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The Geographic Center of Nowhere

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THE GEOGRAPHIC CENTER OF NOWHERE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English and Philosophy
Murray State University
Murray, KY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by Sharon Mauldin Reynolds
May 2017

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Introduction

Long before I ever thought of writers' conferences or MFAs, I was learning what makes a good story by reading. As a child, I immersed myself in the adventures of Robin Hood and Robinson Crusoe, the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, and the rousing Westerns of Zane Gray. I went through Nancy Drew mysteries like a box of Kleenex and graduated to the novels of Ellery Queen in adolescence, going on to discover Daphne DuMaurier and sweeping historical sagas like those of Samuel Shellabarger and Anya Seton.

In college I was introduced to literary fiction and became more aware of style, diction, and structure. Although I was a Mississippian like William Faulkner and Eudora Welty, I had never read their work until then. Welty was even a graduate of my alma mater, Mississippi State College for Women (now Mississippi University for Women), and Faulkner's grandfather is buried in the cemetery of my hometown, Ripley, MS. My first look at stream of consciousness with *The Sound and the Fury* stirred my imagination, as did James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The first story I wrote – which appeared in the student literary journal, aptly called *Dilettante* – was my embarrassingly derivative attempt to emulate this style. I continued in this vein into my early twenties, imitating unreliable narrators like Welty's in "Why I Live at the P.O." and Truman Capote's in "My Side of the Matter." Many of my early efforts at writing fiction were either imitative or autobiographical. Somehow, with little real guidance at the outset, I eventually found my way out of this phase.

Working as a newspaper reporter for fourteen years proved to be excellent training for my writing, even though it took time away from my fiction. Besides helping

improve my syntax, it broadened my experience and introduced me to people in diverse walks of life – from royalty to the homeless. Many of my ideas for stories have come from these experiences, and to this day I still clip news articles that spark my imagination.

A watershed moment in my writing life came in the summer of 2008 when I attended the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Although I had taken writing workshops off and on and even had a couple stories published, I felt like my writing was at a standstill. Much to my surprise and delight, my workshop leader – a famous author whom I had admired for years, Tim O'Brien – praised my stories and gave me a great deal of support and encouragement. I left Sewanee with a renewed determination to continue improving as a writer. I eventually had several more stories appear in literary journals, and in 2014 my short fiction collection was published.

So many authors have influenced me it's hard to narrow the field to two or three. Sherwood Anderson really touched my heart with his collection of small town "grotesques" in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Although Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County originally gave me the idea of creating my own fictionalized Mississippi town, he was more concerned with the legacy of the antebellum South and broader social issues like racism. I liked Anderson's approach of a central character in each story who has a particular inability to express himself or herself. I think it has helped me move beyond Southern stereotypes which sometimes still manage to creep into my stories.

I've also found Richard Yates inspiring. So much of his work is about dreamers who are doomed to fail, like April and Frank in *Revolutionary Road*. As someone once said, Hell is much more interesting than Heaven, and Yates can be brutal in subjecting his

characters to Hell. Yet, he is also compassionate. I would like to be more successful with this approach to my stories by paying closer attention to the nuances of a character's behavior. Alice Munro, another writer with a regional focus, was also influential. Many of her stories are about the dilemma of a young girl coming of age in a small town, a subject I often return to in my fiction.

Munro is also someone to emulate regarding the art of time in fiction. Her flashbacks can go on for pages and encompass a lifetime, but they serve a purpose to the whole story rather than highlighting some random aspect of a character's life. Dale Ray Phillips pointed out in my first draft of "The Geographic Center of Nowhere" that two pages describing the main character's marriage served no particular purpose and took the reader out of the story. Cutting that flashback helped move the story forward more smoothly.

I believe the best short stories are about loss, and that is what I tend to write about. The stories in my thesis all deal with a character who has suffered some sort of loss – whether from a job, a marriage, or through death. Many are driven by a desire for freedom versus the need for safety and security. They persevere and grow despite roadblocks and bewilderments they encounter.

The idea for two stories in this collection came from newspaper articles – "Road Conditions" and "Family Portrait" – the first from an article about a runaway Audi that crashed into an apartment building. The second had been in the back of my mind for years, ever since I'd read a newspaper article on a family who had taken the drunk driver who killed their son under their wing. Aside from the basic situations, both stories were entirely imagined.

But often I find the germ of a story in a person I meet or a chance encounter. “Carleen” grew out of my curiosity about a woman at my niece’s baby shower. Something about her struck me as being so out of place in the little backwoods Mississippi church where the shower was held. I was similarly curious about a female Orkin technician who sprayed my apartment. Although as a reporter I had interviewed many women in non-traditional jobs, I’d never met a female pest exterminator. She also introduced me to a term for certain insects I’d never heard before – “occasional invaders.” A story of the same name grew out of that meeting. Family stories or my own experiences are other sources for stories. For example, “The Geographic Center of Nowhere” was influenced by a year I spent in a small town on the edge of the badlands of South Dakota. There was something so evocative about the terrain. It was the perfect personification of loneliness felt by the main character in that story.

When ideas are slow in coming, I find exercises or prompts are often useful. During my first residency at Murray, Tommy Hays instructed us to put ourselves in the kitchen of our childhood and then add two characters and a conflict. That exercise jogged a memory of a rather unusual gift my grandfather sent us one year – two baby alligators – and ultimately led to a short story.

Although ideas have never been a major stumbling block for me, executing them isn’t always easy. Establishing motivation has been a particular issue. I found Michael Kardos’s book, *The Art and Craft of Fiction*, useful in dealing with this problem in “Occasional Invaders.” If your character’s motivations elude you, he suggests writing a brief autobiography from that character’s point of view (Kardos 163). After I did this for my main character, I discovered information that I condensed into back story and then

changed the opening to reflect her motivation. Introducing a character's wishes right away is also useful in propelling a story forward, according to Josef Novakovich (136).

An example of establishing motivation up front is the opening of Jill McCorkle's short story, "Intervention." Marilyn is going along with an intervention to stop her husband's drinking, albeit not very enthusiastically. But she's clearly worried about him: "Sid is sixty-five. He is retired. He is disappearing before her very eyes" (McCorkle 1061). The story also illustrates the effective use of back story and flashbacks. Woven throughout the narrative as the family prepares for the intervention is the story of Sid and Marilyn's marriage, their children's lives, and the revelation that Marilyn had an affair and also had a drinking problem.

Interiority also gets to motivation and at the very least helps us understand a character. As Kardos points out, presenting the thoughts and feelings of a character is something literature can do and movies and TV cannot (80). Interiority is an element of fiction I need to be aware of and practice more consciously in my writing. I took Lynn's advice to get into Claudia's head in "Family Portrait," and as a result, I believe her motivation toward the end of the story is clearer.

I read somewhere that the most common reason editors cite for rejecting a story is "the ending doesn't work." Indeed, that's a critique I have heard more than once about my own stories. Endings have definitely posed difficulties in my writing. During my work with Dale Ray, I became more conscious of creating a narrative hook at the beginning of a story – "front loading," as he called it – and then circling back to that beginning at the end. Charles Baxter's story, "Horace and Margaret's Fifty-second," is a beautiful example of a circular ending. It begins with Margaret's growing confusion

when she awakens, thinking the sun is shining in a window she'd never seen before. As it turns out, she'd just forgotten to pull the shade down the night before. The ending shows how her dementia has progressed. She talks to a tree about her husband who has Alzheimer's. She knows she will soon be like him but laughs when she thinks about the two of them together, "checking on the sun and other tricks of light shining from odd directions on the open gulf lying radiant and bare between them" (Baxter, "Horace" 30).

I've tried to move beyond epiphanies as a means of ending a story. Certainly Raymond Carver didn't mind ending his stories inconclusively. Nevertheless, we know by the end of "The Student's Wife" that there's little hope for this marriage. And, in "Fever" we understand that the protagonist is going to let go of his marriage and move on. It's tempting to have a character "come to realize," but as Baxter says in his essay, "Against Epiphanies," it's not always necessary and the character's experience might not warrant a vision (52).

Lynn directed me to *Olive Kitteridge* for examples of successful, diverse endings. An instance of another circular ending can be seen in "Incoming Tide." The story opens with a man staring at the ocean and, we later learn, contemplating suicide. At the end, he regains his will to live when he saves a woman who has fallen into the water: "oh insane, ludicrous, unknowable world! Look how she wanted to live, look how she wanted to hold on" (Strout 47). "A Different Road" ends with a long paragraph that summarizes how a traumatic event has changed Olive and her husband and gives us a glimpse into their future: "They would never get over that night" (Strout 124).

I struggled with endings in the early drafts of several stories in this collection. Again, I think understanding my characters' motivation was part of the problem. In

“Carleen” I cut out a long scene at the end about a memory of her first boyfriend because it didn’t really relate to her motivation, plus it took the reader out of the story. Once in a great while the ending just seems to write itself and comes as a surprise, as was the case with “Road Conditions.”

While I have mostly been preoccupied with elements such as structure and characterization in revision, I need to be more focused on line editing. I never thought of myself as being guilty of overdoing clichés until Dale Ray pointed out several examples in my stories. I realized that I needed to be more specific and detailed in my word choices, and that calls for carefully analyzing every sentence.

In particular, I need to be more attentive to imagery and description. As Francine Prose tells us in *Reading Like a Writer*, well-chosen details can reveal a character’s socio/economic status, his hopes and dreams, and his vision for himself (198). Sherwood Anderson is the master of portraying character through such details in *Winesburg, Ohio*. In “Hands,” we see Wing Biddlebaum’s torment and fear as his “nervous expressive fingers” carry bread crumbs to his mouth like “a devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary” (Anderson 34).

Flannery O’Connor’s imagery is unparalleled, her metaphors startling and astute. “Revelation” opens with a long scene in a doctor’s waiting room and closes with one in a pig parlor. This unusual comparison of settings might be seen as a metaphor for the human condition. Almost every paragraph is peppered with pithy descriptions: the grandmother’s large handbag in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” “looked like the head of a hippopotamus” (O’Connor, *Complete* 118); Mrs. Shortley in “The Displaced Person” “stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain”

(O'Connor, *Complete* 194); in "Judgment Day" Tanner thinks of his daughter's apartment in New York as being "in a pigeon hutch of a building, with all stripes of foreigners, all of them twisted in the tongue" (O'Connor, *Complete* 541).

I consider dialogue one of my stronger points. Having grown up in the Deep South, I developed an ear for its idioms and pronunciations. O'Connor's fiction is a wonderful model for dialogue. She doesn't use apostrophes, which can be very distracting. Rather, she often gets the regional dialect across by unusual spellings. In "Judgment Day," for example, one character says "had-do" for "how do you do," "haddy" (howdy), and "you might's well" (might as well). The old man calling a strange Negro "Preacher," a sort of colloquial nickname, is priceless. I love the rhythm of some of her conversations – in "Revelation," for example, when Mrs. Turpin talks about hog farming to the "white-trash" woman: "One thang I don't want," the white-trash woman said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Hogs. Nasty stinking things, a-gruntin and a-rootin all over the place" (O'Connor, *Complete* 493).

All the stories in this collection are either set in rural Mississippi or feature a character with ties to the region. As O'Connor says,

The great advantage of being a Southern writer is that we don't have to go anywhere to look for manners; bad or good, we've got them in abundance. We in the South live in a society that is rich in contradiction, rich in irony, rich in contrast, and particularly rich in its speech (*Mystery* 103).

Even though I lived in the West and Midwest many years of my adult life, I still feel a connection and nostalgia for the Deep South. Mississippi today is much different from the way it was when I was growing up in the '50s and '60s, but the legacy of the

Civil War and the Jim Crow era still lingers. I often feel the need to return to those days in some of my stories – the mid-to-late 20th century – before the pervasion of digital devices. However, I don't want to be confined to those borders or be pigeon-holed as regional writer. Although my characters will most likely tend to be from the South, I hope to place them elsewhere more often.

As I have grown older, so have my characters. I believe there is more of an audience today for characters in their sixties and older and the obstacles they face in the 21st century. Although none of the characters in this collection falls into that category, I have found myself drawn to their situations more often. At the same time, I am intrigued by the so-called millennials and Gen Xers. I find it a challenge to write about someone much younger than I, growing up in a vastly different era. Although short stories are my form of choice, I have also made a couple of attempts at novel writing. A compromise might be a linked short story collection somewhere in the future. There are still other voices, other lives I want to explore.

The Geographic Center of Nowhere

Sam slips a cassette into the recorder. There's a brief hiss of blank tape before the man who calls himself "Uncle Rick" begins his pitch. Every Tuesday the Uncle Rick tapes arrive in a manila envelope at the converted barracks where Norma and Sam live, one of several hauled down from the Air Force base in Rapid City and set up in the dusty courtyard of the Windy Knoll Motel as extra housing for gypsies like school teachers, combiners, and out-of-work cowboys.

"Hey, Sam. How ya doin'?' Ready to get cooking with those books? We're going to read about rocks today – something there's plenty of out there in the badlands. Oh, yeah, I know it's not the most exciting subject in the world. Not like reading about ol' Darth Vader, is it?"

Norma listens from the darkened kitchen, sipping sherry and taking long drags from a Virginia Slim. The jagged silhouette of the mesas against a full moon fills the window. Uncle Rick sounds familiar – a cornier version maybe of another Rick she once knew. But this one is an inmate at a nearby federal prison. He belongs to the prison's Jaycees. Their community service project is tutoring children with learning problems like Sam, who's repeating the third grade.

As long as her nine-year-old son is listening to the voice of this unknown man, she knows where he is. She pours more sherry into the juice glass and goes out into the tiny backyard that overlooks the badlands, sinking down onto the frayed green and white webbing of a lawn chair. Thank God it's Tuesday. A chilly wind is blowing in from the

badlands, though it's still mild for November in the Dakotas. She feels the soft, thick fur of their blue heeler, Jesse – christened by Sam in honor of Jesse James – as he settles at her feet. After a while the screen door slams. So much for a little peace.

“Mom, I don't know how to do this stuff. You gots to help me.”

She closes her eyes, arms growing heavy at her sides. Last time it was a diorama for geography, a tiny African village. Sam got so frustrated trying to make a hut from grass and mud in the bottom of a shoe box, he took the whole thing outside and stomped it into the dust.

“What stuff, Sam? All you have to do is read, follow along in your science book with the recording.” The sweet, syrupy liquid warms her chest. If only Uncle Rick could show up in person.

“No-oo.” Sam draws out the syllable, impatience making his voice shudder. “We gots to build a volcano. That Rick guy said.”

“Sam, I think it was just a suggestion, something you can do later. Besides, we might not have all the ingredients now.”

“You just don't want to help me. I wish Dad was here. He'd help me.”

“Well, Dad's not here. It's just me and you.” The backdoor slams again. She knows his face is red now from anger – even the tips of his ears – and his cheeks puffed out. This isn't how she'd envisioned motherhood. Sometimes she thinks it would be comforting just to lie down in the badlands, go to sleep and never wake up.

She's heard how, every now and then, some Indian, driven to despair, chooses this simple, painless path to death. When the temperature drops well below zero, he fires up his courage with whiskey. Throwing off his clothes, he begins walking down and

down, threading deeper into the shadow of the mesas. She can understand the lure of the badlands, this *mélange* of beauty and bleakness, vast as an ocean floor.

She knows Sam goes down there, despite her taboos. Since Rod left in June, he's been staying away from the house more than ever, roaming the town with another third grader, a boy named Kelly whose mother works at the drugstore. Norma had watched high school kids, who called Rod a hippie because of his pony tail, speeding on their motorcycles through the rough terrain below her house. Neighbors told her teenagers went there to smoke pot at the city dump.

Sam had come home one day with a split lip, crying. He said he and Kelly fell, trying to get away from the older kids who were chasing them on their bikes. Norma stationed herself on the road out front of her house and stopped one of the bouncing motorcyclists.

"Did you boys try to run my son and his friend down with your motorcycles?" she demanded, her mouth tightening. The kid, no more than fourteen, dug his cowboy boots into the hard, dry earth as his bike idled, rolling a wad of snus from one cheek to the other and regarding her blandly. Like most males in town over the age of six, he wore a cowboy hat but no helmet.

"No, ma'am, we did not. Them kids was chunking dirt clods at us. Almost made me wreck. We was just trying to get them to go on home."

