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Beneath a kindly sky

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BENEATH A KINDLY SKY

A Creative Writing Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Kristen Jane Garabedian

May 2000

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ABSTRACT

BENEATH A KINDLY SKY

by Kristen Jane Garabedian

This creative writing thesis consists of an introduction and four short fictional stories. The introduction discusses my process for writing and includes excerpts and advice from some of the authors I most admire: Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Mark Twain. The stories that follow explore various ways that characters can move from preconceived notions to a fuller understanding of reality.

Affectionately dedicated to
Shoney, Crumpy, Skeeter, Luby, Daisy, and Lemley Gilbert

With heartfelt thanks to
John Engell, Virginia de Araujo, and Paul Douglass

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We'll find perfect peace,
where joys never cease,
out there beneath a kindly sky,
we'll build a sweet little nest
somewhere in the west,
and let the rest
of the world go by.

— J. Keirn Brennan

Introduction

The first time I read “The Displaced Person,” I wondered how Flannery O’Connor had managed to create such a marvelous, dark, humorous, pitiful world. How had she thought to write about a cigarette-swallowing dairyman? Life on a dilapidated farm? The decaying remains of old Southern culture? I rushed to buy an anthology of her stories and devoured each work with an increasing sense of awe and envy.

The more I understood and loved O’Connor’s stories, however, the more contemptuous I became of my own attempts at writing fiction. I tried—with absolutely no success—to create characters like Hulga Hopewell, Enoch Emery, Chancey Shortley, and the Misfit. I sat down every day and stared at a blank piece of paper, waiting for inspiration that would lead me to create the equal of O’Connor’s homely priest tiptoeing behind a sleek, disdainful peacock, muttering “Arrrrrr! What a beautiful birdrrd!” (Complete Stories 198). I did everything I could to emulate my favorite writers: Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, and Carson McCullers. I failed miserably every time. No matter how I tried, I could not capture the essence of the fiction I loved. Adding to my frustration was the fact that I could recognize greatness when I saw it. How humiliating it was to know the quality of work I wanted to create, but consistently fall short of it.

For a few years, I stopped writing. The mere thought of attempting a piece of fiction made me break out in a cold sweat. And then it occurred to me that I would never succeed in trying to write other people’s stories, precisely because they were not *my* stories. I had despised my sentences because they did not flow naturally in the

musical cadence of Southern dialogue; in doing so I had disregarded the fact that I am not a native Southerner and was, in fact, born and raised in California. I had lamented my lack of imagination because it had never occurred to me to write about peacocks until I read “The Displaced Person.” What a revelation to discover, through reading O’Connor’s essays and letters, that she spent years raising peafowl on her mother’s farm. I finally realized the obvious: Flannery O’Connor did what creative writing professors have been trying to pound into their students’ heads all along.

Namely, to write what you know.

Now, Flannery O’Connor wrote what she knew with a great deal more talent, insight, and skill than most people—myself included—are able to marshal. Nevertheless, the knowledge that she and other wonderful writers had drawn from their immediate surroundings gave me the confidence to start doing the same. As my own experiences began to seem more valuable for fiction, I grew tired of waiting for inspiration. I did not want to lose any more time.

When Katherine Dunn (the author of Geek Love) was six years old, she watched her brother use a slingshot to kill a rabid cat. Her description of the incident expresses the same kind of urgency that I now feel about writing:

I saw that foaming, staggering cat wobble out from behind a stack of old tires, and my brother drilled him clean between the ears. The cat dropped without a twitch, but that night [. . .] I realized what death was and felt the whole aching universe zooming outwards. I suddenly knew I would die—end completely. And the real tragedy was that all the wonders I’d seen and smelt and felt would die with me. I couldn’t bear it. And from that moment to this I’ve struggled to record as much of it as I can. (352)

Faithfully recording the details of life—the many wonders that each of us experience—is the first step toward a successful work of fiction. The process does not end there, however. Once these details have been satisfactorily set down on paper, the fiction writer’s challenge is to create something new from them.

A writer must first decide whether to start with a particular theme and compose a story to illustrate it, or to start writing and see where the process leads. My view on this subject matches Flannery O’Connor’s: “Start simply with a character or anything that you can make come alive. [. . .] When you have a character he will create his own situation and his situation will suggest some kind of resolution as you get into it. Wouldn’t it be better to discover a meaning in what you write than to impose one?” (Habit 161).

This process for writing stories, which I have followed, may not be the most direct, but it is the one that works best for me. I begin with a short, detailed description of something that I have seen, heard, or felt: a shred of conversation, the sound of wind rustling through poplars, a surreal afternoon in Shelby County, the way a cobweb shimmers in the sunlight. Once I have the details down in a way that makes the incident “come alive” (161), I begin to rewrite. With each revision, more of the reality falls away; in its place I substitute imagined characters, dialogue, settings, and events. The result generally bears little, if any, resemblance to the original account.

Initially, I found the idea of fiddling with reality rather daunting. But one of my favorite professors, Virginia de Araujo, gave some advice to our poetry class once that made all the difference. A fledgling poet was attempting to express grief over the death of his father by describing the trees, grass, sky, and raindrops he had seen at the

cemetery. The poet felt stuck; his description of a pine tree did not convey his sense of loss. Another student suggested to the poet that he describe a different kind of tree—a maple, perhaps, whose leaves would change with the seasons and eventually fall to the ground. The poet argued that although he could see how a maple would be better for the poem, the fact was that there had only been pine trees at the cemetery, so he would have to settle for those. That was when Virginia looked up at him and said, “This is creative writing. You don’t owe the truth anything.”

That statement has helped me trust the creative process immeasurably. Instead of feeling chained to facts that may only take a story so far, I understand that reality can be used as a springboard into a rich, beautiful pool of imagination. Likewise, the wide variety of literature I have enjoyed throughout my life now stands me in good stead as a writer. I can sense in my own work where fictional dialogue, characters, and events are needed; I believe this is largely due to the great writers who have left wonderful examples to learn from.

William Faulkner discussed the importance of voracious reading to a writer during an interview with a University of Mississippi English class. In answer to the question, “What is the best training for writing? Courses, experience, or what?” Faulkner said: “Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You’ll absorb it. Then write. If it is good, you’ll find out. If it’s not, throw it out the window” (Lion 55).

I am frequently amazed by the ease with which fictional characters slide in and take up residence in my short, reality-based accounts. In “Gospel Mass,” for example,

the few characters inspired by real people have long since elbowed their prototypes out of the way and have undergone an extensive series of transformations. The others seem to have materialized in the pews of their own accord.

In the first draft of “Gospel Mass,” there *was* no hulking boy with his father. Mrs. Tate fell asleep during a long, windy sermon and Julie fainted on the altar. A few rewrites later, a boy appeared who was delicate and pretty and wore a gold-lame suit. Instead of performing his scheduled solo at the mass, he carried the unconscious Julie out of the church and drove the Tate’s rental car to the hospital, leaving his avaricious father to sizzle in the parking lot. In the next version, the pretty boy turned surly; he hated everyone in the church, including the Tates, and slipped out the back door when nobody was looking. Over the next few rewrites he evolved into the sad, confused character in the final version of the story.

“Ishmael” also underwent drastic changes during the revision process. The story began as a 40-page third person account of an equine veterinarian and his assistant, as they went on their daily rounds. The story then switched to first person narrative, told from different points of view, similar to Faulkner’s structure in As I Lay Dying. I could tell that neither form was right for the story, but it was only after I had left “Ishmael” alone for a while—working on “Quail Flat” in the meantime—that the spirit of the horse rose up and declared that it would tell its own tale.

Mark Twain commented on the value of finding the correct structure for fiction in the following passage from his autobiography: “There is only one right form for a story and if you fail to find that form the story will not tell itself. You may try a dozen wrong forms but in each case you will not get very far before you discover that you

have not found the right one—then that story will always stop and decline to go any further” (267).

As my fictional characters grew into their own personalities, they began to whisper to me that they really would not do this, but they would do that, and that they would be most comfortable in a particular story structure. My responsibility as the writer was to listen and represent them as faithfully as I could. I found that despite any predictions I tried to make while writing the stories in this thesis, I rarely knew what would happen, although I could understand—the characters being who they were—why the different events were occurring.

I must admit that after spending so much time with Ishmael, Eddie, Mrs. Tate, the hulking boy, and the rest of the characters that inhabit this thesis, they seem quite real to me. This is just as well, I suppose, for how can a character seem alive to anyone else if he or she does not already live and breathe in the author’s mind? Adela Rogers St. Johns touched upon the importance of characters seeming authentic, in describing her childhood meeting with Rudyard Kipling when they were aboard a small boat crossing the English Channel. While exploring the decks, five-year-old Adela bumped into an old gentleman and told him—when he asked what she liked to read—that The Jungle Book was her favorite:

I asked him, stranger to me as he was, if he didn’t feel that Mowgli was real. Realer than anybody, I said. He said, Oh yes, he knew Mowgli was real—and yes, Bagheera, who was my favorite. [. . .] A few days later I received a copy of The Jungle Book, and written on the flyleaf were words that thrilled me a great deal more than most I have read since. [. . .] “To my little American friend, who knows that Mowgli is real as well as does the man who made him, Rudyard Kipling.” (89)

It may seem like a paradox to say that characters require sufficient development and spirit to take on lives of their own, since I just finished discussing the importance of letting characters reveal their true natures—but it is not a paradox. It is another aspect of a complex creative process.

At least for me, a great deal of character and plot development takes place between drafts, while I am thinking about other things. Instead of finishing the first draft and charging straight on into the second, I give my conscious mind a rest and let it think about other things. My unconscious mind, though, seems to keep working on the story. When I come back to work after a break, new characters and events come pouring out. Mark Twain discusses this process in his autobiography: “When the tank runs dry you’ve only to leave it alone and it will fill up again in time, while you are asleep—also while you are at work at other things and are quite unaware that this unconscious and profitable cerebration is going on” (265).

Perhaps what I love most about the work of Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, and Carson McCullers is that in their fictional worlds—as Dorothy Walters writes in her critical essay “The Lack of Beauty in Flannery O’Connor’s Work”—“life does not seal its subject into neat categories” (223). Characters like Anse Bundren in As I Lay Dying, Jason Compson in The Sound and the Fury, Mrs. Shortley in “The Displaced Person,” and the grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” are both “serious and absurd, laughable and deplorable” (Walters 223). McCullers’s works such as “Correspondence” and The Member of the Wedding succeed in being humorous, painful, and touching all at the same time; the same goes for stories and books by Faulkner and O’Connor.

One way that these authors express the inner workings of their characters is through the effective use of physical detail. Carson McCullers, for example, tells us a great deal about six-year-old John Henry by showing how he fashions a biscuit man from a scrap of dough:

When Berenice gave him some raisins, he did not stick them all around as any other human child would do; he used only two for the eyes; but immediately he realized they were too large—so he divided one raisin carefully and put in eyes, two specks for the nose, and a little grinning raisin mouth. When he had finished, he wiped his hands on the seat of his shorts, and there was a little biscuit man with separate fingers, a hat on, and even a walking stick. John Henry had worked so hard that the dough was now gray and wet. But it was a perfect little biscuit man, and, as a matter of fact, it reminded Frankie of John Henry himself. (83)

Rather than tell us directly that John Henry is a perfectionist, a serious child, and that he approaches play as if it were work, McCullers shows us these things through physical action.

Faulkner employs exquisite detail in his descriptions of physical surroundings, which tells worlds about his characters. An example of this can be seen in Quentin Compson's stream of consciousness phrase: "the honeysuckle drizzled and drizzled I could hear the crickets watching us in a circle she moved back went around me on toward the trees" (Sound 154). From these twenty-five words, we gain instant access to the narrator's senses: he smells the honeysuckle, he feels the drizzling rain, he hears the crickets, he sees his sister moving toward the trees, he feels watched by creatures that are most likely not paying him any attention (an indication of Quentin's tender, neurotic personality).

Flannery O'Connor uses detail in a sharp, clean way that evokes a strong image of her characters' appearances and personalities. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," she

describes the children's mother as "a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like a rabbit's ears" (Complete Stories 117). When the young mother encounters the Misfit later in the story, she is dazed and compliant; she carries her baby off to certain doom in the woods without the slightest fuss. O'Connor's unadorned style of writing is similar to her description of the landscape in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." She writes: "The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled" (Complete Stories 119).

