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In Pursuit of a Path: A Collection of Short Stories About Women

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In Pursuit Of A Path:

A Collection Of Short Stories About Women

(TITLE)

BY

Stacey M. LaFeber

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

This collection of short fiction, through third-person narration and empathetic characters, tells the stories of five different women struggling to be themselves, essentially telling the struggle of women and humans everywhere.

These women, who are in the minority--a lesbian, a single career woman, a black woman, an elderly woman and a young college woman--especially represent the wonders and beauties and complexities and difficulties of being a woman. Their obstacles though are society, homophobia, gender, race and age.

However, despite their obstacles and their opponents--themselves, family, friends, co-workers, employers--somehow they reach within themselves and find new strength to emerge from their respective conflicts. They emerge into truer, more determined, stronger, more peaceful and better selves.

Brooke Uriah lets go of the woman with whom she was in love and who has died recently. At the same time she takes ownership of her lesbianism by standing firm with her family, primarily her mother. By letting go and standing firm, she embraces a truer woman in herself.

Mick Niessen takes on everybody and everything that gets in her way of being a successful businesswoman, until her conscience decides to take her on. She hears her conscience and the significant people in her life before listening to an even more determined woman in herself.

Laine Judé steps around anybody and anything that may

cause conflict in her life, until someone steps in front of her black skin and her dream to teach. Instead of stepping backward and then around, she steps forward for once, clearing the path for a stronger woman in herself.

Cade Quinlan gives in to her failing health at age ninety, but her family does not. They judge her wishes to hold on no longer as fleeting, delirious from age and pain and medication. Before she becomes comatose, she thinks enough ahead to ask her friend to speak on her behalf, finding a younger, more peaceful woman in herself.

Sally Crofton gives up herself to help her friend Cade Quinlan. At age twenty, however, her word is as valued as Cade's. Still, she steps up and confronts Cade's family regarding her friend's wishes. They make her step back, causing her to step back even farther and see the good of her failed attempt, thus seeing a better woman in herself.

Collectively, these women have similar advantages--human spirit, humor, intelligence, talent, wisdom--and distinct advantages--love for another woman, female anatomy in a "man's world," color of skin, too much age, too little age. Individually, they take different paths to utilize their advantages in order to overcome their disadvantages.

Some self-interpretation may consider this collection as feminist. More simply, it is a reflection of some of the diverse personalities within the 1990s, reemphasizing the importance of serious subject matters and reaffirming perhaps the ultimate moral value: truth.

For all of my family and friends,
especially my best friends,
my mother Barbara,
Pamecita,
me.

Acknowledgments

With eternal thanks to SOMEONE for helping me plod my path. And with special thanks to Dr. Bruce Guernsey for helping place me in this position; Dr. Terry Shepherd for helping me pursue my passion; and Dr. David Carpenter for helping me "perfect" my passion.

Contents

Preface	v
The Brooke Runs Sweet	1
To Your Knees	34
Jude From Georgia.	65
Watching The Veins Go By	87
Bibliography	

Preface

...though the ability to write well is partly a gift--like the ability to play basketball well, ...--writing ability is mainly a product of good teaching supported by a deep-down love of writing.

(Steward 9)

Since I consider writing and playing basketball two of my passions in life, John Gardner's words leapt at me from "Writers On...", a home page on the Internet created by Sherry Steward. My desire does not necessarily mean I do them well. Some have said I have a gift for both, but again others' good word about my written word and physical play does not guarantee good writing or good playing. Good teaching does not ensure good writing or good playing either.

All three aspects combined though--talent, teaching and desire--come closer to a guarantee of goodness than any aspect on its own, as Annie Dillard notes: "I think some teachers think that if the students have a good heart that is enough. But it isn't" (Steward 9). No, it is not. God is the donor of our gift; we the students are the seers of our passion; and writers before us are the teachers of our craft. Good writing is all three culminating at once. And just as it is not John Gardner or Annie Dillard showcasing their magic, then uncasing the illusions backstage for their students to emulate step-by-step, it is not Larry Bird or

Phil Jackson showing Michael Jordan how to score 25,000 points in his NBA career.

All writers and players are different; therefore, their abilities and styles are different, because, as Tom Wolfe puts it, "there are no two identical brains" or "two absolutely identical consciousnesses" (Bellamy 87). One can compare and contrast, and even emulate, but never completely match. This is where external influences affect "the internal situation of the individual," since it certainly is not "the only reality" (Bellamy 87). A teacher can teach the basic techniques--how to develop a character, how to use setting as a character, how to transform language. A coach can teach the fundamentals--how to set a pick, how to take a charge, how to press on defense. In my opinion, however, what a teacher or coach says to inspire the protégé and help the protégé gain a better perspective of the craft impacts the learning and mastering process as much as the techniques. As a result, *how* a protégé *feels* about his/her craft can be as important as *how* he/she writes it; in addition, *what* a protégé writes about can be as important as *how* he/she writes about it:

...form-content distinction.... [Tom Wolfe's]
arguing that the content is always changing, so
the same form is viable forever. Because the
times are always changing, the content is always

important. It's not just the form that is so crucially important. (Bellamy 79)

Although the above snippet was included in an interview between Joe David Bellamy and Tom Wolfe in the early 1970s, its validity has transcended decades. Wolfe's response to Bellamy's assertion indicates extra elements of form always at a writer's disposal, thereby accenting the importance of content:

You do have two new elements always available. You've got your own way of looking at things. You're not looking at the world the same way as any other person, unless you've let yourself be so totally conditioned that you're some kind of automation. But also--the second element--the conditions *around* you have changed.

(79-80)

Then the conditions around Bellamy and Wolfe were changing in the aftermath of a Presidential scandal and a foreign war. Fiction itself was changing, transforming into Wolfe's "new fiction" and other "mutations," as some writers of the time termed such changes. The changes heated debates on the future of fiction and where it was going. Wolfe, though thickly involved with the changes of form, gave a reflective yet perhaps prophetic analysis in the same interview with Bellamy:

I imagine the most serious subject now is

changes in the way people live, not politics, not wars. I think it's just the changes in the way people live, the changes in the way they look at the world. Perhaps that's always been the most serious subject. (79)

Indeed. Where fiction was going was toward today. As much as fiction was changing and has changed, it has stayed the same, come full circle. Even Joyce Carol Oates led us back around to today. With all of the labels that tend to get attached to fiction, she stripped it and reasoned "there aren't any conventions really. There are no conventions or traditions, only personalities" (Bellamy 29).

And women are some of the most fascinating personalities of today. And gender and race are two of the most serious subjects of today, which with the help of Joyce Carol Oates and Bebe Moore Campbell will be expounded upon later in this preface. And the short story is one of the best ways to display these personalities and subjects because "the genre as a whole seems constantly to resist universal definition" (Shaw vi). Combining the three aspects of talent, teaching and desire into writing the short story, strong personalities can translate into strong lives, strong subjects can translate into strong stories.

When Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks came together to compile *American Short Story Masterpieces*, they searched for "short stories which on occasion had the ambition of

enlarging our view of ourselves and the world." They too stripped the labels placed on fiction--"self-reflexive, fabulist, magical realist"--to get back to the basics of fiction. They realized "that the wheel [had] rolled forward again," bringing fiction as it once was closer to today. They wanted to reemphasize the importance of content, serious subject matter, "singular stories with a narrative durability, within a discernible narrative tradition" (*Masterpieces* Introduction).

This is the same intent with which I approached the creation of my own collection of short stories. Deliberately, I minimized fancy and fantasy to concentrate on simple and real. Not that fantastical fiction is a denounced form of writing. On the contrary, most recently, I was mesmerized by Laura Esquivel's short novel *Like Water For Chocolate*. With the use of another era and another country, actual cooking recipes and fantasy, Esquivel transports her readers to that era, to that country, to the recipes and fantasy making sense of people's lives and loves. It is almost like participating in a dream, not one's own, but the main character's--Tita, a strong woman desperately trying to accept her lot in life.

Without the thrust of fantasy, my collection of fiction aspires to be like a dream as well, like John Gardner's view of fiction, a "'vivid and continuous dream' in which the reader is 'living a virtual life, making moral judgments in a

virtual state'" (*Anything Can Happen* 4). And after the dream readers take with them moral values of "[g]enerosity, hope..." and the "ultimate moral value" of "[truth]" (*The New Fiction* 177). Since the short story has a "recurrent concern with [the] audience...as an intimate group or community" (Shaw vii), the dream is merely a means to communicate these moral values to the readers.

Whereas William Gass is more interested "in disarming the almost insistent communicability of language" (*Anything* 22), like Gardner "everything I choose in writing a piece of fiction is aimed at communication" (*Anything* 22). The communication is an attempt at "an affirmation that has something to do with how to live," not "an affirmation of just living" (*Anything* 24).

How we live is a reflection of our world, our lives as they are at that time, as fragmented as they may be. We still live by sorting our chaos, therefore still write this way. Tom Wolfe asserted this in the 1970s, and it still echoes in the 1990s:

When you don't have a coherent class structure, it's more difficult to present a picture of the society. It's also more of a challenge.... ...present it in a way that gives people a larger picture of themselves....

(Bellamy 82)

Today the conditions around us are constantly changing. The

1990s brought us more Presidential scandals and another foreign war, although it was certainly on a much smaller scale than Vietnam. However, in a way we also endured our own small, civil war, the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Racism today is a serious subject, as is sexism, homophobia and ageism. Collectively, women today are strong personalities living strong lives. Thus, the intention for my collection was to write about strong women who have a lot going for them, but also a lot going against them; strong women who eventually emerge from vulnerable situations by tapping into unrealized strengths; strong women, after respective years of maturation, experience instances of maturation and are forever changed.

In "The Brooke Runs Sweet" Brooke Uriah is the first main character introduced in this collection. She is a lesbian. I selected this particular subject matter because of three reasons that also have transcended the decades:

- 1) We take it for granted that the relationship between a man and a woman, one of [fiction's] staple ingredients can be rendered and felt in an infinite variety of ways, and that the given elements in a character's situation--gender, class, or heredity--are always tempered by personal experience.

(Adams 12)

- 2) [H]omosexual characters--however skillfully

they are presented--tend to be judged by criteria which would not normally be applied to their more conventional counterparts. (Adams 12)

3) Critical appreciation of homosexual themes in literature must take account of the wider social and cultural context in which it is produced. The process of judgment is peculiarly complicated by conditioned responses to this subject so that the quality of a relationship is frequently overshadowed by its categorization. (Adams 9)

As for the first reason, I wanted to display this staple ingredient, but simply between a woman and a woman, proving emotions can be "rendered and felt in [the same] infinite variety of ways" (Adams 12). As for the second and third reasons, perhaps ideally and naively, I wanted to alter the judgment criteria (12) and "conditioned responses" (9).

Mick Niessen and Laine Judé are the second and third main characters, respectively, introduced in the collection to follow. Mick is a single, career woman in "To Your Knees;" Laine Judé, or Jude, is a single, career woman in "Jude From Georgia." Mick is white; Laine is black. In these particular cases, race "counts more" (Chambers *The New York Times Magazine*), that is "counts more" against Jude than for her. In addition, it "counts more" against Jude than it does against Mick. I selected these serious subject matters

to display the fine line of prejudice between anatomy and skin color, as Bebe Moore Campbell and Joyce Carol Oates discussed in the 1994 interview, "Which Counts More, Gender Or Race?"

Both authors at the time had written novels about relationships between black and white women, which I touch upon in "Jude From Georgia." In all four of the short stories of my collection, "gender does give [all of the main characters] commonality" (Chambers 18-19), but each woman has an extra, distinct element (or more) that also counts against her. In Mick's case she defends her gender, marital status and place in the business and social world against her male counterparts as well as her female counterparts, business, family and otherwise. She does not, however, have to defend her skin color against any of her counterparts. On the other hand, Jude does because "race throws up some barriers" (Chambers 19). In her case she especially defends herself against her female counterparts, her landlady, the principal's secretary, the female board member. As Joyce Carol Oates points out in the same interview with Campbell, "We expect more of people who have been oppressed" (Chambers 18), but for Jude such an expectation counts less.

Cade Quinlan and Sally Crofton are the final main characters introduced in this collection. In "Watching The Veins Go By" each of their extra element of prejudice is age; Cade has too much and Sally has too little. I selected this

serious subject matter to display "the lifelike"
(*Masterpieces* Intro):

...that is to say, toward [a] realistically
fashioned [story] that may even in some cases
approximate the [outline] of our own lives. Or,
if not our own, at least the lives of fellow human
beings--grown-up men and women engaged in the
ordinary but sometimes remarkable business of
living and, like ourselves, in full awareness of
their mortality. (*Masterpieces* Intro)

At the age of ninety, Cade is fully aware of her mortality
and wishes to prolong her failing health no more. It is her
body and her life, but not her decision. Or is it? At the
age of twenty, Sally also is fully aware of her friend's
mortality and wishes and speaks on Cade's behalf when she is
no longer capable. It is her duty and her loyalty as a
friend, but also not her decision. Or is it? The 1990s is
an age of ethics. Is it ethical to assist someone with her
own suicide? Who is the best judge of such ethics? The
person who wishes to die? The person's family? Those who
know her best? Her doctor? A judge? The government?

This is our world today, fragmented with homophobia,
sexism, racism, ageism and many other serious subject
matters. Brooke, Mick, Jude, Cade and Sally simply exemplify
the essence of contemporary women, who are "[l]iving
[s]tories, [t]elling [l]ives" (Frye). These characters and

their stories, and my intent to tap into their strong lives, relate well to the premise behind Joanne Frye's *Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience*:

For women writers, like women characters, have been denied the support of cultural precept. Their stories, when told, have been too often set aside as personal and feminine; their pens, when wielded, have been refused the authority of perceived truth. They, like their characters, have been denied the legitimate evidence of their own experience. (Preface v)

Perhaps it is due to this precedent and its lingering perception of possibility that I opted for my protagonists' lives to be told from third-person narration, as opposed to Frye's "focus...on the peculiar fruitfulness of first-person" (Preface xi). First-person narration is indeed a bold approach. Add present tense, and it is a bold approach with urgency and immediacy--if utilized in my collection, a bold approach to bold subject matters. However, I opted to take a sober approach to bold subject matters, so as to draw less attention to the narrator and the usual authorial implications, and to draw more attention to "compelling," "coherent" and "[sincere]" lives being told (*Masterpieces* Intro). As in "Gardner's dream, the reader forgets the artist and the language; character is person, plot is

behavior" (*Anything* 4).

If the reader does forget me as the artist, it does not necessarily mean I was only behind the pen and computer screen. I, like many writers, many teachers, draw from my own experiences when writing, especially when developing characters. If I truly want to attain Gardner's "dream," then who better than real people to help develop real characters, "characters we could respond to as human beings" (*Masterpieces* Intro)? They are people I know and do not know, "people I...recognize and do not recognize" (Beattie 3), "people I meet [and] [do not] meet" (The New Fiction Oates interview 31). And yes, they are me as they are Joyce Carol Oates:

My use of myself in stories--well, it has always been there, the use of emotions I've felt. It's our constant battle with nature (Nature), trying to subdue chaos outside and inside ourselves, occasionally winning small victories, then being swept along by some cataclysmic event of our own making. (*New Fiction* 25)

Inevitably, one's struggle, like that described above, possesses enormous potential of appearing on paper.

Oates herself and another writer, teacher, person, Maya Angelou, served as models for the main characters within my collection. Both relate to the above struggle as well as the struggle of being a woman and its numerous roles. For

instance, in her interview with Bellamy, Oates discusses the difficulties in fulfilling all of her roles: person, woman, wife, writer, professor and so forth. In the process she finds it even more difficult "to remain sane and accountable" (23). All of the women within my collection discover this grit, but perhaps none more so than Mick.

Maya Angelou also knows the difficulties that sometimes go with trying to be one's self:

Being a woman is hard work. The woman who survives intact and happy must be at once tender and tough. She will need to prize her tenderness and be able to display it at appropriate times in order to prevent toughness from gaining total authority....

(Wouldn't Take Nothing 6-7)

As Angelou knows her own life and words best, this duality is more easily spoken about than accomplished. Brooke Uriah, Mick Niessen, Laine Judé, Cade Quinlan and Sally Crofton help illustrate the difficulty of this duality. Specifically, Angelou served as a model for Jude. Race is obvious; more importantly though, Angelou's grace and demeanor envelop Jude, so she can better face obstacles such as race. In a way Bebe Moore Campbell also stepped into Jude. Her experience after the 1992 Los Angeles riots is similar to Jude's experience at the gas station/convenience mart: "I

was on a corner one night...and I became aware that there were three Asian women standing at the corner and they were pulling away from me" (Chambers 18). Instead of pulling away, the strangers in Jude's episode pull at her with their glaring and gawking eyes. These instances, real and fictional, are common occurrences of racism.

Perhaps the most significant element of character development in my writing is empathy. Granted, for the most obvious reason of skin color I cannot fully empathize with Jude. However, "I have to have the same empathetic reaction to the character I would have toward a friend" (Beattie 5). Being an empathizer, as opposed to a manipulator, is another major contribution to attaining Gardner's "dream," to attaining my own dream. As a result, empathy is an easy transitional state for the reader.

The success of my collection depends on this state. The combination of character development, third-person narration and subject matter culminating at once should bring the reader to "a unity of feeling and understanding" (*Masterpieces* Intro). As a writer I already have reached this state. I understand and respect the effort it takes to combine talent, teaching and desire. Therefore, because of this effort, I have become a better writer and a better person.