Sam denied they'd ever thrown anything at the bikers, but Norma could easily imagine him doing so, especially since he was always trying to impress Kelly.

One Saturday morning, she'd heard them talking on the front door step. "I know this dude that's in prison," Sam said. "Me and him's going to Alaska when he gets out."

“Yeah? How come he’s in prison?” Kelly wanted to know.

“Shot his partner,” Sam said. “Shot the sumbitch right between the eyes for double-crossing him.”

Maybe she should have another talk with Sam about Uncle Rick. Then again, maybe he needed his fantasies. After all, she had her own. She just didn’t share them. Her first real boyfriend had been a business psychology major named Rick. He had red hair and claimed an Irish heritage, demonstrated by his easy charm. When he talked about the business world, he spoke in a take-charge voice that seemed to fit right in with three-piece suits and kidney-shaped desks. Maybe he’d become an entrepreneur, and then gone on to cutting deals, cooking books, defrauding the federal government. But as a prisoner, perhaps he was evolving, becoming compassionate and introspective.

Many of the women in town have husbands or boyfriends in the prison, some very likely guilty of violent crimes. Helga, Norma’s landlady, and LaQuitta, a neighbor who lives in the motel court with her mother in-law, are married to inmates. LaQuitta’s husband is a one-legged drug dealer she hooked up with in the *Rapid City Journal* personals. Helga managed to spend all of one month with her second husband – a car salesman from California who was staying at the motel – before the FBI caught up with him for operating a chop shop.

Norma gets to her feet now and goes back into the house. Sam isn’t in the living room. She hears the voice of Uncle Rick droning down the hall from his room.

“Sam?” She knocks on the door. “Want to see if we’ve got the ingredients for that volcano? We could at least get started.”

After a few seconds, she pushes the door open. The window over his bed is open, the screen out. The tape recorder sits on the floor. There is no sign of her son.

“Damn it, Sam. Get back in this house.” She leans out the window, shouts into the darkness of the motel court, knowing he’s hiding out there somewhere, trying to summon up the courage to keep running. The first time he tried this was right after Rod left. They’d gone grocery shopping in Rapid. He’d seen a rod and reel in the window of a hardware store and begged her to buy it for him.

“I can’t afford it, Sam. I have to buy your school supplies,” she’d said.

“Dad would buy it for me. I know he would.”

“Fine, why don’t you ask him next time he calls?”

“He never calls because he doesn’t want to talk to you,” Sam muttered from the backseat.

No, she thought, he never calls because he’s an asshole. He didn’t want to be married. Or a father. But she said nothing.

When she stopped at a red-light, he jumped out of the car and ran down the sidewalk. She sat there, watching filmy clouds scud across the vast sky. For an instant, she saw herself driving away, putting miles and years behind her. Rod had done it. Now Sam was doing it. Why not her? Horns were blaring behind her. The light was green. She took her foot off the brake, circled the block, and pulled over to the curb, opening the door on the passenger’s side just as her red-faced son walked by.

“Get in, Sam,” she said. “I’ll buy you the fishing tackle for Christmas.”

She knows she’s the easiest target for his anger, but she doesn’t know what to do about it – here, in the geographic center of nowhere. Rod had given her a choice when

they left Michigan over a year ago for the only teaching job he could find – at a high school in a town of eight-hundred on the edge of the badlands of South Dakota.

“You don’t have to come, at least not yet,” he’d said. “Why don’t you stay here till I see what it’s like and maybe find us a place to live?”

“We have to try, for Sam’s sake.” She knew guilt made her follow him. But it was also as if they were in a contest, each hoping the other would leave first.

After a while, she turns the recorder off and lies down on Sam’s lumpy mattress. Another tape begins playing – this one in her head. It’s her own voice, reading from a journal she kept when her marriage started falling apart. The small black book is probably at the bottom of one of the still-unpacked cardboard boxes on the back porch. Like an alcoholic memorizing inspirational lines from the big book, she used to read and re-read the pages. Here’s the way it was on a certain night in June 1973. Here it was six months later. Some days she felt like a schizophrenic searching for a message from aliens, trying to interpret strange markings on the page.

By eight o’clock, Sam still hasn’t returned. Norma gets up from his bed and goes to the back porch, rummaging around in an old shoebox until she finds a hammer and some nails. She’s driving nails into the window sashes in his room when she hears the front door open, then his voice.

“I can just break the window pane.” He’s wearing only a short sleeve t-shirt with his jeans, his cheeks chapped from the wind, swollen in resentment.

“Why are you doing this to me, Sam?” The familiar numbing seeps around her elbows.

“Cause you won’t help me. That Rick guy says your parents will help you.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe that Rick guy should come over here and help you himself.”

They’ve gotten into a pattern she can’t seem to break. She wishes she could feel that surge of love she had felt for Sam when he was younger. Once, when he was around three or four years old, he had looked at her, a frown creasing his smooth little brow, and asked, “Mommy, how will you know me when I’m grown up?” As if he would morph suddenly into adulthood and be swallowed up in a sea of strangers. Charmed, she had clasped him in her arms, assuring him that, indeed, she would always know him. Now she’s not so sure. She sees him standing in his crib as a baby, thumb firmly thrust in his mouth, rubbing the remains of an old yellow baby blanket against one cheek while she comforts him, trying to soothe away the night terrors that used to awaken him. Now she’s alone with a boy who regards her as the enemy, escaping into a harsh landscape populated by convicts and juvenile delinquents.

Almost every Saturday, Norma can count on her neighbor LaQuitta coming over with something from her kitchen. In exchange for room and board, she keeps house for her husband’s 80-year-old mother. A large woman with a long gray pony-tail, LaQuitta has hinted at having Indian blood. The weekend before Thanksgiving, she walks across the court with something in a large mason jar that looks suspiciously like a human organ.

“It’s pickled deer heart.” She sets the jar on Norma’s kitchen table. “My granny’s recipe. Tastes real good with crackers.”

“Thanks. I’ll be sure and try some. Was your granny, um, Sioux?”

“That plus a few other things. Us kids used to think she was a witch. Now I’m keeping care of my old man’s mother, I know what a real witch is. You know, that old

biddy has never once gone to see her son in prison? Says it gives her heart palpitations to look at that razor wire.”

Norma averts her eyes from the gray mass in the jar. “Are you cooking Thanksgiving dinner for your mother-in-law?”

“Well, now that’s how come I wanted to talk to you. Her daughter, that thinks I’m just the housekeeper? She’s coming to carry the old lady to Rapid for the day. Naturally, they never asked me. If you’re not going anywhere, me and you ought to just invite ourselves over to Helga’s for potluck. She’s by herself, too, except for her boy.”

“That’s a great idea,” Norma says. It occurs to her that their husbands might know Uncle Rick, or whatever his real name is. Maybe they could ask around, see who’s in Jaycees, who’s making recordings for school kids.

Early Thanksgiving morning, she walks barefoot across the gray linoleum floor in the hallway to turn up the oil heater. Opening the curtains behind the heater, she sees a pheasant strutting in front of the oil tank. As the bird picks its way through weeds and plastic bread wrappers, its splendid feathers spread out like a stripper’s fan. At breakfast she tells Sam about the pheasant. He eats Frosted Flakes while she mixes up a potato salad to take to Helga’s for Thanksgiving dinner.

“Wish you’d got me up. I’d of shot it with Dad’s .22.”

“I took the .22 apart, remember? Besides we don’t have any bullets.”

“So? Dad showed me once how to put it back together, plus Darwin gots plenty of bullets.”

Norma doesn't particularly like Helga's son, Darwin, a tall, surly-faced sixteen-year-old who helps his mother run the motel. She was horrified on one occasion to see him walk up to a mangy, half-starved dog that had limped into the court, aim a pistol right at its head and calmly pull the trigger. LaQuitta said that was simply "animal control" in this town.

"Well, you don't need to kill a bird unless you're going to eat it," she tells Sam. "Anyway, we already have a turkey for dinner."

"I don't want to eat at her house." Milk dribbles down Sam's chin. He has an overbite but Norma can't afford braces. "She called me a little punk that time." He spits out the consonants, imitating Helga's German accent.

"She could've refused to rent us this place. You did break the vending machine in her office, sticking your hand inside that flap."

"You and the old man wouldn't let me have any money. And he almost tore my arm off," he adds.

Norma never really understood what was broken, just that Helga was shrieking about "a machine that cost me \$10,000." Rod had been furious, jerking Sam away from the vending machine, almost dislocating his shoulder.

"That's just dumb, so dumb," he'd hissed at the boy. Norma's throat had tightened.

"Don't say that," she'd begged in a whisper.

"You won't have to be around Helga all the time," she tells Sam. "You can go down in their basement and shoot pool with Darwin. And don't call your father 'the old man.' It's disrespectful." Even if he doesn't deserve respect.

Norma feels slightly uncomfortable around her landlady, fearing Helga will bring up the vending machine incident or some other misdemeanor Sam might have committed. But as she sits in the kitchen with Helga and LaQuitta, sipping beer and waiting for the turkey to finish cooking, she begins to relax. Helga delicately pours herself another Budweiser at the kitchen counter and stumbles to the maple dinette set in front of the patio doors. She has dingy blond hair and a small square face that looks pissed off most of the time.

“Oh, my goodness,” she says with a little chuckle. “I am all wobbly after only one beer.”

From across the table, LaQuitta surreptitiously holds up five fingers and winks at Norma, who dips her head to hide a grin and looks over at the array of house plants in front of the patio doors. Dead moths and dust balls have collected at the edge of the doors. Helga lives in a real house, not one of the refurbished barracks.

“You have a nice place,” Norma offers when she can think of nothing else to say.

“Oh, but it is too little.” Helga waves her hand. “And everything is move, move.” Norma wonders if she’s referring to a black vinyl recliner positioned incongruously in the middle of the kitchen floor. Helga frowns at her. “You are divorce now?”

Norma shrugs and raises her eyebrows. “Separated.”

“I was wondering. I hadn’t seen your husband for a while. I been divorce before, from Darwin’s dad. I was in Germany, helping take care of my grandmother. He fell in love with somebody else while I am gone. Boom – he moved out. I ask myself, why? Why?”

LaQuitta is brushing her cigarette back and forth across the words “Wall Drug, U.S.A.” on the bottom of an ashtray. Norma figures they’re waiting for her to explain why Rod left. Had he been unfaithful? They both had. Had he hit her? Once or twice, but mostly he just yelled. There were plenty of juicy details, but really they just didn’t love each other anymore.

“What’s it like, visiting in the prison?” she asks. “I mean, how do you get in?”

“How you get in? You steal a car like my old man.” Helga flicks ashes from her cigarette onto the floor.

“There’s this guy up there,” Norma says. “He’s Sam’s reading tutor. Through the prison Jaycees.”

“You can bet he won’t be hanging around my Carl,” Helga says.

“You have to write to them and get them to put you on their visitors’ list,”

LaQuitta explains. “What’d you say his name is?”

“Rick. That’s all I know. It’s funny, but I used to know another Rick who sort of sounds like this one. I don’t remember his last name, though.”

“So, ‘Dear Mr. Rick-the-convict-reading-man.’ Hey, don’t go doing nothing foolish. You want to stay in this dump the rest of your life, waiting for a man?” Helga belches without covering her mouth.

During dinner, Norma watches Sam and Darwin hunched over their plates, silently stoking themselves with turkey and dressing like cowboys in a bunkhouse after a hard day’s work. It pains her to think her son fits in here – in this *dump*, as Helga calls it. If they stayed, he’d be just like Darwin in a few years. She takes a small bite of cranberry

relish, feeling slightly queasy from the beer. Helga's words, *waiting for a man*, echo in her head.

The Tuesday after Thanksgiving, things are quieter than usual at the rural electric co-op where Norma works. Most of the other women in the office are ranchers' or farmers' wives whose families have lived here for generations. Nobody ever mentions her husband or asks her anything about her life. She's not even sure they're curious. By eleven o'clock, she's filled her coffee cup twice, smoked too many cigarettes, and tried to sneak read a paperback book at her desk – Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz*. Now she's peeling hot apricot polish off her fingernails, her thoughts wandering as a radio tuned to the only station with good reception softly plays country-western music.

She pictures Uncle Rick, gazing out a small barred window at the badlands as he records Sam's lessons in the prison library. He has begun to think of Sam as a son. He has two little girls of his own. His wife has custody, plus the house in the suburbs and the car. He thinks about coming to find Sam when he gets out. He won't be able to return to his old job back East, so he'll hire out as a combiner or work on one of the ranches outside town. Although he's pushing forty, he's never been in better shape. The prison has a gym, and he lifts weights every day. Maybe he'll come to the co-op and ask to have the power turned on and the bill put in his name at a little trailer somewhere. Of course he won't know who Norma is. Not right away.

"I'm breaking horses east of town," he'll say, giving a few well-established names gleaned from the Jaycees as references. "The money will be coming in pretty good."

She'll notice the creases still in the plaid shirt and the jeans he's wearing, stiff with newness. The soft, almost cherubic quality she remembered in his face will be gone, not even a trace remaining in the deeply tanned furrows of his brow. But the green of his eyes will be as clear as a mountain creek. Looking at her behind the counter, he will be transported back nearly twenty years to the college library where they first met. His hand, calloused from lifting bales of hay on the prison farm and digging endless irrigation ditches, will slide across the utility contract to cover hers.

"Norma," he'll whisper, "is it really you?"

The front door bell rings just after three o'clock, and Norma looks up to see Sam's teacher, Miss McKee. She's come to pay her electricity bill.

"Is Sam sick today?" she asks Norma.

"I beg your pardon?" Norma looks at the short, plump young woman across the counter. The kids call her Fish McKee behind her back because of her long, thin mouth and slack chin. She's taught school for only two years. The few times Norma has dropped in to pick up Sam or visit the classroom, Miss McKee seemed overwhelmed by her charges.

"He wasn't in school all day. I just wondered if he's got that bug that's been going around."

"Um, yes, that must be it. He hasn't been feeling well." She leaves the office at four o'clock, driving straight home. Pulling into the grassless motel court, she sees the gate to the backyard open, no sign of Jesse. The Uncle Rick tapes are still in the mailbox. She knows Sam won't be in the house but still goes from one room to another, calling him.

“Looks like it’s just me and you, Rick,” she says, opening the manila envelope and slipping the tape into the recorder on the coffee table.

“Hey, kiddo,” the voice begins. Right away she notices something different in the tone. And the drawl is gone. He sounds more Midwestern. “How’d your turkey day go? I sure hope it was better than mine, know what I mean? I bet your mom cooked up something real special. Isn’t she great? Good looking and a good cook to boot. I can just see the two of you sitting down at the dinner table. Hey, save a place for me next time, will ya, podnuh?”

Norma jabs the off button and looks around the room, at the bare windows with shades rolled up. Is this some kind of message for her? She rewinds the tape and is listening to it again when Sam comes in the front door.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

She punches the power button off. Her anger seems to have faded for the moment. She clears her throat. “Why did you skip school today?” He tosses his dusty jeans jacket on the sofa and turns on the TV. “You went out with Darwin, didn’t you?” Helga’s right, she thinks. Sam is a little punk.

“Alls we were going to do at school was dumb things and watch that dumb old movie, *The Hound Who Thought He Was a Raccoon*. Darwin and me hunted for fossils.”

“After supper you’re going straight to bed, no TV. And if you skip school again, you’ll be grounded for a whole week. I have to go to work every day and you have to go to school. That’s just the way it is.”

Sam clenches his fists. “I know why Dad left – because of you. And I’m leaving too.”

“Fine. You do that.” Maybe I’ll leave first. Something cold has taken hold of her.

The following day, after she’s made sure Sam is in his classroom, Norma calls the co-op and tells them she has a doctor’s appointment over in Pierre and won’t be in till noon. She then heads out of town in her old Chevy station wagon, along Highway 81. It’s only a half-hour drive to the federal prison camp. She should easily be home by noon. The prairie stretches out alongside the highway, rocky and brown, the colorful wildflowers that bloom spring and early fall lying dormant. In the distance, she can see the outline of the mountains. It’s a clear day, just above freezing, with no snow in the forecast. She’s never been to a prison, but from the way LaQuitta described it, this one was pretty open, with non-violent offenders living outside the fence. If she can’t get in, maybe she can at least catch a glimpse of Rick. Or someone who might be Rick. It’s crazy, she knows, and she’s not really sure why she’s doing this. She’s probably reading too much into that last tape.

