JOSEPH SALING

Fireflies

1962.

Mary Ann, with autumn hair and eyes the rarest green. Mary Ann feeds the pigeons in the school court yard and prays at early mass with the nuns. Mary Ann teasing, running with my hat in her hand, throws it into a rose bush in front of the convent.

"Ouch! Stop that Jason! You're pulling my hair!"

Mary Ann rushes through the back door, bursting in on her family in the final stages of dinner. "I told Jason to come home with me. We've got play rehearsal and he was just going to wait at school.

It's too far to walk home and come back, I'm ready to say, but I don't need to.

"I told him he could eat with us. I knew you wouldn't care. He wasn't going to eat anything."

"Of course he can. Mary Ann, show Jason where the bathroom is so he can wash his hands. How's your father, Jason?"

"He's fine ma'am. I'm not any bother am I?"

"Of course not. Go wash."

Mary Ann's father is buried behind a veil of Cherry Blend while leafing through the pages of *Time.* "Missed your father at St. Vincent's meeting, Jason. Is he all right? Not sick is he? I haven't seen him at church recently, either."

"No sir." I'm looking at pork chops stuffed and baked, green peas with mushrooms, and home cooked apple-sauce. "He's busy. He's out of town a lot for art shows and seminars."

"And your aunt, Jason?" Mary Ann's mother asks, cutting pumpkin pie and putting it on the table. "I haven't got any more milk. Do you drink coffee?"

"No, ma'am. I'd like some water if you've got some."

Mary Ann's father laughs.

"We miss her at Wednesday bridge."

"She's busy too. She does Pop's paperwork and most of his scheduling. Pop says they both had more time before he got famous. Says he was happier then."

"Don't you believe it," Mary Ann's father says, putting down *Time* to look at *Life.* "He wouldn't change back for an instant."

"C'mon, Jason. Daddy, leave him alone. We've got to eat and get back."

On the way back to school, we stop beside a deserted barn, a remnant of the original farms from before they filled in the creeks, cleared the trees, and marked off streets where they could build houses on top of cornfields. We stop to count the stars.

"I like you, Jason. I like you a lot. And my folks like you. They don't like too many of my friends. But I'm glad they like you."

We kiss there beneath star number 893 and then race back towards school before the wind can catch us loitering and whisk us off to some court. *Guilty as charged, Your Honor. Loitering and kissing in the neighborhood of stars.*

A hint of strawberry sachet. Howard found them, bound in pink yarn beneath a pile of rayon slips. "They're love letters, aren't they?" he asks.

Chicago. New Orleans. San Francisco. Los Angeles, Atlanta. New York. "Where'd you get these?" I ask.

"From her middle drawer."

"What were you doing in Aunt Margaret's dresser?"

"Just looking."

"For What?"

"Just looking. That's all. They're love letters, aren't they?"

"I don't know. Put them back."

"They're from Pop aren't they, Jason? From when he goes away."

"You're not supposed to get in other people's things. That's like stealing."

"You think they're going to get married? You think we'll have to call Aunt Margaret Mom, or what? Let's read them."

"They can't get married, dummy. Aunt Margaret's still married."

"But I heard Pop say Uncle Will's as good as dead."

"But he's not dead. He's alive, and they're Catholic, and we're Catholic, and there's nothing anyone can do. Now put them back dammit."

A thin pencil line of orange defines the edge of the western sky, and above us stars blink into a chilly existence.

"Isn't it lovely?" Mary Ann asks.

"What?"

"The sky, stupid. Jason, how can you stand out here and not know what I'm talking about?"

"When I'm with you, Mary Ann, all I see is you."

"Don't." She wrinkles her nose without looking at me and keeps her eyes fixed on the stars. "You don't do it right. It doesn't sound the way it should when it comes from you."

Once a week I have dinner at Mary Ann's.

