

# FAST LANES

## CALLIE

There are two photographs of Callie, both in those dark sepia tones that look so brown and velvety. He was my mother's brother, and he died a year before she was born. My mother had a surviving brother and sister but they were ten and twelve years older than she; to her, they seemed grownup from the beginning. Callie was the one who had disappeared, a baby she herself seemed to have lost, the child who would have changed her childhood. In one portrait he wears a smocked dress, stockings, buttoned shoes with straps, like any baby of that era. His moving hands are a blur. In the other he could be a contemporary two-year-old in a diaper, holding a ball; the haircut looks modern, and you can see faint lines on his calves where the stockings hugged his legs. He was a husky, healthy baby. Throughout her childhood, my mother heard his story in particular phrases. He died of diphtheria and whooping cough. The girl brought it in with the butter.

Before the Thornhill reversal of fortune, before they themselves kept cows and sold milk and butter, they had dairy goods delivered by horse and wagon. The house in Belington was a small Victorian mansion with stained glass windows and warm, burnished woods; there was a three story floating staircase, butler's pantry, buttons in the floor wired to sound in the long kitchen at the back. Those fine old homes in isolated towns were cut up into apartments later, or turned into funeral homes. The Thornhill home became a funeral parlor; it is a funeral parlor today. Back then, in a West Virginia of 1924, the house was gracious, filled with the same antique furniture and dishes my family used as I was growing up, things my mother told stories about. Your grandmother rocked all her babies in this Eastlake cradle; someday it will be yours. I was my mother's only daughter, the one who would inherit the dishes, the cradles, the women's things, and the stories. These are the Baltimore pear goblets that belonged to your great-grandmother, here are the sugar, the creamer, the butter plate. The butter plate, round, of a glass so fine it rang, has a globular lid, a round bell with the glass pear subtly swollen on the front. They molded the butter to make it beautiful. When Mother used the plate, I would ask for the story. She used to tell me, "Callie was my best baby," and to the end of her life, her eyes filled with tears when she spoke of him. Her best baby? I thought this an

odd thing to repeat to a surviving child, and told my mother so. He never got to live, my mother retorted, exasperated. What more could she give him, after she'd lost him, but to say that? Good heavens, I didn't mind. It was a terrible death for her. Not the only death, but the worst one. They quarantined the house, and Mother fought it for four days and nights, the fever and the terrible cough. Oh, you know the sound, like croup, like the cry of a strange, barking bird, almost a non-human sound, and then they stop coughing, and they drown.

If you lose a child, the women of the town told me, it flattens you; you never get over it. But some women endured it repeatedly. I never knew my grandmother. But once I asked if she hadn't been angry at the woman who made the butter, the contaminated butter delivered to those eight or nine houses, and her house was one. How could she be angry? That woman didn't know, and she lost two children, her youngest baby, and her older girl too, the one who delivered the butter and helped her so. When Mother repeated that phrase she would weep, as though Callie had been her help. And he was. Until you came, she'd tell me.

People don't always understand how babies can be a help, why seemingly beleaguered women might want another child, and another. If they can have them, if they can nurse them through what was once called childbed, and raise them. People forget, even women forget, how mothers fall in love with their babies. My grandmother's marriage was already a trial; her husband drank and philandered, and his business had begun to fail. The twin sons she'd lost a few years before were dead at birth; she never knew them. But she adored Callie. He looked like her own brother, Calvin, blond and fair as china, but his nature was his own. When she said he was her best, she meant that he was . . . happy. One of those babies who is interested and alert but doesn't seem to resist the world, who seem delighted. He was peaceful, my mother was told, and his smile, the look of his eyes, lit up so. The night he died he relaxed into Mother's arms and his little face turned resolute. His lips were blistered as though clear beads of water sat along his mouth. She'd tried so hard to save him. The Belington graveyard was a rolling meadow, tamed and mown, fenced in Victorian black iron. Every spring they planted sweet peas and white impatiens at the smallest gravestones in the family plot. Two of the stones were sleeping lambs; one was a lamb that stood.

My mother learned vigilance from her mother. She wrapped her children up against the cold and never let them go out with their heads wet, or too soon after a bath. She never let them sit on the ground, except at the height of summer, because the ground was cold. She'd grown up

alone with her mother, the other siblings having left home, the money gone. Her dissolute father was gone, committed to an asylum when she was sixteen, when the two women could no longer manage his moods and rages. They turned their big home into a rooming house and managed to keep the antiques, the silver, the dishes, the pewter. My mother taught me to value these things the family had touched and used; every holiday she set a festive, gracious table with the Haviland and the Baltimore pear.

I take the butter plate and its beautiful globe from my own shelves and think of my grandmother on a long ago Easter, in another place and time. The girl has delivered the butter and my grandmother holds its pale color in her palms. She presses it into the mold by hand, flattening the top with a wooden spatula. When she turns it out onto the round butter plate it forms a flower shape nearly white, cool and creamy; the shape is round and compact as a girl's breast, a young girl, a girl the age of that twelve-year-old who just now finishes her rounds, having walked the last set of steps in her buttoned boots and collected the last of the money into her chambray clerk's apron. There is a dull throb in her head and her fingers tingle. It is April in the mountains and spring has just come. The air is crisp but the light has begun to change and the sky is breathy and blue. She woke even earlier than usual today, just after dawn, because her mother's babies were fussy and crying, because all the customers needed bigger orders than usual, in time for guests and Easter luncheons. Now the lurch of the wagon and the creaking of the big wheels begin to assert their dragging lull. She looks out into the road over the broad back of the harnessed mare and sees how the air seems to move and shimmer, as though it were a hot, hot day. She is warm and her face is moist. The ache in her head feels distant but more constant, a weight and a terrible pressure, as though a color of such density spreads through her. The horse knows the way, and so she closes her eyes.