A private road leading to the prison bisects soybean fields surrounded by electric fences. As she approaches the guard’s shack, she sees a massive brick building in the distance. It once housed a college, although Norma can’t imagine who the students might have been, out here in the middle of nowhere. A complex of smaller buildings is in the background.

When the guard approaches her car, she rolls down the window and launches into her prepared introduction. “I’m here to see an inmate. I know this sounds funny, but all I have is his first name and a description. He’s a member of the prison Jaycees.”

The guard studies her driver's license, nodding. "Well, ma'am, I'm afraid you have to be on the inmate's visitors' list before we can let you in. And we only have visiting hours on weekends."

Damn, she should've known about visiting hours. "I'll need his full name to get on the visitor's list, won't I? His first name is Rick and he's got red hair. Do you know anybody like that?"

He looks at her, slowly shaking his head. "We've got 480 inmates, lady. And I only know their numbers, not their names. You could try calling the warden's office."

For a name that could be fictitious and a man who might or might not still have red hair. The futility of her venture suddenly makes her tired. "Yeah, I'll do that," she says. "Thanks." Making a U-turn, she slowly drives back down the road, glancing up in the rearview mirror every now and then. There are no inmates in sight, only the guard watching her leave. She takes a deep breath, tightening her hands on the steering wheel to keep them from trembling. Rick, that other Rick, wherever the heck he is, had dumped her. Why on earth would she ever want to see him again? He was her past, not her future.

That evening, she pulls on her down vest and goes out into the backyard, taking a glass of sherry and an old brown blanket. On impulse, she also picks up the tape recorder. Jesse settles at her feet as she sits in the lawn chair. In the silvery light of the half moon, the rock formations in the badlands are like an alien terrain. The chilly air rushes into her nostrils as she inhales deeply from the cigarette, tugging the blanket tighter around her legs. A cloud moves over the moon. After a while the back door closes softly, and Sam comes over to stand beside her.

"Why are you always out here by yourself?" he asks

“It’s just, I don’t know, pretty, peaceful. Don’t you think?” She puts the glass of sherry beneath the chair, surprised he’d even noticed her absence.

“You said there were rattlesnakes.”

“They’re hibernating. And I’ve got Jesse to protect me.”

He settles on the ground at her feet, hugging the dog. “Good old Jesse. How come you like him now? You didn’t used to.”

“I’ve always liked him. I just don’t like cleaning all the burrs and crap off his coat. Remember what a mess he was when he wandered into our yard?” Thankfully, they’d found him before Darwin had.

“Yeah. I gave him a bath in the tub. He hated it.” Sam notices the tape recorder and picks it up. “Were you listening to this?”

“I thought I might.” She pushes the on button and Uncle Rick’s voice in the darkness begins explaining how one rock changes into another and another and turns into lava that ends up being sediment and so on and on until it becomes lava again. “Of course, this doesn’t happen overnight,” he says. “It takes millions of years.”

After a few minutes, she turns the recorder off. “We never did try that volcano experiment. Maybe we could do that Saturday. Would you like to?”

“I guess so. Is he a real guy, that Rick guy?”

“Of course he is, Sam.”

“I don’t think he’s real. I mean, not a real prisoner.”

“Who do you think he is?” Apparently, Sam has decided not to go to Alaska with Uncle Rick.

“I don’t know. Just a guy. Somebody they pay to do stuff like that, like on TV commercials.” He sits there, rubbing Jesse’s fur. “But we won’t ever know for sure, will we?”

“Does it really matter? He’s helped you, and he must be a pretty good person, doing what he does for kids.” Or maybe he just wants time off for good behavior.

The moon slips out of the clouds, rising over the badlands. She’ll miss this view when they leave, a reminder of beauty amid starkness, like prairie flowers on a bleak landscape. But there’s nothing else for them here. Rick isn’t going to leap from the tape recorder or the manila envelope, a full-grown, mail-order super hero, even if she wanted him to. Rod isn’t going to transform suddenly into the ideal husband/father and return. It’s all on her. She stares into the darkness and tries to imagine life without a masculine presence, with only a recorded voice repeating the same words until the battery goes dead. Whatever comes next is unclear, as murky as the far reaches of the badlands that she races toward in her mind.

Family Portrait

It was awful what happened to the Reids and the Heavener's that summer night two years ago. Both couples were up in their sixties and in the best of health. Fred Reid still taught history at Mount Vista High School, but Claudia, his wife, had taken early retirement from her job as principal at the elementary school. She'd discovered a love of travel late in life and enjoyed taking off with various groups to Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon and even Alaska on a cruise. Fred was more of a homebody.

Geneva and Vance Heavener owned a farm and ran an auto body shop out in the county on Dumas Road. They were big in the Pentecostal church. The two couples didn't socialize together, but they certainly were acquainted. Claudia knew the Heavener's daughter, Joanne, in elementary school, and Fred had taught her in his western civ class her junior year.

Since this thing happened, Fred has started going back to services at the First Presbyterian Church. Claudia doesn't go with him. She doesn't go much of anywhere. Doesn't even look at the travel brochures she's collected. The Heavener's weren't the sort to come into town often anyhow, so they haven't been missed. Some people said they probably didn't want to run into Claudia. Because of the daughter and all – Claudia and Fred's daughter, Frankie, the one that killed little Joanne Heavener.

You hope, when the phone rings at 2 a.m., it's the wrong number. Claudia and Fred had just fallen asleep. They'd stayed out late at the country club's Fourth of July

cookout and watched the Lions' Club fireworks show at the fairgrounds. Claudia, who was a light sleeper, jerked awake. Her hands shook so much she almost dropped the receiver.

"Hello," she pressed the phone against her ear. "Who is this?"

"Miz Reid?" It was a man's voice. Frankie's dead, she thought. Just go ahead and say it. Their daughter had left the country club early, saying she was going to a field party out in the country.

"Yes, for goodness sake. Who is this?"

"Miz Reid, this is Sheriff Thurmond. Sorry to disturb you and your husband at this hour but I'm afraid there's been an accident. You all need to come on down to the hospital."

"For God's sake, sheriff. Just tell me – is Frankie hurt? Is she dead?"

"Oh, no, m'am. She's fine, but we had to bring her in to get her checked out."

The Reids arrived at the Mount Vista Hospital twenty minutes later, looking like refugees from a hurricane, coats thrown on over pajamas, hair uncombed. Claudia hadn't even put on her bedroom slippers. Their twenty-year-old daughter sat in the lobby, very much alive but, to her parents' horror, in handcuffs. Sheriff Thurmond got to his feet and shook hands with Fred.

"Frankie!" Claudia cried, running to her daughter. "What did you do? Why are you like this?"

"It's just procedure, Miz Reid," the sheriff said. "We have to do that whenever there's an arrest of any kind."

"Arrest for what in God's name?"

Sheriff Thurmond began telling them about the “vehicular accident.” His flat, country voice seemed to be part of a dream Claudia was having. She heard “high rate of speed” and “failed to negotiate a curve,” etc.

“And then the vehicle just ploughed right through the living room wall of the Heavener’s residence. Hit that couch like a freight train,” the sheriff was saying. “Right where that little girl had fell asleep watching the television.”

“What do you mean? What girl?”

“Little Joanne Heavener. She was supposed to get married next month. Her fiancé is coming home from Afghanistan.”

Claudia and Fred looked at each other, both gone pale. “Is she okay?” Claudia asked, her voice a whisper. Please don’t say she’s dead, please let her just be hurt a little.

The sheriff sighed and looked down at the tip of his lizard skin boots. “No m’am. Not yet but she’s still unconscious. Took a real awful lick to her head. They’ve got her up at Baptist Hospital in Memphis.”

Claudia felt as if her face had frozen. She couldn’t stop shaking her head. “Are you. . . are you sure. . .” she began.

“Oh, yes, m’am. She took such a lick on the head – “

“I mean are you sure it was Frankie driving?”

The sheriff frowned. “Well, she was at the wheel, Miz. Reid. And there wasn’t anybody else in the vehicle at the time. So yes, m’am, I’m pretty sure it was your daughter driving.”

Fred got to his feet, clearing his throat, and addressed his daughter. “Frankie, you haven’t signed anything or made a statement, have you?”

Frankie looked up from examining the floor, her eyes bloodshot and bleary. Beneath the fringe of dark bangs, her skin was dead white. “Dad, I . . . I don’t remember anything. Just waking up in the ambulance.”

“Then don’t say a word. I’m calling Steve Fortier soon as we get home. She can come home, can’t she, sheriff?”

“Well, eventually, Mr. Reid. First I’ve got to run her down to the station and book her. Then she’ll have to go before the judge in the morning.”

“You mean she has to spend the night in jail?” Claudia asked.

“Yes, m’am, what’s left of it. Now if you all don’t mind, I need to be going. The sooner we get this over with the better.”

Claudia was distressed to see what looked like vomit stains on Frankie’s T-shirt. She took hold of her forearm but Frankie pulled away. “It’s okay, Mom. I’m a big girl.”

“Court’s at 9 a.m. if you all want to be there,” the sheriff said, leading Frankie out the door.

“We’ll be there all right,” Fred said. “Don’t worry about a thing, honey. I’m calling Steve Fortier soon as I get home.”

Claudia put her hand over her mouth as her only child was led away to the blue and gray squad car. She thought of watching her walk into the school room the first day of kindergarten, carrying a little pink book satchel. Now she’d gone and killed somebody. “It’s over,” she whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Her life is over.”

“Nonsense,” Fred declared, steering Claudia out the door into the parking lot. “Steve’ll take care of this. You’ll see.”

She was silent on the short drive back to the house, a list scrolling through her head of what they should or could have done to prevent such a tragedy. Fred was rattling on about college and how Frankie could've had some structure, some guidance if she'd gone to college instead of running off to Nashville right out of high school, where the only thing she learned was how to drink and do drugs. Now look at her, twenty years old, divorced, and likely facing jail time.

Claudia didn't move when he pulled up in the driveway of their ranch-style house.

"We could've done something sooner," she said finally. "She ran wild in high school and we never tried to stop her. My job was just so demanding, and you always had your nose in a book."

Fred rested his forehead on the steering wheel and sighed. "Claudia, let's not fight now. We can't change the past. We have to stay strong for Frankie."

As she lay sleepless in bed, images of her daughter flickered through Claudia's mind. Frankie as a three-year-old, plucking daisies from a neighbor's yard, presenting them to her mother. Claudia had scolded her, made her apologize to the neighbor. But I loved her, she thought. Once, when Frankie was eleven, she'd been angry at Claudia over something and taken a pair of scissors to one of her mother's blouses, slicing through a sleeve. That hurt Claudia terribly. I loved her. Why couldn't she see that?

The preliminary hearing the following morning was mercifully brief. A date was set for Frankie's next court appearance when she would be formally charged and restitution set for the damage to the Heavener's house. Since she'd had a possible concussion and needed to be closely watched for the next few days, she would have to

stay with her parents, at least for a while, which was fine with her. She didn't want to go back to the shabby little duplex on the outskirts of town where she'd been scared all the time, listening for her ex-husband to return. That's why she started sleeping with the television on – so she wouldn't hear him when he came.

In her parents' basement she turned on the television and aimed a box fan at her bed. She didn't want to move ever again. Still, her sleep was restless, especially the first couple of nights. She wasn't allowed anything stronger to drink than Coke, which just made her pee. Her mother brought tea and toast on a tray and spoke only in one- or two-word sentences: *Here. Eat. All finished? Okay. Goodnight.*

Her father came down occasionally. At first he tried to talk about her “disease,” as he called it. *Was it their fault? Had they been too hard on her? Too lenient?* But when she refused to answer, he didn't press her. The doctors had probably warned him not to be confrontational because of the head injury. He dropped the father-knows-best routine and just watched TV with her.

The Heavener girl didn't die right away. She lay in the Memphis hospital for two months in what they called “a medically induced coma.” Translation: brain damage. Her fiancé had come home from Afghanistan and now was stationed at her bedside 24/7. Maybe she knew he was there, maybe not.

Mr. and Mrs. Heavener wrote to the judge, saying they wanted the person responsible for their daughter's injuries to be a “tool for educating others about the dangers of driving drunk.” If Frankie's accident had happened today, she would be sitting in prison for a very long time. But it was the '80s, and laws weren't as tough then. She

was convicted of manslaughter after Joanne Heavener finally died but, thanks to her lawyer, sentenced to only nine months' home incarceration and a \$25,000 fine, plus weekends in jail for a year. After the year was up, she was put on probation and required to give talks at schools around the area for Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Claudia and Fred blamed Frankie's ex-husband for the drinking and drugging. *You didn't used to be this way, her mother said. Going up to Nashville right after high school and getting involved with a drug dealer? That's where it started, all this stuff with crack cocaine and what have you. We should've stopped you.*

First of all, I drank and smoked pot all through high school and you guys just chose to look the other way. Second, you were the ones wanted me to marry him. You came up there and practically dragged us to the altar.

They'd been afraid she'd end up pregnant, without a wedding ring. She was an embarrassment to them, a disappointment. Two educators whose daughter just barely made it through high school. Well, now she'd given them something to really be embarrassed about. *Is that what you're trying to do, the shrink they made her go to after the accident asked? Hurt your parents? No, she'd told him. I'm not thinking about them at all. I just like to get high.*

When she and Donnie had moved back to Mississippi, Frankie told her parents it was just too hard to break into the country music scene. But the real reason for the move had been Donnie's arrest for trafficking. They'd slipped out of Nashville while he was out on bail. He went to work at the shoe factory in Mount Vista, and she took a job

spinning records at the local radio station. *Direct from Nashville*, was the way the announcer introduced her.

In their backyard, among the corn and squash, Donnie grew cannabis and constructed a still in the shed. He sold moonshine in Mason jars to local blacks, pot to high school and college kids. She was fairly content until she found several messages on the answering machine from two different women. He claimed they were ex-girlfriends who were harassing him, wouldn't leave him alone. She believed him until a third called, claiming to be his wife. By then he was dealing with some gang members from up North who were pissed off because a white boy was infringing on their territory down in Mississippi. Her complaints were just a distraction. She threatened to burn down his cash crop and the still if he didn't tell her the truth about the women. She wouldn't really have done it, but he thought she was responsible when, late one night, somebody did indeed put a torch to the cornfield, destroying everything but the house.

I will come back and kill you in your sleep, he'd told her before he left. *I swear to God I will, you ungrateful bitch.*

Not if I kill you first, she'd said.

Geneva and Vance Heavener had become a hovering presence while Frankie was incarcerated. Every weekend one or both went down to the jail to make sure she was safely behind bars. "That little mouse" is what Claudia called Geneva. Soft-spoken and shy, she'd probably been a beauty when she was young, with red hair and skin fine as porcelain, eyes sea-glass green. She'd always been a tiny little thing, but in the year since her daughter's death she seemed to shrink to almost nothing. Vance was balding and

stoop shouldered, with deep-set brown eyes and heavy brows in a long face. Claudia referred to him privately as Lurch, from the “Addams Family.”

After Joanne’s death, Geneva started dreaming about a pink door. Pink had always been Joanne’s favorite color. Her bridesmaids’ dresses were going to be pink, and she’d chosen pink carnations to highlight her bridal bouquet. At first the pink door Geneva dreamed about was locked. She would stand in front of it, knocking repeatedly, until finally she woke up. At other times, she would wander into another dream, but she always circled back to the door. Once she found herself in an aquarium, watching a humpback whale. She sipped a cup of tea and thought how sad it was the creature was trapped like that.

Geneva didn’t tell her husband about these dreams. He was a quiet, no-nonsense person who didn’t believe dreams were important unless God or Jesus was speaking directly to you. Geneva wondered if you could think of the whale as Jesus in disguise, but Vance would most likely consider that sacrilegious. Could the pink door represent heaven? If it did, Geneva thought Joanne would be behind it.

The dream gave her a great deal of comfort. She began to wonder what Joanne would say to her when the door opened. One morning as she awoke, the answer came to her: Joanne would tell her to forgive the Reid girl. Geneva didn’t know how she could do that. The girl was still alive; she had her whole life ahead of her. Joanne never even got a chance to get married and have children. All her dreams were stolen by that girl. Then Geneva heard Frankie speak at the local high school and everything changed.

