

MACHINE DREAMS

THE HOUSE AT NIGHT

Danner, 1956

In the humid nights her mother let her sleep under one thin sheet, an old one worn soft from many washings, and in the dark of her child's bedroom she turned and sweated until the sheet wrapped her small body like a sour cocoon. Night sounds in the house were shot with lambent silence: rotary blades of the stilled electric fans gathered a fine dust behind the ribs of their metal cages. Once you're asleep you won't know how hot it is, go to sleep, fans cost money to run; crickets sounded in the close dark, their throbbing continuous as the run-fling of a high-pitched musical engine. No breeze stirred to break their sounds; Danner drifted, almost sleeping; each shrill vanished faster than the last. She heard faintly her brother breathe and whimper; in these summer days the artificial disruption of school was forgotten and the fifteen months of age separating them disappeared; they existed between their parents as one shadow, the kids, and they fought and conspired with no recognition of separation. Doors opened now onto the same unlit hallway; near Billy's room the hallway turned, lengthened past the bathroom and emptied into their parents' bedroom. There the high Grand-mother Danner bed floated like an island above its starched white skirt; the row of closet doors slid on their runners, a confusing line of illusions; and the two big bureaus shone. The bank of windows was so high no one could see anything but the branches of the lilacs, branches that now in the August night looked furred with black and didn't stir. By day the leaves were a deep and waxen green. Jean, come and get these kids, don't either one of you ever stand near the driveway when you see I'm backing the car out, goddamn it, I'll shake the living daylight out of you: what it meant was the State Road construction and the jackhammer, shaking a grown man's body as he held the handle and white fire flew from the teeth of the machine. Endless repair of the dusty two-lanes progressed every summer, but the roads were never finished; they kept men working who had no other work and Danner liked to watch; at night she saw those men in the dark corners of her room, tall shadows with no faces. Even if there aren't prisoners anymore the workmen are nearly the same thing, and they did look different, dangerous, though they wore the same familiar khaki work clothes her father wore to work at the plant. Your father and Clayton own the concrete company—they don't work for a wage, do you understand what I'm saying? The workmen were from Skully or Dogtown and their

families got assistance, a shameful thing; in those shabby rows of houses on mud roads they kept their babies in cardboard boxes. But that was just a story, Mitch said; they were trying to get along like anyone. You'd say that about any man who worked on a road, wouldn't matter if he was a lunatic, and Jean turned back to the stove, always; she stood by the stove, the kitchen cabinets, the sink, the whole house moored to earth by her solid stance, just as the world outside went with Mitch in the car. He carried the world in and out in the deep khaki pockets of his workman's pants. When Danner and Billy were with him and the road crews were out, Mitch waited with no complaint for the flagman's signal and kept the windows rolled down. Yellow dust filled the car and caked everything with a chalky powder. Big machines, earth-movers and cranes, turned on their pedestals with a thunderous grinding as two or three shirtless men pulled thick pipes across the asphalt with chains. Mitch held both children on his lap behind the steering wheel, the three of them crushed together in a paradise of noise. Jackhammers and drills were louder than the heat, louder than sweat and the shattered ground and the overwhelmed voices of the men. Mitch smoked and talked to the foreman, yelling each sentence twice while the children coughed from the dust and excitement. Jean made them stay in the back seat if they had to stop near the construction; she nodded politely to the flagman, kept the car windows rolled up in the stifling closeness just another minute, and locked all the doors. At home they weren't allowed to lock doors: children are safe at home, you should never be doing anything you don't want Mama to see, but Danner and Billy closed themselves secretly into adjacent closets and stayed there until the dark scared them, tapping messages with their fists on the plywood between them. Pressed back against clothes and stacked shoe boxes, Billy wore a billed khaki cap like his father's and Danner kept a navy blue clutch purse her mother no longer used; it smelled of a pressed powder pure as corn, and the satin lining was discolored. Danner unzipped it and put her face in the folds; she held her breath just another minute and that made everything lighten: the fields surrounding the house were full of light, scrub grass grew tall, and the milkweed stalks were thick as wrists. Wild wheat was in the fields and the crows fed, wheeling in circular formations. Milk syrup in the weeds was sticky and white; the pods were tight and wouldn't burst for weeks. Where did the crows go at night? They were dirty birds waiting for things to die, Danner was not to go near them; when the black night came she was in her bed to wake in the dark and pretend she saw the birds, rising at night as they did at noon, their wingspan larger, terrifying, a faint black arching of lines against the darker black; even the grasses, the tangled brushy weeds, were black. Danner heard the house settle, a nearly inaudible creaking, ghostly clicking of the