I admire O'Connor, Faulkner, and McCullers—and many other writers—so much, that it is difficult for me to say exactly how they have influenced me. They have made me love reading, they have inspired me to write, they have taught me to pay attention to details and find meaning in them, they have shown me that every kind of person has an interesting story to tell. I could not possibly compare my writing to theirs, without suffering extreme discomfort and embarrassment; I doubt that anyone could read such a comparison without laughing out loud. I can say, however, that I aspire to my favorite authors' beautiful and effective use of language; wonderful sense of humor; skill in creating characters that live and breathe and matter deeply; genius in writing dialogue; and overall psychological complexity that permeates their fictional work.

When asked if he had anything revelatory to say about his novel, A Fable, William Faulkner answered:

There is nothing to say about it. I did the best I could, and if there's something more I could say, I'd have said it in the book. There's nothing I could add to it. I think if I would do it over, maybe I would do it better,

but I always think that with everything I've done, as any artist thinks. The work never matches the dream of perfection the artist had to start with. (Lion 81)

This is a fair approximation of how I feel about this thesis—both the stories and the critical preface. I might be able to do the whole thing better if I tried to do it over again, but there comes a point when the greatest value lies in recognizing that you gave your best effort, and it is time to let go and move on. The stories in this thesis do not match my original dreams of perfection. They have, however, taken on lives of their own and become what they were meant to be. In that way, they have surpassed my expectations.

I am grateful to have been surprised.

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Gospel Mass

The inside of the church felt delicious, dark, and cool after the sweltering August afternoon. Strains of gospel music drifted back to where Julie stood in the atrium, waiting for her eyes to adjust. She twisted her damp brown hair slowly into a bun and watched colors and details bleed into the shadowy figures around her. Julie's mother, small and blonde in a green T-shirt and slacks, fanned herself with a brochure. Old women roosted in the pews like tired stew hens. A gaunt man with dark, sad eyes and a Pepto-Bismol colored shirt sat alone in the last row raking his fingers through his greased black hair. "Are you ready?" asked Mrs. Tate. Julie skewered her hair into place with a pencil and nodded to her mother. Together they walked down the center aisle.

When they reached the front of the church Mrs. Tate smiled up at the giant crucifix glinting behind the altar, as she did at paintings when she went to the museum. "Well, here we are," she said, placing a hand on her thin hip. She turned to survey the assembly. "I hope this is all it's cracked up to be."

A swarthy man with a black pompadour glared at them from the front row. Julie gritted her teeth and began to tug at the wrinkles in her black linen dress. Why did her mother have to be so embarrassing? Just three nights before, on the way to the airport, they'd stopped at a drugstore to buy some Dramamine. Mrs. Tate had traversed each aisle silently until a group of teenage boys strolled by. Then: "Do you need another box of tampons?" Julie had blushed furiously and disappeared around a corner while the boys hooted.

“What sweet music,” said Julie. “You think we should be quiet in here so we can hear it?”

Mrs. Tate regarded her daughter. “Maybe I’ll just wait for you in the parking lot.”

Julie pulled viciously at the wrinkles in her dress, then decided to try a technique from her Psychology class: inducing another person to whisper by whispering first, yourself. She clasped her hands lightly behind her back.

“Well,” Julie whispered, “who knows what this is cracked up to be, anyway? That woman on the phone was just guessing. She said she knew someone in the choir—”

“Look, programs!” Mrs. Tate rushed over to a stone-faced man by the side door, then—two peach-colored programs in hand—marched back up the aisle. Julie settled in next to her mother with a sigh. Down at the far end of the pew an old woman hunched over her Bible, moving her lips slightly as she read.

“There,” said Mrs. Tate, handing Julie a program. “Now, let’s just see what we’ve got.” She fished a pair of reading glasses out of her backpack and inspected the cover: SEVENTH ANNUAL MEMORIAL GOSPEL MASS 1999 MEMPHIS TENNESSEE—THE LAST OF THE MILLENNIUM!!! AND FEAST OF THE ASCENSION. Elvis Presley’s head gazed up at the words from the smudged, inky confines of a circle.

“Not a very flattering picture,” whispered Julie.

“It looks like a mug shot,” observed Mrs. Tate.

Julie and her mother and her brother Seymour, who was probably wandering along Beale Street at that moment, were not big Elvis fans but they'd wanted to see Graceland all the same.

The idea had surfaced on a plane two summers ago. The Tates had flown to Spain for a great tomato fight in the streets. During the return trip the sound mechanism for the in-flight movie had broken. The crew, deciding that the scheduled feature would be too dull without a soundtrack, had substituted a documentary on Elvis impersonators. How this documentary happened to be on board in the first place, the passengers never knew, but within minutes the entire plane was roaring with laughter. A female Elvis, a six-year-old Elvis, an octogenarian Elvis—all dressed in spangly white jumpsuits and capes—gyrated across a silent stage. Skydiving Elvises plunged from a plane, their parachutes blooming like poppies in the soft blue sky.

Best of all, the Tates had decided, was the hulking teenage boy in the yellow satin shirt. He looked nothing like Elvis, but his father had obviously groomed him from day one to believe that he did. A granite-eyed older man silently addressed the camera as the boy stood with his arms crossed, lip curled, and eyes distant and proud.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Seymour, "he walks, he talks, he sings 'Hound Dog,' he eats deep-fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches by the dozen. You won't believe your eyes, you won't believe your ears. All this and more for the price of one thin dime. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you—Kong! The eighth wonder of the world."

The next year, after watching news coverage of the candlelight vigil at Graceland, Mrs. Tate had called her children gleeful with the news that she'd booked a trip to Memphis for the following summer. Mr. Tate, no great Elvis fan himself and

lacking the inducement of the in-flight movie, had said that he'd rather stay home and shovel out the horse stalls.

Julie examined the cover of her program, then pointed to a large photograph propped against the left side of the pulpit. "Isn't that the same picture?" A life-sized image of the King—decked out in a glittering white jumpsuit, cape, and red flower lei—gazed soulfully up at the crucifix. "Is he weeping?"

Mrs. Tate took off her glasses and squinted at the photograph. "I think he's sweating. That must be from the Aloha concert."

"There's something different about this picture, though," said Julie, holding up her program. "See? I think they've distorted his features to fill up the circle."

Mrs. Tate glanced at Julie's program, then looked around the church with a dissatisfied expression. "You know, we're pretty far back. Why don't we move up some?"

They slid down the bench and headed back up toward the giant crucifix until Mrs. Tate found a pew in the center section that pleased her, just three rows back from the pulpit. Someone had carefully placed individual Kleenex packets at regular intervals along the mahogany bench. Julie and her mother climbed over the legs of a large woman who sat next to the aisle.

"Perfect," said Mrs. Tate. "Now we won't miss a thing." She deposited one of the complimentary Kleenex packets in her backpack and turned to smile at the woman next to her.

The woman looked to weigh about as much as Julie, Mrs. Tate, and Elvis Presley put together. A chunk of lank, greasy black hair fell over her right eye. She

sported four tattoos on her arm: Elvis in profile, a shaky replica of his autograph, a study of Graceland, and “Taking Care of Business in a Flash” (which Julie had just discovered to be Elvis’s motto). The woman rested her tiny, tennis shoe-clad feet on the pew in front of her and, from time to time, grabbed hold of the seat back and wrenched her torso around to talk to the man behind her.

“Say,” said Mrs. Tate, smiling broadly. “Where’d you get that fancy pin?”

The woman looked down at the button on her T-shirt as if it had just landed there, then returned Mrs. Tate’s gaze. “You got to buy them back by the door. They’re two dollars.”

Mrs. Tate turned to say something to Julie, but a sharp, querulous voice startled them both. “Where you girls from?” Mother and daughter turned around in their seats to confront a stringy old lady who leaned forward and gripped the back of their pew. She looked like a piece of pale jerky in a blue print dress.

“We’re from California,” said Mrs. Tate, her eyes twinkling. “Are you a real Elvis fan?”

“No,” said the old lady, swiping the air with thin veined fingers. “I’ve got a bunch of clippings for some people I met a few years ago. I’d just mail them, but I lost their address and phone number. Thought maybe I’d see them here.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Tate, disappointed. “Are *they* real Elvis fans?”

“Don’t you know it,” said the old lady, settling back in her pew. A hulking boy with dirty-blond hair slouched next to her, staring sulkily at the floor, a black satin shirt peeping from beneath his gray-and-white-checked sports jacket. A cold-eyed, heavysset

man had the aisle seat and was speaking in a low, gravelly tone to the tattooed woman in front of him.

“I went to the Waffle House five years ago,” continued the old lady, “and there was this whole table full of French people. One of them spoke English, so I’d say something and then he’d say it in French to the others. When they said they was Elvis fans, I told them ‘You wait right here. I’ve got something you’ll like.’ I went home and got the newspaper from the day Elvis died and brought it back to them. We’ve been in touch ever since.”

“How nice,” said Mrs. Tate.

“They was all just jabbering away, except that one who spoke English.” The old lady leaned forward and said in a hoarse stage whisper, “That’s not very nice, is it?”

The sullen boy raised his head to glare at the old lady. There was something vaguely familiar about him, Julie thought, but she couldn’t quite place him. He looked a little like Todd Woodward next door, whose main chore was to take a sledgehammer and smash all the empty beer cans his father threw out into the backyard during the course of a day. But there was something else, too, she thought.

“My name is Sayra Smith,” the old lady said abruptly, extending her hand to Mrs. Tate. “That’s S-A-Y-R-A. Sayra.”

“That’s an unusual spelling of the name.”

“Well, my mother named me that. I was too young to do anything about it.”

“I didn’t mean...” faltered Mrs. Tate. “Say, do you know where Wayne Avenue is?” Mrs. Tate had spent two years of her girlhood in Memphis and was determined, while on this vacation, to drive over and see the house where her family had lived.

Since landing in Memphis on Thursday, she had asked pretty much everyone they ran into—waiters, store clerks, drunks in alleys—if they knew where the small, residential street was.

The sulky boy opened his mouth like he was going to say something.

“Can’t say as I do,” said Sayra.

“How about Jackson Elementary School?”

“I do know that one. It’s on the other side of town,” said Sayra. “Me, I live in Whitehaven.”

“And this is your grandson?”

Sayra looked sharply at the boy. “I don’t know him. He’s with that man over there.”

The hulking boy scowled down at the floor.

“I’ve been in my house forty-two years,” continued Sayra. “The neighborhood’s changed from what it used to be. My neighbors,” she leaned forward and whispered, “they’re all black.” She hissed the word ‘black’ in three syllables—buh-lay-uck—then sank back against the pew. “I’m the token white person in the neighborhood,” she said, chuckling. “Now you can go home and tell everybody you met a crazy old lady in Memphis.”

“I beg your pardon,” Mrs. Tate said suddenly. “I’ve just remembered something very important I must do.” Julie watched her mother clamber over the tattooed woman’s legs and beat a hasty retreat up the aisle. Sayra narrowed her eyes to slits and fixed Julie with a glittery gaze, then turned and struck up a conversation with the

woman on her left. The sulky boy continued to stare at the floor, but Julie thought she saw him smile.

“That’s right,” the heavysset man said, nodding briefly at the boy. “Born August sixteenth at two-forty in the afternoon. That’s the same day and time the ambulance took the King out of Graceland. Sure, Aron here was born in 1982, but don’t you think that time and day was lost on me and his mama, God rest her soul. We knew right then what he was called to be.”

“Amazing,” breathed the Tate’s large, tattooed neighbor.

“Chosen, that’s what he is.” The man looked over at the boy and let his lip curl slightly. “You look up when a lady talks to you.”

The sullen boy raised his head.

“Here’s another thing. You never seen a boy so attached to his mother.” The man rested a beefy arm on the back of the pew. “Can’t do nothing with him since she passed away. He don’t have a lot of friends, don’t fit in with the other boys. Sure as hell can’t get him out hunting with me.”

“I ain’t studying no hunting,” the boy said, returning his gaze to the floor.

“See what I mean?” The man expanded his gaze to include Julie. “He’d just sit around all day in the dark if I let him. Course, you saw ‘Long Live the King.’”

Julie stared at the man. The cold eyes, the square head—it took her a moment to realize that she was face to face with the father from the documentary. She gazed at the boy and felt her mind assembling his features like a jigsaw puzzle. The boy hung his head lower than ever and his ears burned scarlet. “They made that movie before Elsie passed on,” the man said.

Julie turned back to face the altar.

"I heard you last year," the tattooed woman said. "You sound just like him."

