

DOYLE'S DINER

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Back in 1962, Providence, North Carolina, was no different than most of America's small towns. Main Street comprised a simple lineup that included a movie theater, barbershop, police station, and dime store. The Esso station could be found on the western end of the main drag, but at the eastern boundary of the town proper, where the line of commercial buildings gave way abruptly to the wide fields of the county's many tobacco farms, stood Doyle's Diner, a familiar gathering place of Providence's residents for several decades. Billy Doyle, the owner and cook, was the son of the man who'd built the diner back when Billy was still a baby crawling around the unfinished wooden floors of the two rooms his parents rented in a large boarding house that once stood where the movie theater was eventually built. For most of Billy's childhood, his mother was the diner's sole waitress.

No one on either side of Billy's family had ever attended college, so it was much to his parents' pride that while still in high school, Billy had been on track to attend the University of North Carolina on a basketball scholarship. At six feet, seven inches, he was the tallest boy in school—the tallest person, it was suspected, in all of Randolph County. In truth, Billy was not particularly interested in sports, but he and his family knew his height was a way to parlay his mediocre academic scores into a college offer. Just under a month after Billy's seventeenth birthday, on a frigid, rainy December night, Billy's parents left him studying at home in order to make the forty-minute drive to Winston-Salem, the nearest city, to do some Christmas shopping. Less than a mile from their home, their car hit a dark patch of ice and sailed into the trunk of a honey locust tree in the front yard of their nearest neighbor's house. Billy's parents were killed instantly. Billy abandoned his dream of college and took ownership of Doyle's Diner, where he presided over the grill for the next forty-six years in what he considered his filial duty and homage to his father's legacy.

In those early days, the people of Providence rallied around Billy. Many of the town's women volunteered to help out at the diner. By the time he was nineteen, however, Billy had figured out (in his mind, at least) all he needed to know to run the business and he made it clear he didn't want charity. Billy's first order of business was to hire a waitress and a dishwasher. For the latter,

he turned to one of his former basketball teammates, a burly kid named Delmar who was the first post-segregation black student to attend Randolph High School. Delmar lived a hardscrabble existence with his parents and four siblings on a small farm just outside town.

Much harder for Billy was his search for a full-time waitress, as there were few girls in Providence at that time who were not married and raising a family. One girl, though, did come by the diner when word got out that Billy was hiring. Her name was Virginia Denby. Like Delmar, Billy knew Virginia from school. She'd been in most of his classes and her father had been his English teacher. Mr. Denby had earned the reputation of being the hardest teacher at the school and gave Billy the only D he'd ever received. Billy hated Mr. Denby, so he viewed rejecting his daughter's request for a job as a chance for a small retribution against his former teacher. When Billy told Virginia he wouldn't hire her, she didn't argue or beg; she simply nodded and rose from the stool at the counter, picked up her pocketbook, and left. As Billy watched her walking away through the glass door of the diner, he noticed her shoulders hitch and saw her pull a handkerchief from her bag to wipe her eyes. The sight of Virginia crying because of his pettiness caught Billy off guard and occupied his thoughts for the rest of that day. The following morning, after a mostly sleepless night, Billy sent Delmar to the Denbys' house to tell Virginia that the waitressing job was hers if she still wanted it.

So Virginia came to the diner to wait tables, but within a year she was helping with the accounting and had taken over ordering supplies. In contrast to Billy, who was reserved and terse, Virginia was an outgoing girl, talkative and friendly. She wasn't what most people would have called beautiful—she was stout and had poor eyesight that forced her to wear thick-lensed glasses—but Billy thought her face was quite pretty. Months after she'd started at the diner, Billy would sometimes hear teenage boys sitting at the counter making fun of her appearance when she was out of earshot. This angered him, and he knew it was because, to his surprise, he'd fallen in love with her. And, he soon learned, she with him.