And because of the efforts of the characters within the following collection, I have become a better woman. They

travelled a long way to reach today. All women have travelled far to reach their destinations. A destination for some these days is one of the professional women's basketball leagues. Hey, even as a basketball player, I still have a shot at goodness.

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The Brooke Runs Sweet

The lake was exceptionally beautiful today, the white sheet cake before the decorative roses, momentous message and candle flair. Brooke hadn't sat on her favorite rock behind her parents' house since Thanksgiving, the last time she had visited. Christmas had whisked her away to Aspen, and now here it was near the end of February with spring ready to stampede, charging into the red of summer, where to her The Run of the Bulls would simply be a fun free-for-all. However, her visit was far from planned, and what she felt was far from normal.

"Brookelyn, don't you think you should come in now? You stay out here any longer and the Seigert boys'll use you as a hockey puck," Steve Uriah, Brooke's father, high-school tennis coach and biggest fan, asked in white breaths from the sliding glass door. His hair looked as if some ashes from the fireplace had flown in to nest permanently atop and aside his black perch; some had even trickled to his mustache.

"Yeah, you're probably right," she said with a hint of a smile. Her father always had been her favorite, corniest comedian. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay, honey, we'll have dinner after you've warmed up."

Brooke turned back toward the lake as the sliding door closed and sealed in the fire and ashes. She unclasped her

arms from her knees, eased her boots to the firm white ground and slammed in. She brushed the cold from her denim ass and strode to the lake's shoreline, following alongside the prints of a deer, crunching with each step. She peeled off her blonde leather gloves and stuffed them into the pockets of her coat, the dark green corduroy collar turned up. Then she carefully chose the best skipping rock she could find. It simmered in her hand, sending shocking waves to every sensual spot, culminating in a shiver. Thereupon, she blindly wished for a witness from the first star she saw, held the smooth, sand-dollar-size rock close to her right cheek, her left, cocked it in a low side position and let 'er rip.

After a thaw she just knew this throw would have been a good six-skipper. Instead, it chipped and thunked about three times before it leveled out to a clean skating shave. Again, Brooke closed her blue eyes, inherited from her father, and when she opened them she saw herself sliding. She waited, then spun to trudge up the hill to the house just as the rock swooshed by the Seigerts' house, heading for the E Brook.

The fire was the first thing she saw, the first thing she felt, when she slid closed the door behind her, sealing out the brisk air and flakes that had started to fall. Still standing at the door, she looked closer and noticed a lot of ashes had accumulated in the fireplace while she was outside.

She resisted the urge, the same one she had since she was a child, to approach the soot, inhale and annihilate, as if it were merely dust on a nightstand. She remembered her mother muttering something or other, "making more of a mess...", as skinned shins and sagging socks scampered out the screen door.

"Well, perfect timing, Missy. I just took the last potato out of the oven," shrilled a dainty woman with blonde hair sheared at the neck, Steve Uriah's high-school sweetheart, bride of thirty-two years in June, the former Jan Ellen Bradford. "Don't forget to wipe your feet."

Brooke's raven hair, pulled back in her usual, casual ponytail, shook free the few hitchhiking flakes and droplets. It wouldn't be much longer before the flakes stayed like the ashes. She stomped and wiped her boots, loosened the laces and placed them next to her father's work boots, which were neatly lined up with the rest of the family's shoes. Brooke's mother insisted everything had its place. Brooke agreed except when it came to each other's place.

Brooke started for the kitchen, but she backtracked and straightened the rug covering the two-by-four stretch of linoleum at the back entrance.

"Don't forget to wash your hands, either," her mother reminded her. "I'm sure you had to be messing around with something for as long as you were out there."

Out there. Brooke recalled many a time when she, and

usually her older brother Derring, had to stay out there until her father came home to see what she had been messing around with. One summer they sat on the well's concrete slab base from mid-afternoon until dusk because they had been messing around in the mud down at the crawdad hole. They became like tin men in the rain. Their father eventually pardoned them with sentence served, and the next day in their mud-crusting shoes they were off to see what else they could see and mess around with out there.

Brooke flipped up the faucet in the kitchen, pumped the soap dispenser and let the hot, soft water sterilize her hands, simmering them in a stranger way than the rock had. She cringed and felt her fingers tighten, watched them turn red with screams of white scattered throughout. Finally, she furiously scrubbed them together, paused and rinsed. She flipped down the faucet, pulled a paper towel, held the rest with her right forearm and perforated perfectly. It absorbed her dripping hands, and its vigorous wiping added more color. Her dry, chapped hands crumpled and slamdunked it into the paper bin.

The phone rang and startled only Brooke. She realized contemplation on her favorite rock couldn't cure all of her edginess--it was only human. It would probably take quite some time before her insides were cleaned good, kind of like featherdusting the fireplace.

"Hello, Uriah residence," her mother answered the same

way she had since she was fresh out of college, another one of her sorority hangups. "Yes, she is. May I tell her who is calling?"

Brooke froze. Her stomach darted to the floor. Her ears started to conduct their own test of the Emergency Broadcast System. They repeated, this is only a test. This is only a test. Caroline was the only one who knew this number. Caroline was the only one who called whenever Brooke would go home to her parents'.

"Brooke Ebbet, it's for you," her mother whispered as she held both hands over the receiver of the cordless phone. "He said he's a friend."

Relief and grief struck Brook at the same time--**he** meant it wasn't Caroline. She picked herself up and stuttered to the phone, taking it from her mother and her silly countenance. She breathed in what air her stomach hadn't already embezzled when it skipped her body, and she slowly, curiously said, "Hello."

"Brooke, it's Peter. Brian and I have been trying to track you down ever since we heard. We are so sorry, Brooke."

Walking into the blue formal room, Brooke softly replied, "It's all so hard to piece together, Peter. I just can't get a handle on it. One hour I'm saying goodbye to Caroline. The next I'm carrying her purse in a plastic bag." Once again, Brooke couldn't control her tears. First, at

six-fifty-three this morning. Then with Caroline's mother, Tate, Mama McDowell. The two-and-a-half-hour drive with the chows in the jeep. Her father's arms. Now, Peter.

"What the hell is happening? Why is this happening?"

"I don't know, Brooke," countered Peter, the accountant, Brian's roommate, "their" neighbor. The one Jan would always nudge Brooke about when she and Steve visited their daughter's constantly-in-construction house and her roommate Caroline. What about him? she would say. Clean, good-looking, steady job, and apparently he can cook, she would giggle as she nibbled on his homemade cookies. If she only knew Brian was the cook.

Peter continued, "Tell us what we can do for you?"

She gathered her paralyzed senses. Crying wasn't going to do her any good, nor was this pacing, especially since the Persian blue carpet and the rest of the azure decor were for show-and-tell, not sit or eat or drink or.... Caroline wouldn't stand for these sobs, either. Gut it out, Uriah, she'd say. It's not the end of the world. Life goes on. Then most surely, she'd break into The Beatles.

"There's nothing you can really do right now. Everything's been taken care of already. I tell ya what, though...you can give me a great big hug when you see me in a couple of days," Brooke returned. Her smile returned, too. Briefly, but it had returned.

"You can definitely count on that."

"Okay then, I better go," Brooke said. "We're about to eat dinner. I'll see you soon."

"Okay, Brooke. Take care and know we love you."

Peter faded. The quiet pierced Brooke as she slid the antenna back down. She sat for a moment, didn't move, got caught in a long, deep stare at the Persian blue carpet. From the left she felt the piano stepping in. From the right the China cabinet started its showdown swagger, while the picture bureau simply spectated, the loveseat Brooke had sat down on scooted her closer to the draw and the other fixtures hushed. But before a collision or a bullet brushed a heart, her stare snapped and rose.

Brooke's daze and socked feet coordinated themselves back to the kitchen, where her parents and brother had settled for supper. Her mother's countenance remained unchanged. It volleyed in sync with Brooke as she tucked the phone in its cradle on the counter next to the portable TV, and then one-eightied to the lone, awaiting chair at the table.

"Is everything okay, Brookelyn?" Brooke's daddy asked. Could I crawl into your arms? she thought. That would make everything okay again. Make it go away. Make it all go away. Squeeze me so tight that I explode and reform. Kiss my shins, pull up my socks, pat me on the behind and send me on my curious way.

"Yeah, everything's fine. That was just Peter and

Brian sending their best," Brooke explained after she cleared a cough.

"That was Peter?" her mother intervened with raised, penciled eyebrows, rippled forehead and twinkling crow's feet. "Well, why didn't he just say so in the first place?"

Brooke shrugged her off and passed the platter of foiled potatoes to her brother Derring, whose tranquility had endured since Brooke's arrival earlier that afternoon. He knew his peace and pacification for his sister would come, even if their mother bantered on. He would be there for his sister as she had always been there for him, and in more of a capacity than an embrace of greetings and apologies. He could do more for her than a cliché.

"Despite the circumstances," her mother added, "it will be nice to see him." No, Brooke thought in a glare, despite my best friend's death, you will still be trying to make a match here on planet earth.

For that fact alone--her mother's spotted, rose-colored glasses--Brooke had to tell them. She knew she had to forewarn them, although turning her mother's silly countenance up a notch could easily be worth the silence. No, now or then, Brooke's words would still get a high rise out of her mother, which in all seriousness Brooke would gladly bypass and play in ice skates against Martina Navratilova with Wimbledon and the welfare of the world on the line. Besides, her mother's silliness, pettiness,

whatever it was, would not be desired or tolerated for everyone's sake, Brooke' sanity's sake and, especially, Caroline's sake.

"Look," Brooke shakily started, "about the service. There are a few things you need to be aware of." Derring shot her an uh-oh as he returned the steak sauce to the lazy Susan; her father gave her his eye contact as he levered the knife on the butterdish; and her mother acknowledged her with a quick neck turn as she hovered over her bowl and slid her fork out of her mouth full of salad. Brooke cleared her throat. She almost wanted to check a mike to see if she were "on." Testing. One, two, three. Testing. The only problem was she didn't have any notecards. No teleprompter to address the state of the union. She was frantically searching in her mental filing cabinet. A, B, C, D, E, F, F, F, there it was, Family, somewhere before Fate and Friends. Damn. There weren't any notecards, only pictures, pictures she had drawn in her mind over and over again. She skimmed them, checking if any would aid her testimony, but for some reason she just didn't think they would see it the way she did.

"Well...." Good start, she encouraged herself, patted her own behind and said, Go ahead. Her mother's whole head shifted this time.

A little girl's socks sagged again. As the other one stayed behind her swaying back, one hand wiped her black

curls from her sweaty brow, streaking some dirt that had been caught in a crease of skin. Beads of sweat left her knees and meshed with her skinned shins. She worried this broke can't be fixed.

"Um...," she tried another approach. Her attention-getter apparently had done the trick. Her audience hadn't gone anywhere, though she wanted to crawl under her chair--an altogether different angle, but it probably wouldn't have the same effect. No, she had to stay right there, strap herself in if necessary. The music played, faintly syncopated, but it played. And the puck was at center ice. No pick-up game between the Seigert boys. There was a lot more at stake than who got to play video games first when they went indoors. Brooke planned on saving just that, that was if she could muster enough strength to stop wobbling and steady her skates. She secretly looked up, hoping this time for any witness she saw to swoop down and help out. Her resolve wasn't as assured as before and had started to retreat.

"Is Sweeney going to be there?" Derring asked. "Man, that is one crazy chick. Whoo-doggie. I don't think they've ever seen anyone like her before. Do you, Brooke?"

Whoa. Where the hell did he come from? she asked herself. No one or thing stepped forward and provided any answers. More of her secret glances--down, up, behind--whirled around and waited. Still, nothing. She did claim to have seen a blur, which more than likely was her heart

skipping her body to join the ranks of her stomach. This was not the way her insides needed to be cleaned out good.

"Oh, no," Brooke agreed. "Sweeney is quite a character, one I'm sure you two have never encountered before." Jan and Steve were Christmas cards compared to this woman with spiked hair, a braided tail hanging off her shoulder and a cross dangling from her right ear.

Her mother's countenance clanged with confusion; her father asked a question of his own, "What do you mean, dear?"

"I mean...I mean that there are going to be some people there who are not like you, but that doesn't mean they are any less people. Some will dress differently, plain look different. They will talk differently, have different views. Caroline knew these people and cared for them immensely, as she cared for everyone. I know and care for these people too. It didn't matter to Caroline, and it doesn't matter to me. We've been over this before. I don't want it to be an issue with you. It will not be the time or the place," Brooke burst out in what seemed one breath, if indeed one were in her scarce stock.

Relief and grief struck her at the same time again. She saw the light bulb starting to clear the confusion from her mother's countenance. Jan played the dumb role as long as she could, but even she couldn't avoid this revelation. Brooke could hear Caroline. "Mothers are not dumb," she had said. "For Christ's sake, you live *in* them for nine months,

more or less. Then they bear you, and you live **with** them for nine months eighteen times over, more or less. They're not dumb, by any means. They simply want what they think is best for you, and they think suppressing such a thought may help them help you get that best."

Denial still enveloped her mother, but her instinct crept from behind. She could not see it as a matter between Jan and Brooke, two individuals, two persons, two human beings. Instead, she saw two titles, mother and daughter, two roles, two assignments. She wanted to blame something or someone, maybe even herself. What she failed to recognize was this was something blame bounced off of; this was something that just was, nothing more, nothing less.

Her father set down his utensils, stroked his moustache and searched for his little girl. He heard big words from a big girl. She certainly understood them, or how would she have been able to blurt them out so gracefully like that? When he presented a three-year-old with her very own miniature tennis racket and ball, she said, "No, Daddy." He was deflated. He didn't understand.

Derring already understood. He was her knight, her friend. She was his baby sister, his friend. Caroline was his friend too. "Are you saying that some of those 'funny' people are going to be there?" Brooke's mother said in a low voice, enclosing the word funny in a whisper.

"Yes, they're funny, Mother," Brooke responded. The grip on her knife showed no signs of weakness, as red and white flowed again. Her nostrils flared the way they always did when she was on the defense. "They're funny all right. They can make you laugh until your sides hurt and you're begging them to stop. But the funny thing would be you laughing your ass off and not even knowing that they were 'funny'," Brooke mocked her mother on the final funny.

Derring bulged his brown eyes behind his spectacles and almost choked his t-bone down the wrong hole. His abs tightened so his belly wouldn't pop like a balloon headed for the ceiling fan. Her father was himself--his safety constantly on.

"Now listen here, Missy," Brooke's mother took her own offense, "you just tone it down. As long as those people are not indecent to me or in public, I don't have a problem with them."

Brooke shook her head on the inside and outside. Tears welled, though she wished they wouldn't have. She wanted to stand without tears. They glazed her blue eyes like ice upon the lake. Many would have said, at that moment, Brooke, too, looked exceptionally beautiful. "You just don't get it, do you? A very special person was killed in a car accident this morning, and you're looking under it, over it, around it, past it. You're looking everywhere but at it. People, all kinds of people, loved and respected this person with all of

their heart and soul. And I was the first person in line."

"Well, of course you did, Brooke," her mother patronized. "We all loved her."

The knife slammed to the table. Tears ran away from Brooke's eyes, slid down her cheeks and splashed on her plate of untouched nourishment. Some were caught by her colorful hands, blended into her skin and pushed into her hair. She gathered her electrified senses, tugged at her gut and said, "Dammit, Mother, I was **in** love with Caroline. The same way you are in love with Daddy. The same way Derring is still in love with Trish. Don't you see? **I** am one of those people, but even if I weren't, you would still have a problem with me. Why can't you just understand me for once? Caroline was my life. And now...now my life is gone." She scooted her chair back, rose and walked through the blue formal room, down the hall, to her room with the medals and trophies and ribbons.

No eyes met. No eyes blinked. Heads bowed or looked away. Thoughts ran, in incoherent directions and dead-end mazes. They sat at the table as separate entities in a collective bubble, a bubble floating higher and higher above them, high enough to where they saw themselves below, heard their hearts pumping, their brains throbbing, commanding them to speak. They fought their blindness, their deafness, their muteness. The bubble floated still higher, but their reflections came closer and closer until they were nose to

nose, pupil to pupil. They were about to speak when the crash of glass sliced their ears and sent their eyes toward the hall from where the clamor came.

Derring vaulted out of his chair and down the hall with his father right behind him.

"Brookelyn," her father shouted, "open this door. Unlock the door, Brookelyn."

The brass door handle wiggled. The door, which sported a yellowed Brooklyn Dodgers pennant, received blow after blow, fist after fist. First, there were two fists. Then there were four. All marched an off-beat cadence with intermittent clangs of brass and chants that sounded from far-away lands. Finally, the brass handle stopped dancing, the fists took a breather and the shouts sailed farther and farther away into the silence. The bodies took command, lowered their shoulders and slammed into the pennant, and slammed into the pennant, and slammed into the pennant until the lock splintered from its seam. The pennant descended from its resting place, nicked the brass handle, wafted into a new season, and blanketed medals and trophies and ribbons. There were also clothes, some on hangers, some not; pretty pastel pillows and matching bedding; Martina and Chris and Brooke with smiles and signatures under cracked glass; dried rose petals and pencils and pens and posters. And Brooke.

Derring and her father both went to her side on the floor, cracking the picture of smiles even more, though they

walked as gingerly as possible, almost tiptoeing. Her father helped her limp hands around his neck, where they lassoed tighter, the rope a familiar red and white. Her tears were buried in her father's chest, muffling her trembles and whimpers. Derring also knelt and put his arms around the two of them. His golden head gently propped against their heads and mixed like the moon in the middle of two passing blacks of night, with a few stars sprinkled here and there. No one uttered a word, not even her mother who stood in the doorway, the murmuring dancefloor, with a red-nailed hand masking her face.

