



ALSO BY JOSEPHINE W. JOHNSON

The Sorcerer's Son and Other Stories

The Dark Traveler

Wildwood

Paulina

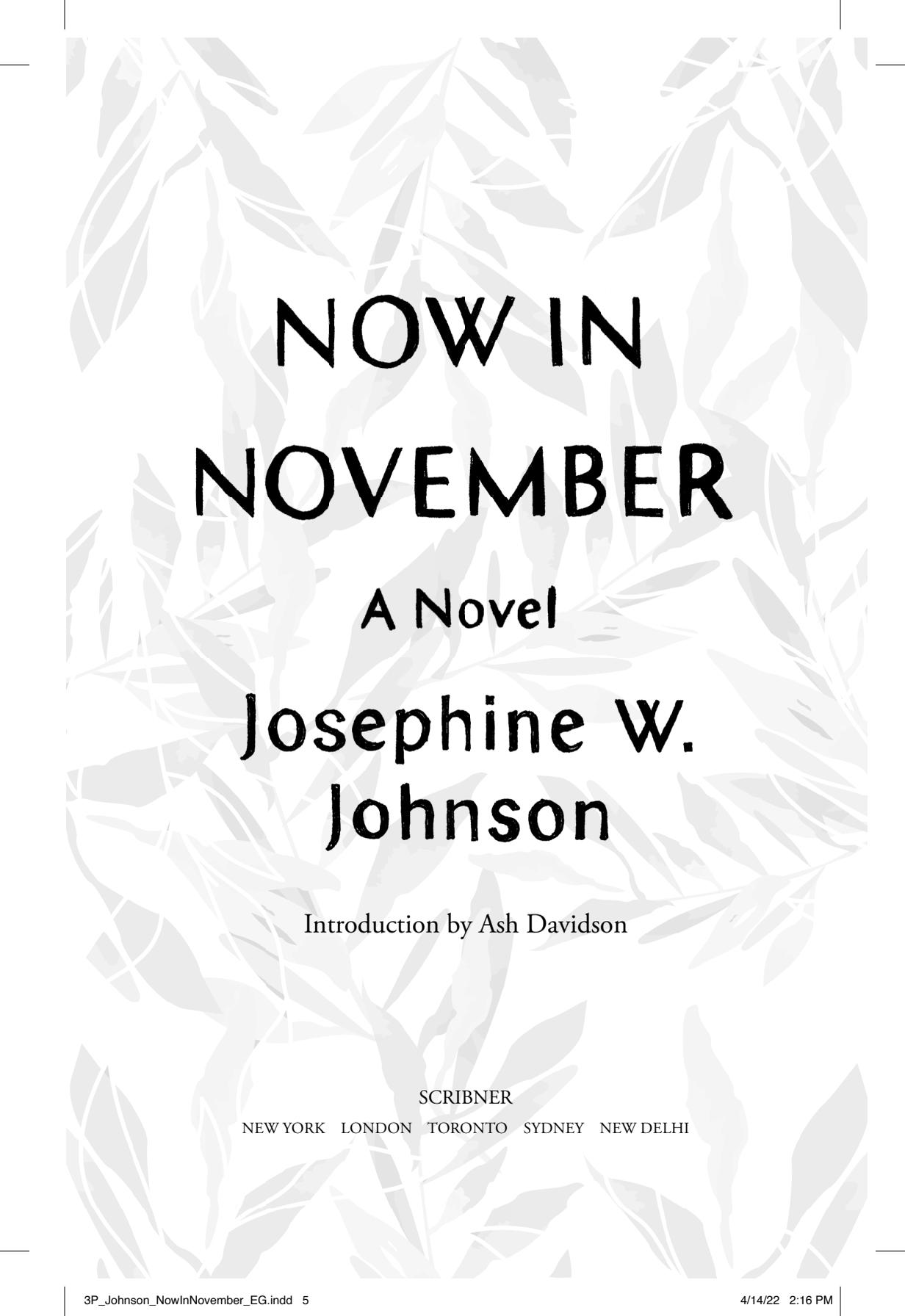
Jordanstown

Year's End

Winter Orchard

The Inland Island





**NOW IN
NOVEMBER**

A Novel

**Josephine W.
Johnson**

Introduction by Ash Davidson

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NOW IN NOVEMBER

INTRODUCTION

Quiet and surprising, this is more than a novel about the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. This is a book about thirst—the land’s thirst for rain, yes, but also human thirsts for love, for justice, for the relative security a little money can bring.