"You know he's singing over at Tiny's on Beale tonight? Just twenty bucks a head. I've got some tickets with me—show'll probably be sold out later."

The woman pulled a crumpled bill out of her fanny pack. "I certainly look forward to hearing you," she said to the boy.

"We thank you, ma'am," said the father, plucking the bill from her fingers and giving her a ticket. He glanced at the boy. "You look up when a lady talks to you."

Mrs. Tate's return cut the conversation short. She climbed back over the large woman's legs and handed Julie a button. "Just pin that on and you'll fit right in. Did I miss anything?"

"Well," Julie began, feeling the color creep up into her neck. Everyone around them seemed to be listening. "That boy behind us," she blurted, "it's his birthday tomorrow."

"It is?" said Mrs. Tate. She turned around and beamed at the boy. "Well, that's wonderful. Happy birthday to you."

"Thank you ma'am," the boy mumbled.

"You know," said Mrs. Tate, "there's something so familiar about you."

The boy looked up hopefully.

"He looks like Todd Woodward," said Julie, hurriedly. "Look, the choir's coming in."

"Yes, you do. You do look like our neighbor," Mrs. Tate said. "But there's something else."

“Mom! How do you feel about going to the Rendezvous for dinner?” Julie demanded.

Mrs. Tate looked confused. “Well, that all depends on Seymour,” she said. “You know he’s been on that health kick lately.” She nodded to the boy, as if to apologize for her daughter’s rudeness, then turned back around.

“What’s your problem, anyway?”

“Nothing,” Julie whispered. “It’s just—the choir’s coming in.”

The singers arranged themselves by height near the altar. The director, a young brunette with a beatific smile, bounded out to take her place in front of the risers. She motioned for the assembly to stand, then began to conduct the choir and congregation in “Amazing Grace.”

The music washed over Julie like a cooling river. She heard the gravel-voiced man and the large woman and her mother singing *how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me* and she heard a clear, plaintive voice that she knew was the boy’s. Suddenly she saw Graceland, which her family had toured on a sleepy Friday. She heard the crickets and jar flies and katydids along the highway, so loud you could hardly believe the sound was real. She saw ivy-covered trees haunting the countryside like swamp monsters. She thought of Elvis giving his brand new car to an old woman shivering at a bus stop and then having to call the car dealer to ask for a ride home. She felt the old, worn cobblestones under her feet that led down to the Mississippi River and sensed people who had walked on them before she’d ever been born. She saw alligator gars lurking below the river’s surface *through many dangers toils and snares* and thought of herself drifting crazily down the river on a raft with the hulking boy.

A thrill of excitement ran through the crowd. People nudged each other and craned their necks for a better view, as people do at a wedding when the bride begins to walk down the aisle. Julie looked back over her shoulder and saw the hulking boy watching Mrs. Tate as he sang *His word my hope secures*.

A gloomy procession of mourners came trudging up the center aisle toward the front of the church. The woman leading the group wore a long, yellowed lace dress *I shall possess within the veil a life of joy and peace*. Her haunted, hollow eyes barely seemed to take in her surroundings. Her feathered blonde hair lay lifeless and dry and she clung to a vase of yellow flowers as if it were the only thing pulling her along.

A sturdy, grandmotherly woman in a white Elvis T-shirt and Bermuda shorts followed, a glass serenity candle cradled in her hands. Then a small and serious Brazilian man with “22” sewn on the back of his soccer shirt; a tall man with caterpillar eyebrows and a gray pompadour; the gaunt man in the Pepto-Bismol shirt *the earth shall soon dissolve like snow the sun forbear to shine*. The people marched on, at least fifty of them, bearing their gifts to the altar. They laid their candles and flowers along the edge of the altar and returned solemnly to their seats *but God who called me here below will be forever mine*.

Having finished all the verses of “Amazing Grace,” the choir and assembly began to sing “A-men” over and over to the melody, so that the entire procession would have musical accompaniment. A tall man in a ruffled pink shirt caught Julie’s attention as he strode by; she watched him walk to the left side of the altar, put his candle down, bow his head, and kneel before the photograph of Elvis.

“Did you see that?” asked Mrs. Tate, jabbing Julie in the ribs.

The man strode purposefully back to his seat.

"I know I've seen that boy somewhere before," whispered Mrs. Tate. "That nice boy right behind us. It's just on the tip of my tongue."

Julie glanced over her shoulder. Sayra was craning her neck, searching every face in the congregation. The heavyset father was studying his watch. The hulking boy, singing "A-men," still had his eyes fixed on Mrs. Tate. Tears slid down his sullen face; somehow, he looked like he'd been homesick for Julie's mother for a long long time.

"It's just gnawing at me," Mrs. Tate whispered. "I'll have it in a minute."

Julie listened to the boy singing *A-men, A-men* and felt the backs of her eyes begin to burn. "Don't," she said.

Mrs. Tate looked sharply at her daughter.

"Just don't," said Julie. "I'll tell you later."

"I don't know what's got into you today." Mrs. Tate snapped open her program and resumed singing "A-men."

Julie looked up at the crucifix, which suddenly split into three watery gold shimmers that danced along the wall. She listened to the voices singing for another moment, then turned away from her mother and began to feel along the smooth, polished bench for one of the complimentary Kleenex packets.

Ishmael

A few weeks ago, kicking around the pasture with nothing much to do but graze on weeds and watch the clouds go by, I made a wonderful discovery.

Or so I thought.

By pushing against a loose fence post in the far corner of the field, I was able to bring down a section of barbed wire that had kept me at a vexing distance from a certain apple orchard across the road. I had been giving this orchard my utmost attention since the first leaves unfurled on the branches. I had watched bees race from blossom to blossom, then drone lazily through leafy rows as summer stretched out. I had stood in the shady spot by the fence, switching my tail to fend off flies, and watched men walk up and down the row, stopping sometimes to turn rusty wheels that let loose a gush of water in the dust. I had watched those tantalizing green apples swell until they were so full and heavy they dropped from the branches into the dirt.

And then I pushed on the fence post.

And then I was free.

My man—a kind one with gingery hair and a moustache—had gone out early that morning. He'd come out to feed me the usual alfalfa cubes and oat hay before Albert even crowed. I didn't expect him back until dark. He usually stayed out past dinnertime when he oiled his hair and shined his shoes. Where did he go? It's not my place to say.

Anyway, I stepped over the barbed wire and went straight across the road to the orchard. I never tasted anything so delicious in my life! There were no men in the

orchard, so I wandered up and down the rows, eating as I liked. Time passed very pleasantly and the sun was just sinking behind the hills when I heard my man call:

“Ishmael!”

I pricked my ears and looked in the direction of his voice. The mosquitoes were out in full force by this time and I switched my tail furiously to keep them at bay.

“Ishmael!”

I nickered softly. My man ran up to me and buried his head in my mane.

“You beat everything, you know that,” he said finally, fastening the halter around my head. “Just look at you slobbering all over the place. I bet you won’t want any dinner tonight.”

He was right about that, but I drank thirstily from my water trough. It felt wonderful to be home again. My man scratched me behind the ears for a while and ran his hand down my neck. Then he sponged me off with warm water, wondering aloud how I had gotten out of the pasture.

About this time, I began to feel pretty grouchy and sour. I stamped my feet and began to paw the ground.

“There, there,” my man crooned. “I just want to get a few of these knots out of your mane before bedtime, Ishy.” He came tenderly toward me with the brush. I was beginning to feel really lousy. Plus, I hated when he called me “Ishy.”

“Come on now, Ishy. Stand still. There’s a good boy.”

I did not want my tangles brushed. I did not like being called Ishy. He was really getting on my nerves, so I bit him on the shoulder.

My man jumped back, then left my stall, shutting the door firmly behind him. He stood for a long time looking in at me through the bars. "Maybe you'll be friendlier in the morning." He snapped off the light. I pawed the ground for a while, then stood very still.

The longer I stood there, listening to crickets and looking out through the bars at the wild bright stars, the more restless I felt. My heart pounded fiercely, and I began to pace around the stall. My stomach was beginning to hurt and I tried to kick at it from time to time with my hind foot. At least I felt like I was doing something.

Hector stopped outside my stall on his nightly foray to the chicken coop. When he saw I wasn't going to be any good for conversation that evening, he padded on in search of a juicy rat.

I kicked out at the back wall, banging my hoof against it. Then I stood in the middle of the stall, stretched out and panting. My stomach hurt so much that I lay down on my side. After a few minutes I felt better, so I got up again. But the pain soon grew worse. I lay back down on my side, stretched my legs out, then pulled them up to my belly.

My heart was hammering by that time and I felt so sick and hot I could hardly think. I began to roll on the ground, kicking and thrashing. While I was doing this, I guess I must have started kicking the wall again. I barely heard the stall door slide open, and then the light went on, and I saw my man standing in his nightshirt looking down at me. I thrashed again and he jumped out of the way and slid the door shut.

It seemed like a long time before the door slid open again and a tall man whom I'd seen before knelt down next to me. "What did he get into?"

“Apples,” my man said. “Broke out while I was gone. He was all right five, six hours ago.”

“Apples are especially bad,” the tall man said, bending over me. “They ferment in the stomach.” Something bit my neck. I thrashed again and both men jumped back. “Torsion. He’s past colic.”

“But he looks better,” my man said. He sounded very far away and the stall around me was going gray.

“Not always a good sign—”

* * * * *

When I came to, it was dark and very cold. I tried to move, but couldn’t. I tried to speak, but couldn’t do that either, so I had to content myself with staying still and thinking. I thought for a good long time about my quiet life in the pasture, my exciting time before that at the racetrack, and the halcyon days even before that when I skittered along over hills next to my mother. I remembered the terrible auction when I got too old to win races and how the kind gingery man had saved me at the last minute from the slaughterhouse. He had led me to his trailer and driven me home and turned me out to pasture. I thought of his sunburned face and the way he talked to me and scratched me behind the ears. And then I remembered biting him the night before and I felt very sorry and ashamed. I thought that if I could just see him again, I would stand perfectly still and let him brush my mane all he wanted. I might even nuzzle him.

I thought about those things and more for some time in that dark, chilly place and then the queerest sensation began to steal over me. I didn't know what it was at first. How would you notice something like that, really, if it hadn't occurred to you before? But there was no denying it—I was no longer breathing. And as ice cold as it was all around me, I felt no need to shiver or even try to warm up.

Suddenly there was a sound and I felt myself lifted up and out and moving slowly through the air. I heard muffled footsteps. I tried to prick up my ears to hear better, but was not particularly surprised when they didn't respond. I determined to keep my wits about me and learn all I could about this strange new situation. The footsteps and motion stopped then, and I went down slowly and felt the spongy ground beneath the right side of my head.

“What's that?” asked a girl's muffled voice.

“Horse head,” replied a man's equally muffled voice. “The owner said I could have it.”

“You asked the horse?”

Things were already so topsy-turvy, even these chilling words failed to unnerve me as they once would have.

“I had to euthanize it last night. Worst torsion case I've seen in a while. The owner was really upset.”

“That's awful.”

“You'll see worse than that if you're going to be a vet.”

It seemed amazing and impossible that anyone could converse so easily at a time like this. And yet, a kind of peace was already settling over me. So this was it. Well then, there was nothing left to fear.

“Where’s the rest of it?”

“Tanner came by early this morning.”

“Can I see the head?”

“If you want to.”

A crackling sound like wildfire filled my ears and light dazzled my left eye. I saw the blurred face of a young girl as she leaned over to look at me. She looked a little like the girl who’d gotten me started on apple pieces at the racetrack, curse her! But this girl’s face was sweet and sad, and when she said “poor thing” it nearly choked me up.

“What are you going to do with it?” she asked, standing up.

“Boil it down.” The crackling spoiled the air again and everything went black.

“Display the skull so clients can see what’s going on with their horse.”

So this was to be my fate! A grisly one, to be sure, but not without its philanthropic aspect. I steeled myself to meet the process bravely and, a moment later, felt myself lifted back and up and moving again through the air. I landed painlessly on my jaw on a patch of warm, soft ground.

“He should be thawed out by the time we get back from calls,” the man’s muffled voice said. Two sets of footsteps crunched away, two doors slammed, and I heard spattering gravel and a motor growing ever fainter.

