First in Flight

I.

AUTUMN 1900

A grooved wooden handle, mostly stripped of white paint, that might have been part of a mirror. A green tin that once held shoe polish or hair wax—with French words on it! And two buttons for Pearl. All these things she found down at Postal Point, where a dull wedge of sand caught the distant currents of the sea. She tied them all up in her apron—the handle, the tin, the pearl buttons—and started home.

To her right, even water like butter melted in the skillet. To her left the dunes. A bald blue day, the kind that comes after a storm. There always was good hunting at the Point after a storm. Ahead of her the beach was a white road that led to every other place she had been and every other person she had known.

If you wanted to go anywhere else, you had to get into a boat and row.

It used to be she would show her father what she found, but she wouldn't show him these things. He'd only say they were torn from the belly of a shipwreck. Pried from the hands of skeletons. But Pearl liked to think they were from over the sea, that they were gifts from living people. A fine French gentleman had snapped the buttons from his silk and lovely shirt and dropped them in the sea for her to find, here on the other side of the world. A fine woman—perhaps the proprietor of a large and beautiful hotel—accidentally let her trunk slip from the deck of a steamer in a port, but she didn't care because she had so many trunks, so many mirrors and many tins of wax or cream, all smelling of almonds and roses, that she didn't care if these things made their way here, to her. To Pearl.

When Pearl arrived at the post office she went through the back door, where the kitchen was, instead of the front door, which led to the mail room. Before she entered she took the boots from around her neck, where she'd tied them by their laces, and put them on. Her mother was scouring the kitchen floor with white sand. What are you clomping around for, she said. You're going to be waking him up.

The door to her bedroom was partly open and she could see the man from Ohio laid out in her bed, sleeping.

He isn't up yet, her mother said. Your father said they went through hell on the crossing. Spent the night in the swamp. After a night like that I'd pitch a fit if someone was to wake me up with their boots clomping.

But Pearl kept her boots on. She didn't want the man from Ohio to wake up and see her in her bare feet, even though she could see his foot, slim and white and emerging from her blanket like an eel. It was poor folk that went around in bare feet all the time, when they were awake. She took the broom from her mother's hands and finished the scouring. When he woke up maybe she would be able to go into her room again. She would find her hat box and place her new things inside. The pearl buttons, the tin, the mirror handle. They would go in with all her other treasures.

He wouldn't eat none of the salt cod, Israel told her later that afternoon. Didn't see him eat nothing but a bit of jelly he'd brought with him. He ate it right from the jar with his fingers because he didn't like the look of our spoons. So I'd pegged him for a fancy one. But when the storm came up he turned out more of a man than that. Why, Pearlie, he took the hat right off his head and used it for bailing water. Can you imagine? A nice hat, too, it was.

Mama said you spent the night out there, Pearl said. Where'd you spend the night, Iz?

Oh, out on the North River. You know what it's like.

No, I don't, she said. I don't know.

Just cordgrass and mud, that's all. No trees, nothing for shelter. Not out of the rain but out of the wind, which is the important thing. Probably he was sitting there thinking what a mistake it all was, coming out here. But if he was, he never said, never complained.

Why don't you ever take me out there?

What for? Israel said. There's nothing there, like I said.

I want to see it, is all.

All right, Pearlie, he said. I'll ask your pa. We can go some Sunday when the weather's nice.

But she didn't want to go when the weather was nice. She wanted to go when it was as it was on Wednesday. She wanted to go under a big black cloud. She wanted wind and rain and fog, and she wanted the waves to be higher than her head. If the man from Ohio could do it, why couldn't she?

Israel lifted the sack of mail over his shoulders. He looked quite fine that way, the bag hung from his shoulders as if weightless, as if it weren't heavy with words, heavy with other people and other places. Her father had been paying him a nickel every week to bring the

mail from Elizabeth City, now that he was so busy with the lifesaving station. And she'd heard the man from Ohio had given him a whole dollar for the ferry ride.

Let me take the station mail down for you, Pearlie. Seeing as you've got guests and all.