Jeannie, Mary Ann's younger sister, watches me as I stand beside the sink with a glass of water in my hand. She's a high school freshman with hair the color of dark cherries, full lips, and a mature figure that she presses against her partners when she dances. Hints of forbidden perfume and secretive "mmmms" against a partner's ear. She watches me and I become embarrassed and have to turn away before being exposed as a lecher right there in front of Mary Ann's family. I draw another glass of water. "She bathed in dew in the valley and walked…"

"Give me those you little creep." Steven, the ten year old brother, has found Jeannie's cache of love poems and begun reading them while standing in the doorway between the living room and kitchen. "Give me those!" Steven takes off and Jeannie chases him through the hall.

"Next week's a big one for you kids, isn't it?" Mary Ann's father, now in a constant cherry fog, says. He rises occasionally from the columns of *Time* to speak. "School play. First issue of the paper. I don't know how you kids do it. Science club. Seminars. Everything else and still study. I remember when I was in school . . ."

"Daddy, you can't remember that far back and you know it."

He puffs his pipe and pulls his ear then buries himself in the pages of the magazine. I say goodbye to Mary Ann's mother while Mary Ann kisses her father on the forehead, smiling when he rolls his eyes up to her and then back down at the article in front of him.

Pop's sketchbook filled with pages of Mom. Mom in the hollow of Old Man's Cave. Mom gazing across the Detroit River from Windsor. Mom, nude, reclining, eyes laughing, mouth pouting teasingly. A sheet draped over her shoulder, one breast triumphantly exposed like a painting by Gaugin. A virginal goddess in a waist high field of daisies. Diaphanous folds of cloth clinging to sculptured youth.

Maybe she posed. But Pop draws her even now. In the downtown library, there is a painting called "The Dance." In one corner, Mom sits at a window in which a backwards "CAFÉ" sign makes a half circle of light above her head. She stares toward the street and ignores the couples in the middle of the floor.

Sometimes, he doesn't know it. Once after staying

up all night to read a Bromfield novel, he painted a panorama called "The Farm." Aunt Margaret pointed it out. In every scene, she was there. Sometimes old, sometimes with red hair. But always the same woman in progressive frames of her life.

Flipping the pages, I linger over each charcoal drawing and pencil sketch. Mother before cancer destroyed her body. Mother as a lover. An artist's mistress. A mother a son seldom sees, and I can hear her laugh as Pop shows her the drawings. See her blush as she extracts a promise from him never to show them, to either destroy them or put them where they'll be safe, where the children will never see them. And I hear Pop's answering laugh, silenced now for more than four years, teasing her while running his fingers through her corn silk hair and whispering her name. *Sarah.*

I close the book. Visions of Mother mingle with memories, and the two don't always mesh. I return the sketches to their shelf, the book carefully put back beneath three rolled up posters. Emotions swirl inside me, a mixture of fear and anger. Arousal. I leave the garage studio on a cold Saturday afternoon, the first in November, and I watch the fireplace smoke curling above the chimney.

Aunt Margaret's turkey, cranberry relish, and stuffed celery with fancy cut radishes and corn custard. Asparagus and a lettuce wedge salad with Uncle Joe's sweet ranch dressing. Everyone on Margaret's side of the family except her father has come for Thanksgiving dinner. Grandpa refused to come.

The old man has hated Pop since Mom first introduced them twenty years ago. At Mom's funeral, the seventy-five year old veteran swung his heavy cane at his son-in-law and called him a soulless bastard. Everyone said it was grief and felt obliged to point out how well he had borne the strain. They led him away to an empty parlor where he sat – hands on his cane, chin on his hands – and stared at the wall.

Three weeks later, he came to the house with Grandma and Uncle Pete, Margaret's and Mom's youngest brother, to take Margaret home. But when she announced she was staying, he threw his cane across the room, narrowly missing Pop's head and knocking an ancient Japanese vase from the mantel. Then he stood and walked out unassisted, refusing help from his wife, who followed just ahead of Margaret. Pete stayed behind to apologize, but Pop, staring at the broken porcelain in front of the fireplace, silently waved him away with the cane he had picked up from the floor.

