

Shaping

Sylvy sits alone on the front porch swing, cross-legged and humming softly as mosquitos whine past her in the dark. Further out in the yard she can make out Toby's small shadow swooping and crouching as he aims a fat cupped hand at blinking lightning bugs. The bugs seem to be squatting low in crazy groups around the yard, some by the lawn jockey near the cement driveway, others out toward the railroad ties that separate the Johnson's place from the road. The night fills in around the bugs, slowly creeping out onto the road in front of the house and porch. Sylvy hears Mr. and Mrs. Johnson murmuring in the house, talking behind the kitchen door. Occasionally they talk loudly and she can almost hear what they say, then they rapidly lower their voices. She wonders when they'll come back out; she wants to talk to them or at least listen to what they want to say to her. Maybe she can try to explain, although she figures they probably won't give her much of a chance. She shakes her head at the bugs and slaps a mosquito. Fine then, she thinks, let them come out anyway. She's tired of waiting. She looks out where Toby is playing, then draws her knees up to hug them hard beneath her chin.

"How many you got?" Sylvy calls to the little boy outline kneeling in the fresh-cut grass. "Come here and show me." She waits as he finishes his last capture, trying to calculate how many bugs a seven-year-old can possibly hold in one hand without squishing them all. Toby straightens, hands closed, and scampers up the porch steps. He stands in front of Sylvy, his face child-solemn. Bug-catching is serious business with Toby.

Once, a long time ago, when Sylvy was seven like Toby she was out in her own weedy backyard, just a few blocks from the Johnsons. A tick had burrowed itself in her neck, not far below her right ear. Mama discovered it that night while helping her bathe. "Look here, what's this?" she exclaimed, pulling at Sylvy who sat wet and warm in the white porcelain tub. "Ummm. No. You get out of the tub. We gotta get this bug out from under your skin." Then she called Aunt Isabel over in Girard to find out the best way. The metal tweezers she used poked and pinched, hurting Sylvy's neck as she stood shivering under the big shaded kitchen light. Finally the bug was tugged out, most of it anyway, and its little round body set on fire with a barnburner to make sure it wouldn't dig anymore. Later, after Sylvy was admitted to the hospital with a fever that turned her whole body a dull red, they discovered that the tick's head had gone deep — too deep for Sylvy's Mama to know — and its toxin was poisoning her. Sylvy left the hospital a few days later, after the doctors had silver-neededled a blue ampule of anti-toxin into her rear. She wasn't strong, but could walk and got to miss a whole week of school after that.

She was seven then. She's almost fourteen now, but bugs still aren't much fun for Sylvy. She sits on the porch, swinging a bit in a side-to-side motion; she fingers the tiny scar below her right ear where the doctors had probed for the tick head. Toby stands in front of her, his He-Man t-shirt pulled out of his shorts, hands hidden behind his back.

"Which one?" he speaks, tipping his head up to her, defying her to guess right. His nose is flattened brown with late-spring freckles. "Guess!"

She sighs. Bugs. His hands have now appeared between them and she leans forward to point left.

"Naw." His hands disappear behind him again and he grins a little, his elbows wiggling as he shuffles the bugs between fingers.

"Hey, mister." Sylvy leans forward again and taps He-Man on the face. "I got that one right, huh? C'mon, let's see. Give."

"Naw, you didn't . . . Guess again." He brings his hands out and the fists are squeezed little balls. "Come on." She sighs again and points right this time.

"Hah!" he shouts and waves both hands in front of her. Sylvy slips back on the swing, expecting a cloud of bugs to fly up in front of her. But — no bugs.

"OK." She scoots back all the way against the swing slats and folds her arms across her stomach. "What happened, you cheater? What'd you do with them?" Her head is cocked to one side and she wrinkles her eyebrows in mock sternness. Toby grins again, a glinty-eyed cherub, and turns around, wiggling his butt at her.

"Oh Lord, Toby," she groans like Mrs. Johnson did the night Sylvy told her she saw cockroaches under the kitchen sink. "In your shorts? They're running around loose in your shorts?" She hopes his parents aren't listening. What would they think now? Their voices have been quiet for a few moments. Are they listening to her and Toby?

"In my shorts? Course Not," Toby scoffs over his shoulder. "They'd get out and crawl down my legs." He shakes his head at her ignorance. "Fly away then . . . In here." He reaches back into his pocket and scoops out two or three brown bodies which crawl sluggishly to the edge of his palm, cling there for a second, then fly off.

