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Shadow Bands

JEANNE SCHINTO

Mira stepped carefully: she was being studied. She walked with exaggerated precision into her parents' kitchen. As purposefully as a blind girl, confident, unblinking, she stared straight ahead as if at some privileged vision.

Behind her, the boy—a slim brown child: Charlie Nicely from the household next door—followed her every gesture with eyes that were huge and black and liquid, clouded with a far-off pain, one he only anticipated, maybe: a future pain. Cautiously he moved with the rigid gait of a wounded soldier, obedient hands down by his sides, dark fingers pointed. He moved as if he thought he might be in danger of knocking something over—or waking someone up—with a sudden, unexpected motion, one that might surprise even himself.

Actually, there was nothing or no one to disturb. Mira's parents were not home, and any objects of real value had been placed well out of reach of children. Not only that, but the noise of adults drunkenly shouting was coming through the wall of the row house next door. Not party sounds, not festive—anyway, this was mid-afternoon—but the sounds of desperation none too cleverly disguised, the kind that people make when they know that no one is listening to them.

In that house, identical to Mira's parents' except that it recently had *not* been made brand-new, Charlie lived with his mother and grandfather and several other family members and friends—and maybe some enemies as well. There were so many of them, in fact, that no one could accurately count them; none of their neighbors could, that is. As for the Nicelys themselves (they were sometimes called the "Nasty Nicelys"), probably they just didn't bother. There certainly wasn't any need for them to count for the purpose of setting a supper table, for example, because their table never was set. Not that they even had a table. And everyone on the block, rich or poor, black or white, hoped that the Nicelys soon would take themselves and their lack of table manners elsewhere. "White Trash," they were pronounced by their neighbors—except for Charlie. *Charlie Brown* was his full nickname, given to him by the man he called "Granddaddy," because the child had a black man for a father, one, incidentally, whom he'd never seen. Brad

Williams had been sent to jail for armed robbery six years ago, about the time of Charlie's birth. Since then, his mother'd had two more children—white—by Gary "Lurch" Shepherd: two more sons, Chubby (Gary, Jr.) and Day-Day (David), with permanently dirty faces and the blazing blue eyes of every Nicely, of the white ones, that is. And though some Nicelys eventually did leave—most notably (at least, most recently), Charlie's grandmother, Beverly Jean, who was born-again and living on a rocky farm outside Frostburg—some on the block were less hopeful than others about an imminent departure by the whole, extended Nicely clan; after all, the family, in one form or another, had been living in the rented house going on thirty-five years.

The kitchen of Mira's parents, who'd been living in the neighborhood just six months, was an enviable place: shining copper everywhere; the latest equipment, most of it unused. Mira's parents worked late into the evening, and usually already had eaten dinner with clients by the time they taxied home.

Mira's own suppers consisted mainly of sweets—calories that were adding to the young womanliness that had begun to envelop her. She ate in front of the flickering colors of the downstairs TV. She was lonely in her new school, a new city, in her new, uncongenial, "changing" neighborhood, and had taken to befriending Charlie expressly against her parents' wishes. They objected not only to the upbringing he was being given by the nearly toothless, twenty-year-old girl (his mother) he simply called "Vicky," but because Mira was more than twice his age.

For Mira's part, she knew she ought to look for friends among her peers; knew, too, that she should be looking down on the Nicelys. Ignore them and hope they'll go away, as everyone else on the block hoped. But she didn't. She loved to play lessons with Charlie. She spent most of her free time drilling him, teaching him things. She seemed to be preparing him for something; she didn't know what.

Mira pushed up her sleeves, revealing pink chubby arms, and took the greatest care in selecting for Charlie a piece of fruit from the bowl—his reward. "Want me to cut it up for you?" She held the apple in her palm for him to admire. In her other hand she held the knife. She began to use it even before Charlie had nodded.

"What did you have for supper last night?" Mira asked, handing him a slice. She was curious about everything that went on in his household. She asked him all kinds of questions, knowing it would be rude to ask them of someone other than Charlie.

"About a hunnert bowls of raisin bran," he replied. He had taken the fruit and begun to eat it without even looking at it. Mira surreptitiously

sniffed and examined any piece of food offered to her in a home other than her own.

