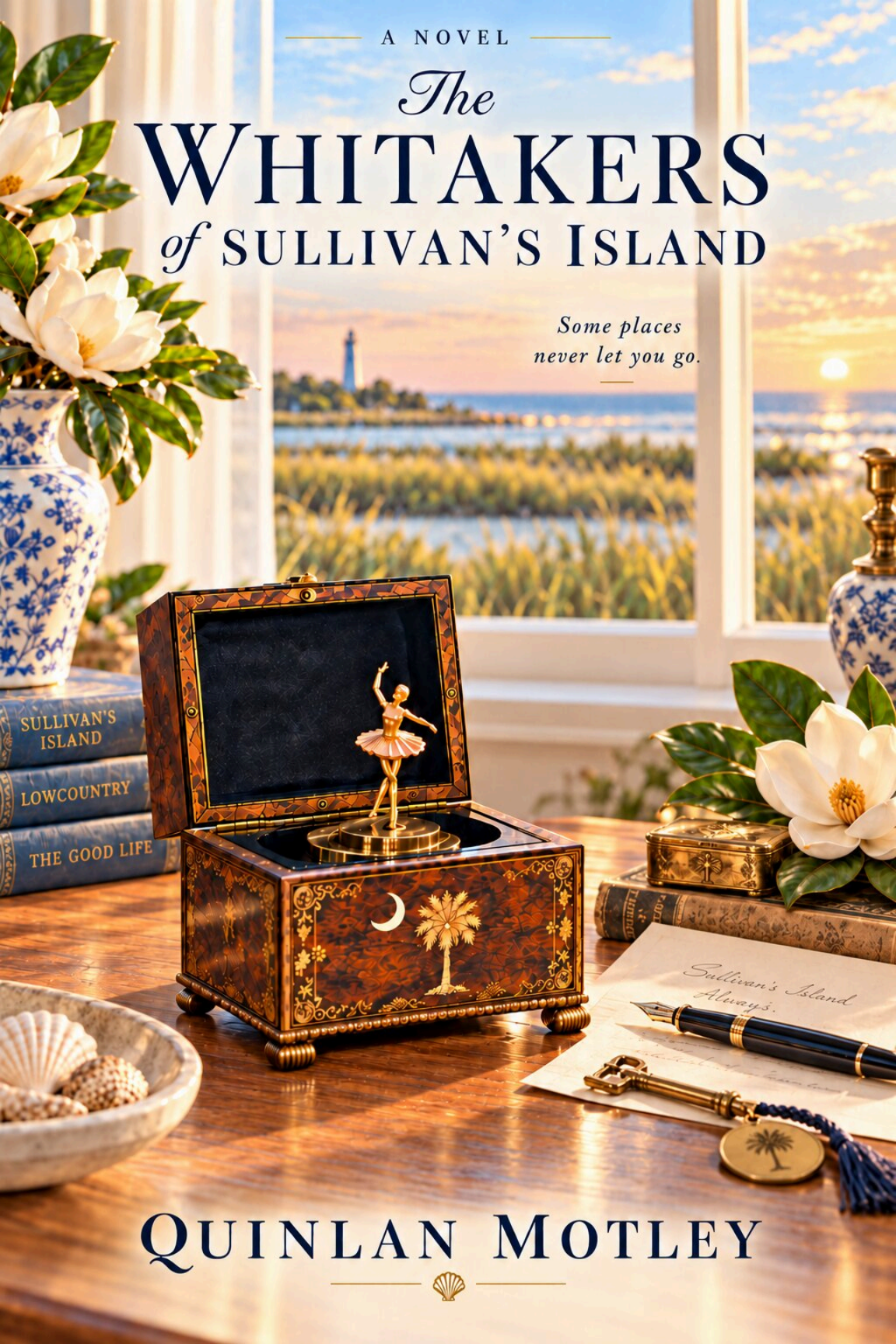

A NOVEL
The
WHITAKERS
of SULLIVAN'S ISLAND
Some places never let you go.
SULLIVAN'S ISLAND
LOWCOUNTRY
THE GOOD LIFE
Sullivan's Island
Always.
QUINLAN MOTLEY

In Yeshua name.
Amen

The Whitakers
of Sullivan's Island

Quinlan Motley

GoodNovels.org

Free opening selection
Chapters 1–7

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The complete book contains eighteen chapters.

The Man in the Photograph

(Chapter 1)

Charleston, South Carolina | Wednesday, November 24, 1971

Eli had given the secretary his name. He had not told her that he thought her employer was his father.

Now Graham Whitaker stood in the doorway with a folder under his arm, looking from the young man to the clock behind the secretary's desk.

"Mr. Park?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come in. I have a little time."

Eli was eighteen. He had been in Charleston for nearly three weeks, carrying this address in his pocket and finding reasons not to use it. Now he followed Graham into the office.

"Will you need that typed before Friday, Mr. Whitaker?" the secretary asked.

Graham looked down at the folder as if he had forgotten it.

"No. Leave it for Friday. You can go when you're finished."

Inside, he put it on a stack beside the telephone and offered Eli a chair. There was a Duke law diploma on the wall. On the desk, turned toward the chair Graham had just left, stood a photograph of Graham with a woman and three children.

Eli sat with his satchel on his knees.

"My mother knew you in Korea."

Graham had begun to sit. He stopped with his hand on the back of his chair.

"What's her name?"

"Hana Park."

Eli took the photograph from the book in which he had carried it. The younger Graham was standing beside Hana, whose head was turned toward him. Eli slid it across the desk.

Graham picked it up by the edges.

"Oh," he said.

For a while he did nothing else. Eli had practiced answers to questions about where he had got it and why he had come. The man did not ask them.

"Is she here with you?"

"She died in January."

Graham looked up.

"She was ill?"

"For a long time." Eli kept his hands on the satchel. He could speak about the illness. He had told people about it for months. Speaking about the morning afterward was harder.

A car sounded its horn outside. Graham pulled his desk chair closer and sat down without letting go of the photograph.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

Eli watched the man's thumb move away from his mother's face. He had seen that careful way of holding the print before, in his aunt's hands, but not here, not in a man who had lived all these years without her.

"How old was she?" Graham asked, and shook his head before Eli could answer. "I know how old she was."

He put the photograph flat on the desk.

"She was my mother," Eli said. It was the one part he had already told him, and still it was where he had to begin. "After she died, my aunt told me you were my father."

Graham looked at him then, properly, without the photograph between their eyes.

"When were you born?"

"October, nineteen fifty-three."

Graham's hand closed on the edge of the desk. "I didn't know she had a child."

"She wrote to you."

"I never received a letter."

Eli opened the book again and took out an envelope. He laid it on the desk, with the folded letter beside it. Graham's name and an

old military address were on the front; the marks beneath them showed that it had been sent back.

"This is the letter she sent. It came back to her. My aunt gave it to me with the photograph when we were sorting Mother's papers."

Graham turned the envelope toward him.

"That was my address in Pusan."

He reached for the letter, then stopped.

"You can read it," Eli said. "But I want it back."

"All right."

The letter was in English. Graham read from the beginning. Hana wrote about two new desks she'd received for her classroom, joking about her sister Sujin's complaints at having to move them with the drawers full. At Sujin's name, Graham's mouth moved a little.

Then he reached the words Eli knew without looking.

"I am going to have a baby. You did not know when you left. Neither did I."

Graham stayed on that part longer than it took to read it. He went on to the request for an answer through the school, and to the line about making arrangements. Eli left the page where it was. His mother had needed things. He would not hide that from this man.

At last Graham looked at the date again.

"April," he said. "I was already back in the States."

Eli looked at the envelope. His mother had held it after it came back, knowing it had not reached this man.

"But you didn't know."

"No." Graham raised his eyes. "I didn't know about you."

