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Budging

by

Kelly Barth

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

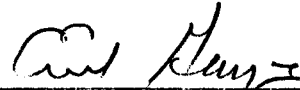
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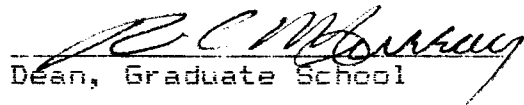
University of Montana

1992

Approved by



Committee Chair



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Date June 1, 1992

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Budging

I asked Hui Min for scissors. When she came back with a pair of pinking shears, I trimmed Kenny right out of the picture-- let him drop into the trash on top of some cabbage. I snipped off part of my shoulder in the process, and a piece of his cheek clung to my sweater like it was part of the weave. That's the way with endings. You leave things you hadn't planned. Take things you didn't want. I still have that sweater though, so I can prove he's gone. Hui Min had asked to see my family pictures.

"You don't want him anymore, Lucy?" she said, picking him out and shaking him free of a piece of cabbage.

"Never really did, I guess," I said.

Only a little part of me ever did, the part that lets all the other cars merge in a highway construction zone. The rest of my personality went underground for repairs or protection. People had been arranging blind dates, dropping

hints. Aunt Lucy, my namesake, had provided a wedding cake for every person in the family since she took a decorating class in 1927. She had trouble with a bridal shower cake I asked her to bake for a friend.

"My roses don't look right anymore," she said, fanning her knobby, arthritic fingers and holding them out for me to see. In the same breath, she said, "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Kenny had looked like a father in a toothpaste ad. Clean nails, an accountant, opened doors, said nice things, filled my weekends, made me one half of a pair.

Hui Min couldn't understand about Kenny. She didn't speak enough English for me to define the word coma, to explain that my engagement had been one, metaphorically speaking.

Just like that, I slid myself in my half a picture back in a sleeve of my wallet. A pen mark on the plastic covered my smile so I scrubbed it with nail polish remover that Hui Min stored dead center of her new Lazy Susan. She hadn't been in the States very long, so she didn't know what people kept on their kitchen tables. The remover ate through the plastic so I found another sleeve to put myself in.

It was Friday. I spent every Friday evening at Hui Min and Xiao An's one-bedroom apartment in Brookside. They lived smack in the middle of the bad side of town, the side full of gun shots and boarded-up windows and roaches. But it was

cheap. In China, they had shared rooms the size of closets with two, maybe three other people where the beds were the floor, the desk, and the bookshelf. They'd lived in the apartment for three months already and their eyes were still round with amazement. They swung their arms around, gesturing at the space.

They had come from Shanghai six months earlier and decided to try chicken at the Kentucky Fried where Kenny and I used to eat Fridays after church.

I walked up to their booth and said, "Ni zhong guo ren, ma?" I was taking a Chinese class that met every Wednesday after work. My teacher was a priest, Father Han. He suggested we find Chinese tutors. Father Han told us if we saw a Chinese person to ask them "Ni zhong guo ren, ma?" which means "You Chinese?" I didn't realize what a stupid question it was until I asked it. From one look at them, the answer seemed obvious. And then if they hadn't been, if they'd been from Korea or something, they wouldn't have understood me anyway. But they were polite. That's the thing about the Chinese, Father Han said, "We're a peace-loving people--affirmative at all costs. You could ask a Chinese person to drive his car into a tree and he would nod his head and smile. Chinese assume you mean the best."

That first night we nodded lots. When I told them fried chicken was a killer--pretty little blobs of cholesterol--they laughed long and loud and bits of food fell from their

mouths.

"You're funny," they said. They belched and weren't embarrassed.

I asked if they needed help with English and we reached an agreement--free Chinese dinner for free tutoring. I was so relieved. Both Fridays and Wednesdays were taken care of.

For weeks, Fridays had felt like death. Out of sheer habit I'd driven to the parking lot of Sheil's funeral home where Kenny had loved for us to park. So many nights, he had leaned over me and traced an awful little path around my eyes and the bridge of my nose with his fingertip, around and around, until I'd swear he'd worn off all the skin. He'd say, 'You're pretty,' too many times to believe, the streetlight glinting off his nose. And I would lie flat with one hand clamped around the edge of the seat. Sometimes I would stroke the small of my back like mom used to when I hurt myself.

"It'll stop soon, baby," she'd say.

And always he would ask why I seldom touched his face or stroked his hair.

I marveled that he didn't see that I had to put forth a great deal of effort to look relaxed, that my eyes rarely closed. He never saw that I was trying to convince myself that I could learn to love him. He looked like a husband, and I was the right age to find one. I found a mole on his left ear I thought I could start with and spent all of our Friday

nights in the parking lot staring at it. And always he would make me drive his Buick home because it pleased him that I could barely keep its wide hulk from slipping off into the gravel at the edge of the road.

Hui Min chose four packages of her own pictures to show me. We were reaching the "sharing family background" ring of ourselves in the onion of intimacy, a metaphor used in a book Making Friends of Internationals. I'd checked it out from the library in February, two weeks after I broke off my engagement. The packages marked China Hui Min put back in the cardboard box from Lou's fish market. On the side, it read in blue letters, 'if it swim, we catch it.' Each photograph showed either her or Xiao An at the university, peering out of a bush by the library, huddled underneath the giant domino sculpture on the lawn of the art building. In each one, the sun shone on their teeth, on the smile one lover gives another. I peeled each photograph apart from the next; the heat had sealed them together tight as skin to vinyl.

It was a record-breaking hot August in Kansas City, and it was the weekend I would have been married. We'd made all the arrangements early because Kenny wanted to get everything set in his mind--make sure the hook was in my lip. In January, we rented the church, but was no need to worry about booking way in advance. Nobody wanted summer weddings. The

reception hall in the church basement wasn't air-conditioned. The pastor said during a July wedding, most of the frosting slid off a three-story cake, and the plastic bride and groom broke in two pieces on the floor.

Startled by the reality of the preparations, I voted we wait until spring. But Kenny wanted to see the Rockies the first week of September--the color of the aspens, he said. And all I could think was that I loved Colorado and never would again. He said that way we could spend all our holidays together that year--Thanksgiving, Christmas--away from both families. I should have taken care of things then, but I was just coming to my senses. When he called to tell me he'd booked two tickets to Denver, I hung up the phone and sat staring at the calendar for three hours. We struggled over wedding colors and settled on mint, the color of an antacid tablet.

"Where was this picture taken?" I asked Hui Min, pretending not to know. Before Kenny and I had started dating, I'd run smack into him in front of that same forsythia bush at the University Center. While we ate our first lunch together, I decided I believed in angels, thinking they'd whispered in our ears, telling us where to walk so we would run into each other again. I'd watched the tiny bald spot at the back of Kenny's head during a missionary film festival at a friend's church. I didn't have a church of my own. Kenny wove straight through the folding

chairs afterwards and found me as if he were winding up an invisible rope tied between us. I remember thinking that I wouldn't mind if we saw each other again--that was all--not all it came to mean. When we did see each other again, Kenny wasn't surprised. He believed in predestination--that God steered one man and one woman toward each other, two dots in the vast circle of time and space, destined to merge into one larger dot. I'd never had a steady boyfriend and was already 21. I believed Kenny.

Hui Min closed off her kitchen from the rest of the apartment with a curtain printed with daisies. While I trailed my finger through the leg-shaped pool of sweat collected on my chair, I tried to think of another question to ask.

"What's on the menu, tonight?" I said. She always cooked three or four dishes and a big pot of sticky rice.

"Mew?" she said, not understanding.

"That's the paper thing they give you in restaurants with all the food printed on it. Do you know the word restaurant?"

She stared. "Food is printed?" she asked.

We'd reached an impasse. It was time for the Chinese/English dictionary.

"M-e-n-u" I spelled.

Hui Min and Xiao An were biochemistry students. They

didn't have to read or speak English much, especially not everyday, get-around-town English. Hui Min and I had broken a record that night; we talked for an hour without the dictionary. She smiled and felt outside the kitchen door for her plastic scuffs with a picture of Barbie glued on each instep. They didn't wear their shoes in the kitchen. I made a mental note to ask if it was a religious custom, if I should take mine off. I didn't want to because the linoleum was hot and greasy as a pancake griddle. Since I'd arrived, I'd busied myself stepping out of the path of a roach that was scurrying under the table, looking for safety and shade under my feet, I suppose. I was determined not to budge from my chair. At all costs, I would keep Hui Min company. I would not offend her by saying 'Whew' and leaving every five minutes for air. If Kenny could see me now, I thought. He said I would never be anything but selfish--would never give of myself to anyone.