"Not one but two!" Grandpa was shouting in the foyer as Howard and I stood in the arch between the living room and hall and watched Grandma try to comfort him. "Damn it, woman, keep your hands to yourself. Satan has claimed two of my daughters and all you can do is brush lint from my coat."

Aunt Margaret stood facing him. "I don't understand you. I don't know what you can be thinking. Eugene and these boys…"

"Body and soul!" the old man shouted at her. "Body and soul. And you with a husband in a hospital full of loonies. If I stopped paying. . ."

"Daddy! Please! Stop it,"

"Come, Eva." He stomped from the house and planted himself in the back seat of Pete's car while his wife stood in the doorway and stared at their daughter. Grandma's eyes said she wanted to stay. They also said she wished Margaret would go with them. Then she left, followed by Pete, who got in the car and drove away. Before the car had left the driveway, Margaret was in the living room on her knees at the edge of the rug next to Pop, picking up the pieces.

After dinner, I take my cousin June out across the ravine toward the edge of the wood where we scare up a covey of quail. Howard, following, raises an imaginary gun to his shoulder. "Pow! Pow!"

"Get lost, you turd," I say.

"Where you taking her, Jason? To the cave?"

"I said get lost. Go on. Go back to the house."

"I don't have to. What's matter? Fraid someone's going to see you play kissy face?"

"Jason. We'd better get back," June says.

"June, wait. You damn little…damn…damn you. June! June, wait up."

"Mary Ann is really sick." Jeannie says pushing up close to me, and I feel her cheek move against mine as she lifts her lips up toward my ear. "She was really bad Christmas night." We're dancing in our socks in a gymnasium with red and green flood lights. "But the doctor says she'll live." She wrinkles her nose the same way Mary Ann does. But it isn't disgust. It's an invitation.

"She sounded OK when I called," I say. There's something forbidden about dancing with Jeannie while Mary Ann lies pale and waning on her bed.

"She's getting better. She was well enough to get mad at Mom when she wouldn't let her come."

She squeezes me impossibly close, and I know I should leave her, leave the dance and race through the snow to sit at Mary Ann's bedside and nurse her back

to health. But Jeannie is here, and it's warm in the gym. And there is the promise of a walk through the empty school halls after the next dance.

"Jesus! What are you doing?"

"Don't, Jason. Don't curse," Tina, my date for the night because Mary Ann said she was going to be busy, says.

The wind is driving the pellets of icy rain against our face, and the umbrellas are useless. Mud covers our ankles in the school parking lot while Tina, a ballerina, leaps over one puddle and then another.

"You're splashing mud all over us. Jesus! Watch out will you!"

"I asked you not to curse."

"Look at me. My legs look like a fucking hippopotamus."

"I'm not going another step until you apologize," Tina says stopping still 20 yards from the entrance to the gym."

"OK. I'm sorry. Now will you hurry up for chrissake? They can't start the game without me."

Tina stands in the mud and the cold and waits for an apology. "You are hateful," she shouts after me, her voice dying in the wind.

Inside, I take my place at the scorer's table and begin copying the names and numbers of players from both teams into the book and get set to keep track of who plays and who scores or fouls as the teams come to center of the floor. The gym is filled to capacity, but I can see Mary Ann sitting in the fifth row with Marty Williams on the opposite side of the court. During the half, while cheerleaders turn cartwheels, I watch Mary Ann and Marty climb down from their seats and make their way to the exit. At the doors, Marty turns and looks back at me then waves. It's too late to pretend I don't see them, so I wave back and take the coke the opponent's scorekeeper offers. Mary Ann doesn't look at me as they leave.

Outside after the game, the wind has calmed but the rain keeps coming down. Tina is waiting for me at the car. "I'm sorry," I say. "About before." But she sits silently the whole way home, staring out the window so she doesn't have to look at me. She doesn't want to go for pizza; doesn't wait for me to come around to open the car door when we get to her house; and walks ahead of me to the door where she tosses back a barely audible good night that is lost in the freezing rain as the door closes.