But she refused. It was her job to call over the surfmen's mail, and she wasn't going to give it up, especially not for some stranger from far away. She took the mail sack from him, which really was very light—already she had removed what letters there were for the village, placed each one neatly and quietly in its hole so as not to disturb their guest, who was awake now and busy in her room scratching scratching with his pen—and bid Israel goodbye. As she walked down the sand in her bare feet her boots clicked beneath her neck, where they hung once more tied by their laces.

It was the privilege of the surfmen to receive their letters before anyone else. Some of them had come from far away, from Bath and New Bern and farther towns, from wives and children who were waiting patiently for a little bit of the meager salary paid out by the lifesaving service. She knew some of the surfmen who lodged at the station sent every penny back home; it made her feel proud, as the postmaster's daughter, in such vital deliveries.

Because the beach was so straight and so long, she could see the surfmen long before she reached them. They were in the middle of a boat drill. Even from a distance she loved to watch them. She loved the way the surfmen moved in concert over the sand as they hauled the surfboat, four to a side, from the station to the water. It's more important, her father had told her, to work together than to work quickly. We move faster together than we would if each man moved at his own quickest pace. When they reached the edge of the water they jumped in and rowed out to the shoal; when they reached the shoal they reversed course and began to return to shore.

She loved the drills. The precision of the boat drill, the grand drama of the Lyle gun and the breeches buoy, whose boom could be heard all the way up at the post office. Her favorite was the capsize drill, in which a surfman stood on the keel of an upturned boat and began to roll it beneath his feet, like a log. Her father could do it for minutes on end without getting wet. She loved hearing the other surfmen cheer his name as they watched from their skiff: Billy! Billy! His feet were so light he seemed to hang in air.

Time was they even let her take part in drills. Down the beach was a wooden tower that stood in for a distressed ship, and when she was small she rode along the line of the breeches buoy in her father's arms, riding the preserver ring. Later it was her brother Eli her father took with him, before Eli died.

And for a while they had let her play the injured woman. She liked the gritty tingling feeling of the mustard plaster on her arms and legs. She liked the feeling of the surfmen's firm hands on her chest when they brought her back to life. But one day that summer,

not long after her fifteenth birthday, she'd lain down in the sand for the drill and her father had whispered quietly, Get up, Pearlie. You're too old for such games now. Until he'd said it she hadn't realized that her skirt had fallen crumpled against her lap. But hadn't it always?

When she arrived the drill was over; they were carrying the surfboat into the station. The keeper was reading the time from his brass pocketwatch. When the surfmen saw her coming with the mailbag they cheered, because they knew her arrival meant reprieve; if she had not appeared just then they would have had to take the surfboat out and perform the drill again. They smiled and joked with her as she distributed the mail: What did you bring me, Pearlie? Pearlie, what have you got for me?

She had two letters for her father, both with the same return address. She recognized the address, that Ohio address; she'd seen it many times. He opened one and gave the other back to her. Look here, he said. It says c/o. You know what that means, Pearlie. It means care of. This letter's care of me, which means it's care of you, which means I'm trusting you to get it where it needs to go. You go on home and give that to the man.

She looked at it again. It was addressed to the man from Ohio—c/o Bill Tate, Postmaster, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. She did what she was told; she went back up the beach.

Outside the post office door she could hear the sewing machine. She expected to find her mother inside sewing a patch on a dress or a pair of trousers, but when she entered it was the man from Ohio who was pulling a colossal sheet of cream-colored fabric through the needle with careful long fingers. He was sitting in the middle of the kitchen and the cloth fell around him like heavy folds of yellowish surf. Pearl had never seen a man work a sewing machine before. When she brought him the letter he let the pedal go.

My brother, he said, gesturing to the envelope as if his brother were inside of it. I'm going down today to choose a place for our camp. You'll have your bed back soon enough, I promise.

It's all right, she lied. I don't mind sleeping with my mother and father.

He nodded. He was very tall but because he was seated at the sewing machine their eyes were nearly level. Go on and guess, he said.

It's a big white dress, she said, the kind Ida McKinley might wear. A dress so long you need a dozen servants to carry the train.

He laughed stiffly and shook his head.

It must be a sail, then, she said. For a clipper ship.

Closer, but no. These, he said, are wings.

You know I myself am the son of a shipwreck.

The son of a shipwreck, the man from Ohio repeated.