These longings start with Arnold Haldmarne, who is already deep into his fifties when, broke and “chopped back down to root,” he sells the family car and most of their possessions and moves his wife, Willa, and three daughters to a heavily mortgaged farm. There, he takes up the plow, yoking the family to a debt that will cast its shadow over their lives.

Deep-feeling, observant Marget and her little sister, Merle, quickly fall head over heels for the place. Free to roam, the younger Haldmarne girls delight in the natural world and accept their roles cooking and cleaning. Only the eldest, Kerrin, who has inherited their father’s

INTRODUCTION

short temper along with his red hair, balks. Volatile and restless, Kerrin doesn't fit in the family she was born into, and her bouts of depression and defiance of her bitter, overworked father frighten her sisters. But ultimately, it's the arrival of a hired hand, Grant, worldly, kind—and available—that reveals deeper thirsts.

In a parallel universe, *Now in November*, which sold out its first edition five days before it was published and won Josephine W. Johnson the Pulitzer Prize in the Novel in 1935, at the age of twenty-four—the youngest person ever to win a Pulitzer for fiction (only twenty-two women have won it in the nearly nine decades since)—would be shelved companionably alongside *The Grapes of Wrath*. Instead, this slim, tender, and sometimes brutal novel has, like its author, largely slipped through the literary cracks. If you've never heard of *Now in November* or Johnson, you're not alone. Yet, for a book published almost ninety years ago, its concerns still feel surprisingly modern.

If you've ever struggled to make the minimum payment on a credit card or student loan, you'll recognize how the corrosive worry about money gnaws at the Haldmarnes. A failed dairy strike exposes the rot at the core: the injustice of working hard and just barely scraping by, of subsisting at the mercy of the market and the whims of the weather. The thirst for a fair price for the fruits of their labor taunts the parched family like a mirage, disappearing as they draw close.

It wouldn't take much—one good season—to lift the Haldmarnes out of their poverty and elevate them to the relative comfort of their neighbors to the north, the Rathmans. They are, after all, privileged compared to their Black neighbors to the south, the Ramseys.

The Ramseys are warmhearted and generous, and Marget, our eyes and ears in the novel, is matter-of-fact about the brutality of American racism; her father would happily borrow the Ramseys' mules, but

INTRODUCTION

won't break bread with them. This racism robs the Ramseys of agency, so that at times they seem less like people and more like symbols of the perils of being both poor and Black in America.

This is the same America that loves a good bootstrapper success story, but this trope Johnson sidesteps, focusing instead on the precariousness of working-class life, when a slip, a fall, a burn, or a broken bone can begin a slow slide, the way the cost of medical care and absence of a social safety net still sink working people today. The shame of watching others suffer without being able to help weighs heavily.

The seeds of Johnson's later activism—and future books—seem already sowed in *Now in November*, from labor rights to feminism to the environment. After her Pulitzer win, she told the *New York Times*, “My uncle is a dairy farmer. . . . The land around him is farmed by tenants or share croppers. Their condition is almost hopeless under the present system.” A year later, Johnson was arrested in Arkansas for encouraging cotton-field workers to strike. In 1969, she penned an op-ed for the *Times*, railing against environmental destruction, and published *The Inland Island*, perhaps her best-known work, now cited as an early stepping-stone in environmental literature.