I had determined to face this adversity with courage, but as I lay there in the warm sun I began to despair. What had I done to deserve this? What a way to end up! My skin warmed gradually and began to loosen, and that cheered me a little, but the hard facts of my predicament prevented me from being truly happy. I do not know how much time passed, or even if I slept, but suddenly something began to snuffle and nudge and nose against the dark, crinkling layer around me. I felt quite sure it was a dog, and though I had befriended many a dog in my day and would not be averse to some cheerful company now, I felt myself at rather a disadvantage.

I attempted to speak sharply, but of course I was unable to speak in any way. I was beginning to feel rather edgy—in fact, quite desperate!—as I was dragged backwards a little at a time through the soft dirt. And then I heard a yelp and the sound of four paws running away.

Floating in the darkness above me was a gleaming bright head of bone.

In a sweet, soothing voice that used no words but told me everything, the head said that it had planned to wait for me on the shelf but had decided to intercede when it saw that I was in some peril. There was no need to be frightened, the head continued. Mine was to be a glorious task. I would be helping to save the lives of our brethren. And then it showed me wonderful things—sparkling oceans, deep rainy jungles, raging winds where the stars hurled past—and said the only reason I was still in this small frozen place was because I believed I was trapped.

It's only natural to want a home, the head told me, and here you have one. We all come back to rest in our skulls on the shelf from time to time. It's easy to be a wanderer if you know there's a home somewhere waiting for you; without a home, you

spend all of your wandering days looking for a place to settle. But there's no reason to believe you're trapped here—there is more out there than you can possibly imagine.

And then the head vanished.

This was all very confusing, but the incident left me feeling a little more hopeful. The sun continued to warm me and, as the dog did not return, I was free to contemplate this new development at my leisure. When I'd seen the ocean and stars, it had felt like I was being pulled along from the inside, racing a thousand times faster than I ever had at the track. If I could go anywhere right now, I thought, I would go back to my pasture and my kind gingery friend. I began to concentrate on my stall, seeing it more clearly than I saw the darkness around me, and all at once I was there. I saw it all from above: that wretched apple orchard and Hector sniffing tentatively around my empty stall, lashing his tail, and Albert parading along by the fence as he was wont to do. And there was my man, leaning against the sliding door and holding a few long black hairs that I recognized as my own.

I willed myself downward and was thrilled to discover that I could maneuver quite easily through the air. I hovered next to my friend's shoulder and thought, "I am well. Thank you for your many kindnesses."

My friend looked surprised and a faint smile crossed his face. "You were a fine horse, Ishmael," he said. "I'll never forget you." He turned away from the empty stall and walked back to the house.

I hovered around the stall for a while then flew out over my pasture and across the orchard. Suddenly I remembered my head. Certainly I would have preferred to

continue exploring, but I felt a certain obligation to it and was loathe to leave my head there unattended. I concentrated and in an instant was back in the dark.

The dog, who had taken my absence as an opportunity to start nosing around again, ran off. This time I flew out of the bag and chased it to a far corner of the grounds. At this point, I remembered the tall man and the girl and wondered about their progress. I pictured the girl, who had seemed a sympathetic sort, and found myself a moment later floating in the cab of a truck as it sped down the highway. The tall man was driving. He wore large dark glasses that made him look like a giant fly.

“So,” said the girl as I found a comfortable spot to hover, just over her left shoulder. “Do you have anything to boil it in?”

“No, not yet. I need something tall enough to fit the horse head but narrow enough to sit on the barbeque grill. I thought we could stop on the way back and pick something up.”

“You’ve done this before?”

“Sure, lots of times. I used to work in necropsy at the Cincinnati Zoo.”

The truck veered off onto a side road, and then again onto a sharply rutted dirt road. At the end of the drive stood a woman who shaded her eyes with her hand.

We all got out of the truck and the woman walked over, the corners of her mouth raised. “Morning,” she said. “There’s something wrong with Cupid’s leg. I don’t think I should ride him anymore.”

“Where is he?”

“I’ll bring him out.” She disappeared behind the barn.

“Being a vet is a lot like being a detective,” said the man, looking around the property. “You have to think of all the possible ways an animal might have hurt itself. See here? This fence post—”

The woman came back, leading a magnificent glossy sorrel who reminded me of my best friend, Stanley, at the racetrack. He pricked his ears toward me and whinnied a friendly greeting.

“Trot him out, please.”

The horse and woman jogged away from us in a straight line. Although I no longer had legs, I could almost feel my own itching to run.

“Very good,” called the man. “Could you canter him around the ring?”

The woman walked Cupid to the round pen, where she stood at the center and made loud kissing noises at him. He broke instantly into a beautiful canter.

“See anything?” asked the man.

The girl squinted for a long time, trying to see something. She finally shook her head.

“That’s because there’s nothing to see. If that horse was in pain, you’d see him jerk his neck up when he cantered. You might also see something back there in the flank.” He signaled to the woman. Cupid whinnied cheerily to me when they returned, then dropped his head to snatch up a mouthful of dry grass.

“Did you see him limping?” asked the woman, smiling. “I just don’t think I should ride him anymore.”

“Your horse is fine,” the man said. “A little overweight, maybe, but a few extra riding sessions will take care of that.”

"I can't believe this. I heard you were the best vet in the county. How can you not see that?"

"Well, you're always welcome to get a second opinion. Why don't you call Dr. Pace? He'll give you any opinion you want."

He handed her a bill, and we all got back into the truck. "I hate people like that," the man told the girl, as he backed the truck over the dirt road. The woman stood tearing up the bill in the driveway. "There's nothing wrong with that horse, but she doesn't want to ride him and wants me to give her an excuse why she can't. There are two kinds of horse owners in the world: brushers and riders. That woman is definitely a brusher."

* * * * *

The inside of the store reminded me of the racetrack dumpster. A short, older man sat behind a counter cluttered with papers. "Afternoon," he said without looking up.

I hovered along at the girl's shoulder as she waded through mops, brooms, buckets, hoses, and then pots and pans. "These won't work at all," the tall man said. "Let's go."

"Help you find something?" the short man grunted.

"I'm looking for a stainless steel pot, about this big."

"What you see is what we got. That's a pretty big pot, anyway. What you going to do with a pot that big?"

“I’m going to boil some—stuff.”

The man behind the counter narrowed his eyes. His glance darted from the tall man to the girl, then back to the tall man. “We don’t have any pots that big,” he said. “I think you’d best be on your way.”

We drove next to a feed store. I followed the man and girl down aisles of worming medicine, feed buckets, and bags of grain. They stopped in front of the galvanized tubs, the kind people use to bathe dogs.

“How about one of these?” asked the girl.

“No, that would never fit on the grill. I need something narrower and taller.”

“You want to cook something in that?” asked a boy in a green apron. “What is it?”

“I’m just going to boil some—stuff.”

The boy hurried away.

“I guess they don’t have anything either,” said the girl. “But would one of those small silver garbage pails work? Maybe we could get one at Handyman.”

It was very cold inside the big store. Bright, colorful round things were bouncing around on the upturned fans. We went up aisles of little metal things and down aisles of big wooden things. I hovered along between the man and the girl, who were walking at exactly the same speed.

After a few minutes, the girl looked up at the man. “Do you know where the garbage pails are?”

“No,” he said. “Do you?”

A salesclerk directed us to a large display of plastic and metal trashcans. The man and girl gazed uncertainly at the different sizes.

“How big is the head, anyway?”

An old woman looked up from the recycling bin section.

“I don’t know,” said the man. “About that big. It has to fit on the barbeque, that’s the thing.”

“Maybe we should have measured it before we left.”

Little did they know I was right there.

“Well,” said the man, selecting a large silver pail. “This one ought to work. I can always bring it back if it’s too small.”

A bubbly young woman with rosy cheeks smiled at them when they reached the cash register. “Oh, these are just the greatest,” she gushed, taking the pail. “You can store all kinds of things in them—tools, winter sweaters, firewood. I even have one in my closet and I keep all my shoes in there.” She smiled warmly. “What are you going to keep in there?”

I saw the girl smile and turn away.

“I’m going to boil some—” said the man.

The bubbly cashier blinked rapidly, a smile frozen on her lips.

“—stuff.”

The color drained from the woman’s face. She shoved the pail back over the counter and snapped, “Next!”

When we pulled up at the clinic—a pleasant cream-colored house and barn with two rows of stables—I saw the saucy black lab nosing her way back into the plastic garbage bag.

“Scout! No!” The man jumped out of the truck and shooed the dog. She galloped playfully a few feet away, her tail high and wagging, a laughing expression on her face. Then she licked her lips and stood panting, as the man hauled the bag through the clinic doors.

I watched, fascinated, as the man opened the bag to reveal a brown horse head, which I recognized from the reflection in my water trough. It lay on the shining black mat and somehow it seemed like that patch of floor never could have been quite complete before my head was there to grace it.

I decided not stick around for the skinning and boiling and drying and bleaching. There was a whole beautiful world to explore, so many wondrous things to see—why would I choose to hang around and watch a gruesome process on something that wasn’t even me, anymore?

I did pop in a few times to see how things were going. On my way back from a sweeping desert with pyramids, I dropped by to see the tall man’s wife (also a veterinarian) come home from her trip, edge over to the silver pail on the barbeque, and lift the tented tinfoil to reveal my grinning teeth. I paused on my way to a place called Antarctica to scare off a German Shepherd who had dug under the backyard fence and was running down the street with my bright drying skull in its mouth.

From time to time, I still stop in at the clinic to visit with friends and take a restful vacation on the shelf. That old skull of mine may not seem like much, but it’s

home. And that soothing voice—whose name turned out to be Bessie and who has accompanied me on many a junket—was right. It's easy to be a wanderer if you know there's a home somewhere waiting for you.

I like to stop in for a rest whenever my kind, gingery friend brings his new ex-racehorse to the clinic for a wellness exam. My friend always asks to see me, and he takes my skull off the shelf and holds it in his hands and calls me a fine horse and even calls me Ishy.

I can't say I mind it a bit.

Dear Diary

March 18

I still like Carver, damn it. The whole thing has grown to colossal proportions, but nothing ever really happens. He stays away for months sometimes; other times, he seeks me out. I don't understand what he means or wants, but here I am with all these *feelings*. Daphne says she thinks he's not prepared for the way he feels when he sees me. Maybe so. Maybe not. But to an extent, at least, maybe so.

The thing is, this time, it feels like he's been gone absolutely forever. I don't even know if he's coming back. He said he might be quitting. I checked the old gallery schedule today to see how many months it's been since he left, and it only turned out to be one.

I went out to dinner Sunday night with a friend of Daphne's—he was in town on business and didn't know anyone here (Daph was away for the weekend). She'd already told him about my Carver saga. He said the whole thing sounded hopeless—that the only thing sicker than Carver's relationship with his girlfriend was the fact that I'd gotten all tangled up in it.

"I'm not tangled," I said. "He keeps telling me how unhappy he is. He knows we're just friends, as long as he's going out with Ruby."

"You're all tangled up," he said. "It makes me sick."

Daphne's friend called tonight. "Well, I just wanted to say I had a really good time with you and I'd like to see you again," he said. "If you ever get over this *Carver* thing, give me a call."

I tore up his number and crawled into bed.

March 19

If nothing is going to change, then I need to get over Carver. If something is going to change, then I would very much like to marry and spend the rest of my life with him. Of course I say that now, not really knowing some things about him. Not knowing, really, what he thinks of me, how he feels, what he believes, or what motivates him. I can say that now, partly, because it's a wishful and dreamy thing to say. But then again, I am rather a wishful and dreamy sort of person.

From now on, no pursuit of Carver of *any* kind. No making up reasons to go by the gallery, no forgetting things in your car so you have to go out to the parking lot, no stopping by to say hello. No inviting him out for coffee. No giving him your phone number in hopes that he'll call.

Remember how you left Carver a message last month and he never called you back.

Remember how you felt on Valentine's Day.

Don't stop to talk unless he comes out of the gallery to see you.

In a recent radio interview, this basketball player said, "Everything I do, I do to please the Almighty. I can't be thinking about other people—the coaches, the fans—what they think. Because then I'm worshipping *them*. I'm not worshipping God anymore."

No more worshipping Carver.

March 20

Carver came back today. I didn't see him, though. Daphne saw him leave for the day, but all I saw was his parked car. Someone else came over to get the mail. Maybe he doesn't want to see me anymore. I think maybe he hates me.

The thing is, I'm afraid I'm truly and completely in love with him. I have such a strong feeling that we're going to be married someday, that he's supposed to be the one for me.

I just don't know how to reconcile all this with what actually happens.