"Did the cockroaches get in it this time?" she asked him playfully. But he answered matter-of-factly.

"Nope. They stayed in the 'frigerator."

"And how do you think they get into the refrigerator in the first place, Charlie?"

He hunched his small shoulders. "The big ones open the door for the little ones?"

"What's your favorite meal? If you could have just one thing to eat for the rest of your life, and it had to be that, what would you choose?"

"Penny cakes."

"Does Vicky make them for you?"

Charlie shook his head. "Nope. Detox does." Detox was Stanley Nicely, his grandfather's brother.

After he'd eaten a slice or two more, he started back toward the dining-room table, where the playing cards were spread out. He had been able to divide them into the red and the black without trouble, but could see no difference between the club and the spade, the heart and the diamond.

Mira sat down across from him and watched his eyes work. They were two deep, round pools reflecting her whenever he glanced up to catch a helpful signal. He seemed to be able to take in a lot without moving his head. Yet, somehow, his eyes were unseeing too; he must have taught himself not to notice certain things, the better not to. Mira's eyes looked as if they did not know enough to avert themselves from anything.

"Let's play War," Charlie suggested brightly after a while—somewhat craftily, too.

"No," Mira said in her teacherly way, although she would have enjoyed a game of War. "I think we should keep trying to separate the suits."

"Thass too hard," Charlie insisted quietly.

"Never say never, Charlie. You can do it. Just look at each card. See this one?" She made the card snap. "How the sides are sharp and pointed? That's the diamond. And this one?" She snapped another. "With the rounded parts and a point at the bottom? That's the heart. Maybe we'll draw them later."

He lowered his eyes to the cards again. His obedience amazed Mira: how could he always be so good? It also made her slightly uncomfortable. He set himself to whatever task she gave him, without a sigh or a grimace or making any other kind of face, as surely Mira herself would have.

She suspected that he'd slept in his clothes: they were the same ones he'd worn yesterday. That proved nothing, but Mira liked to think that it did. Besides, Pearl, a neighbor of them both—a black woman who worked as a nurse's aide at night—had remarked to Mira's father once, and Mira had overheard, that Charlie didn't even have a bed of his own. "He must sleep hung up by a nail in the corner, like an old raggedy coat," Pearl had said. And Mira had pictured him sleeping just that way until she had asked Charlie himself and he had told her that he slept with his granddaddy on the living-room couch.

Of all the Nicelys besides Charlie, it was Charlie's grandfather, Roy, whom Mira saw most frequently, as he walked jauntily down the sidewalk, whistling an unrecognizable tune. He delivered packages for the liquor store on the corner in pants too short and a jacket too thin, never in a hurry. Licking his lips and adjusting his false teeth with his tongue to make a ready smile, he winked at Mira whenever they passed. She knew that he was dirty—round circles of hair had been eaten out of his scalp by something. And once she had seen him urinating without breaking his stride. That was the same day he called out to her from his porch as she left her house: "*Voulez-vous couchez avec-moi ce soir?*" I bet you didn't know I knew French, did you?" He came wobbly-legged down his porch steps and followed her down the sidewalk. "I know French, German, Italian, too. I was in all those places in the Navy. Shot a German *woman*. She didn't die, though."

"Don't get friendly with *any* of them," Mira's parents gently had warned her. Still she had with Charlie, and made it a point to wave or nod whenever she passed by any of the others. Roy, Detox, and the third brother, Ernie—all three of them, skeletally thin with gaunt, red, wrinkled faces and blue eyes that looked seared, as if they had gotten too close a look at something—waved back, cordial enough, and so did Roy's many sons: Ricky, Mike, Steve, and Dirtball among them. And so did Lurch, who now lived in the house as well. But Mira never said anything more to them but "Hi," though if she were walking with her parents, she did not even say that, for invariably Roy (and any one of the others) conveniently would let a passing car catch his eye as their paths crossed.

"Don't you know a baseball diamond?" Mira urged Charlie, seeing that, though lucky guesses had helped him a little, he still had not been able to separate the cards correctly. "A heart-shaped box of candy?" Roughly she traced the symbols on the table while Charlie shrugged, looking smaller than usual; he was almost cowering. Then he collected himself and began to study the cards again, but in a way that let Mira know he was only pretending to try now.