Eli had thought that an answer, once he had one, would tell him what to do. He could hear the secretary closing a drawer in the next room.

"You didn't know my name before this year?" Graham asked.

"No. Only that my father was an American soldier."

Graham drew a breath as if he meant to say something more. Instead he laid the letter on its envelope and pushed it back with the photograph.

"Your aunt is Sujin?"

"She lives in Pusan. She took the picture."

"I have one too."

Eli looked at him.

"She had two prints made," Graham said. "Your mother gave me one before I left."

"You kept it?"

"Yes."

For the first time since entering the room, Eli looked away because he wanted to, not because he was afraid of being seen looking. In the desk photograph the youngest child had one hand over the older boy's sleeve. The woman stood close to Graham, who was laughing.

"My wife," Graham said. "Caroline. And our children."

"I knew you were married. Does Mrs. Whitaker know about my mother?"

"Yes. I told her before we married."

Eli folded the letter along its old crease. He did not ask what the wife had said.

"Where are you staying?"

"With Ruth Alden. She is an American teacher who used to live near us in Pusan. She knew my mother. I call her Mrs. Alden."

"When did you arrive in Charleston?"

"Early November. Mrs. Alden helped arrange a study visit. English lessons here, and visits to schools. I want to become a teacher. I go home on January twenty-eighth."

His school in Pusan had sent work for him to finish during the visit. Ruth and the people arranging it had settled his room, lessons, and return passage before he left Korea. Finding Graham had been the part Eli must do for himself.

"And you've had the address all this time?"

"Yes."

Eli looked at the door through which he had finally come.

Graham glanced at the clock. Eli closed the book.

"You said you had a little time."

"No. I was only..." He looked at the folder on the desk. "I was going to finish that and go home."

The secretary called goodbye from the outer office, and Graham answered her. They listened to the outside door close.

"Would you have lunch with me?" he asked.

Eli kept a hand on the satchel clasp.

"There are things I'd like to ask you," Graham said. "And things you may want to ask me. I don't seem to be doing very well at either."

Eli had questions. He was less certain now that he could bear all the answers in one day.

"Lunch would be all right."

* * *

At the Colony House, Graham waited for Eli to sit before taking the chair opposite him. Eli put the satchel between his feet. Without the desk, he did not know where to rest his hands.

A man carrying menus greeted Graham by name. Graham began to answer, stopped, and looked toward the other tables.

"This is Eli Park," he said.

"How do you do?" the man asked.

Eli answered him. Nothing else was asked. Graham moved his water glass, although it had not been in the way.

When they were alone again, he asked what Eli would like to eat.

Eli chose something he recognized. He had been hungry outside the office. Now he hoped hunger would come back before the food arrived.

Graham asked about Ruth, and Eli told him that she had left Korea years ago but still wrote to Sujin. The conversation became easier while it concerned someone who was not at the table.

"Do you have classes this afternoon?"

"No. I have some reading to finish. For myself. Mrs. Alden has more books than places to put them."

"What are you reading?"

"Three Men in a Boat." Eli had left it open on Ruth's sitting-room table, where she had complained of finding it facedown.

"I read the last page first," he said. "I don't think I should have done it."

"Why did you do that?" Graham asked.

"My mother did it."

"She did?"

"In a shop. Before she bought one. If she didn't like the ending, she put it back."

Graham smiled, and Eli could see him trying to put the woman who bought books beside the one he remembered.

"I didn't know that."

"She told me not to do it with books for school."

"Sound advice."

"I didn't always take it."

Their food came. Graham waited until the plates were down, then asked whether he had many books at home.

"Some."

"We could see about getting you a few while you're here."

Eli set down his fork.

"I haven't finished Mrs. Alden's."

"I only meant, if there's something you need."

"I don't need anything today."

Graham nodded. He cut a piece of his lunch, but did not eat it at once. Eli wished he had answered differently and was also glad he had not thanked him.

After a while he said, "Did you love her?"

"Yes."

The answer came before Graham had put down his knife. Eli had prepared himself for an explanation. The simple yes left him unable to speak.

"She never told me about the two of you," he said at last. "Did she know you loved her?"

"I told her. I think she believed me."

He was silent long enough that Eli thought that was all he meant to say.

"I was waiting to hear from law school. I told her I might not get in. She said she'd want to see me even if they turned me down."

A small smile had come into his face. It did not last.

"She was afraid she'd asked me to supper too soon. With her mother and Sujin there. I was afraid of saying something stupid in front of them. We walked halfway down the road before either of us admitted being nervous."

Eli had known his mother could be afraid. He had not pictured her wanting this man to come back to supper, listening for what he would say.

"She could make you think she wasn't afraid of anything," he said.

"Yes."

Graham looked down at his plate. Eli took a bite of his lunch and gave him time. He did not know how much of this memory he wanted, only that he would have been angry if there had been nothing to tell.

"Are you with Mrs. Alden tomorrow?" Graham asked.

"We're going to her daughter's."

"Would you come to us instead? For Thanksgiving dinner."

Eli's fork stopped above the plate.

"My mother will be there," Graham said. "I'd like you to meet her. I'd like you to meet all of them."

"Have you told your wife?"

"No. I'm going to tell her today."

The man with the menus passed behind Graham. Graham did not look around this time, but Eli remembered the first glance.

"Perhaps you should talk to her."

"I'll speak to her when I get home. But I do want you to come."

Eli moved a small piece of bread away from the edge of his plate. He wanted to meet Graham's mother. He wanted to know whether Graham was different at home. Neither want made him certain he should go.

"I'll speak to Mrs. Alden," he said. "I think I would like to come."

"May I collect you at half past eleven?"

"All right."

"And I'll bring you back afterward."

Eli nodded. He was glad to know where the day would end.

Graham nodded. He asked for the address on a clean piece of paper, and Eli wrote it without opening the book in his satchel.

* * *

Ruth was at her kitchen table when he returned. There were two onions on the cutting board and a third in her hand.

"I went to his office," Eli said.

She put the onion down.

"He was there?"

"Yes."

He sat in the chair across from her. Now that he was home, he could feel how tired he was. Ruth had helped him find Graham after Sujin, his mother's sister, gave him the name. She had offered to come to the office. Eli had wanted to knock on the door alone.

"What did he say?"

"That he didn't know."

Ruth waited.

"He read the letter."

"Do you believe he didn't know?"

"I think so." Eli looked at the knife beside her hand. "I thought that would make it easier."

She drew the cutting board away from his sleeve.

"He asked me for dinner tomorrow. With his family. I said I would like to go, but I was meant to go with you."

"I'll tell my daughter."

"You won't mind?"

"I'll miss having you there." She picked up the onion. "That isn't the same thing."

He watched her begin to cut it.

"He's coming at half past eleven. He'll bring me back."

"Then leave your key where you can find it. I may still be out."

Eli put his hand in his pocket to make sure it was there.

Tomorrow he would meet the people in the photograph on his father's desk. He wondered which of them would be glad he had come.

One More Place

(Chapter 2)

Sullivan's Island | Wednesday evening

Caroline had put the bread out to dry and sent Lucy upstairs before Graham came into the kitchen. He was still wearing his tie. She took one look at it and handed him the apron hanging by the stove.

"You'll get flour on that."

"What am I doing?"

"What you promised your youngest daughter. Her cards are on the dining-room table. You're drawing a turkey."

"Then why the apron?"

"Because I need this bowl moved first."

He smiled and lifted it. She directed him to the counter, reached past him for the towel, and found his other hand briefly at her waist. It was a familiar piece of awkwardness, the two of them trying to work in the same kitchen. She leaned against him for a moment.

"Are we ever going to have that lunch?" she asked.

"Next week. Friday?"

"You'll have to put it in your book."

"I will."