In March, Aunt Margaret goes with Pop to Baton

Rouge where he gives a seminar and from there to New Orleans. "Why don't we make it our honeymoon?" he asks one night before they go.

"I wish we could."

"We can."

In my mind, I see Uncle Willie. Master Sergeant Willard Spillwell. Ten years at St. Theresa's where I envision him seated on a hard bunk, staring at the walls of his tiny cell with bars on the door and a window too high to reach. One naked bulb hangs in the middle of the room over an unfinished worm riddled table. His beard never grows and always looks a week old. His worn army shirt is sweat soaked and stained black by blood. Cockroaches crawl around his feet while he sits stoically staring at the harsh stone wall and says nothing.

At times they say he is lucid enough to remark on the fresh flowers on his side table and smile at the nurse while he pauses on his daily walk to smell the roses outside his window. In the winter he builds snowmen or makes snow angels for other patients to see. But most of the time he is lost in a fog on top a hill in Korea or in the middle of a snow storm in a German forest. The faces of people he sees around him become the composite of two wars. Companies of muscled youth weave in and out of one another, and the names become mixed as Willie searches for patterns in an effort to predict. "For if one can predict," he tells a nurse one day, "one can survive."

Aunt Margaret visits him once a month. Drives the one hundred and fifty miles by herself to listen to him babble and then comes home to report what she has seen. "He doesn't remember me from one time to the next, Gene. He doesn't know who I am. Today he thought I was an Army nurse, and he told me about 'Peggy.' Told me how pretty she was. Told me this was going to be the last war."

She repeats her conversations to be free of them and then steps back into her role as woman of the house.

"You know we can't be married as long as Willie's still alive."

"He's never going to get well," Pop says.

"Don't, Gene, please."

"But hell, Margaret..."

"I know. Just be glad I can go with you. Please."

Aunt Margaret has moved into the sketch books. I haven't seen them, but I know she's there, just as long ago she moved into Mom's room and took her place in Pop's bed.

Mary Ann wears jade taffeta, long white gloves, and a corsage of six sweetheart roses. Her hair is done up in

a tight bun, and a string of jade hangs about her neck. "Moon River" comes from the lounge on the other side of the wall, and Mary Ann and Lois excuse themselves to go to the ladies room. "What a night," Jack says.

"Yeah," I say, closing the menu. "It's hot in here."

"So is Lois." He laughs. "How 'bout Mary Ann?"

"Just lay off."

"Striking out again? Listen, later tonight, I'll drive down Overbrook. With me and Lois in the front seat, the moon in the sky, she'll have to come across."

"You trying to end it for me or what?"

"Just doing you a favor."

"Well I don't need it. Just stick to the original plan."

"OK. You grow up and be a virgin. Not me, man."

We're sitting side by side on the swing in Mary Ann's front yard with the light from the porch pushing our shadows out across the lawn. It's been a little over a half hour since Jack dropped us off and drove away with Lois. "I've had fun tonight, Jason." Mary Ann says, holding my hand against the seat between us.

"Yeah. Me too."

"I suppose I ought to go in. Mother and Daddy are probably waiting to hear about my first prom."

"Mary Ann, I…"

"I wonder where they went."

"Who?"

"Lois and Jack."

"I don't know. Around the corner somewhere. I don't want to talk about them. I…"

"I wonder what they're doing."

"What do you think they're doing? You know what they're doing. Girls talk too. Just like guys."

"Did you ever…" she pauses. "You know. Did you…"

"What?"

"Do more than just kiss?"

"What?"

"You know. Have you ever…"

"No."

"Never?"

"Why do you want to ask such things?"

"I don't know. Kiss me so I can go in."

"Mary Ann. I want to tell you something first."

"Don't, Jason. Just kiss me."