"Okay, let's go outside in the garden and draw things," she sighed.

Charlie followed Mira with her sketch pads and coffee can full of colored pencils out into the bright sunny rectangle of her parents' back yard. In their house he moved so stiltedly—he was almost theatrically careful. In their garden he relaxed a little. They walked to the far end of the yard that had been planted in rows with vegetables, herbs, and flowers; they sat on the brick path with their backs against the garage that had been warmed by the sun.

Mira began to draw the window of the Nicelys' back bedroom on the second floor. It was broken and covered with the pages of a dirty magazine fastened with electrician's tape. She worked on this awhile, then decided she would draw both that window and the window of her own bedroom, the mirror image next door. The two houses met in a peaked roof. One half of it—the Nicelys'—stood unpainted, crumbling; and the broken window was prominent. Mira's parents' half was painted a soft blue-gray with a shade pulled down exactly one-quarter of the way and a houseplant on the windowsill.

Someday, Mira thought, she'd do a drawing of the view *from* her window *down* into the two back yards, one so different from the other. The Nicelys used their back yard as a parking lot and garbage dump. Three cars were squeezed into it, end to end. At the head of this line, up against their house, a two-man-tall pile of garbage teetered. They threw their garbage—mostly brown shopping bags full of beer cans and fast-food wrappers—out of the back bedroom window every night. A rat the size of a small dog had tunneled in and lived beneath the mound. Charlie had seen it and its burrowed cave. Mira hadn't, but both she and Charlie could smell the rodent from where they sat, on this side of the fence.

"Yuck," Mira said, holding her nose.

"Lurch say he's gonna kill it with a baseball bat upside the head," Charlie said proudly of the man he sometimes referred to as his "father." He spoke of Lurch's proposal as if he were imparting world-important knowledge.

"Well, I wish he'd hurry up and do it, then."

"Dirtball say it's dead already—that's why it smells so bad!"

"Well, is it? I thought you said you saw it."

"I did! . . . Or maybe it was his mother," he added more quietly, backing down.

"Maybe."

"I won't go back there no more," Charlie confided, "'cept walking on top of the cars."

"I don't blame you, but I bet Vicky doesn't like you making footprints on her car roof too much."

"She never sees me," he laughed somewhat nervously. The mention

of his mother must have made him nervous. He got up and walked among the rows of vegetables, foot in front of foot carefully placed along the pathways of straw, just as Mira had shown him.

"I do it when she's not home," Charlie added. He bent down to look at a cucumber seedling. Sometimes, Mira thought, he does things solely to please me, because he senses the right thing to do, and then he does it, like a teacher's pet, never mind his true feelings and what he really wants to do. She watched him walk among the rows as cautiously as if he thought the soil were paper-thin and a step too heavy might break right through it.

"You could have a garden in your backyard, Charlie, if you cleaned it up," Mira said.

"What about the cars?"

"They could park them out on the street, like everybody else on the block."

"You park your car in your garage."

Mira had no rejoinder to this. She just watched Charlie in silence. He kept silent, too, until he added, almost to himself: "If Vicky had a garden, she'd grow things jess to step on 'em."

Mira was stung by this remark delivered as unbitingly as if it had been a compliment. She felt the truth of it, and the astuteness of Charlie.

She worked long and hard on her drawing, into the evening. She enjoyed the filling in of detail on opposite sides of the picture. Her parents were still at work; then, since it was a Friday, they were going with another couple to a movie and then would get something to eat.

Charlie had gone home at once when Vicky had called him to come and eat what she'd brought him. From her side of the fence Mira had heard her say to Charlie and his two half-brothers: "And you'd better eat every fucken bite!" Vicky never even looked at Mira, ever. A tall, skinny, sallow-skinned girl with bruise-colored eyes, the missing teeth—not all of them simply fallen out, but some of them knocked out or broken off at the gumline—she grumbled and grimaced, looking down, when she and Mira passed on the sidewalk. Vicky's most frequent destination was the pay phone outside the liquor store. It was while Vicky was on the phone that Mira successfully, unobtrusively, had read the tattoo on her arm. The word she had chosen, scrawled so unprofessionally a child might have done it, was *LOVE* in the same bruise color of her eyes.