One sultry summer evening after locking up the diner, Billy said goodnight to Delmar and walked two blocks along Main before turning north onto Church Street. A trickle of sweat that Billy knew was from more than just the heat slid down his temple. He was on his way to the Denby house to ask Mr. Denby's permission to marry Virginia, who'd left work early to scout out her father's mood. She and Billy had prearranged a signal: Virginia

would turn on the porch light if she felt it was safe to proceed. If the light was out, it meant her father was in an ill temper and it would be best to wait for another day to approach him about their marrying.

Billy had changed into a clean white shirt before leaving the diner, but he could feel the dampness spreading under both arms as he turned the corner onto Gilbert Avenue, half a block from the Denby residence. In the trees above him, the trill of cicadas matched the rhythm of Billy's heartbeat. Although sunset was more than an hour away and the town was still bathed in the waning sunlight, the light glowing above the Denbys' porch was distinctly visible when Billy was two houses away.

Despite his trepidation, Billy did not hesitate when he reached the house. He took one long, deep breath and pressed the pearl-buttoned doorbell. Half a minute later, Billy looked down through the screen door at Mr. Denby, who, with a puzzled expression, peered over a pair of wire-rimmed reading glasses.

"Good evening, sir," Billy began. "Sorry to intrude, but I was hoping I could speak with you. It'll only take a few minutes."

Virginia's father looked up at the tall boy he'd nearly flunked several years before, and Billy noticed the tiniest narrowing of the man's eyes. After several moments, Mr. Denby pushed open the screen door and stepped back to let Billy enter. Mr. Denby led them to left of the foyer and into a room that was evidently the man's private study. The wall directly opposite the door was entirely composed of shelves overfilled with books; many of the volumes were packed in sideways above rows of others. A haze of cigarette smoke hovered near the ceiling. Mr. Denby made his way to a large upholstered chair, removed a newspaper, and indicated with a wave of his hand that Billy should sit. The older man then stepped behind a large desk and took a seat himself.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Doyle?" Denby said.

"It's about Virginia," Billy said, wiping a cool slick of perspiration from his palms on the legs of his trousers.

"Is she causing some kind of trouble at work?"

"No, sir. Nothing like that."

"I see then," Virginia's father said, the slightest hint of a smile rising on the corners of his mouth.

At that moment, Billy could see that Mr. Denby did indeed understand why he was there. And likely always had.

Billy proceeded to tell Mr. Denby how in love he and his daughter were and that Billy would be honored if Mr. Denby would allow them to marry. It was a nice, short speech, Billy thought, and he'd even managed to keep his voice mostly steady

during it. Virginia's father explained to Billy how he'd always hoped his daughter would settle down with a man of letters or a professional, such as a doctor or dentist. Yet, he conceded, Billy struck him as an honest, hardworking young man and seemed to be genuine in his profession of love for his daughter, who, Mr. Denby admitted, was not the most desirable girl in Providence. Billy started to dispute that assertion, but then decided against it, knowing the less he said the better.

So Virginia and Billy were married the following spring at the True Believers Baptist Church, two blocks from the bride's home. Billy's only family, an uncle who lived in Iowa, could not travel to North Carolina due to ongoing problems with gout. So the wedding was a Denby affair. The newlyweds honeymooned for three days in the mountains near Asheville, driving the two hours from Providence in Virginia's father's Pontiac. It was the first time since he'd taken ownership of the diner that Billy had closed it for more than a day. Upon returning to Providence, the couple moved into their new home (Billy's wedding gift to his bride): a two-story Craftsman-style house at the western edge of town, as far away as Billy was able to find from his in-laws' place. He'd used most of his savings for the down payment and secretly fretted about making the mortgage payments. But as long as business remained at its current level, Billy figured they would manage.