"Are you all right, Brooke?" Caroline's mother, Tate, Mama McDowell politely asked. "We're about to start the service."

Brooke's shoulders and body acknowledged Tate, but their turning trend couldn't tantalize her head to come along. It was locked, secured in a whole other world, her land, no one else's. She did hear Tate, at least her body did as it turned to try to answer back politely since her head was so rude, especially her mouth and eyes. Her mouth gaped ever so slightly, receiving a little air, but no words, not even little ones, were sent. And her glassy, blue eyes stretched like stone, reaching through her long lashes for her black eyebrows, or tan crow's feet, or dark circles--any of them to quickly reach into the sand and pull her eyes away

from Caroline's picture to Caroline's mother.

She sat on their porch between their two dogs after they had just returned from vacation in the Carolinas. Connie and Mack, black and red chows, had missed them so much that their tongues licked and tails wagged for an hour straight, but true to form they straightened up like the lady and gentleman they were and posed a perfect cheese for Brooke and the Canon. The oversized, rolled-up sleeves of her oxford shirt exposed both smooth, tanned wrists as they draped over the dogs. Looking closer, perhaps with a magnifying glass or microscope or nonhuman eye, the sleek, gold watch said seven-ten and the sleek, gold herringbone said Merry Christmas. Her long tanned legs, ajar just a tad at the knees, relaxed in her walking shorts down to her sandals and peeking toes. Some of her sandy hair, with rays of the sun visiting for the summer, hadn't survived the thirteen-hour drive and hung with the sweat on her brow and by her ears, while the rest still obeyed her hair clip. Even without the sun or her smile, which always sauntered to one side, and even with the sweat and civilization, she was beautiful, naturally beautiful, inside and out.

Peter and Brian, Connie and Mack's watchdogs for the week, insisted on snapping a family picture. The timer took a group photo. Both of these were in the collage Brooke and Caroline had collaborated on for a space on the rec room wall. Tate thought it would be nice for the service. She

also brought the charcoal sketch of her daughter that Brooke had drawn for a birthday gift when they were in college. But the one that spelled Brooke, the one that blocked her head as if it were wedged between two brick walls, the one that seemed to be having its own conversation with the zombie that stood before it, was the simple eight-by-ten of Connie, Caroline and Mack stacked so neatly on the front porch right next to a slow Illinois sunset. It wasn't Peter and Brian. It wasn't the lens. It was Brooke. Caroline smiled at Brooke, for Brooke, because of Brooke. The film didn't capture Brooke at that very moment. But she could have sworn, at that very moment, she lost herself in a reflection. It wasn't the sun. It wasn't the flash. It was Caroline. Brooke could have sworn she was losing herself again.

"Huh?" the earthling finally spoke broken English, and she didn't smack her skull against a brick wall when she turned toward the alien. Instead, she felt her arms buckle at the elbow as they tried to claw from the chamber. Her heart thrashed. She tried to pull her head away before the sockets encircled her scalp. The cement rose to her waist.

"Brooke? Sweetheart? Are you okay?" Tate asked, phrase after phrase, trying to pry Brooke loose. By Brooke's elbows Tate guided her from the easels of pictures to the steps leading to the altar.

Brooke gathered her mesmerized senses--she blinked her blue eyes, licked her chapped lips and saw Caroline. No, no.

She saw Tate with her cropped brown hair and warm face, in her dark tartan suit. She saw her father in his black suit and tie next to her brother in his double-breasted black suit and gold tie pin. She saw her mother in her black dress and full red lips. And there were Peter and Brian in front of Sweeney and her tail. And hey, there was Trish standing alone by the entrance. And there was Caroline again. No. There was Taylor, Caroline's younger sister, sitting with her father Cooper and his second wife Gloria.

"I'm all right," Brooke reassured Tate and her family. She didn't have a megaphone or a doctor's release or a stamp on her forehead to reassure the church full of craning necks.

"Do you need a glass of water, dear, or some fresh air?" Brooke's mother asked.

"No, I don't need a glass of water or some fresh air," Brooke snapped. "I'll tell you what I need. I need to get this over with." She stood up strong in her low black heels, backing everyone away so they could clear a path. She wanted to dismiss them. She wanted to dismiss everyone so she could just be alone, with her thoughts and with Caroline.

She was about to go find her place where she had left her leaflets and rose and chapstick, when she almost ran right into Reverend Fairburn. What little white hair he had left crowned into his sideburns. His reading glasses crept toward the edge of his shiny nosetip, the top of his head shiny too. His small eyes and mouth answered together, "We

also need peace for Caroline to rest in."

He guided Brooke with one hand on her back as his other clutched the Bible, shrouded underneath his white-robed armpit. He helped her sit down and, before he climbed the few carpeted steps to the altar, he whispered, "I think you'll need to wait, Brooke. I do believe Caroline was first." Then he winked.

His altar approach signaled the restless audience for their silence to begin outward and their sympathy to begin inward. It was also the signal for individuals thirty-two inches or shorter to voice their opinions about the view, bathroom facilities and refreshments. For all they knew this was another one of those things where two people kissed at the end. Same place, same songs, same Amens.

The reverend, with a little help from the shhh sections, awed the assembly and began, "Today, we do not mourn a death. We do not shed a tear for every speck of ash and dust. We do not say goodbye. We do, however, say farewell until we meet again. We do smile for every ounce of love and care. We do celebrate a life. Caroline Aven McDowell was born February 3, 1962, at the Scott Air Force Base Infirmary to Airman Cooper Allen McDowell and the former Tatiana A. Lorenzen. Nearly ten years later, Caroline was accompanied by a sister, Taylor Aren."

Brooke lost every word after this. She slipped back into her trance and became fixed on Caroline's middle name, a

name at which she laughed the first time she heard it until the title holder explained its meaning. With the straightest face and the sincerest tone, Caroline had simply said, "I am blessed." Brooke had realized how serious Caroline was and straightened her own face; she gave her utmost attention to the new friend she had made at college.

"I truly believe this," Caroline continued. "Aven is a part of heaven. I can feel someone or something watching over me." Her expression never changed. Neither did Brooke's, but her opinion did--she had listened to perfect sense, some of the purest, if not the purest, words she had ever heard. The person before her believed these words, and without further hesitation, so did Brooke.

Her name stuck to Brooke's brain, moving memories around like stirred coffee. Her brain sputtered as she remembered that she said this heavenly name for the last time just the other night. Brooke had shouted from the garage, "Caroline Aven McDowell, we're gonna be late."

"Don't go ballistic, Uriah," Caroline had replied as she came around the corner from the living room into the kitchen, "your dead cow will still be on the menu when we get there." She poked her earlobes, trying to find some reasonably-sized holes for the Aztec set of earrings her father had expressed from Arizona for Christmas. They accessorized well with her blouse, stirrup pants and flats. She stuffed her wallet in its matching purse, another high-

priced department-store gift Gloria had picked out for Cooper to send, grabbed her wool coat off its hook and greeted her companion, who had held the door open. They ran under the closing double garage door, into the headlights' beams and falling snow.

Caroline's four-door jeep tracked through the ice and snow to Nodim's Fine Foods and Spirits in the city, just beyond the overpass, off the expressway. They frequented there after Brooke had become acquainted with the owner, Pep, when she designed the construction of the fitness complex farther up the boulevard. Dinner at their usual secluded table wasn't a special occasion or an apology. Actually, before it expired they needed to use a gift certificate that Caroline had randomly won the previous summer at one of Brooke's softball games. Besides, Caroline had business out of town the next few days--an alcohol-and-drug-abuse counseling conference in Chicago--so they thought it would be nice to spend a full evening together. Brooke's cow was still on the menu, a medium-well t-bone; Caroline shied away from red meat as much as possible and chose the fresh halibut. And over two carafes of wine they discussed everything from pasta to plays to philosophy, from family to friends to failure.

"Brooke," Caroline said as she placed her hand on Brooke's, "do you know what I like about you so much?"

"No, Caroline, what?" Brooke patronized for she knew

the wine had definitely taken its effect.

"I like you, that's what," Caroline asserted.

They both laughed before Brooke added, "Well, I like you too."

"No, really," Caroline became more serious, "I truly do like you." Brooke no longer patronized with her words, for words were no longer necessary. She said everything with her silent blue eyes, and one smooth movement of her fingers slipping into Caroline's and staying forever.

"Brooke Ebbet," Brooke's mother whispered as she squeezed her hand, "it's your turn to speak." Again, Brooke tried to swim from her land to the mainland, through the thickets. Her heart became like a bullfrog in the distant marsh, its echo matching the bubbles and plops in the water, the whistles and whirrs in the air. A knife cut at the darkness, but layer after layer peeled from another with no end in sight as the blind man's dog sniffed his stench, swallowed bugs whole with each pant, heard the ticks at the tips of his ears and sunk his three paws in the warm mud. The only end was in time. Dawn began to wake from her slumber and spread her wings through the bigtop branches. The knife slid back into its sheath. And Brooke washed ashore with a bullfrog in her pocket and sand granules under her nails.

With her leaflets and rose and without her chapstick, Brooke stole a deep breath from her father's eyes, stood

strong and swiveled to the podium at the altar where Reverend Fairburn waited for her to acknowledge his introduction and take his place. She gently set each of her articles down, straightened them and straightened them again. Her hand pressed the middle of her smart black suit and crisp white shirt, checking to see if any of her internal organs had returned from their sprees. This time she did have a mike, which she startingly knew was on when she cleared her throat. And she did have a few notecards, with her mental filing cabinet ready for reference. A tickler, the size of a billboard, was on call in the Hs, Help, somewhere after Heaven and Hell. Tate had provided the pictures, as physical as they were.

"Indeed," Brooke introduced her words and herself, "I am saying farewell until we meet again, Caroline Aven McDowell." No secrets, Brooke looked up and back down, sharing a laughing smile with the unsure audience. "And Caroline," Brooke continued in a voice reaching puberty and with eyes catching coins for wishes, "I know I am going to miss you like I have never missed anyone or anything before in my life, but I am also going to be okay. Uriah will gut it out because you taught me to know more about my guts. And I do. And I will."

Brooke stole another deep breath, this one from Derring and his crying smile. He couldn't help himself. He tried to help his sister change her biting lip to a crying smile like

his, but her colorful hands clung tighter to the incline of wood that held her words, shifted her eyes to more syllables and continued, "Once when I was down with where I had been, where I was and where I was going, you handed me this piece of paper full of words for me to comprehend at such a confusing time." She slid a piece of paper from under her notes. "No goofy card, no bouquet of balloons, no one-way ticket. Just black and white." She straightened her new order and recited:

sweet

rivers run
not away
to

their sisters
and brothers
you

alongside
not ahead
behind

their fathers
and mothers
inside

bends
not north
west

their hearts
and soul
flesh

rhythms
not made
feet

their Maker
and Nature
meet

Brooke paused with the silence, slid the paper back under her notes and started again, "I felt what you meant, but as usual you needed to elaborate for my technical mind." Brooke paused with the mild laughter, a smile interrupting a tear. "All you said was, 'Run, Brooke, not away from or to anybody or anything. Run with yourself and run sweet.' I understood better, but now, at this moment, I truly understand. I am going to see you again someday, Caroline. Yes, indeed. In fact, I am going to see a great many people again someday. But for now I need to see me and believe what I see. Thank you, my friend. For helping me get to know my gut, for touching my life and my heart, for being you. Save me a seat wherever you are, okay?"

With Connie and Mack on the plush green couch, Brooke crossed her legs and talked with Peter and Brian and Sweeney, if one could call it talk. Peter and Brian and Sweeney talked incessantly about Caroline. Brooke nodded and uh-huhed occasionally in between watching her hands pet the dogs and watching all of the people pet each other. Every ten minutes or so, she'd grab a glass of wine, pass on the finger foods being trayed around by an aunt or a cousin or anyone who claimed relation to the deceased.

And every once in a while, Brooke shook her head and laughed on the inside because this was what Caroline wanted-- a party, a party she had planned. Music provided by The

Beatles, The Monkees and U2. Food catered by aunts and cousins and anyone who claimed relation to the deceased. Wine and mixed drinks served by Derring and some of his college cohorts at the downstairs bar; beer served by one's self, the tapper and the chilled keg on the deck outside. Atmosphere created by family and friends and acquaintances, and bachelors and masters and doctorates. All under one roof, the roof built by Uriah and Daughter and their own four hands, nail after nail.

The wine didn't cut it, so Brooke rose, fervently brushed Connie and Mack's shedded hairs from her faded denim ass, excused herself from her company and braced for the maze jaunt ahead, as well as the questions and the concerns and the hushed voices and ensuing eyes. The pardons were inevitably granted but not without many a square How-are-you? Well, Brooke refrained from saying, I feel like shit, my heart's been split in two with a spoon and my feet are still killing me from standing in those heels so long greeting people like you; but other than that, I'm hunky dory. And you?

Tate stood with Taylor by the fireplace, admiring the mantel pieced with frames and knickknacks and the wall hung with originals and charcoal sketches. Brooke maneuvered through the line, person after person, pylon after pylon. Taylor saw her approaching and caught her eye, both catching each other's smile.

"How's the fire?" Brooke asked. She took the poker and stoked it, feeling the heat rush her face, giving her that usual feeling of the worst sunburn ever. She poked the lip of a log, listened to it singe and crack and sizzle, watched red remnants cling to the black iron and fall in a gasp to the gray. Brooke stirred all of the ashes that had accumulated, spreading them evenly across their concrete bed.

"It's a lot warmer here than it is in the kitchen. People aren't closing the sliding door all the way when they get a beer," Taylor informed her sister's roommate, the one who had taught her how to play tennis, the one she teased had a better-looking girlfriend than most of the guys she knew.

"Wonderful. I was gonna get a beer," Brooke said.

"Oh, I'll get it for you," Taylor said. "Let me get it for you." On that she was gone.

Tate smiled from Taylor's trail of dust to Brooke, who was smiling at the same trail. Brooke's head swung, this time with no complications, toward Tate, carrying her smile in the same position. She realized Tate's smile could no longer be savoring Taylor and asked, "What?"

The smile wavered, and those familiar crystals returned to Tate's eyes, which rolled up to a thinking position, suspended and rolled back down, parallel to Brooke's. Minus the jacket to her suit, she stood, nose to nose, pupil to pupil and spilled, "You know, I hated you, Brooke. I thought you had taken my little girl, my Caroline,

and corrupted her. Cooper leaving was probably the best thing to ever happen to me, in more ways than one." She laughed and then soberly continued, "Or else I might never have known how wrong I was."

Brooke was entranced, differently from times before. She didn't know if she should say she was sorry or say thank you or say what, again. She chose nothing to do with words, slipped her arms around Tate and softly yet strongly pressed herself into her. Like an anatomical chart lifting the bodies' skins, noting organs and tissues and muscles and bones, routing veins and arteries and circulations and respirations, all of those magnificent reds and blues and greens and browns, everything flowed between the two.

"Should I come back later?" Taylor asked as she stood double-fisted in front of this glob in front of the fireplace.

Brooke and Tate released their arms, their embarrassed laughs, exposed their splotchy wet faces, and reached in their pockets for tissue. Taylor waited to hand Brooke her beer, not necessarily waiting for an answer to her question.

"Are you ladies laughing or crying?" a familiar, distinguished voice quipped. Brooke's father, with her mother by his side, approached the group of women.

Everyone laughed again, a little. Then the silence started to climb, up and around, like vines going for the jugulars, until Jan broke out with what she, and probably

Steve, obviously had persuaded herself to do, "Tate, I don't think I've taken the chance to tell you how sorry I am. Caroline was a good person, which shows a lot on your part."

The stunning comment gunned everyone down, including Jan, but instead of numbing, it actually picked up the pace, encouraging Jan to continue. "I loved her," Jan said as her eyes smoothly transitioned from Tate to Brooke, "like she was my own daughter."

Tate thanked her and told her how much she appreciated hearing that. Taylor sensed the heaviness and excused herself to talk to Derring and some of the guys she knew. Not long thereafter, Tate also excused herself to check on the culinary clan. Brooke was there for the duration. She wasn't trapped or treed; she was in a whole other world, a new dimension, a new dimension where she stood without tears. She shook her head on the inside and studied the figure before her, then she chose to hug her mother, a gesture that had become foreign to both but required no instructional review. They hugged until her father asked, "Hey, can anyone get in on this?"

After they all pulled away, Brooke said, "You'll have to excuse me now, but I need to do something before this double-fistedness impairs me from properly doing it."

Both consented with nods as Jan carefully wiped her eyes and Steve winked one of his. Brooke grabbed her wine glass and the plastic beer cup, both of which she had set on

the mantel. She chugged the beer, giving it the ol' college try. Jan and Steve raised their brows in amazement. She set the empty glass, with a little left over, back on the mantel and refilled her hand with a rose and a red and white urn that had rested on the mantel next to her chapstick and leaflets. With one scoop she had them both and with one spin she turned for the kitchen.

On her way through the people, she looked toward the bar--Taylor talked with Dominic, who had graduated with Caroline and Brooke and was in the same fraternity as Derring; Derring talked with Trish and at the same time watched Brooke peripherally. His glance caught her, then swiftly caught their parents, who were approaching Cooper and Gloria, and just as swiftly returned to Brooke. Brooke shrugged her shoulders, passed a glance to Trish and returned to Derring. He shrugged. They both smiled.