"Oh Lord," she groans again for Toby's benefit. "Just don't sit down, you hear?" Then they both giggle. "Lightning bug pancakes! For breakfast, yummm!" Sylvy snorts and Toby giggles again in appreciation. She listens to hear what the Johnsons are doing inside the house. Lord, now she really hopes they aren't listening. Then she giggles again. Oh well. When they've gone she'll make Toby take his shorts off in the shed and shake the bugs out of them. Don't want to get them in the house. That is, if the Johnsons do go and she stays to watch Toby. She doesn't want to make him do it now. They wouldn't understand now. They don't understand at all.

Sylvy is quiet, listening thoughtfully to the electric hum of the porch light. A second passes and she is rewarded with the Johnson's murmur, low but distinguishable. It sounds like normal talk. They've decided something. She hears a chair scrape. What? Mrs. J looking into the vanity mirror? Mr. J getting coffee in the kitchen? What? Patience, she thinks, and begins to hum again. When they come out she'll know what they've decided.

She looks out past Toby onto the road, at the deep stretch that is the end of the Johnson's lot. This same road runs on, she thinks, into town, through stop signs and under lights of neon shades, reds, greens and yellows. It keeps going — why stop? It goes on until finally it is lost, merging from town lights into highway colors of wide-awake whites and pinks. Sharp colors that make the road into day and make you drive straight. But here, swinging softly on the Johnson's porch, the colors are only satin shades of black on black, smoothing colors and smudgy edges. Sylvy watches the road, humming softly, waiting. She leans her chin into a cupped hand. A car will come by any second now, she knows. It will slash the dark apart, bringing the town and highway lights with it, then blur on. She sighs. Maybe, just maybe it won't come for awhile yet.

Toby jumps the cement steps and hops back out into the yard. He hops a few steps further then plops to the ground, his face bent forward in the grass. Is he a rabbit looking for lettuce, or a snake sound asleep? Sometimes she joins him in this grassy fun and they talk about ants and grass shoots and baby clover. But tonight . . . She turns a bit and looks back in through the picture window that shows the Johnson's living room. Toby's train set makes an oval on the hardwood floor, cars and engine stopped in mid-run. He was playing with them when she arrived that evening, just as he has played with them every evening in the five months she'd been sitting for the Johnsons. She stares through the glass. Lord, what are they doing in there?

She thinks about which dress Mrs. Johnson should wear tonight. She hopes it will be the smooth lavender satin. It feels so soft and slick when Sylvy touches it, and cool. It's always cool under her fingers. And lavender is a pretty shade, not too purpley, making Mrs. J's hair shine real black like pieces of crystal. Mr. J always gives a wolf whistle when she walks out of the bedroom in it, making her smile and Sylvy and Toby giggle. Toby has his mother's black hair. Sometimes, after it has been washed and combed Sylvy feels like giving it a wolf whistle, but she knows Toby wouldn't like it. Boys don't like it when girls show their feelings that way. It's like they don't know what to do and it makes them mad.

Sylvy frowns in the dark. Toby has disappeared into the yard, but she's not worried. She can hear him running like a wild man from end to end, stampeding cricket noises. She wishes boys would understand more. Toby understands a lot, probably the best of anyone, but she wishes they all would try to understand more. She thinks about the boyfriend she almost had, up until last Saturday. Buddy Stevens who is three grades ahead of her in school. He's supposed to graduate next year in the spring. He went out with her friend Elizabeth for a few months and she had worn his class ring wrapped in the fuzzy pink yarn you could buy at Woolworth's for fifty cents a strand. Then they broke up and Buddy asked Sylvy to the Friday night skate. Of course she talked to Elizabeth first, before she agreed to go. Elizabeth didn't care — she was going to the movies that same Friday with Bobby Snyder. Why should she care what Buddy did? "But thanks for asking first, Sylvy. You're a true friend." So Sylvy went skating with Buddy that weekend. By the end of the evening they were skating with one arm around each other, and a few times Sylvy pirouetted backwards to face him as they circled slowly around the rink. Even Elizabeth hadn't learned to do that yet. And he didn't try to hook his thumbs down her jeans like Elizabeth had predicted. They just skated round and round underneath the revolving lights.