He released her, but remained beside the counter. She began wiping flour from a clean place.

"What is it?"

"Someone came to the office today."

"You usually have several."

"A young man. From Korea."

She stopped wiping.

"Do you remember what I told you about Hana?"

"Yes."

He had told her before their engagement. She had asked whether Hana expected him to come back. He had said no. Caroline had believed him, and nothing in the years since had given her cause to doubt that answer.

"She died in January," he said.

"Oh, Graham."

She could see that he was hurt. She put the towel down and waited for him to say how he had heard.

"The young man was her son."

Caroline looked at the bowl he had just moved.

"His name is Eli. He says I'm his father."

She did not answer. From upstairs came Lucy's complaint that Bennett had taken something of hers. It sounded as if they were in another house.

"How old?"

"Eighteen. He was born in October of fifty-three."

"We married in fifty-five."

"Yes. I left Korea in January of fifty-three."

"You didn't know?"

"No."

She had heard certainty in his voice often enough to know when he was using it for somebody else's benefit. This was quieter than that.

"What makes him think..." She could not finish the question without sounding as though she wished some other man had done what Graham had done.

"Her sister told him after Hana died. Sujin. He brought the photograph she took of us, and a letter Hana wrote in April. It was sent back to her. She said neither of us knew when I left."

"Do you believe him?"

"Yes."

When Maddie was born, Graham had stood beside the bed afraid to touch her until Caroline put the baby in his arms. She remembered the care with which he had bent his head. Another child had already been walking and talking then. Somewhere in Korea, someone had been cutting his food into pieces.

"If you had known about him, would you have gone back?"

Graham sat down. "I think I would have tried."

"Then we might never have met."

"Caroline."

"We might not have married. There might not have been any of this." She gestured toward the stairs, where Lucy had begun calling for her father.

He reached for her hand. "I wanted to marry you. I love you."

She believed him. It did not stop her imagining a different life, one in which he had gone back to Korea and she had never known the children upstairs.

"I need a little time," she said.

"I know."

He released her hand when she drew it away.

The bread lay in neat pieces in the shallow pan. Tomorrow morning she was to put it into a meal for the same people she had fed last Thanksgiving and the year before that. She had made Lucy's favorite pie. Bennett had asked whether Grandmother was bringing the other one. Nothing in the kitchen had changed.

"Where is he now?"

"With a Mrs. Alden in Charleston. She knew Hana. He's here visiting schools."

"How long have you known this?"

"Since this morning."

"And you came home just now."

"I took him to lunch."

She looked at him then.

"I didn't want to leave him standing in my office."

"I didn't say you should."

"I know."

"Don't answer things I haven't said."

He took off his tie and laid it on the chair beside him. She could not bear that ordinary movement and could not have said what she wanted him to do instead.

"I invited him tomorrow," he said.

"You invited him here."

"Yes."

"To our Thanksgiving dinner."

"Yes."

"You've already decided what I will do."

"I decided I wanted to see him again."

"And I prepare it. I explain it to the children. I sit down at the table as if..."

"I'll tell the children."

"That is not all I said."

He looked away. She had wanted him to understand the whole thing at once, the way she had been made to understand it.

"You should have asked me," she said.

"Yes."

He came around the table, then stopped short of her.

"I should have. I'm sorry."

The apology did not bring back the afternoon in which there had been nothing to ask.

"Does anyone else know?"

"Mrs. Alden. And the people Eli has chosen to tell. I haven't spoken to Mother yet."

"People will think you knew."

"Some may."

"They'll think I knew."

He rubbed a hand over his face. "At lunch a man came to the table. I introduced Eli by his name and hoped he wouldn't ask anything else."

Caroline understood that relief. She had felt it when difficult subjects passed her by at church.

Her friend Anne Foster helped with the charity luncheon Caroline organized each spring. Last year Anne had proposed inviting Marian Ellis, a young woman raising a son alone. Caroline had agreed until she learned there had been no marriage. Then she asked Anne to withdraw the invitation.

She had called it protecting the girls who would be there. Now she could hear how readily she had said it.

"Caroline?"

"I'm here."

"I can tell Mother tonight. We ought to tell the children before he comes."

He was already making arrangements. She wanted him to understand that she was still trying to take in the news.

"Not tonight. Lucy is already meant to be in bed."

"In the morning, then."

"With me there."

"Yes."

"And plainly. I won't have them trying to guess what you've left out."

He nodded.

"What time did you tell him?"

"I said I'd collect him at half past eleven. Bring him back afterward."

He would be collected and taken back to Ruth Alden's. For now, Caroline could think about one dinner.

"We can have him to dinner," she said.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet."

He sat without speaking while she found another plate. The dishes were already stacked for the morning. She took the bottom one from a second stack, where it would not leave an uneven space, and placed it beside the others.

"Does he speak much English?"

"Very well."

"All right."

She opened the drawer for another napkin. There were plenty. She stood with the open drawer against her knees, holding a napkin she had no reason not to use.

Graham stood up. "I'll call Mother."

"And do Lucy's turkey."

He looked toward the dining room. "I haven't forgotten."

"You forgot yesterday."

"Yes," he said. "I did."

After he left the kitchen she went back to the bread. From the next room came the scrape of a chair, then his mother's name, spoken into the telephone. Caroline broke a piece that was already small enough.

Outside the Picture

(Chapter 3)

Thanksgiving Day | Thursday, November 25

Eli's place card was the only one without a turkey.

Lucy had made it after breakfast, when Graham and Caroline had told the children who was coming. There had been questions, and Graham had answered them. Thirteen-year-old Bennett wanted to know whether his father would still repair his bicycle. Maddie, the oldest, wanted to know why they had waited until morning to tell them. Lucy, the youngest, asked how to spell Eli.

Caroline had stayed beside her husband. She had said they would meet him today and that he was their guest. Maddie had looked at her when she used that word, but had said nothing.

Now Lucy was looking at the blank corner of his card.

"You can draw one," Caroline told her.

"Daddy did the others."

"Then ask him when he gets back."

"But he gets back with Eli."

Caroline had no answer that satisfied either of them. Lucy took up her pencil.

Evelyn arrived while Graham was gone. She embraced Caroline, then put her pie on the counter and asked for something to do. Caroline gave her the potatoes. Neither woman pretended she had come without knowing.

When the car stopped outside, Caroline was carrying the gravy boat to the dining room. She put it down before there was anything in it.

Eli came in behind Graham, holding his satchel close to his side. He wore a clean shirt and carried his jacket over one arm. Graham reached back to close the door, and Eli moved out of its way with a quick, apologetic turn of his shoulder.

Bennett did that when he thought he was standing where somebody wanted to walk. The recognition disturbed her more than the features she had prepared herself to inspect.

"Caroline," Graham said. "This is Eli."

"How do you do, Mrs. Whitaker?"

His voice was lower than she had expected.

"I'm glad you could come," she said. "Let me take your coat."

He gave her the jacket. She was relieved to have something ordinary to do with her hands.

Evelyn stepped forward and offered both of hers.

"I'm Graham's mother, Evelyn."

"Yes, ma'am."

She held his hand a moment longer than the greeting required, looking at him with an interest Caroline wished she could share so freely.

"You may have heard something dreadful about me already."

"No, ma'am."

"Then he's being careful."

Graham smiled. Eli did too, a little.

Lucy came around her grandmother.

"I made your turkey. It's smaller than the others."

"I don't think I'll mind."

"On your card," she said. "Not to eat."

Bennett laughed before he could stop himself. Lucy gave him a look and led Eli to the dining room to show him.

Maddie stood back until her sister had finished. Then she introduced herself and asked what schools he had seen. She listened to the answer. Caroline had been afraid the children would stare or fall silent. Now she found that their ordinary interest was difficult too.

