

PROLOGUE

It was only June, but September was on the line with the clean socks and sheets. Beatrice was talking. And a decision had been made—of course. Beatrice thought she wasn't listening, but she was listening. She always listened.

She turned her head away from it, but there it was again. She could see it flapping at her out of the corner of her eye. That sly season of change. Damn! Why was it always sneaking up on her like this?

And then there was October. Of all months, she hated October. Oh yes, she knew all about those innocent, blue skies. Some people called them beautiful. But to her, that particular cold blue was the color of emptiness. The sham hue of a glass eye. The color of a cracked robin's egg that one finds abandoned upon the ground—useless—after all the hatchlings have flown or fallen from the nest.

At first, the sunny days of October do seem hopeful, all laughing and brilliant with the colors and the turning leaves. But then, swifter than you think, there falls a killing frost, and all the patient growth of summer is gone in an instant.

How merciless a season, she thought. How beguiling.

She turned her head again, until her eyes settled on something new. She forcibly ushered September and cold October, with its tin-can trail of losses, from her mind and slammed the door behind them. There!



A man remembers certain things. There are certain things a man remembers. Like the first girl he ever kissed. And the way it felt: the surprising soft feel of someone else's lips, and the warmth of the mouth's interior.

There are other firsts as well. He remembers the startling feel of a breast in his hand. And the first sight of his own baby boy. The shocking redness of bald flesh. Although where that boy is now, he can't seem to remember. Did he die?

He is distracted, becomes upset, agitated by this question. He gets up from his chair and sits down again promptly. He gets up again and struggles to get to the door. But some woman has come to lead him back to the chair almost immediately. As if he needed help!

She says, "We're not going out right now. It's time for your favorite show. Remember?"

He doesn't like this. He doesn't like this at all. But he seems to lack the means to resist. He makes it hard on her, though, by grunting stubbornly and leaning with all of his weight in the other direction. Until finally she forces him back down.

Now. What was he thinking of?



We are going on a trip. We meant to leave a long time ago, but never had the time. But we can't wait any longer. Even though the floor is dirty, the beds are unmade; there are dishes in the sink and a heap of laundry in the closet. And people harbor unfulfilled expectations of us that, alas, we must finally forsake. All these things will await our return—or not. It really doesn't matter. We go. We go. We must.



The place is embedded in a flat plain, a sea of grasses. As you spin, you see the low rounded hills in the distance.

It is safe here in the bosom of the country. There are quiet streets where you can still ride your bicycle, where an old acquaintance will raise a hand in passing and call out, "Hello!"

Shade trees knit above your head. And sky above that rises upward. With big clouds that sail.

There is a bank. And a café. And a church. And brick storefronts with proud keystones announcing the dates of their birth: 1897, 1902, 1912, 1888.

A lone hawk rides an updraft just out of town. And a cottonwood drops its tufted seeds into the river. A prairie dog frantically scratches up

a yellow cloud of earth with its stubby forepaws, pausing now and again to catch its breath, or to listen.

And a young man in a white T-shirt uses a broom to carefully sweep away the dust from the grillwork of his new truck. There is a sense of abiding in the set jaw of an old man who sits on his porch in the shade and chews a plug.

It is one hundred seven degrees out here.