The following spring, on the same day that Billy and Virginia celebrated their first wedding anniversary, the state of North Carolina announced plans to begin construction on a stretch of interstate highway that would pass just south of Providence. It was rumored, and later confirmed, that an exit would be built for the town. This was welcome news, for it meant an increase in business for all the merchants in town, especially the diner and gas station. Billy secretly allowed himself to worry less about their finances. And two years later, when the new segment of I-40 opened, his hopes were realized. Doyle's Diner was busy all day long as cross-state travelers interrupted their journeys to rest and get a meal. Things were so good, in fact, that Billy and Virginia were forced to hire a part-time employee, the teenage daughter of the projectionist from the town's movie theater, to help Delmar and Billy in the kitchen or to assist Virginia during the busiest times. Billy often told Virginia that he worried all their good fortune would come crashing down around them one day, to which Virginia would shake her head and kiss his cheek.

"You are such a worrywart," she'd say.

"Why should we be so lucky when others have such a hard time?"

“It’s God’s will,” she’d always answer.

Then came the miscarriages. Billy did not hear any more from his wife about God’s will. Having children was the one topic the normally talkative Virginia never spoke about. Billy would sometimes walk into their bedroom to find his wife lying face down across the bed or sitting at her vanity, her cheeks damp from crying. At these times, he would back out of the room as quietly as possible and wait downstairs for her to appear. She would look at Billy, her eyes dry but still red, and give him a taut smile. He’d tried to reassure her that things weren’t so bad.

“We have so much to be thankful for. So much more than lots of people in town,” Billy said.

She’d look past him, nodding indifferently, saying yes, she knew that was true, but Billy knew she didn’t mean it.

The girl who worked on weekends, the projectionist’s daughter, was named Nancy. She was, certainly to Billy’s mind, an extraordinary beauty. She had soft waves of deep auburn hair that seemed to shift color when she turned her head, and bright hazel eyes that were difficult not to stare at (for men at least). Much to Billy’s chagrin, whenever Nancy worked at Doyle’s Diner, there were always men flirting with the girl or making passes at her. It was also common for a half dozen boys to be loitering on the stools, nursing bottles of Cheerwine and unsuccessfully trying to hide their furtive leers. Billy, who was only about five years older than most of these boys, felt protective of Nancy and would come out from the kitchen every so often to warn the boys to be gentlemen while in his establishment. Both the boys and Nancy would giggle when he did this. Virginia would smile at her husband and then turn to give the boys a quick wink to let them know Billy’s bark was infinitely worse than his bite.

After closing time on the weekends that Nancy worked, Billy would insist on walking her home. Her family lived just south of town in an isolated, rundown neighborhood that was situated behind the row of businesses on Main Street. Separating the movie theater and the five and dime was an alleyway that provided a shortcut to the cluster of streets where Nancy and her parents lived. On most nights when Billy would escort her home, they would walk in silence until turning into the alley where, the awkward silence becoming too much for her, Nancy would attempt to draw the taciturn fry cook into conversation.

“Have you ever met anyone taller than you?” Nancy asked one night.

“Not yet.”

Billy told Nancy that it wasn't always an advantage being so much taller than most people. Buying clothes that fit was difficult, especially shoes. He'd have to drive to Winston-Salem or even Greensboro if he needed anything.

"Well, there has got to be more pluses than minuses to being tall."

"At a parade, I guess," Billy said after a moment, feeling the need to say something in reply.

"You think I'm pretty, don't you?" she asked one night, catching Billy off guard during their walk to her house.

He said that he did and quickly added that everyone he knew did as well.

"Prettier than your wife?"

He looked down at her and her eyes held his. Billy felt his cheeks burn.

"A husband can never think there's anyone prettier than his wife," Billy said.

He was pleased with his response and hoped that would be the end of the conversation, but she reached over and slid her tiny hand inside his, squeezing lightly.

"Your secret's safe with me," she said before pulling her hand away.

Billy started to say something else, felt he should, but he just looked at her smiling at him and in that instant his silence betrayed his feelings.