In many ways, the drought and devastation of the Dust Bowl in *Now in November* rhyme with our modern experiences of climate change, when a tipped electric line can send a tidal wave of flames surging across the landscape, licking hundreds of homes from the map.

Yet for all the big issues it tackles—from race to class to gender, from mental illness to the inhumanity of industrialization—the book's most artful and revelatory moments often come when Marget, attuned to the slightest change in barometric pressure, turns her gaze on the family's emotional weather. “I wanted to give a beautiful and yet not incongruous form to the *ordinary living of life*,” Johnson told the *Times*.

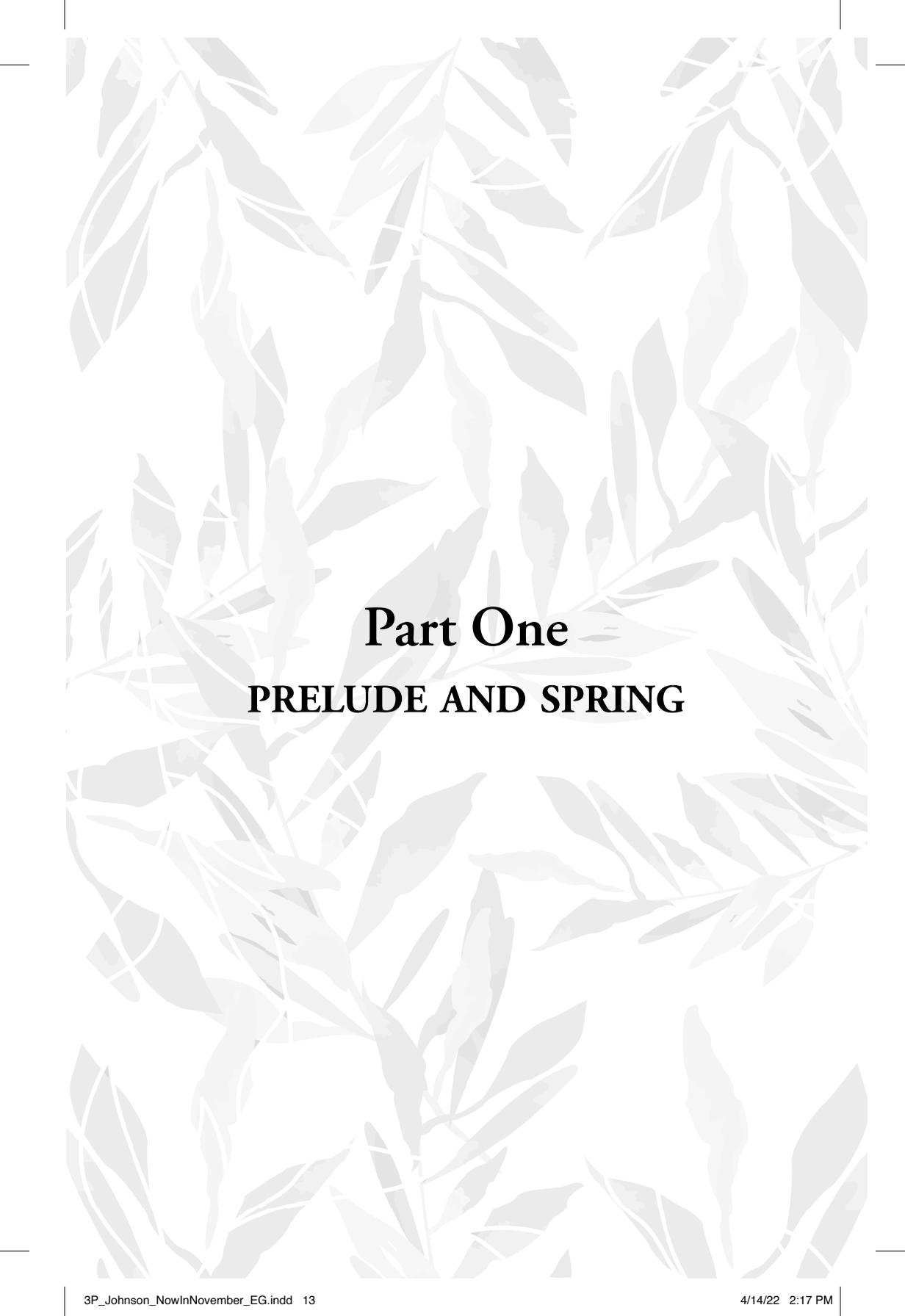
INTRODUCTION

As ponds dry up, crops wither in the fields, calves cry out for water, and the family searches the sky for rain, the yearnings that have been smoldering since Grant's arrival begin to flare. Kerrin becomes increasingly desperate in her pursuit of him, but Grant's affections have landed on Merle, who doesn't return them. As she watches from the sidelines, it's Marget's sensitivity to Grant's heartache, and her own secret, unrequited love for him that form the beating heart of the book.

Timid and plain, Marget is accustomed to hiding her feelings and reining in her hopes. As the middle sister, she knows her place, sandwiched between clever, self-confident Merle, who charms and teases Grant with her banter, and beautiful, unstable Kerrin, who brazenly reaches for what Marget desires. Marget's own great strength is acceptance. When all the violence and tragedy unspool in the novel's final pages, she simply bears it.

To absorb the true power and beauty of *Now in November*, it helps to read the book through to its blazing end and then loop back to the opening chapters. After the smoke has cleared, you can walk alongside Marget again, looking back on the last ten years with the magnifying glass of hindsight, bearing the full weight of the past, as she does.

Ash Davidson
Flagstaff, Arizona
January 2022



Part One
PRELUDE AND SPRING

CHAPTER ONE



Now in November I can see our years as a whole. This autumn is like both an end and a beginning to our lives, and those days which seemed confused with the blur of all things too near and too familiar are clear and strange now. It has been a long year, longer and more full of meaning than all those ten years that went before it. There were nights when I felt that we were moving toward some awful and hopeless hour, but when that hour came it was broken up and confused because we were too near, and I did not even quite realize that it had come.

I can look back now and see the days as one looking down on things past, and they have more shape and meaning than before. But nothing is really finished or left behind forever.