Pearl lay in her mother's bed listening to her father talking in the kitchen with their guest. Her father was drinking whisky. She'd heard him offer a mug of it to the man from Ohio but he would only take milk.

My father was from Scotland, her father said. He sailed for Baltimore just before the war. He was to work at a foundry there, a glass foundry. Well, a storm came off the Chesapeake and blew him south, and before he knew it he and everybody else on the ship were stranded off Diamond Shoals. Mind you, that was before the light was built. Lost everything but his clothes he was wearing. Never made it to Baltimore, he just stayed. They made him postmaster because he knew how to read.

Pearl's mother was hot beside her. If her father had another cup of whisky he might fall asleep in the kitchen chair and she might not have to lose the cool expanse of bed where her right arm rested, free. But if he did not he would come to bed and she would be caught between them for another night, like a pair of hot-water bottles.

And yet, the man from Ohio said, perhaps what he saw as his misfortune was only God's providence. For it led to you, and to your family.

He never was one to complain, her father said. The wall's thin planks did nothing to dampen the brittle proud quality of his voice. Whit's fur ye'll no go past ye, he'd say. That's Scottish talk. What's going to happen will happen.

Pearl lay in the bed with her eyes on the ceiling, listening. She wanted to hear more about her father's father. A shipwreck—well, she'd never known about that. Why hadn't he ever told her? But they began to talk of other things.

In a few days, the man's brother arrived as promised. And as promised, they made their way down the beach with Pearl's mother's sewing machine added to their overladen wagon. She only saw him once again, a few weeks later, when he came to return it.

II.

SUMMER 1901

Pearl Brand Tooth Powder. Thoroughly Cleanses the Breath and Purifies the Teeth. As Pure and Perfect as Pearls. That was what was written on the canister. It was a message from the sea. A message to her! We are searching for you, Pearl. Won't you come and meet us, Pearl? In it would go, into the hat box, with the pearl buttons, the mirror handle, the tin, the brass lion from the head of a walking stick, the broken locket, the green and brown glass bottles, the coins with their faces rubbed away.

Postal Point was what some called this place. Other people called it Three Mile Point, which struck her as a dreary unimaginative sort of name. Postal Point was a better name because it *was* like the post office—a place where things arrived quite mysteriously. It was possible, perhaps, to trace every current and eddy in the sea that brought the canister

here, as it was possible to make note of every hand that touched a letter on the way to its destination, every train and carriage and boat that carried it. But mostly it seemed a kind of sorcery, a magic that made things appear where they had not been before.

And even the glass-blue jellies trusted the tides to take them where they needed to go. Was it crazy to think that someone's wish, a wish for her, rode the tides? That someone somewhere was dreaming of a Pearl? And that she, Pearl Tate of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, aged sixteen years, was the Pearl that was being dreamed of? Two pearl buttons, one Pearl Brand Tooth Powder, one Pearl Tate. If only, if only, she could put them all in her pocket and climb into a box marked Return to Sender.

The men from Ohio were back again. Sometimes the surfmen went down to assist them, including Israel, who had given up fishing and ferrying in the spring to join the service. He was on a year's contract. As the most recent man to join up, he was given the title Surfman Eight.

When the brothers wanted help they hung a red flag outside their camp, which the surfmen could see flapping over the white sand from a great distance. Among the tasks the surfmen had helped them perform were the clearing out of the abandoned shacks of the campsite, half-buried in the sand, eerie reminders of impermanence, of the island being shaped and re-shaped by wind and ocean even as families like hers tried to keep their grip upon it. The surfmen brought paraffin and fresh water down to the brothers' camp, and they helped carry their great contraptions up Kill Devil Hill.

It's orderly down there, Israel told her, for a camp. They've got all their pans and kettles and utensils and what have you hung upside down inside those tents. I can't decide if it's soldiers they remind me of, or women.

But Pearl didn't need to be told; sometimes she culled over the brothers' mail. They received more than anyone on the island, and from such places: Dayton, Indianapolis, Chicago—Paris! She burned to know what Paris had to say to them. They took the letters from her with fingers black with machine grease. She watched as they opened and read them then traded them. When they were done reading they began talking in such language she could barely understand; they said *warp* and *yaw* and so many of the words were numbers. As she watched them she could see they would never marry; they were as good as married to each other. They were complete unto themselves. How nice, she thought, it must be.