March 21

I was in my office this afternoon, after avoiding Carver all day out of sheer humiliation, and the phone rang. After a slight pause a man's voice said, "Hello." Kind of distantly. I had no idea who it was. "Hello?" I said, and then the voice said, "Hi, this is Carver." And went on to say that he was back at the gallery and wanted to talk to me before we just ran into each other and did I have some time this week to go get a cup of coffee.

I said sure.

He said when.

I said how about tomorrow.

He said okay when do you get in.

I said I have to pick up some parade costumes at the library but I'll be back after that.

He said well why don't you swing by when you get back—I'll clear my whole calendar for you.

And that was it.

I hung up and cried at my desk for about a minute. Then I set about anticipating the worst. He and Ruby are engaged—just wanted to let me know and could I recommend a good reception band?

When I went out to my car around 7 pm, there—stuck in between the window and door—was a shred of canvas with “Hello” painted on it, complete with an exclamation point and underlines. Even if he's going to give me terrible news, at least I think he must like me all right.

Plus, I'm relieved to hear from him. Especially a phone call. Phone calls are hard. They are, in my experience, some of the hardest things to do. And he did it for me. So even if the news is bad, at least I can think that he cares enough about me to let me know what's going on, instead of leaving me hanging.

The most interesting part of all this is that, at Cordelia's suggestion, last night around 4 am I visualized myself wearing a flowing blue sari and kneeling at the edge of a sandy riverbank in biblical times. A basket floated in the river, like in the story of Moses, and my filmy blue veil trailed in the rippling water as I bent down to place all the notes, shreds of canvas, dried flowers, old paper coffee cups, and everything from, or somehow connected with, Carver. Then I put Carver himself into the basket. I looked at him for a long time as he sat there rocking placidly, knees drawn up to his chest. Then I pushed the basket away and watched it float toward the sinking sun. I watched it until it disappeared.

Please, I prayed, let him learn, let him understand, let him find what he needs most—even if it's nothing to do with me.

I gave it all up to God.

I watched him float away.

And today he called.

March 22

Is it possible that this really happened or am I in some kind of dream? I don't know for sure. Somehow, I feel like I don't even quite exist.

Can this really be happening?

We went for coffee, Carver and I. We walked through the park to a little outdoor café. On the way over he said, "I saw somebody walking on the street the other day who looked like you."

"Maybe it was me."

"No, it just looked like you."

"Oh." (I don't know—what do you say to that?)

"But then I saw someone else who looked like you. And then someone else."

"I must speak to that cloning factory." (*Why* must I say such stupid things?)

And then he said... I can't believe he said this... "What I mean is, I've been thinking about you. I've been thinking about you a lot since February."

"You have?" I gasped. My knee buckled mid-step and the melting green shadows of the trees seemed to gush all at once into the clear blue sky.

“Yes.” He touched my arm. “That’s why I called. That’s why I wanted to talk to you. You know, I’m actually—oh, here we are. What can I get you?”

We’d reached the outdoor café and I hadn’t even noticed. I stared at the menu, but felt so dizzy I couldn’t make sense of the words. I tried to think what I’d had the last time we were there and couldn’t remember that either. I looked helplessly back at Carver.

“Blackberry iced tea?” he asked. I nodded and he ordered that and an iced coffee for himself. We carried our drinks to a beautiful corner of the café garden. He waited for me to sit down on an old silver oak bench beneath a flowering cherry tree. Then he sat in a chair next to it. A light floating rain of petals drifted down the whole time we were there. I sipped my tea and waited and thought how his hair is exactly the color of honeyed gold.

He took a long drink of coffee. Then he leaned toward me, looked deep into my eyes and said, “I have a crush on you every time I see you. I always have.”

I sat there and stared back at him like a nitwit (of course).

“You know how I used to come over and check the mail five or six times a day?” he asked. “Well, I didn’t have to. That’s not even my job. I was just trying to run into you.”

I was in such a daze. I was absolutely speechless.

“I’m actually single now,” he said. “I broke up with Ruby six weeks ago—I said my piece—and I’ve been thinking about you a lot. I’d really like to start seeing you. I mean, if you’re not seeing anyone else.”

Like I’ve even *thought* of anyone else in years.

A mockingbird warbled a long, liquid song in a birch tree just behind Carver's shoulder. A bluebottle flashed past and it was like I could see thousands of translucent colors in its wing all at once. The sun on my bare arm felt like something alive and kind.

Carver finished his coffee. He smiled at me. "I can't wait to start spending time with you."

Never, in my entire life, have I seen a more beautiful place than that courtyard today.

"Did you," I finally managed to say, "want to do something this weekend?"

Carver rattled the ice in his plastic cup. "No, I can't. I have to work all weekend. How about lunch tomorrow, though?"

"I'd love to," I said.

We walked back through the park and I felt like I was floating—like it was all a shimmering, wondrous dream. When we got to the stairs leading down to my office in the basement, Carver brushed a stray hair from my forehead and said, "I can't wait until lunch tomorrow."

I can't believe this is really happening.

March 23

Carver and I didn't get to go out to lunch today. The special events meeting ran longer than it was supposed to. Maude sat at her desk, picking buds off a potted primrose and crushing them between her fingers as she fired off questions about the upcoming parade.

“Did you finish the script? Have you confirmed extra police presence? Did you deliver those plastic animal snouts to the Council Chambers?”

Yes.

Yes.

A thousand times yes.

But she wouldn't let me leave—in fact, she seemed to take a fiendish kind of delight in my despairing glances at the clock. I watched my lunchtime tick away. Finally she ended the meeting—it was quarter to one by then—and I raced over to the gallery. Carver was just hanging up the phone in the studio. He said he had to get over to the Raven Gallery right away because of an emergency.

I smiled anyway.

Before he left, he sort of stood on his toes and asked if I was free for lunch Monday, instead. “Maybe I could make something and bring it in,” he said. “What do you like? Sandwiches? Do you like turkey?” I said that would be great, that I loved turkey. Then he drove away.

I swear, I am absolutely truly in love with Carver.

What a sap I am.

March 26

I thought that Carver and I were going to have lunch today. That he was actually going to make lunch and bring it in and call and everything.

He never even came to work.

I kept waiting to hear from him. I sat at my desk in that dank, ugly basement cutting plastic tablecloths into strips for parade banners. I was too nervous to think about writing a press release. I didn't want to call anyone and tie up the phone. I didn't want to go anywhere, in case I missed his call.

The basement grew uglier by the hour—who knew those low ceilings and stained walls could possibly look worse than they already did? Monday is aerobics day in the ballroom, and the dull, constant pounding overhead nearly made me scream.

At 11 am Daphne said, “I have to drop off some checks and street closure packets at city hall and then I’m going to take flyers to a bunch of stores downtown. Have a wonderful time at lunch! I can’t wait to hear about it when I get back!”

At 3 pm, she came back downstairs carrying bags of ribbons and balloons. She breezed past my desk and asked, “Well, how was it?” When I didn’t answer, she turned around and saw me sitting there, surrounded by heaps of plastic strips.

“No,” she said.

I began to cry.

And now I’m crying again. It must just be a misunderstanding, or else something major must have happened, because I can’t believe that after all this Carver would just not bother to show up.

I need to thank him for that piece of canvas he left on my car three nights ago. I can’t believe I forgot to mention it.

I feel so awful.

I suppose he doesn’t need to know that.

March 27

Carver and I had lunch today.

He seemed to have absolutely no concept that we had plans yesterday. “Hey gorgeous!” he called, when he saw me walking through the parking lot. I went over to talk to him, determined to find out what had happened, but he invited me to lunch as soon as I walked up. He seemed so genuinely glad to see me that I just didn’t feel right about bringing the whole thing up.

So I didn’t.

He said he had to go pick up some art supplies and that he’d stop on the way back and get some sandwiches, and then we could eat them in the park. He asked if there was anything I didn’t like. I said asparagus and liver. He said the deli was probably fresh out of that, anyway.

Wednesday is square dancing day in the ballroom. I was on the verge of screaming again when Carver called at 2 pm.

“So, where do you want to go?” he asked, when I got to the gallery.

“I thought you wanted to eat in the park.”

“You pick a place.”

I tried to think of a pretty spot—it had to be just right—but my brain felt suddenly desperately tired so I said, “Sycamore Grove.” I was there last fall and it was beautiful, with big leafy trees spreading over a secluded picnic table. Carver walked ahead of me, carrying a white paper bag in the crook of his arm. He opened the gate. When I stepped through, my heart sank.

The beautiful, leafy branches were gone—they'd been pruned right back to the trunks. The trees looked like giant, amputated torsos sticking out of the ground.

With all the gorgeous places around, I *would* pick the one bleak spot in the park. "I don't know what happened," I said. "Maybe we should go somewhere else."

"This is fine," said Carver. We walked over and sat on top of the picnic table (the one that *would* have been secluded if any branches had been left on the trees). A woman with big Coke-bottle glasses put down her book and stared at us for a long time.

I wished she would mind her own business.

"I hope you like turkey," Carver said, pulling two white paper-wrapped sandwiches out of the bag.

"I do," I said. "Thanks."

The white sun beat down until I felt sure I would roast to death. I never would have worn the green sweater dress and black tights if it hadn't been so cold this morning. I wore the right outfit *yesterday*, when we were supposed to meet for lunch.

Anyway.

I bit into my turkey sandwich—plain white bread, with no mustard or mayonnaise or anything—and was mortified to feel a thin layer of bread stick to my upper front teeth.

That's never happened to me before.

I didn't even *know* that could happen.

Why should I be remotely surprised?

Carver chewed a bite of his sandwich reflectively. "Well," he said, "we finally get to have lunch."

“Mmm-hmm.” Why had I not thought to bring a drink?

“Seems like a lot has happened since the last time I saw you.”

“Mmm-hmm!” I took another bite of the sandwich, desperately hoping to dislodge the thin layer of bread. This, of course, cemented another layer on top of the first. I looked desperately at the white bag.

“Here, I got some drinks, too.” Carver reached into the bag and extracted a large glass bottle of orange liquid; a printed iguana crawled down the neck. I watched him twist the cap, cracking the seal. Then he set the bottle next to his sandwich. Drops of condensation ran down onto the hot, painted table.

Carver pulled a small plastic bottle of water from the bag and handed it to me. “I wasn’t sure what you liked,” he said, “so I got you this.” I smiled—mouth closed, of course—and took the bottle. I twisted the cap, with the vague feeling that something was missing.

“Wouldn’t you love to be a bird?” mused Carver. He smiled up at a bluejay that chattered and hopped from knobby trunk to trunk. “Just flying around and singing, not a care in the world?”

I took a sip of water, glanced at Carver to make sure he was still engrossed in the bluejay, then turned my head and swished the lukewarm water through my mouth.

It didn’t work.

I looked back at Carver, who was still admiring the bluejay. I turned around again and desperately ran my knuckle over my front teeth. Success!

I took a final drink of water, then turned back around—setting the rest of the sandwich behind me, so Carver wouldn’t see how much was left. I was about to re-cap

the water bottle, when I noticed some grayish grime pressed into the outside ridges of the white plastic top.

Inside was more of the same.

I recognized the aftertaste of tap water a moment before seeing the grayish grime on the bottle's already-broken safety seal.

I looked back at Carver then, who was still absorbed in the antics of the bluejay. "That sure looks like fun," he said. "I'd love to be a bird."

"Their brains are pretty small," I heard myself say. "You probably wouldn't know the difference."

He looked at me, confused. Then he grinned. "There's that sense of humor I love." He offered me the lizard bottle. "Want some? It's got ginkgo and bee pollen in it. It's supposed to be pretty good for you."

"No thanks."

"Well," he said, crumpling the white paper from his sandwich and stuffing it back into the bag. "Do you want to head back?"

"In a minute. I want to talk to you about something."

"Can we do it later? Ruby's coming by at three to help me take my truck to the mechanic."

"Ruby?"

"Yeah." He stood up to stretch. "Oh, we're not going out or anything. She just came by Saturday to get a few of her things from my apartment and she said she wanted to be friends. We ended up going out to dinner and everything. Boy, I think I used up about six pounds of nervous energy waiting for her to come over."

It has always amazed me how radiantly beautiful a person can be—regardless of physical appearance—when that person is kind and dear and is someone you love.

Today, I was amazed to see radiant beauty vanish before my eyes.

Carver's hair is nothing like honey or gold.

I think he dyes it.

I was staggering out to my car this evening under the weight of two raccoon costumes (for the parade), a bunch of books, and my purse. I didn't make it, of course. All the books fell when I reached the edge of the lawn.