The years were all alike and blurred into one another, and the mind is a sort of sieve or quicksand, but I remember the day we came and the months afterward well enough. Too well. The roots of our life, struck in back there that March, have a queer resemblance to their branches.

The hills were bare then and swept of winter leaves, but the orchards had a living look. They were stained with the red ink of their sap and the bark tight around them as though too small to hold the new life of coming leaves. It was an old place and the land had been owned by Haldmarnes since the Civil War, but when we came no one had been living there for years. Only tenant farmers had stayed awhile and left. The land was stony, but with promise, and sheep grew fat in the pastures where rock ledges were worn back, white like stone teeth bared to frost. There were these great orchards planted up and down the hills, and when Mother saw them that first day she thought of having to gather the crop and haul the apples up this steepness, but she only said a good harvest ought to come, and the trees looked strong though old. “No market even if they bear,” I remember Father said; and then,—“it’s mortgaged land.”

Nobody answered, and the wagon went on groaning and squeaking in the ruts. Merle and I watched the jays, blue-flickering through the branches, and heard their screams. The elms were thick with buds and brown-webbed across the sky. It was beautiful and barren in the pastures, and the walnuts made a kind of lavender-colored shadow, very clean. Things were strange and unrelated and made no pattern that a person could trace easily. Here was the land and the spring air full of snow melting, and yet the beginning of fear already—this mortgage, and Father consumed in himself with sour irritation and the future dread. But Mother sat there very quiet. He had not told her the place was mortgaged, and the land at least, she had thought, was unencumbered, and sanctuary though everything else was gone. But even in the moment when she saw that this, too, was uncertain and shifting ground, something she always had—something I didn’t know then and may never know—let her take it quietly. A sort of inner well

of peace. Faith I guess it was. She stood a great deal and put up with much, but all without doubt or bitterness; and that she was there, believing and not shaken, or not seeming so at least, was all that we needed then to know. We could forget for the time this sense of impermanence and doubt which had come up from his words. Merle was ten then and I was fourteen, and it seemed to us that some great adventure had begun. But Father looked only at the old, year-rotted barns.

