

Sixth Picture

Driving the Truck

I never showed this picture to anyone: the golden field, me with my head back laughing, my hands at the wheel of the truck. It took four or five pencils to do this: I started with Summer Green, Iron Gray, and Beach Sand. That was something, that Saturday night.

Izzy and the Old Man were going to the movie in town. "It's a romance," the Old Man said, waggling his eyebrows at me. "A waste of a good evening."

"You'll love it, John," Izzy said. "There are snacks in the refrigerator and in the cabinet. Snacks all over the place. You won't starve." She leaned out the door. "And there's a tin of that hard candy on my dresser."

Steven crossed his eyes. "They're so sour they curl your tongue."

"Not mine." I'd been eating them all summer; I couldn't get enough of them.

"That's because—" he began. I knew he was going to joke about my being sour.

But the Old Man came out the door. "I just saw the mess you left in the shed," he told Steven. "Straighten that place up. It's bad enough your room looks the way it does."

"What's this neatness kick?"

"Did you notice how neat Holly's things are?"

Without thinking, I put my hand up. "Don't ...," I began, but it came out almost as a breath. Neither one of them heard, or maybe they just weren't paying attention.

Steven unfolded himself from his chair so slowly, it seemed as if he weren't moving.

"Hang in there, Hollis Woods," Steven said as the Old Man stamped around the side of the house and started the car. "We're going to be out of here in five minutes."

"Where?" Already he was running around the side of the house to the shed.

I sat there listening as he threw things around for a few minutes, and then he was back. "I'm going to teach you to drive. Good thing they took the car instead of the truck." He dangled the keys in front of my nose. "Anyone who can keep her things disinfected can drive a truck."

"I don't think—" I began.

"Scared?"

"Never."

"All right, don't waste my valuable time arguing."

In back of the evergreens and the row of holly bushes was a flat field. The Old Man kept it mowed against snakes, rattlers that struck blind in the summer. "Don't worry," Steven said, sliding into the truck. "No one's been bitten for about a hundred years. Pop worries about everything."

Steven drove as if he'd been doing it all his life. He grinned across at me in the suicide seat. "Since I was about eight," he said, knowing what I was thinking. "I'm going to take the truck up the mountain one day."

He showed me the gears and the pedals, and then we switched seats. And so I drove in that field in the summer-evening light, Steven shouting directions as I lurched through the ruts, bucking, stalling, starting up again with gear-grinding noises.

"Aha, Hollis Woods," he yelled. "There's hope for you. I knew it!"

I pressed my foot down on the gas pedal a little harder. "Yahoo!" I yelled. "It's me, driving a pickup truck!"