And yet, Pearl had grown tired of them. They struck her as overgrown children, playing with overgrown toys. Their seriousness and sobriety were like children's imitations of grown men. She wondered if they knew how people in the village spoke about them, how they were thought to have too much money and too little sense. People called them

foolish, but they were possessive of them; they were *our* fools. They had gone away but they had come back again; they had chosen this place for their tinkering and so honored it. But to Pearl this only made the brothers more baffling—to have come here, to this frayed margin of the world, by choice.

Now that Israel was living at the station, Pearl suggested she should be the one to call the mail over from Elizabeth City. She was as good an oarsman as anyone in the village, and she had the time. But the laughter of Israel and her father made her so angry that she left the table and went outside. She took her father's skiff and dragged it to the edge of the soundside marsh and dropped it in the mud and sat inside of it.

What are you doing, Pearlie? Israel said when he found her at last. Are you going away?

Why shouldn't I, she said.

He thought about this for a moment and said, Well, I'd miss you, I suppose. I'd not like it very much if you were gone.

Then you better come too, she said. You better get in before I push off without you.

He did get in and they sat facing each other in the skiff, separated by the black strap of a pine tree's shadow. All right, Israel said. We'll go off to Manteo and get married. Would you like that, Pearlie? It'll be a short marriage, because your pa will put a bullet in my teeth as soon as he tracks me down, which won't be but a few hours after they pronounce us man and wife.

Then we won't go to Manteo, she said. And we won't go to Elizabeth City, or Edenton. We'll go somewhere else, far away. We'll go to France, she said—or Ohio.

I don't think you can sail to Ohio, Pearlie, he said.

You don't know, she said. Have you ever tried?

Honestly, Pearlie, he said. If I didn't know better I'd think you were mad at me. I joined the service so I could be here more often, so I could see you. And as soon as I join up it seems you're itching to pull anchor and get away from me.

She bent over and hugged her knees; her stomach was all quamished. I'm sorry, Iz, she said. I'm not feeling myself.

Later that summer the mosquitos gathered in black clouds. Everyone stayed indoors. The surfmen were confined to the station and the men from Ohio stayed in their tents. At the post office the windows were black with their bodies, thick as falling rain. Later they found a dog, dead in the dunes and bitten all over. Beneath its fur its skin was all white as if they'd drained it clean.

The new baby was named Eli. But there already was an Eli, Pearl said to her mother.

It's a family name, her mother said. I always wanted a son named Eli, and the one I did have is gone now. Why shouldn't I have another?

Besides, she added. I couldn't think of nothing else.

She went to her father, who told her she ought to be respectful. After all, your mother named you, didn't she? The pearl that grew inside the oyster.

He smiled at her halfheartedly and crossed his arms. Lately she had gotten the feeling that she had become frightening to him. He did not know what to do with her now that he could not pick her up, like a little girl. She, too, crossed her arms. She did not like the old familiar joke about the oyster. She did not like the image of being closed up inside the shell, in the gluey dark.

The new Eli screamed and was red. Son of a son of a shipwreck, born with a dead name. She thought, Why shouldn't he scream?

III.

AUTUMN 1902

Eli was often sick. His rapid fits of coughing reminded Pearl of the sound of heavy rain falling through the roof into a zinc bucket. She rubbed liniment on his fragile ribs. She gave him yaupon tea, diluted heavily with water, hoping it would expel the sickness, and held him above the sand as he retched. The spasms racked his fragile body from his skull down to his white limp feet. Her mother was too tired, always too tired, to do these things. You're going to make a good mother one day, Pearlie, she said.

On Eli's first birthday she took him down to the Tate cemetery. She wanted him to know there had been another Eli. He lay in her arms with a blue film over his eyes and would not look in the direction she pointed. Pearl felt as if she were carrying the Eli of the grave, and feared there was another Eli beneath the sand, struggling to get free.

