through the house, not with any detail of course but memory filled in the picture: there was the round table beneath the chandelier where Sandy had left our father's mail in the evening, and behind it the grandfather clock that had been my job to wind every Sunday after Mass so that the ship beneath the 6 would continue to gently rock between two blue rows of painted waves. I couldn't see the ship or the waves but I knew. There was the half-moon console table against the wall, the cobalt vase with the painting of the girl and the dog, the two French chairs no one ever sat in, the giant mirror whose

frame always made me think of the twisted arms of a golden octopus. Andrea crossed through the foyer as if on cue. We were too far away to see her face but I knew her from the way she walked. Norma came down the stairs at full speed and then stopped abruptly because her mother would have told her not to run. Norma was taller now, although I guess it could have been Bright.

"She must have watched us," Maeve said, "before she ever came in that first time."

"Or maybe everybody watched us, everyone who ever drove down this street in winter." I reached into her purse and took out the cigarettes.

"That seems a little self-aggrandizing," Maeve said. "*Everyone.*"

"They teach us that at Choate."

She laughed. I could tell she hadn't been expecting to laugh and it pleased me to no end.

"Five whole days with you at home," she said, blowing smoke out the open window. "The best five days of the year."

CHAPTER 2

AFTER HER FIRST appearance at the Dutch House, Andrea lingered like a virus. As soon as we were sure we'd seen the last of her and months would go by without a mention of her name, there she'd be at the dining-room table again, chastened by her absence at first and then slowly warming over time. Andrea, fully warmed, talked about nothing but the house. She was forever going on about some detail of the crown molding or speculating as to the exact height of the ceiling, as if the ceiling were entirely new to us. "That's called egg and dart," she'd say to me, pointing up. Just when she'd reach the point of being truly intolerable, she'd disappear again, and the relief would wash over Maeve and me (and, we had assumed, our father) with its glorious silence.

There was the Sunday we came home from Mass and found her sitting in one of the white iron chairs by the pool, or Maeve found her. Maeve had been walking through the library and had seen her through the window just by chance. She didn't call for our father the way I would have, she just walked around to the back door off the kitchen and went outside.

"Mrs. Smith?" Maeve said, shading her eyes with her hand. We called her Mrs. Smith until they were married, having never been invited to do otherwise. After they were married I'm sure

she would have preferred us to call her Mrs. Conroy, but that would have only intensified the awkwardness, seeing as how Maeve and I were Conroys as well.

Maeve told me Andrea was startled, and who knows, maybe she'd been sleeping. "Where's your father?"

"In the house." Maeve looked over her shoulder. "Was he expecting you?"

"I was expecting *him* an hour ago," Andrea corrected.

Since it was Sunday, Sandy and Jocelyn were both off. I don't think they would have let her in if we weren't home but I don't know that for sure. Sandy was the warmer of the two, Jocelyn more suspicious. They didn't like Andrea, and they probably would have made her wait outside until we got home. It was only a little cold, a nice enough day to sit by the pool, the sunlight glittering across the blue water, the tender lines of moss growing up between the flagstones. Maeve told her we'd been to church.

And then they just stared at each other, neither of them looking away. "I'm half Dutch, you know," Andrea said finally.

"I beg your pardon?"

"On my mother's side. She was full-blood Dutch."

"We're Irish," Maeve said.

Andrea nodded, as if there had been some disagreement that now was settled in her favor. When it became clear there would be no more conversation, Maeve went inside to tell our father that Mrs. Smith was waiting by the pool.

"Where in the hell did she park?" Maeve said to me after our father had gone outside. She almost never swore in those days, especially not right after Mass. "She always parks in front of the house."

And so we went to find the car, looking first on the far side of the house and then back behind the garage. When none of

the obvious spots panned out we walked down the driveway, the pea gravel crunching beneath our Sunday shoes, and onto the street. We had no idea where Andrea lived but we knew she wasn't our neighbor, she hadn't just walked over. Finally we found her cream-colored Impala parked a block away, the front left corner crumpled in on itself. Maeve crouched down to inspect the damage and I went so far as to touch the hanging fender, marveling at the headlight which had been spared. Clearly, Andrea had banged into something and she didn't want us to know.

We didn't tell our father about the car. After all, he didn't tell us anything. He never talked about Andrea, not when she was gone or when she was back. He didn't tell us if he had her in mind for some role in our future. When she was there he acted like she'd always been there, and when she was gone we never wanted to remind him for fear he'd ask her back. In truth, I don't think he was particularly interested in Andrea. I just don't think he had the means to deal with her tenacity. His strategy, as far as I could tell, was to ignore her until she went away. "That's never going to work," Maeve said to me.

The only thing our father really cared about in life was his work: the buildings he built and owned and rented out. He rarely sold anything, choosing instead to leverage what he had in order to buy more. When he had an appointment with the bank, the banker came to him, and my father made him wait. Mrs. Kennedy, my father's secretary, would offer the banker a cup of coffee and tell him it shouldn't be much longer, though sometimes it was. There was nothing the banker could do but sit there in the small anteroom of my father's office, holding his hat.