He wasn't a man made for a farmer, Arnold Haldmarne, although brought up on the land when a boy, and now returning to acres not different much from the ones he used to plough. He hadn't the resignation that a farmer has to have—that resignation which knows how little use to hope or hate, or pray for even a bean before its appointed time. He'd left the land when he was still sixteen and gone to Boone, making himself a place in the lumber factories there. He'd saved and come up hard and slow like an oak or ash that grows with effort but is worth much more than any poplar shooting two feet high in a season. But now he was chopped back down to root again. It's a queer experience for a man to go through, to work years for security and peace, and then in a few months' time have it all dissolve into nothing; to feel the strange blankness and dark of being neither wanted nor necessary any more. Things had come slow to him and gone fast, and it made him suspicious even of the land.

We hauled our beds here in the wagon with us. The car was sold and most of the furniture gone too. We left our other life behind us as if it had not been. Only the part that was of and in us, the things we'd read and the things remembered, came with us, and the books we'd gathered through three generations but could not sell because earth was knee-deep and wading in books already. We left a world all wrong,

confused, and shouting at itself, and came here to one that was no less hard and no less ready to thwart a man or cast him out, but gave him something, at least, in return. Which was more than the other one would do.

The house was old even then, not log, but boards up and down as barns are made. It was overgrown with the trumpet and wild red ivy-vines, twisted and heavy on the porch. Wild grapes were black across the well in autumn and there was an arbor of tame ones over the pump. Father found an old thrush's nest hunched up in the leafless vines and took it down so that Merle wouldn't mistake it for a new nest in spring and keep waiting for birds that never came. She filled it full of round stones and kept it up on the mantelpiece, maybe because she thought that the fire would hatch stone birds,—I didn't know. She was full of queer notions and things that never existed on earth. She seemed older sometimes than even Kerrin who was born five years ahead.

That first spring when everything was new to us I remember in two ways; one blurred with the worry and fear like a grey fog where Father was—a fog not always visible but there, and yet mixed with it this love we had for the land itself, changing and beautiful in a thousand ways each hour. I remember the second day we came was stormy with fist-big flakes of snow and a northwest wind that came down across the hills, rattling the windows until the panes were almost broken, and the snow smacked wet against the glass. We thought it an omen of what the winters here would be, but strangely it was not cold afterward, even with almost two feet of snow along the ground, and a wind that shook the hickories from branch to root and sent a trembling down through the oaks. Merle and I went down by a stony place in the woods where the rocks shelved out to make a fall, and saw the air-bubbles creeping under the ice, wriggling away with a quick and

NOW IN NOVEMBER

slippery dart like furtive tadpoles. Down near the crawfish shallows the slime ferns were green and fresh and the sun so hot that we walked with our coats swung open and stuffed our caps away. Much of everything, it seemed afterward, was like that beginning—changing and so balanced between wind and sun that there was neither good nor evil that could be said to outweigh the other wholly. And even then we felt we had come to something both treacherous and kind, which could be trusted only to be inconstant, and would go its own way as though we were never born.

CHAPTER TWO



It was cold that first March and the ploughing late, I remember. There are times out of those early years that I have never forgotten; words and days and things seen that lie in the mind like stone. Our lives went on without much event, and the things that happened rise up in the mind out of all proportion because of the sameness that lay around them. That first spring was like in a way to most that followed, but marked with a meaning of its own.