"Look at selfish now," I said aloud, the words resounding in my ears. The heat lulled me nearly to sleep.

"Ah, menu," said a bulge in the daisy curtain.

"You have those?" I said. Of course they did. I scolded myself. Just because she didn't know a word didn't mean that the Chinese simply did without the thing, whatever it was.

When she pushed the curtain aside, a gust of what now seemed cool summer air wafted into the kitchen. Hui Min took a glass jar full of something like dried spiders from the

cupboard over the stove and unscrewed the lid.

"Smell," she said.

It reminded me of licorice.

"Anus," she said, proud of her new vocabulary word.

I reached for the dictionary.

She sprinkled a handful of the black bits into a saucepan with the chicken with sticky brown sauce that I loved so much.

"Anise?" I asked. A herbaceous plant.

"Do you have that?" she asked.

"Yes, but it's ground."

"Ground?"

I pretended not to hear. We weren't getting anywhere, and I knew she was too polite to ask a question twice.

I loved watching her cook. She worked like a juggler, or better, someone who kept a stage full of plates spinning at the end of long sticks. Everything spit and sizzled, demanding her attention. When the dumplings, jiao tze, threatened to boil over, she whirled round and dumped a glass of cold water in the pot, commanding silence. She sent a cutting board of tomatoes chunks hissing into the frying eggs. Sliding the wok back and forth over the flame with one hand, she unscrewed the lid from the bottle of sesame oil with the other. The finishing touch, she took a plastic package from the drawer with the silverware.

"Please open," she said.

"What are these?" I asked. I braced myself.

Her brow furrowed as she sprinkled half the bag of feathery bits into the soup. "Um--I knew that one last week," she said.

I handed her the dictionary.

"Shreemp," she said.

Brine shrimp, the kind sold in frozen blocks as food for exotic pets, beta fish and newts.

"Here--see?" she poured a few into my palm. They were wispy and transparent as angels, each with two black bead eyes that stared up sadly from the soup pan. That Friday, Hui Min put me in charge of stirring. To be polite, I always asked if I could help and she would look at me with concern as she did the wok of vegetables that needed to be jigged over the flame. She'd never stirred soup.

Xiao An flapped into the room in rubber thongs. It was time to cook the rice. That was his job.

Hui Min said that before he'd met her, Xiao An never touched anything in the kitchen. Once she taught him to do a few simple things, he strutted around the room, waving spatulas, flicking grease on the cabinets and the stove.

Kenny loved for me to watch him do his laundry. He flattened his socks so they looked like they had just come out of the bag, still had the cardboard inside. And he folded his t-shirts so that the sleeves didn't bunch and the neck

didn't stretch--in three smooth motions. You could waltz to him.

"Are you watching me?" he'd asked. "You'll do this."

He took me shopping for a new coat.

"Your old one's too green. It's not exactly a church coat."

On the way to my sister's for Christmas dinner, we turned around on the interstate so he could go home and change his socks. They didn't match his pants.

"It's important to me," he said when I laughed.

One time, we spent a whole evening walking up and down grocery store aisles. A shopping test, he called it. The test allowed him to see if I would be a wise shopper. He made check marks on a scratch pad and figured on a calculator. I wiped tears out of my eyes so I could read the labels. I'd chosen the wrong color toilet paper for the spare bathroom in his house, the house that was to be our house.

"I just wanted you to remember. Never buy blue--the bathroom is peach," he said, patting my shoulder and making another check mark.

Xiao An always burned the rice, then he and Hui Min would stand toe to toe, shouting at each other. They seemed angry, but would walk away smiling at me as if nothing had happened. To me, Chinese voices always sound angry, swaying up and down like a warped record.

I liked it better in the kitchen before Xiao An and the rice. When he did come in, Hui Min changed her conversation, like she switched to another station, one that Xiao An liked to listen to. Each Friday, before he came in, she taught me to draw Chinese characters--flower, river, home--and I practiced on paper napkins while she talked. Home was easy to remember. You drew the symbol for pig under the symbol for roof. She said whenever there is a pig in the house, a family always lives there. She told me stories about growing up during the Cultural Revolution. During the wheat harvest, she and the other students had to walk to nearby farms and spend all day gathering up bits of grain the machines had left behind. Hui Min's mother made her a rake so she wouldn't have to stoop over--so her back would straighten at the end of the day. Her father broke the rake in front of Hui Min's teacher. Because, he said, he was afraid the officials would think she was trying to do less work and to stand out from the others. One summer, she saved part of each dinner for a skinny silver cat that sat on her window sill. She named the cat Xiao Ge Ge, little sister.

"I talked to the cat," she said. "But then she disappeared. My neighbors ate her." Hui Min said she wanted a cat, but Xiao An didn't like them. Instead, she bought him a goldfish.

"Xiao An says fish don't lose hair," she said. She looked in the fish bowl. "It's alright. I could like fish.

I'm trying to learn how to love this one." She tapped the glass and it swam to the top of the bowl. She stroked its back with one finger.

Kenny wanted me to speak in tongues. His whole family knew how. One night, his sister, who played the piano, wailed a speech from her piano bench. Kenny cried while he interpreted what she had said. The gist of the message was that we shouldn't be bound up with fear even though she sensed there was somebody in the room who would have an accident within the week. Angels would protect them from the worst. Everyone moved in a herd to the front of the church, crying. I followed. Swaying from the top step with a cruet of anointed vegetable oil, the pastor waited for those who would like to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Suddenly, I felt several pairs of hands on my back--warm, and pleading hands. A line formed behind me and when my turn came I lifted my chin toward the poster of a dove tacked to the wall above the preacher. He drew an oily cross on my forehead. Squinting, I prayed, "God teach me how to do this. Kenny's watching." After an awkward pause, I started mumbling, "Shi bla, bli, bla," like I used to from my corner of the back seat of the car when all my sisters were talking to my mother, and I could think of nothing to say but wanted to take part. I wondered when God would tell me what to say, when he would put foreign words in my mouth. I reminded Him that there were

other people in line. Suddenly, the preacher tipped his bald head backward. "Listen to this sister bless the Lord. Isn't God good?" I got a round of applause. Kenny gave a little yelp, a thing he did only in church. Soon I would interpret tongues, he said. Shi bla, bli, bla. God and I knew better. But the warmth of his approval was long in wearing off.

"Ack, ack, ack, ack," Hui Min said swishing Xiao An back toward the kitchen door. He'd forgotten to take off his shoes. Their voices rose and fell behind the curtain. Gesturing elbows and hands billowed the cloth. Chinese must all be dramatic, I thought. They must all speak with their bodies. It occurred to me I hadn't said anything for a while.

"So how are your studies?" I asked the curtain. They emerged from behind it, smiling. I used this question every week. Both of them always seemed so relieved to hear it. It was one English sentence they could understand on the first pop. And I didn't tire of asking because they never answered it to my satisfaction. From what I had been able to make out, both of them isolated some kind of tomato disease in a dish, then pulled a piece of the skin off and looked at it through a microscope. Somehow they determined the disease's genetic structure. I called them vegicologists.

"Studying vegetable viruses will help China grow strong stuff like this," Xiao An said, waggling a cucumber in my face.

I held the cucumber at arm's length, "What do we have here," I said. Then I held a plastic knife near its stem, "Say Ah."

Hui Min's laugh sizzled with the eggs.

"Hui Min's studies are fine," Xiao An said.

She rushed for the curtain. I heard her rummaging through their desk. She called from the bedroom, "Lucy, I want you to look over my lab report--for spelling."

"This university is OK for master degree, for Hui Min, but not for Ph.D.," said Xiao An. "I got a letter from Purdue University. They will give me a lot of money. They have a big lab. What do you think of Indiana?"

"It's much more expensive," I lied. "It's far away."

On Valentine's Day, Kenny and I had talked about what marriage mean. He enjoyed talking about money and how since he came from a big family--he was the youngest of six children and all the rest were girls--that they never had as much as they wanted. He always had to eat the dark meat of the chicken, legs and thighs, because they were the only things left and couldn't be wasted. He'd told me this more than once because I made the mistake of telling him the story of how my sister pulled a vein out of her chicken thigh and sang the theme song "Gone Fishin'" from a tv show "The Fisherman's Friend." And of how my mom tried to stifle a laugh and tea spurted out her nose.

"There were times," Kenny told me, "that my father wouldn't even let my mother buy a birthday card because they couldn't afford it--and there may be times that I may ask you not to buy a card."