When they reached Nancy's house that night, Billy stopped on the sidewalk to watch her until she disappeared through her front door, which was their routine. But this time, Nancy walked around in front of him and, standing on tiptoe, kissed him lightly on his lips before skipping along the walkway and up the front steps of the house. Then, just before pushing open the door, Nancy turned and gave a dramatic curtsy and waved. Despite the shock of the unexpected kiss, this caused Billy to smile.

A couple months later, on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, the weather turned unseasonably frigid and carried the rare threat of snow. The diner was busier than usual with flocks of people coming in to escape the cold. Billy bustled about the kitchen preparing orders. Behind him, Delmar whistled amid the clatter of the freshly rinsed dishes he was stacking next to the sink. From the dining area, Billy could hear the comforting din of dozens of conversations interspersed with Virginia's voice periodically shouting out orders. Every now and then, when Billy saw that Virginia wasn't looking, he'd peek out through the pass-through to watch Nancy clearing plates and refilling coffee cups, recalling

how soft her hand felt against his own rough palm. And how soft her lips felt when she'd surprised him with a kiss.

A group of five boys Billy had never seen before were crowded into one of the corner booths, smoking, laughing loudly, and horsing around. Several of the boys wore lettermen jackets from a high school in the adjoining county. Billy noticed whenever Nancy came near, they'd ask her to bring them a new straw or spoon or another order of fries or a refill of their Pepsi Colas. One of these boys, a tall boy with a thick neck and slicked hair, would try to pull her into the booth when she brought whatever they'd asked for. She would implore them to stop, warning them she'd get in trouble if they didn't, and pushing away from their grasps, but she remained smiling all the while. When she came into the kitchen to bring some dirty dishes to Delmar, Billy informed her that he was going to kick the boys out.

"They're just fooling around," Nancy said. "They don't mean any harm."

Billy told Nancy to just steer clear of them since it was getting late and they'd be closing soon. When the boys' final order of French fries was ready, Billy carried it over to their table himself.

"Here you go, fellas," Billy said. "Enjoy the fries. And, by the way... don't let me catch you in here ever again."

"Yeah? What're you gonna do about it?" the thick-necked boy asked.

"Do us all a favor and let's not find out, OK? Now eat up and get out of my diner."

After the diner closed and they were all cleaning up, Nancy went to clear the booth where the boys had been sitting and noticed that one of them had written "FUCK YOU DOYLE" on the tabletop with the squeeze bottle of ketchup. She wiped up the mess and never mentioned it to Billy.

A couple weeks later, on their walk from the diner to her house, Nancy and Billy didn't talk, both of them seemingly lost in their own thoughts. Several times Billy noticed Nancy looking up at him, appearing upset and on the verge of saying something, but then she'd look away. That evening Billy watched Nancy hurry inside the house with no more than a mumbled goodnight. She didn't curtsy or wave or look back, but Billy had waved even after she'd shut the door. Billy stood with his hands stuffed in his trouser pockets, watching the house for several minutes before heading back toward his own house and his waiting wife.

At five-thirty the following morning, as Billy and Virginia were preparing the diner for the Sunday breakfast crowd, there

was a loud knock on the diner's front door. Through the glass, Billy saw Walt Castle, one of Providence's three police officers. Billy noticed an unusually serious expression on the typically jovial policeman's face. Puffs of steam pulsed from Walt's nostrils in the frigid morning air. After Billy let him in and offered him a cup of coffee, Walt explained that Nancy's father had called the police station an hour earlier to report that Nancy was missing. She hadn't come home after work the previous night, the father had said, so Walt was starting his investigation at the last place she had been seen.

Billy explained how he'd walked Nancy home and watched her go into the house. When Walt asked if she'd seemed worried or troubled in any way, Billy thought about how quiet she had been and how she had rushed into the house without saying anything other than a muttered goodnight, but he answered that she seemed pretty normal to him. Walt wrote notes on a small pad with a stubby pencil.

"So you were the last person to see her alive," Walt said.

"She's dead?" Billy asked, an icy feeling seizing his gut.