When Geneva phoned the Reids, Claudia didn't give her a chance to say anything beyond her name and asking to speak to Frankie. "What more do you want from my daughter?" she demanded. "Hasn't she been punished enough? She'll be paying for this one mistake for the rest of her life, believe you me. Who's going to hire a convicted felon?"

But Geneva said she didn't want to punish Frankie. She wanted to invite her to go to church that Sunday. Claudia pictured her daughter being pilloried before the congregation. Geneva assured her nothing could be further from the truth.

"You see, Mrs. Reid," she said in that barely audible voice, "I heard Frankie speak at the high school last week, and I have come to realize that I was wrong about her. I'm not proud of the fact that I judged her, that I used to think she wasn't anything more than a no-account drunk who had no remorse for killing our only child. As you know, I wanted her to go to jail for the rest of her life and thought she got off easy. But, again, I was wrong. When she got up there to speak to an auditorium full of teenagers and told them how much she regretted what she'd done, that took a lot of courage. I saw that she really was remorseful. I believe God has forgiven her. And so have me and Vance."

She went on to tell Claudia how she'd gone up to Frankie after the speech. She looked scared to death, Geneva said, as if she expected to be yelled at in front of everybody. Instead Geneva thanked Frankie for a wonderful speech and said she forgave her. "We both cried," she added.

Reluctantly, Claudia called her daughter to the phone. Claudia wasn't happy about this whole public speaking thing, but it was all mandated as part of the suspended

sentence. Frankie was becoming the poster child for MADD. At least she'd quit drinking, Fred would say.

Frankie agreed to Geneva's invitation, and from that Sunday on, a pattern was set. She would drive out to the Heaveners and go to church with them. Afterwards, they would come into town for dinner at KFC. On Wednesdays, she'd join the Heaveners' Bible study group. Every day she talked to Vance or Geneva or both on the phone. Then in April, she announced she was getting baptized. Even Fred was disturbed by this development.

"Are you sure about that, honey?" he asked. "You want to join the Pentecostal Church?" It was one of those rare occasions when Frankie was eating Sunday dinner with her "real parents," as Claudia had taken to calling herself and Fred. Lately, she'd also been spending more time helping the Heaveners around their farm.

"Yes, Dad, I'm sure." Frankie looked up from her plate. "The people in that church are so loving and welcoming. They treat me like a normal person. Not like a ...you know."

"You don't think you'll be treated like a normal person in the Presbyterian Church, where your family belongs?" Fred asked.

"I didn't say that. I hadn't been to that church in so long, though. This one, the Heavener's, feels more like home to me."

"I suppose next thing, you'll be rolling on the floor, talking in tongues," Claudia pushed her chair away from the table.

"Maybe, if the Holy Spirit is within me."

Frankie wished she could make her mother understand that she just wanted to be at peace with herself and the terrible thing she'd done. She realized Claudia probably felt threatened by the Heaveners, especially Geneva. Geneva had even warned her about that.

“Satan will try to turn you around, back to your old ways,” she'd said. “He'll try to tempt you away from the church. And he's not above using those you love to do that.”

Frankie didn't think Claudia was in league with Satan, but she hadn't been a very good mother, constantly criticizing Frankie about everything from her grades to her weight to her choice of friends. And she was the same way with Fred. Sometimes Frankie wondered why she'd even married him and had a child by him. She could never tell Geneva this, of course. She and Vance were just the opposite, doting on each other and on their daughter. Joanne had clearly been wanted as a baby. And Frankie had to go take her out of their lives.

In June, she went to work at Vance Heavener's body shop. Claudia didn't hesitate to express her disappointment. “A mechanic? Seriously, Frankie? You don't know anything about cars.”

“Vance is going to teach me, Mother. You ought to be happy because now I can move out.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Heaveners are going to let me stay in this room they have off the garage as part of my salary. It's more convenient. That way I don't have to worry about driving out there.”

“Don't you get it, Frankie? You'll never be able to move on with your life as long as you're tied to those people.” Privately Claudia believed the Heaveners wanted to

continue punishing Frankie, but she knew it was no use telling her that. Even Fred scoffed at the idea.

“You make them sound like a cabal, like demons,” he’d told her.

“Maybe that’s what they are,” she’d replied.

Claudia predicted that Frankie would be back home within a week at the Heaveners. But a week came and went, then a month, and from all reports Frankie was settling in. Fred drove out to see her one afternoon in September after school. He didn’t know what to expect when he pulled up to the corrugated steel building next to the Heavener’s house. There were two bays, both with cars up on lifts. A mechanic in blue coveralls, standing behind a green Subaru, turned around as he parked. Fred realized it was his daughter.

“Hi, Dad.” Frankie strode toward him, all smiles and hair tucked beneath a John Deere baseball cap. She rubbed her hands with a small towel and leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek. “I’d give you a hug but I’ve got grease all over my hands.”

Fred just shook his head but couldn’t help smiling. He’d always wanted a son and now it looked as if he had one. “Well, I guess there’s something to be said for country living and hard work. You’re looking great, Frankie.”

“Yeah, who knew? Party girl turns grease monkey. Bet folks would get a kick out of that.” She led him to a picnic table beneath a pecan tree. “Geneva usually brings me a snack about his time. She’ll be glad to fix something for you, too.”

“No, no. I can’t stay. Got to get back and grade some papers. I just wanted to see how you’re doing, how you like your work and living way out here.”

She grinned, rubbing the back of her neck. “Strange as it may seem, I really like it – compared to standing at the cash register at Walmart or sewing seat covers for cars.”

“You know, they have mechanic classes over at the community college. You could get an associate degree.”

“I’ve got the best teacher right here, Dad. Besides, we’ve had this conversation before. I don’t want a degree.”

“Yes, I know. Sorry, honey. Can’t blame me for trying.”

She wished he could understand she didn’t want to be in her head. Sitting in a classroom would be more than she could take. Too much time to think. The tactile feel of an automobile engine kept all her attention at her fingertips, in front of her eyes. She never wanted a drink or a hit while she was underneath the chassis of an automobile.

Geneva kept a vase of fresh flowers on a small table against the wall where the sofa once sat. An 8x10 photo of Joanne was in a silver frame next to the flowers. There was no sign of the damage done by Frankie’s car. The dry wall had been replaced and painted over, a nice shade of lavender. Sometimes Geneva sat in the wingback chair beside the table to read her Bible. It was the only book in the house besides the *Farmer’s Almanac*. Frankie was used to being surrounded by books and had taught herself to read by the age of five. But she found she liked the absence of books, so different from the house she’d grown up in.

She would always be fifteen back in that house. Her parents would continue trying to re-invent her. Geneva and Vance didn’t care whether she had a college degree. They didn’t expect her to be perfect. Geneva did ask one thing of her, however.

“Whatever you do from now on,” she’d told Frankie from the beginning, “you have to do twice as good because you’re living for two.”

On Frankie’s 21st birthday, Claudia drove out to the Heaveners for the first time. She hadn’t seen her daughter in months. From what Fred had told her, she expected to be greeted by a coverall-clad, grease-smearred tomboy. But when she arrived at the Heavener farm, Frankie was nowhere in sight.

“Oh, Geneva’s got her helping around the house and garden on weekends,” Vance Heavener said. “She still works on cars, though, during the week.”

When Geneva opened the front door, Claudia was greeted by the smell of cinnamon. “So nice to see you,” Geneva said. “Frances will be so pleased. She’s back in the kitchen, doing a little baking. We’re making her birthday cake.”

“Frances? Is that what you call her?”

“Yes, m’am. It’s what she wanted. Made her sound more grown-up, I guess.”

Frankie stood at the kitchen counter, her back to Claudia. Her auburn hair was twisted into a bun at the back of her head and she wore a plain white blouse with a blue denim skirt that fell almost to her ankles. She turned, with a smile that seemed genuine.

“Mother, how nice to see you,” she said, sounding just like Geneva.

A few months later, Claudia picked up the *Tupelo Journal* and saw a front-page photo of her daughter having Sunday dinner with Vance and Geneva Heavener like that was where she belonged. The accompanying story, headlined, “Couple Forgives Drunk Driver,” told how the Heaveners had lost their only child but found peace in forgiving the

person responsible for her death. *The Lord said forgive thine enemy and we have forgiven Frances Reid*, Vance Heavener was quoted as saying. *We've practically adopted her*, Geneva Heavener said. *She spends more time with us than she does with her own parents.* Claudia stared at the grainy photograph. Geneva's remark stung, but Frankie's hurt worse: *I've never felt so much love*, she said. *They've made it possible for me to forgive myself.*

Why hadn't we seen that, Claudia wondered? They'd never talked to Frankie about her guilt feelings or the Heaveners' loss. They'd been too busy trying to keep her sober and out of jail. Why discuss her guilt feelings? That would be like rubbing her nose in it. *I've never felt so much love.* Didn't she know Claudia and Fred loved her too? Claudia looked at the paper again. She couldn't remember the last time Frankie had been photographed with her and Fred. They didn't keep framed pictures hanging around the house, certainly nothing like a family portrait. They hardly ever sat down together for a family dinner. She took her cup of coffee into the living room, sinking down onto the avocado green sofa.

People should tell you these things, but it all goes by so quickly. Then the day comes when you wish you'd had family dinners, you wish there was a family portrait hanging over the fireplace. Instead, there's a tasteful, gold-rimmed mirror and in the dining room a mahogany table that's never set for dinner.

Occasional Invaders

The exterminator was nervous. She drove out County Road 73 in the 1999 Mazda pickup, a sign advertising “JJ’s Allrite Pest Control” plastered on the side, and bounced past kudzu-draped hills and across a narrow wooden bridge spanning a branch of the Hatchie River. Cresting a hill, she could see what Dr. Hayes Talbott called his “cabin,” sitting on a ridge, half-hidden by pines and mimosas. Somewhere amongst that maze of twenty-odd rooms there was a cabin, built by a northerner back before the Civil War as a hunting lodge. Over the years the original cabin had been enlarged with a series of wings fanning around it like a miniature Pentagon. It was home to Hayes when he wasn’t staying at his Alaskan chalet or traveling the country, destroying buildings in the name of his salvage business. The exterminator, who was called JJ, hoped he didn’t know this was her first job.

When the woman she assumed was Mrs. Talbott opened the door, JJ was struck by her teeth – maybe because her own were so crooked. Mrs. Talbott’s were small and even, almost like a baby’s, except for two sharp canine uppers. Silver bracelets jangled on her wrist. One small hand streaked with dirt held the door knob.

“You the exterminator?”

“Yes, m’am. Jennifer Jumper. JJ.”

“A bug lady. Cool. I’m Sheilda Talbott. Come on in. Let me run wash up. I’ve been down in the basement, poking around in those dusty old shelves.”

JJ stepped into the foyer and found herself facing a full suit of armor with a pick ax in one hand, guarding the door, and a floor-to-ceiling painting of a nude woman on horseback on the back wall. So this is what it's like to be rich, she thought.

"Dr. T. does like to impress," Sheilda said when she returned a few minutes later, her lavender-lined eyes crinkling in a smile. Nice. She made him sound like a rapper. "Wait'll you see the Trophy Room. But first, let's take a look at where the problem is."

JJ followed her through a huge room, where the only furniture was a white baby grand piano in the middle of a gleaming hardwood floor, to a door in the kitchen that led down to the basement. When she'd called earlier that day, Sheilda had described finding some "flat, silvery bugs" skittering through the crevices of the brick walls in the wine cellar. Silverfish, JJ had deduced. They were plentiful in Mississippi.

"Dr. T's scared to death these things are going to get upstairs and mess with his trophies," Sheilda said, clattering down the steps in strappy silver pumps.

"Yep. They can be death on fur and feathers." Like most everybody else in the county, JJ had heard all about Hayes's famous "Trophy Room," where he showed off the stuffed bodies of various creatures he'd bagged during his younger days on worldwide safaris.

Sheilda glanced back, a hint of a smile tugging one corner of her mouth, eyes a smudge of cloudy green glass. "Basement," like "cabin," was a misnomer. The room was more of a concrete bunker, with shelves of canned food, bottled water and bathroom necessities lining the walls.

"Planning on weathering a nuclear holocaust?" JJ asked. A leather couch and a desk with a computer were positioned on an oriental rug in the far corner

“Oh this? Just some extra supplies. Dr. T. thinks, you know, folks ought to be prepared, especially after all these hurricanes. Here we are.” She opened a steel door that led into a dark, narrow room where the temperature was several degrees cooler.

JJ had never seen a wine cellar before, though she remembered reading about one in an Edgar Allan Poe story. She shone a flashlight on the racks of bottles, dozens of them, many filmed with dust. One or two silverfish obligingly showed themselves, and then quickly glided back into the darkness, tiny antennae waving. She grabbed one with gloved fingers.

“We call these occasional invaders.” She showed Sheilda the half-crushed insect. “They’re like crickets or centipedes. They don’t really want to live inside, but they can do some serious damage if they get in.” At least that’s what she’d concluded after doing some research the night before on the internet. Getting certified as a pest control technician hadn’t involved very extensive training.

Sheilda wrinkled up her nose, drawing her head back. “Yuck. That’s disgusting.”

“You probably don’t realize it, but creepy, crawly creatures are all around us. Why you’re never more than fifteen feet away from one on any given day.” More information gleaned from surfing.

“TMI. I’d rather not think about that.”

Back upstairs, she took JJ on a quick tour of the Trophy Room, where the walls were crowded with mounted heads of moose, deer, bears and a billboard-size picture of a young, robust looking Hayes kneeling beside a dead elephant. A polar bear and a grizzly stood beside the French doors leading into the dining room, clawing the air, as if ready to grab visitors for their own dinner. A full-sized ram, or mountain goat, sat on a fake rock

high up on one wall. The fieldstone fireplace at one end of the room was big enough to hold JJ's pickup. A long black leather sofa was positioned in front of it, draped with a zebra hide.

"Just between you and me, I don't like all these dead eyes staring at me," Sheilda said, lowering her voice. "But you know how men are."

I'm sure you do, JJ thought. The story was, Hayes had brought her up here to northeast Mississippi a few years ago after finding her wandering along the beach, down the coast from Biloxi. After he'd lost his medical license, he'd gone into the salvage business. His crew was finishing the job on houses Katrina hadn't completely destroyed. Sheilda had been picking through the debris of her own house when he'd noticed her. He'd supposedly offered her a private suite at his cabin and a job as personal assistant/caretaker.

"No sign of any varmints up here," JJ said as Hayes walked into the room. She hadn't seen him in years and barely recognized him. He seemed to have shrunk and his skin was blotchy.

"I never had any problem with these things before," he said, scanning the service contract and scribbling his signature. "Sheilda must've brought them up here," he added with a little chuckle, rubbing his sparse, iron-gray goatee.

"Oh, hush," Sheilda said, flapping a hand at him. JJ waited for a ripple of flirtation to pass between them, but Hayes just frowned, squinting at her like he was trying to figure out who she was, his cloudy green eyes like old dollar bills that had gone through the wash. She wondered if he'd remember a skinny blonde they used to call "Spiderlegs" back in high school. But that was more than twenty years ago. He wasn't

the only one who had changed. Her hair had dulled to brown and she was no longer skinny.

“Didn’t you used to play guard on the girls’ basketball team?” he asked, surprising her.

“Forward. All four years. You’ve got a good memory.”

“Oh, I went to all the games, boys and girls. My son, Trey, played basketball and football.” Which, of course, she knew. Trey had been in her class although they didn’t exactly run in the same circles. He went on to pledge Sigma Chi at Ole Miss while she never even went to junior college. “Well, I sure hope our little problem is confined to the basement,” Hayes said, handing her the signed contract.

“I wish I’d been with you. I’d love to see what that place looks like on the inside.” JJ’s mother spewed out a lung-full of smoke, taking another sip of coffee. She stood in the bedroom door, watching JJ remove a khaki and orange baseball cap and unzipping the matching jumpsuit. “People say she went to interior decorating school in Baton Rouge. I bet she’s fixed it up real nice.”

“People say a lot of things, Mom, but I try not to talk about my clients. That’s unethical. How much business would I get if I told everybody about so-and-so’s underwear lying around or the stack of Playboy magazines in the closet?”