The next Saturday they went to the movies. *Smokey and the Bandit* was playing for only a buck at the Twin. Buddy and Sylvy began by holding hands, but about the time Burt Reynolds reached the Arkansas line she realized that Buddy's hand was touching the inside of her thigh. She shifted a bit in her seat, crossing her legs like Elizabeth had warned her to do and Buddy's hand went back to the shoulder rest for a few minutes, then draped across her shoulders. Later she realized his arm had moved lower around her neck and he was massaging the skin underneath her bra strap. "Stop it," she whispered "Stop," and she shrugged her shoulders. He pulled his hand up. She looked at him, not sure what to say to set things right. Then she nodded toward the screen, "I want to watch."

"Fine," Buddy had mumbled and put his arm back, once more, on the shoulder rest. He never called her again.

Sylvy watches Toby where he sits in the grass, just within the light circle of the porch lamp. He is holding something carefully in the palm of one hand, probably another lightning bug, and easily rolls it over. His short fingers are so gentle, lightly playing with the bug.

Why can't boys understand? Sylvy knows they'll try things; Mama told her that over two years ago. And she knows that there are things she's not supposed to let them do; Mama told her that too. So why do they have to get mad and not talk to her again, or whisper to their friends in the halls at school as she walks by? What do their mamas tell them?

Sylvy watches as Toby flips his hand, flinging the bug out into the yard. He pushes his body back against the steps, only a few feet from her, and leans his head on his hand. She guesses he is shaping stars again. Last weekend he told her how they were doing geometry in math class at school. "You know," he explained seriously, "shapes. Circles, squares and stuff. We learn how many sides they have and how to draw them." Toby wanted to get ahead of the class, so Sylvy helped him a little. By bedtime he knew pentagon, octagon and decagon and could draw a finger-line from star to star showing the right shape and number of sides.

Last Sunday Mr. and Mrs. J went to Newton Falls to visit Mr. J's boss. Toby didn't want to go, didn't want to do anything. His bike was broken, and it was all Sylvy could do to get him out of his room. "You can try riding mine around the yard," she said.

"It's not the same," Toby said. "Besides, yours is too big for me."

"Well, what's wrong with yours?" she asked doubtfully, looking at the small two-wheeler.

"This." Toby held up a bent silver disk. It looked like the part of bike chain was supposed to wrap around, but warped. "Broke it when I went off the curb over on Jewell Street." He looked down. "Got this too." He showed her a bandaged knee.

"Oh." Sylvy looked at it and grimaced. There was flaky brown showing through the white wrapping. She looked back to the disk he held.

"Daddy said we'd have to get another one. This one's too bent to be pounded back into shape." He tossed the ring over next to the bike and it clanged against the cement.

"Hey, Tobe," she said. "Let's go over to the junkyard." She grinned so he'd smile back at her. "Maybe we can find the part, instead of your dad buying it!"

Toby shouted, "Awwright!"

They hopped on Sylvy's bike, Toby perched on top of the handlebars and Sylvy pumping steadily behind him. When they reached the dump, they slipped under the closed gate and wandered through the dirtheaps and trashpiles. It was a warm day for early May and the dump was starting to smell a bit, just a little old and rusty and rotten. Pieces of shiny metal lay everywhere and after an hour Sylvy's back began to hurt from bending over so much and straining to pry up half-buried silver disks. Another half hour went by and she decided it was time to sit. It was Toby's bike — he could keep looking. She stared around the dump noticing an abundance of pipes and tubes, and pieces of rubber that might've once been attached to very fast cars. At the bottom of one fat mound lay an overturned toilet, part of its bowl painted a bright butterfly yellow. Not too far from the toilet was a brown plunger with a broken handle. She smiled. Maybe they had come from the same house? She wondered about a house now that had no toilet.

“Hey! Sylvy, hey! C’mere quick, you gotta see this,” Toby was yelling from around the side of a small trash mountain. Sylvy stood up and brushed off the seat of her shorts. She hoped he’d found the bike part, she was ready to go home. As she made her way through the concentrated junk, she could see Toby kneeling on a box, his body crouched and still.

“Look at this.” His voice was soft now and Sylvy wasn’t really sure she wanted to see whatever it was. Just as she got up beside him, Toby reached forward for a thin black piece of — rubber? She stopped and as Toby lifted the rubber into the air it began to wiggle and writhe. She screamed and began to back away, “Toby, drop it! Drop it, it’s a SNAKE! You hear me? I said put that thing down!” But then she stopped backing up and watched Toby. The snake had stopped moving and Toby gently lowered it to the ground.