"Not even construction paper and glitter?" I asked. He'd been to my house when we celebrated birthdays. We overdid them.

"What would you say if we had to move to, say, Fairbanks?" he said. "If I got a transfer from work and we had to move far from your family, what would you say?"

He was an accountant, for God's sake. That night I noticed I hated his aftershave and that his part was too far over on the side of his head and that he tucked his sweaters into his pants. I cried all evening, begging him not to move, not to move us to Alaska. I asked him to drop me off at my folks' house. I was so queasy he had to unbuckle my seatbelt for me. I didn't even knock on their door, just used my key and walked down the hallway. I had to see them there breathing--then that wasn't enough. I coughed so they would wake up, so they would see me and agree that it was unreasonable--this Fairbanks thing. And I asked my mom if she would bake me something filling. And she did. She sat there with me 'til 4 in the morning, watching me dip breadsticks in the butter tub and pluck all the petals off the dozen purple roses Kenney had bought me for Valentine's. I gave him a chocolate calculator and a card with a poem in it about

friendship. He read it, pulled a pen from his pocket and made me write 'I love you.' I told him I forgot. I said I was scared of getting married, that I'd been thinking. That it seemed that a lot of people spent so much of their life worrying about it that they wound up settling into rooms full of pans and towels and clocks and coffee tables, sharing things with someone they found they didn't really know.

"I'm scared every time I think about it," he had said. "It's only natural. But we must conquer our fear. Nothing good comes without fear."

With Kenny and me, things never turned into fights. They petered out.

"Do you want to go to Indiana?" I asked Hui Min. "Just like that, leave all of this?" I swung my arm around the kitchen. When I said this, I thought maybe I should check into racquetball--that maybe they had Friday leagues.

"I want to live here. I picked Kansas City," she said. "Many times, I told Xiao An I don't want to go, that this is a good place for me. But Xiao An says--"

She raised her voice over the TV news. Xiao An liked to turn the volume up and move his lips with the newscaster to practice English.

"When would you leave?"

"Xiao An says I could get a job in the lab--I could finish up my master degree there and start a Ph.D. It makes

me feel bad when he works at night--when he's not here. English--living here, makes me feel tired. I need to talk to someone from here," she said, tapping her chest. "We live better together. Did you know An means peace?"

"What does Xiao mean?" I asked.

"Small," she said.

"And he's decided you want a Ph.D.?"

She stared. She let the dumplings boil over.

"I want a Ph.D." she said, nodding.

"Yes, but where do you want to get it?"

"From university," she said.

"Does it have to be Purdue?"

And I told her that Indiana is so hot that the grass turns brown by June and so dry that everyone has eczema. Only farmers live in Indiana, and the farmers raise corn. That all there is to eat is corn, and people who live there develop corn allergies, I told her. I've never been to Indiana. I talked until the chicken burned dry and the vegetables smoked. All the while she stood nodding.

"I was the one who decided to come to the United States--Xiao An came with me," she said.

"That's right and you haven't lost the power to make decisions," I said.

She nodded again--not just your run-of-the-mill Chinese nod, but an assertive one.

I heard Xiao An's voice swooping in the living room:

"The President said today...Meedle East...Miiidle East...I will not budge...budge. Lucy--what is that word--that budge word?"

"Move," I said. "It means move."

Hui Min clanged her spoon on the stove and jumped at the sound. She scooped the rice into a bowl and said, "Ack, Ack, Ack." Tipping the pan on its side, she showed me the bottom. It was lined with a carpet of rice grains. Burnt.

"Xiao An," she said, followed by a string of Chinese. They swayed and barked at each other for at least ten minutes. I stayed and watched. Normally, I wouldn't be so rude, but I'd never played such a crucial role in someone else's argument before. She rolled up his Purdue brochure and stirred the soup with it. Xiao An finally gave up and collapsed in a chair, making weak gestures with his hands. Hui Min towered over him. She never let go of the rice pan.

"Are you married?" I tried to shout over the din. They'd never said. I didn't want to drive a wedge into a marriage dot. They couldn't hear me. In their fury, one of them stepped on the roach, one of them stepped on my foot. They moved into the living room. I followed.

Hui Min ripped the T.V. cord from the socket. The President's face shrunk to a white point. Hui Min rolled the TV cart into the stairwell of the building. He followed her back inside, all the way to the closet. She packed some of his clothes. I moved my chair to the corner of the room.

She chased him around with a suitcase.

"I will stay here," she said, stopping by my chair. "No. I will live with Lucy. But you go to Purdue. You and your fish."

She brought the fish bowl to him, the fish sloshing with her every step. When he reached for the bowl, she held it out of his reach, coaxing him to follow. They circled the room as if I weren't there.

"Hui Min, I don't have enough room in my place," I said.

Xiao An wiped a tear from his cheek and held it out for Hui Min to see. He wiped it on her face. Kenny never cried. First thing after we broke the engagement, he asked for the ring back.

"Hey kids," I said. "Hold it."

Booster Club

Gwen held her hotdog to her face like a baby bottle, warming her lips and hands. She didn't tell her parents or any of the other clerks at the fabric store that she'd developed a habit of going to her old high school's football games--four of them already. She recorded a special telephone message for football Saturdays, "Just missed me--have gone to the library to do some research."

That was only, in part, a lie.

When she went to the first game, she couldn't find the words to explain it even to herself. She had set out in her car, fully intending to go to a bridal shower at the store in honor of the woman who stocked buttons and zippers and snaps. "If I can't find a parking place near the stadium," she had promised herself, "I'll turn back." She parked the car in a handicapped spot and decided to keep the kitchen towels. When

she saw the new employee from the public library sitting on the top bleacher by himself, she felt strangely relieved, absolved. She had left the stadium after the game feeling somehow excited, open-minded.

Since before she could remember, Gwen had been nauseated by even the mention of anything athletic. She felt like her legs and arms weren't screwed in tight enough and was constantly amazed at the way they would fling about--as if they didn't belong to her.

"Gwennie didn't like balls," her mother would say to nearly anyone who would listen. This story about Gwen she understood well enough to tell. "Bit right through the first one I gave her, stuck a tooth in and popped it clean through. From then on, you bring a ball into the room, and she'd scream fit to bust."

PE class gave names to Gwen's hatred: Murder--a game in which opposing teams sat on scooter boards and rolled the length of the gymnasium, pelting one another with rubber balls; medicine ball--identical to volleyball except that teams hurled a huge canvas sack stuffed with paper wads over the net onto each others' heads; floor hockey, the object of which seemed to be to chop as many ankles as possible with the hard plastic stick.

Watching football wasn't appropriate to Gwen's personality, but try as she might she couldn't stay away from the Ashton High School home games. They gave her a sense of

knuckling down to something long left unattended.

She had only gone to one football game while a student of Ashton High, to please her father, a loud, high-spirited man whose cheek twitched when he was excited. Throughout her childhood, he often took her into his lap, clutching the ticklish spot just above her knee to build the suspense before the day he and his girl would watch the Hooters take the field. Oh, the things they would eat, the clapping and screaming they would do for the Fightin' Hooters, he reminded her cringing figure. At half-time on the day he'd so looked forward to sharing with Gwen, he policed the bleachers searching for the student who had beamed the water boy with an icecube.

Gwen stuck her tongue out at the gray brick building frowning on the football field from its perch on the hill. Though a reunion had come and gone, she still dreamed high school--that her classes met on 40-foot scaffolding--that she finally found a table of people to eat lunch with who all, on closer examination, proved to be different shaped versions of herself.

Now a member of the Ashton High School Booster Club, Gwen tugged at the huge gold zipper of her official booster jacket with "Hooters" stitched in gold across the front. She could only fasten the zipper halfway because of the hundreds of tiny gray threads wound in its teeth.

A nervous, bald man on the field waved his clipboard at

the band director.

"Anthem," he wheezed.

A gust of wind crossed the band section, wrenching white squares of music from their clips, sending them swooping across the bleachers like a flock of birds. One soared into Gwen's cheek. "Five O'clock Jump." She folded it and put it in her pocket.

"Will you please stand for the Ashton anthem," the loud speaker scratched. Stand or sit? This was always a dilemma. Gwen was unsure which direction to face, the building, the mascot, the flag. She hated to draw attention to herself. If she could only feel like she did in the library--that she knew where everything was, like the heat register in the middle aisle that warmed, on one shelf Faulkner, on the opposite Flaubert.