Later she took him down to see the brothers' camp. They had built a new workshop, a building of actual lumber they had brought over from the mainland, though they still slept in the canvas tents. Inside the workshop their machine was covered by a tarp. They showed Eli a little toy they called a flying bat, a wound propeller that rode the air on a scrap of cloth. The flying bat made Eli come to life somewhat, but soon the wind picked up and dashed it into the junipers. When they'd presented it to her, they'd said: for your little one.

The bones of many fish washed up at Postal Point picked as clear as the ones on her father's dinner plate. Bits of wrack were threaded through the keyholes of their eyes. And more: gulls' skulls, sharp and pointed as kitchen knives. Some great animal, a whale or shark, had taken their lives then itself foundered and split open.

Still she searched among the skeletons for another invitation from across the sea. What she would not give to find a white comb, masquerading as a row of ribs, or a spoon, or a

bit of bottle glass polished to a stone the color of the sea. But she brushed aside the remains of the little animals without luck. No one was calling for her anymore.

The foot might have been saved if only the surgeon had come earlier. It was nearly morning when he arrived, having been brought down from Elizabeth City by her father. Israel had spent nearly twelve hours on his bed at the station, moaning in pain or glass-eyed and seething, fogged up with laudanum. Pearl passed the hours growing ever more resentful of her father; how easy it was, she thought, to simply get into a boat and go. What was harder was to stay here, at the station, and sponge Israel's forehead with cold water as he made such sounds, sounds as she'd never heard from any animal.

When the surgeon came finally he pulled back the blanket and she saw it for the first time. The foot hung from the ankle by two red braids of string. She felt the vomit rise in her throat but she kept control of herself. The doctor only shook his head.

So it was to be the saw. Her father told her to go home but she refused. She had promised not to leave Israel. As the surgeon worked she was struck by a thought, which she knew was neither reasonable nor fair, that it ought to have been the men from Ohio. They were not surgeons, no, but they were engineers, and precise and meticulous. With their fine exacting fingers they might have performed the amputation better. They would have done it in a way that would not have made him scream and scream through the leather belt he held in his teeth. But they were not here, the brothers. They were back in Ohio in their bicycle shop, or more likely at home, sleeping in the same bed, under a heavy quilt, beneath a window where the bare trees were rimed with frost and the pane was filling up gently with snow, which she imagined was something like sand, the whitest sand there could be.

It was only later that her father told her what had happened. None of the other surfmen would say and Israel of course could not. They had been drilling with the breeches buoy. When her father pulled the cord, the gun had fallen on its side and launched the line at Israel instead of the water. Her father kept his hands in his pockets as he told her this and would not look at her. His voice was very low and she could see how ashamed he was.

Israel lay unmoving in the mail room for two days. On the third he awakened and was in high spirits. He joked with the surfmen who came to call. They said, How are you feeling, Iz? And he said, Oh, a bit wobbly. He bounced Eli gently on his lap. He said, I hope you didn't want to go dancing this weekend, Pearlie. But what kind of joke was this? There was nowhere in Kitty Hawk for dancing.

Everyone said how fine it was, the way he took the accident in stride. They said it showed a Christian spirit.

This was her dream.

She lay on the ocean floor. The shoal had rent a gash in her and all the things of her life were streaming out: pearl buttons, tins of wax, brass kettles, pans and brooms, spoons and knifes, hawser ropes uncoiling, strands of fishing wire, thousands of letters, releasing their ink like an octopus, many small skulls and bones, her heart, the size of a whale's heart, still beating. The current carried them to shore and distributed them along the sand for gulls to peck at. Beachcombers took up the things of her life to take them for their hatboxes, as keepsakes.

But in truth she never went to the Point anymore—there was too much to be done. She had to prepare the milk for Eli and play nurse for him when he was sick, and now she had Israel to look after, too. He was sleeping on a bed in the mail room. He had given up his place at the lifesaving station for good.

They were building an addition onto the post office, a room for them to live in once they were married. Israel did his best to help, but without his right foot he moved slowly and was easily tired. Often, in the middle of the hammering and sawing, he would excuse himself and disappear into the mailroom. He said he needed to rest, but she could hear him crying quietly at times into the mattress.

She wondered if her father heard it. He had been greatly affected by the young man's accident. There's no use denying it, he had said to her once among the live oaks, it was my mistake. He had followed her out to the grove where she took Eli for fresh air. Above them the oaks lifted their arms like beggars, and the moss hung from them like rags. I've got to give him what I've got to give, her father said, until what is given is equal to what was taken away. You see that, don't you, Pearlie? When it's all equal, then everything will be all right.