At the table Graham waited until everyone was seated. Eli's chair was beside Evelyn's, where Caroline had put it that morning. She saw him look at his card before he lowered his head.

Graham thanked God for the food and for those gathered to share it. His voice caught briefly on the last word. Caroline kept her eyes shut until the amen.

Lucy wanted white meat. Bennett wanted to know whether the potatoes could come his way before everyone took the brown part. Evelyn told him the brown part did not travel separately.

For several minutes there was enough to pass that nobody needed to think of a question. Caroline watched Eli accept dishes and refuse a second helping of one without making a ceremony of either.

"You speak English very well," Maddie said.

"My mother taught it."

"Did she teach you at home?"

"At home too."

"That sounds terrible," Bennett said.

"It could be."

Bennett looked up, pleased to have found something he understood.

"My mother can hear me doing arithmetic wrong from the next room," Lucy said.

"I can hear you asking Bennett to do it," Caroline said.

"That too."

Graham laughed. Caroline found herself smiling before she remembered to wonder what Eli would make of them.

"Do you play baseball?" Bennett asked him.

"Badly."

"So does Lucy."

"I don't want to play."

"That's fortunate," Bennett said.

"Bennett."

Eli had begun to smile. "I sometimes want to. It doesn't help."

"I could show you," Bennett offered.

"If you don't mind starting near the beginning."

That pleased Bennett even more. He turned to Graham.

"After you fix my bicycle."

"I said we'd do it."

"You said last Saturday."

"I did."

"And the Saturday before."

Graham set down the serving fork. "I remember."

Caroline waited for him to make another promise. He did not, and Bennett returned to his potatoes with the look of someone who had established a fact.

As the dishes emptied, Caroline began to eat her own dinner. Once Graham began to ask Eli something while Maddie was already speaking to him. He stopped and let her finish. Once Eli reached for the wrong glass, saw Lucy watching and asked whether it was hers. She told him firmly that it was.

Caroline brought the pie in with Evelyn's help.

In the kitchen Maddie said, "Could he come back sometime? I've got a book he might like."

"We haven't finished today."

"I know. I meant another day."

"Let your father make the arrangements."

"Why?"

"Because there are other things to consider."

Maddie waited, but Caroline did not name them. She handed her the plates.

When Caroline returned to the dining room, Maddie was giving Eli the book.

"You can bring it back when you've finished," she said. "And if you go to Grandmother's, I'll bring a record for you to hear. She has a player."

"What is it?" he asked.

"Elvis. 'Suspicious Minds.' You think it's finished, then it starts coming back."

"So it doesn't end?"

"It ends. Just not when Bennett wants it to."

Caroline carried the empty dishes past them, listening to her daughter make another afternoon possible without asking her.

By the time they went outside, the afternoon had cooled. Lucy put on her sweater and then complained that it covered the collar of her dress. Evelyn said the collar would survive being remembered without being seen.

Graham brought the camera from the house.

"Before we lose the light."

They took a photograph on the porch each Thanksgiving. Caroline sent prints to relatives at Christmas. Last year's was still in her mother's sitting room, Lucy leaning forward so that she would not disappear behind Bennett.

Caroline turned toward the place where they usually stood. For a moment she saw the photograph she had expected the afternoon before, before Graham had come home, before there had been a seventh card. She wanted that familiar group, just once, without having to decide what to say when she put the print in an envelope.

Eli stood near the steps, outside the small rearrangement of chairs and people.

"I could take it," he said.

"Yes, thank you." The answer came from her too quickly.

Graham kept hold of the camera.

"There's a timer. I can set it over here."

He indicated the railing. Caroline knew it worked. They had used it the year before. Evelyn drew Bennett nearer to her, leaving a place on his other side.

"Let's have this one first," Caroline said.

Her husband looked at her. She looked back, and did not withdraw the request.

He could have set the camera down. Instead he put it into Eli's hands.

"It's this button," he said.

"I see."

Graham showed him how to wind the film. Then he went to his place beside Caroline. His sleeve touched hers. She moved Lucy a little to the left.

"Can you see everyone?" Graham asked.

"Yes."

There was time to hear a car turn into the next street. Caroline held her smile. Eli lifted the camera.

After the shutter clicked, Lucy asked whether she had blinked.

"Take another," Caroline said.

Eli lowered the camera to wind it. Graham had moved half a step forward. Evelyn touched his sleeve.

"Now?" she asked, looking toward Eli.

"One more," Graham said, and stood back beside Caroline.

Evelyn let go of his sleeve. She did not look toward the camera until Eli raised it.

Eli took the second photograph and came up the steps to return the camera. Graham accepted it without looking at the counter.

"Now we'll use the timer," he said. "Come and stand with us."

"No, thank you."

Graham looked at him.

"You should be in it."

"It's all right." Eli reached for the jacket Caroline had laid over the chair. "I'd like to go back now."

She wanted to say they had only meant to take the usual one first. The words would not come out differently enough from what she had already said.

Evelyn came to the steps with him.

"Will you have lunch with me tomorrow?"

"I have some schoolwork to finish in the morning."

"After that, then. I won't eat at eleven merely to prevent you."

He looked at her. "I'd like to."

"I'm free after eleven," Graham said. "I can collect you at Mrs. Alden's."

Eli nodded, but kept his attention on Evelyn while she told him where she lived. Caroline could hear how carefully the older woman was keeping the invitation small.

Lucy brought a wrapped piece of pie from the kitchen. Caroline had not told her to save one.

"For Mrs. Alden," Lucy said. "Unless she doesn't like it."

"Then I'll eat it."

"You can tell me."

"I will."

He thanked Evelyn for the pie and Caroline for dinner. He thanked her with the careful politeness he had used when he

arrived. She had hoped for something warmer, though she had given him no reason for it.

Lucy fetched the penciled card from the table and gave it to him with the pie. Graham opened the car door for him, and Caroline watched them leave. Inside, Eli's plate was still beside the place where his card had stood.

* * *

Ruth had not come home. Eli let himself in and took the pie to the kitchen. He found a plate, put the wrapped piece on it, and set it where she would see it.

Graham had asked in the car whether he still wanted to go tomorrow.

"Yes," Eli had said. "I would like to see your mother."

The rest of the drive had been quiet. At the door Graham had said he would telephone after eleven, and Eli had agreed.

Upstairs he put his satchel beside the bed. He took out his mother's photograph and looked at the space around her, at her mother's doorway behind the two of them. His mother had been looking at Graham when Sujin took it. She had trusted the man enough to forget the camera.

He laid it on the table. In his jacket pocket he found Lucy's place card. He set it beside the photograph, then moved it far enough away that neither covered the other.

Eli wanted to believe his father had wanted him in the picture. He could still see Graham handing him the camera.

He put Lucy's small turkey where he would see it when he woke.

The Years Between

(Chapter 4)

Friday, November 26, and Saturday, November 27

At breakfast Eli asked Ruth whether it would be difficult to move him to another host.

She stopped spreading marmalade.

"Have I done something?"

"No."

"Then you had better explain before I spend the morning trying to remember it."

"Somewhere farther from the island."

Ruth had known him since he was a boy struggling through the English stories his mother selected. She did not usually let him abandon a difficult sentence.

"What happened yesterday?"

"He was kind."

"Your father?"

Eli nodded.

"And his family?"

"They knew I was coming. There was a place for me."

He broke a corner from his toast. He had woken hungry and angry with himself for being hungry.

"They took a photograph," he said at last. "I took it."

"Ah."

He waited for her to tell him he had misunderstood.

"Did you want to be in it?" she asked.

"Not by then."

"This is your room until the end of your visit," Ruth said. "What happens at the Whitakers' doesn't alter that."

"I don't want to be troublesome."

"Then stop leaving books on the stairs."

He looked up. She was smiling, slightly.