Brooke finally fought her way through without squashing too many of the pylon-like people. She set her articles down briefly, long enough to envelop her Brooklyn Dodgers jersey, the one Caroline had gotten her for Christmas one year, with her jacket. She slid back the glass door with her right hand, which was slipped through the handle of the urn, stepped out, three-sixtied and slid it back, sealing in the buzz and the heat.

The wind had picked up, whipping and whapping before settling again. Earlier it had carried away red and white

balloons released by the whole congregation after the service. Brooke's boots tracked one step after the other in the melting ground, past her second favorite rock, down to the dock. The wind steadied her the whole wobbling way until she ran out of plank and stopped; the wind stopped again momentarily. To her right, the Daniels and Sheridans-- "their" neighbors. To her left, "their" brook, the Down-E Brook, which Brooke and her father named after they had picked out the land. She couldn't place it immediately, but she heard a hum. She thought for a second it was the wind, smiled and stopped herself from humming any more Neil Diamond.

Brooke held out her glass, the rose still tucked between her palm and the glass, for a cheer with the wind, paused and drank. Then she rested her right hand, still slipped through the urn's handle, on the dock's front right steel post. The cold steel simmered her skin like one of the rocks below the water would if she reached through the liquid veil and seized the granite in her grip. Her left hand set down the wine glass and rose onto the dock. She bent further at the knees, took in the air and gave it back. She held the smooth, hip-curved urn close to her right cheek, left cheek, unsealed the lid, set it next to the wine and rose and inverted the urn. The ashes fluttered out, disappearing into the water. Another gush of wind galloped by from the east, almost taking Brooke with it. The ashes flew toward the

brook, swirling up and down and around.

"There you go, my friend, just as you had planned," Brooke said to the sky. She had tried to convince Caroline's family to help her with this assignment, but they respected Caroline's wishes, not wanting to cross her convictions, something they worked hard never to do while she was alive.

Brooke continued, "I know you didn't plan to leave like you did, but here we are." A sigh sailed to the sky. "I still believe in you, though; I will always believe in you, so I will always believe in me. And when I forget, I'm sure you will find a way to remind me." A smile soared after the sigh. "I love you, Caroline. You are my blessing."

The white sheet cake after the occasion: the smudged, half-eaten decorative roses, the sliced, no-longer-legible momentous message and the snuffed, made-a-wish candle flair. Another day the lake was exceptionally beautiful.

To Your Knees

An early pregnancy test, a romance novel and a douche. The stranger's shopping cart seemed cavernous to Mick as she locked in on the rectangular items, tossed in like they were ragdolls with amputations. Mick thanked her lucky pills that it was not her cart and she was only in this twenty-four-hour supermarket on a Thursday evening for a pair of pantyhose, a wedding card and a pack of gum, sugarless.

She tried to divert her attention from the metal cage's stock, but the apparent mother-already and maybe-mother-again caught Mick's curiosity as she tossed in a few more rectangular items--a pack of cigarettes, a tabloid and a candy bar. The woman wiped her frazzled, tinted-blond hair away from her blushing face, which appeared obligated to tell her tale of life based on these items of health, hack literature and hygiene.

"My boobs are killing me," the woman said under her raspy breath. Mick's own chest felt a pang as if it empathized with the hefty pair the woman toted; her mind winced at the thought of what was to come next. *The woman went on to explain how she didn't like the pill because it actually made her periods worse, although it'd be worse if she had another kid. She already had four. Two of 'em were with her in the store. She wondered what could be takin' 'em so long.* Mick wondered what could be taking the checker so

long with the customer in front of them. *Anyways, her husband didn't always wear condoms because he said they "inhibited his performance." She thought he needed all the help he could get. Sooner or later, though, she was hopin' it'd be sooner, he was gonna have "it" cut because she wasn't about to get her tubes tied because they say that messes ya up, too. And she wasn't gonna keep goin' through this two-weeks-late, false-alarm bull, either.*

She whispered to Mick, "Don't ya just hate it when you're late and ya get all those symptoms?"

Mick was dumbfounded. She stood frozen in her running shoes with her t-shirt covering almost all of her silky shorts. Of all the checkout lanes in the store, Mick thought she had chosen the express lane for rapidity, not group therapy. And Mick certainly was not one to express herself in the company of strangers. She felt bad for this woman, really she did. She wanted to say how sorry she was about her unfortunate situation and how terrible a woman's burden can be. On the other hand, instead of granting easy sympathy to the woman, she wanted to cite one of her mother's favorite adages: You made your bed, so lie in it. Thus, when Mick did express herself, her opinions flew from one spectrum end to the other, touching down in the middle at times. But as it was today, she was not in the best of moods for chit chat, let alone a conversation that entailed conception, contraceptions and cutting of fairly major body parts.

"I can't say I hate it or love it because I've never experienced it," Mick replied in her collected voice. Mick's small smile at the end of her statement looked as if it were pleading with the woman to please take it easy on her.

The woman tossed her items onto the conveyor belt, and the checker was none too thrilled to ring them up. The methodical movement simulated the loading of luggage onto an aircraft, maybe a small cargo plane headed for Costa Rica. The woman and the checker were the loaders, not caring what the luggage contained so long as it landed in the vicinity and the task got done. Mick was the inspector, looking on and not caring that the luggage was mishandled so long as the task got done. The sooner they loaded, the sooner the plane ascended and Mick punched out to go home.

"Aren't you lucky, honey," the woman said as she tossed the last of her items onto the worn, vibrating, black belt. From behind Mick came yet more rectangular items. The woman's children had returned and tossed the boxes of cereal and cupcakes they had been sent to retrieve or had set out on their own to capture. Both were boys with burr haircuts and could have gone for twins, except for the domineering height one had over the other. Mick turned sideways, allowing them to scoot by and get closer to their mother.

"Who gotta candy bar?" the younger one asked.

"I did," the mother answered.

"Then I want one," he said.

"If he gets one, I get one," the older one added.

They each grabbed a candy bar from the tiered rack on the right and tossed them onto the counter, where they landed half on the now-stationary belt and half on the metal that outlined the entire checkout island. The checker continued her task with the same blank face. In a monotonous drone to complement her bust of stone, she asked, "Will that be all?"

"You better get two more for your sisters," the woman told her sons, thereby answering the checker. The boys grabbed for the same candy bar, their hands wrestling to see who gained control. As mighty a struggle as the smaller boy put forth, he succumbed to the older one's hand pushing him out of the way and back into Mick. Mick tried to catch him, but her one free hand was not quick enough as he fell to the scuffed, tiled floor. Perhaps his instinct was to get back up and get back in there, but he opted to cry, perhaps a response he learned being the younger one.

When the woman raised her head from her checkbook and realized what had happened, she yanked the candy bar from the older one's hand, tossed it to the checker and used her own hand to cut off the circulation in the boy's upper arm. She whispered something stern in his ear, and he walked toward the exit. She yanked the younger one up and whispered something a little less stern. He followed his brother.

The checker recited the total as the bagger put the last item into the rectangular paper sack. The woman

hurriedly wrote and ripped the check from its perforated seam. She snapped her pocketbook shut and shoved it back into her purse. "Well, if I was you, honey, I'd never experience it if I could help it." She gave a hearty laugh and disappeared through the automatic exit.

Mick let out a small laugh, more of a forced chuckle, as she tried to make eye contact with the checker. Mick's notion that the checker just might see the zaniness in what had taken place subsided fast. She laid down her items, rectangular, excluding the plastic egg. The checker repeated the same routine she had done with the woman, although she did ask Mick if she would like that in a sack. Mick declined baggage, paid and got the hell out of there. The luggage had lifted.

Mick played with a paper clip on her desk, pushing it around with the eraser of her pencil, outlining the rectangular perimeter of her calendar. She checked the clock, her watch, any timepiece around. Her four-o'clock meeting with Ernie was to be brief, just her latest pitch. She did not have time for a champagne celebration, acclaimed with roses and well-wishers. She had another race on I-70, a downshift to her hometown for someone else's champagne celebration.

On the next lap Mick pitstopped to review the rectangular, ivory invitation one more time: Michele Anna

Niessen, 5240 Country Rain Lane, Columbus, Ohio, 43232. Although she had known for months as yet another bridesmaid-elect, her fourth such role in five years since college graduation, Mick still could not believe Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Schoby requested the honour of her presence at the marriage of their daughter Julie Marie Schoby to Eric Michael Rutherford. The invitation was laid out as a reminder to take in hand for it held the directions to the rehearsal dinner, Mick's second flag she had to make in a straight shot. A reminder of the impending date was not necessary. Mick's handwriting noted it on the calendar racetrack after the four-o'clock slot; her disbelief noted it on every tight turn.

What she could not believe was that Julie had settled for marrying Eric. The friend Mick knew had the fire to climb a volcano and poke her head in at the top. She did not know the friend who lately had chosen to view the volcano from a glossy magazine. Mick liked Eric, really she did. It was just that he packed no punch. He was simple, steady and stable--a real nice guy with next-door's address. A nice guy who had recently finished optometry school in line with Julie's upcoming orthopedic residency. Julie herself was innocent, intellectual, beautiful and brown all over. The innocence, however, was slick to the touch, a veneer for appropriate occasions and family members. On the inside flourished a whole other person--a person in pursuit of

passion, untamed and unmatched. Well...it was matched once, but Julie had discounted Brandon with a monstrous X.

Brandon had evoked Julie's passion because he was indeed the love of her life. Typically tall, dark and handsome, he was also dark in his ways. Julie's misfortune was that he took on too many women's passions without so much as consulting Julie. He did love her, but he could not love her singularly. He could not tell her, either. He showed her one night, inadvertently. He tried to explain, but pride also came with her passion. She cut it off cold, knowing one kiss could lead her to believe anything that slid from his mouth. Mick knew her friend would never be the same, but marriage was not the kind of thing to fling around for a change of life.

Mick thought of the woman in the supermarket last night. Was her husband her Brandon? Was he at one time? Was there a time when she anticipated the experience of children? Despite the woman's advice and her impactful plug as more reason for effective birth-control measures, Mick wanted children, just not right now. She was only twenty-seven, which was young to her but ancient to the curious critics who seemed to ponder her marital status on a daily basis. The critics would be delighted if they were in her brain today. Marriage and children in the same sequence. Marriage too someday, just not right now. And hopefully it would be provoked by love, not by a stranger in a supermarket

or an invitation in the mail.

"Hey, Mick, what're you doing this weekend?" Norom Khanata said as he entered Mick's office without knocking on the door she always left open.

From the pit to a screech into the wall. "Hello, Norom. Come on in," Mick replied without raising her auburn head, which was now consumed with disguising her paper-clip pushing into top-priority business. Norom Khanata was in her past, a place she would prefer to politely keep him.

"The door was open. Should I come back?" The wounded child was heard in Norom's voice, seen across his five-o'clock shadow on down to his gulping Adam's apple, a golf ball bobbing above a tee.

Mick did not have time to play this game of picking Norom's pride off the floor every time he entered her office and chose to put his foot in the trap. It was a game he challenged Mick's patience to play nearly every day since their brief affair halted at Mick's hand. Usually Mick's patience lost in the juvenile joust. Although Norom obviously was no intellectual match for Mick, somehow she most always apologized and he pranced off with his false pride and the delusion of being the winner and still Mick's suitor.

"No, you can stay, Norom, until Ernie calls me for our meeting." The comforting mother was heard in Mick's voice, seen across her fair face--an attractive view cupped by

strands of hair neatly released from a French braid.

"So what're you doing this weekend?" he asked again.

"I'm going home for a wedding," she answered.

"Oh, you have a date." His wound returned. His lance slid from its sheath and poked Mick on her armoured chest. Mick's horse reared. And the contest would have persisted had it not been for the ringing of a bell.

Mick excused herself to Norom and lifted the receiver to her phone. She said a few quick words to Ernie and hung up. "I have a meeting now, Norom, so you will have to excuse me. And not that it is any of your business, but I do not have a date. I simply have a wedding to attend."

"Then why don't I go with you?" he asked as he walked with her to the door.

She stopped, turned around and faced him squarely. She was taller in her heels than his five-nine frame. She gritted her teeth. "Please do not make me draw you another picture, Norom. If I had wanted you to go with me, I would have asked. I did not ask because I did not want you to go with me. I do not want you to ever go with me again. Do you understand?"

Her harshness had pushed him from mealy-mouthed to close-mouthed. He was on another verge of tears. In all her years, Mick never had seen a guy come so close to tears so many times. She could not figure out what she ever had seen in him in the first place. Mick's patience lost again, but

this time an abrupt disappearance replaced an apology. And more than likely, a card full of written mistakes would be placed on Mick's desk Monday morning camouflaged as a white flag of surrender. Mick felt a poke on her chest. Another plea ignored.

Ernie waited for her with his feet propped on his desk and the phone suctioned to his ear, a common position of his. He motioned with his hand for her to come on in as he rolled his eyes to indicate the importance of the call. He said a lot of okays and honeys, so Mick detected it was his wife Judy. Mick laughed, walked around his desk and nestled her nose into his neck, a common play tactic of hers. He shoed her away and warned her with a familiar smile and fist that he would retaliate with some form of embarrassment for her in the future. Mick enjoyed this game.

He hung up and immediately said, "You're a shit, Mick. You know how hard it is to get her off the phone. Just wait though, when you least expect it, bam, I'll get you back. You know I will. Maybe I'll have to put a bug in Khanata's ear, sweetnothings direct from you." His bald head rocked with laughter; some teeth sat in the middle of his salt-n-pepper beard.

"Don't you dare, Ernie," Mick commanded. "I think I just squashed that bug in his ear, so please don't even toy with me, or him, especially him." Mick's face scurried in search of some sympathy from her good pal.

"All right. All right," he eased. "But I sure hope you squashed that bug with a sledgehammer because I'm gettin' worse and worse at this Dear Abby bullshit. Hell, the other day I told the poor bastard to call the psychic hotline." They both giggled at the advice and the thought: Norom dialing the 900 number over and over again until he heard what he wanted to hear, nothing short of marriage, two-point-two boys and a big screen TV. Fate at a buck-ninety-five a minute, seventy-five cents each additional.

"Maybe I should call it," Mick said, "and ask if they have any openings, but I guess I would know this already if I were a good psychic." Mick giggled again, feeling the thrill she got from her and Ernie's everyday electricity. A sort of attraction had even emerged between them, both knowing that nothing would ever result from it. Ernie was fond of his marriage; Mick was not fond of his marriage or his business status. It was a safe affair that neither would taint; they adhered to a code.

Others tried to taint it for them. Theories were slung through the mill: Mick's quick rise on the rungs of success was directly linked to the sheets of sex with Ernie. She eventually graduated to the CEO's bed. Mick's sudden "vacation" last winter was an abortion of the fetus formed with Ernie, or the CEO, for Mick had lost track at that point. The theorists then aborted this brainchild and concluded Mick's lesbianism. They needed something,

anything, to explain her lone appearances at company functions, her thanks-but-no-thanks passes on dates with some of the company's most eligible bachelors, her total neglect of any life outside the office.

At first Mick was furious when Ernie carried to her what wind he had caught. He brought her down with his humor and the logical reasons of jealousy, envy, greed, the usual. It was a familiar story that Mick had heard before in her life, and the sequels got worse and worse.

"Ern," Mick said as she looked at her watch, "as much as we enjoy laughing at one another's expense, I better pitch my idea so I can get out of here."

"Okay, Mick, whadda ya got?"

"Well, it's really quite simple," she began. "Knoxville's WTMC is in financial difficulty, according to a close source. Zindale may not think so at this point, but they need a television station in Knoxville to complement their radio station KNXV. The demographics are a mere formality. Once we show them the potential market in the city they tend to forget, they will snatch WTMC from the closest competitor and complete their matching sets of the Midwest--from Kansas City to now Knoxville. Like I said, simple...yet brilliant, don't you think?"

Ernie's face looked as blank as a computer screen just flipped off. And his actions filled in nothing. His hands descended from the back of his head while his feet descended

from their propped position on the desk. Feet planted on the carpet and back upright, he removed his glasses and rubbed his face and the top of his head, scratching the scruff of his neck at the end of the descent. He returned his reading glasses to his face, and Mick continued to read nothing but strangeness from the situation.

"What the hell is the matter, Ernie?" Mick asked.

"Mick," Ernie began to fill in the blank, "Mitch pitched that same brilliant idea to me earlier this morning."

"What?" Mick replied. The yellow flag waved as cars skidded, guardrails dented, gas tanks exploded. Still, Mick barreled through the chaos, weaving from lane to lane, dodging debris. She emerged from the dustcloud, surprising herself as well as the crowd. She gripped tighter, pushed harder and surged ahead.

"Exactly what time did Mr. Peters pitch this idea of his?" Mick inquired, stepping to every other word, pausing once Ernie's brain started to search for an answer.

"Gosh, Mick, I don't know. Around ten-thirty, maybe."

"Did he have any background data for this idea of his?" she asked, stepping in the same style, pausing again as Ernie's cogs clicked and so she could lay a file folder in front of his busy face.

"Well, no. I told him to get it to me by the...I'll be a son of a bitch."

"Dammit, Ernie. He approached you right after I had

mentioned it to him in the break room. He didn't have any data because I had the necessary information, compiling it for our meeting today. He's the son-of-a-bitch, Ernie. It was my idea."

Ernie sat. Mick stood. Both hung in the air. They seemed spent, buckled over from running so hard to catch up. Mick looked up though, saw the competitor a car's length away and kicked the clutch. "He really will be a son-of-a-bitch when I get through with him," Mick said in her veer toward the door.