Once, late at night, Mira had overheard Vicky and Lurch talking in the Nicelys' backyard. It sounded as if Lurch was planning to leave Vicky, and she was trying to talk him out of it. She reminded him of his

sons. "I hope they die!" Lurch had retorted. "Well, I'd like to see how well you do out there in that big world all by yourself," Vicky had said. That seemed to end it, and Lurch evidently had stayed.

Now Vicky appeared to be pregnant again, and Mira wondered if it would be a girl this time. She didn't think Vicky would like a girl, but probably wouldn't let a little thing like the wrong-sexed child bother her much. Vicky seemed to sense an order to things, something beyond her control, and yet she was a part of it: she didn't fight it. Nothing to fight: she couldn't see it. Mira admired that in Vicky, despite everything else, including her treatment of Charlie. Mira, who felt she herself rightly belonged nowhere, even envied Vicky a little. All the Nicelys, except Charlie, truly belonged with each other.

Mira worked on her drawing until it was long past nine. She still wasn't finished when she heard noise and shouting on the street outside. It went on for quite a while, but she didn't get up to see what it was. She was used to disturbances made by the Nicelys. She half-expected Charlie to lift the mail slot in the front door—that was how he knocked—and ask to come in and tell her about it. But he didn't. And she didn't get up from the table to go look out the window until she saw the ambulance lights—red, silver, red, silver—racing around the room.

Police and police cars were everywhere, with lights and badges flashing. In the center of it all, a big black man was being bandaged, leaning up against a parked car like someone being frisked. Huge amounts of the whitest gauze were being wrapped around his middle. His head had already been wrapped in a turban of gauze by the ambulance attendants.

Several Nicelys were out on the sidewalk, shouting at the wounded man, making boxers' moves, but not getting up too close to him. Somewhere Roy had lost his false teeth, but still he was shouting the loudest: "I hope you die!" At this, the wounded man jerked up from the stretcher on which he had been laid and started to fight. The police restrained him, and they and the ambulance drivers eventually got him to lie back down.

Several police went into the Nicelys' house. From her window Mira could see that they all made sure to avoid a wide black pool on the sidewalk, just outside the Nicelys' gate: it glistened under the orange street lights. She watched from the window until the ambulance workers and all of the police were gone—and until it was finally, mysteriously, quiet next door. She waited a long time for Charlie to come over—to tell her what had happened. But his eyes never did appear in the rectangle of the mail slot, although several times she imagined she'd heard the squeak it made whenever he opened it.

She went to bed, and later on, heard her parents arrive home, coming in the back door from the garage. Mira didn't get up to say hello to them, or to say anything else; she pretended to be asleep. She wanted to keep wondering in the dark about the Nicelys. It wasn't the first time police had come to their door. Once, they came in the middle of the night to take Dirtball away for questioning. Mira heard them rumble up the stairs and bang on the back bedroom door, saying to him, "Be cool, now, man, be cool." The next day, no one seemed disturbed. They were all out on the front porch, as usual, drinking and laughing. Later, Dirtball returned—a big, pimply boy of nineteen with the expression on his face of a child who thinks he's outsmarted someone—telling stories. "And you know what they gave me to eat?" he asked no one in particular, swaggering in the Nicelys' dirt patch of a front yard. "A bologna sandwich! And I said to them, 'I don't eat no bologna sandwiches!'"

The Nicelys all had been so cheerful! If the same thing had happened to either of Mira's parents or to anyone they knew, they would have been somber and busy making phone calls for days. Mira fell in and out of sleep, wondering how the Nicelys' mood would be tomorrow. She felt strangely elated, almost happy, as if she had glimpsed something of rare privilege, a thing usually hidden, one of life's secrets, direct and real. Because she never had felt this way before, and because it was for such a peculiar reason, she decided it must be a feeling she would have more often as she got more grown up. She wondered if her parents would see that she was changed. So distant, murmuring in their cavernous bedroom down the hall—they were two tall strangers in her mind's eye tonight. They would never understand that she was actually happy to be living next door to the Nicelys.

The minute she awoke the next morning, she got dressed and tiptoed downstairs. She looked again at the sidewalk, and saw exactly what last night she had only supposed: that the black was not any black at all, but the bright red blood of a person. This excited her, made her feel special for living so close to such an event, such a family who would do such a thing.