"I moved them."

"After I found them with my foot."

He smiled back despite himself.

His room at Ruth's did not depend on Graham. He had known that before he went to Thanksgiving dinner, but he needed to hear her say it now.

"I would like to stay," he said.

"Good. Finish your toast."

He was working on his school report when Graham called at eleven twenty. Eli accepted the invitation to lunch at Evelyn's. On the drive to the island his father asked if he had slept.

"Yes."

"I didn't, much."

Eli looked at him. He had not imagined his father lying awake. He had imagined the house closing around the people who belonged there and resuming its usual conversation.

"I'm sorry about the photograph," Graham said.

"I offered to take it."

"And I put the camera in your hands. I stood there beside Caroline while you took both pictures."

Eli watched the houses passing the window.

"I wanted to see your mother today."

It was not the whole reason he had come, and Graham did not insist on the rest.

Evelyn served soup and another slice of her Thanksgiving pie. There was no place card, no announcement about him. When his answer about where he lived meant little to her, she admitted it. He described the steep way to his aunt's home and the shop where the proprietor still asked after his schoolwork although he had once broken her window with a ball.

"Did you pay for it?" Evelyn asked.

"My mother did. Then I paid my mother."

"A sensible arrangement."

"It lasted a long time."

Graham asked how old he had been. Eleven. Whether his aunt had lived with them. Yes, until she married; later she had moved back after her husband died. Eli answered because these were questions he could answer without defending anyone.

"What was he like when he was small?" he asked Evelyn.

"At nine he learned to whistle. We heard nothing else for a week."

"I practiced outside," Graham said.

"Under the kitchen window. Then he learned to do it with two fingers. I regretted complaining about the first kind."

Eli looked at his father. "Can you still?"

"Not at the table," Evelyn said.

Graham lowered the hand he had already begun to lift. Eli laughed, and his father grinned at him.

After lunch Graham proposed a drive. Eli had a report due for school.

"Could I work here for an hour instead?"

"Of course," Evelyn said, and gave him the spare room.

Through the open door Eli could hear the older woman's voice carrying up the stairs. Graham answered, and she laughed. The sounds reminded him of home so unexpectedly that he had to put down his pen. His mother and Sujin had seldom agreed about how loudly a person ought to speak inside a house. Usually they had conducted the argument at a volume that proved neither was listening.

Before leaving he asked whether Graham could come again on Saturday.

"Here?" his father asked.

"If it suits your mother."

"It suits me," Evelyn said. "You may ask me yourself."

"I'll collect you in the morning," Graham said.

There were things Eli had not asked at the restaurant. He wanted to ask them where his father would not be looking over his shoulder at another table.

* * *

That evening Ruth asked the operator for the Pusan call arranged before Eli left Korea. Sujin would be waiting at the church office on Saturday morning there. When his aunt answered, Ruth left them to talk.

He spoke in Korean, so quickly that she told him to slow down. Was he eating properly?

"Yes. I met him."

The line crackled. He repeated it, naming Graham.

His aunt was quiet long enough for him to ask if she was still there.

"I am here. Was he kind to you?"

"Yes."

"Thank God."

"He didn't know about me."

"Then I'm glad you went."

He wanted to tell her about the photograph, but she was too far away to sit beside him afterward.

Instead he told her about Lucy's instructions for the pie she had sent Ruth. Sujin laughed and asked if he had left any. He said he had been closely supervised.

Then she asked what Graham looked like now.

"Older than in the picture."

"We all are."

She told him she had begun taking in mending with a neighbor. They worked at his desk while the daylight was good.

"Where have you put my books?"

"On the shelf. I haven't thrown them out."

"I didn't think you had."

"You sounded as if I had. We have three coats to finish next week."

"Isn't that a lot?"

"I don't mind. A woman came back yesterday just to show me how well the sleeve fitted."

He could hear how pleased she was. He had imagined the room exactly as he had left it.

Eli turned the receiver in his hand. In January, while he and Sujin sorted his mother's papers, she had given him the photograph and the returned letter and told him whose name was on the envelope. He had been too hungry for the name to ask why he had not been allowed it before.

"When did you know he was my father?"

"Hana told me before you were born."

"You could have told me."

"She was your mother. She said she would tell you herself."

"But she didn't."

"No."

"What was she waiting for?"

His aunt did not answer at once.

"After the letter came back, she was afraid to begin again. They had said goodbye. She didn't know whether he would want her, or a child."

"She had years."

"Later she said that if she told you his name, you would want to find him."

"I did want to."

"She was afraid of that too."

"She could have asked me."

He could hear a door closing at the other end of the line.

"She kept saying she would tell you when you were older," Sujin said.

"You believed her?"

"At first."

"And after that?"

"Your mother was hard to argue with."

"I know. I lived with her."

Sujin said his name, then stopped.

"That was easier for you," he said. "Waiting for her."

"She was my sister."

"I was there too."

"I kept thinking I should speak to her again. I should have."

For a moment he wanted to put down the receiver. He imagined leaving her in that little church office with the answer she ought to have given him years before. Then he heard her breathing and remembered that she had walked there early so he could hear a familiar voice.

"I'm angry with her."

"I know."

"With you too."

"Eli, I am sorry."

He pressed the heel of his hand against his eye.

"I don't know what to do with it."

"Stay on the line a little longer."

Ruth helped them arrange another call for the Monday before Christmas. It would be Tuesday morning in Korea. Sujin promised to be at the church office.

Before saying goodbye he asked whether she had mended the brake on his bicycle. She said she had taken it to be done because she was tired of hearing him complain about it from the other side of the world.

He laughed. Then he cried after the call. He did not want his mother to have been wrong, and he did not want being angry with her to make him miss her more.

* * *

"Why didn't you write to her?"

Graham set down his cup. He had brought Eli to Evelyn's house on Saturday morning. Now father and son sat alone at her kitchen table. Eli had waited for this chance, but after the call with Sujin he was afraid of hearing another answer he could not change.

"When I left, we were saying goodbye," Graham said.

"Did you write afterward? Even once?"

"No."

The direct answer took away the argument Eli had been preparing. He had expected a list of unsuccessful attempts,

something he could compare to his mother's letter. There was only no.

"You knew where she lived. You could have found out."

"If I had written or gone back, perhaps I would have."

Eli stood and went to the sink.

"I used to think someone would come," he said.

He had not intended to tell this part.

Graham said nothing.

"There were Americans at church. Sometimes someone would come with Mrs. Alden, and I would watch to see if she introduced him to my mother. I thought they might have been sent to ask about us. Once I asked whether my father knew our new address. Mother said it would not be difficult to find her."

"Eli."

"I didn't even have a name to ask for. I thought whoever he was must know mine."

He could hear Graham moving behind him. He did not turn. If the man touched him now, he was afraid he would push the hand away.

Graham stopped at the other side of the table.

"I knew I had lost your mother," he said. "I didn't know I had a child."

"That is easier for you."

"Yes," Graham said at last.

Eli wanted the man to say something foolish enough that he could be angry without becoming ashamed of it.

"She was a good mother," Eli said.

"I haven't doubted that."

"I don't want everyone telling me what she should have done."

"I won't tell you that."

Eli came back to the table and sat down.

"Why did you say goodbye?"

"I was going home. She had her mother there, and Sujin, and her teaching. I didn't know what I could offer her except waiting."

"You were going to school."

"I'd applied to Duke, in Durham. I didn't know yet whether I'd get in. I was still in the Army."

"And she didn't want to wait."

"No. But I didn't ask her to, either."

Eli tried to imagine his mother being young enough not to know what she would do. In every memory he could reach, she was already his mother.

"After I came home, I told myself leaving her alone was what we had agreed," Graham said. "Then Duke accepted me. I went up to Durham to look for a room. I remember wanting a desk by the window."