“Well, I was the one got them for customers – excuse me, ‘clients.’ Remember? Everybody around here uses Orkin, or else goes to Wal-Mart and buys bug spray. I told Lila and them at the beauty shop you had a pest control business down in Florida, and Lila told that woman about you when she came in to get her hair done.”

“Yeah, I know, Mom. And I appreciate it. But it wasn’t *my* business until I came back to Mississippi and got certified.”

“I thought you told me you helped Eugene out down there.”

“I went with him on a few service calls.” And that was to make sure he wasn’t fooling around. Which of course, he was, only not when JJ was along. Not only that, he was taking advantage of old people, selling them services they didn’t need. He was also using chemicals banned by the FDA. The pest control company would’ve let all that slide, but when he started moonlighting illegally, that was it. They fired him.

“I still think it was his fault you got the cancer, exposing you to those chemicals he used,” her mother said.

It was his fault all right, but not because of chemicals. Something else she wasn’t going to share with her mother. She’d gone for a checkup before their health benefits ran out. That’s probably what saved her life. The cervical cancer was Stage 1 and hadn’t spread. The bad news – she would need a complete hysterectomy. The son-of-a-bitch couldn’t just cheat on her; he had to give her cancer, too.

One thing Eugene had made certain to do was get monthly maintenance in the contract, whether it was necessary or not. JJ had done the same with the Talbotts. When she returned to their compound a few weeks later for the monthly service, she hardly recognized Sheilda. The silvery blond hair, black roots showing, was caught up in a rubber band, sprouting weed like at the top of her head. She wore gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt with two coconuts over her boobs and the words, “I monkeyed around in Barbados.”

“Goodness, I must look awful.” She pushed her bangs off her forehead. Without makeup, her skin was pale and blotched and there were dark circles under her eyes. “I’m about worn out. Got behind in the cleaning.”

“Sorry to hear that, Mrs. Talbott.”

“Oh please, just call me Sheilda.”

“That’s an unusual name.”

“Isn’t it? My daddy misspelled ‘Sheila’ on the birth certificate and it stuck.”

She followed JJ from room to room, watching her spray the floorboards and crevices, chattering a mile a minute about how she’d been trying to clean the place up. At first JJ thought she might be on something, like maybe a wild mushroom Hayes had brought back from South America or somewhere. But when she got done and ready to leave, she saw Sheilda wanted company.

“Come on back here and have a glass of tea with me.” She led JJ to a marble-top bar in the middle of a kitchen that would make Martha Stewart proud. JJ half expected to hear a buzzer go off and see red flashing lights, signaling contamination, as she sat down on a stool.

“I swear, I have got to get Dr. T. to hire somebody to come muck out this old house. It’s way too much for one person to clean.” Sheilda helped herself to a handful of Sweet Rewards chocolate cookies from a half-empty sack on the counter. “But I guess I can’t complain. It’s better than a FEMA trailer.”

“Did Katrina take your house?”

“Yeah, but I think it did me a favor. Got rid of a roommate.” Her pouty little mouth curved in a smile when she saw the surprised look on JJ’s face. “Oh, she wasn’t

killed or anything. Just had to find somewhere else to live. We weren't getting along too well anyhow, so that was a good time for me to look for my own place. Dr. T showed up at just the right time."

"So where were you living?"

"Down on the Coast, in Waveland. I was, you know, one of those casino girls that walks around in a short skirt, bringing you free, watered-down drinks to get you to spend more money on the slots."

"It must be kind of boring for you, being up here in the hills."

"Not really. Casinos can be boring, too. Plus, you got to deal with your lechers, trying to cop a feel or get you up to their room. Yeah, I guess you could say Katrina was the best thing ever happened to me." She told JJ how she had been working at the Lava Bar in the Isle of Capri casino when Katrina made landfall at Waveland, just down the coast.

"It hit that town like a hydrogen bomb. Luckily, I wasn't home at the time. My little house was totally blown apart. I guess, you know, Dr. T felt guilty because his salvage company was carting off what was left of my house. He asked did I have any place to stay, and when I said no, he told me I was welcome to come up to northeast Mississippi with him, that his housekeeper had quit and he could use the help plus he needed somebody to set up travel arrangements and such. Then, after I'd been here a few months, he asked me to marry him. So there you are."

She sat up abruptly, lacing her fingers together in front of her on the counter. "But that's enough about me. What's your story? How'd you happen to become a – what do you call it?"

“Exterminator, pest control technician, whatever. You know, like that say about business – find something people need and try to come up with a solution. This is a pretty buggy part of the country, as I’m sure you know.”

“It must be hard, being an intelligent single woman around here.”

JJ shrugged, brushing cookie crumbs off the front of her coveralls. She knew what Sheilda was asking. You’re looking at the big four-O in the rearview mirror, doing a traditionally male job, no man in the picture. Are you a lesbo or just a loser?

“You seeing anybody? “

“I see lots of people.”

“Anyone special?”

JJ was getting uncomfortable with all the questions, but she didn’t want to offend a customer. And Sheilda clearly was running the household.

“I stay pretty busy. I don’t have time for a lot of gallivanting. Look, I really should be going. I just have to make another service call, back in town.” Apparently, it impressed people that a “bug lady” was working for Hayes Talbott, and her phone was beginning to ring more often.

“I’m sorry I was so nosy,” Sheilda said. “It does get lonely out here sometimes, with nobody to talk. We can still be friends, can’t we?”

“Sure, sure. I’ll be back every month for service calls.”

“I didn’t mean just that. Hayes is gone a lot. Like right now, he’s down in Mexico, trying to salvage sunken treasure or something. We could just hang out. There’s this whole, big, empty house.” She leaned across the counter and gave JJ’s forearm a little squeeze. “I’m not much for church-going or Junior League, and I bet you aren’t either.”

She looked at Sheilda's hand on her arm now, feeling the warmth spread up to her chest. There were a million ways being quote unquote friends with this woman could fuck things up. She didn't want to end up like Eugene, losing her business.

Despite her misgivings, JJ began looking forward to the monthly service calls at the Talbotts. It irritated her, though, the way her mother bragged about her "friendship with Mrs. Dr. Hayes Talbott" whenever JJ took her to the beauty shop or the doctor's office.

"She's my customer, Mom. We're not best buds," JJ said as they drove back from Lila's one afternoon in late November. "Plus he's not a doctor anymore, not after all that business over drugs."

"Well, you sure seem to spend a lot of time over there. And once a doctor, always a doctor."

"I go once a month for a service call, which isn't a lot of time."

"Does it take all evening to do a service call? You're late for supper every time you go out there."

She was right, of course. JJ didn't spend nearly as much time with her other customers. In fact, she deliberately made her call to the Talbotts the last one of the day. And she'd begun accepting an offer of something stronger than tea. Hayes was usually gone or at his desk in the basement. Sheilda said he preferred working there, away from distractions.

On one rare occasion when he was home, he stumbled into the den where they were sitting on the sofa. He stared at JJ for a moment and then looked at the bottle of

bourbon on the coffee table. JJ felt heat slide up from her chest. She knew what he was seeing: the hired help sitting on *his* sofa, drinking *his* bourbon, with *his* wife. He left the room without a word. Sheilda just looked at JJ and shrugged. But JJ had gotten the message. After that, she decided to limit the time she spent with Sheilda and confine her drinking to tea in the kitchen.

They were sitting at the kitchen counter one gloomy afternoon in early spring. Sheilda had been unusually quiet. She gazed out the patio doors to the pines that formed a barrier behind the house, their limbs limp with recent rain. After a while she looked down at the glazed marble counter and, as if reading the words there, told JJ how, over the past few weeks, Hayes wouldn't let her leave the house without him except for trips to the grocery or the beauty shop, and when he was home, he was usually drunk or on drugs. News flash, JJ thought.

“And what's worse, now he's gone and hired these Mexicans to keep an eye on me – Jesus and Immaculata. I shit you not. They're living in the garage apartment. Jesus keeps the keys to my Corvette and tells me he's supposed to drive me where I need to go. ‘Meestar Talbott said.’”

“Yeah, sounds harsh. Maybe you ought to go back to the Coast for a while.”

“There's nothing there for me. My house, even the whole town, is gone. So is the casino where I worked.” She tucked her head, fiddling with the hem of her robe. “I wish I was like you, JJ, independent and all. But I'm not. I need somebody.”

“Yeah, don’t we all.” It was a cliché, JJ knew. She just couldn’t think of anything else to say. She slid off the barstool, thinking she’d probably stayed long enough, but Sheilda grabbed her arm.

“Oh, don’t leave. I don’t want to be alone.” She was close enough that JJ could smell her perfume, see the moisture glimmering on her lips. How would it feel, she wondered, to taste that mouth, to slide her hand over the warm swell of breasts glimpsed through the half open blouse?

“I, uh, I really have to go now. Mom’s expecting me.” She could barely breathe. Escaping to the cab of her pickup, she felt weak and melting between her thighs, a not unpleasant sensation. She couldn’t remember ever feeling that aroused with Eugene. At least I have sexual feelings, she thought. But did that mean she was a lesbian? Was Sheilda one too?

The only lesbian JJ knew was one of her customers – poor old Georgia Dawkins, who was so mannish looking everybody called her “George,” after her late father. Now up in her 60s, George had once been a fierce golf competitor. She displayed her many trophies on the windowsills of her house so there would be no mistaking her championship status. But gout had taken its toll on her. These days she spent most of her time on a recliner in front of the TV, a glass of bourbon and coke nearby. Her parents were long dead, siblings several states away. And she’d never married. Called herself “an unclaimed treasure,” but everybody knew she was a dyke, albeit a closeted one. She still lived in the same one-story ranch house where she and her two beautiful sisters had grown up, still dressed in khaki Bermuda shorts and a green golf tee.

Whenever JJ went to George's house, she thought of the three Dawkins girls growing up there, young and hopeful, dreaming of their future. Her own mother would be dead in a few years. Would she be like George, alone and entombed in memories?

Throughout most of that summer, she stayed busy, driving around three counties now, thanks to an influx of customers. So far she hadn't managed to kill any living creatures, spraying the wrong chemicals; but she had to spend several hours a week perusing web sites for information. She'd stayed away from the Talbotts, making excuses over the phone to Sheilda that her mother needed her. Going against her own business strategy, she informed Sheilda that monthly service wasn't necessary but that she should call if there were any problems. It's better this way, she thought.

But when Sheilda finally did call, she was glad. "They're baa-ack, JJ," she said. "Those invader things are in the basement. At least Hayes claimed he saw them."

"Okay. Better to check it out, not take any chances," JJ said, wondering if Hayes saw pink elephants too.

When she got to the Talbotts, she was met by a Mexican woman with frizzy red hair and a garland of roses tattooed across her chest. She just stared at JJ for a moment then lifted her chin to signal come in.

"I'm here to do the spraying," JJ offered, but the woman was already walking away. Sheilda must've gotten her husband to let the Mexicans help around the house, she thought. But when she entered the den, she saw Sheilda reclining on the leather sofa, jabbering away in Spanish with a Mexican man. A half-empty bottle of tequila and bowl of limes was on the coffee table. So much for being all alone.

“Oh, hi, JJ,” Sheilda said, glancing over her shoulder.

“I thought you didn’t speak Spanish.”

“Jesus and Lata have been teaching me. I’m a fast learner.”

I’ll bet, JJ thought. What else have those two taught you, or has it been the other way around?

“Is Dr. Talbott back from parts unknown?”

“Yeah, I locked him in the basement.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Of course not. I’m trying to keep him away from drugs. I locked the wine cellar, too. Go on and finish up whatever you have to do and come join us.”

It took JJ nearly an hour to get through spraying. Returning to the den, she handed Sheilda the invoice. She had no intention of staying. “Okay. You should be set for a while. There’s really no need for me to come back for a couple of months. I, um, I guess there’s no need to check the basement?”

“Oh, it’s fine. Maybe a couple of rats here and there. I’m kidding, I’m kidding, JJ. Jeez. Don’t look at me like that. Hayes is fine. He’s got plenty of food and water plus a TV and computer. Just no drugs or alcohol.”

Now who’s the prisoner, JJ thought as she drove away. She wasn’t a big fan of Hayes Talbott, but going cold turkey could be dangerous, even for a doctor.

A few weeks later, Sheilda called in the middle of the night, sounding hysterical.

“JJ, I know it’s late but I didn’t know who else to call.” She’s done it, JJ thought. Hayes is dead. “There’s this thing, an animal or something, running around in the air ducts.”

“What about your Mexican friends? Or your husband.” If he’s still alive.

“Jesus and Lata? Hayes took them with him on a little trip south of the border. I’m all by my lonesome. Don’t you do stuff like that? Trap animals?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I’ll pay you double if you come out. I know it’s late but I’m scared to be here with that thing running loose.”

JJ sat up, fumbling to turn on the lamp. She managed to get dressed without knocking anything down and waking her mother, gargled with Listerine and made a pass at her hair with a comb.

When she arrived at the Talbott compound, she found Sheilda in the kitchen, down on her knees, hammering kindling wood over the cupboards. “Thank god you’re here, JJ,” she cried, getting to her feet and shaking out the hem of her purple paisley robe. “I was way upstairs when I heard this racket. It was like a poltergeist throwing pots and pans around. So I get my pistol and creep downstairs. The doors to this cupboard flew open, and there sits a raccoon eating out of a box of Cocoa Krispies.”

“Did you shoot at it?”

Sheilda glanced over at the little silver .38 sitting on the counter and shook her head. “No, I just couldn’t. I’ve never in my life pulled a trigger. Besides, I didn’t want to kill it – just scare it out of the house. But it ran back into that closet where the furnace is and into the air ducts.”

“I’ll take care of it. And don’t worry. No animals will be harmed.”

JJ open the closet and filled a wire trap with what Eugene swore was a fail-safe coon-catching weapon – Reese’s peanut butter cups. Then she motioned for Sheilda to slip out of the kitchen.

“This might take a while,” she whispered as they sat down on the sofa in the den. “You don’t have to wait around. I’ll take care of everything and let myself out.”

“Oh, I couldn’t go to sleep, not knowing if everything was okay. Besides, it’s nice to have company.”

JJ sat with one arm resting on the zebra skin on the back of the sofa, looking into the empty fireplace, wishing she were in bed right then. Glancing at Sheilda, she saw the robe had fallen open, revealing the top of one rounded breast, and then quickly looked away. Sheilda didn’t seem to notice, instead, scooting closer, her legs curled underneath her. JJ waited for the tingly, warm sensation signaling arousal, but she felt nothing.

Hayes must’ve found out Sheilda was fooling around with the Mexicans and taken them back to Mexico, she thought. Maybe he even planned to divorce her. Or maybe he was just pissed about being locked in the basement. So Sheilda needs a backup plan. Just then, there was the sound of a snap from the kitchen.

“Bingo,” she cried, jumping to her feet and running to the kitchen, Sheilda right behind her. When she picked up the cage, the raccoon barely glanced at her as it munched the remaining Reese’s cups.

“He’s really kinda cute,” Sheilda said, “at least behind bars.”

“Don’t go falling in love with him,” JJ said, walking toward the back door. “He’s not your type.”

“What are you going to do with him?”

“Drive out a little farther in the country then let him go.”

Sheilda followed JJ to the pickup, tiptoeing over the flagstone path in her bare feet. “Can I come with you?”

The moon was still out, a gentle breeze cooling the summer night. They might’ve been the only two people in the world. “I’d rather you didn’t, Sheilda. I just want to finish this job and go back to bed. You should do the same.”

She climbed into the cab and drove off without looking back. Sheilda would still be standing there, she knew, an orphan from the storm. But she’d weathered worse. She would survive. And so will I, JJ thought. Several miles down the road, she released the creature and watched as it scampered away into the woods. “And don’t come back,” she called after it. “Next time she just might shoot you.”

Carleen

Carleen hoped she was done with prison. She'd been driving down twice a month for more than a year to the South Mississippi Correctional Facility to see her brother, Lowell, who was locked up for having sex with an underage girl. All the while she'd worked full-time and been the sole caretaker for their ailing mother. Now that was about to change. Lowell was getting out in just two weeks, and Carleen was going to New York City with some friends. But first she had to make this last visit for a Thanksgiving dinner the prison veterans' club was having for family and friends. She never imagined celebrating Thanksgiving in a prison.