"Now, Mick," Ernie said in his attempt to stir from his stupor. He knocked his knee on the desk and muttered some damnations. He reached to soothe it as he hopped in haste to head off Mick, whose motor had momentarily idled when she heard the commotion behind her. She turned and saw her colleague gasping toward her then collapsing on the arm of the leather couch by the door. He continued, "Just hold on, slugger. If anybody's gonna come close to castrating anybody else, it's gonna be me. I don't tolerate that kind of shit, no way, no how." He winced after finishing his sentence and went from gently rubbing his knee to as if he were scrubbing out a spot.

"Are you okay, Ernie?"

"Yeah, sure I am," he answered before sliding over the arm of the couch into its hull. His friend walked around to the front of the couch and seated herself on the glass coffee

table, covering a nature magazine as she sat. She removed his hand, examined the knee and reasoned, "I don't want you to fight my battles, Ernie. That would be like sharks feeding at the slaughterhouse. I think you'll live." She removed her hand, stood and walked back toward the door.

Ernie swung his legs off the couch's arm to the floor, crookedly stood and hobbled only once. "Mick, you know me better than that. I'm not fighting your battles; I'm doing my job."

Hand on the knob, the other on her hip, she thought and said, "You're right. You trust me to do my job, and I trust you to do yours." She opened the door. "Give me the gory details on Monday."

The yellow flag lifted. The checkered flag brought the fans to their feet, in the stands and on the grass. Zooms and vrooms buzzed their heads, scattering the empty cups of beer and hot dog wrappers. A lap alone, a champagne bath, a flowered robe awaited the first driver, the driver who was already in her next race, pressing records, bumping tires, marking skids.

The Pucci's sign lit up the wooden restaurant like a fire in a forest. Mick's lipstick lit up her sullen face like a disco in a funeral parlor. The drive had taken its toll, testing her stamina for the evening ahead--hellos and hugs, stares and comparisons, questions and deductions. She

puckered at the rear-view mirror reflection, checked her teeth for smears and practiced a smile of many to come. Then she took in a long breath and blew into the windshield before looking one last time at the rectangular-shaped mirror. The mind said go get 'em; the reflection said it would only hurt a little.

Mick swung her long legs out the open door, stood on the pavement and reached for her jacket. It felt good to stretch and inhale the slow summer evening. She adjusted the jacket to the curves of her body, the cuffs of her blouse, the nape of her neck. The suit appeared as fresh as it did this morning, but in addition to the drive, Mick was still somewhat stale from the workday--arriving at seven a.m. so she could leave at four, being without her assistant Parker so he could attend his daughter's daycare performance, jousting with Norom so he could twist the blade further into her senses, pitching her idea to Ernie so she could find another blade in her back. The thoughts rolled like movie credits until she shook herself out of her zone, grabbed her purse and shut the door. As her heels clicked across the parking lot, she pressed a couple of buttons attached to her keys, locking the doors to her car and confirming the alarm's presence.

When she met the door, she smoothed the back of her skirt until it ended in line with her hamstring, terse from her hammering jogs and exercises. The movement aroused her

sexiness and reminded her how capable she was of handling herself in any arena. Her sudden spiritedness sprung her through one heavy wooden door and a second. And then there she was in a swarm of noise and moveable heads.

The dim lighting and rustling din joined the second-hand smoke to transport Mick as if to another country, maybe dropped off with the supplies from the Costa Rican cargo plane, a five-thousand feet nosedive into a rain forest full of mist and dwellers, a place for which she had a passport but no guide. Her eyes found no one; her nerves found the pit of her stomach.

"Mick Niessen?" asked a husky voice from Mick's blind side. A thick man with a soft smile entered her view. Mick immediately melted as she always did when she saw Julie's older brother Jon, her crush, her ultimate, unattainable flesh and soul. He was also Mick and Julie's chauffeur until licenses prevailed. He was their stand-in at prom when their dates, the twins, got the mumps. He was their hero as Mr. Football and Mr. Buckeye, All-American and inevitably All-Pro. He was still their hero, at least Mick's, for she really could not speak for Julie anymore.

"Oh, my gosh, Jonboy," Mick gushed with surprise and reached on tiptoe to embrace this mountain. "How are you?"

"I'm as good as you look. I swear you just get prettier and prettier. And to be a successful businesswoman on top of that. You're still with that Columbus company,

aren't you?"

After what felt like blushing over her entire body, Mick regained her composure, smiled and replied, "Yes, I am, and things are going very well. What about you and your contract with the Bengals? Have you settled yet?"

"We're getting close," he said, "but I'm looking at other offers. The money would have to be awfully good, though, because I really do enjoy playing near home. You and your boyfriend will have to make it to a game again."

"Hopefully, a boyfriend is not a prerequisite for attendance, or I may not be able to make many games," Mick mused.

"Oh, you're not with that Norm anymore?"

Mick cringed at the almost correct pronunciation of Norom's name. Eight months and three dates ago, she and Norom had driven to Cincy to see Jon and the Bengals play Cleveland. They joined Julie and Eric, and of course Mr. and Mrs. Schoby. Afterwards Jon and Frank, another lineman from the team and Jon's best friend, caught up with them at dinner just in time for Julie's and Eric's engagement announcement. Mick feigned excitement until she had a chance to speak with Julie directly, which she did in the restroom after numerous champagne toasts to the couple's future, football, family and friends. There she asked her friend if she were truly in love with Eric, was she truly over Brandon, was this really what she wanted. Mick just wanted to make sure. Away from

her family and husband-to-be, Julie's answers were as Mick suspected. Before their exploratory heart-to-heart advanced any further, however, Mrs. Schoby entered the lounge area of the restroom and beckoned them to return to the gentlemen. On the way back to the table of linen, crystal and china, Mrs. Schoby probed Mick for the possibility of a double wedding; she thought Norom was a sweet, handsome, foreign man. Besides, she thought it was certainly about time both Julie and she settled down; there was no reason why they still couldn't have their careers, even when the children came along.

And this woman was educated, Mick thought, had travelled the world, had forced her husband to stop seeing his mistress. Mick's mother had always said Mrs. Schoby was old-fashioned in the latest style dress. Mick nixed the double wedding notion, although Norom tried to give her a ring two weeks later, one month after their first date. She stated the standard of barely knowing one another, yet knowing in her gut that even with time Norom was not her life partner. Time ended up being a month and a half too long. The feeling in her gut mounted and mounted until she could no longer fool herself; everyone else, especially Norom, was no problem. His politeness turned overzealous. His sensitivity turned pathetic. His manhood turned macho.

Working together did not aid the matter. Coworkers firmly believed Norom received his promotion because his

"girlfriend" used her higher ranking and tutored him on the interview questions. Mick was neither, his girlfriend or a cheater. Eventually Norom resented the difference in their rankings--he wanted to be on top, at least at their company. Since he had been there longer, he suggested that Mick take advantage of the outside offers that came her way if she wanted their "relationship" to work out. Mick suggested he and his psychiatrist refigure why his first marriage did not work out. Eight months and three different dates later, she stood before another man, an enticing, older, single man.

"No, I am not with him anymore," Mick replied. "I am not with anyone right now."

"Good. I didn't really think he was for you anyway. And since I'm by myself too, why don't ourselves be with each other this weekend? Y'know, pal around together, have a partner for slow dances, make everyone think we're an item."

Mick giggled. "Some things never change."

Jon held out his arm and asked, "Shall we?"

"We shall." She slipped her arm into his and allowed him to sweep her toward the rectangular bar. They bellied up and ordered a couple of drinks. While Jon answered a football question from the guy next to him, Mick sipped her drink, peering over the glass, getting a better look at the moveable heads. She saw Frank, Jon's teammate and best friend, at the end of the bar, smiled and waved, glass still in hand. She wondered why he was not hanging out with Jon.

Almost as quickly as she thought it, she answered her own question: rehearsal dinner or not, a man can enter a bar alone and go virtually unnoticed drinking his beer, watching sports on the television; a woman cannot enter a bar alone without being viewed as desperate, waiting to be picked up. She scoffed to herself at the double standard, then turned toward the dining area, searching mainly for Julie, but only saw more people filing through the door. After Jon finished his opinion of artificial turf with the same eager guy, she said, "Three questions: Where is Julie? Where is the bathroom? And when is dinner?"

"I don't know. Over there. And soon." They both laughed as Mick excused herself to get her own answers. First, she leaned toward both men and stated, "Over half the league's stadiums have artificial turf, deal with it." Then she walked past the entrance, toward the dining area and found the bathroom. She entered the lounge area and immediately saw Julie and Mrs. Schoby fawning in the mirror. Actually Mrs. Schoby fawned over Julie, who caught her friend's reflection, stopped her mother's actions and jumped at Mick. The whole restaurant probably heard their screams of barely seeing one another for eight months, as automatic as men patting each other on the butt during sporting events. Mrs. Schoby kissed Mick on the cheek, then backed away so Julie's grandmother could complete their rectangle of space.

"Hello, Mrs. Stanton," Mick yelled at the small woman,

who finally looked up and realized who Mick was.

"Why hello, dear," she answered in her Virginian drawl. "How are you? I haven't seen you in ages. Still such a pretty girl, you are. Did you bring that delightful young man Marianne told me so much about?"

Mick maintained her smile, took it toward Mrs. Schoby and heard *deja vu* echo through her head. Same state, different restaurant's restroom, same conversation. She returned her smile to Mrs. Stanton and said, "Unfortunately, Mrs. Stanton, he could not attend."

"Oh, pity, dear. You didn't have to come alone, did you?"

Many times Mick had handled this type of question, so why, she wondered, was it a such a befuddling experience for her now with this petite, silver-haired, hard-of-hearing grandmother? She had not felt bad about her independence at functions in a long time, because no person, no book, gave her a valid reason why she should. Men her age, twice her age, were eligible bachelors. Women her age, less than her age, were old maids. At that moment she remembered why she was here in this restroom, in this restaurant, on a Friday evening for cocktails, hors d'oeuvres and dinner, meatless: she was Julie's maid of honor.

"No, ma'am, I met your grandson here." Mick's smile brightened. It aimed for Mrs. Schoby, who did not have one to match. Julie covered hers with her hand. Mrs. Stanton's

had not changed since the start of the conversation. Plane propellers whirred. Car tires burned. Mick readied for word from the tower and wave of the flag.

The sun was close to yawning and stretching and starting its day as Mick quickened her step on the path between the Schobys' house and her parents' house, a path she had walked and biked hundreds of times as a child. Heels in one hand, pantyhose and bra stuffed in each of the size nines, blouse untucked, purse on shoulder and jacket draped over the other arm, she tried to piece together the rest of the evening sometime after her seventh Jack and Coke. With others from the wedding party, even Eric, she went to some clubs after the rehearsal dinner. Julie was tempted, but thought the better of it knowing her hotel, Mom and Dad's, had a curfew. The other Schoby child knew no limits, so after drinking and dancing and the others retiring, he and Mick had their own little party in his parents' guesthouse by the pool. This part of the evening she had no trouble recalling. It was some of the best sex she had ever had.

"Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God," Mick muttered as she thought of her and Jon's first, second and third time. She looked up at the pink and purple sky--like He did not already know. And like her mother would not know. Mick pictured her asleep in her muumuu on the sunroom's wicker couch with newspapers strewn and TV blaring, a valiant

attempt to wait up for her daughter. Mick had told her it would be late before she arrived home; she just did not think it would be this late. She pulled her watch away from her other jewelry tucked in her skirt pocket, another item Jon removed from her body one by slow one, and checked the actual time. Five-thirty-seven. In approximately seven hours she herself would have to place each maid-of-honor item on her body, in a much differently slow manner she was sure. She quickened her step again, abetted by the demand of the freight train rolling through her head, indicating it planned no immediate stops.

The screen door quietly creaked as Mick ever so gently pulled it open, startling the cat, Mr. Tobias Pickett, but not her mother, Mrs. Abigail Niessen, as she presumed. The wicker couch was full of newspapers, rectangular folded or full-length, but empty of mother and muumuu. The TV emitted nothing; the birds contributed chirps while another neighbor's dog barked in the distance. Mick completed her rotation through the door, easing it shut and turning to see her mother was not missing after all.

"Well, good morning, sunshine," her mother said in a tone of great anticipation, holding a steaming cup of coffee and stepping down the one step from the living room to the sunroom. Her friends and most of her family called her Abby, as did Mick on occasion. "Look, Mr. Pickett, Mickey's home. Weren't you just saying how responsible a woman she was?"

Mr. Pickett yawned from the top of the couch and stretched into the form of one of his brothers and sisters harried on Halloween.

"Mother, please be kind," Mick replied and sat in one of the wicker chairs across from the couch with the rectangular glass table in front of it. She dropped her possessions on the artificial turfed floor. Mr. Pickett pranced down the back of the couch, across the table and into Mick's lap. She automatically began stroking him, wishing someone would stroke her head and derail the lunging locomotive.

Her mother noted Mick's attire, in its disarray. "Where have you been, Mick?" she asked. "And where is your car? I didn't hear it."

Had she been standing, Mick would have staggered, by the implicating inquiry and the lingering liquor. She felt drunker by the minute, but gone were the drink, the dance, the deed. They were replaced by the hour of the day, the activities of walking and sitting and talking, and facing her mother. Thoughts of yesterday, last night, this morning, flew, raced, chugged, through Mick's head. She repetitively addressed God again, to herself. Mr. Pickett nuzzled her hand, since she had ceased her petting obligation while deep in her zone of thought. She thought of being on top of that mountain of a man, kissing his soft crags and curves; her thoughts were finally memories, no longer fantasies; she also

thought the less she moved her head, the less it would ache.

"Well...I went to the rehearsal dinner at Pucci's, which is where my car still is. Then some of us went out and time just got away," Mick replied, wincing from the strain yoked on her head.

"Not to mention your clothes." Her mother glanced again at Mick's appearance. Mick glanced down at Mr. Pickett. The pause receded between them until her mother continued, "How did you get home?"

"I walked."

"You walked? From where?"

"The Schobys' guesthouse."

"Julie wouldn't have stayed there the night before her wedding, and surely she didn't go out with all of you."

"No, I stayed with Jon."

Her mother's eyes leaped at Mick. The train in Mick's head jumped tracks. A longer pause receded deeper between them.

"Oh, Mick, how could you let something like that happen?"

Mick clung to the question, especially the word let, as if she had no say in the matter. The brake cord pulled right from the ceiling into her hand. Still, she pieced together a coherent reply. "Mother, I did not let something like that happen. I wanted something like that to happen."

"Do you hear yourself, Mickey? You're talking with the

morals of most guys."

"And you're talking with the double standards of most Marianne Schobys."

This pause did more than recede. It averted eyes from each other to floors and walls. It threw arms down to walk away without resolution. It dug and dug at the air in attempt to bury the conversation. Then Mick dropped her shovel, turned around and looked her mother square in the eye. "Look, Mother," she said, "I apologize for not calling. It was inconsiderate. I will not, however, apologize for something I wanted to do."

"Oh, don't worry about Mom and Mr. Pickett. You should be more worried about your father and Norom."

The name blew through her head like a train whistle. As if the first whistle were not enough, she said the name too. "Norom?"

"Yeah, he called last night about ten o'clock, expecting you to be home from the rehearsal dinner by then."

The first engineer tugged the whistle cord again, the second shoveled the chunks of coal and the conductor punched the tickets. Down the aisle Mick moved forward, backward, side to side, fumbling for the overhead compartments, seats, passengers, any support to help her find her seat among the crowd of couples, singles, families. Her stomach jostled to the clickety-clack of the car bouncing on the track, stumbling forward, tipping side to side, pulling backward. She was

almost there when the train entered a tunnel through the mountainside, flipping the switch, tying the blindfold, swallowing the sun.

Her mouth was like Chicken George's cotton, her heart like Jake LaMotta's jab. There was no light to lead her from the field, the ring. So parts of her stuck, thumped. Her head was as clear as a school bell, her belly full as a whiskey barrel. There was no light to lead her from the schoolyard, the pub. So parts of her rang, swirled. The whistle spouted again, loud and long, and the train emerged from the tunnel, on the other side of the mountain. The light lasered Mick right in the eyes, who kept her hands away and dared to look back. She squinted, still standing, and finally focused to behold her seat in front of her. She would have sat, but the sticking, the thumping, the ringing, the swirling, triggered an alarm, causing her punch-drunk brain to go bleep and scatter from the caboose.

Mick's mom tailed her from the sunroom to the bathroom, Mr. Pickett at their heels, hoping to be fed. She found Mick on her knees, her head crowning the toilet. Mick heaved and wheezed more than once before grabbing a towel, leaning back against the tub and wiping her mouth, her brow.

"Are you sick, Mickey, because you made a mistake with Norom or Jon?" her mother asked, placing a cold washcloth, she had just wrung out, on her daughter's forehead.

Taking in another dense chunk of air, Mick replied,

"No, Abby, I'm sick because José Cuervo and Jack Daniels don't get along." She cleared her throat, then spit in the toilet. She leaned back, but quickly leaned forward again, stuck her finger down her throat and heaved yet once more. Her head hung for awhile just above the lid and basin, debating whether it had the strength to keep from springing off its hinges.

Her mother moved toward her and said, "Let's take these good clothes off, honey, before you, uhm, before you soil them." Mick waited a moment longer, for the silence to quilt her stomach, hammer the hinges and signal a temporary ceasefire. She sat back again against the bathtub, then attempted to help her mother help her off with her remaining clothes.