Eli waited.

"I thought she'd laugh at me for being so particular. I'd worried for months that they wouldn't take me."

"You could have told her."

"I could. But then I thought I'd have to ask if she would see me again."

"Wouldn't you have wanted to?"

"Yes."

His father reached for his cup, then left it.

"But I wanted to get started. I had books to buy, things to arrange. Once classes began, there was always something I could say I had to do first."

His father stopped.

"What was she like when you were little?" Graham asked at last.

Eli looked at him. Eli had wanted Graham to ask that question. Now he could think only of how many things there were to tell.

He began with the shoes.

"My feet grew. I kept telling my mother there was something wrong with the shoes. She said they couldn't be shrinking every month."

Graham smiled a little. "Bennett did that."

Eli looked at him.

"I'm sorry," his father said. "I didn't mean to change the subject."

"No. It's all right."

And, unexpectedly, it was. He could imagine Bennett presenting a shoe as evidence that someone else had made a mistake.

"She used to take me back to the shop," Eli said. "I thought if she went with me they might believe us."

"Did they?"

"They sold us larger shoes."

Graham laughed, and Eli was pleased before he could decide whether he ought to be.

Evelyn returned carrying a bag of groceries. Eli helped her put them away. Over lunch she asked about his books. Graham stayed, and for a while Eli could answer him without speaking about his mother.

Afterward he brought down the schoolwork he had carried from Ruth's. His father rose from the table.

"Would you rather I left you to that?"

"You can stay. If you like. I don't want you to correct it."

"All right."

"Everyone here asks whether they may correct my English."

"I was going to ask whether you needed another chair for those books."

Eli laughed and moved them. Graham sat down with the newspaper. Once he read something aloud that he thought Eli would like, then apologized for interrupting. Eli asked him to finish it.

Before leaving, Graham invited him to help repair Bennett's bicycle on Tuesday afternoon.

"I may not be any help," Eli said.

"That has never kept me from trying."

Evelyn asked whether he would stay until Sunday evening. Eli telephoned Ruth to tell her where he would be. She asked him to bring home the book he had promised not to lose. When Graham left, Eli carried his books up to the spare room.

The Bicycle

(Chapter 5)

Sunday, November 28, to Tuesday, November 30

On Sunday after church, Caroline stayed to help with the Christmas parcels. A woman carrying a sleepy child asked whether a neighbor could be added to the list. Caroline brought her a chair and wrote down the address.

"She won't come herself," the woman said.

"Then I'm glad you came."

When the woman left, Maddie put on her coat.

"May I go to Grandmother's? Eli's still there."

"We'll talk at home."

"I told him I'd bring a record."

Caroline gathered the parcel list. The room was nearly empty, but she still glanced toward the door before answering.

"At home, Maddie."

Her daughter said nothing on the journey back. That silence was waiting for Caroline when she entered the kitchen.

"Now?" Maddie asked.

Bennett was at the table pulling the crust from a piece of bread. Caroline hung up her coat.

"Not this afternoon."

"Why?"

"We have to think about the family too. People will ask questions at school. All of you will have to answer them."

"He's our brother."

Bennett stopped pulling at the bread.

"I know what your father told you," Caroline said.

"Then what else do I have to think about?"

Caroline wanted to say that Maddie was too young to understand. But Maddie was waiting for an answer, and Caroline had none she wanted to give in front of Bennett.

"Telephone him. Tell him you can't come today."

Maddie went to the hall. Caroline could hear every word.

"I'm sorry. I can't come after all."

Then, more quietly, "No. I haven't changed my mind. Mother says I can't."

When she returned, she was holding the record against her chest.

"You could have said we had something to do," Caroline told her.

"Do we?"

Graham came in before Caroline answered. Maddie asked him whether she could take the record to her grandmother's.

"Of course."

"I told her no," Caroline said.

He stopped. Maddie went into the hall again, staying close enough to hear.

"I've asked you for time," Caroline said.

"And I'll give you time. But she wants to listen to music with him."

"People will talk."

"They might. I was frightened of that too. You saw what I did with the camera."

Bennett slid off his chair. Neither parent noticed him leave.

"He is my son," Graham said. "I'm trying to know him. I've asked him to help me repair Bennett's bicycle on Tuesday."

"Bennett has been waiting for you to do that for weeks."

"Yes. He has."

Caroline heard him admit it without defending himself. She wished she could explain her own fear as simply.

Maddie appeared in the doorway.

"I can be back by five."

Caroline looked at the record. A Sunday afternoon, a grandmother's house, a song her daughter wanted someone else to hear. That was all she was being asked to allow.

"By five," she said.

Maddie went to telephone Eli again. Caroline opened the parcel book, then shut it. The work she needed to do was not in there.

* * *

Bennett would not let Eli touch the bicycle.

He did not say so. He moved the wheel each time Eli reached to steady it, and when Graham asked for a rag, Bennett snatched one from the shelf before Eli could turn around.

On Tuesday afternoon, behind his grandmother Evelyn's house, Eli stood beside the bicycle Graham had finally promised to mend. Bennett had laid the tools in a careful row. Every time Eli approached, the boy shifted something out of reach.

Eli kept his hands in his pockets.

"Do you know what's wrong with it?" Bennett asked.

"Your father said the front wheel wobbles."

"I know that."

"Then we agree."

"A good start," Graham said.

Eli considered going inside to work on his school report. But he had accepted the invitation.

"Where do you want me?" he asked.

Graham pointed to the other end of the bicycle. "There, if you don't mind. It keeps tipping."

Eli crouched and held it steady.

"I said I could do that," Bennett muttered.

"You can help me with the wheel," Graham said.

Bennett read the shop's instructions aloud, raising his voice whenever his father tried the next step too soon. A streak of grease reached Graham's cuff.

"Your sleeve," Eli said.

Graham examined it. "That will be an interesting conversation."

"Mother told you to change," Bennett said.

"I thought this would take ten minutes."

"You always do."

Eli smiled before he could stop himself. Bennett saw it.

"He does," he insisted.

"I believe you."

Bennett had come to Evelyn's with Maddie on Sunday. He discovered why the record player would not work, plugged it in, and complained through the first song. Then he asked to hear it again. Eli had thought they were getting on.

Now Bennett read the next sentence and asked whether they needed to replace the piece his father was holding.

"Come look," Graham said.

The boy crouched beside him. Eli could see the resemblance everyone had been seeking in his own face. Both looked annoyed when they were merely thinking.

He watched too long. Bennett noticed and straightened.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you staring?"

Graham looked up. "Bennett."

"I was watching," Eli said.

"There's nothing to watch yet."

Eli let go of the bicycle.

"You can do it, then."

Eli stood.

"Do what?" Bennett asked.

"Everything."

"Eli, wait," Graham said.

"I am waiting. I've been waiting to be told where to put my hands."

"It's my bicycle," Bennett said.

"I hadn't forgotten."

Eli heard himself and disliked the sound. He was eighteen; Bennett was thirteen. Knowing that did not make the younger boy easier to bear.

Graham stood. "You don't have to snap at him."

For an instant Eli thought he was the one being corrected. Then he saw that Graham was looking at Bennett.

"I didn't ask him to come," Bennett said.

"I did."

"You ask him to everything."

"That's not true."

"You went to get him Friday and Saturday. You came here Sunday. You keep finding time now." Bennett looked down at the wheel. "We need you too."

"I know you do," Graham said.

"Then why does everything have to be about him?"

Eli reached for his case.

"It doesn't. I can go."

"I'm not asking you to," Graham said.

"I know who is."

Bennett looked away.

Eli wished immediately that he had not said it. The boy's anger had been easier to face than the embarrassed color spreading across his cheeks.

Graham took a breath and began more quietly.