When Lowell had been sentenced, she thought prisons were full of scary men who'd rape or knife you in a heartbeat. As it turned out, most of the inmates looked surprisingly ordinary in their prison-issue khaki shirts and slacks. They lived in dorms, with their own cubicles rather than cells and could walk around outside in the yard, work out in the weight pile, cook their own meals in dorm kitchens, sometimes sleep in if they wanted. Though she was careful not to wear tight jeans or high heels, she still felt like she stood out in the visitors' center with her height and prematurely gray hair, which she wore in a French twist. But nobody gawked or whistled as she walked past the small plastic tables where they sat with their families or girlfriends.

Lowell was always upbeat and glad to see her – his big sis who came faithfully once a month to sit at a child-sized table that struck them right at the knees so they couldn't exchange contraband underneath it; who brought exactly fifteen dollars in

change for the vending machines and one car key, visible in a Ziploc bag; who wore no jewelry or provocative clothing.

Now, after going through security, she arrived at the chow hall for Thanksgiving dinner, where an inmate handed female visitors a single rose as they entered. In front of the dining tables, other inmates stood like a stag line at a high school dance, wearing freshly laundered khakis. The long tables were covered with white paper tablecloths and decorated with cardboard turkeys and Christmas trees. The room had low ceilings and exposed pipes, the yellowish-beige walls adorned with inmates' paintings, including disturbing murals of airplanes crashing and the space shuttle Columbia exploding. One mural was the larger-than-life head of a black lab whose huge brown eyes gazed out from behind cattails and tall grass, like some crazy Stephen King dog.

“Hey, Sis. Thanks for coming,” Lowell said, stepping out of the stag line to hug her. He looked a little thinner, but the muscles in his arms and shoulders were hard. Working out was one of the ways he passed the time. “Just 14 days and a wake-up and I’m out of this hell-hole.”

“I know. You look good,” Carleen said. It was impossible not to return Lowell’s grin, but the appealing look on his round, boyish face could morph all too easily into a glower if he was impatient or angry.

He guided her to the buffet line, and they picked up Styrofoam plates. There seemed to be a Fourth of July motif added to the occasion, with fried chicken, ham and macaroni and cheese in large plastic containers, and, for dessert, a sheet cake trimmed in red, white and blue with an American flag. Boxes of strawberry, chocolate and vanilla ice cream stood open beside the cake, growing mushy.

“So, what’re you up to these days?” Lowell asked as they sat down. A snaggle-toothed man with a gray beard was across the table, flanked by two young women silently forking food into their mouths. Further down, a black inmate sat with his white wife, or girlfriend, and an older black woman, who was staring straight ahead, hands in her lap.

“Same old thing. Working at the paper and coming home to take care of Mother. We have your old room all ready.”

Carleen had moved back to Mount Vista a year earlier after being laid off her job as a copy editor at a newspaper in a neighboring county. She was living with their invalid mother and taking obits at the *Mount Vista Echo*. The setup was supposed to have been temporary, just until she found a real newspaper job, but being up in her forties and competing with new j-school grads made it tough.

“How’s the old lady doing?” Lowell asked. “She’s not going to die on me while you’re gone, is she?”

“Not unless you kill her, which I feel like doing several times a day. But she always spoiled you, so maybe it won’t be so hard. Besides, you had all that training in the service. I can’t even do CPR.”

Lowell’s release was coming just in time for him to take over as caregiver while Carleen was in New York. Finding a sitter had been a challenge since her mother’s crabbiness had run off more than one aide. She was hoping the arrangement with Lowell would work out to be permanent. After all, where else did he have to go? Nobody wanted to hire a sex offender, plus he couldn’t live anywhere near parks or schools or wherever kids might gather, which pretty much ruled out anywhere in town besides their mother’s

house in the country, never mind that he wasn't a child molester. He'd been charged with statutory rape after the parents of a 15-year-old girl found out he'd had sex with her and reported him. Maybe he would've realized she was lying about her age if he hadn't been so high on tequila and pills. But drunk or sober, Lowell wasn't known for his good judgment.

As if reading her thoughts, he said, "Look, Carly, you deserve to have a life. I'm locked up, but so are you, in a way. I promise I won't let you down. I'm a changed man. Once I get out, I'm never going back in."

Carleen smiled, taking a sip of iced tea. He always said what he knew you wanted to hear, plus he was using his pet name for her. Just then, a tall, skinny inmate with a mullet crept up behind their chairs, startling her. He held a small digital camera. "Want your pitcher taken?" he asked.

"Hey, Burris," Lowell said, grinning and slapping the man on the arm. "Yeah, sure." The money the Veteran's Club made from the pictures and from selling donuts to other prisoners went to pay for the dinner, Lowell told her. They took their place in front of the black lab mural and Burris pressed a button. He showed them the picture on the camera screen. One huge brown lab eye peered over Carleen's shoulder.

Dinner was over in just under two hours. Lowell and Carleen hugged goodbye, and she walked with the other visitors across the dark yard to the parking lot. Glancing back at the windows of one of the dorms, she could see inmates milling about among the rows of bunk beds. Several came to stand at the windows, hands cupped around their faces so they could get a look at the group of civilians. She stood still for a moment, watching them watch her, as the chill of the late autumn night penetrated her thin jacket.

Growing up in their little northeast Mississippi town, she and Lowell used to walk to school every day past the two-story concrete block building that was the county jail. Inmates would call out to them through the bars on the second floor. She never saw faces, just arms reaching out, mostly black or brown. Sometimes Lowell would throw rocks at the bars. Stop that, Carleen told him. How would you like it if you were in jail and people threw rocks at you? I'd throw them back, he said without hesitation.

Just as she was now the caregiver for their mother, it usually fell to Carleen when they were children to take care of her little brother. Their mother was divorced and worked as a cook on a tugboat, 75 miles away in Memphis, going up and down the Mississippi River for three months, back home for one. They all lived with their grandmother, who spent most of the day in her housecoat, watching television. Carleen packed Lowell's lunches and made sure he did his homework. In a way, she was proud of how well she looked after her brother, better than their mother, whose idea of child care during her three weeks off was to put notes on the refrigerator for them after school, leaving a phone number for wherever she would be playing cards with her girlfriends, along with instructions to put a frozen dinner in the microwave.

"I cook three meals a day, seven days a week, three months in a row for ten men. I sure hell aint cookin when I'm off," she declared.

When Carleen was thirteen and Lowell was ten, she moved them out into the country and brought along her boyfriend, Roy. He was considerably younger, just in his twenties, and worked on the same tugboat. Carleen thought he smelled like he'd never bathed the entire twenty-one weeks. It embarrassed her to no end the way he walked around the house without a shirt, showing off his tan. When he took to barging into her

room unannounced, she started sleeping fully clothed and made sure the door was locked every time she used the bathroom.

“Soon as I graduate high school, I’m out of here and never coming back,” she told her brother.

“I’m leaving, too,” Lowell said. “I ain’t staying as long as Rambo is around.”

As it turned out, a couple of years later, Roy was the one to leave – in handcuffs. He claimed that he hadn’t intentionally penned Carleen down on her bed. He said he was hanging curtains in her room, trying to do her a favor, when he fell off the ladder and landed right on top of her. Only Carleen never was on the bed. She was walking out of the room, she said, and he grabbed her. Lowell heard her yelling and came at Roy with his souvenir Louisville Slugger, the first thing he laid his hands on. He managed to get in one lick before Roy hit him upside the head with the hammer he’d supposedly been using for the curtain rods, putting him in the hospital for three weeks. When he finally came home, Lowell wasn’t ever the same. He started running around with a rough crowd that was into everything from smoking pot to petty theft. His current stint behind bars wasn’t his first.

When Carleen got home that evening from the prison, her mother was in the den, bandaged feet propped up on an ottoman, watching the Weather Channel and smoking.

“I stopped at Winn-Dixie for groceries,” Carleen said.

“I sure hope you got my Marie Callender dinners this time.” Her mother didn’t look up, eyes on the weatherman pointing to a huge map. “I hate those old off-brand things you bought last time.”

Carleen set the bags down on the counter that separated the den from the kitchen and began pulling out frozen dinners, cans of Ensure and Campbell's soup. "They were having a special, Mother. But don't worry. I'll never bring it into your house again, even if they're giving it away."

"And none of that low-carb stuff. I don't care what the doctor says."

"Did you take your pills this morning?"

"I think so."

Carleen sighed and opened a cabinet stocked with medicine bottles, taking down the blue plastic pill organizer. The compartments labeled "Thurs. morning" and "Thurs. noon" were full.

"You haven't taken any." She handed her the pills and a glass of water.

"You expect me to take all these at once?" Her mother frowned at the multicolored pills in her palm.

"Just pretend they're jelly beans." That should be easy enough for a diabetic, Carleen thought, sitting down on the ottoman. "At least take your aspirin and the water pills."

"You don't have to watch me like a hawk. I'm taking them."

Carleen twirled a lock of silver hair around her finger and turned to look at the TV where the streaks of blue indicating heavy snow on the weather map were moving up the East Coast.

"See what you got waiting for you up in New York City?" her mother said.

"They're calling it snowmageddon."

“I feel sure it’ll be cleared up by the time we leave. You missed a real nice dinner, by the way. Lowell looks good. He’s all ready to come home.”

Her mother had refused to visit after her first and only trip to the prison, when she’d gone deathly pale at the sight of the rolls of glittering razor wire running the length of the fence like an evil Slinky. She hardly said two words during their entire visit.

“I don’t see how he can be up to doing stuff around here. He needs a rest himself, after everything he’s been through.”

“We’ve had this conversation before, Mother. Lowell’s not a kid. He’s going to be forty next month. He’s perfectly capable of taking charge. Besides, I won’t be gone to New York but a few days.” Or who knows? Maybe I’ll decide to stay.

“You hadn’t ever been any farther north than Nashville. I don’t know why in the world you want to go to New York City. You don’t have any idea how to act up there.”

“Maybe it’s time I learned.” Maybe it was past time. Maybe it was time to actually try living there. She’d started thinking of this trip as a trial run. If she felt like she fit in, maybe she’d just move up there.

When she went to bring Lowell home two weeks later, he just stood by her car in the parking lot with his head down. She realized he was crying and put her arms around him. “I know, I know,” she said softly. “It’s okay. Let’s go home now.”

They drove in silence for the first few miles along the two-lane blacktop, Lowell staring out the window, seeing open fields for the first time in two years. “Thanks, Carleen,” he said finally. “Thanks for the ride home. I really appreciate everything you’ve done. I won’t let you down again, I promise.”

Carleen just smiled, thinking, wouldn't that be nice. "Well, you may not thank me after you see all you have to do with Mother."

"No diapers involved, are they?"

"It hasn't come to that yet, but when she has to go, sometimes she doesn't make it all the way to the toilet."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Yes. No. Well, it did happen once. Just No. 1."

"Oh, hell, long as it's not something more serious. Won't be the first time I stepped in somebody else's piss. Guys in prison aren't always careful where they aim."

After a couple of hours, Carleen pulled off the road to a Wendy's drive-thru at Lowell's request. She ordered two double cheeseburgers, fries and a Coke for him and a Diet Coke for herself.

"You not eating?" he asked, biting into a cheeseburger.

"I'm not really hungry now." She didn't mention that her stomach was queasy from a little too much wine the night before. Her excuse had been she needed to get rid of the bottle of chardonnay before her alcoholic brother came home.

Lowell finished the second burger and stuffed the wrappers in the paper sack.

"Man, nothing beats Wendy's. Only thing better is my own cooking."

He'd learned to cook in the navy, which helped him get a job in the prison kitchen. Their mother liked to brag that he'd inherited her talent.

"Yeah, Mother's going to be happy to have you around. I'm sure you'll hear all about the slop Carleen's been feeding her. Translation: healthy food."

"What? No pork rinds?"

“Also no sweet tea, French fries or lard.”

As they continued to drive, Lowell waved occasionally at oncoming cars.

“What’re you doing?” Carleen asked.

“I don’t know. It’s just nice, being able to wave to people.”

She thought of the inmates gathering at the dorm windows to watch her and the other departing visitors after the holiday dinner. Lowell was on the outside now. She hoped he could stay there.

It was dusk by the time they reached Mount Vista. The streets were nearly deserted, a bank of gray clouds threatening freezing rain. Lowell slept as Carleen drove down Main Street, past the Garden Club welcome sign that had been up since the 1960s. Piggly Wiggly and Pizza Hut sat off to the right, next to a Mexican restaurant that Carleen remembered as the Big Star Cafe where she used to hang out in high school. She turned down a road that ran beside the new Mount Vista Educational Complex and out into the country where white frame houses were spread out along soybean and corn fields. Her mother’s house sat on a hill, a weather-beaten old horse-drawn wagon underneath a large oak tree out front.

“Wake up, sleepyhead. We’re home.” She jostled Lowell’s shoulder and he sat up, rubbing his eyes, looking around.

The TV was on but for once their mother wasn’t in front of it in her recliner. Carleen could hear her clattering around back in the kitchen. A moist, salty smell wafted into the living room.

“I’m not believing this. Tugboat Annie’s cooked supper for you.”

Their mother emerged from the kitchen in a flowered duster, her thin gray hair sticking out like a ragdoll's, lips pressed tight in the round, doughy face, head tilted to the side. Carleen watched as she opened her arms.

“Hey, Mama,” Lowell said, gingerly patting her head as he held her against his chest.

“Oh, Lowell,” she said. “Oh, Lowell.”

Carleen had only a few days to get her brother ready for his caretaking duties before leaving for New York. He followed her from room to room as she went over the routine. He was so quiet and obedient it was almost creepy. At other times, he couldn't sit still. He kept offering to do things.

“Do you need me to move anything for you or mow the lawn?” he'd ask. When she reminded him that it was December and the grass wasn't growing, he went out in the yard and looked for bits of trash to pick up. She wondered how long this new Lowell would last.

The weather was clear as Carleen drove to the Memphis airport for the first leg of the trip with two friends from her church, Euhlyn Stamp and Janie Heavener. Later, between flights, she couldn't help checking her phone repeatedly, expecting a text from Lowell, saying she had to get home right away. Her companions reminded her she was supposed to be taking a break.

“Carleen, I'm fixing to throw that phone off the Brooklyn Bridge if you don't quit,” Janie said.

“Sorry. Old habits, you know.” Carleen shoved the phone into the recesses of her purse.

It was dark by the time they reached the city. From the window of the plane, Carleen drank in the view of the lights that spilled across the dark palette as far as she could see. Driving over the RFK Bridge into Manhattan, the women oohed and aahed, pointing to the brilliant skyline.

“It’s just like a postcard, just like a postcard,” Janie kept saying.

After the cab driver dropped them off at their hotel, they stood on the sidewalk, still streaked with slush from the snowstorm, looking around for a doorman to help with their luggage. All they saw was a middle-aged man in jeans and a baseball jacket, talking to a younger man with several piercings in his face.

“If that’s the doorman, I’ll carry my own suitcase,” Euhlyn said, heading for the stairs to the lobby.

Together they dragged their suitcases up the steps. Carleen stopped to read aloud an inscription on the riser of the top step: *everything is going to be alright*. Good to know, she thought.

“They misspelled *all right*,” observed Euhlyn, who taught middle school language arts.

“I thought that was acceptable either way,” Carleen ventured as they entered the lobby.

“Depends on what you mean by acceptable,” Euhlyn replied.

A band in the bar was playing some unrecognizable tune so loud the women could barely understand the clerk as they tried to register. Carleen noticed an exit over to the side with a sign beneath it that read, *An exit is just an entrance to someplace else*. She didn’t know whether “someplace” was one word or two.

“Did I understand her correctly? Did she say bunk beds?” Janie asked as they waited for the elevator. She was still huffing and puffing from climbing the stairs to the lobby.

“Yes, I believe that’s what she said,” Carleen murmured.

Euhlyn jabbed the elevator button again. “Good grief, is this thing even working?”

Carleen felt a growing sense of dread as they opened the door to the first room. She had been in charge of making the reservations and specifically asked for two rooms with two double beds in each. The room they entered was dark and small, more like a cabin on a boat than a hotel room. Bunk beds were built into an alcove, and the only other furniture was a desk, a chair and one lamp. And, of course, a mini-bar.

“I’m sorry,” Carleen said. “But they messed things up. I really did ask for two double beds in adjoining rooms. Maybe they’ll give us a discount.”