The little attention my father had left at the end of the week he saved for me, and even that he made part of his job. He took

me with him in the Buick on the first Saturday of every month to collect the rent, and gave me a pencil and a ledger book so I could write down how much the tenants had paid in the column next to what they had owed. Very soon I knew who would never be home, and who would be right there at the door with an envelope. I knew who would have complaints—a toilet that ran, a toilet that was stopped, a light switch that was dead. Certain people came up with something every month and would not part with their money until the problem was resolved. My father, whose knee had been ruined in the war, limped slightly as he went to the trunk of his car and pulled out whatever was needed to make things right. When I was a boy, I thought of the trunk as a sort of magic chest—pliers, clamps, hammers, screwdrivers, caulk, nails—everything was there. Now I know the things people ask you for on a Saturday morning tend to be easy fixes, and my father liked to do those jobs himself. He was a rich man, but he wanted to show people he still knew how things worked. Or maybe the show was all for me, because he didn't need to drive around picking up rent any more than he needed to drag his bad leg up a ladder to inspect a patch of loose shingles. He had maintenance men for that. Maybe it was for my sake that he rolled up his shirt sleeves and pulled the top off a stove to inspect the heating element while I stood there marveling at all the things he knew. He would tell me to pay attention because one day the business was going to be mine. I would need to know how things were done.

"The only way to really understand what money means is to have been poor," he said to me when we were eating lunch in the car. "That's the strike you have against you. A boy grows up rich like you, never wanting for anything, never being hungry"—he shook his head, as if it had been a disappointing choice I'd made—"I don't know how a person overcomes a

thing like that. You can watch these people all you want and see what it's been like for them, but that's not the same as living it yourself." He put down his sandwich and took a drink of coffee from the thermos.

"Yes, sir," I said, because what else was there to say?

"The biggest lie in business is that it takes money to make money. Remember that. You've got to be smart, have a plan, pay attention to what's going on around you. None of that costs a dime." My father wasn't much for imparting advice, and this seemed to have worn him out. When he was finished, he took his handkerchief from his pocket and ran it across his forehead.

When I'm in a charitable mood, I look back on this moment and I tell myself that this was the reason things played out the way they did. My father was trying to give me the benefit of his experience.

My father was always more comfortable with his tenants than he was the people in his office or the people in his house. A tenant would start in on a story, which sometimes was about the Phillies' inability to pitch against Brooklyn and other times was about why there wasn't enough money in the envelope, and I could tell by the way my father was standing, the way he nodded at one part or another, that he was paying attention. The people who were short on the rent never complained about a window that was painted shut. They only wanted the chance to tell him what had happened to them that month, and to assure him that it wouldn't happen again. I never saw my father scold the tenants or make any threats. He only listened, and then he told them to try their best. But after three months of conversation, there would be a different family living in the apartment the next time we came back. I never knew what happened to the people with hard luck, but it happened on some day other than the first Saturday of the month.

My father smoked more as the day went on. I sat beside him on the car's wide bench seat, looking over the numbers in the ledger or staring out the window at the trees as they flicked past. When my father smoked I knew he was thinking, and that I was meant to be quiet. The neighborhoods got worse as we headed into Philadelphia. He saved the very poorest of his tenants for the end of the day, as if to give them the extra hours to get together what they owed. I would rather have waited in the car on those last stops, fiddled with the radio, but I knew enough to skip the part where I would ask him to let me stay behind and he would tell me no. The tenants in Mount Airy and Jenkintown were always nice to me, asking about school and basketball, offering me candy I'd been told never to accept. "Looking more like your daddy every day," they'd say. "Growing up just like him." But in the poorer neighborhoods things were different. It's not that the tenants weren't nice, but they were nervous even when the money was in their hand, maybe thinking how it had been the month before or how it would be a month from now. They were deferential not only to my father but to me, and it was the deference that made me want to crawl out of my skin. Men older than my father called me Mr. Conroy when I was no more than ten, as if the resemblance they saw between the two of us was more than physical. Maybe they saw the situation the way my father did, that someday they'd be paying the rent to me and so had no business calling me Danny. As we climbed the steps of the buildings, I peeled off chips of paint and stepped over the broken slats. Half-open doors flapped on their hinges and there were never any screens. The heat in the hallways either ran to tropical or didn't run at all. It made me think what a luxury it was to rattle on about a faucet in need of a washer, while failing to remind me that this too was a building my father owned, and that it was well within his

power to open the trunk of his car and make things better for the people who lived there. One by one, he knocked on the doors and the doors opened and we listened to whatever the people inside had to say: husbands out of work, husbands gone, wives gone, children sick. One time a man was going on about not having the rent because his son had been so sick and he had to stay home himself and watch the boy. The boy and the man were alone in the dark apartment, everyone else had gone I guess. When my father had heard enough he went into the living room and picked up the feverish child from the couch. I had no idea what dead looked like in those days but the boy's arm swung back from his side and his head dropped back in my father's arms. It put the fear of God in me. If it hadn't been for the deep congestion of his breathing I would have thought we'd come too late. The air in the apartment was heavy with the mentholated smell of suffering. Maybe the boy was five or six, he was very small. My father carried him down the stairs and put him in the Buick while the boy's father came behind us saying there was no need to worry. "It'll be nothing," he kept saying. "The boy's gonna be fine." But he climbed into the back seat of our car all the same and rode beside his son to the hospital. I had never sat in the front of a car while an adult was sitting in the back and it made me nervous. I could only imagine what the nuns would have said had they seen us go by. When we got to the hospital, my father made arrangements with the woman at the desk, and then we left them there, driving back to our own house in the dark without saying a single word about what had happened.