"Poor choice of words. We don't know that. But you *were* the last person to see her, right?"

"I don't know. I suppose so."

"Oh, her poor parents," Virginia said, coming up beside Billy.

Walt nodded and wrote something else on his notepad. Billy wondered if he was writing "poor parents." Then the policeman asked if either Billy or Virginia could think of anything else that might help him find the missing girl. The DoYLES shook their heads in unison. Walt drained his coffee cup, thanked them and turned to leave. Just then, Billy remembered the rowdy group of boys in the corner booth. He told Walt about them, describing as many as he could remember, especially the boy with the slicked hair who'd grabbed Nancy. Virginia occasionally corrected some details. Billy indicated that they wore high school letterman jackets from the adjacent county and added that he thought they'd been drinking beer. When Walt finished his notes and left, Billy relocked the door behind him even though it was only fifteen minutes until the diner opened for business.

"Why did you say that? About those boys drinking?" Virginia asked when Walt was pulling away in his patrol car.

"Boys that age, it's very possible," he said. "Heck, even likely. You know that."

The truth was he wasn't sure why he'd said it, but even as Virginia headed back to the kitchen, Billy stood there, picturing Nancy curtsying and waving goodbye.

The Sunday after-church crowd was twice as large as usual; the whole town, it seemed, had gathered at Doyle's Diner to discuss the news of the missing girl, which had spread like a contagion. The prevailing theory was that she'd run off with a boy, but there were plenty who suspected foul play by the antisocial projectionist or his wife. Billy considered the latter just the nonsensical ranting of mean-spirited people and the former unlikely. As pretty as she was, Nancy never talked about boys, and she didn't have a steady boyfriend.

Walt Castle dropped by the diner twice more during the week following Nancy's disappearance in order to clarify some points in Billy's initial statement. Walt told him that he'd checked out the boys from Davidson County; all had solid alibis for where they'd been after leaving the diner. The last public sighting of the girl, the policeman said, was by a couple who, while waiting outside the movie theater for friends, had seen Billy and Nancy turn into the alley.

"Technically, *I* made the last sighting," Billy said, a bit more testily than he'd intended.

Walt looked at him and Billy could see that the policeman was someone who didn't like to be corrected.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I'm kind of busy," Billy said, even though there was only one customer in the diner.

After Walt Castle left, Billy was sullen for the rest of the day. He asked Delmar to please stop his incessant whistling, and once when Virginia leaned through the pass-through window to ask if an order was ready, he snapped at her—something he'd never done before.

"You're acting meaner than a sore-tailed cat, Billy Doyle," she said at home that night. She was packing up some fried chicken and a pecan pie to take over to Nancy's family. "What's eating at you?"

"Walt Castle thinks I might have something to do with Nancy going missing."

"That's nonsense. He thinks no such thing."

"Is it? You didn't see how he looked at me today. And why does he keep wasting time coming around to talk to me instead of being out there looking for that poor girl?"

"He's probably hit a dead end," she said. "The police must be under a lot of pressure."

He conceded that might be true, but Billy couldn't shake the feeling he was a suspect.

"Come with me to deliver this food," Virginia said. "The walk'll do you good."

They hadn't saved enough money for a car yet, so the Doyles walked arm in arm through the crisp autumn evening. When they came to Main Street, both of them stopped to look up at the darkened marquee of the movie theater, which had been closed ever since Nancy's disappearance. Billy started to walk toward the west end of the block, but his wife pulled him in the opposite direction.

"Where're you going?" she said. "Let's cut through the alleyway. It's faster."

Billy hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Virginia asked.

"Nothing. Just hadn't thought about cutting through the alley is all."

Of course, Billy *had* thought about the alley. He just didn't want to be reminded of all the times he and Nancy passed through it together, especially their last time. Or how nice it felt the time she'd held his hand and kissed him. When Billy and Virginia crossed through the alley and emerged two blocks from the projectionist's house, Billy wondered if he should have told Virginia about what had happened that night. He was right, he concluded, to keep it to himself. He glanced down at his wife, who was staring at him with an odd look on her face.