“Brrr,” Janie exclaimed. “It’s freezing in here. Where’s the thermostat?”

Sometime after midnight, Carleen was awakened by the vibration of her phone beneath the pillow. She looked at the caller ID and considered turning the phone off.

“This better be important, Lowell,” she said with a sigh.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to wake you up. I just wanted to make sure you got there all right.” She could tell by the slurring that he’d already been to the beer store. “Course, guess I’d of seen it on the TV if the plane crashed. Ha ha.”

“Everything’s fine. I’m just tired. Is Mother okay?”

“Sleeping like a baby. I gave her a couple of Tylenol 3 ‘cause she said her legs were hurting. They must of knocked her out.”

“Are you trying to kill her? She’s not supposed to have that stuff. Just give her some plain old Tylenol. Or rub her legs with rubbing alcohol,” she said, emphasizing *rubbing*.

“Hmm. Don’t know if she’d like for me to do that.”

“It’s fine, Lowell. I do it all the time.”

“You said no diapers.”

“This is different, Lowell. Now go check on her, make sure she’s still breathing and let me get some sleep.” Carleen turned the phone off and slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Janie in the top bunk. Opening the mini bar, she rummaged through the tiny bottles and found some Absolut. So what if an ounce cost ten bucks, she thought, I need it.

The next morning, she turned on the tap in the shower only to find there was no hot water. She was about to call the front desk when Euhlyn burst in from the adjoining room, wrapped in an oversized white bathrobe.

“Can you believe there’s no hot water, and it’s going to be off till seven o’clock tonight,” she cried. “They’re putting in some new boiler or whatever. You’d think they could’ve warned us last night.”

Everything is going to be all right, Carleen reminded herself. I’m in New York.

At least the breakfast buffet wasn’t depleted by the time they came downstairs. After eating, the women bundled up and headed for a hop-on-hop-off bus. Euhlyn had purchased their tickets online along with passes to Ellis Island and a ferry ride. On Saturday, they were going to see “Wicked.” Carleen had voted for “Chicago” but was overruled. Despite the cold, they sat on the top deck of the bus, huddling together.

Driving through the tunnel of skyscrapers, looking down on the convoy of yellow cabs, the throngs on the sidewalk, Carleen felt a sense of familiarity.

“You know, I’ve seen these places so often on movies and TV, I feel like I’ve already been here,” she said.

“Déjà vue all over again,” Euhlyn said.

“All I can think of is, all those people and I don’t know a single one of them,” Janie said.

Carleen told them she’d heard if you stood on a street corner all day in New York, you’d see everybody you’d ever known in your life pass by. The women just looked at her and frowned. “Not the actual person,” she explained, “just somebody who looks like them.”

Over the next few hours, they went to the top of the Empire State Building and walked around the Rockefeller Center, then headed back on the bus for a stop at the 9/11 memorial. Carleen stood at the reflecting pool built in the footprint of tower No. 1, watching the water flowing down all four sides into a void in the center, thinking how morbid that seemed. Janie and Euhlyn ran their fingers over the names of the victims engraved along the edge, reminiscing about where they were when the towers fell. Carleen felt her phone vibrating in her trousers pocket. She walked a few feet away and sat on a bench. There was a text from Lowell.

Mother’s had a little accident. I found her this afternoon laying on the floor in her bedroom. She’s at the hospital now.

“Oh, crap,” Carleen whispered, dialing his number.

“What happened?” she asked when he picked up. “Was it her blood sugar?”

“I don’t know for sure, Carleen. She wasn’t unconscious or anything, just mad as an old wet hen. She said she’d been hollering for me for hours. They’re running a bunch of tests on her now to see if anything’s broken.”

“What do you mean, hollering for hours? Why didn’t you hear her?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was sleeping.”

“Sleeping or passed out?”

“I wasn’t drinking, Carleen, okay? We’d been out to eat at the Waffle House. I never should of let her eat all those pancakes and syrup, but you know how she gets. She’d of pitched a fit right there if I’d tried to stop her.”

“Oh, good Lord. She knows better.”

There was a pause, and then Lowell said, “I think she might’ve done it on purpose.”

“Really?” But Carleen had a feeling he could be right.

“Yeah, she’s been raggin on me since you left. I mean it’s only been, what, a couple of days. I wanted to go out once to see an old Navy buddy, and she gets upset. ‘You’re fixing to leave me, just like your sister,’ she says.”

“So she’s trying to punish us.”

“I know it sounds crazy, but I wouldn’t put it past her.”

Carleen didn’t want to alarm Janie and Euhlyn, so she decided not to mention her mother’s accident for now. Later, during dinner at a restaurant that Euhlyn had chosen overlooking Central Park, her phone vibrated again, and she excused herself to go to the restroom. The news wasn’t good. Apparently, her mother’s hip was fractured and she needed surgery, Lowell said, but with her poor health, the procedure could be risky. I

should be there, Carleen thought. As a Christian, I should be taking care of my mother, never mind she hardly took care of me.

“And there’s something else,” Lowell said. “They say she’ll have to have somebody with her 24/7 or else go into a nursing home after she gets out of rehab. She’ll be laid up in the bed and can’t take care of herself for a while.”

Carleen closed her eyes, willing herself into denial. She went back to the table and tried to downplay the news to her friends. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. She’s a tough old bird,” she added, not wanting to see the concern on their faces.

“I don’t know how you do it, Carleen. You’re such a good daughter,” Janie said. “My husband’s sister lives out in Arizona and expected us to take care of my mother-in-law who had Alzheimer’s. I said to him, ‘honey, there’s no way. We both have full-time jobs. I can’t take on another one.’ We had to put her in a nursing home.”

“You’ve got to live your life,” Euhlyn said.

Lowell called the next day while the women were taking a ferry ride around the island to report that their mother had come through the surgery and was doing well. As the ferry cruised slowly by the Statue of Liberty, Carleen marveled at the size of the monument up close. *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.* She pictured herself among those huddled masses they’d seen at Ellis Island in stark, black and white photographs, bedroll on her back, battered suitcase at her side. Having left everyone and everything she’d ever known behind, not knowing what lay ahead. *Everything is going to turn out alright.*

The day their flight home was due to leave, Euhlyn insisted they spend a few hours at Macy’s. “Even if you don’t buy anything, I hear there’s nothing like Macy’s at

Christmas,” she exclaimed. “Everything’s on sale, and they have one whole floor with nothing but shoes.”

Carleen was thankful the dressing rooms were as spacious as their hotel lobby. After an hour or so of wandering through the maze of merchandise, she had finally succumbed to the shoe floor and bought a pair of high-heel, black leather boots that Janie pronounced as “awesome.” Pleading fatigue, she plopped down on a sofa, wearing the boots, while her friends tried on what must’ve been an entire winter wardrobe. Her phone rang as she was watching a segment about the mega millions lottery on New York 1 TV. She didn’t recognize the caller and didn’t answer. Claspings her hands together, she looked down at her feet clad in shiny black leather. *Leave me alone. Just leave me alone.* With no particular destination in mind, she walked out of the dressing room and took the first down escalator she saw, then the next and the next. She thought of an old TV show, “Twilight Zone,” where a man – or was it a woman? – gets on an escalator that goes down into infinity. She didn’t think she would mind that now. *An exit is just an entrance to someplace else.*

Out on the sidewalk, she zipped up her coat – a black, knee-length puffer like so many other women were wearing that year – and walked fast, not making eye contact. That was a tip she’d heard once on “Prairie Home Companion.” Garrison Keillor was broadcasting from New York City. He said if you wanted to be taken for a New Yorker, “wear black, walk fast and don’t make eye contact.” What if she just kept walking? In the movies there was always a “Help Wanted” in some café window. Maybe she’d see one of those, walk in and get a job right away.

Although it was December, the day was clear and the temperature above freezing. A few people sat at the benches and small tables at Herald Square Park, some with Macy's bags at their feet. Most were staring at their phones. Carleen sat down on one of the empty benches, shoving her hands deep into her pockets, wrapping one hand around her phone. She searched the faces of the people who walked by, testing the theory of seeing someone from your past. Everybody seemed to be walking fast and not making eye contact. Then, from out of the crowd, who should be walking toward her but Cleo Wilbanks, her high school boyfriend. She tried to make eye contact, but the stocky, dark-haired young man was engrossed in a conversation on his phone. He was wearing a black leather jacket, just like Cleo, and jeans. She hadn't thought about Cleo in years. He'd joined the army after high school and never come back to Mount Vista.

She was still sitting on the park bench, staring into the crowd, when the phone rang again, same "unknown caller." Maybe she should answer. It might be about a job.

A recorded voice came on the line: "You have a collect call from a correctional facility in Leakesville, Mississippi," the voice said. "If you wish to accept the call, press 1."

Carleen's arm went limp. The phone slipped from her hand, falling to the sidewalk. She stared at where it lay beside one of her new boots. A gloved hand reached down to retrieve the phone, holding it out to her.

"You dropped something," a stranger said. Carleen looked up at the woman, just someone ordinary whose face she wouldn't remember, but probably a New Yorker. Did the woman think she was also a New Yorker?

“Thanks,” she said, taking the phone. Perhaps, if they’d been on the subway, she would’ve started a conversation with the woman. Maybe she’d tell her how she’d been talking to her elderly mother on the phone, trying to convince her to come live with her in New York. But her mother was too stubborn. It’s hard, she’d say, being so far away when your mother is ill. But what can you do? You live here. You have to live your life. You just have to do the best you can, the woman will say. And Carleen will nod wisely, thinking about her tiny apartment up in Harlem, how her mother would hate it. I go to visit her as often as possible, Carleen will say. I’m actually going down for Christmas. But I won’t stay long. I have to get back up here. It’s where I belong. It’s where my life is.

Road Conditions

Just after Lexie lost her job at the power plant, a runaway automobile crashed into her apartment. She wasn't injured, just temporarily homeless. Could I be any more of a cliché, she wondered? She'd been sitting at the kitchen table, sending an email to her boyfriend, Brandon, who was in Afghanistan, when she heard the high, keening shriek of an engine, followed by an explosion that shook the whole building, knocking her to the floor. A huge hole gaped in the living room wall where the hood of a silver Toyota, radiator still smoking, protruded just inches from Brandon's ratty recliner. Her one piece of nice furniture – the Tiffany floor lamp she'd found at an antique shop – lay in glittering pieces on the carpet. Burnt rubber mingled with the dusty smell of drywall and mortar. Bricks were scattered around the floor. She could taste the dust settling around the shattered windshield of the car. A limp hand dangled over the steering wheel like an empty glove.

It took her a moment to realize someone was screaming – “MommyMommy” – in a collision of two long syllables. A teenage girl with sleek black hair was struggling to get out from the passenger's side of the car, a violin case clutched to her chest. It was the Japanese girl who lived across the apartment complex parking lot with her mother. Lexie was trying to help the girl out when Quentin, a neighbor from down the hall, burst in the front door.

“Oh my god, Lexie, are you okay?” He helped her and the girl over to the sofa and then pulled out his cell phone to call 911.

Later, as she sat in Quentin's apartment trying to hold a cup of herbal tea in her shaking hands, Lexie realized she didn't even know the name of the girl or her mother. Hot amber liquid sloshed over the edge of the cup, scalding her. Quentin took the cup from her and got a cold rag from the kitchen.

"That poor kid," she said, pressing the rag to her hand. "What's she going to do? I think it was just her and her mother."

"Maybe she's got relatives here," he said. "I'm just glad you're okay."

"When am I ever going to be able to get back in my apartment?"

"Don't worry about that now. Maybe there's an empty apartment you can move into for a while. Or you can stay with me if you'd like." He rubbed the dark stubble on his chin, head tilted to the side as he looked at her. She stared at the cleft at the tip of his nose that matched the one in his chin.

"I'm not having sex with you again, Quentin."

"Of course not, Lexie. I wouldn't expect you to. I'll sleep on the sofa." He smiled and she marveled anew at how handsome he was.

They'd both gotten drunk at a New Year's Eve party one of the other residents threw. It was right after Brandon's national guard unit redeployed. She'd been angry—at the government for sending him over there again, at Brandon for joining the National Guard in the first place, at herself for putting up with shabby treatment at the power plant. Quentin calmly listened to her rant but didn't attempt to offer any advice. At one point, she asked what he thought about "this shitty war," and he just shrugged and said he didn't know much about it. He never watched the news, which he'd been addicted to in what he

called his “former life.” For years he’d suffered from migraines, he told her. But after a month or so of his swearing off newspapers, the internet, radio and TV, the headaches left, never to return.

“I got the idea from my students,” he explained. “They don’t have a clue what’s going on outside the sphere of their own lives. They have enough to contend with as it is. They don’t need the evening news.” He taught at a school for troubled boys, many of whom had lost their parents or been abused. “It’s a way of avoiding the global aspects of suffering,” he added. “It allows me to concentrate on individuals.”

Lexie sort of wished she could feel the same. “I love humanity. I just don’t like people,” she said, half jokingly. “But I’ll make an exception with you.”

A few days after the accident she could move back into her apartment, but it didn’t feel like home anymore. She moved slowly around the three rooms in her bare feet, wearing only a T-shirt and panties, not bothering to empty trash, throwing everything from used tampons to chicken bones on the floor beside overflowing wastebaskets. Her contacts got knocked from a pile of makeup on the back of the commode into the toilet bowl, so she jammed on an old pair of over-sized glasses with pink tortoise-shell frames. She ran out of shampoo and used Tide to wash her hair.

Brandon told her she needed to get out of the apartment and start looking for another job. They were Skyping and his big square face seemed to take up the whole screen. “Hell, people are getting killed over here all the time. You can’t let it get to you, Lexie.”

“You drive a truck, Brandon. You’re not in combat.”

“Neither are you, so stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“What did you say, Brandon? I can’t hear you. Oops, something’s wrong with the screen. Now I can’t see you.” She hit the escape key and the screen went blank. She felt a little mean. What if he got killed by a drone or something? But he ought to know better than try to give her orders. It was bad enough when he was a civilian; now it was even worse.

She did get out of the apartment the following day but not to look for a job. She went to the funeral for the woman who had been driving the Toyota. It was held in a local Methodist church that had special services in Japanese. The daughter sat on a front pew with an older Asian woman and several younger ones. Lexie hoped they were going to take care of her.

Driving away from the church after the service, she suddenly became aware of the steering wheel in her hands, the accelerator beneath her right foot. The accident investigators had said the woman’s Toyota might’ve been defective. The girl had told them it shot forward as soon as her mother put it in gear and wouldn’t stop even though she kept pressing the brakes. Lexie held her breath all the way to her apartment, going barely ten miles an hour. She went to her computer as soon as she got home and Googled “sudden acceleration in automobiles.”

Several examples flashed up on the screen, among them, a 2010 Camry like her neighbor had been driving. But the chronicle of malfunctioning automobiles didn’t stop there. She scrolled through dozens of narratives about accidents – from wheels suddenly breaking off on the freeway to seatbelts strangling passengers they were meant to protect. Ralph Nader got it right in the sixties, she thought – *Unsafe at Any Speed*. Her 12-year-

old car wasn't listed among the renegades, but the fact that it was also a Toyota bothered her. Even though her bank account was dangerously low, she bought a bicycle, telling Brandon it was for exercise and saving gas for short trips to the grocery store. Somehow she didn't mind telling Quentin the truth, that she was giving up riding in cars.

"This is like quitting smoking, or you not watching the news," she said. "It's just one more thing I can control in my life."

When she decided to leave town for Christmas, she handed him the keys to her car and asked him to crank it once in a while, or even drive it if he wanted. He planted a chaste kiss on the forehead and wished her a merry Christmas.

"You, too," she said. "How are you celebrating?" She realized she didn't know anything about his family, except that he'd been married once and was divorced.

"Oh, you know, go to midnight Mass, work in the soup kitchen Christmas day, stuff like that."

"So you'll just be sleeping in and ordering Chinese?"

"Pretty much."

"Well, if you'd like some company, come on down to my aunt's in Mississippi." She didn't know why she'd said that. Now he was liable to think she had a crush on him. Did she? On the long bus ride, she ruminated over that question. And her future with Brandon. When she stepped off the bus in Mount Vista, the town where she'd grown up, she still didn't have any answers.