She was naked, except for her white underwear and emerald ring, a gift to herself. She wiped her mouth, then told her mother, "You better close the door before Dad gets up."

"He's already gone. He and Joe left at five for the grain elevator, like they do every Saturday, even if Joe's daughter is getting married today."

Another shrieking whistle. Mick returned to her knees with the ache in her head and loins, and now an ache in her lower back, her period announcing its looming arrival. After more heaving, she struggled to keep her head from gravitating into the toilet, a round peg for a round hole, although she

felt rectangular, tight and taut and straight. And she felt her underwear might as well have been tossed in with the rest of her clothes on the floor. A ragdoll with knees, no limbs, no eyes.

The smooth ceramic of the toilet suddenly provided a cool touch for Mick's knotty hands, speeding up the flow beneath them once again. The air conditioning vent behind the toilet provided a cool breeze for Mick's heavy head, not resting on the toilet's lid, inspiring the lids of her eyes to reopen. The gurgling in her stomach finally had slowed. Saliva started to return as Mick licked and smacked her lips, her tongue, the roof of her mouth, all anticipating paste and wash. With the tingling in her hands nearly subsided, she braced them on the toilet's rim and lifted herself up and away from a place she swore she would not bow again. Her mother stood back and watched.

Hunkered over the sink, Mick ran the cold water on her hands, ultimately cupping them and bringing the briskness to her face and mouth. Splash after splash, gulp after gulp, swish after swish, her drenched face finally faced the image in the mirror. This woman could fly to Costa Rica. She could drive on champagne and roses. She could ride the rail alone in her seat as she admired her window view. She did not have to do it all at once or solely by God's and man's rules. But until the next plane, car or train, she had to get herself together for the next task at hand: to stand

next to her best friend at her ceremony of marriage, her friend's own choice, because she was asked and she accepted. Mick had her own choices ahead--mode of travel, window or aisle, paper or plastic--but not today.

She dried her face, grabbed the white, rectangular bar of soap and turned on the shower.

Jude From Georgia

Snakes of snow slithered and swirled across the interstate, mating with the drifts on each side. Still, the battered green Maverick held its own against the vicious March wind and miled its driver closer to her destination. As a child Laine was accustomed to winters in Chile with her father and the embassy; she was accustomed to summers in the South of France with her mother and the elite. The state of Georgia at this time of year was accustomed to blooming dogwoods and playoff-contending Hawks and spring-training Braves. Yesterday's blizzard had the South chattering, shivering and panicking.

The word panic did not exist in Laine's vast vocabulary. She did not panic at age six when she saw her parents kiss for the last time and officially separate into their own worlds of homes, businesses and companions. She did not panic at age eleven when she saw a South African policeman's bullet enter her college-bound cousin's temple as their trip to the market crossed a demonstration. She did not panic at age sixteen when she saw a black baby doll hanging in a noose from the ceiling of her boarding-school dorm room. Instead, she embraced her parents' independence as evolution and played at each house, learned each business and met each companion; she took the bandana from her hair and pushed it hard against her cousin's blood until an

ambulance arrived to officially announce dead-on-arrival for a small article on page four and a small obituary on page six; and she removed the doll from her lofty view, walked her to the city youth center for love from Mary and continued to send smiles toward the faces in the hall.

The lengthy drive gave Laine's mind ample opportunity to recount last week's swift details, as well as plot details of her life's next hour--she always tried to think ahead. One minute, it seemed, she was busying herself with her normal routine of researching her master's thesis, then the next she was bound for a small high school in southern Illinois.

"We're in a bit of a pickle, Miss Jude," Mr. Hawver, the high school's principal, had said.

"Actually, it is pronounced Ju-day," Laine had corrected him.

"Pardon me, ma'am. Miss Overhill would say it with real flair. She's the one you'd be replacing. Y'see, we knew all along about her maternity leave after the break and had her replacement all lined up, but the young girl got a full-time teaching position up north somewhere. None of our usual substitutes can handle all of Miss Overhill's load and we only want one, so our superintendent insisted I post it again. He likes us to do things by the book around here."

He had talked fast and often. She had concentrated harder on what he had to say than how he said it, an accent

strange to her. She had squeezed in the appropriate answers, and apparently he was satisfied with them, offering her the job if she wanted it. Her mind had debated little and her gut persisted, so her voice accepted.

"Great," he had said. "Just fax me your resumé and transcripts, then I'll fax you a contract and make it official."

Laine had sent faxes, made phonecalls, negotiated leases, rented moving equipment, sold furniture, packed clothes, given away clothes, given away food, paid bills, paid visits. She had tucked the six years of her Atlantan life in a U-Haul, a trunk and a backseat and crammed any extra under the Maverick's vinyl seats or in a box by the radiator for the next tenant in E108. In less than six days she had said all of the necessary goodbyes without so much as a wave or a look back, then pulled away from the curb and signaled at the light to turn left.

Jack stayed away from her mind, ironic as it was since he had spent so much time there. She realized that she could not blame him or his parents, so why allow him or them and anger in her head at the same time. As for her heart, there she put him away on a shelf next to Tommy Runyan, a cadet at the academy across from her boarding school. They gave each other their virginities and first loves. His parents gave him an ultimatum when they met her parents at a joint family weekend event: no more mulatto girl or no college. She

could not blame conditioned people for being so struck by how deeply dipped in black her father's skin was. Her mother's skin appeared to have received only a coat, and more of a brown than a black. Laine had caught just a light wind of their colors.

Jack's family, excluding his sister-in-law, were similar in reception. He had simply underestimated his family's prejudice and overestimated his will against such prejudice. She and his family made it through the holidays behind clenched smiles, but Jack and Laine barely made it through the next few months as a result. This morning was the last time she would awake to the unused pillow next to her, his smell still fresh on the unchanged bedding, discouraging her from enjoying the entire bed. Aside from two years and two days of the love made and the love lost stenciled in her head, his smell was the last intangible remnant; she could not bring herself to wash it away just yet. She could not bring herself to anger, either, because she knew skin colors and hearts did not change; circumstances did.

Once again in her young life, Laine was essentially on her own, an independence she carried with patience. Her parents voiced no real opinion about most of her decisions--the college she chose to attend, the car she chose to buy, the job she chose to pursue. They just wanted her to be her own person, something they knew she was at quite an early

age, but mainly they were too concerned with their own lives. Laine knew deep down that they viewed some of her choices as not the wisest, but was eased they gave her the freedom to roam and learn. Now, she felt, was the time to roam and move on to something fresh. She needed to leave behind her molted skin, whatever thirst it may have had now drowned by an unusual spring snow.

The farther north she travelled, the less the snakes of snow slithered around her car and her. The path to get her there had gone from interstate to route some time ago, from a straight shot to more of a shape of an S. She had mapped her way carefully, whereas her stops were to be appropriate yet minimal. Only a couple of hours remained between Rosa Laine Judé and a new skin in which to grow, but the jackknifed semi in the Tennessee mountains had drained her pace and tank.

She did not feel the eyes upon her initially as she clicked the gas pump handle into motion. Then in an instant she twitched with the sense of strangers' eyes touching her without permission, involuntarily forcing her own eyes to lock with a stranger's pair and send quickly in another direction. The wind nipped at all of the customers' fingers, some gloved, some not. The peekaboo sun glared at all of the customers' eyes, some shaded, some not. Differently designed license plates and skin tones at this small town's convenience mart had caused some fingers to point and some eyes to stare.

Inside, the cashier, reeking of smoke and reaching for another menthol cigarette in her smock's pocket, aligned herself with the same approach toward the latest customer-- she said everything with her eyes, including pointing with her index finger toward the restroom when asked by Laine for its vicinity. Laine thanked her, then thanked her again in return to the car and more eyes. The key popped up the lock, then turned over the engine. The heater blew, and Laine was warm again in no time.

"You're Jude from Georgia?" asked the landlady of the apartment building where most of the young teachers stayed, according to Mr. Hawver.

"Actually, it is pronounced Ju-day," Laine said.

"You're the one I talked to on the phone?"

"Yes, I am, Mrs. Mason."

Laine's face was a charcoal mirror to Mrs. Mason, whose eyes needled and stitched Laine's features against her colored cloth face.

"Would you like to come in?" Laine asked.

"No, no. I won't keep you."

"Are you sure? The pot of coffee I just made is warmer than this hallway."

Laine opened the door wider, accessing entry and an eyeful of stacked boxes. Mrs. Mason followed the thick coffee scent and her curiosity.

"How do you take your coffee, Mrs. Mason?"

"Bla-ack," she replied while surveying the apartment's contents. She stopped, looked at Laine and answered again, "Nothing in it is fine, thanks."

The kitchen's clutter kept Laine from seeing the silverware in the first box into which she looked. She went to another before her memory of packing returned her to the first. She unwrapped a cloth placemat and selected a spoon to stir the cream and sweetener in her mug, then handed Mrs. Mason her mug with nothing in it but coffee.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Mason.

"You're welcome," Laine responded. "And thank you for arranging all of this over the phone. It is exactly how you said it would be."

Mrs. Mason spied the vacuum hose sprawled on the living-room floor, then snaked her way up a wall of expensive-looking artwork, the only items in their respective places. She concentrated on a piece of red and blue and green and yellow figures holding hands and a chessboard hanging above their heads.

"Anything for Lionel, uh, Mr. Hawver."

"Yes, I do look forward to meeting him in person." Laine glanced at her watch. "We are supposed to meet first thing this morning."

"I'll go then. I was just checking to see if you had arrived last night like you said you would, y'know with the

weather and all."

"Oh, you don't need to leave."

"Yes, I should. I have plenty of things to do myself."

"Thanks again then, Mrs. Mason, for all of your assistance. Feel free to take the mug with you and finish your coffee. I trust we will see each other again."

Clutching the mug with both hands the way she had received it, Mrs. Mason eyed the untasted, steaming coffee, then the cup that contained it. She started to read the word coffee printed in ten different languages.

"No, that's okay. I've had enough already this morning." She handed the mug back to Laine and headed for the door. On the way she noticed resting on the couch a framed black-and-white picture of people. Reaching for the doorknob, she saw a light-colored little girl between a darker woman and an even darker man, all sporting their Sunday best and their best smiles. Mrs. Mason turned and asked, "How do you say your name?"

"You're Jude? From Georgia?" the secretary behind the counter asked.

"Actually, it is pronounced Ju-day," Laine replied.

"Excuse me?"

"Ju-day. My last name is pronounced Ju-day. Is Mr. Hawver in?"

The secretary picked up the phone on her desk, punched

a button and said a few words in a low voice. The words were too muffled for Laine to distinguish; plus, steady traffic of teachers and students thickened the closed quarters' early-morning air. More strangers' eyes upon Laine swelled her senses while shrinking the space in which she stood. A tall, broad figure broke Laine's peripheral plane, switching her attention to the towering shadow.

"So you're Jude from Georgia," said the man whose voice Laine recognized right away. His large hand seized Laine's, its authoratative reciprocation immediately impressing him. "I'm Lionel Hawver--from Illinois." A deep laugh replaced his deep drawl.

"Laine Judé. Nice to meet you in person, Mr. Hawver."

"Yes, that's right, Ju-day. Well, welcome to Illinois, Miss Judé. And welcome to Coolton High."

Laine came close to continuing their conversation, when a lanky, mulatto boy in shorts and a t-shirt sauntered up to the counter and stepped next to the space shared by the principal and the newest teacher. She watched Mr. Hawver watch the student's entrance and interaction with the secretary.

Mr. Hawver asked, "Nando, why are you out of zero-hour p.e.?"

The question barked at the boy, who showed surprise to see the principal in his own office. He looked up to meet the face he saw every schoolday and answer the growl he heard

sometimes in his sleep. "I, uh, Stephanie Norton said Mrs. Hallmeyer wanted me to, uh, come to the office."

"I thought he could be the student host for Miss Jude," Mrs. Hallmeyer said. She cleared her throat before correcting herself, "I mean, Miss Judé."

A glare replaced the growl, but the giant retained his composure. Back and forth he looked from Mrs. Hallmeyer to Nando. Mrs. Hallmeyer busied herself from one sheet of paper to another. Nando looked from Mr. Hawver to the slender woman by the wall safe, a woman with physical qualities similar to his.

"Nando, this is Laine Judé," Mr. Hawver said, unleashing the brief silence. "She's Mrs. Overhill's replacement."

The boy's eyes lit up as he asked his new Spanish teacher, "You're the new teacher from Georgia?"

"Yes, I am," Laine finally spoke again. "It's nice to meet you, Nando." Laine extended her hand, which the boy shook while grinning.

"It's nice to meet you too," he answered. "Hey, way to go, Mr. Hawver."

"Okay, Nando," Mr. Hawver said. "Go get changed and you can help host Miss Judé. Mrs. Hallmeyer, clear Nando with his homeroom and clear Kara Peale as the other host, which already should have been prearranged with her homeroom. Miss Judé, Nando and Kara, the President of the Foreign

Languages Club, will show you around the school before your first class. I'll meet up with you then and check on you. You'll have to excuse me now for a conference call I'm expecting. Again, welcome."

Their tour led Laine past classrooms, where teachers were gearing for the first Monday back from spring break vacation, and through the new gymnasium, where the zero-hour p.e. class participated in a game of bombardment. It had been a long time since Laine had heard whistles shriek, kickballs twang, weights clank, ping-pong balls pop. How much more fun she would have had, she thought, if her school had been co-ed. Her boarding school did not even have a mascot, like the black and gold cobra that lunged from the mural on which it rested, coiled on a fringed pillow as wide as its inflamed head. Its split tongue and sinister smile greeted Laine, a St. Marie alum.

Nando described most of the buildings and the rooms and their inhabitants. Kara was a quiet girl with long brown hair tacked in back by a barrette.

"Toca un instrumento, Kara?" Laine asked in Spanish as they paused at the music room, catching Kara unaware of Laine's real purpose here.

"Trompeta, Señorita Judé," Kara replied with a smile.

"Y Nando?" Laine asked of her other student.

"Uh, hey, I haven't taken that stuff yet," Nando

replied. They all smiled, Nando nervously, Kara proudly, Laine calmly.

"What room are we in front of and what does instrumento sound like?" she asked.

"Uh, the music room and in...stru...," he responded.

"That's it," Laine interjected, "sound it out. In-stru...."

"In-stru-ment-o," he began again. "Oh, I get it. Instrument. Yeah, I play the drums." They all smiled again, all easily.

"Very good, Nando. A lot of times in language you can find a word within a word."

Finally, the students led Laine to the destination she had anticipated reaching from the moment she accepted the position, the place where what was said mattered more than who and how, the classroom, her own classroom. As substitute she may have been for the room and Mrs. Overhill, once inside a sense of permanence and element climbed through Laine like a snake making its way around a tree branch, one revolution after another gripping the bark; the feeling made its way through her like the reptile made its way through the cool grass, one blade after another flicking past her face, down her body. A new tree, a new backyard, a new skin.

Here was where it all counted. Here she could put away the long eyes and hard whispers and limp hands she encountered in the faculty lounge, one of the stops on the

tour. Her hand had remained firm, her name vulnerable and her color black as she weaved around the small room and nodded to everyone's announcement of title. She had prepared for such a possible reception, but she also had prepared herself for the stacked books resting on the bulging shelves, the empty student desks standing at disheveled attention, the chalk dust rising from slate and felt to hand and nostril. She breathed and looked around and smiled. Rosa Laine Judé had arrived once again at the place she always had known she belonged.

After laying her coat over the back of the large desk's chair and setting her briefcase on the side, she slowly sat down and sank into the thick wood. A note from Mrs. Overhill, in perfect cursive and red ink, greeted Laine in the middle of the desk, even more neatly arranged than the rest of the room:

Dear Ms. Judé.

Welcome to Coolton High School! It may not appear to be much, but we're proud to call it ours.

Make yourself at home, don't take any grief and call me for anything, anytime: 555-2358.

The lesson plans you received are on the desk calendar as well as in the black vinyl planner on the filing cabinet. Bueno suerte and bon chance.

Sincerely,

Rachel Overhill

Laine took kindly to the accent on her name and the smiley face after the respective good lucks. It was a blind reception, she realized, but positive nonetheless and of which she avowed to strive for more.

She had studied the lesson plans during the four days prior to the trip, thus they simply awaited execution. Laine simply awaited the bell, signifying the end and the beginning. She opened each drawer, walked each aisle, flipped each switch. She knew the schedule--the next bell at fifty-two minutes after the hour, signifying the end of homeroom and the beginning of first period, second-year Spanish, Laine's first class as a teacher in District 15.

The window invited her over to its pane, to lay her arms on its sill. A blustery wind jutted outside the lines of her otherwise placid view. Debris danced itself into a frenzy before resting against the snow-sprinkled bushes. An American flag beat the very pole that held it high. Laine's eyes slid down the pole, worn rope whisking, metal clasp clinking, to the concrete foundation. Her keen vision, as strong as her grandmother Pearl's, focused on the brief inscription: 1913 A.D. In the year and the name, part reflex, part reflection, she closed her eyes and with her right hand touched her forehead, sternum, each shoulder blade, respectively, and said, "Amen." As she turned to the opening of the door, skin casing estranged from a snake, its host far elsewhere, danced with the other debris.

"Oh, my God. I can't believe it," said a woman draped to her knees in a dark, wool poncho, which added to the bulkiness underneath, and zipped to her calves in black, vinyl boots. Coarse-looking hair, perhaps a wig, wound her

head tightly and highly. She had jelly-like jowls and even bigger eyes with her thick glasses. To Laine the woman could have passed as kin to the Coolton Cobra, its smile replaced by a snarl and a scowl.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" Laine inquired. "May I help you?"