I was kneeling down, trying to gather everything up without looking like too much of an idiot, when I saw Carver ride by in the passenger seat of a junky brown car. He sat there placidly, waving at me as the car passed. The brunette driving grinned triumphantly. I watched the car move toward the sinking sun. I watched it until it disappeared.

I stood up with the roar of a river in my ears.

Quail Flat

“Oh, there you are,” said Lousia in her customary handwringing voice. She bustled toward the Comstock family like a giant pullet in a dark floral dress. “How was your drive, Joseph? Did you run into any traffic?”

“No, the cars swerved before I could hit them.”

“You!” Lousia tucked her chin under a little and slapped playfully at her brother’s arm. “I can’t talk to you. You’re just like Daddy was. Claire, it’s nice to see you. You always look so stylish.”

“Thanks,” said Mrs. Comstock. “You look lovely.”

“Oh, I’m a mess,” said Louisa, reaching up anxiously to pat her hair, “but it’s nice of you to say so. How’s the job going? Do you like working at home?”

Nancy shaded her eyes and looked at her father’s family, standing under the large white canopy. There were her uncles and cousins—big men with wide shoulders and sunken features—talking and laughing dryly, rocking on their heels from time to time. She watched her aunts flutter back and forth in the shade like moths while her girlcousins stood, arms crossed, in small smirking groups. She saw her Uncle Cab—sunburned face, wild white hair, drooping moustache—wearing one of the few black suits under the canopy; when he noticed Nancy, he lifted a hand in greeting.

“You live in such a beautiful place. I’m glad you’re there to enjoy it. Well, Nancy!” Louisa planted a kiss on her niece’s cheek, leaving a whiff of heavy perfume to linger when she drew away. “It’s good to see you again. And who’s this—Anthony! It’s been years. I think you’ve grown two feet since I saw you last.”

“Hi Louisa.” Tony bent down to give his aunt a polite hug.

“So, how’s everything going?” asked Mr. Comstock.

“All right.” Louisa lowered her voice and the family leaned toward her. “We’re still waiting for Eddie. I don’t know when he’ll be here. But come on over to the shade, now. No sense broiling out here in the hot sun.”

“It must be a hundred degrees,” remarked Mrs. Comstock.

“One hundred and five, the radio said. And only ten in the morning.”

Mr. Comstock led the group, walking with long easy strides, to join the rest of the family. In front of a few rows of brown folding chairs stood a gleaming coffin draped with an American flag. Floral arrangements covered and flanked it; long red, white, and blue ribbons swayed gently whenever a breeze blew through. Mrs. Comstock and Tony walked over to see Bella—Uncle Leo’s new widow—who stared dazedly around from her seat in the front row. Nancy watched her mother bend down to take the old woman’s hand.

“This looks beautiful,” said Nancy. “You really did a nice job.”

“Thank you. It wasn’t easy—I’m sure you heard all about it from your father.”

Mr. Comstock rolled his eyes and walked over to talk to his cousin, August.

“No one thought it would be easy.”

“No, nobody ever thought that.” Louisa squinted out at the bright soft sky and fanned herself with her clipboard. “I hope he gets here soon. We older folks can’t stand the heat as well as we used to. Oh, there goes the pastor. I need to give him these notes before the service. Excuse me, will you?”

Nancy watched her aunt hurry across the lawn to intercept a smiling old man in a light blue suit. Then she strolled over to talk to her favorite uncle, Cab.

“You like that book I sent you?” Cab demanded, his dark eyes glittering.

“I love it! Thanks so much. I never knew you were friends with Bud from ‘Father Knows Best.’”

“Yeah, we’ve been friends a long time. I was in a movie he did for PBS about Quail Flat in the old days. I rode an old-fashioned bike in the first scene. When the movie showed, everybody asked him, ‘How come you had Mark Twain riding a bike at the beginning?’”

“You *do* look like Mark Twain,” said Nancy, laughing. “I never thought of it before!” She gazed out over the sun-drenched lawn. All of the adults stood under the canopy, but a few dressed-up children Nancy didn’t recognize were playing a lazy game in a small, weedy patch by the fence. One of the boys folded bits of paper into airplanes and sailed them on the occasional breeze; the other children threw pebbles at the planes, trying to knock them out of the air. “Say,” said Nancy, looking back at her uncle, “where’s Eddie?”

“Aaah—moron wouldn’t get in my truck. I went over to pick up him and Bella this morning, and he said he wanted to walk over. Can’t reason with him—he don’t know beans from pork—so I said to hell with him and just drove Bella over. He’s probably updating information, or whatever the hell he does when he’s by himself.”

“Caleb,” said Louisa, bustling over to take her elder brother’s arm. “Excuse me, Nancy. Caleb, would you come over and help me figure out seating for the front row? I want you and Joseph up there by Eddie in case he—well, who knows what he might do?”

“You think I want to play musical chairs or something?”

“Come on, now. You haven’t even said hello to Joseph yet.”

“Aaah—” Cab stormed off toward the front row.

“Well,” said a frosty voice. Nancy looked over her shoulder and saw her older cousin, Rachel, standing behind her. Rachel was short and pretty, with frosted blonde hair and a hard smile curling on her lips. “Nancy. I hardly recognized you.”

“How’ve you been, Rachel?”

“Same as usual. You know Katie’s graduating this year? We’re very proud of her.”

“Nancy,” said Jean, another cousin about Rachel’s age. “Sad about Uncle Leo, isn’t it?”

“And Auntie Bella.”

“They were so close. I don’t know what she’s going to do without him. Or what anybody’s going to do with—well, you know.” The three women stood silently for a moment, nodding gravely. Then Jean tossed back her dark hair and lifted her chin in the direction of the street. “Well, here he comes. Loping up the sidewalk with his plastic bag of *Cracked* magazines.”

Nancy turned to see a huge, black-suited figure making its way up the street. The figure was still blocks away, but Nancy did not need to see the face to know that it was her cousin, Eddie. “Is that really what he’s got in there?”

“Yeah, *Cracked*,” smirked Rachel. “Like his head.”

Jean and Rachel collapsed into laughter and clung to each other, tears streaming down their cheeks. Nancy watched them for a moment, looked back at Eddie who was now only about a block away, then walked off to find her mother and brother.

Louisa met Eddie at the edge of the shaded area and ushered him up to the front row, where he took a seat next to his mother. Nancy had not seen Eddie in about five years, but except for the fact that his hair was a little grayer, he looked the same: seven feet tall; enormous and muscular; gaunt, cadaverous face; perpetual five-o'clock shadow; dark blue eyes that somehow managed to be flat and intensely burning at the same time. As soon as Eddie sat next to his mother, the family settled into place—the older relatives in the folding chairs and the younger ones standing in rows behind them. Nancy stood next to her mother, who was already standing by Tony. Nancy's big cousin, Jack, stood on the other side of her, his arms folded across his chest, his blond beard trimmed neatly over his generous tanned face. "Hey string bean, you a model yet?" he asked, as the pastor cleared his throat at the microphone. Jack had greeted Nancy this way at family gatherings ever since she could remember. "Five bucks says Eddie flips out."

Nancy looked at the back of Eddie's head, which towered over everyone else in the front row. Yes, Eddie refused to take his medicine—but he couldn't help it that, being paranoid schizophrenic, he didn't think there was anything wrong with him. Nancy listened to the soft sighing of the sycamore leaves and added her own to the chorus. She looked back at Jack. "You're on," she whispered.

"Friends, I am honored to speak to you about Leonard Comstock this morning because he was a friend of mine for thirty-five years. He was a kind, intelligent, warm-hearted gentleman who dearly loved his family and friends. He was a quiet man, and so when he spoke, people listened all the more carefully."

Nancy listened to the pastor with relief and gratitude. The fire-and-brimstone preacher that her aunt Louisa had hired two years before, to preside over her grandmother's funeral, had delivered a searing hour-long admonition about how everyone present was going to die someday, and would they be ready for heaven or would they spend a fiery eternity weeping and gnashing their teeth? The preacher had only mentioned her grandmother once during the sermon, and when he did, he'd had to pause and look down at a piece of paper before mispronouncing her name. "You're going to die," he'd hissed to the crowd. "You're all going to die." The ultimate tribute that day, in Nancy's opinion, was that out of love and respect for her grandmother each family member had resisted the temptation to keel over, facedown on the lawn, during the preacher's sermon.

"Now, I'm just an old Okie," the pleasant pastor continued, "and my eyes aren't as good as they used to be, so I ask your forgiveness in advance if I mispronounce anything. Leonard Comstock was born right here in Quail Flat. He graduated from Franklin High School in 1929 and went to work alongside his father and brothers in the family orchards. He saw combat in Italy during World War II, which is where he met his wife, Isabella, whom you see seated in the front row. Leo always enjoyed telling the story about the time he found himself trapped in the line of fire in someone's front yard vegetable garden. With bullets flying over him, back and forth, he couldn't do anything but lie there in that garden and wait for the shooting to stop. He lay there all day, face down in the dirt, and by nightfall he was so hungry that he broke down and picked something to eat. The only things growing there at the time, though, were onions.

Leo always said he'd never forget the fire of five raw onions in his mouth while enemy fire flew over his head."

The family laughed appreciatively. The pastor removed his glasses and mopped his brow. Nancy glanced at Bella, who sat in the front row staring vacantly off to the left.

"Well, Leo made it out of the onion garden," said the pleasant pastor, "and presumably bought a few packs of gum while he was at it. A few weeks later in Rome, he asked a beautiful young Italian woman for directions in front of a fountain, and a few months later that lovely woman consented to be his wife. Leonard and Isabella married in Rome, and then they returned to Quail Flat to make their home near the family orchards. Three years later Isabella gave birth to their only child, Edward, who was his parents' pride and joy. Edward grew up to be a brilliant young man. He graduated with honors from Cornell University in 1969, went on to receive his Master's degree from Harvard in 1972, and—"

"Excuse me." Eddie stood up with his right hand raised and turned to address the crowd. "I'd like to say something."

The air hung heavy and still under the canopy. The mourners shifted uncomfortably and did their best to settle in for the long haul. "Pay up," Jack whispered to Nancy.

"I'd like to say," said Eddie, speaking so quickly that the words ran together, "that I actually graduated with honors from Cornell in 1970 then received my Master's degree from Harvard in 1972 and then continued on at Harvard where I earned my

Ph.D. in 1974 from there I went to work on Wall Street with the company of L.B. Smith from July of 1974 to November of 1979—”

Bella held her hand up to her son as if to say, “why are you telling them this?” Nancy saw her father lean over Louisa and tug at Eddie’s jacket. “This isn’t about you, Ed,” she heard her father say.

“Then in December of 1979 I went to work briefly for Metropolitan Jones also on Wall Street where I conducted direct market research that extended to a number of different companies and I worked there until March 23 1980 at which time I went into business for myself and began to update important information on an hourly basis.”

Eddie sat down abruptly. There was a moment of absolute silence, and then Jack applauded. “Thank you, Edward,” said the pastor, smiling kindly. “I know your father would have appreciated that.” A ratty-looking guitar player stepped up to the microphone. He had long, straight brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, and wore the same faded black T-shirt and ripped jeans she’d seen him in two years before at her grandmother’s funeral. He sang a bluesy rendition of “Balm in Gilead,” which Nancy loved—although she couldn’t help resenting the fact that he dressed like such a slob for her relatives’ funerals.

“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,” concluded the pastor, “Amen.” A breeze swept through the canopy. An old man shuffled up to the coffin and folded the draped American flag into triangles. He handed it to Bella, who looked surprised to be suddenly holding a flag and tried to hand it back. “That’s for you to keep,” Nancy heard Louisa say. “We’ll get a nice box to keep it in.”

The mourners milled around for a few minutes, offering condolences to Bella and occasionally straying over to shake hands with Eddie.

“Who is this?” mouthed Bella, so quietly that Nancy could barely hear her.

“This is Nancy,” said Mrs. Comstock, who held the old woman gently by the elbow. “You used to watch her and Tony when they were little. Do you remember when Joe and I dropped Nancy off at your house in the middle of the night, in her pajamas with a binky in her mouth? When I went to the hospital to have Tony?”

Bella looked confusedly at Nancy. “She is your sister?”

“No, she’s my daughter. Joe is my husband, and Tony is my son.”

“And you are Louisa’s friend?”

“I’m Claire,” said Mrs. Comstock. “I’m married to Joe, who is Leo’s nephew. He’s the one who helped you and Louisa with the funeral.”