empty furnace pipes; her mother, her father, walking the hall in slippers. They walked differently and turned on no lights if it was late. Danner lay listening, waiting, fighting her own heavy consciousness to hear and see them as they really were. Who were they? The sound of her father was a wary lumbering sound, nearly fragile, his heaviness changed by the slippers, the dark, his legs naked and white in his short robe, the sound of his walking at once shy and violent. Danner heard him ask one word and the word was full of darkness: Jean? At night her mother was larger, long robe dragging the floor, slide of fabric over wooden parquet a secretive hush. Danner heard her mother up at night. Doors shut in the dark. The bathroom door, click of a lock. Hem of the long robe gliding, a rummaging in cabinets too high for the kids to reach. Jean finds the hidden equipment and pulls out the white enamel pitcher; the metal is deathly cold, the thin red hose coiled inside is the same one she uses, sterilized before and after, to give the children enemas. "Younger than Springtime" is the song she sings when she rocks Danner to sleep, the child at seven nearly too big to be held like a baby, earaches and sore throats Billy will catch next, and the two of them awake till midnight. She rocks them both at once and reads a thick college text for the classes she takes one at a time. She memorizes everything as though she were a blank slate; next year when Billy's in school she'll do practice teaching and get the certificate, there's never enough money and they meet the bills because she plots and plans, and the smell of her throat and neck as the cane-bottomed rocker creaks is a crushed fragrance like shredded flowers. Danner is the one who won't sleep; she smells her mother and the scent is like windblown seeding weeds, the way the side of the road smells when the State Road mowing machines have finished and the narrow secondary route is littered with a damp verdant hay that dries and yellows. Cars and trucks grind the hay to a powder that makes more dust, swirling dust softer than starlight; Danner hears Jean's voice as one continuous sound weaving through days and nights. Pretty is as pretty does, seen and not heard, my only darling, don't ever talk back to your mother, come and read Black Beauty, a little girl with a crooked part looks like no one loves her, and she cuts Danner's flyaway brown hair to hang straight from the center with bangs, a pageboy instead of braids; that way it takes less time. The chair creaks and Danner is awake until Jean lies in bed with her and pretends she'll stay all night. She calls Danner Princess, Mitch calls her Miss, Billy is called My Man; who's my best man? Danner watches Jean pick him up; he's still the smaller one, hair so blond it's white. He stiffens laughing when his mother burrows her big face in his stomach, and he drinks so much water in the summer that he sloshes when he jumps up and down. Runs in and out of the house all day to ask for more and drinks from the big jug. How

can he have such a thirst? Lifting that heavy jug by himself, looks like a little starving Asian with that round belly; at five he shimmies to the top of the swing-set poles, a special concrete swing-set their father has brought from the plant and built in the acre of backyard down by the fence and the fields. The poles are steel pipes twenty feet high, sunk into the earth and cemented in place; the swings are broad black rubber hanging by thick tire chains. Billy climbs the tall center pole and the angled triad of pipe that supports the set at either end, but Danner prefers the swings, a long high ride if she pumps hard enough, chains so long the swings fly far out; she throws her head back, mesmerized, holding still as the swing traces a pendulum trajectory. Locusts in the field wheedle their red clamor under her; locusts are everywhere in summer, in daylight; she and Billy find their discarded shells in the garden, a big square of overgrown weeds in a corner of the lot. In the tumble-down plot they dig out roads for Billy's trucks, and the locust shells turn up in the earth: they are hard, delicate, empty. Transparent as fingernails, imprinted with the shape of the insect, they are slit up the middle where something has changed and crawled free. Danner throws the shells over the fence. Billy smells of mud and milk, kneels in dirt and sings motor sounds as he inches the dump trucks along. They make more roads by filling the beds of the bigger plastic trucks, pushing them on their moving wheels to the pile of dirt in the center; when they've tunneled out a crisscross pattern of roads, they simply move the dirt from place to place, crawling in heat that seems cooler when they're close the soil, making sounds, slapping the sweat bees that crawl under their clothes and between their fingers. The stings, burning pinpricks, swell, stay hot, burn in bed at night. Danner sucks her hands in her sleep, and the lights are out, the calls of the night birds are faint, and the dream hovers, waiting at the border of the fields; the dark in the house is black. The bathroom light makes a triangular glow on the hallway floor; the glow hangs in space, a senseless, luminous shape, and disappears. The bedroom door is shut, a lock clicks. Danner lies drifting, hears the furtive sound of the moving bed, the brief mechanical squeak of springs, and no other sound at all but her father's breath, harsh, held back. All sounds stop then in the black funnel of sleep; Danner hears her mother, her father, lie silent in an emptiness so endless they could all hurtle through it like stones. Jean sighs and then she speaks: Oh, it's hot, she says to no one. Danner sinks deep, completely, finally, into a dream she will know all her life; the loneliness of her mother's voice, Oh, it's hot, rises in the dream like vapor. In the cloudy air, winged animals struggle and stand up; they are limbed and long-necked, their flanks and backs powerful; their equine eyes are lucent and their hooves cut the air, slicing the mist to pieces. The horses are dark like blood and gleam with a

black sheen; the animals swim hard in the air to get higher and Danner aches to stay with them. She touches herself because that is where the pain is; she holds on, rigid, not breathing, and in the dream it is the horse pressed against her, the rhythmic pumping of the forelegs as the animal climbs, the lather and the smell; the smell that comes in waves and pounds inside her like a pulse.

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