“Must’ve been asleep,” he said without looking at her. “Poor guy, sorry I woke you up. Thought you were dead. Hey, Sylvy.” He turned a bit. “What are you doing? Geez, it’s just a garter snake. He was getting some sun.” He looked at her. “What’s wrong with you? Daddy gets ’em in the garden all the time, they don’t bite or anything.” He moved away from the box he’d been leaning on and went over to where the snake had slithered. Automatically Sylvy started to walk forward, too. After all, she was supposed to be taking care of Toby. She watched quietly as he grabbed it again, closer to its head. The tail wriggled in circles for a second, then stopped. Maybe it was half dead.

“Here.” Toby sat down easily in the dirt. “Look, see. He won’t hurt.” He pulled at the snake’s tail, stretching it out over his legs. The snake re-coiled again, and again Toby straightened it out. She watched quietly at the game they played.

“You try it.” He took his free hand and pulled at her. She grabbed her hand away. “No. That’s OK. I don’t want to, I . . . I’ve touched snakes before.”

Toby looked at her. “Where?”

She looked off toward the dump exit. “Ummm, biology class. There’s a tank full of them.”

Toby looked back at the snake and was quiet for a second. “OK . . . That’s OK if you don’t want to.” He nodded and smiled, “Really.” Sylvy smiled and looked at the snake curling in Toby’s lap. “Ready to go?”

She waited for a minute, watching Toby stretch out the snake again. “He sure is a wiggly thing, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, a regular Mr. Wiggles,” and they both laughed.

So they brought Mr. Wiggles the snake home in a cardboard box they found lying not too far from Sylvy’s yellow toilet. Now Mr. Wiggles had a place on the shelf with Toby’s other friends, the lightning bugs and crickets he had caught. Maybe tonight she’ll try to pet him like Toby did or to pick him up. Mmmm. Maybe not. Toby never said anything about her reaction to the snake. He really understands. She watches as Toby’s head moves up and down silently. He is still shaping figures.

Maybe that is why she likes sitting with Toby on the weekend so much. He seems to understand everything she does. Even the time he slipped out of bed and caught her in his parents' room, spritzing bits of Mrs. J's perfumes up and down her arm. She knew he understood because he never told his mother. And Toby never got mad for long, even when she made him clean up the jelly he spilled all over the kitchen floor. And he never said things to be mean or to hurt her. But he didn't know that his parents might not like everything he and Sylvy did while they were gone.

She knew the Johnsons were watching her strangely that evening when she knocked on the front door and walked into the living room. She knew something was unusual, too, because neither of the Johnsons were dressed to go out; she wasn't that early. Mr. Johnson was still in the coveralls he wore to work at Hummels where he fixed typewriter and calculating machines all day. And Mrs. Johnson still had on her powder-blue bathrobe. They watched her walk in and she knew when Mrs. Johnson looked at Mr. Johnson as Toby ran to greet her, kissing her wetly on the lips. On the lips like he always did.

"Hey, Sylvy," Toby had exclaimed. "I got this great new boxcar. You want to see it? Wait, I'll get it." He ran up the steps. "It's in my room."

Mrs. Johnson was standing in the kitchen doorway. "Sylvy, would you come in here and help me with the dishwasher?"

"Sure," Sylvy murmured and followed her into the other room.

The two of them began unloading the machine, pulling out china plates and stacking them gently in the glass cabinet. Mrs. J tugged at a Siverstone pot. "Mr. Johnson and I have noticed that there's quite a few wet towels in the laundry on the nights you babysit, Sylvy." She stopped and looked across the dishwasher at Sylvy.

"Yeah, I know," she agreed. "Toby likes to splash." Sylvy reached to help with the pot. Mrs. J let go and picked up the silverware basket.

"We've also noticed that Toby doesn't like to sleep in pajamas anymore."

Sylvy nodded and was quiet.

Mrs. Johnson set the basket on the counter, leaving the silverware still inside. She looked at Sylvy and her lips were set in a narrow line. "When we asked him why, he told us that you didn't wear pajamas." She paused. "He also said that was how the two of you stay warm." She stopped.

Sylvy stood still, staring at Mrs. Johnson. She could feel her teeth clamp tight and she could hear herself when she swallowed.

"Sylvy? Hey, Sylvy?" Toby's voice made them both turn. He poked his head through the doorway. "C'mon! You gotta check this out."

Sylvy turned back to Mrs. Johnson.