Mist beaded on her jacket, but her section of bleacher was very nearly dry. She had carefully selected a seat in the center of the stands and sheltered it with her body since before the Hooters took the field for pre-game stretching. Though she didn't want to budge an inch in either direction and expose her territory to the elements, she felt socially adventurous. She had rehearsed three chatting scenarios already. The first were warm-ups. The last, one she hoped to have with the library employee, she'd written on an index card: G--Hello. L--Hello. G--Nice day for football. L--Yes. G--Do you come here often? At this point, the conversation

fell apart. The last line seemed unpleasantly familiar but she could think of no better way to pry from him the information she wanted, the information that might help her formulate her own reasons for returning to these stands like a bird caught in a weekly migration pattern.

He wasn't there yet. He was normally the first person in the stands, sitting at the very top, his glasses glinting in the afternoon sun. He worked the library circulation desk. She admired the way he bounced the stamp on the ink tray, swooped the cards out of their paper pockets, slid them into the dating machine that chomped them like some kind of mechanical rodent--all in one smooth motion. He moved to some sort of primal library rhythm inaudible to the common ear. And he never made probing comments about Gwen's selections, unlike the gray-haired woman who'd taken a nearly obscene interest in watching her reading habits develop over her 20 years of patronage.

"Doing a bit of bird watching I see--ka chunka," the woman and the machine would say. "Ooo--Willa Cather--ka chunka--Reproductive Habits of Small Mammals--ka chunka--hmm--ka chunka."

Unlike her, he always made magnificent comments over her selections.

"Did you know that C.S. Lewis was irritated by little children?" he had asked her. "Ka Chunka." Gwen began taking index cards to the library so she could jot down things he

said. He had a face like her Uncle Frank who had fixed a squirrel's broken leg and let it pull peanuts from his shirt pocket.

"Oh man, he ran farther than that," Gwen said to the referee and glanced at the people around her to rally support for her cause, as she had seen her father do. Today, she understood bits and pieces of the first few plays. Each game she picked up a little more. And from what she could gather from the surrounding conversation, rehashing plays was essential to establishing rapport. She remembered what her father said to her mother when they had friends over for the Superbowl: "Watch the ball, Marge."

"Put that ball back where it belongs," Gwen said. She fit the hotdog between her knees and wiped the fog from her glasses.

This first quarter, like all first quarters, she spent orienting herself, getting a feel for the crowd, arranging her blanket, food and program in a pleasing semicircle around her, and eavesdropping. This day, she felt ready to graduate to a higher level of interaction. She planned to follow the three-step approach used in a psychological experiment she had read about in which a woman was freed of a crippling fear of cats. Step 1: she sat in a room with them; Step 2: she made eye contact with them; and Step 3: she held, caressed and talked to them. Gwen hoped one day to glide from bleacher to bleacher chatting about the weather and grocery store

prices.

For Gwen, conversation seemed a strange sport all its own. She spoke her first word at 24-months, when most children are forming sentences. After all those years, she still found herself inept. Her parents and schoolmates seemed to be reading from a script that she'd never been given a copy of. She would wait politely at her dinner plate, mentally polishing an insight or story only, when given the opportunity to speak, to forget what she had intended to share. By the age of 16, she decided conversation involved too many risks, too many chances to be misunderstood or to misunderstand. She shaved her repertoire to the essentials: excuse me, thank you, please pass the peas.

A heavy woman unfolded a square cushioned bleacher seat one row in front of Gwen. As the woman sat, air screamed from the two torn corners of the vinyl. Her thighs draped over the sides, the outer edges of her slacks soaking up drizzle from the bleacher. She waved at a blonde cheerleader who then leapt the fence and came so close Gwen could have touched her skirt. Though she spoke to her mother, the girl fastened her eyes on Gwen's shoes.

Her Chuck Taylor high-top basketball shoes were reserved for football games. They were too short; she could lace them only halfway. As soon as Gwen could sit, she popped her heels out and rested them on the soft canvas back. These shoes gave her confidence. They were the only pair she had ever seen,

the last pair on the sidewalk sale table at the mall. She didn't know who Chuck Taylor was, but he had signed the disc glued to the shoe at her ankle bone.

This cheerleader's tiny fairy nose reminded her of Andrea Wittecomb, a classmate of Gwen's, the first girl at Ashton High to wear clogs. What a glorious wooden sound she made. For two years in a row, the student body voted Andrea and Brian Obermeyer "Best Overall." Gwen's senior year, a double page photograph in the school annual featured Andrea and Brian posing in a tree. Brian Obermeyer was the first boy to make Gwen's palms throb from a mixture of love and terror, the pain relieved only by hand wringing.

"Best overall--what does that mean?" Gwen's mother had asked. "Best over what?"

Stitching across the sailor flap of this girl's uniform read "Nicki." Nicki, Andrea. Same difference. They all had the same perky ring to them.

Gwen shuddered. A fantasy, rusty with disuse, crept through a deep groove in her brain. In it, she wore a mask. She blindfolded and tied Andrea Wittecomb to a riding lawn mower in her neighbor's tool shed. This left no one for Brian Obermeyer to take to the spring dance but Gwen. Then, the plot took its traditional ugly turn. Try as she might, she could never imagine her way out of it. She returned to the shed and rescued Andrea herself who was then so weakened and relieved she asked Gwen to carry her home. They wound up at

the dance together. During biology class, Gwen used to divide her lab paper into squares and sketch out the whole sordid scenario in stick figures.

Nicki patted the top of her mother's head and folded a bill her mother gave her into her sock. "I don't know when I'll be home, but you know I'll wear my seat belt," she squealed and galloped back to the sidelines and joined herself to the tail end of a human snake. The force of her footsteps spilled coffee cups and popcorn tubs down the length of each bleacher.

Gwen drank in her every move--her sudden springs into the air, how she held her arms like boomerangs and sent them back and down and around and behind her head, slapping and folding them together again in a series of chopping motions.

Stop staring, Gwen told herself. The woman sitting next to Nikki's mother peered over her shoulder, watching Gwen with suspicion through the head of her garbage bag slicker. Gwen thrust her attention too rapidly onto the field and clapped when the opposing team intercepted. In all the excitement, mud and mist, she couldn't distinguish the color of the uniforms and couldn't recall on which end of the field the Hooters would score.

The weather had driven away most of the crowd. Only the pep band, parents and a few stragglers remained. At the furthestmost corner of the stands, Gwen spied a gray-headed woman with a wet, pink and green swirled nylon scarf clinging

to her head, a bag of something in her lap. --This will be my first social target. I'll bet she's a nurturer. Gwen believed it wise to begin her desensitization experiment with a motherly looking stimulus.

Gwen shifted her weight, her bones grinding into the bleacher. Library still wasn't there. Almost time for the quarter break and a hot chocolate. She threaded her arm through the hole in her jacket pocket. Coins rolled in the lining and collected with bits of lint in the little tuck of cloth near the zipper. On football days, Gwen jingled. She gloried in the sound.

"That's a very healthful looking snack you have there," Gwen said, gesturing at the woman's pistachios nuts. She hoped that, like her mother, who also wore head scarves, this woman would snap up an opportunity to encourage sound nutrition.

"Good for your digestion," the woman said. She paused to bite red dye and salt underneath her fingernails. Gwen sat down beside her. "Burn more calories than you take in cracking them."

"Is that your grandson?" Gwen asked, pointing toward the bench at a dejected, muddy boy the woman seemed to be watching.

"No grandchildren--not as far as I know," the woman said. "I come to watch these girls." She pointed to the

cheerleaders who jumped to each others shoulders and staggered, piggyback, toward the crowd.

"Especially that one there," she said pointing a red-stained finger at Nikki. "Look how the other girls watch her. Bet she's a good student."

"Do you have children?" Gwen asked.

"It's not like my girl didn't try. Tried her heart out at tap lessons. Gymnastics. Things they didn't have when I was a girl."

The woman clapped her hands in front of her face with the cheerleaders.

"Always breaking things--seemed like on purpose. She broke four toes in that school right there." She pointed to the hill.

"So did I," Gwen said. No that's not what I meant to say, she thought. "I mean, I was a student there."

The woman stared straight ahead. Gwen found herself leaning forward, curling around to see the woman's face. Step 2: Maintain eye contact with the stimulus.

"You probably saw my girl then. She was real different. Fiddled with pottery glazes. School still uses one named after her. Cindy's Cyan, something like that."

"Cindy Hatch--was that your daughter?"

"She's someplace in New Hampshire. Strawberry something-or-other, making mugs and plates and stuff. Letter said she has her own shed with a potter's wheel. She mailed me a gravy

boat. The handle broke off."