Bella nodded a little dazedly.

“I think we’d better get her over to the car,” said Mrs. Comstock. “It’s pretty hot out here for her.” Nancy blinked back tears. She and Tony watched Bella carefully as she walked, making sure she did not lose her footing on the grassy slope that led to the road.

Eddie stood by the curb watching them approach. He stood apart from the dozens of relatives that crowded around their cars, trying to decide who should drive over to the restaurant with whom.

“You’re coming to lunch, aren’t you?” Nancy asked.

“No I’m afraid I won’t be able to make it I’m already behind on updating my information I almost didn’t make it to Leonard Comstock’s funeral this morning I had so much to do—”

“It won’t take too much time to come to the restaurant. I’m sure someone would give you a ride,” Nancy persisted, eye-level with the old envelope that Eddie wore paperclipped to his lapel; handwritten in thin black ink were the words: “EDWARD L. COMSTOCK, MOTHER’S MAIDEN NAME CARPACCIO.”

“No,” he said. “If I go to the restaurant I’ll take the number 29 bus that goes from Spruce Street over to Pine and that will drop me off exactly three blocks from the restaurant and from there I’ll walk down Pine until I get to Orange turn left on Orange and then walk through the doors of the restaurant—”

“There are lots of cars here,” Nancy said. “I’m sure someone would give you a ride.”

“No if I go to the restaurant I’ll take the number 29 bus that goes from Spruce Street over to Pine and that will drop me off exactly three blocks from the restaurant and from there I’ll walk down Pine—”

* * * * *

Nancy sat next to Tony near the end of a long rectangular table that ran down the center of the cool, dark Basque restaurant. Bella sat next to Tony, and Eddie sat across from his mother at the end of the table. Mrs. Comstock, having lingered outside a moment too long admiring the Martha Washington geraniums, had taken the last

empty chair, which was next to Eddie. On her other side, opposite Nancy, sat the ratty guitar player. Nancy considered initiating a discussion on appropriate funeral attire, but decided against it. Instead, just as the soup arrived, she said, "You have a wonderful voice."

"Thank you," said the guitar player, "but there's really nowhere around here to go with it."

"No, I guess not. If you want to sing professionally, though, maybe you should move to a place that's more steeped in music—like Memphis or Nashville."

"Yeah, I've thought about that before. Especially because there's something pretty bad going on in Quail Flat right now and if there's nothing I can do about it—"

"Thank you," said Nancy, as the waitress set a salad in front of her. "Sorry."

"That's okay. Anyway, there's something bad going on around here and I think if I can't do anything about it, it would probably be best just to move to another area. Although it's bound to be everywhere soon enough."

"What is it? Gangs?"

"No." The guitar player put down his salad fork and leaned confidentially across the table. "Have you ever heard of Arnold Snow?"

"Arnold Snow?"

"He's this magician. He has a show on channel 43 in Quail Flat once a week, where he goes around town and does magic. He does it right out on the streets, so there's no way he could be using wires or anything like that."

"He does magic tricks?"

“He does *magic*. He makes things appear and disappear, and he levitates himself and other people. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, right on TV. I think he uses black magic,” said the guitar player, lowering his voice to a whisper, “and I don’t necessarily think he uses his powers for the good.”

Nancy glanced at Tony and Mrs. Comstock to see if they’d heard this, but they were too busy chewing their salads and avoiding eye contact with Eddie to notice. She took a bite of her salad and chewed it longer than she needed to, trying to think of the best way to phrase what she wanted to say next. “Don’t you think,” she said finally, “that if it was really magic, and he’d been doing this on TV for years, that he’d probably be a lot more famous by now?”

The guitar player sat back in his chair. “I think he’s keeping a low profile for the time being.”

Nancy nodded and felt relieved when the waitress came to pick up the salad plates and bring in the next course. “Here, Eddie,” said Mrs. Comstock, “give me your plate and I’ll put some calamari on it for you.”

“Thank you but I prefer to serve myself I never let anyone touch my food which is a tradition I started when I worked at L.B. Smith on Wall Street from July of 1974 to November of 1979—”

Tony kicked Nancy under the table, then gave his full attention to the fried calamari. Mrs. Comstock continued studiously to avoid all eye contact with Eddie, who turned to Bella and began telling her that he had worked on Wall Street—which she certainly knew, since she was his mother.

“What is that?” asked Nancy, as the waitress set a platter of mysterious-looking meat on the table.

“It’s definitely carnage of some sort—” said Eddie.

Tony kicked Nancy under the table again and kept on chewing.

* * * * *

“Nancy? This is Aunt Louisa. Is your father home?”

“Hi Louisa. No, he’s not home right now. Is something wrong?”

“Well, Nancy, I hate to keep calling and bothering everybody, but I just talked to Eddie on the phone and Auntie Bella is missing.”

“What do you mean? How long has she been gone?”

“Well, Eddie said he got home about ten-thirty this morning and she wasn’t there, so he called the police and filed a missing persons report. I’d called this morning to see how she was doing, and the phone just rang and rang. Finally I called Eddie’s number—you know he has his own phone in that little room of his—let me give you that number, by the way, so your father will have it—and Eddie finally answered. I said, ‘Where’s your mother?’ And that’s when he said he didn’t know—that she’d been missing since ten-thirty this morning.”

Nancy looked at the clock. It was just past one.

“It hasn’t really been all *that* long,” she said. “Is there anywhere she goes? Anyone she might have walked over to see for a little while?”

“No, there really isn’t. She walks over to the church on Sunday mornings, but last week when she did it, she fell and nearly broke all the bones in her body and frightened everyone, including herself. So I don’t think she would have done that. Plus, it’s Saturday. Sometimes she walks over to the beauty parlor, but she just did that on Thursday, so she wouldn’t need to go again so soon.”

“Do you think she might have walked over to the cemetery?”

“Well, I thought of that but I don’t know. I only live about twenty minutes away from there. Maybe I’ll hop in the car and drive over and see.”

“You don’t want to go over to the house, though, do you? I heard about what you went through last week with Eddie.”

“No, no. In fact, when I dropped Bella off last night she wanted me to come in but I said I had to get home right away.”

“Dad told me a little about what happened. That must have been terrible—Eddie’s huge!”

“Well, it was terrible, Nancy. But I guess I was invading his territory a little—”

“What, did you try to go into his room?”

“No, I was just in the house. But he’s got an air conditioning unit in his room that he runs, so it’s nice and cool in there, but Bella’s out in the rest of the house and he won’t let her open any of the windows or doors or run the fans, and with the hundred and five degree heat outside, well you can just imagine what it’s like in there. It’s stifling. So she was just miserable. I couldn’t stand to be in there, myself. So I went and knocked on Eddie’s door and he wouldn’t come out. He said he was too busy updating his information to come out and talk to me. So I knocked on the door again

and said, 'Eddie, I really need to talk to you.' And he just said, 'Goodbye,' through the door. But there was poor Bella sweltering and looking so uncomfortable, so I knocked again and then he burst out through the door and yelled, 'What!' So I told him I wanted to talk to him about getting the air conditioning system serviced in the rest of the house, that we really needed to get someone out there to do it. And then he just kind of went berserk and brought up his fist and was backing me up against the wall. And he yelled, you know, '*She* has the money! *She* pays the bills!' And I said, 'Well, I know that's not true, Eddie, because you control everything she does. She won't do anything without your approval.' And then he started cursing at me, using four letter words, telling me to get out of the house, and shaking his fist in my face. Rachel was there with me, and he was yelling so loud that the girl across the street heard him from her bedroom and came out into the street with her cordless phone and called 911. I don't know what to do, but we have to do something and it has to be done quick."

"Did he actually touch you?"

"No, he didn't. But he was very threatening and I was definitely afraid. You know, I grew up with brothers and we argued. And Sam, when he's gotten mad, he and I have had some pretty heated words. So I know when something's seriously threatening."

"Yeah. Dad said—well, that you all knew Eddie when he was a kid and he used to throw a bunch of temper tantrums."

"Yes, he was really kind of a mama's boy. He had to have his ratty old yellow blanket with him everywhere he went or he'd throw a tantrum. He was really a spoiled brat, actually, and a mama's boy. Your father says he's being a spoiled brat now, and I

say no, it's more than that. Well—oh dear, my other phone is ringing. Would you excuse me? And tell your father that I called?"

* * * * *

"Nancy? It's Aunt Lousia again. Well, that was Auntie Bella on the other phone. She called me right when she got home, so I wanted to let you know. She said, and I don't know if it's true or not, that Eddie told her today was Sunday so she walked all the way to church and ended up at a wedding. She rested there for a while and then she came back home. I guess I should wait and see how things turn out before I call and get everybody in a panic."

"Well, you never know how things are going to turn out."

"She's been wearing the same clothes for the last week or two, which is different for her. You know how neat Bella is. The last time I saw her I noticed that her clothes were soiled. You know, they say that's one of the first signs. You remember how Grandma got?"

"I remember."

"Well, tell your father I called, but don't panic him about it."

"No, I'll tell him the good part first."

"I'm sure you will. You know, I *know* you're a grown woman, but we always think of you as a tiny girl running around. You know how it is."

* * * * *

"I think we'll need to start doing this about once a month," Mrs. Comstock told Nancy, her hands resting lightly on the steering wheel. "It's not really something I want to do—Eddie's so weird, you know—but I think it's a good idea to stay in touch with Wanda. She can let us know how things are going, and help keep an eye on Bella."

They drove down the familiar streets, past the abandoned gas station, then stopped at the tiny yellow house where Nancy had spent so many afternoons as a child. No matter how many times she saw it as an adult, she was always surprised by how much smaller it looked than the house in her memory.

"Well, here we are," said Mrs. Comstock. She paused on the sidewalk, frowning at a tree branch that jutted out at eye level. "This will have to go," she said, grabbing hold of the branch and trying to break it off.

"Do you really think you should do that?" Nancy glanced at the tiny house. "We don't know what Eddie's like about these things."

"Well," said Mrs. Comstock, releasing the branch, "it won't break off, anyway. Somebody'll have to come in with pruning shears. I wonder if Wanda has some." They climbed the smooth red steps to the door, and Mrs. Comstock surveyed the adjoining wall. "We'll need to put in a handrail."

Bella answered the door, looking frail and lovely as always. "Come in, come in," she mouthed so softly that only through lip-reading and context were they able to understand her. They glanced around the living room and peered anxiously down the darkened hallway. Muffled opera music was coming through the shut door at the end of the hall.

“Are you all ready to go?” asked Mrs. Comstock. Bella smiled and mouthed something, then moved off in the direction of the kitchen. After what felt like an eternity, Bella reappeared with a bone-colored purse dangling from her wrist.

Mrs. Comstock took Bella’s arm and gently escorted her down the red steps. Nancy followed, relieved to be outside again. “You wait here with Bella,” said Mrs. Comstock. “I’m just going to run over and get Wanda.”

Nancy stood on the sidewalk, holding Bella’s arm. She couldn’t think of anything to say, so she grinned at her great-aunt. Bella smiled back and patted her arm. Mrs. Comstock came down the steps of the house next door with a gangly woman in a faded print shirt and navy slacks. “Hi Isabel,” the woman called. “Are you ready to go to lunch?”

“Well, if that’s what we’re going to do,” mouthed Bella, looking a little dazed.

“You come with me in my car—that’s right, over here in my car—and—do you ladies want to drive over with us?”

“No, I think we’ll follow you to the restaurant.”

“Okay then. Isabel? You get into my car over here.” Wanda helped Bella into the passenger seat of a battered blue Buick.

“I think Wanda may be mildly retarded,” said Mrs. Comstock.

* * * * *

"I'm sure glad you folks are here," Wanda told Mrs. Comstock as they walked through the Magic Spoon parking lot. "Isabel needs some family to keep an eye on how things are going."

The four of them settled into a booth at the back of the restaurant. "Can I start you girls off with some cold drinks?" asked the waitress.

"I think we're ready to order," said Mrs. Comstock, closing her menu. "The lady there would like a chicken sandwich and a Pepsi. I'll have a tuna melt and a Coke. Wanda?"

"Do you have Monte Cristo sandwiches here?"

"Yes ma'am, we do."

"I would like to have a Monte Cristo sandwich and a chocolate shake."

"Yes ma'am. And for you?"

"A piece of berry pie?"

"Is that all you're having?" asked Mrs. Comstock.

"I'm not hungry," said Nancy.

