Grammy’s house sits between Unkie’s and Mrs. Backus’. Unkie’s house smells like old sweaters and there’s nothing to eat there. Mrs. Backus always has date nut bread and cream cheese. Her husband keeled over before we got here. Mrs. Backus whispered the Act of Contrition in his ear.

I used to take the bus to school, but here I can walk in five minutes and come back to Grammy’s for lunch. My job is to find Grampy and tell him it’s time for lunch. Grampy doesn’t go far because he has bad lungs from smoking. I can hear him breathe all over the house, even at night. When we first got here, his breathing seemed so loud. Now I only notice when I don’t hear it.

“Grammy says come to lunch.”

He doesn’t say anything and he doesn’t come either.

Back to the lunch table, I sit with my sister Maryrose, my mother, my little brother Tommy and Grammy. Nobody is allowed to start until Grampy gets here and nobody knows when he’s coming. My sister Bette used to do this job, but since she had her tonsils out, she only eats buttered noodles and sleeps. If she ever gets better, she can have her job back.

And then his breathing comes closer. He sits down, and now we can eat.

School’s okay. I sit in the back because I am tall, but to see the homework assignments, I have to walk up the aisle and put my nose on the blackboard. Mary Ann Cloonan said it looked like I was smelling the chalk. Sister Magdelene called Mom and told her, “Take John to the eye doctor.”

After school, Mom makes me play cards with Bette. When I’m done with cards, Maryrose has to play checkers with her. Tommy is too little to play anything. Bette is only five. I am in the second grade and have my first Holy Communion in eight weeks. Grammy says the doctor didn’t sew up Bette’s neck right so she had to go under the knife again the next day. The TV is in her room, and Mom sleeps with her.

“Mom says to play cards with you.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, what? Rummy? Spit?” She doesn’t know how to play Spit, and I know it.

“Who taught you Spit?”

“Marty.”

“Will you teach me?”

“Not while you’re sick.”
Before she would have made me teach her. But she just gives up now. I don’t like her white moon face and the chips of skin hanging off her lips.

The phone rang just as I woke up the day after she was operated on. Grammy says she threw up blood. Bette told me it was black and red. Everybody but Grampy went to the hospital without eating breakfast. Uncle George came over and told me and Maryrose to go to school. As I ran down the front steps, I heard him shouting into the phone.

“What in hell are you doing to my niece?”

I shuffle and deal. We arrange our cards and put down our plays. The throw away pile gets so long it falls off the bed. I crawl around picking up all the cards and when I get up, Bette’s eyes are closed.

“Bette, are you asleep?”

“I don’t want to play anymore.”

“Okay.”

I spring off the bed and run lightly down the exact middle of the hall so no one can hear me running because running isn’t allowed. The stairs squeak out their song. I jam my hat on, flick my earflaps down, zip my coat, and wind my muffler twice around.

My Christmas Schwinn waits against the garage out back. The sun has already slid behind the mountain. I grab the handle bars, take three long strides and slam onto the seat. Cold air knifes into my chest and my spit makes a frozen patch in my muffler as I pump the pedals and start going fast. Rounding the corner to go down the hill, I bang my knee on a fence post. Cinders swirl up from the ruts as I bump along faster and faster. A tree branch rakes my cheek. I hear a car somewhere near Carroll, so I speed up. The car’s horn billows then fades away. Down the alley into the dim blue air, I fly.