She opened the door, stepped out into the brilliant sunshine falling at an angle across the porch, and stared at the splattered side of the parked car that the man had leaned up against while the ambulance workers had dressed him. The splashes of blood he had left behind were almost artistic, free and large, like a modern painter's marks. But the wide flat puddle of red on the sidewalk, where he must have lain before the ambulance arrived, just beyond the Nicelys' gate, was redder

than any paint Mira had seen on either a house or a canvas. She stared at it a long while, fascinated. When a young black man walked by and expressed to her wordlessly his own excitement and wonder at the stain—over the noise of his suitcase-sized box of blaring music—she felt proud, but knew enough to keep it inside: on her face she wore a look of ponderousness and worry.

Mothers from the projects had a different reaction, and Mira took it as a personal insult. With their laundry in wire shopping carts, and little children trailing behind them, they scuffed by with a first and then a second disgusted glance at the stain under their feet, but not a third one backwards. They did not stop. They were not fascinated or amused. And they did not look at Mira standing with her feet apart on her front porch. They kept walking, finally not seeing at all—urban professionals—as the wheels of their carts squealed under the weight of large households' dirty clothes.

Mira wondered after these women disapprovingly. How was it that they had come to have such a lack of simple curiosity? How was it that they deliberately chose not to see? She kept her eyes on the spot, as if it were her duty, feeling important, even enjoying herself. She still was keeping her vigil when Charlie Brown came out onto his porch.

He wore the same rumpled clothes he'd worn now for three days running. He had lint and pieces of dust caught in his matted hair. She saw that one of his eyes was blackened, and that he looked frightened and upset, but was trying not to. She was glad he chose to hide it; if he didn't, it would spoil things. She wasn't pleased with his reaction, but she also felt sorry for the boy.

"Charlie, what happened to you?" she asked gently.

"Walked into a post, wasn't looken," he said, carefully rehearsed, and even someone who didn't think they knew him would have said that he was lying. He was much more somber than she'd ever seen him before. That wouldn't be fun. She didn't like him lying to her, either, but she'd forgive him this once, under the circumstances.

"The pig won a car," he added to Mira's thoughtful silence—she was back looking at the blood.

"What pig, Charlie?" She was annoyed. Did he think she could read his mind?

"In the cartoon!" he said, his small voice straining.

"I don't watch cartoons, Charlie, you know that," she snapped. She had told him many times that most cartoons were dumb, and supposedly he had finally agreed with her.

"That's why I'm tellen you!" he shouted.

"Shhh!" she warned, pointing to his door and then to her parents'.

She was annoyed at the shouting and surprised at it, too.

"Then it went out," he added in a lower voice, nearly a mumble.

"What went out? The cartoon?"

He nodded at his torn sneakers, which had many knots in the laces.

"Is your electricity shut off again?" Mira sighed.

In reply Charlie just looked across at the row of town houses on the other side of the street, squinting into the yellow sun. And Mira thought of the Nicelys groping around in their dark house tonight. It was interesting when the electricity was shut off during a storm, but this was something inconvenient, not interesting at all. What could Mira do about it? Nothing. Why couldn't the Nicelys just pay their bill? They seemed to have enough money for beer and cigarettes every day, she thought self-righteously. She felt like an adult, having such an opinion. Adult-like, too, was her next idea: Poor Charlie—so what would they, she and he, do today?

"Less play lessons," Charlie said demandingly, giving his foot a little stamp. But Mira said no. He couldn't come inside when her parents were at home. They wouldn't even like it, really, if the two of them just talked together outside.

"No, let's go for a walk," she said, as if this were something they always did, although they never had before. But she'd learned long ago from her parents, indirectly, that if the tone of voice you used was confident enough, it made your idea seem that way, too. Besides, she also had this newfound importance. "Yes, we'll go for a walk. You go tell Vicky you're going somewhere with me."

"She's asleepen."

"Well, then, go tell your granddaddy."

"He's asleepen, too!"

"Well, then, come on!" And they took off together down the street.