"Is something bothering you, Billy?" she asked.

"No. I'm fine. Why do you say that?"

"You look distressed all of a sudden. And you've been acting strange ever since we left the house."

"I'm okay. Let's hurry now. It's getting chilly."

When they reached Nancy's house, Billy stood to the side of the door and held the basket containing the chicken and the pie while Virginia opened the screen door and knocked. For a moment, he thought no one was going to answer and actually hoped that was so, but then the heavy oak door swung open, its hinges squeaking softly.

The projectionist was a short, stooped man with the pale skin of someone who spends the majority of the time in the dark. Like most of Providence's citizens, Billy did not know the reclusive man well—rarely did Billy and Virginia go to the movies and Nancy's father had been in the diner only once—but it seemed to Billy the man had aged considerably in the past week. The projectionist looked at them in turn with an expression Billy found unreadable.

"Yes?"

"We hope we're not disturbing you and your wife," Virginia said. "We know that these have been difficult days for you both and we wanted to bring you a little something, just to help out."

She gestured toward Billy, who took his cue to hand the basket to the man.

“Just some chicken, and a pie for dessert,” Virginia added. “It must be hard for your wife to think about cooking.”

The projectionist looked at Virginia and said nothing, his blank expression unchanged. He turned toward her husband, looking first at the food basket and then up at Billy’s face. Being short, he had to bend his neck back a good ways to do this. And then Billy saw a shift in the man’s eyes, like a sudden recognition, and his brows began to furrow.

“You’re the diner fella, ain’t you?” the projectionist said.

“Yes, sir. My name’s Billy Doyle.”

“You was with my baby girl when she went missin’?”

“No, sir. I walked her home to make sure she was safe and—”

“Don’t you lie to me! I seen you two kissing.”

Billy experienced a sudden sensation as though all the air had been squeezed from his body. He stared at the older man, unable to speak. Billy peeked at Virginia. She was looking right at him, her eyes wide and her mouth dropped open.

“You got some kind of nerve showing your face around here,” the projectionist shouted, a mizzle of spit spraying out with the words. “I told Walt Castle that you ought to be drug into the police station and beaten until you tell what you done to my girl.”

The projectionist’s face, neck, and cheeks flushed deep red and his eyes widened, his pupils dilating like a feral animal. He took a step toward Billy, who lifted his arm to ward off a blow, but instead the man slapped the basket out of Billy’s hands, sending its contents bouncing and rolling across the chipped, uneven boards of the porch.

“Get the hell out of here! If I see you again, I’ll shoot you as sure as you’re standing here.”

“Sir, please,” Virginia started, “surely there’s some kind of mistake...” but the man turned toward her and when she saw the fury in his eyes, she flinched.

“Get off my property before I call the police. And take your pissant peace offering with you.”

Billy and Virginia gathered up the dirt-flecked pieces of fried chicken and scooped globs of spilled pecan pie into the basket and hurried off the porch. Billy wrapped his arm around his wife, pulling her tight against him, and they walked home in silence. Tears ran down Virginia’s face, but she made no move to wipe them away.

Once home, Billy poured them each a small glass of brandy from a dusty bottle he kept hidden on the back of the pantry’s top

shelf. Virginia rarely drank alcohol, but she accepted the glass readily when Billy proffered it. When she stopped crying, Billy came over to the sofa and sat down beside her.

"Why would he say that, Billy? About you kissing his daughter?"

Billy felt heat rise in his neck and cheeks. He leaned toward the small coffee table where the bottle of brandy was and refilled his glass so his wife couldn't see his face. He drank most of what he had just poured in one big swallow and sat back. He turned toward Virginia, who was waiting for him to explain. He'd never lied to his wife, never needed to; Billy realized he was, at that moment, at an important crossroad in his marriage.