Kerrin complained of the raw coldness and the house was hard to keep warm enough, but I remember one day of God that came toward the last, when we lay down carefully on the grass so as not to smash the bluets, and smelled their spring-thin scent. The hills were a pale and smoky green that day, and all colors ran into and melted with each other, the red of crab branches, dissolving down into lavender of shadows, but the apples had bark of bloody red and gold. We went up where the old barn was then, the one grey-shingled with sagging beams—that was in its age like a risen part of the earth itself. We ate our lunch there on the south side of its wall and sucked in the hot

spring sun and the pale water washed blue along beyond the trees, and even Kerrin seemed less alien and odd. Dad had too much to do and could not waste his time in coming, for the getting enough to live on and eat was work sufficient itself, and if a man thought to put anything aside or to pile it up for another time, it kept his nose in the furrow and his hand on the plough even while he slept. Mother stayed back with him to eat, and we thought they were probably glad to be alone one meal at least, without all our eyes staring them up and down and noting the things they said, to remember and repeat should they ever at any time contradict themselves.

We sat on the hill and watched a bluebird searching the trees and along the fence posts, and could see a long way off into the bottom land where the creek was and the maples that followed the water, long-branched and bending down to its pools. There was a shrike in the crab branches and Kerrin said they were cruel things, impaling the field-mice and birds on locust thorns so that their feet stuck out stiff like little hands. I didn't think they were cruel things though—only natural. They reminded me of Kerrin, but this I had sense not to say aloud.

"Dad's birthday comes soon now," Merle said. "He'll be fifty-seven. We should have a party, I think—with presents." She got up slow and shaking herself like a shaggy thing, heavy with warm sun and the food. She stood up in front of us with a round grave face.

"Where'll you get the money?" Kerrin asked. "I've got some, but you haven't any. I bought a knife that I'm going to give him."

I looked at Kerrin quick and jealous. "—Where'd you get money from?" I asked. I hadn't remembered there was a birthday coming, or thought of a thing to give, and it made me angry at her.

"It's mine, Marget. I earned it!" Kerrin shouted. "I suppose that

you think I stole or borrowed!” She got up and glared down on me. She was dark all over her long thin face, and I think she hoped that I did suspect her—she wanted to feel accused of dark and secret things. I probed the earth into little holes and buried a dandelion head, embarrassed and half-afraid of what she might do to me. “I just wondered,” I said, “since nobody else has any.”

Kerrin drew herself stiff like a crane. Her eyes seemed almost to twitch when she got excited or thought that she had a right to be. “You ought to have shut your mouth before you talked. You don’t know anything anyway!” Her liddy eyes opened fierce. She was always making scenes.

Merle clasped her fat hands together. She was anxious and uneasy and dreaded these times more than any snake or ghost. “We ought to be going back,” she said. “Maybe it’s later than the dishes—”

Kerrin looked angry and defiant. “What if it is? Who cares? Maybe I’m not going back a while!” She kept breaking twigs in her skinny hands.

“Kerrin,” I said like a pompous fool, “it isn’t always the things we want that are given us to do.”

“Why don’t you do them then?” Kerrin sneered.

I didn’t have anything to say. I was afraid to start probing again about the knife. Nothing was changed, but the afternoon seemed cold and chilly. . . . Merle started off down the hill. She was always thinking of Mother having to do the work alone, and was always the first to start at whatever there was to be done. Something was in her, even then, that kept walking foot after foot down a straight path to some clear place, and I wished then, and still do, that there was something in me also that would march steadily in one road, instead of down here or there or somewhere else, the mind running a net of rabbit-paths that

twisted and turned and doubled on themselves, pursued always by the hawk-shadow of doubt. But even though I despised myself, it seemed that earth was no less beautiful or less given to me in my littleness than to Merle who had twice as much of good in her. And it seemed unjust and strange, but would probably balance up some day.

I ran after her and Kerrin followed, not wanting to come or to stay alone. "What'll you give him, Merle?" I asked. She looked red and proud, pleased to be questioned when she knew the answer. "I'm going to give him a box," she said. "A big one for his nails and screws."

"That's wonderful," I told her. "You can make partitions in it for the sizes, and stain it some." But I didn't see how she was going to do it at all.