He ran and ran in circles around her, then ran far ahead and circled back. Mira, plump, out of shape, struggled to keep up, and marvelled at Charlie's energy and strength. His upper body appeared to remain stationary, while his muscular little legs whirled beneath him. He never moved with such freedom in Mira's parents' house or yard. Nor in his own back yard or in sight of anyone in his household. She began to think she didn't know him very well after all. Even the familiar shirt he wore looked strange against this new landscape of the streets leading downtown. The shirt was red with a silver patch made of duct tape smack in the middle of the back of it, like a target, where Vicky had touched it with a cigarette. Mira kept her eye on that patch—the sun made it appear to flutter like a silver bird following him—as she struggled along, her lungs and chubby knees aching.

Passing the temperature and time on the bank sign, she shouted after him, hoping to make a number lesson out of it, but her words were lost: Charlie was too far ahead to understand them, and wouldn't come back to listen to her explain.

He tore in and out of stores, creating suspicion. She followed close behind, pulling up her socks on the run. In the drug store he slowed, surveying the items on the shelves, while she bought a package of cough drops—this, just to show the glowering store manager that they did have some legitimate business in the place. Then Charlie ran up and told her proudly, in a loud voice, and in front of the cashier and several other customers waiting sleepily behind them in the line, that the last time he and Vicky had been here, she'd taken a chocolate bar from the display and given it to him to eat. "And she didn't pay for it or nothin'!" he beamed and then ran out the door. Mira, reddening, paid for her purchase and hurried away after him, thinking that the actions of members of his household were very often not precise and praiseworthy at all, and shouldn't be considered that way; and Charlie should know that: he should be told. But the boy was already far ahead of her up the street.

She followed him into the city park and up the grassy hill. It was the place that she had come with her class not too long ago to view an eclipse of the sun. They had been made to put their backs to it and look at its image projected through a pinprick onto yet another piece of cardboard. Actually, it had only been an *annular* eclipse. Carefully she had been taught the distinction by Mr. Hammond, the bearded young science teacher, who smiled too much, who wanted too much for the students to like him, so they didn't. They did learn from him about penumbras, shadow bands, Baily's Beads, the corona—all in preparation for the viewing. But when the day finally came and they looked through their cardboard contraptions, they saw nothing even remotely spectacular. The skies had been overcast; then they'd further darkened, but otherwise . . . nothing. Mira was convinced that she would have seen *something* if she'd been allowed to look at the sun directly—at least she would have seen what there was to see of the sun that day: a large spot of glare in the bleak, gray sky, with furious clouds racing past it.

It was here on the grassy slope that Charlie finally rested. He threw himself down on the ground, and Mira sat, too; then she saw that they weren't alone.

Not far off was the couple she often noticed on her way to the school bus stop: a tall black man in an Army fatigue jacket and his girlfriend, who was white with red hair and always wore skirts that swept the

sidewalk. They were never not together, and to her it looked as if they were clearly in love. The dreaminess of their eyes was certainly something to behold. Neither would ever hurt the other, she felt sure. Would they? Sometimes, when she saw them walking, she had to look closely to make sure that their eyes were open. They held hands, and each led the other along. Probably they lived in the park; probably they were junkies, Mira thought; but she admired them and their togetherness anyway, at least from a distance.

"Who *was* that man at your house last night, Charlie?" she asked, watching the man in the fatigue jacket eat popcorn from a bag that the girl held out to him. They were sitting on a blanket with many household items lined up on it with them. He did look like the man who'd been hurt last night at the Nicelys'—but it couldn't be the same person, could it? "Who was it?" she asked again.

The boy shrugged. "I don't know." He wouldn't look at her.

Mira smirked. He really was a poor liar. "You do too know who it was, Charlie!"

"No I don't!" he said into her face.

She flinched, but persisted: "Wasn't it your father?"

"Lurch?" The boy was confused by her.

"No! Your real father!"

He was silent, chewing his lip, looking away from her again, and she saw that his unhappy mood had returned. After a while, though, she saw that a new, diverting thought had crossed his mind; he said with glee, "Lurch got him in the back with a machete!"

"Who? That guy last night? That's awful, Charlie! Is he going to be all right?"

"Vicky got a machete in the shoulder down in Virginia! She was on TV!" he bragged.