"I don't know," he said at last. "He must be mistaking me for someone else he saw kissing Nancy."

Virginia held her husband's eyes for what seemed like an eternity to him, then took a sip from her glass.

"That explains one thing," Billy said. "Now we know why Walt Castle keeps coming back to the diner. Nancy's father has been putting foolish ideas into his head."

Again Virginia studied Billy's eyes. At last, she leaned forward and poured herself another glass of brandy, filling it to the point of nearly overflowing.

While it had been their routine ever since getting married to walk to the diner together in the early-morning hours no matter the weather—when the streets of Providence were hushed and tranquil—the following morning Virginia told Billy to go on ahead to work, that she had a couple errands to run and would meet him before opening. Billy was surprised by his wife's statement. She'd never mentioned any errands to him and he suspected there truly weren't any, but he didn't argue the point. He knew she was still upset about the events of the prior evening. But over the next several days, Virginia made other excuses to avoid walking to work with Billy and it quickly became evident they'd begun a new routine. After a month, Billy stopped asking Virginia each morning if she was coming with him. And while Billy Doyle was no master of subtlety, he understood that ever since Nancy's father had said he'd seen Billy kissing his daughter, his marriage was, for the first time, in real danger.

Billy would tell himself that he hadn't done anything wrong. Many times he would stand sweating over the griddle at the diner, trying to infuse in himself a sense of outrage at being misjudged. But this thought was usually supplanted by guilt-ridden memories of how soft Nancy's hand felt in his, or how warm her lips had been when she'd kissed him. Billy knew he had nothing

to do with the girl's disappearance, so he mostly found himself wishing Nancy would simply show up. Not so much for everyone to know she was safe, but so that she could clear things up for his wife.

But five months later, Nancy's whereabouts still remained unknown. Initially, the girl's disappearance had incited a flurry of interest from newspapers as far away as Charlotte and Richmond, but as spring approached, the matter once again became Providence's own private mystery. And the uneasiness surrounding the case had seeped deep into the town's collective psyche. Rumors spread about Billy and Nancy having "had a thing" and that was why she had to go away. Billy noticed that certain regulars no longer patronized the diner, and Delmar confirmed that some members of his church's congregation had been whispering about it when they thought Delmar was out of earshot.

Even with the loss of some local customers, business at the diner continued to be brisk thanks to the increased traffic on the new interstate highway. Without Nancy to help, Virginia was forced to handle all the waitressing duties by herself. Billy was uncomfortable with the idea of replacing the girl, almost to the point of superstition. Besides, the days seemed easier when he and his wife didn't have time to think about anything but work. They never spoke about Nancy or about their visit to the projectionist's house, but the girl's aura seemed to pervade their lives like an invisible and disquieting fog that never lifted. Worst of all, Billy secretly despaired that his wife had stopped loving him.

Then one bright May morning, as the breakfast rush subsided, Walt Castle walked in the diner and asked Billy and Virginia if they'd heard the news.

"What news would that be?" Virginia asked coolly as she wiped toast crumbs off the countertop with a damp cloth.

"Nancy's back in town."

"When? How?" Billy asked, leaning across the pass-through.

Several of the lingering patrons, most of them locals, turned to listen to what the policeman had to say.

"I'm not at liberty to divulge details," Walt said, "but it turns out she's been in Raleigh all this time. At a hospital a good part of it."

"Oh, my," Virginia said. "What happened?"

Walt looked about the diner and kicked lightly at something on the floor with the toe of one shiny Brogue, and Billy surmised the policeman had regretted saying as much as he had.

"Well," Walt said, pausing momentarily as if to weigh his words

carefully, "a good bit of it was written about in the Raleigh papers, so it's not exactly a secret. There was a nurse arrested. Nancy was not the first by a long shot, from what I hear. Poor girl. Apparently they found Nancy just in time, before she bled to death."