The woman spit a shell between the bleachers. They both looked down. The ground was pimped with red.

"She's happy, I guess. Works next to a wood carver who let his toenails grow so long he can't wear shoes."

Cindy Hatch. Gwen's cousin's locker partner. "The stoneware sister." A noiseless girl with glasses and a braid who asked if she could store her pots in their locker for safe keeping. She smelled like a cave.

"I'm old enough to have earned a fantasy," the woman said. "I came here and picked out a daughter. That one right there." She pointed at Nikki. "I followed her all over town after a game. I know where she lives. I wanted to be there when she turned her light off."

Gwen picked up her cup of hot chocolate, smiled and made a squeaking noise between her teeth that she'd heard people make after seeing the same person in several grocery store aisles. She looked across the bleacher. Library was in his usual place near the scorekeeper's box, binoculars swinging round his neck. He wore a gigantic raincoat. Gwen's stomach lurched like it used to when she saw her dad's car pull in the driveway. Part of her had wanted to be as excited as he wanted her to be--to leap into his arms. Part of her wanted to hide in the closet and not risk disappointing him.

The woman worked her arm in a choo-choo motion, watching Nikki and her friends chug down the sideline like a train,

shouting "L-O-C-O-M-O-T-I-O-N."

Gwen had cast aside all pretense of watching football. She scanned the crowd and selected a small man in a Michigan jacket with his hair trimmed in neat circles around his ears. She gathered from his fidgeting that he also was having difficulty concentrating on the game.

"Never bother people who are really watching the parade. It makes a negative first impression." Gwen's uncle had given her \$20 and this one piece of advice before sending her into the American Royal Parade in Kansas City with a stack of fliers advertising his deli.

This man would probably welcome a short exchange of dialogue. He was clean-cut. Gwen's mother would like him. Judging from his folded hands, he was either in college or the work force. Why sit in the rain at a high school football game? This intrigued her.

Gwen straddled her bleacher. For a moment, she felt uninhibited. What now? Step #2. Eye contact. Look at me, she tried to say with complicated hand gestures and hair tossing.

He looked. She didn't expect him to look. It checked her enthusiasm.

Such gentle eyes he had. Eyes in search of a woman who could sit by herself and think, or who would be just as happy to talk to him and walk beside him on the sidewalks around his neighborhood before dark.

-- I'm over here.

She raised her hot chocolate in the air. Should she move to a nearby bleacher?

He looked back at the field, blushing.

-- He's shy. I won't laugh at you if you're shy and don't know what to say next. I know. I understand. He's still looking.

He was, Gwen discovered, looking over her shoulder. The bleacher lurched on its screws and a blue pleated pep club skirt brushed Gwen's cheek. The girl had a camera with a monstrous lens that she twisted at the man, squealing. He grabbed her by the ankle, sending her tumbling into his lap.

-- Brother and sister?

The two wrapped in a blanket and fed each other bits of chocolate. A huge college ring threaded on a piece of string thumped against the girl's chest.

Two people down, one quarter to go. Gwen didn't know if she would have the energy for the third encounter, the important one. She swun her legs over the bleacher toward the field. One shoe fell off, thudding on the gravel below. It lay there, laces splayed. "Why did you bring me here?" it seemed to say.

-- Did anyone see?

She scolded herself for looking around. It could have happened to anyone. A sure sign that Gwen felt out of place--

she stared. She wanted Nikki's mother's bleacher chair. She envied the way a man clapped and whistled. Turning her head wildly from side to side, Gwen felt surrounded by things she couldn't have. She glimpsed her own face in a man's eyeglasses. Tufts of bangs jutted from under her beret. Her mouth was sagging open. Her mother had warned her about her "fish look." It forced people to assume she wasn't bright. She felt wrinkled and small in her booster jacket. No one else was wearing one.

Spreading her knees apart, she leaned over for a look at her shoe, to make peace with it. It was gone.

"You dropped this?" Gwen looked up to see his face, Library's face, and her shoe dangling beside it.

"Yes, that's mine. Thank you," she said, snatching it by the tongue. It slipped from her grip. Quick as a mongoose, he pinched one lace between his fingers, bringing the shoe up swinging and set it beside her on the bleacher.

"I guess I've rescued you twice," he said to the shoe.

-- What do I do when approached by the stimulus?

The whole thing had happened in a blink. He was so close she could see his pores and and he was already talking. Not a single line of dialogue she'd written on the index card was appropriate to the situation.

"Please," she managed and patted the bleacher next to her shoe. "Sit."

He sat. Gwen wriggled her shoe back on and glanced up.

-- No! Oh no! He's looking at my face. What? What's wrong?

"I've been thinking you look so familiar," he said. "Do you read Milton?" He took off his hat and lowered his coat collar.

"Library," he said. "Thursday nights, right?"

Gwen leaned slightly closer and sniffed. Printers ink. Binding glue. Books. Could she have dreamed anything so wonderful?

"Do you like football?" he said, his face down, picking invisible lint.

"No."

"Me neither. Thought I'd try, you know. Have to keep an open mind."

"Everybody up for the kick-off," the loud-speaker rattled.

Gwen stood.

He stood next to her.

"Coffee?" he asked.

"Yes. My Uncle Frank loved coffee," she said.

He rented the second floor of the head librarian's house. A stained glass window of a lamb hung from a bar above his kitchen window. All of his plants leaned toward the door as if threatening to climb out of their pots and leave.

"They don't get enough air, I guess," he said.

"I read houseplants thrive on human drama," Gwen said.

He had a collection of his grandfather's antique marbles in their original leather pouch. He poured them through his fingers onto the rug. They each chose their favorite, put it to their eye and stared down the lamp shade at the lightbulb.

They wound up spending the rest of the afternoon on the floor with his school annual, a roll of butcher paper, scissors and paste. He'd penciled graffiti on nearly every page. "Look," Gwen said with delight. "You put antennae on this one."

They made a collage.

"Can you dance?" he asked.

"Sort of," she said.

"Strauss?" he asked.

They rolled the collage out on the floor. They waltzed on it.

Will You Watch Me?

The girl hadn't intended to get off the bus. On top of everything else, truck stop bathrooms had no toilet paper. But over the past two days, her legs had stiffened around her rucksack, and she had begun to find pictures and faces in the pattern of the vinyl seat in front of her. At the last moment, she decided she needed this break to stand and breathe.

"We stop 15 minutes for coffee," the bus driver spit into his microphone. "You ain't back--we leave."

It was 3:15 in the morning.

The girl leaned in the shadows against a brick wall by a woman trying to light a cigarette. After holding the flame inches from the cigarette's tip, the woman dropped the lighter where a pocket might have been sewn on her blouse. It clattered on the pavement. The girl found it and put it back

in the woman's hand because she heard her father's voice in her head.

"If there's anything you can be it's helpful," he'd said many times when she was a child. "You never know--holding a door, nodding at someone. To be seen is a wondrous thing."

"Long trip," the woman said, sucking on the cigarette, "especially since they won't let you smoke on the bus. Where you headed?"

"School," said the girl, "West Virginia." Her voice squeaked like a gate.

"Don't talk to anyone," her father had said with fear in his voice as she boarded the bus. She hadn't spoken since this trip began. Exhaustion is what she remembered from the trip home, the thought of never being able to sleep again. She was awake for 49 hours. The trip back to school she kept her eyes shut most of the time, her head resting against the seat. She propped her rucksack between herself and the aisle, so she would hear if someone tried to sit beside her. If a nap came, she was ready for it.

"Gonna be a long one--the ride of my life," the woman said.

Around midnight, the girl had watched the woman board the bus in Oakley, Kansas. A younger woman in pajamas and a raincoat waved and held a baby with its lips pressed open to the depot window like a fish in an aquarium.

"Sold my car to buy a ticket to Iowa," the woman said.

She gasped at the sound of a diesel.

"I just married him in November. His kids were grown--my kids were grown. I'd been a widow for years. He took me dancing. The way he'd hold me."

She took another drag.

"I thought he had wings, you know. Then he fell down out of the truck after a long trip--three weeks I think. So drunk he couldn't see. Like I'd never met him."

The woman stepped out of the shadows, and the girl's eyes traveled the length of a pink groove splitting her cheek.

"He has this big ring--I have more of these down my legs, right here--on my back. I woke up on the kitchen floor--blood in my mouth, in my eyes, thinking, what the hell happened, you know. I'd been out cold. He thought he'd killed me. Said if I ever left he'd find me. I waited 'til the scabs came off--a little timer I set for myself. I had to leave my daughter and a little grandbaby.