"Bennett, I was supposed to repair this with you before Thanksgiving. I put it off before I'd even met Eli."

"You were working."

"Yes. I kept making you wait. We'll finish the bicycle, and we'll have some time together on Saturday, just you and me. You can choose what we do."

"You said that about fishing."

"Then we'll go fishing on Saturday. I'll put the rods in the car Friday night."

Eli lowered the case. He had nowhere he wanted to go.

"I'd like you to stay," Graham told him.

Eli set down the case.

"Tell me before you turn it," he said to Bennett.

Bennett bent over the instructions again.

They finished the repair with Bennett reading instructions and Eli steadying the bicycle. Once the wheel turned freely and no longer wobbled, Graham set it upright.

"I'd better try it."

"You're too big."

"I'm aware of that."

He went only a short distance, his knees rising at an angle that made Bennett put a hand over his mouth. Eli tried not to laugh until Graham turned and saw them. Then it was impossible.

"I believe it's repaired," Graham announced, dismounting with more care than he had used getting on.

"You nearly weren't," Bennett said.

He took the handlebars as soon as his father let go.

Inside, Evelyn had made sandwiches. Eli showed her the account of his school visit, then left the notebook open on the table.

"Would you like to go somewhere on Sunday?" Graham asked him. "We could drive along the island."

"Could we walk instead?" Eli asked. "On the beach."

"Sunday afternoon, then."

Bennett asked if he could have the last sandwich. Evelyn told him it was half a sandwich and he might divide it with Eli. He cut it unequally, examined the pieces, and passed Eli the larger one with the expression of a boy who did not want the matter discussed.

When Graham went to bring the car around, Bennett followed Eli onto the front steps.

"Do you really play baseball badly?"

"Yes."

"Some people say that so you'll think you're going to win."

"I say it so you'll stand farther away."

Bennett laughed. "We could throw a ball next time."

"All right," Eli said.

Bennett turned toward the house. "I'll get your notebook."

Eli stayed on the steps and waited for him.

The Other Half of the Tune

(Chapter 6)

Friday, December 3

On Friday Graham took Caroline to lunch. It was a promise he had made before Eli arrived, and when she sat down he put his appointment book away.

"How long have you got?" she asked.

"Long enough to eat with my wife."

She opened the menu. He noticed her blue dress. For a little while they spoke about Lucy's teacher and the cousin who always remembered old debts just before Christmas. Caroline laughed. She had missed being able to laugh with him without first discussing what was wrong.

Afterward he walked with her to the shops. She was waving to an acquaintance when he bent to kiss her.

"In the middle of the street?" she said.

"We're on the sidewalk."

He squeezed her hand before returning to his office. She watched him go, then turned toward the window she had meant to look in.

* * *

Back at home, by four o'clock Lucy had decided that being an angel in the children's Christmas singing was beneath her.

"They only stand," she told Caroline.

"You sing."

"So does everybody."

Caroline had the music on the piano and a pan in the oven. Bennett was outside cleaning the fishing rod he would take with Graham in the morning. Eli had come to return Maddie's book.

Lucy pushed her music toward him.

"Do you think this is too high?"

"For a table?"

"For me to sing."

"Oh." He looked at the page. "I would have to hear you."

Caroline sat down at the piano. "Then come and stand here, Lucy. Start where we did before."

The child drew breath with such determination that her first note startled all three of them. Eli looked at Caroline. She kept her eyes on the music.

"Less force," she said.

"You said they needed to hear."

"From the parish room. Not from Mount Pleasant."

Eli made a small sound. Lucy turned on him.

"What?"

"I think they heard."

"I don't like standing by myself," Lucy said.

"You won't be by yourself on the day."

"But I am now."

Eli moved beside her and held the page. His voice was quiet, but he stayed with her when she hurried and waited when she lost the words. At the end she looked pleased.

The oven needed checking. Caroline rose, and Eli stepped away as if the practice had ended.

"Can you play that much?" she asked him.

"The tune. Not all of what's printed."

"That's all she needs."

In the kitchen Caroline could hear Lucy slow down to follow the tune. Eli stopped to find a note, and the child waited instead of arguing.

"You found it," he told her.

"I knew where it was," Lucy said. "I was going too fast."

"Everyone has that difficulty in this house," Caroline said from the doorway.

Lucy looked from one to the other as they laughed.

Lucy fetched a box of Christmas decorations while they rested from the singing. She unwrapped a glass bird and held it up by its thin cord.

"Did you get presents like this when you were little?" she asked Caroline.

"My father gave me a music box one Christmas."

"Did it still work?"

"It was new, Lucy."

"I mean when you finished with it."

Eli laughed. Caroline took the bird before Lucy could swing it.

"I pulled the lid too far. I thought I'd broken it. Daddy sat beside me and showed me where to stop." She remembered his hand over hers, making her try again. "I was so afraid of spoiling it I hardly heard the music."

"What happened to it?" Eli asked.

"I don't know. We moved after he died. I haven't thought of it in years."

Lucy wanted to know whether they might buy one that played every Christmas song. Caroline said such a thing was called a record player, and the child went to find Maddie.

By the time Graham came home, his youngest daughter had sung her part twice without help and was refusing a third time on the grounds that she knew it. She took him to hear about Bennett's preparations, leaving Caroline and Eli beside the piano.

"You were patient with her," Caroline said.

"I wanted her to be patient with me."

"You could have let her think you knew the notes."

"She was going to find out."

He had not risen from the stool. Caroline set aside the Christmas music and opened the hymnbook beneath it.

"Do you read music, or learn by hearing?"

"A little of both. My mother could read it better than I can. Mrs. Alden let me practice when there was no one waiting."

"What do you like to play?"

He turned several pages and stopped at "Amazing Grace."

"We sang this at home."

"In English?"

"Sometimes. Not usually."

She looked at the familiar tune. "Will you play it?"

He began too slowly for her taste, with gaps while he found the next chord. He reached the end, stopped, and looked at the keys.

"You're waiting for me to say something," she said.

"You were leaning."

"Was I?"

"A little."

"I was going to suggest we try it more quickly."

He moved aside. She sat next to him on the stool and played the beginning at the pace she preferred. Her fingers knew it well enough that she could watch his expression.

"Too fast?"

"For me."

"You needn't play it all."

"I meant to sing."

She stopped, then laughed.

"I've been hurrying people through that for years."

"Perhaps they're used to you."

"Lucy certainly is."

They tried again. He sang the first line under his breath, and she let his voice set the pace. He did not sing as though anyone had asked him to perform. In the middle of a phrase he moved one finger toward the page, following something there. She waited. When he continued, she went with him.

At the end she kept her hands on the keys.

"Again?" he asked.

"Yes."

This time he found the lower notes while she played the melody. They collided once. She lifted the wrong hand, leaving him to sound a rather mournful chord alone, and he laughed before apologizing.

"Oh, don't," she said. "It was dreadful."

"I was going to say I thought it was me."

"It was both of us. Start there."

They began from the place she indicated. In the hall Graham stopped to listen, then went on without interrupting.

Eli knew another tune with very little in the left hand. He could not remember its name in English and was not certain it had one. He played part of it for her, stopped to correct himself, and began again. The melody returned to the same small phrase. She asked him to show her that part.

"It's only this," he said.

He played the phrase slowly. She tried it and looked up to find him openly pleased.

"There," he said. "Now you can do it."

"I'd like to hear you finish."

She moved to the armchair by the window. He began again, and she listened without helping.

When the music stopped, Eli remained at the piano.

"My mother used to ask for that one," he said. "When she was doing something else."

"Did it bother you that she wasn't sitting down to listen?"

"Sometimes. Then if I stopped, she'd ask me to go on."

"She was listening."

"Yes."