Billy looked at Virginia, who had put her hand up to her mouth in surprise and he saw that she understood something he did not. But he sensed it was not the time to ask about it. After a couple minutes of awkward silence, Walt said goodbye and left. An animated murmur rose from the booths of customers, more than a few of whom stole looks at Billy.

As they went about the business of the day, first preparing for lunch and then dinner, Billy and Virginia said nothing to each other about Walt Castle's visit or the news he'd brought. Billy pondered what had happened to Nancy, but a big part of him understood he didn't want to know. Now and then, as he scraped charred bits of burgers and grease off the griddle, or lowered baskets of French fries into the sizzling fryer, he thought of the last time he'd seen the girl. She had seemed distracted and upset, obviously wanting to tell him something. He should have spoken first and encouraged her to open up to him. Would that have changed anything? All day, he desperately wanted to talk with Virginia about it, but he waited for her to bring it up first. She never did.

Within a few weeks of the news of Nancy's return, the projectionist moved his family up north and Billy never heard of them again. More details had emerged about Nancy's disappearance. The nurse who'd been arrested hanged herself in her prison cell the night before her trial was set to begin, and there was new information about a traveling salesman almost twenty years older than Nancy who the police were actively searching for. The amount of tawdry buzz that pervaded Providence during those days had not been seen before or since.

Eventually Billy hired another waitress, a widow friend of Virginia's who'd lost her husband suddenly to a heart attack at the age of forty-eight, and life at Doyle's Diner returned to a monotonous, comforting routine.

One evening at home, Billy wandered into their bedroom to find Virginia smoothing the corner of a bedsheet she'd just put on. Not long after they'd learned about Nancy's return and her problem, Virginia had gotten into the habit of changing the sheets every night before they retired, something Billy found odd and disquieting. He had learned to stop questioning, though, because Virginia's answer to why she did it was always that she simply

felt like it. Without speaking, he walked over and took hold of one edge of the spread and helped her align it. They had not been intimate in months and Billy yearned to hold his wife in bed. When they'd finished with the bed linen, Virginia folded down the sheet in preparation for retiring, then walked into the bathroom. Billy heard the water running into the bathtub as she readied her bath. He called her name.

She didn't answer. Billy hoped it was only because of the noise from the rushing water. A brief sense of desperation flickered inside him like a nervous tickle in his midsection. The water stopped. "Virginia," he said, and waited.

She appeared at the bathroom door, clutching her robe closed with her hands.

"Do you love me?" he asked.

"Oh, for God's sake, William Doyle. You ask the stupidest questions." She let one hand go from the front of her robe and reached up to remove the bobby pins from her hair bun. She shook her head once, letting strands of hair fall over her shoulders, and disappeared back into the bathroom. After a minute, Billy could hear the soft splash as she slid into the water.

Although she was out of view, Billy nodded. He often felt stupid around her, but not just when he asked her questions. And, more importantly, he realized, he didn't feel *just* stupid; he felt guilty. How could he ever tell Virginia of the nugget of shame he felt whenever he thought about Nancy? The shame that he knew had nothing to do with what happened to the girl, but rather with the pleasantness he felt whenever he recalled that night she had kissed him. He pushed that thought to the back of his mind and convinced himself, as he always did, that it was a frivolous and innocent memory. After all, it truly was. To think otherwise would be ludicrous.

Billy undressed and climbed into bed to wait for his wife to join him. After she did, he turned onto his side and reached over, placing his hand on her arm. To his surprise, she didn't pull it away. Billy wanted to say something then, something healing or clever, but his mind could not fix on anything.

"I heard there's a new Italian restaurant in Winston-Salem," he said at last. "Would you like to go this Saturday night? We haven't dressed up and gone out in a long time."

Virginia craned her head back to look at him before placing her free hand on top of his own, which still rested on her arm.

"That would be lovely," she said, and smiled.

It was the first smile he'd seen on his wife's face in a very long while, and it filled Billy Doyle with hope.