"By now, he knows I'm gone. He's due out this morning for Omaha. On I-70 right out here," she pointed toward the highway.

When the bus engine started, they both jumped. The woman looked at the unburnt cigarette, threw it down and stepped on it.

"Did I tell you he's a truck driver?" she said, her eyes darting from side to side, taking in the parking lot that was

criss-crossed with rigs. "He's out there somewhere."

The girl and the woman both had seats to themselves, catty-corner across the aisle. Intent on sleep, the girl wedged her head between the arm rest and the window. Her eyes fluttered open every few seconds. After a time, she sat up and peered through the dark. The woman's place looked empty. Hadn't she seen her climb the bus steps? The girl stood to her feet, her face white, her mouth open. She found the woman curled into the corner of her seat, wound in a grey cocoon of blanket.

"I can't sleep," whispered the girl. "Want some company?"

The woman squinted into the dark then hoisted her carry-on bag from the seat beside her. It clanked on the floor.

"Pictures of my kids. A platter my momma gave me--be damned if I'd leave 'em there. Don't mean anything to him. He can have whatever's left. I don't need anything."

"I have an apple," the girl said.

She split and cored it with a nail file, fingered both halves in the dark and handed the woman the bigger one. They chewed together and took new bites at the same time.

The girl remembered a story her father had told her when she was afraid.

"Sit on my lap, Angel," he had said. That was his special name for her. This story told of a little girl who

once felt uneasy walking through a stand of woods she crossed on her way home every night. So the child prayed. That very night, a man attacked another little girl on the same path. He didn't bother the first little girl because he saw two big men carrying lanterns walking on either side of her.

"Do you believe in angels? she had asked her father."

He had.

Two years later, the girl's younger sister had disappeared. Posters of her still flapped from fence posts and shop doors all over their home town.

The girl smoothed the hair on the back of her neck and shut her eyes. Her lips shaped small words that made no sound. Hearing herself say them, she had found, made them hard to believe.

"Wish I knew where he was," the woman said.

They rode several minutes in silence, straining to make out the black shapes of billboards, barns, solid things. The bus pulled off the road. They watched the driver drag something onto the shoulder, a deer or a big dog. The woman pointed to a steeple lit with floodlights.

"Churches stop the wind out here," she said. "In Kansas, everything that stops wind is of some use. You stay on this bus through to Iowa?"

The girl nodded.

"Will you watch me?" the woman asked and let out a breath that made the girl shiver.

She told the woman that she still couldn't sleep nights because when she closed her eyes she saw her sister's face. The face she'd made the last morning the girl ever saw her. A dribble of milk was running down her chin. One eye was matted shut.

"September--she had allergies," she said into the dark. Someone sneezed.

"Goodbye from Kansas, the Land of Ahhs," a sign read. "Come again."

Suddenly tired of the weight pressing on her hip, the girl pulled a tiny television from the pocket of her jacket. She could tune in only one station, but it was clear as life. A man was talking, his face filling the screen that was square and small as a soda cracker. They watched for as long as they could and the picture didn't change. Neither could hear what the man was saying.

"My husband's hair does just like that," the woman said, stroking the glass above the man's head. "Can I hold it for a while?" she asked.

Despite the rocking of the bus, she gripped the man's blue face steady in her palm, held it out where both of them could see it.

"Wish I knew where he was."

Zest

"I ain't seen a counter like this in a long time," I said, and then I sat down on one of the diner stools and spun round three or four times. I been doing lots of stuff like that since I finally decided what I'm on the earth for.

The boy opened his hand and the mop handle smacked the tile loud as a pistol shot. A paper hat was hanging to the back of his head like a bird fixing to fly off and hide in a light fixture. His apron said, 'Hi may I help you' in big green letters. I guess that way he didn't have to talk. A big wad of gum swelled out one of his cheeks.

"I'm headed for barbeque school in Kansas City," I started in on my story because the boy came over and laid the mop down like he wanted to hear. "When the brochure came, it could have just as easy have flown down from heaven. Like an angel wrote on the outside, 'This is what you were meant to

do, Romey Davis.' All I've ever been good at is cooking meat. As my family says, it's miraculous, but my burgers don't shrink, never have. There I was at the grocery store, hosing vegetables and Suzanne hollered from her register and asked would I like to set up a barbeque booth at the school carnival. I'd never done it before, but I rigged up my own grill and sold enough to buy a bus ticket. People told me 'You're good,' so I went to the library and looked up cooking schools in a book. I found one and I called them up and asked how I could go.

And all the while I was talking, the boy stood in front of me with his hands buried in a sink of dishes. Since I left home, it has shocked me to see people with sleepy faces, wishing they were someplace else. I'd seen that boy's look in the mirror every morning. He wanted something.

"Don't mind me," I said trying to think of something that would put him at ease, him and the girl behind the counter. I was the only one in the place. "I got a sandwich on the bus. I'll just be drinking something. Won't be hard A-tall."

They both looked.

"You're open ain't you?" I said.

I ran my finger over the boy's arm like I was checking for dust. He laughed until she looked at him. If she didn't have the oddest glasses I've ever seen, red as blood. They looked like little girl glasses that she hadn't had off

enough. Her head had kind of grown out around them like a pumpkin through a fence. She had a ball of hair on top of her head like Momma's. Since I'd left Stillwell, I'd seen plenty of things. I stopped myself from telling this girl that people don't wear their hair like that anymore.

"What do you want to drink," the girl said, and I said I wanted an orange soda in one of those big soda glasses lined up against the wall. And I told her to blow the spiders out of the inside. Then funny thing, she said they only served chocolate and vanilla sodas. So I said, what's that and pointed to the glass tub bubbling with orange fizz. And she said that I meant pop, not soda.

"You're not gonna sell much of that if you don't know what to call it," I said. "It's about time you had some real customers in here."

And the boy grinned. He grabbed the mop again and shoved it back and forth, like to saw up the floor. He got it tangled in her feet.

"You don't have to do that," she said. "We'll just have to do it all over again. Help the man with his drink. Customers first, mopping second."

The boy lowered his head.

"You'll learn," she said.

He was fully eager, but I could tell there wasn't enough room for him in that place.

The ordering done, I got back to my story. The boy

listened close except when the pinball machine in the corner made a clapping noise and said, "Play Ball." It went off every five minutes regular as a cuckoo clock, and he'd look at it each time like he did at the girl when she told him to do something. He hadn't gotten used to it.

"Sending off for that brochure is the first real thing I've ever done in my whole life," I said. "Inside, it said to send them a letter saying why I wanted to go to barbeque school. That wasn't hard. I filled up a whole sheet of paper and I tucked in my recipe for barbeque sauce. The brochure said they had very few slots open because they rented small accommodations on the second floor of the old Baldwin piano building--but that they had hopes of expanding very soon. Because Kansas City has a taste for barbeque. And that's what I imagine with the stock yards and it being so hot there. You've probably heard of Kansas City strip steaks. They sent me another brochure about Kansas City. Here's a picture of downtown at night. See the cow lit up on top there? That's the Polled Hereford Building. I figure people who live in the shadow of a cow tall as a house must know their barbeque."

And the boy nodded his head so hard it looked like it might come loose from his neck.

"You need to start the chili," said the girl. He found a plastic tub in the freezer and popped the frozen orange brick of chili into the cooker. That done, he stood in front of me, picked up a brush and scrubbed the tub. He held it up to the

light to check for stains and scratched at some tomato skin with his fingernail.

"I don't use the brush, the grease stays on it too long," the girl hung around him like a fruit fly. "See here the bristles are orange. I always use a rag. I always wash the lid first. I don't know if that matters."

He mumbled something.

"What?" she said. "What?" she said again.

I pulled the Kansas City brochure from my shirt pocket again. "It says here," I said to the boy, "the Royals got a new stadium to play baseball. Looks like a great big oyster, don't it? Full of little baseball pearls. Bet they smack 'em right onto the highway.

"You got baseball around here boy?" I asked.

He shook his head and pulled the apron away from himself like it was hot, like it was burning him.

"Can you throw?" I asked.

He balled a towel, wound up and drilled it into the sink.

"Play ball," said the machine.

"That's some arm you got there boy," I said. And I told him they had so many ball diamonds in Kansas City that you head any direction and before too long, you walk right into one. Leastwise, that's the way I imagine it.

"Smell the hotdogs boy?" I put my hand to my ear.

"Listen. Hear the crack of the bats?"