"Toby." Mrs. J's voice was flat. "Why don't you and Sylvy go outside for a bit. Your father and I will be out in a few minutes."

Sylvy untucks her legs and leans forward on the swing. She looks through the porchlight to the steps and sees that Toby has pulled a mower-chewed stick out of the grass and is trying to divide and keep track of the shapes he has already made. She smiles. She wants to laugh at him, he is trying so hard, but she doesn't. He doesn't like to be laughed at, even in fun. So Sylvy just swings and watches him as he draws shapes. It is a nice night. She doesn't want it to change.

Toby throws away his stick and rolls over, lying flat. When he gets up, his back will be wet from the night grass. She sighs. That's all right, he'll just have to head straight for the warm bathtub and the Johnson's fluffy red bath towels. She smiles, remembering the night a month ago when she first saw Toby double-wrapped in one of those monster towels. That night she had bathed Toby, just like her Mama used to do to her, soaping him good everywhere and playing splashing games to get him rinsed. When the bath was over, they were both wet, so she put her clothes to cycle downstairs in the dryer and slipped on Mrs. J's blue robe — just until her own clothes were dry, she figured. She walked back to the bathroom, the too-long robe trailing behind her. Toby's shining black hair and pink-clean toes peeped out at her from under the red towel. She laughed and called, "Toby. Hey, Toby, where are you?" a few times, pretending to look all over the bathroom. They both giggled for a minute, then she pushed him out the door and into his bedroom. They laid down nestled together on the bed, and she continued with the adventures of Paddington Bear. It was still early and the Johnsons weren't supposed to be home until after midnight. Sylvy and Toby fell asleep. Several hours later Sylvy was startled awake by the sound of a passing car honking its horn. The Johnsons? She listened for a second, but the house stayed quiet. She shivered. Toby's red towel was lumped on the floor. She curled against him for warmth, tugging the yellow afghan that lay on top of the bed over them. She pulled his small body closer to hers and fell back into sleep.

After that the nights she came over to the Johnsons to watch Toby fell into a pattern. Play, read, bath, bed. Sometimes she took her clothes off and really splashed with him in the big pink tub. But they were always careful to clean up good afterward. And there were never any clothes between them when they fell asleep. It was more warm and comfortable that way. And it seemed right.

Sylvy tries to think about it all as she swings back and forth and watches Toby draw lines against the sky. They never actually do anything that's bad — just hold each other. Occasionally she likes to touch Toby in places — places that she could never touch any of the boys she knows. But she thinks Toby understands and he only lays quietly as she does it. And, to be fair, she lets him touch her too. But she also knows that the Johnsons wouldn't like it if they knew. She turns to look toward the road and the dark.

“Pentagon is five,” Toby’s child-voice breaks up her thoughts. “So what’s six? Isn’t there a six?” He turns to look at her.

“Of course there is,” she answers as she stands and stretches her arms. Lord, she’s tired. Are the Johnsons ever coming out? She glances at her watch. They’ve been inside about twenty minutes now and it’s almost nine. If they stay out past one, she’s going to have to charge them double. Again, she thinks, that’s if they go out at all. She steps down to sit beside Toby on the walk and leans back against the steps with him. Maybe the Johnsons will go out tonight, Sylvy looks up at the sky, but they probably won’t need her ever again. They’ll probably get someone else, one of her classmates, maybe. She picks up a pebble lying beside the walk and throws it out into the yard. A car drives by, briefly lighting the road, and then it is dark again.

“Toby?” she asks quietly.

“Shh . . . Pentagon, five, hexagon, six, octagon, eight.” His head is nodding to the rhythm of the words.

“Toby, what would you think if I didn’t sit with you anymore?”

He looks sideways at her, his face half toward her and half toward the sky, as if turning fully would make him lose all the figures he’s got. “You going somewhere? Gonna stay with someone else?”

“Maybe,” she answers. She hasn’t thought that far ahead. She likes sitting with Toby.

“Well, who?” He turns to face her now. No more shapes.

“I don’t know.” She is quiet for a second. “Maybe Joey Hamilton over on Crescent Street.”

“Oh,” Toby says. “Nah. All he ever wants to do is play Tonkas.” He turns from her and watches the road.

“What about Sammy Allen on East Drive?”

“Don’t know . . . I guess. He’s got two new Transformers.” Another car drives past, noising out the crickets, the mosquitos, the Johnsons, everything. “I could come over and play sometimes? Mommy said I could have a new one, too — maybe Destructicon.”