Yes, she saw it well enough. She saw that she was part of the debt, part of what was to be given away.

Her mother teased her: Once they're done with that room, the next thing they build will be a big bed for the two of you. But the idea of sleeping next to Israel made her flush with cold. She imagined lying in bed with him and having the nub of his ankle slide against her leg, smooth and hard like leather.

When the men from Ohio returned in late September she and Israel went down the beach to visit them. He unlaced his boot and showed them the wooden foot, into which her father had carved shallow grooves in imitation of toes. The brothers passed Israel's foot back and forth between them and declared it excellent craftsmanship.

They had a new invention: a bicycle with unusually wide tires, made especially for riding on the beach. It will reduce the time necessary to travel into Kitty Hawk by half, they told her. No longer will we have to walk two hours each way for supplies.

She'd never ridden a bicycle before. She fell many times before she was able to ride smoothly down the beach. But when she mastered it, how lovely it was! She rode with the wind and she could feel her hair stream around her head like a crown. She felt as if she could ride it forever, along the beach and through the swamp into Virginia and Washington, into Ohio and France and everywhere else there was to go. But eventually she turned around and rode back down to Israel, who was waiting for his turn.

He could not manage it. Each time he tried to make the machine go forward he faltered and fell into the sand. His wooden foot could not press down on the pedal without throwing it off balance. An engineering challenge, certainly, the brothers said. Come back next week and we'll have a solution.

It took a long time for Israel to walk back to the post office and when they arrived he was slick all over with sweat. She saw she had made him walk too far. He collapsed in the mail room and began to cry openly. You looked so happy, Pearlie, he said, riding away from me. I was so certain you wasn't going to stop. She's going to keep on riding, I thought, and I'll just be standing here. She won't even look back.

It was the first true wreck anyone had seen in years. It took Pearl some time to get down the beach, slowed down by Israel on one shoulder, dragging his wooden foot through the damp sand, and Eli shivering on the other. And of course the plodding steps of her mother behind them.

What would it be? A passenger ship, maybe, bound from Europe for Washington or Savannah. Fine ladies of France and Spain spinning in their white lace in the black water, helpless as jellies. Men in frock coats bobbing like pins. It would be her father who saved their lives, Pearl's father, and if only one of them were to say, I shall repay you by taking your daughter into my service, she shall be my governess, my maid, my lady-in-waiting, she shall want for nothing.

Why not a ship of industry? A railroad ship bound for South American jungles? There was much of that these days, she'd heard. A handsome young man of the railroad who would wake in the station, and the first thing he would see would be Pearl, his nurse, his angel. He would not be able to live without her from that day. Pearl, I have only this rough life to offer here. And yet she would show she could do what anyone could do, drive a nail with a heavy hammer and cut down thick vines.

The rain was cold as nails on her back as she spun her fantasies. Eli scrambled farther up her shoulder to climb within the protection of her wide hat, and his kicking brought her back to herself. Ah, Pearl, she thought, it is time to put your childish things away.

They had heard the boom of the breeches buoy as they walked, and by the time they arrived the thick rope had already been pulled into the fog. Dozens were there already,

looking out into the greenish veil past which the surfboat had disappeared. She left Eli with Israel and her mother and walked down the line of surf to the crowd's edge. Hundreds of black planks were scattered on the gray beach, for a mile or more. On the waves they were still arriving. Oh, the ship must have been torn apart and turned to splinters!

But no, she saw how the planks were of even lengths, and not one was broken. It must have been a lumber ship that foundered and loosed its cargo. She could see it far out on the shoal, wrenched at a severe angle, though indistinct, like a cloud of blown smoke. She thought she saw the surfboat, too, a secondary shadow, but she could be not be sure. There was nothing to see out there, nothing yet, though all around her they were waiting patiently for something or someone to come into view.

So she turned around to face the shore, to face their faces. Some of the men had pipes that burned like tiny campfires in the gloom. The women were laughing and gossiping, and children ran around their feet. They had all had so little entertainment since the men from Ohio packed up their camp.