The door jingled and we all looked at it. A woman walked up to the girl and asked for a chocolate soda. But the girl wouldn't fix it. She looked at the boy and at me to scare us. We weren't supposed to talk. That was a serious bus station diner. And the boy was in training. The best way to learn how to use all the machines was to wait on all the customers. Although she didn't say it, that was what her pinched up face said. He scooped ice cream baseballs like he'd been doing it all his life but the soda machine scared him. I could tell.

"From now on use vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup-- let the soda run against the glass. No. No. Let me do it," she said.

While the boy was busy, I looked around. Above the hamburger grill was a homemade poster of two squirrels and a sundae. One squirrel was holding a banana like a bat, the other pitched a ball of ice cream at his friend. Somebody put a lot of thought into that poster, like they really wanted to make the food taste better. Best thing about it was that I knew the only poster like it in the whole world was tacked right to that wall. "Get your ice cold sundaes here," it said.

"Now, take your spoon and stir," said the girl. "Don't stop--get your head back so I can see what I'm doing. And there you have your soda." She'd done every bit of the work after she'd fussed at him to do it. Took the water nozzle out of his hand when he picked it up to help.

"Don't learn anything that way," I said. And then I knew that was for the best because the more he learned the more comfortable he'd be and the better he'd get with blenders and grills.

"I like this poster," I said. "Shows a real zest for life." That's what my acceptance letter said. Mr. Romey Davis you show a zest for life that will take you far in the American Royal Barbeque School.

The boy smiled, chocolate syrup dripping from his nose. "That's my drawing," he lisped. Somehow, I'd known it was.

"It's baseball, ain't it boy?" I said. "You got to get out of here--what's the name of this town? You got to go where they're playing the game, like I followed the cattle. Do it before it's too late and you get so good at stirring and wiping things that they won't let you leave. And your eyes will look like this forever."

I held up a napkin holder for him to see himself. "Eyes look like that when they never saw what they wanted. I know. I haven't always looked like this."

He gripped a bottle of dish soap and tapped it on the counter, sized me up like I was winding up to pitch a ball over the counter.

"Tell you what I'll do," I said. I wrote my name and the name of my hotel in Kansas City on a napkin. "You and your glove, you come. You find me."

"Excuse me," I wiggled my fingers at the woman. "Why

don't you make me a sundae," I said. "That paper one there looks good enough to eat."

Musical Chairs

Helena was Oliver, the cat's, first love--his rescuer. He first took up residence with Helena's sister Addie who had, years earlier, set out chipped beef to provide a square supper for one cat. Word spread. One afternoon, a Siamese tom strolled into the yard trailed by Oliver, then a dirty black kitten, trying to suckle the Siamese whenever he slowed his pace. They both tried to squeeze into the circle around the feed pan, interrupting the dining hierarchy established by the 15 other resident strays. The Siamese got the message and moved on. Persistent, Oliver found he could wiggle his body between the legs of a tall calico and yank the food from her mouth. The group pinned him to the ground and tore his ear, leaving a notch he would always have difficulty cleaning.

Addie said, unlike the other cats, Oliver didn't play or explore. When Helena first saw him, he was roosting like a

tiny black hen in the center of a rain-soaked rug on Addie's back steps. He sat in Helena's palm, silent, his claws unsheathed. He chewed bits of her apple muffin; it weighed more than he did.

Addie brought out some tape and a box with holes cut in the side. She said Oliver sat on the air conditioner unit in the kitchen window and watched she and her husband eat meals, his mouth opening and shutting, trying to meow over the roar.

"I'm worried about this one," she said. "He was weaned way too early. You need a momma, don't you darlin'?"

"I don't want to make a rash decision," Helena said. "You know Dad."

"Picture the veins in his neck," Addie said, holding her breath and reddening. She spun the pot of tomato plants. "You know what it is, don't you," Addie said. "He can't stand it when they die."

"What are you doing?" Helena asked.

"I read in this book you have to pick suckers off tomato plants to get the most 'fruit-producing mileage.'" Her fingers were green with the juice of the vine.

"Suckers?"

"These little branches grow right between these two healthy parent stems. Have to go," she said, pinching and throwing one over her shoulder. "They look like other branches--they just won't ever bear fruit."

"Momma said the vet offered to take care of Speckles'

body when he died, you know? But no, Daddy said that wasn't where he played," Helena said.

She set Oliver on her head. He stayed there quiet as a black stone.

"Nice hat," said Addie.

"Daddy says he doesn't want another pet because they make it hard to travel, to just 'pick up and leave.'"

"When's the last time they picked up and left?" Addie said.

"Aunt Esther's funeral and estate sale," Helena said. "They stayed overnight in Clinton--fished at the dam."

Addie looked up, her fingers knuckle deep in potting soil. "How'd they get the dog home? Speckles, I mean."

"Plastic bag," Helena said, looking as if she might gag. "I was fine about it. We all were fine until we saw Daddy come across the yard with the sack over his shoulder. The nose was pressed against the plastic."

"Speckles was Josie's right? Lord what an ugly dog. Wher'd she find him?"

"The laundromat, wasn't it?"

"Wire hair. Mom said she still finds it stuck in things. That one must have been especially hard, huh?" Addie said.

"The ground was frozen. Mamma and me and Josie traded off going at the hole with a pick axe," Helena said. "It was a hard one."

"They're getting old," Addie said.

Helena remembered the trip to Clinton. "Moma wore a yellow shirt, when we went fishing. She got ticks really bad. You know they really like bright colors. Seed ticks. We were up half the night."

"Oil and tweezers?" Addie asked.

"Oil and tweezers."

"You were there?" Addie said.

"I go with them a lot."

"I was gonna ask what would stop them from going on trips since you'd be there with the cat."

Oliver stood and arched his back.

"Ow, Ow," Helena unhooked his paws from her scalp.

"Sharp?"

"I haven't ben going a lot lately," Helena said.

"I thought you said Clinton was their last trip."

"I mean like to the store and stuff," Helena said.

"Momma hates it when Daddy goes to the grocery store with her. He buys lots of things they don't need. Big hunks of meat. Bags of turnips on the quick sale table."

"I wish Tom would shop with me," Addie said.

Three cats had wrapped themselves around her legs and one of her arms.

"They're really shedding." She pinched at her tongue, gagged and spit.

"Gross."

"Sorry."

"Usually Momma and I go. I don't like going when Daddy's along," Helena said. Her mother didn't buy what she really wanted because she was afraid what he would say. She and Helena used to buy a tabloid for fun. He thought they believed them. He held one up and asked Helena's mother if she couldn't tell that was a drawing of Elvis, not a picture. Helena figure that went without saying.

"They usually come home fighting," Helena said. "Is that it for the sucker hunt?"

Addie stood. Cats galloped from every corner of the yard.

"Dinner," she screamed.

"But they still wouldn't have to worry about taking care of the cat because I've been thinking I might move out." Helena ducked her head and whispered the last few words as if she'd just shouted in church.

"Have you told Momma?"

"No, not really. I just try to say things like if I had a place I'd have a chair like that."

"How old are you anyway?" Addie asked.

"28."

"Oh Lord, what does that make me? Well, yeah. It's probably high time. That might be fun--a place of your own."

"I just feel kind of weird I guess. People at work ask me if I want to go out. I tell them I have to go home and take care of mom. Sometimes, I lie and tell them she's sick.

And I say, 'Oh boy. Another evening with Mom. What fun.'"

"You don't go out?"

"Most of the time I've got plans already. When they ask, I'll remember it's Mystery night or Momma'll call to tell me some old movie's on. Then I don't want to go out, you know?"

Helena loved nights at home. She and her mother each fixed up their own tv tray with the same things on it. They'd made a deal to eat whatever the other would stomach: A can of sardines, a hunk of havarti, bagel chips and, on Fridays, a bottle of near beer. And they would eat and belch and drop crumbs on the floor, watching anything, especially stupid mysteries. One of them would narrate for the other: "He's going to get her. Oh God. Don't go in there, not in those heels. Not the underground garage, again. Oh. Oh. She's down. The ankle's gone." Sometimes they'd lay bets: "I'll see you one sardine and raise you a fudgesickle that it's the nurse. She's too good--too blonde. No one suspects." On weekends, they played scrabble or worked a puzzle until Helena's father shut his bedroom door to let them know they were getting too loud.

"Don't be embarrassed," Addie said. "I'd stay home too." Addie poured a pile of cat food pellets on the walk and scraped a plate of leftover eggs and toast crusts on top. Some of the scraps fell on the quicker cats' heads. Smaller ones were yanking pieces of crust and running for bushes to eat in peace. If they didn't, there wouldn't be anything

left. The big yellow tom, by virtue of his size and nastiness, ate all he wanted and then walked away. If there was anything left, it was because he wasn't hungry anymore.