Her Aunt Bess was waiting for her in the same Buick Skylark she'd had for fifteen years. She couldn't understand why Lexie hadn't driven and even refused to get into her car.

“First you say you’re taking the bus home, now you tell me you don’t ride in cars a’tall? Is that how they do things up in Illinois?” She grabbed Lexie’s duffel bag with hands as sinewy as grapevines, throwing it in the back seat of the car. Her iron-gray ponytail lay over the shoulder of an old green parka.

“Do you realize, Aunt Bess, that nobody in New York City drives a car? They take the subway or a bus. Plus, in Europe, everybody has walked everywhere for centuries.”

“Well, shoot, some of those countries probably still don’t know what an automobile looks like.” Aunt Bess got into her car, creeping alongside Lexie, who stuck to the shoulder. It was less than a mile from the bus stop on the highway to her house, and Lexie had fully intended to walk if she had to no matter what time the bus arrived. But after spending nearly twelve hours on the road, she wasn’t up to a discussion about her rationale for swearing off cars.

“I’ll give you all the gory details tomorrow,” she promised her aunt.

As she walked up to the door of the white stucco house where she’d spent most of her childhood, she saw that the same ugly Christmas wreath her aunt left up year round still hanging there – like the courthouse clock on the square that always said four o’clock. She vaguely remembered their picking the wreath out at the Ben Franklin store during an after-Christmas sale years ago. The red Scotch plaid bow had long since faded to a sickly pink; the plastic holly leaves had been stripped of all but one or two flattened berries.

“Aunt Bess, don’t you think it’s time to get you a new wreath?” she asked, pushing open the unlocked door.

“It’s time for a whole lot more than that,” Aunt Bess said, her deliberately oblique tone inviting a response. But Lexie ignored the remark, figuring it was an allusion to a

mysterious “gentleman caller,” a Mr. O’Cain, whom her aunt had mentioned in several previous letters. She was too tired for that conversation, too.

The familiar burnt-wood smell from the fireplace greeted her as she walked into the darkened house. Shaking off her navy pea coat, she hauled the duffel bag to her old room, which faced the street. It was virtually unchanged except for a few touches added during her summers home from college. She smiled at the symmetrical arrangement of the miniature ceramic shoe collection on the maple dresser and the artful pile of round and cylindrical-shaped pillows on the yellow plaid bedspread she’d made in high school home ec class. Through the years the room had been a refuge, a place where she could come to zone out and feel safe – whether for a few days or a few months.

After she said goodnight to Aunt Bess, Lexie looked around the room again and realized there was something she had to take care of before she could fall asleep. She scooted the dresser aside and then shoved and pulled the double bed away from the windows facing the street to the opposite wall. She wasn’t taking any chances on a kamikaze car intent on destroying itself and anything in its path.

The next morning she rambled around in the closet where many of her and Uncle Doc’s old clothes were still stored and pulled on a masculine-looking purple bathrobe she’d never seen before. In the bathroom, she splashed cold water on her face and tugged a comb through the tangle of dark curls. Aunt Bess was clomping around the kitchen in pink fuzzies and gray sweatpants.

“How do you manage to make so much noise in those things?” Lexie asked. Aunt Bess paused in her relentless counter scrubbing to stare at Lexie as if trying to place her.

Was it the bathrobe, Lexie wondered? She couldn't imagine her aunt getting sentimental over a garment – or anything else for that matter.

“Talking about noise, what was all that racket in your room last night?”

Lexie poured a cup of coffee and took a careful sip before answering. “I just thought I'd sleep more comfortably with the bed pushed up against the opposite wall.” She put the coffee cup on the front page of the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* and sat down at the kitchen table.

“Too cold for you?”

“Actually, it was the cars. The traffic, you know, on the street right outside the window.”

Aunt Bess sat down with a plateful of toast cut into triangles. She dipped one into her coffee, carefully tapping off the excess liquid on the edge of the cup, and raised one eyebrow quizzically at Lexie.

“Oh, I know it sounds weird,” Lexie said. “But you tend to think about little details like the position of your bed when a machine that belongs on the road comes barreling through your living room wall.” Then, as briefly as possible, she told her aunt about the car crashing into her apartment.

“I'm just guessing, but does this have something to do with you avoiding cars altogether?” Aunt Bess asked.

“As a matter of a fact, it does. You should see the stuff I've printed out from the computer, stories that would curl your hair. The worst one to me was this little kid. Eleven years old. He was sleeping on the living room couch and got run over by a pickup

truck of all things. His sister's boyfriend left it in gear. Just stepped out for a minute and boom – it took off all by itself and went right through the wall.”

Aunt Bess cradled the coffee mug in her hands and studied a squirrel trying to reach a bird feeder on the limb of a cedar tree outside the kitchen window. “Little boogers eating everything I put out. Just because you read about bad things happening doesn't mean they have to happen to you.”

“But that's just it, Aunt Bess. Something bad did happen to me. Or at least, almost happened.”

“Maybe you ought to go to a headshrinker about this car thing. Aunt Bess got up from the table to freshen her coffee. “I read in a *Reader's Digest* about all these people afraid of this and that? Why, one man was even scared to death of toasters.”

“See? It isn't just me,” Lexie said.

“Now you take my friend, Mr. O'Cain, that's in his eighties and with cataracts? Does he let that stop him from getting in a car and driving a hundred miles on the four-lane to see me once in a while? Not on your life.”

As hard as it was to imagine her aunt with a boyfriend, Lexie realized it was time to at least acknowledge Mr. O'Cain's existence. “Yes, you mentioned something about him in your last letter. Something about going on a cruise? I was a little, I don't know, surprised.”

“Yeah, well, that makes two of us. I wasn't exactly looking for any man. I guess you could say we're friends, maybe a little more.”

“How'd you meet?”

“We went to high school together. Didn’t I tell you? He always did like me back then, but after he went off to the service, me and Doc got together. When he saw in the paper about Doc dying a couple of years ago, he held onto the obit and finally got the nerve to give me a call. He’s been coming down from Memphis now since May, regular as clockwork.”

“So, does he, like, make the trip, in you know, one day or what?”

“If you’re asking does he stay all night with me, the answer is no. That is one thing you don’t hurry at our age.” Lexie couldn’t help noticing the way Aunt Bess avoided her eyes. Suddenly she realized who the purple robe belonged to.

A couple of days later, Quentin surprised her with a call. “Everything’s fine here,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you my news. You’re not going to believe this. I went out today and bought a second-hand TV and got a subscription to the paper.”

“Whatever possessed you to do that?”

“I don’t know. I guess, I figure I should be able to handle that sort of thing better – news, I mean. Plus, I got interested in this woman’s lawsuit.”

“What woman?”

“The sister of the dead lady. You know, the one who crashed into your apartment. I guess there’s some kind of class action suit against the company that made the car. I thought you might be interested.”

“Well, I’m not. I came here to get away from that stuff.” She hadn’t meant to sound so abrupt, but she was disappointed that he’d just called to tell her about a lawsuit.

“Are you feeling any closer to getting back in a car?” He said this with a little laugh. She could picture the lopsided grin, the rapid blinking of his eyelids behind horn-rimmed glasses.

“I don’t know. I’m not making any decisions any time soon.”

After several days of watching TV and surfing the Internet, Lexie decided to walk downtown to visit Uncle Doc’s drugstore, where Aunt Bess still worked part-time for the new owners. An old orange VW van was rattling by the house as she stepped outside. It was the kind that used to be called a “hippie van.” An elderly man wearing a cowboy hat was at the wheel. He smiled and waved at Lexie. People did that around here, smiling and waving from cars, assuming they knew you or just being friendly.

She hardly recognized the drugstore even though Aunt Bess had prepared her for the change. The new owners had torn out the soda fountain with its red vinyl barstools and shiny chrome counter to make room for several rows of shelves, offering everything from canned goods to cat food. Aunt Bess thought it was a big mistake.

“They can’t compete with Walmart,” she’d told Lexie. “Fools don’t have enough sense to realize nostalgia is in. Baby boomers just love soda fountains.”

The pharmacist’s platform at the back still looked much the same as it had that summer day more than twenty years ago when Lexie first came in with her mother. The scene had been described to her so often she never knew whether it was her memory or someone else’s: Uncle Doc, the pharmacist, looking down at them, jokingly asking Lexie’s mother, “How much would you take for that young’un?” He was trying to cheer them up – the thin, filthy child and the gaunt-faced country woman. But the woman just

stared back at him, unsmiling. A week or so later, she returned, same dark-haired child in tow, cheeks now scrubbed clean. Then, every Saturday for the next month she showed up, sometimes with two or three other children scrabbling around her legs. She said she was just looking around but never bought anything. If one of the children reached out for a comic book or a candy bar, she slapped its hands. Finally, one day, when no one else was in the store, she approached Uncle Doc at the platform, Lexie clutching the hem of her mother's dress, and said softly, head down, "Mister, I reckon we could let you have her for a couple hundred if it's not too much."

Aunt Bess, who was filling a telephone order for nerve pills, as she called them, joked about wanting to pop a whole handful when she heard what the woman said. "Of course, we couldn't hold with buying somebody's child," she told Lexie. "But you and your poor mama looked near about starved to death. She said she and her husband were trying to scrape up enough gas money to drive to Texas and pick grapefruit. I thought to myself, what if they go and sell that pretty little girl down in Old Mexico?"

Aunt Bess had always wanted a little girl but had never been able to get pregnant. So she and Uncle Doc agreed to keep Lexie that spring, just until her parents returned. Fatten her up, Aunt Bess explained. Give her a good bath, buy her some clothes and a few toys. They gave the parents three-hundred dollars with the understanding that the arrangement would just be temporary. Six months later the parents hadn't returned. Lexie turned four in the white stucco house and soon stopped crying for her mother. She continued to call her adoptive parents aunt and uncle and even thought for many years to come that she really was their niece.

"Can I help you, young lady?"

Lexie, startled, looked up at the pharmacist and realized she'd been standing in the middle of the floor. Her mother would've been about her age, maybe even stood in that very spot. "Oh, no thank you. I'm just waiting for my aunt," she told the man.

Aunt Bess emerged from a backroom. "I guess you came to see me to my car," she said to Lexie, "although it sure would be nice if you were to ride along. Looks like it's fixing to sleet or snow, one."

"I wanted to get out for a little exercise." Lexie clutched her parka at the neck as they walked out into the stiff, cold wind. "Say, Aunt Bess, I was just wondering. You told me once how my parents and the rest of the kids left town for good. Are you sure none of them ever came back?"

Aunt Bess shrugged. "Sure as I can be of anything. If they were around, they'd of probably come by asking for more money."

Lexie slipped her arm through Aunt Bess's, drawing close in the frigid air. "It's funny. Like they didn't exist in real life, just in stories. But I always felt like they were around, like I'd turn the corner one day and there they'd be. Only they wouldn't recognize me. I still remember her, you know. I remember watching as they drove away, waiting for her to turn around and wave. I didn't know why she was leaving me there. I wanted to run after the car, but I just stood there. She never did wave."

Aunt Bess patted Lexie's arm with a mittened hand. "I know, I know," she said. As she opened the car door, she looked up a little sheepishly. "Speaking of strangers, I hope you don't mind that I went ahead and asked Mr. O'Cain to eat with us Christmas. He may or may not be able to make it, depending on the weather."

“Of course I don’t mind,” Lexie said, trying to sound sincere. She watched the big green car pull away, wondering where she would be spending next Christmas if her aunt married Mr. O’Cain and moved to Memphis or Florida.

It was snowing lightly on Christmas Eve when Lexie went to Jitney Jungle just across the highway to pick up a few last-minute items for Christmas dinner. She stood in the checkout line behind a beefy looking man in a grease-stained denim jacket. The cashier coughed into a wadded-up tissue as she rang up the carton of generic cigarettes he set down.

“Sounds like it’s still hanging on,” the man commented to the cashier.

“Yeah, I can’t get rid of it,” the woman said.

“I got something I can’t get rid of myself,” the man went on. “Blowing out blood at both ends.”

“Well, you better get that taken care of that, hon’.”

As Lexie walked across the parking lot, careful to avoid patches of ice, she wondered how the clerk would react to a revelation that Lexie had taken a pair of scissors to her driver’s license. It was probably easier to deal with bloody stools. When she was a few houses away from Aunt Bess’, she noticed a red car just like her Toyota sitting out front, the motor running. She stood in the middle of the sidewalk, hugging the paper bag of groceries against her chest. Quentin stepped out of the car.

“Hey, little girl. Need some help?”

“Quentin, what in the hell are you doing here?” She didn’t move as he took the grocery bag from her. His cool dry mouth brushed her cheek.

“Hell is where I’ve been, I think. At least I went through parts of it on the way down here.”

“How did you find us?”

“Surprisingly enough, you do appear on some maps.” They walked up the steps to the front door. “Actually, I figured I’d take you up on that invitation to join you and your aunt for dinner. You were serious, weren’t you?”

She couldn’t answer that question. Instead, she said, “You’ll have to sleep on the couch, you know.”

“No problem. I just don’t want to drive back alone. It’s awful lonely in that car with nothing but NPR to keep me company, and I couldn’t even get that south of St. Louis.”

Aunt Bess opened the door. Her pale blue eyes seemed pushed together, lips drawn inward. “He’s gone,” she announced, turning away. Lexie didn’t have to ask “who.”

“Was it a wreck?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Worse. He’s history.” Aunt Bess plopped down on the chintz-covered sofa, staring at the Christmas tree in front of the window. “He tried to say it was road conditions. Too slippery to drive, he says. Doesn’t have four-wheel drive, he says. Ha. I could tell he’s just looking for a way out.”

Lexie sat down beside her. “You scared me to death. I thought he was dead or something. The roads are bad. Just ask my friend, Quentin. He drove down from Illinois.”

Aunt Bess looked up, noticing Quentin for the first time. “Looks like tonight is full of surprises,” she said. “Don’t pay me any mind, Quentin. You’re welcome here,

being a friend of Lexie's and all. Look at you, driving all this way, and here's a man acted like wild horses couldn't keep him away from me, won't even step outside for fear of falling."

"Actually, there were a couple of times I thought I wasn't going to make it," he said. "Good thing I had Lexie's Toyota for the traction."

"Funny, isn't it," Aunt Bess said, "how that vehicle got down here in spite of her? Maybe it's a sign."

The next afternoon, after Christmas dinner, they sat around the tree opening presents, drinking the Bailey's Irish Cream Quentin had brought and playing Pictionary. Lexie sat beside Quentin, his arm draped on the back of the sofa behind her. Outside, the weather had warmed up, as pleasant as an early autumn day, the roads wet with melting patches of snow.

When it was her turn to play Pictionary, Aunt Bess drew crude pictures of ships going down beneath waves and stick figures on desert islands. "My luck, and he'd of booked our cruise on the Titanic anyhow," she grumbled. When the phone rang, she jumped to her feet. Lexie took her arm.

"It's probably Brandon," she said, glancing at Quentin who was absorbed in his drawing. "He was supposed to call today."

She's already decided she would tell him Quentin was there. He could make of it what he wanted. But he apparently couldn't imagine Lexie would be interested in another man.

"Great," he said when she told him. "I'm glad he brought you your car. Now maybe you'll get some sense and drive it back."

He didn't come down here to bring me my car, she wanted to say. He came because he wants to fuck me. Again. And you know what? I want him to.

They talked for a few more minutes about the minutia of their lives. When Brandon said "I love you," Lexie didn't reply.

"You know, Aunt Bess," she said after hanging up, wondering if the seasonal goodwill was making her too sentimental, "the highway runs both ways. And the roads are looking good. It's still early enough, we could pay a surprise visit to your friend in Memphis."

"*We?* You planning on driving?"

Lexie shrugged. "I don't know. But I figured you might not want to go alone."

"It looks like to me you got a backup driver."

"See what you started," Lexie said, nudging Quentin.

"Me?" He grinned slowly and looked down at her, one eyebrow cocked. She knew he hadn't set out to seduce her back into an automobile or, for that matter, into bed. With Quentin, life just happened. Like the weather. Get into a borrowed vehicle that might or might not have a loose bolt somewhere and point it south to a spot on the map. Who knows what the ride would be like or where the road would take you. Maybe she couldn't control fate or the weather, but she could decide a few things about road conditions. She looked at the two of them and smiled.

"I'll do the driving," she said.

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