"For fighting? On the news? That's bad, Charlie. That's not good. And it's not good that she took that candy bar in the drug store, or that Detox threw a bottle through that car window, or that Dirtball. . . ."

In the middle of her speech Charlie got up and started running again, this time at a group of birds feeding on the grass.

"Charlie!" Mira got up and followed after him.

Four black crows big as cats flew into the trees caw-cawing, then folded their wings and glared down at them both, while Charlie flapped his arms, jumping up and down, futilely trying to touch the lowest tree limbs.

"Charlie!"

"What?"

"Don't do that!"

“Do what?”

“Scare the birds. They aren’t doing anything to you!”

In response Charlie ran and leapt at them some more, circling the wide base of the tree.

To show indifference—that is, to hide her hurt and anger—Mira turned her back on him and looked up at the sun, full-face, eyes open. She stared boldly at it as long as she could, then had to glance away with her eye sockets aching, tearing, and her vision spotty. She nearly lost her balance. When she recovered herself, she looked around for Charlie. He was over by the junkies, and so were two black girls about Mira’s age.

It looked as if the girls considered themselves to be very grown up, at least to Mira. What were they all talking about? Maybe the girls were asking the junkies for drugs. They were mildly overweight, like Mira, in their new spring dresses. They must have walked over from the projects. Maybe one of them had a baby at home. Maybe both of them did. Mira felt superior to them in many ways, but she also was intimidated by them.

“Charlie!” Mira called to the boy, who stood on the edge of the group’s blanket, listening to them. He ignored her, and took some popcorn from the bag held out to him. But Mira decided not to be afraid. She took the path—a dusty path; no one had meant a path to be here, but the grass had been worn by many lazy walkers over the years, and now there was a diagonal cut right through the heart of the park. She walked straight over to Charlie and the others in the group, but stayed on the path.

“Charlie, Vicky’s going to be mad when she wakes up and finds out that you’re gone. You better come home with me now.”

But the boy just kept eating the popcorn and listening to the man whose slowly worded sentence Mira had interrupted. Everyone else but Charlie was looking at her. Finally it was one of the black girls who spoke up: “Hey, white bitch, you leave this boy alone.” She had a gravelly voice and the whites of her eyes were not white at all, but yellow.

“You take care your own babies,” said the other black girl. The skin of her forehead was wrinkled and so was one of her forearms—burn marks.

Mira was indignant. “He’s not my baby!”

“Well, why you actin’ like you his momma, then?” the other one said, and they both moved closer to Mira, who was still standing firm on the path.

“I’m not.”

“You get outa here, bitch! Go on, go on home!” the burned girl said and picked something up off the path.

"Come on, Charlie," Mira said, frightened now, but still holding her ground. Then she saw the two girls moving, shifting directions, darting like disturbed shadows. She smelled the sweet, sharp odors of their skin. She couldn't see where Charlie was anymore. Then the burned girl's hand came up close to Mira's face as she threw some grit into Mira's eyes.

She cried out for Charlie, groping, but found only strange arms and hands that pushed and pulled her and scratched at her cheeks and pulled her hair. A blow to her stomach knocked her breath out, and she couldn't even speak. She heard them laughing as she tried to catch her breath, gasping like a drowning person. She knew she must look ridiculous. She kept sipping at the air, never getting enough. Finally, then, she could scream, but she still couldn't see. She screamed and screamed, fascinated at how good it felt to take such deep breaths, then let it all out again. She rubbed the last of the grit from her eyes, and saw that the junkies still dreamed, the girls were gone . . . and so was Charlie.

She limped home, ignoring the stares. She knew her lip was swollen and her shirt bloodied, but she didn't care. She wore these as an emblem of something.

From the head of her block she could see that her parents were busy out on the sidewalk. Her father held the garden hose and was directing it at the stain outside the Nicelys' gate. Her mother was using a stiff broom to push the water into the gutter. As Mira approached, she watched the water flow red, then pink, all along the gutter to the drain, and her stomach turned queasy. Her parents were so intent on their chore, grim-faced and officious, they didn't even notice her. But for now she sneaked up the steps of her porch, and caught sight of Charlie on his porch. He was crouched behind the wooden slats of the railing, watching her parents work. When he saw Mira, he stood and his black eyes flashed at her with hope. Mira hurried past.