"I think I love you."

"Don't spoil the evening. Please." She kisses me and then vanishes through her door, and I'm left alone with the yellow porch light pushing against my back. I sit there for another 10 minutes and then get up and walk

down to the corner where I stand under the street lamp and wait another 20 minutes for Jack to come back to pick me up.

"How'd it go?" Jack asks as I get in the car.

"All right."

Pop and Aunt Margaret spend the summer traveling, going from art shows to antique auctions, to college campuses where he lectures. Howard goes to summer camp and then to Uncle Joe's farm to spend the rest of the summer with June. I am left alone, working noons at Harry and Faith's Diner.

In the evenings, I sit on the back porch and watch fireflies climb through the dark in front of rows of honeysuckle and elderberry. I catch one and accidentally squeeze it, then watch as its moment of eternal phosphorescence dies.

From the porch, I also watch the stars and remember that what seems like infinite space is finitely bound by light, and that within the expanding shell of the universe all light is contained. A kind of eternal phosphorescence that would let us at any time, if we only knew the right direction, look on our own beginnings.

Mary Ann is dead. A plane crash in Colorado. Bodies burned beyond recognition.

Thirty eight bodies lay along the edge of the Rockies just outside Denver, and the one they said was her they put in a sealed casket and lifted it onto a plane coming east. Now they drop the metal box into a hole and throw in two shovelfuls of dirt as a premature darkness crawls across the sky.

Clouds well up to the west and the south and obscure what is left of day. They roll over themselves as they move constantly closer to us, closer to the hill where Mary Ann and I sat at the beginning of summer.

"This is nice," she said.

"Pop bought it for Mom. For an anniversary present. Mom always wanted land."

"It's peaceful here. That's what I like about it. Daddy keeps saying we're going to move to the country. But we never will. He's been on the police force too long."

"He could move to the country and still be on the force."

"Not Daddy. He'd want to farm."

"We don't farm. We've got the garden, but that's all. Pop says he's going to put in a pond and stock it with bass."

"That's nice. But Daddy couldn't do that. He'd have

to farm, and that would ruin it. He'd try to make it a business. But it wouldn't be like what you've got here. What are you laughing at?"

"You. I can't picture you milking cows."

The caretakers take over as the clouds move closer and the air gets darker. The wind stirs the trees. Dust swirls from the August dry creek beds, and the rain precedes itself. I can smell it. Distant lightning flashes and I can feel it. Shovelful after shovelful of dirt falls on the metal vault.

I have Pop's telegram in my pocket. "Impossible to leave but you know how I feel. Margaret arrives at 3:34 on Sunday. I love you, Jason."

Mary Ann's letter came the day after they brought her body home. "I couldn't explain it before I left…not sure I can now…define it as love but I can't. Saw snow the other day. Can you believe it? Snow in August…. you know it would be you…it's too early…it's easy for you…not the same…you know you get you want whereyouregoing…you…"

I feel as if I'm freefalling in space.

"I envy you your land," she wrote.

It's not my land. Aunt Margaret has the deed now. I only live here.

"I envy you your words. I had no idea you wanted to be a poet until you told me the other day."

I used to want to be a fireman on a train. No one knew that.

"Sometimes I think I want to be a nun. Sometimes a mathematician. Sometimes a man. I don't really know what I want. I do know I'm not ready to make the promises you want."

Nor am I, Mary Ann.

The air grows quickly chilled in the dark and the workmen hasten their pace. They race with the thunder rumbling in the south. Jeannie watches from the top of a hill.

On the same hill where Mary Ann and I sat, Jeannie watched me climb down into the dry creek bed to retrieve her locket. A birthday gift from her grandmother.

"Mary Ann's a real bitch sometimes," Jeannie said as I handed it back to her. "She's seventeen and thinks the whole world is hers. I hate her, Jason."

I lay back on the ground beside her and stared off distantly as if contemplating what she had just said.

"I really hate her," she went on. "She's not at all like