

## *Bees for Honey*

THE McDONOUGH PLACE WAS RIGHT ACROSS THE ROAD FROM ours. A circle of green fields spread out around the two houses like an apron, the road a gray ribbon running east into town and west to the coast. The horizon, where the blurry edge of a field or a line of trees met the sky, was unimaginably far. The traffic on our road whispered to me of places whose names I knew from green interstate on-ramp signs, but at nine I had no interest in listening. A few years later, a new freeway link would be built between the interstate and the coast highway, cutting in half the drive to the fishing towns and beach resorts. It would leave us the schoolbus and tractors and pickups, and take away my sense of home as a place of any significance or self-sufficiency.

I was not the child of farmers. We had a small strawberry crop so my father, a dentist, had something to talk about with his patients. Our fields were leased to produce companies, and although from the road our property looked as immense as the

McDonoughs', it ended at the scraggly cypress windbreak for my mother's rose beds. The McDonoughs' land extended behind their house as far as the river, a mile south, and at least a mile on either side. Mr. McDonough and his two sons, Kevin and Joey, farmed and raised bees. At school, I'd heard Kevin McDonough brag about his father's ranch in terms of acres of lettuce, rows of artichokes, and tens of thousands of bees.

Merrill McDonough was my age but in second grade, where her mussed blond head stuck up a neck higher than the heads of the seven-year-olds in a circle on the carpet for story time. She walked on the balls of her feet and wore gauzy dresses whose sashes and bows made her look like she was on her way to a birthday party. I'd heard my mother say, Really, what could you expect?: Merrill's mother bought her the dresses but never told her they were wrong for everyday. And Merrill herself, how could she know what was appropriate? At recess, the meaner boys would circle around her, making buzzing noises. Merrill always smiled when she saw me coming, and the hand she held out to mine was often sticky with honey.

Warm weekends, my mother sat outside reading a magazine, her face protected by a yellow cotton hat; my father worked, voices from radio talk shows calling from his office's open door. When the driveway got too hot for bare feet, Merrill and I made a shade fort of blankets draped over my mother's patio furniture, accessible only by belly-crawl. Enough sun came through the fabric to fleck our tented world, but it was mostly shadowy and cool. I'd long ago given up blocks at school, but with Merrill I would use my old wooden ones to make walls and furniture for our tent. Merrill sat with her doll, combing out her hair with a twig. When our faces were flushed and moist under the blanket and we were thirsty for fresh air, we'd stand up at the same time and shriek with glee as our privacy collapsed around us.

One afternoon as I built a precariously balanced pyramid of the smooth blond blocks, Merrill stopped combing to watch, put her doll down, and reached for the crowning block and set it down again on the top of the pyramid, gently, with a smile, and turned back to her doll. There was no reason to speak.

THE McDONOUGH HOUSE AND OURS WERE TWINS, SQUAT, one-story ranch-style houses built by two brothers back in the fifties. The yellow house with its small windows set high had always been the first thing I saw in the morning when I raised my window shades. Sometimes, late at night, I woke to the sound of a pickup pulling up, braking, turning off. Kneeling on my bed, I inched the shade aside to watch Mr. McDonough hop down from the cab, slam the door, and when after a minute the light in their kitchen window went on, I watched as he stood at the stove reheating dinner and then ate standing: ducking his head, forking up food. I imagined bacon and eggs, hamburger and chopped onions and tomato sauce, grilled cheese sandwiches, the private clatter of heavy black saucepans, always careful to keep my face out of the sliver between shade and window. When he turned to put the dishes in the sink, I let go of the shade and felt the pulse at the side of my neck as I imagined him seeing the shade sway, wondering why. He was big and his heavy hands were caked with dirt and he had a gruff, low voice that hoarsened when he yelled at Joey once for climbing on an idling backhoe. I spied on aching knees until he left the kitchen as opaque and dark as the rest of their house. When I walked out our front door in the morning, Mr. McDonough and his truck would already have left for the fields, and the kitchen window would be blank and benign.

The first of the artichokes were ready in October. The picking started at the far end of the fields, so Merrill and I

stayed close to the road while we waited for the school bus. The chokes themselves grew at the base of the plant, little knobs that sprung out, too pliable to break easily when young. Ripe, the bulb snapped cleanly from its stalk, outside leaves tightly bound and tipped with small sharp points. On cold mornings when fog lay low along the ground, we picked artichokes and held them in our sweaters like dolls. Other times, we pulled off the outside leaves with fast, downward tugs as a bitter, musty smell escaped. We gripped and yanked the wrinkled leaves in a race to reach the fuzzy choke. Uncooked, it was moist and soft, inseparable from the heart below, as yellow as the discarded inner leaves at our feet. Holding the stalks like handles, we brought the fragrant chokes to our noses as if they were powder puffs. The artichokes were planted in lines so straight my eyes flicked from one to the next as if they were fence slats when I rode by in a car or bus, but here in the field, it seemed Merrill and I were at the center of an endless spiral as we bent and pulled and snapped and tossed. Skipping among the artichokes took us across and between precise and intentional rows, but I felt surrounded by random splendor.

I'D RECENTLY STARTED RIDING MY BIKE TO SCHOOL, AND WAS circling the playground before riding home when I saw girls from my class gathered by the bus stop. I heard laughter and felt lifted by possibilities. Lisa had spoken to me that day in library hour, and she'd let me have *The Borrowers* that she'd just finished. "Be friendly," my mother always said. "Smile and be yourself and people will like you." Maybe it really was that simple.

As I got closer, I saw they made a tight knot whose center was Merrill. Belinda, leaning forward, her weight on one foot and hand on the other hip, was slowly lifting Merrill's hair from the back of her neck. She dropped it suddenly, as if she