"Why would he have done that?" Maeve had asked me that night after dinner when we were in her bedroom. Our father never took Maeve to collect the rent, even though she was seven

years older than me and had won the math prize in school every year and would have been so much better with the ledger it was ridiculous. On the first Saturday of every month, after we'd been excused from the table and our father had gone to the library with his drink and the paper, Maeve would pull me into her bedroom and close the door. She wanted a recounting of the entire day, blow by blow: what had happened at every apartment, what the tenants had said, and what our father had said to them in return. She even wanted to know what we'd bought for lunch at Carter's Market where we always stopped for sandwiches.

"The kid was really sick, that's all. He didn't open his eyes once, not even when Dad put him in the car." When we got to the hospital, my father had told me to go to the men's room and wash my hands, to get the water hot and use soap even though I hadn't touched the boy.

Maeve mulled this over.

"What?" I asked.

"Well, think about it. He hates sick people. Has he ever so much as crossed the door of your room when you were sick?" She stretched out on the bed beside me, fluffing the pillow under her head. "If you're going to put your feet on my bed then the least you can do is take off your filthy shoes."

I kicked off my shoes. Did he sit on the edge of my bed and put his hand on my forehead? Did he bring me a ginger ale, ask me if I felt like I was going to throw up again? That's what Maeve did. That's what Sandy and Jocelyn did when Maeve was at school. "He never comes in my room."

"But why would he have done all that if the boy's father was there?"

I almost never got to an answer before Maeve did but in this

case it was perfectly obvious. "Because the mother wasn't there." If there had been a woman in the apartment he never would have put himself in the middle of things.

Mothers were the measure of safety, which meant that I was safer than Maeve. After our mother left, Maeve took up the job on my behalf but no one did the same for her. Of course Sandy and Jocelyn mothered us. They made sure we were washed and fed and that our lunches were packed and our scouting dues paid. They loved us, I know they did, but they went home at the end of the day. There was no crawling into bed with Sandy or Jocelyn when I had a bad dream in the middle of the night, and it never once occurred to me to knock on my father's door. I went to Maeve. She taught me the proper way to hold a fork. She attended my basketball games and knew all my friends and oversaw my homework and kissed me every morning before we went our separate ways to school and again at night before I went to bed regardless of whether or not I wanted to be kissed. She told me repeatedly, relentlessly, that I was kind and smart and fast, that I could be as great a man as I made up my mind to be. She was so good at all that, despite the fact that no one had done it for her.

"Mommy did it for me," she said, surprised that I'd even brought it up. "Listen, kiddo, I was the lucky one. I got years with her and you didn't. I can't even think about how much you must miss her."

But how could I miss someone I'd never known? I was only three at the time, and if I knew what was happening I had no memory of it. Sandy was the one who told me the whole story, though parts of it I knew of course from my sister. Maeve had been ten when our mother first started to leave. One morning Maeve got out of bed and opened the drapes over the window seat to see if it had snowed during the night and it had. The

Dutch House was always freezing. There was a fireplace in Maeve's bedroom and Sandy kept dry wood on the grate above a bed of crumpled newspaper so that in the morning all Maeve had to do was strike a match, something she had been allowed to do since her eighth birthday. ("Mommy gave me a box of matches for my eighth birthday," she told me once. "She said her mother had given her a box of matches when she turned eight, and they spent the morning learning how to strike them. She showed me how to light the fire, and then that night she let me light the candles on my cake.") Maeve lit the fire and put on her robe and slippers and came next door to my room to check on me. I was three, still asleep. I had no part in this story.

Then she crossed the hall to our parents' room and found it empty, the bed already made. Maeve went back to her room to get ready for school. She had brushed her teeth and washed her face and was halfway dressed when Fluffy came in to wake her up.

"Every morning you beat me," Fluffy said.

"You should wake me up earlier," Maeve said.

Fluffy told her she didn't need to get up any earlier.

The fact that our father had already left the house wasn't unusual. The fact that our mother wasn't in the house was unusual but not without precedent. Sandy and Jocelyn and Fluffy all seemed to be themselves. If they weren't worried there was no reason to worry. Our mother was the one who took Maeve to school but on this morning Fluffy drove her, letting her out with the lunch that Jocelyn had packed. At the end of the day Fluffy was there to pick her up again. When Maeve asked where our mother was, she shrugged. "With your father, maybe?"

Our mother wasn't there for dinner that night, and when our father appeared, Maeve asked him where she'd gone. He wrapped her up in his arms and kissed her neck. Such things