Graham came back to ask whether Eli wanted a ride to Ruth's. Eli had said he would be home for supper. Caroline had forgotten the time.

"Anne Foster is having people in on Tuesday," she said. "For the Christmas parcels. Nothing formal. Coffee, sorting things, writing names on labels. Would you like to come?"

Eli turned toward her.

"With us," she added.

"I can write labels."

"You needn't earn your coffee."

"I'd rather be doing something."

"Then you and I can do it together."

Graham would collect him after class and take him to the office before they went. Anne knew that Ruth was hosting a visitor from Korea. Caroline had told her nothing else.

At the door he thanked her for letting him play.

"You can play again," she said.

"I'd like to."

After they had gone, Caroline returned to the piano and tried the little phrase he had taught her. She had forgotten how it ended. She played as far as she knew. Next time he came, she would ask him to show her the rest.

* * *

At Ruth's that night, Eli took out a sheet of paper. Sujin would want to hear about the afternoon. He wrote the date, then began the greeting he had used at school whenever a letter was going home.

Mother,

He stopped with the pen still touching the paper.

Downstairs Ruth was moving dishes in the kitchen. He could hear the water running and the knock of a cup against the tap. His mother used to sing while she washed. She would lose the words and call to him to supply them. If he pretended not to hear, she made up worse ones until he answered.

He had wanted to tell her about Lucy. About the way Caroline had lifted the wrong hand from the piano and left him playing alone. He had laughed without thinking about whether he was allowed to be happy.

Now he had her name on a page and nowhere to send it.

He put the pen down. For a moment he pressed both hands flat against the desk, waiting for the pain to pass as though it were something he could outlast. Then his face crumpled. He bent over the letter.

When Ruth knocked, he tried to clear his throat before answering.

"Come in."

She saw the paper. He did not have to explain it.

"I had a good day," he said. It came out like a complaint.

Ruth drew the spare chair beside his.

"Tell me."

He told her about the music. She laughed at the part about the wrong hand, and he laughed too, wiping his face with his sleeve. Ruth passed him a handkerchief without interrupting.

He did not cross out the greeting. Beneath it he wrote one sentence about Lucy. In the morning he would begin another letter to his aunt.

Tonight he wanted his mother to have this one.

Beside Him

(Chapter 7)

Sunday, December 5

On Sunday, Eli and Graham walked down to the beach. Graham kept stopping to wait, although Eli was not falling behind.

On the beach there was room for them to walk abreast, but his father seemed to believe he should choose the direction and then make certain Eli agreed with it. After the third pause, Eli asked if they were trying to reach somewhere before it closed.

"No," Graham said.

"Then you can walk here."

He pointed beside him. His father came back two steps, and they went on together.

Eli wanted an hour with his father in which neither of them had to be a host or a guest. The wind lifted his hair from his forehead. On the wet sand their footprints filled slowly with water.

They walked with the water beside them and the angular lighthouse behind. His father had been fishing with Bennett on Saturday, as promised. They had brought home nothing and stopped on the way back for something to eat. Bennett had considered this a satisfactory division of the day.

"He wanted to clean the rod again when we got home," Graham said. "I think he enjoyed preparing for it more than doing it."

"Did you?"

"I enjoyed sitting beside him without being asked to repair anything."

"Perhaps he did too."

Graham smiled. "Possibly."

"Mrs. Alden says Mrs. Foster will make me take home more food than I can eat on Tuesday."

"She will," Graham said. "Leave room."

Eli told him about playing the hymn with Caroline, and about the other tune his mother used to ask for.

"Did she sing?" Graham asked.

"Only if she thought I wasn't listening."

"Then she hadn't changed."

Graham looked down the beach.

"I'd like to hear her voice," he said.

Eli walked beside him. He had been about to say that he would show Caroline the rest of the tune. He waited until he could say it without his voice breaking.

At last Graham said, "What happens when you go home?"

The change surprised him. "With school?"

"With anything you want to tell me."

He would finish the year. There were examinations, and he was behind in work that did not concern English. One teacher had agreed to send assignments through Sujin. Afterward he wanted to train to teach, if he could manage it. He had not said that to many people.

"Like your mother?"

"Not because of her."

Graham waited.

"Not only because of her," Eli corrected himself.

"What would you teach?"

"English, perhaps. I'd like to be better at it first."

"You could study here," Graham said. "I could ask about colleges."

"I want to finish school in Pusan first."

"I meant afterward."

"Don't ask anyone yet."

Graham stopped turning a shell with the toe of his shoe. "All right."

They walked on. Eli had not meant to rebuff him. He wanted to know his father, but he also wanted to recognize the life he would return to.

"There's a boy I help with English," he said. "Min-su. He comes to our house after school."

"Is he a good student?"

"He asks questions I can't answer."

"That sounds like a good student."

Eli grinned. "Once I explained the same thing three times, louder each time. He asked whether English people shouted all the time."

Graham laughed.

"Did you find another way?"

"I drew it. Badly. He understood anyway."

"Then you must be a good teacher."

"For that lesson. I promised we'd begin again in February. I'm collecting things to take back for him."

He told Graham about the boy's determination to use every new word immediately, whether or not it fitted. His father listened. When they turned toward Evelyn's lane, Eli was still talking.

"And were you a good student?" Eli asked.

"I understood things quickly. It took longer to learn to work."

"What made you?"

"Men who worked harder and understood more."

"That must have been unpleasant."

"It was."

Eli grinned. His father grinned back.

* * *

At Evelyn's, Bennett was waiting with a ball and an expression intended to suggest that he had not been waiting.

Eli missed the third throw. The ball rolled under the shed, where Bennett retrieved it with a stick.

"I told you," Eli said.

"You moved the wrong way."

"I know that now."

Bennett shortened the distance without announcing it. Eli caught the next throw, and Graham applauded from the steps.

Caroline came down the lane with Lucy, carrying something wrapped in a cloth for supper. Maddie followed, complaining that Bennett had told her there was nothing left to eat at home.

"I said there wasn't anything you wanted," he answered.

"That is not the same thing."

"It usually is."

Evelyn called them inside before the argument could become interesting.

They crowded around her table. Eli sat beside Lucy, who asked whether he would help her practice again. Caroline said Tuesday was already spoken for but they could find another afternoon. She said it as though his returning were an ordinary arrangement she could expect to make.

Bennett asked Maddie what she wanted for Christmas. When she answered, he announced that it cost more money than he had and he would get her nothing because she had laughed at him for catching no fish.

"Then why did you ask?" Maddie said.

"Bennett," Caroline said. "Tell her what you can spend."

"She was laughing at me."

"You'll need to decide what you can afford," Caroline told Bennett. "And Maddie can decide whether she wants it."

"I can decide without him insulting me," Maddie said.

"I haven't started," Bennett answered.

Evelyn set the bread between them. "Save something for Christmas morning."

Bennett gave an amount. Maddie considered it, then named something smaller. Eli listened while they disputed whether she could change her mind before he went shopping. At home he and Sujin had made no plans for presents that year. He had been afraid to begin Christmas without his mother. Here it was beginning around him before he had agreed to it. He wanted to know whether they would sit like this on Christmas Eve. He did not ask.

After supper Lucy sang the first part of her song without accompaniment. She remembered where to breathe. Eli caught Caroline's eye across the room, and they shared a brief satisfaction before the child demanded an opinion.

When Graham took him back to Ruth's, Eli told him Thursday afternoon was free. His father did not propose a destination.

"Let's leave it open," Eli said. "We can decide then."

Graham said he would keep the afternoon. At Ruth's, Eli opened the notebook in which he had begun collecting lessons for Min-su. He added a drawing of Bennett's ball and a few instructions. On a clean page he wrote the date of Christmas Day. Beneath it he left a space. He wanted to be at his father's house that morning, but he could not bring himself to ask.

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