"What're you going to give him?" Kerrin asked me. "Everyone ought to have something anyway. It doesn't have to be awfully much."

"You'll see," I said. In my heart I didn't think that it *would* be much. I wondered if maybe it wouldn't be anything at all. I wasn't much good at making things.

We went slow in the hot sun. Merle was quiet, thinking, I guess, of all the chickens whose nests still had to be filled, and of the lame one who broke all her eggs but wanted so steadfastly to hatch that it was pitiful, though Merle hated her stupidity and the egg-stuck, smelly hay. It was almost two, and it seemed as if doing nothing at all took up time faster and more unknowing of what it swallowed than work had ever done. We walked up the cow-path where the ground was dry and warm, and alongside the thistles coming up. We could see Dad ploughing again already and robins come down in the furrows but keeping a long way off from the plough. There was a blue-smoke smell from burning brush and a warm haze in the air. Merle walked first, round and with a clean skin, and her mouth full of the one left

piece of bread, and her hair messed up and woolly in the back; and then I came, not looking comparable to much of anything, with a brown dress on and beggar-lice seeds in my stockings; and then Kerrin straggled along behind, acting as though she might leave us any minute. She had reddish hair cut off in a bang, and her arms like two flat laths hung down loose from her shoulders, but her face was much sharper and more interesting than ours. She was stronger, too, and thought she could plough if Father'd let her. But he thought that a girl could never learn how and would only mess the field. "You help your mother, girls," he'd say. "You help your mother." He hired a man to work for a while and Kerrin was angry, felt things pounding in her, impotent and suppressed, and was sullen and lowering as the young bulls are. "He thinks I can't do anything!" she'd shout at Mother. "He treats me as if I were still two. Why don't you do something about it? Why don't you make him see?"

"He'll see after a while," Mother said. "I think he'll see pretty soon."

"Why don't you tell him though?" Kerrin'd say. "Why do you always wait so long about everything? You treat him like he was God Himself!" She'd end that way each time and slam a door somewhere while we pretended not to hear and would go on with what we did, only sick and drawn inside with hate. And for Mother who took things hard and quiet and lived in the lives of other people as though they were her own, it was like being bruised inside each time. I'd hear her suggesting things to Father in a quiet and hesitating way, and if he were tired he would be angry, or if in the rare times when he was pleased about something—about Merle's fat cheeks that seemed to glow in wind, or about some clever thing she had said—he would laugh but never agree at once or let her know she had changed his mind. It was

hard for her to bring things up at the times when he was pleased or sitting down quietly, because he had so few of these intervals, and it seemed like torturing him. We would walk carefully, praying the moment to last longer, to stretch out into an hour, and sometimes Mother would let the chance go past for the sake of peace, although there was much that she felt unjust, and had pestilent worries of her own she would like to have burdened on him.

When we came back that day we saw Mother had all of the old potatoes spread on the cistern-top and was cutting them up for seed. She looked thin and lumpy and her hair was wound in a braided ball behind. She was round-cheeked and young-looking, though, and glad to see us—which used to puzzle me sometimes, even then, thinking that fourteen years of us should have made her more chary and doubtful of our company.

“We had a good time,” Merle said, “and the lunch was good.” She stuck out some oozy dandelion stems curled together with spit, and plastered them on behind at the bottom of Mother’s knot.

“They look beautiful,” Kerrin said. “They look like worms.” She started to cut up potatoes, very fast and neatly, but Merle paid no attention and nobody else did either. I thought that it served her right, and Mother only laughed. Mother never talked much herself, but listened to everything that was said, and it made us feel there was reason in talking because she was there to hear. Nobody else we had ever met cared as much for all of the things that there were to know and be talked about—the wheeling of planets and the meaning of bonds, or the kind of salts that the chickens needed and the names of the great Victorian poets.

We hacked the potatoes for a long time, and quiet. The sun was still warm, and slow in moving. I thought about Kerrin and the money,