"Don't call me ma'am," the woman hissed, "and there's only one thing you can help me with. Are you that Jude from Georgia?"

The woman's directness and irritated inflection rattled Laine. Still, she followed directions and answered, "Yes, I'm Laine Judé from Georgia, filling in for Mrs. Overhill as the foreign languages teacher. And you are?"

Setting down a canvas tote bag and removing her black, vinyl gloves, the woman clacked her boots' heels toward Laine. Laine stayed in front of the window, the coolness outside it now affecting her. The clacking stopped and the hissing began again: "Don't think an accent on your name is gonna change what you really are. And as far as I go, I'm the one who's gonna make sure you don't replace Mrs. Overhill. You just can't and won't. Obviously, there's been a mistake that you're even here."

Don't. Can't. Won't. Laine was not accustomed to such words. Nannies. Nuns. Boarding schools. Finishing schools. Curtsies. Cotillions. Escorts. Airports. Ambassadors. Embassies. Presidents. Prime Ministers. Ceremonies, ribbon-cutting, champagne-christening.

Vacations, summer snow-skiing, winter water-skiing. Languages, Latin, Greek, of course, French and Spanish. Well-fed with etiquette, protocol and word. Words such as these, like the word panic, did not exist in Laine's vast vocabulary, but for the first, real time someone, a stranger, insisted on their possibilities of realization. And for the first, real time they slipped under Laine's skin, even newer with its goosebumps, reptilian to the touch.

Laine's wits and reason gritted against this grain as she responded, "I assure you there is no mistake that I am here. Mr. Hawver and I followed procedure to fill an open position."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Hawver," the woman snapped. "Well, let's just get Mr. Hawver down here, so we can clear this up. You don't belong here, and you're not gonna stay here."

Her boots' heels clacked her away from Laine, in front of and around the desk and toward a box on the side of a closet by the door. She pressed the single, white button, charging a small buzz and then said, "Mrs. Hallmeyer, this is Lorraine Harrington. Please have Lionel come down to Mrs. Overhill's room right now." She released the button.

"He's still on a conference call, Mrs. Harrington," Mrs. Hallmeyer answered.

"Now, Mrs. Hallmeyer. Now." The crackle of the speaker faded fast, leaving Mrs. Harrington's glare and the clack of her boots' heels to command the silence. Wringing

her gloves and pursing her lips, she returned to where she had set down her bag and stood staring at a nemesis she knew only as Jude.

Laine now had a name for the stranger who obviously had a problem with her presence, but knew nothing beyond that. She knew that her color had defeated her character without even a chance at bat. She knew that her untested talent as a teacher meant nothing to this woman as a Coolton citizen. She knew that her perseverance was being pushed by the pull that this woman claimed to possess. Just how strong, Laine wondered, was this supposed pull?

The silence was quite strong, creeping through the classroom, adding to the unknown of this out-of-nowhere showdown. Mrs. Harrington brandished a small notebook from her bag, scribbling some notes in between glares. Laine brandished herself and hope, hope that everything would work out the way it most always had in her life. Although shards and slivers of a situation like this merely had glanced Laine in her past and now razors and venom poised to slit her hope, the same hope still poised herself to face this stranger's disposition.

Unleashing another stance of silence, Mr. Hawver swung open the door and asked, "Lorraine, what are you doing here?"

"More importantly, Lionel," Mrs. Harrington answered, "what is she doing here?"

Holding the smile he entered the room with, he replied,

"Pardon me, ladies. Where are my manners? Lorraine Harrington, this is Laine Judé, Mrs. Overhill's replacement. Laine Judé, this is Lorraine Harrington, the newest member of our school board."

"Don't patronize me, Lionel," Mrs. Harrington snapped, "and answer my question."

Mr. Hawver sighed as he adjusted his necktie and shuffled the papers and files in his hands. He braced his mind and spirit for the spar ahead. "Lorraine, you know very well what she's doing here. She's here to teach Mrs. Overhill's load for the rest of the schoolyear," he said.

"Over my dead body."

As figurative a phrase it may have been, Laine sensed the woman's literal intent. As dead as her Grandmother Pearl in her hospital bed. As dead as her cousin Eldon in his neighborhood street. One of natural causes, the other of accidental, but Laine sensed this woman was hell bent on dying for a cause, a cause such as preventing a woman of Laine's color from mixing in her white world. Laine weighed Mrs. Harrington's intent and the consequences thereof. She recalled the other possible positions she read about the day she was drawn to this one. There was France and her mother. Chile and her father. Atlanta, or anywhere for that matter, and her thesis. She had options. This one did not have to be a force play. She neither needed nor desired dead bodies due to her presence, or more likely disgruntled ones. She

always could find another job. And though people in Coolton always could find another teacher for their district, it would be much harder for them to find their livelihood in allowing someone like Laine to help them with the search. Maybe it would be best for all concerned, she thought, if she moved on yet again.

Mrs. Harrington turned to Laine and asked, "What are you doing here? Why didn't you just stay in the city with the rest of yours instead of bothering us?"

As rhetorical as the questions may have been, Laine sensed more of herself ever in that incensed instance. The anger vined its way from the tingling in her toes and buckle in her knees to the tingling in her hands and buckle in her throat. They were all there at the same time: Mrs. Harrington, the pranksters at her boarding school, Tommy Runyan's parents, Jack's parents, Jack, the eyes and whispers of strangers, and anger, all in her mind, all at once. Hope was far from her mind for the moment.

"For your information, Mrs. Harrington," Laine started, "I am here because I applied for a job I am overqualified for, but accepted the terms anyway because I thought I could make a difference in at least one young person's life. Whether yours or mine or ours, the public school system cares as much about rural whites as it does inner-city whites and blacks--not very much. If my presence is bothersome to you, well, that is all right. I trust you have received your

diploma, and therefore have no requirement for my classes."

In as quick as the moment it was away, hope returned with the brief quiet after Laine's release. Until these moments color, for the most part, had been quiet in Laine's life like a gardener snake lurking in a countryside cemetery's tall grass, blending with the stones and granites and anything else in its path, waiting to strike for personal gain and avoid being prey. Then it, too, naturally processing and evolving, shed its skin and moved on. Now, however, it was loud in Mrs. Harrington's disdain and words and loud in Laine's defense and words. These moments were lifetimes for these women, perhaps the one thing they shared.

"Don't think a smart mouth is gonna change what you are, either," Mrs. Harrington countered. "Lionel, if you don't do something about this, I will."

Laine looked up at the clock above one of the chalkboards and over Mr. Hawver's shoulder and added, "Excuse me, Mr. Hawver. In less than a minute about thirty students will file into this classroom to learn a subject I am both qualified and prepared to teach. Either I teach it here or elsewhere. All I am asking is, is it here?"

There never had been anything Laine did not think she could do. There always had been things others told her she could not do; Mrs. Harrington was the loudest of this group. Lionel Hawver had the authority to tell Laine she could not teach at Coolton High School, although no one could tell her

she could not teach and teach well. Lionel Hawver had the authority to make executive decisions for the betterment of the school and its students, students his desire and degrees presented him the luxury to encourage, to encourage them they could do anything they set their minds to. He stood now facing a familiar stranger with authority and luxury at the tip of his tongue and in the pit of his stomach. He looked from Mrs. Harrington to Laine and back and forth again. The bell then rang, stirring feet to shuffle outside the room and anxiety to shuffle within.

"We're not real formal around here, Miss Judé," Mr. Hawver spoke, "so please call me Lionel." His long smile emerged with a long breath.

"Lionel," Mrs. Harrington screamed, "that's it. You had your chance to be a stands-up guy, so now you've got hardball. I'm taking this to Joe and the schoolboard. You haven't heard the end of this." She scooped up her gloves and bag, and her boots' heels clacked her out the door and down the hall toward the newer part of the school and the superintendent's office.

"On behalf of all of Coolton, I apologize for our newly elected board member's behavior," Mr. Hawver said. "As you've seen so far, we don't all have manners like that." He smiled.

From her own long breath, Laine smiled back and would have curtsied or bowed or spoken a foreign language had the

dignitary before her required such a formality. Instead, she spoke, "Thank you, Lionel. And please call me Laine."

"Don't thank me," he replied. "Thank yourself when you've done your job."

The shuffling feet and creaking door continued to bring students to their seats, pounding books on the desks and sending eyes toward the front. They witnessed the two statues shake hands, then the one part for the door and the other remain. Anxiety within her reshuffled and realigned to face the company she now kept and whose attention she must try to keep. The stares strengthened and the whispers heightened. Even the bell could not drown the volume.

Laine walked around her desk and wrote on that wall's chalkboard. She placed the chalk into its grooved ledge and placed herself back in front of her desk on its edge. She looked at all of the faces, some freckled, some pimpled, some pale, some red. She smiled and waited. One by one the whispers faded, the heads turned and the bodies straightened.

The new teacher nodded, then said, "Buenos días, clasé. Me llamo Señorita Laine Judé." The name appeared on the board behind her. "But...if you like, you may call me Miss Jude."

Watching The Veins Go By

Her skin was like that of a peeled orange or grapefruit, except it was looser and slid around, over the bones, doubling layer upon layer. To some eyes it appeared rough and unappealing to possess or touch with its many cracks and wrinkles, but it was actually soft and supple, hardly ever hot or cold but more lukewarm on the verge of cool, especially the palms of her hands. She held hands with Sally when Sally sat by her bed and they watched Lawrence Welk in the evening or told stories of their families, Sally's mostly living, hers mostly dead. She got her coal black hair, then silver, from her mother, who "woulda been a gypsy if she hadn't met my daddy." She got her light green eyes from him, full of piss and vinegar. She also got her name from him, by mistake. Her mother's death was due to Cade's birth, complications during delivery. Her father mistook the phonetics of Katie and wrote Cade E. Braddon on the birth certificate with a fountain pen, his sixth-grade education and distress of recently becoming a widower. His sister-in-law pointed out the mistake and insisted on calling her Cady, but he liked Cade and Cade it was. So Sally called her Cade, and she called Sally Jesus Christ.

"Oh, honey, I thought you were Jesus Christ again," she said with a hoarse voice, then followed by her familiar cackle. There was a hint of distress heard in her voice

these days, distress of dying before she held her oldest grandson's first child, or little turkey as she termed it since its arrival fell on Thanksgiving. Her health had declined even more after the middle-of-the-night ambulance ride and short stay in the hospital, a respite that was usually more calming than alarming. Typically, her anxiety, loneliness and fluid-building around the heart checked her in about every six months to the seventh floor, room 247, where she rested, laughed and drained, then went home all tuned up. This time was different, and after all she was about to celebrate her ninetieth birthday.

Sally was to celebrate her twenty-third, proudly on the same day as Cade. It was one more thing to be thankful for during that grand month of November. Turkey and mashed potatoes-n-gravy, college and taking care of Cade, her birthmate, headed Sally's list of gratitude. Her father had left the family when she was six years old, bequeathing her the responsibility of tending to her mother and younger brother and sister, twins. She was no stranger to hard work, which she used to counter any hard luck that came her way. An associate's degree and a near bachelor's in biology, occasionally part-time alongside part-time jobs, attested to her ethic.

Colorful stories narrated by Cade inspired her ethic. Wars of the world, from bayonets to scud missiles, six in all. Radio and "The Lone Ranger," motion pictures and "The

Lone Ranger," television and "The Lone Ranger." Teddy and his cigars, Delano on the box with "The Lone Ranger," Harry and Bess and the bomb, Ike, JFK, LBJ, Dick Nixon, Gerry Ford, the peanut-farmer Carter, the actor Reagan, the liar Bush. Buggies, Model Ts, Edsels. Trains, planes, space shuttles.

Years and miles, child-bearing and child-rearing, natural causes and those unnatural, may have reportioned and distorted a body of purity past, but these same essences of life electrified and willed a mind of hope to take the next step from present to future; the step was slower and more intimidating than the last, but taken nonetheless. History laid within Cade, and Cade still lay within history. She possessed incredible power from her experiences of life, love and loss, and demonstrated it to anyone who would listen when the memories punched their path home. Sally was one of the few who did.

"Nobody cares about me anymore," Cade said to Sally as her large frame met the starched pillows and sheets of her bed.

"Now, Cade," Sally said with cheer in her voice and on her face, "you know that's not true."

"Then why don't they visit?"

"Well, they've just been busy lately, that's all."

With a snort and spit Cade hastily replied, "Heh. Too busy for their own mother and grandmother?"

Mother to one and grandmother to three and soon-to-be

great grandmother again. Phineas Joe Quinlan was the only son born to Cade and Delbert Quinlan, ten-year veterans of marriage at the time in 1930. One child was enough for the Quinlan couple as they were both consumed with the family grocery store and fear of repeating Cade's entrance into the world. Delbert would have been content with none, but Cade "snuck one by 'im." Since her mother's death left Cade as the natural caretaker of her father and brothers when she was old enough for the task, finally having her own child made Cade as "plentiful proud as a pig heaped in mud and slop." Phineas, or Phin, evoked more of her hearty laughter and broad smiles as he crawled and tumbled and walked into the boy he was. He evoked more of her Braddon pride and Quinlan tradition as he learned and graduated and married into the man he was.

Now the man was on his second marriage, since his first wife succumbed to cervical cancer; his thirtieth year as a professor at the local college, twenty-fifth as department chair; his third term as Rotary vice-president; his fourth grandchild with his fifth around the corner. All of these roles, along with regular bowler and irregular golfer, busied him from his original one: son. His father had died of heart failure fifteen years ago, so he moved his mother out of their historical hometown house and into a two-bedroom apartment even closer to him. It seemed to Cade though that she saw him even less. Once a week he usually checked on her

health and tended to her business affairs, in and out between family and school and recreation.

The grandchildren were better about visiting when they were younger, before they started their own jobs and families. Braddon and his wife Joy, a former teacher of his, expected their first child and Cade's next great-grandchild, preferably a girl to break the male streak. Out of all of the family, Braddon probably visited the most; sadly, he paid more attention to Cade's expensive, glass vases and such, heirlooms he hoped and sometimes insisted were to be his. Duncan, Phin's younger son, the quieter and scrawnier of the two, his wife Jamie and three-year-old son Del visited more after harvest season. Phin's second wife, Estie, had a daughter from her first marriage who lived in another state, but visited with her husband and two boys during holidays.

One of Cade's most frequent visitors was Sally in the evenings to talk with her, make her dinner and put her to bed. Two older ladies alternated days of breakfast and lunch. Their duties had nearly doubled because of Cade's latest hospital stay, her heart and mind frayed more than ever; their presence was required more to comfort an anxious, exhausted, sometimes invisible-feeling woman rather than to maintain her.

"Here, honey," Cade said to Sally, "take this necklace and give it to your mama." She handed her startled caretaker a pearl necklace. "Barbara Bush could use a necklace like

this." Sally's mother, Barbara Crofton, had met Cade just once this fall.

"Oh, no, Cade," Sally responded. "Now that's not necessary." Sally placed the necklace back in the jewelry box that Cade had opened on her lap. As she still leaned over the bed, Sally was startled again when Cade grabbed her wrist and replaced the necklace in her hand.

Cade brought Sally closer to her and said, "Sally, honey, I want your mama to have this. I want it to be from me while I'm alive."

The clarity in Cade's thought and seriousness in her voice both scared and saddened Sally. She felt sorry for her friend who had lived so long and so much, but now short and little. She also felt what her friend felt. The physical difference in Cade was obvious; the mental and emotional difference in Cade was evident. Her end was near.

"Thank you, Cade," Sally said. "My mother will treasure it always."

"I know she will. That's why I'm giving it to her."

Lawrence Welk then carried the quiet until Cade fell asleep, mouth agape, nose abuzz. Sally unclutched her hand from Cade's and tucked the covers under her chin. She kissed her on the forehead, pushed the power off on the remote, returned the jewelry box to the dresser and went into the living room. There she sat in the chair across from Cade's, a lift chair to help her six-foot frame up to her walker.

She tried to read her three-inch thick anatomy book, but her brain felt as fuzzy as her eyes and the pearls in her hands felt as smooth as gravel dripping in cream. Sleep eluded her these days. Staying all night with Cade, taking even more care of her and making sense of both her sense and nonsense reshuffled Sally's priorities. She thought again about Cade's comment. It ironed her touch, sharpened her eyes, pricked her brain, her heart. Starkly, her friend's body eased further from sky to crust, her mind from cloud to crack, while her own entities crystallized from coal to diamond. She felt helpless in her role: a cold compress to combat a sweaty, scary sleep; an ice chip to quench a fiery, parched palate; a sponge bath to dampen a sultry, stretched skin. Mainly, Sally knew, listening helped Cade. It also helped Sally, whether she witnessed babble or poignancy. She wanted to do more though, more than let her eat cheese against doctor's orders, more than stroke her silver hair and sing her to sleep, more than change her bedding and her favorite, light-blue nightgown.

A timer light in the far corner of the room clicked on, splashing shimmers across the curio cabinet, spotlighting a lead-crystal vase that Braddon so coveted. The vase's unique design detailed tiny circles. The light hit just right, and it spangled into Sally's eyes. She pictured the cut flowers that had stood splendidly in it before. To her right and through the drapes and blinds and sliding glass

door, she imagined the uncut flowers that had sprung splendidly in the concrete bed on the patio last May. They would not be Cade's homegrown, but flowers by anyone, from anywhere, illuminated life. Tomorrow after lab Sally planned to fill Cade's eyes, Cade's nose, Cade's spirit, with flowers.