“Sure you could come over,” she smiles watching the red taillights. “Whenever you want.” She grins at Toby.

“Yeah, I like Sammy.” Toby smiles back and they are both quiet.

The screen door slams behind and high heels taptaptap across the porch. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson have decided to go out, Sylvy realizes, and her grin gets bigger. They are both dressed for dinner, although Mrs. Johnson’s dress is the pale peachy floaty thing. It’s all right, Sylvy shrugs, if you like peaches. She wrinkles her nose.

“Toby, come here.” Mrs. Johnson stretches a hand out to Toby and he dutifully hops up. She looks at Mr. J and then walks back into the house. Toby follows. Inside her voice starts again, but the closed door muffles the sounds like before. Mr. J clears his throat. “Nice night, huh Sylvy?”

“MmmHmmm.” She turns back to the stars. After shapes, maybe Toby will want to learn constellations.

“We’re, uh.” Mr. J stops then starts again. “The Mrs. and I, uh . . . are going out now.”

“Yes, sir.” She turns to look at him, waiting for the general security instructions she usually gets — restaurant phone number, police, fire department, the chips and soda are in the fridge, and so on.

“We’ve decided, uh, not to be gone long. Just an hour or so. Uh . . . Mrs. J isn’t feeling well.” He pauses. “And we’re already late.”

“OK.” She watches him.

“Sylvy . . .” He stares at her for a second, then looks away, shaking his head slightly.

“Yes?” Well? she wonders. But nothing is said and she shivers. She wraps her arms around herself, one hand rubbing the skin along her arm and along the bottom of her neck.

“Never mind,” Mr. Johnson finally speaks and looks back at her. “We’ll be back real soon.”

“OK.”

“Keep an eye on things.”

“Yes sir.”

“Make sure Toby only gets out of bed once.”

She nods. She’s heard this part before.

“And tell him no . . .” Mrs. Johnson’s heels came back out of the house with Toby’s Keds close behind. He looks a little puzzled. Mrs. J watches Mr. J and he gives her a nod. Everything had been taken care of. She turns to Sylvy, but doesn’t smile like she usually does when they are ready to leave. “We’ll be home soon, Sylvy.” She stares at Sylvy and then walks to the car.

Sylvy and Toby wave from the porch swing as the car lights move away and become covered in the dark. The two swing gently for a minute, not talking.

“Well, what’d she say?” Sylvy asks.

“She wanted to know if I was OK. She asked if I wanted to stay next door at the Simpsons’s while they’re gone.” Toby looks out at the bugs blinking near the road.

“That’s all?”

“And if I liked it when you come over.”

“Oh?” Sylvy is thinking. So it’s OK for now. Everything is OK, but it won’t ever be the same. “Well, are you OK?” she asks.

“Yup.” He looks at her and laughs.

“And do you want to go over to the Simpson’s house?”

“Nah.” He begins to kick his feet, making the swing move faster.

“Do you like me?”

“Of course.” He looks at her curiously and hops off the swing.

“Toby?” She touches his arm and he stops. She takes his hand, then drops it. “I won’t be watching you anymore.” She knows he is looking at her, trying to understand. “I’ll probably watch Sammy Allen. I’m going to call the Allens about it tomorrow.” She is quiet, looking away, watching the bugs fly above the head of the lawn jockey.

She feels Toby sit down on the swing beside her and after a second slip his hand inside of hers. “It’s OK, Sylvy.” Toby’s voice is soft in the porch light. “Really.”

Sylvy smiles a little. She feels tired. She wonders how much Toby will think about her later on.

Toby pulls at her hand. “C’mon Sylvy.” She stands up and he tugs her down the steps toward the open yard. They walk out to the edge near the road and stand for a moment, teetering on top of the railroad ties. No cars are coming from either direction. They wander back closer to the porch and sit in the wet grass, looking up at the stars. They’ll both be wet now, Sylvy thinks. Toby is still holding her hand and she can feel his little boy skin against hers. It feels nice, she decides, and smiles into the dark. Even like this, it’s still nice and she feels good about it.

“OK.” She speaks up after a minute. “You remember five, six, eight and ten. But what about seven? Have you learned seven yet?”

“Nope.” Toby is relaxed beside her and listening.

“It’s heptagon. ‘Hept’ means seven.” And Sylvy lifts their hands to trace a seven-sided figure in the sky.

by S. C. Anthony