Bella devoted her full attention to the Pepsi when it arrived. Wanda leaned across the table. "Like I said, I'm sure glad you folks are here to see how things go. I try to keep an eye on Isabel, but I work nights at the hospital and sleep the first part of the day when I get home. When Ed doesn't wake me up with his yelling, I mean."

"Yelling?"

"Yes. He yells in the house at the top of his lungs for about ten minutes at a time, four or five times a day, swearing like a sailor."

“Is he yelling at someone?” asked Mrs. Comstock. “Bella? Bella! Does Eddie yell at you when you’re in the house together?”

Bella looked confused and took a sip of her Pepsi. She moved her mouth and said something so quietly that no one could understand her. She laughed silently to herself, then took another sip of Pepsi.

“You see what I mean?” asked Wanda. “But no, I do not think that Ed is yelling at Isabel. He has been out in the backyard lifting weights and has just started swearing like a sailor. The first time I looked out the window to see what was wrong, I saw it was just Ed by himself.”

Nancy ate a forkful of berry filling.

“I try to do what I can for Isabel. I drive her to church on Sundays when the weather is sunny and I go over sometimes to see if she needs anything from the market. But I do not go over there often because of Ed. When I moved into my house nine years ago, Ed looked at me and said, ‘I don’t have to know you.’ He would not shake my hand. But I do love Isabel.”

“It’s very kind of you to check in on her,” said Mrs. Comstock, cutting Bella’s chicken sandwich into finger-sized pieces.

“I figure I would want someone to do it if it were my mother. We all have to help each other out, you know?” Wanda licked some powdered sugar from her fingers. “So Claire, what do you do for a living?”

“I’m a writer.”

“What do you write? Romances?”

“No, I write—they’re articles for businesses. Computer companies, mostly.”

Wanda nodded rather blankly. She took a very long drink of her chocolate shake.

“You said that you work at a hospital?” asked Nancy. “What do you do there?”

“I clean the operating rooms after surgery. I like it.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Mrs. Comstock, setting her Coke down. “Anyway, about Bella.”

“Yes, well, you know the phone has been disconnected? And I don’t know what all is in the refrigerator and the cabinets, so you should probably make sure there is enough food. And maybe you noticed that tree branch sticking out in the walkway?”

“I saw it,” said Mrs. Comstock.

“The gardener will not return because of Ed.”

“Can I get you girls some coffee?” asked the waitress.

“None for me, thanks. Nancy? Wanda? Bella, how about some coffee? Bella?”

“That Pepsi is such a treat for her,” said Wanda, “I do not think she wants anything but that.”

“I guess it’ll just be the check, then,” said Mrs. Comstock. “Oh, no you don’t, Wanda. Put your wallet back. No, really, I insist.”

They walked slowly back through the parking lot. Wanda helped Bella into the passenger seat of her Buick. “We’ll see you folks back at the house,” she said.

* * * * *

“We’d rather not disturb Eddie,” Mrs. Comstock said to Bella. “Don’t you have a key?” Bella mouthed something and rang the doorbell again, and then Nancy heard the sound of heavy footsteps. The door swung open and there was Eddie, wearing a red Harvard T-shirt tucked into a pair of white Bermuda shorts. The old envelope with his name on it was paperclipped to his collar. “Well hello there,” he said. “Come right in I hope you’ll pardon my appearance I haven’t had time to get fully dressed yet I’ve been very busy this morning updating important information and I’m afraid I haven’t had time to complete my ensemble—”

“How’s it going, Eddie?”

He held his index fingers in the air suddenly and froze, as though he were listening to something else. “I need fifteen minutes to read the newspaper.” He turned and walked quickly down the hall, shutting the bedroom door firmly behind him.

“Whew,” said Nancy, sinking into a dusty orange chair. She looked up at the clock in the corner, and saw that it had stopped one day at quarter after nine. Carved wooden pinecones hung still on the ends of small chains; a carved wooden bird peeked out between two partially open doors. Nancy watched Bella walk slowly toward the kitchen, her purse hanging from her wrist.

“This’ll give us a chance to look around,” whispered Mrs. Comstock.

“Carpets—need to be vacuumed. Furniture—needs dusting. I wonder if the phone’s still in the kitchen.” She walked over and snapped the kitchen lightswitch, but the room remained dark. “Change light bulbs.”

“Hey, Mom,” said Nancy, pointing to a shining silver tea set on the counter.

“Where do you think this came from?”

“I don’t know. It looks expensive. I’ve never seen it before.”

Nancy examined the silver sugar bowl. “It *was* expensive. The price tag’s still on it. Bella?”

Bella took two large Nestle’s Crunch bars from the refrigerator and offered them to Nancy and Mrs. Comstock. “Bella,” said Nancy, taking the cold chocolate, “who bought you the silver tea set?”

“It’s dead,” said Mrs. Comstock, pressing the phone receiver to her ear.

“Wanda was right. The wires are still attached, though.”

Bella headed toward the living room.

“Mom, I think she said that Eddie bought her the tea set.”

“Hmm?” Mrs. Comstock hung up the phone and began to rummage through some grocery bags by the wall. “Why would Eddie buy a tea set? Bella, where do you keep your light bulbs? Oh, here they are.”

Nancy was standing on a kitchen chair, replacing the last screw in the light fixture, when Eddie appeared in the doorway. He wore the same shirt and shorts, and had added black socks and shiny black dress shoes to the outfit. “You don’t need to do that,” he said quickly. “You’re guests here and I don’t want to put you to work doing hard labor—”

“That’s okay,” Nancy said, “I’m all done.” She stepped down from the chair where she had, in truth, felt a little vulnerable. She went over to stand by her mother and leaned against the kitchen counter.

“You’re guests here and guests shouldn’t be put to work doing hard labor—”

“It’s done,” said Nancy, “and it wasn’t hard labor at all.”

“Eddie?” began Mrs. Comstock. “I want to ask you about a few things. I want to ask you about your phone being disconnected—”

“Yes the phone is disconnected and the reason that it’s disconnected is because it’s an old style phone that’s wired straight into the wall and the phone company wanted to charge us an extra thirty-five dollars a month to keep it installed there and I don’t think we should have to pay that since they’re the ones that wired it straight into the wall in the first place—”

“Eddie?”

“—and since they’re the ones that wired it straight into the wall in the first place then it’s only fair that they should not charge us thirty-five dollars for having it in our house since they’re the ones that installed it that way in the first place—”

“Eddie? It’s been disconnected for months.”

“—and the reason it’s disconnected is because it’s an old style phone that they wired straight into the wall and the phone company—”

Mrs. Comstock sighed and leaned back against the kitchen counter, waiting for Eddie to take a breath so she could jump in. He never paused, though, so finally she yelled, “Eddie! We’ll get you a new phone!”

“We don’t need a new phone, that’s the crazy part,” he said. “You’re going to stare at me in utter disbelief when I tell you this—”

Surprise me, thought Nancy.

“—but to take out the phone and replace it with a new one the phone company would charge us one-hundred-and-fifty-two dollars and thirty-nine cents and I

absolutely refuse to pay that when they're the ones that installed it in the first place so I have written a letter to the phone company and only when I receive a written answer—"

"Eddie!"

"—that we will not have to pay this exorbitant fee will I permit a representative from the phone company to come into the house and change the wiring so it will be possible to install a new phone—"

"Eddie! Bella needs access to a phone!"

"—she has access to a phone she has access to a phone she can come into my room anytime she wants and she can use my phone and if people want to call her then they can call my phone and I will go out and find her wherever she is in the house and bring her into my room so she can use the phone but you are going to stare in utter disbelief when I tell you that installing a new wiring system here in the kitchen will cost one-hundred-and—"

"Excuse me, Ed," said Mrs. Comstock. "I need to sit down." Nancy followed her mother out of the kitchen and watched her sink into the dusty orange chair.

"You're the first person to sit there since Leonard Comstock died on July 2, 1998," said Eddie, who had followed them into the living room.

"I was just sitting there a few minutes ago," said Nancy, who perched on a dusty sofa arm under a painting of pink flamingoes.

"Then you're the second person to sit there since Leonard Comstock died no one ever wants to sit there it gives them the creeps or something—"

"I don't think anything associated with Uncle Leo would give me the creeps," said Nancy.

Mrs. Comstock clasped her hands and leaned forward. “Okay, Ed. I understand about the phone and I’m glad Bella can use yours if she needs to. But I still need to talk to you about installing a handrail—”

“Absolutely out of the question!”

“— on the outside of the house next to the porch, so when the frost comes and the steps get slippery, Bella will have something to hold onto.”

“My answer is no that is absolutely out of the question I will not even consider installing a handrail on the outside of the house because it would not be aesthetically pleasing for one thing and for another thing she doesn’t need a handrail she doesn’t have any trouble getting up the steps and she hasn’t fallen yet.” He turned to his mother. “You don’t need a handrail by the porch steps do you?”

Bella looked confused.

“See? She doesn’t need a handrail when I worked on Wall Street for L.B. Smith I went bounding up the steps to the U.S. Post Office two at a time on a rainy day and I didn’t have any trouble so she certainly doesn’t need a handrail for three small steps on the porch my answer is no it’s absolutely out of the question—”

“You were a strong young man when you worked on Wall Street,” snapped Nancy. “Your mother is in her eighties and a fall would really hurt her. You put a handrail in to prevent her from falling—you don’t wait until it happens!”

“My answer is no a handrail is absolutely out of the question she doesn’t need one and she hasn’t fallen yet when I worked on Wall Street for L.B. Smith—”

Nancy looked at her mother, exasperated. Mrs. Comstock, however, was looking over at a shining silver vase on the table by the front door. "Eddie," said Mrs. Comstock, in such a gentle tone that her daughter stared at her in surprise.

"—I went bounding up the steps to the U.S. Post Office two at a time—"

"Eddie."

"—and I never had any trouble—"

"Eddie."

He stopped talking, as surprised by her tone as Nancy had been. "You're taking really good care of your mother," Mrs. Comstock said, "and I want you to know how much we all appreciate that."

Nancy watched with amazement as something seemed to open up in her cousin's face. For a moment Eddie relaxed and a smile flickered across his face. "Thank you," he said. It suddenly occurred to Nancy that her cousin was probably more terrified than anyone about what would happen when he found himself alone in the world. He had to know that Bella was all he had left. When she was gone, who—even in his own family—would come to visit?

"Thank you," he said again, and then his face began to contract and he clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. "But a handrail is absolutely out of the question and even if I did consider putting one in that would mean I'd have to install a matching fence all around the yard and to do that I'd have to get a city permit which would take months if not years not to mention thousands of dollars and it would require a great deal of construction and hard labor so even if I were to consider a wrought iron

handrail that was aesthetically pleasing then I would still have to figure out how to install a matching fence around the yard—”

“We’d better be going,” said Mrs. Comstock. “Goodbye Bella. We’ll come down to see you again soon. Goodbye Eddie. Always a pleasure.”

“You’re leaving already?” asked Eddie. “Well it was nice of you to drop by and take my mother to lunch I used to fly out to do that when I worked on Wall Street for L.B. Smith from July of 1974 to November of 1979—”

“Bye Bella, I love you,” said Nancy, following her mother down the path to their truck. “Bye Eddie. See you later.”

Eddie followed close at Nancy’s heels, talking as fast as he could to squeeze all the information he wished to impart into the few moments he had left. Nancy looked back to see Bella making her way carefully down the red steps by the porch, holding onto the wall-mounted mailbox for support.

“—and from there I went into business for myself updating important information on an hourly basis—”

Mrs. Comstock started the engine and began to inch the truck forward. Nancy was torn between holding the door open so as not to be rude, or closing it so they could drive away. Not sure what to do, she held the door open a few inches, which was just enough for Eddie to keep talking through as he walked along next to the moving truck.

“—when I worked on Wall Street for L.B. Smith I went bounding up the steps of the U.S. Post Office on a rainy day without any trouble at all—”

“Goodbye, Eddie,” said Mrs. Comstock. “Close the door, dear,” she whispered to Nancy. “I would like to get home sometime before New Year’s.”

Nancy said one last goodbye, then pulled the door shut. As soon as the door closed Eddie stopped walking and raised his hand in a friendly wave. Nancy turned to look out the back window and saw that Bella had reached the curb and was now standing next to her son. Nancy waved once more to them both. Before she looked away she saw Eddie hold out his arm to his mother, who leaned on it for support.

Together, her great-aunt and cousin walked back toward the house.