"Oh, honey," Cade yelled from her bedroom, startling Sally from her daze. "Help me, honey."

Sally dumped the pearls and anatomy book from her lap and hurried to Cade's side. "What's the matter, Cade?" she asked, scanning Cade from hair to toe and the newly installed hospital bed from headboard to end. She found nothing immediately obvious, except Cade's pained face, full of fear.

"Oh, honey," Cade repeated. "You're my friend, aren't you?"

Awestruck by the urgency and delicacy of the question, as disoriented and daunted in which it was possibly posed, Sally still answered without hesitation, "Of course I am, Cade."

"Then help me, honey."

"I want to help you, Cade, but first you gotta tell me what's wrong."

"Oh, I hurt. I hurt." Cade's crinkled fingers reached for Sally. Her foggy eyes looked for her friend.

Sally's hand met Cade's and began caressing. Sally then asked, "Where do you hurt?"

"All over, honey. I hurt all over. Oh, please help me. You're my friend. Friends help friends."

The cold compress advanced to an ice pack flat on the forehead. The ice chip advanced to ice water sipped from a bendable straw. And the sponge bath from the morning advanced to an ice rub in the night. Sally stroked Cade's hands and hair a thousand times over and sang "Bye, Bye, Blackbird," as favorite as her light-blue nightgown, a thousand times more. Efforts combined, Sally helped Cade find peace for another moment. Breath and pulse steadied, for both of the women. The lamp on the nightstand, a full drawer of vapor rubs and cough drops and kleenex, glowed on the two, now as still as creatures using their paws for pillows. Cade's eyes closed. Sally's became fuzzy again, close to joining Cade's until Cade spoke.

"Honey," she said, "tell them I don't want to go through this." With each word her mouth and eyes were slow but deliberate in opening. Clarity and seriousness echoed from earlier in the evening.

Sally asked, "What do you mean, Cade?"

"They won't listen," Cade said in a gulp. Sally recognized the sound and lifted the glass of ice water and bendable straw to Cade's lips. She sucked deep and long, her paunchy cheeks briefly disappearing. She gasped when her lips let go of the straw and latched on to the air. Then she repeated the process before gasping once more, licking her

lips and beginning again, "They won't listen to me, honey. It's gonna get real bad, and I don't wanna be kept goin' when I'm real bad. You tell 'em again. Maybe they'll listen to you."

Listening long after the words dissipated into the lamp's glow, Sally relifted the glass to Cade's lips. Cade drank more and Sally thought more, their eyes laden by the respective tasks and time. Cade knew what she wanted and needed, and Sally knew what she needed to do because she wanted to do all that she could to help her friend. The demand and supply were set for sweet exchange, but forecasts were prone to going against the grain. "You still drink that horsepee, honey?" Cade spoke, fighting sleep and recharting the conversation.

The question broke Sally's glass face into a thousand tiny smiles and laughs, like the vase's tiny circles had spangled in the living room light many hours ago. Her cheeks' dimples, much smaller than her friend's puckered by drink, slotted themselves among the smiles. She replied, "It's called beer, Cade. And yes, I still drink it."

"Horsepee," Cade said, cackling and coughing, then wetting her mouth and throat with more water.

On cue Sally retorted, "Oh, Cade, you don't know what horsepee tastes like."

"The heck I don't, honey. My daddy had an ol' mare named Mert. Peed all the time, and one day I was right

behind 'er. Blechhh. That's beer. Horsepee."

Their laughter led the night into the next morning until it too, like the words, dissipated into the lamp's glow. Cade fell asleep. Sally's hand fell asleep in Cade's, and eventually she herself fell asleep in the chair. At dawn she awoke, steered her body to the guest room and plopped onto the bed, clothes wrinkled, shoes on. Tomorrow was a couple of hours away.

The pace of bath, food, medication, TV, sleep, more food, more medication, more TV, more sleep, more fear, more comfort persisted four more days. Sally also persisted, beating each night and beating each test at school the next day. Cade persisted as well; bless her heart, Sally would say. However, her heart beat back, undercutting any strength and bravery put forth by both women as well as any scent and beauty put forth by all of the promised flowers. The last night Cade insisted Sally call Phin, who had been visiting more frequently during the imminent hours. He withstood his mother's pain and pleas no longer, so he called the ambulance to take them away, back to room 247.

Flower after flower flowed into the room, as did visitor after visitor, all unnoticed by the intended recipient. Food no longer flowed spoonfully, now intravenously, and Cade no longer slept optionally, now comatosely. Before the slip into sleep, Cade was capable of

recognizing each family member's face with a listless look and informally saying farewell with a faint kiss. Then her words slipped and slurred past cohesion, her pain and occasional peace past oblivion. Gone were her smiles and cackles, some of her last ones given to Sally; stand-ins were blips and bleeps on a screen, the smallest of signposts verifying blood and breath still flowed. Cade was bad, real bad.

Cade's family was intense with calm, surrounding themselves with each other's whispers and prognoses. They shuttled vending-machine coffee and snacks to the one member assigned to that particular hour's watchpost, while the others congregated in the cafeteria. Sally relieved most of them, insisting that her body and mind, deprived of solid food and rest since Cade's arrival at the hospital, were fit for such duty. The other ladies who helped take care of Cade in her home held their own vigils, with rosaries and recitations and prayer cloths and poems. And they all continued their care, helping the nurses with changings and medications and baths. Phin and Estie and Braddon and Joy acknowledged their presences as little as they always had, except when they felt they were in the way. Duncan and Jamie were consistent too, patting and hugging the women, encouraging them to get more food and rest, especially Sally.

Sally's will to stay by Cade's side, or at least nearby, was relentless, as conditioned as Cade's stance on

colored people and foreigners. Cade had grown up with certain opinions and beliefs and routines, and Sally had grown from witnessing these opinions and beliefs and routines, as imperfect and flawed as they may have been. Cade was attached to these opinions and beliefs and routines, just as she was to her father and brothers, her husband and son, her grandchildren and great grandchildren. Just as she was to plowing the field with Mert the ol' mare, tilling the garden behind her old house, planting the concrete flower bed on her apartment's patio with spring seed and soil, all year after year. Just as she was to Sally and Francene and Mary Jean, the friends who took care of her when she could no longer take care of herself. They received pay and presents and praise for their deeds, but what they treasured more was that they received a part of Cade, a part of life to add to their own. For this they willingly slept bare minutes on a vinyl couch in the lounge, drank cold coffee from a paper cup that popped from a machine, ate stale sandwiches from a plastic container that also popped from a machine at the push of a button.

Mary Jean entered the room and found Sally sitting upright in a chair pulled closely to the bed, hands clasped to Cade's, eyes closed. She roused her much younger colleague and told her with only a smile and a nod toward the door that she would take over. Sally accepted the tag from her teammate and went to the lounge rubbing her eyes and

temples. Duncan and Jamie played with Del and his toys. A splash of Cade's smile spangled in Sally's memory, as she recalled how much Cade enjoyed playing with Del, or any of the great grandchildren, in her large lap. Cade did not hold them for very long, but long enough to gently impress their soft, supple skin and stir a small smile of their own. At the thought Sally stayed in her own smile for a moment, then shared it with Duncan and Jamie. Soon their heads turned back to Del and Sally's thought turned serious.

"Duncan," she started to ask, "how long is this going to go on?"

"I don't know, Sally," he replied. "But for Grandma's sake I sure wish it wouldn't be much longer."

"For his mother's sake I thought your father would have granted her wishes long before now," Sally stated.

Duncan asked, "What do you mean?"

His wife Jamie intervened and answered for Sally, "She means your grandmother told her the same thing she told us and more than likely told your father: she didn't want to go on when she wasn't really here anymore."

They all contemplated the wish, the harshness of losing someone they love, the freshness of that someone losing her pain. Individually, they all came to the same conclusion: their selfishness of keeping Cade in their lives grossly underweighed keeping Cade's life away from death, a path to peace.

Duncan said, "Sally, I understand what you're saying, and I want to respect Grandma's wish as much as you do. I know Dad won't though, because we've talked about it. For one, he doesn't believe in it, and for another he doesn't believe Grandma meant it. He thinks she was just talkin' nonsense."

Sally's heart dropped, an anchor sinking from ship to seafloor, from surface and light to depth and dark, entangled in moss and murkiness. They spoke for her friend when she still could speak, despite her words and their crystal-clear meaning; they shattered her desire and decision even more by speaking for her as she lay flat and mute. Cade's words resonated in Sally's dropped heart: "Help me, honey. You're my friend. ...tell 'em again." The words uprooted the anchor, shaking sand and seaweed, rising through each level of water, merging from confused green into silver pools.

"What about Braddon?" Sally asked Duncan.

"What do you think?" Duncan abruptly answered.

"Well, then, I must try and talk to your father."

Duncan looked harder at Sally. Jamie looked up from Del and hardened the look. Their collective look of disbelief was not out of fear of Phineas, because for the most part he was a simple, easy-going man. It was more a look of disbelief that someone other than Cade Quinlan teetered on the brink of questioning a decision made by Phineas Quinlan.

"Uh, Sally," Duncan said, "I don't know that you should do that."

"No disrespect to you or your father, Duncan. But out of respect for Cade, I've gotta at least try."

Sally walked away. She left the lounge to look for Phineas. She stopped at Cade's room, finding an unmoved patient and visitor. Mary Jean stopped reading to Cade, looked over her shoulder and smiled at Sally. Sally smiled and half-waved, eerily expecting more than a response from just Mary Jean. She finished her walk at the elevator, taking it to the cafeteria's level, where she immediately found Phineas at one of the occupied tables. He quietly led a discussion with Estie, Braddon and Joy before he saw Sally approach. The discussion closed, then he said, "Hi, Sally."

"Hi, Phineas," she said, nodding to the others. "May I speak to you for a moment?"

He looked a little puzzled by her tonal and facial concern. "Well, sure," he said, then waited for her to start her say. When she stepped back, he realized that she wanted to speak solely with him. He added, "Oh," and fumbled pushing back his chair and excusing himself from the others.

The two, tall and petite, sat at a table out of earshot. Sally breathed air and Phineas' cologne. She leveled her eyes to his and said, "Phineas, please understand that I mean no disrespect to you or your family with what I'm about to say."

Phineas's puzzlement dizzied his brain as much as his stature and cologne dizzied Sally's anxiety and angst.

Sally proceeded, "Last week Cade told me, in good faith and mind, that she did not want to go on when she got real bad. She also told me that she told you and other family this too. I just, I just want to know if you plan to honor her wish." Sally was scared, real scared, although she desperately tried not to show it. Her eyes, however, caught in the cluster of her words, quivered and cowered in a corner of her mind.

Behind his glasses, Phineas's eyes said exactly what was happening in his mind: he did not appreciate this intrusion upon his family and their feelings in this delicate situation. "Young lady," he said, carefully choosing his words, "I do take offense to your remarks."

Sally now looked quite frazzled by his tonal and facial anger. Tears crystallized her eyes, brushing the blue into a glaze of sunlight splashing the sea's foam. She felt she was failing herself, more importantly, Cade.

"This is a family matter," he continued, "and we will decide what is best for our mother and grandmother." He paused. "Morally, I don't believe in such a God-awful thing. Besides, legally; my mother never signed the release form permitting the doctors to perform the ghastly act. And I believe my mother had no real inclination of doing so."

Behind her tears Sally thought to herself, Yeah, but

did you ever ask her and actually listen to what she said and meant? Tears streaming down her face, teeth biting her lips, words fought through her tight throat and Sally said, "Again, no disrespect to you or your family, Phineas. I asked out of respect for Cade and her request. I feel bad. I'll say goodbye to Cade and leave you alone."

"I think that would be best," he said. "I'll send you your final paycheck."

Sally sat longer than Phineas, then rose and walked heavily with her heart in her step to the elevator. On the way she overheard Braddon raise his voice when Phineas returned to them and say, "Well, if that doesn't take a lot of gall. She's gonna want something of Grandma's, Daddy. I'd get her key if I was you."

Phineas's wife Estie shushed him, and the elevator doors sealed into one.

Duncan saddled Del on his hip and held Jamie's hand as they paced the hall. They saw Sally exit the elevator and followed her tears into Cade's room. All of them, including Mary Jean and Francene, knew Sally took Cade Quinlan's guts with her to the cafeteria and brought back a stripped version--Sally Crofton's guts hung in sheer strings from her heart. She battled for her wounded friend, blind and deaf in addition to mute. She attempted to be a tongue in addition to a lens and a drum. Barraged by shell after shell, she

emerged from smoke, her spine still a stretcher for Cade's will. She set her friend's will down tenderly and carefully and stared it in the face. The smoke continued to settle from air to ground, from Sally's nose to her stomach. She swallowed the sick feeling.

Francene brushed Sally's hair from her wet face. Mary Jean hugged her, her tears and rosary beads pelting Sally's back. Jamie kissed her cheek, and Duncan patted her back and squeezed her shoulder. Del slept as soundly as his great-grandmother. Throughout their gestures, Sally wept, freely.

A vein skewered her forehead. A tremor shot her body. A tear salted her lips. The taste of tears and saliva and mucus accentuated her puffy eyes and puffy brain, her ringing ears and ringing soul.

She swiped tissues from a box on the bedside table, blew her nose and mopped the residue on her face. She cleared the phlegm from her throat and asked, "May I please be with Cade?" They consented and cleared the room.

Nearly every evening of two years culminated into one. Sally opted to treat it like any other. She checked her watch, realizing the time, and clicked the television remote. The news anchors delivered their segments. Sally marked a mental checklist of inspection, a regime of preservation. She examined Cade's attire, straightening her favorite blue nightgown that the young nurse had put on her in the morning, pressing the crinkles of polyester. She pulled the covers up

to Cade's chin, stubble starting to show from yesterday's electric shave. The round, brown glasses she normally wore lay on the bedside table next to the cardboard tissue box, the styrofoam water pitcher and cup and plastic bag of bendable straws. Sally swiped another tissue and polished the lenses to a shine, holding them to the light and seeing herself in the pieces of glass so settled in their frames. By the nosepiece she placed them perfectly on the table and around the water pitcher, like a bandaged invisible being now had a specified area for its eyes.

Sally's eyes reexamined Cade, mouth shut, nose silent. Sally missed her breathing through her mouth, snoring through her nose; cackling at her own words and stories; rummaging through countless catalogs to pick out a floral, polyester, pull-over dress for herself and a belt and a blouse for Sally; dipping into the "kitty," a red tin box, for a stamp to mail the catalog order, a battery for the remote, a five-dollar-bill for a cheeseburger treat at Dairy Queen or a "little extra" for Sally just because. Sally missed her just because. The feel of Cade's loose, soft skin was forever under Sally's.

She took a soft-bristled hairbrush from the table drawer, lifted Cade's head and neck and brushed her silver hair, slicking the mussed and tousled strands with the days of accumulated oil. Tenderly and carefully, Sally set her friend's head on the pillow, singing only the verse of "Bye,

Bye, Blackbird," then smiled as she stared at a face weathered and mapped with trails and trails of life. She tucked the oxygen cords back in her nostrils and around her ears, then returned the brush to the drawer and reclaimed a seat in the chair.

For minutes she sat in silence, watching the news, occasionally watching Cade and wondering what she watched beneath her closed eyes. From the back of the chair to its front edge, Sally then watched the veins on Cade's arm, so pocked with green and yellow and purple and black bruises by the needle's numerous attempts at finding a usable passage. She watched the veins as if she stood on a bank and watched a river go by. Its current running over mud and rocks and fallen tree limbs, destination unknown and unstressed, just forward and onward. Its current racing fish and snakes and snails and other members of the food chain. Its current reconciling coves and spillways and shores.

Tears ran again over Sally's cheeks and jaws as she ran her hand down Cade's arm and into her hand. Sally's head bowed and rested on Cade's forearm. She wept, freely, simply, so conscious a cry as she never had experienced before in her life. Her head raised, turning away from her free hand's palm wiping the sockets of her eyes. Her head stopped and stared at the cords squeezed in the plug-ins between the bed and table. She stared and deliberated. Easily, she could slide the plugs from the outlet, an

electrical obstacle preventing Cade from reaching peace and light with her beloved Delbert, her one true wish since his death.

Cade's family, namely Phineas, made Cade's decisions. The nurses and doctors sometimes spearheaded and carried out these decisions. Sally and Cade's other previous caretakers were nowhere near these decisions, maybe never were. Their surrogation as cooks, launderers, maids, pharmacists, nannies was over. Sally's surrogation was over, although an attempt at a moment of God was but a foot away.

Her pause of conscience proved too long. Sally felt Cade's cool, loose-skinned hand grip hers in a tight instant. She heard Cade's sigh, eventually smelling her breath, still sweet from Sally's try at maintaining Cade's hygiene and pride. Sally leaned upward and put her ear to Cade's bosom, listening and feeling for reverberations. Finally surrendering that Cade's heart still beat back, Sally leaned farther upward and kissed Cade's large lips, tasting a bit of the faded peppermint flavor. Pulling back she saw through her tears, or so she thought, Cade's smile one more time and sensed her friend would make it home soon, real soon.

Minutes passed like trodden hours making their way around the Quinlan grandfather clock, another item of which Braddon jockeyed for possession. Her hand still in Cade's, her head still on Cade's bosom, Sally reached down near the plugs and rang the button for the nurse: a new bag of

nutrients was overdue.

On the television Lawrence Welk welcomed the audience to another wonderful show.

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