No one would be watching. If she wanted to, she could hurry back up the beach—she could say she'd left the door open to the rain and she'd only just realized. She could gather all her things, which would not amount to much, and wrap them in a blanket, and she could be in her father's skiff before anyone would know. She could be in Elizabeth City by evening and on a train by morning.

Instead she went back to Israel, back to Eli and her mother. Such waves, her mother was saying. He's too old for such waves.

At first she thought her mother meant Eli, but it was her father her mother meant. Oh, her mother said, I wish he were safe at home! I wish we all were safe at home.

That night her dreams were black, black as the deepest sea into which no one—thank God—that day had drowned. She woke in the middle of the night to Eli's crying. But how could a whole dream be black? she thought. How could a dream have nothing in it?

IV.

WINTER 1903

Pintails in the marsh and each reed tipped with a proprietary blackbird. When the shadow passed over them, the pintails fled and the blackbirds scattered, their screeching like the turning of unoiled wheels. When no hawk appeared to match the shadow they returned to their stations, and the next time it passed over them the birds were not afraid. They were among those who saw.

That morning three surfmen had gathered on the dune, having been summoned by the red flag. They were John, Will, and Andrew. A lumber merchant from Manteo was also there, having come down to see for himself what he had only heard about, and having

arrived at the luckiest of times. A teenage boy, known around the village as a shirker, was walking along the beach.

Someone had thought to bring a camera, a Grundlach Korona. It had a brass face and black bellows and long wooden legs like the legs of a heron. A thoroughly modern machine. The surfmen and the lumber merchant placed great hopes in the camera, that it would capture for them what there was to be seen. The teenage boy knew nothing about what was to happen and had no expectations.

When it was done the surfmen convinced the brothers to come back to the lifesaving station for a celebratory dram. Will Etheridge had a bottle of his own moonshine there, but it was declared inadequate, and someone was sent to Dan Midgett's for a bottle of real brandy. Dan and his wife Martha came with the bottle and insisted they stop at Irma Garrish's, knowing that Irma had just that afternoon baked a mess of fritters. When the party arrived at Irma's they found the Reverend and Mrs. Austin taking their leave, and an invitation was extended. In this fashion all of Kitty Hawk began to arrive at the lifesaving station. They were still arriving when the brothers, having sipped respectfully at their brandies, which had been generously furnished with water, bid farewell and retired to write the next day's telegrams.

A winter moon rose as wedge-shaped and orange as an apple fritter. The postmaster arrived with his wife and Israel Perry, who held the postmaster's son on his shoulders. Old Red Gaskell tottered in and asked Israel what the to-do was for, but Israel didn't know. He'd only just arrived.

Their flying machine, the Manteo lumber merchant said, having overheard—it flew. But Red Gaskell waved the reply away like the smoke of the pipes that had been lighted. I've seen it fly, he said, a hundred times. The lumber merchant tried to explain the difference between the old gliders and the new flying machine with its motor engine. We shall all be in the air soon enough, the merchant said. In a few years' time we will take to our private flying machines and spend our weekends in Paris. But Red Gaskell laughed and said that he'd only take to the air when the angel Gabriel came to fetch him.

The boy who'd been on the beach was telling everyone the man in the machine had looked down and waved at him, but no one paid him mind. Soon the brothers and the flying machine were forgotten. More people arrived, surprised to have been drawn from their homes on a winter Thursday. The small interior of the lifesaving station became more crowded and more animated, as if the party were no longer celebrating anything, but was sufficient by its own vitality. Someone passed Israel a fiddle and he played a flew clumsy rounds, his wooden foot beating time against the wooden boards. The postmaster danced a jig upon the floor.

The postmaster's wife could not remember the last time her husband had danced like that. He still had nimble feet, she thought. He danced just like he was rolling a boat. Oh,

it were a lovely evening, weren't it. She would write it down, the way her husband looked when he danced, and how she never even knew Israel could play the fiddle. The way the Reverend Austin balanced a jug of brandy on his head and the fun they all had.

She was a slow and unpracticed writer, but maybe she could ask Israel to help her. She would write it all down, and she would hold on to the letter until they heard from Pearl at last. Until she knew where it could be sent.