Oliver had taken up his place on the rug, resumed his roosting. All of his paws were tucked underneath, his tail wrapped tight around his size.

"He's always last," Addie said. "I usually save a little for him. I have to make sure they're not paying attention when I give it to him though. Kind of reminds me of you when you were a kid."

Addie was oldest of four girls and worried about them all, especially Helena. Even as a teenager, she had played Barbie dolls with Helena.

"'Will you play wit me?' That's what you used to say." Addie stood with her hands on her hips, her lip stuck out. Her Helena-at-four imitation.

"You didn't really play," Helena said.

"You didn't know any better. I moved them around and made them talk a little."

Oliver inched toward the pile of food and retucked his paws. One by one, the cats ate and dwindled into the far corners of the yard, behind bushes, under wheelbarrows, under the brush pile. The food was very nearly gone. The yellow tom, Buster, lay in the grass licking his long matted legs, his tail switching. Slowly, Oliver untucked paw by paw and crept toward the pile of food. Within seconds, Buster was on

him, biting and kicking.

Helena leapt to the tangle of fur and grabbed for the black, taking a long scratch on the wrist.

Oliver screamed.

"Sounds just like a girl, doesn't he?" Addie said.

"Isn't that the worst thing you've ever seen? Take him. They want him dead."

Oliver shook in Helena's hands.

"He acts like he wants to live when you're here," Addie said. "He's picked you out little sister. 'Take me home,' she crooned, attempting a kitten voice. 'Buy me things.'"

Helena stretched out on her side on the top step of the porch, and Oliver scaled her hip. He curled into the crook of her arm.

"Good, ain't he," Addie said. Her husband was allergic to cats. She couldn't let even one in the house without him sneezing and scratching for days.

"I can't let him die," Helena said.

"No. I knew you couldn't. That's why I wanted you to see him."

Oliver measured eight inches long by straight ruler.

New cat, new place. After 27 years, Oliver had stirred the embers, worried out a tiny flame of independence. But he didn't pressure Helena.

"I was waiting for this--the last one to drag home a

stray. Just took you a little longer," Helena's father said. You all come here pretending to belong to somebody else," he said to a fish that swam back and forth across its bowl on a ledge near the dinner table. He swung his fork in its direction for emphasis. "Sure your person visits quiet a bit at first, buys you a few bags of food. But then they stop coming around. I've seen it before. Pretty soon, all they do is call to ask how you're doing. How we're doing. All of you die here. In the middle of winter. I have to hack up frozen dirt. And summer, I have to mow around you."

He'd planted a rose bush at the top of each mound.

"I run a graveyard," he said. "Ought to charge maintenance fees." He held up an imaginary pen and pad. "Sir, can I interest you in a small plot east of the rock garden. Oak or plywood?"

"That's Josette--a girl," Helena said.

"I don't mind them Jerry," her mother said. "I like having animals. They make me feel good."

For a week, Helena looked unsuccessfully for a place of her own. The week after that, her mother started a routine of making off with the classifieds before Helena had a chance at them. Her mother found many uses for them: lining dresser drawers, wrapping up mea scraps and vegetable peelings for compose. On Friday, when helena came home from work, her mother trailed her down the hall to her bedroom to watch her

reaction when she found the twin beds and all the old furniture gone, a new chest of drawers and a cherry wood bed tied with a ribbon in their place.

"Addie called," her mother said. "She's coming over. We'll rent some movies and I'll take some of those bratwursts out of the freezer. Addie's bring pickle relish, your favorite. You fix things up in here just how you want them," she said. "This looks more like a room for someone your age, huh? We'll paint when the weather's nicer, OK? When we can open the windows."

Helena ran her fingers over a clean on her bedroom wall where the glow-in-the-dark Holly Hobby switch plate used to be.

She had trouble sleeping in the new bed that night and several nights after. It was too wide, the mattress too hard. She tried sleeping diagonally and with a heatpad, tried filling the other side of the mattress with books to make it seem less huge. Nothing worked. She was tired all the time. People at work thought she was sick.

"The kitten won't keep." Addie called one night to say Oliver'd been in a fight that left his face bloody. "Nature decides some don't fit in the circle. It's just like musical chairs. Bum leg, constipated, too polite--it doesn't matter. Different ones all wind up without a chair. They don't play right."

Helena drove to four different pet shops before she made her way to a counter with a blue litter tray, a hair brush, and a bowl with a mouse painted on the bottom. As a child, she'd had a cereal bowl like it.

"Hurry and finish all your milk--Peter Rabbit can't swim much longer," her mother had said.

The cashier fussed over her purchases, giving cat advice, congratulating.

"It's like having a baby," she said. "Better."

Oliver rode home in Helena's sleeve, calmly looking out from her arm pit with wax bean yellow eyes, like he'd always been there. She sang to him, "Nothin's gonna harm you, not while I'm around. Nothin's gonna harm you, no sir, not while I'm around." That was all she could remember of the song.

"Good boy--good boy," she said to him, the words tightening the newfound knot in her stomach. He was so small. Maybe that's what her mother meant, why she repeated the same line over the years like a mantra: "It hurts to be a parent--someday you'll understand." She said it when Helena's sister's married, went away to camp, to college. She said it with her teeth clenched around thermometers, her body riddled with viral infections or arthritis flareups appearing mysteriously after one of them left.

Stroking the top of Oliver's ead with a finger, Helena drove her car into a curb and bent a wheel rim.

Although he was too short to step into the tray she'd

bought, Helena marveled at his understanding, his purposeful digging the moment his paws touched litter. She tried to help him, but he would have none of that. He'd just step right out again. Standing on the steps made of books she'd rigged next to the tray, he looked at her and purred. He had a huge, brilliant forehead. She opened a new computer file and typed in the date: "I'm sure he is gifted, as are many misfits," she wrote. "Gifted and misunderstood."

The first night, Oliver draped himself, purring over her head, his front paws touching one of her ears, his back paws the other.

The first few weeks, he stayed only in her room, balanced in her lap or on her shoulder, batting at pencils and the chain on her desk lamp. When he wanted attention, he would pat his paw on her cheek, claws carefully retracted. She'd saved one aggie before she gave her marble collection to a nephew. Together, she and Oliver developed a game of rolling the marble back and forth across her desk. The only rule: it couldn't roll off. They played horse, pig, dog. They never tired of one another.

"Daddy's bought a tv for the shed," Helena said, sitting cross-legged in a crowd of potting soil sacks and petunias, zenias, and gardenias in plastic starter pots.

"The tool shed?" Addie said.

"He calls it his workshop. He's moved all his airplane

models out there. He put a cushion on that old love seat he made out of sticks."

"Doesn't it still get pretty cold out there?" Addie said.

"Space heater." Helena tamped a petunia hard into hits pot. "It's real funny. We'll be watching the same show--but he'll be outside and we'll be inside. I could understand it if he wanted to watch a game. I can see what he's watching through the shed window."

"What does Momma say?"

"It made her feel real bad at first, but she went out there and found chips and chocolate bars stuffed under the pillow. She's seemed a lot happier since she found his stash. That's all she says now, 'he's out there sneaking food.'"

"Does she invite him to stay inside?"

"Sometimes, like if I'm gonna go out."

"I thought you didn't go out."

"I did the other night. I'd never been to the Spaghetti Factory before. The place with the train caboose with tables inside it. This nice girl from physical therapy was going. She had to go alone, too."

"A couples thing?" Addie asked. "Toss me that geranium."

"Toss a living thing?"

"Give it here. That couples stuff is hard, huh?"

"Momma mentioned there was a show about whales on tv when I called to tell her I wouldn't be home for supper."

"They need a VCR," Addie said.

"The closer it got to 5:00, the more I felt like I didn't want to go."

"But you did, didn't you?"

"I stayed for the salads. I only missed half the show. Killed two birds with one stone."

"Momma's lonely," Addie said.

Helena nodded hard.

She pictured herself lying on the couch from the spot that used to be her father's when she was a little girl. Her mother patted her on the head just like Helena remembered her patting her father.

"You never caused enough trouble," Addie said. "Have you ever been in real trouble, like a bunch of people in a car driving around for no reason kind of trouble?"

"Once or twice."

"When?"

The yellow tom climbed into Helena's lap and chewed at a burr between his toes. "Oliver's settled in real nice," she said.

"Settled?"

"Except Daddy won't even look at him. He'll walk out of his way to avoid him. He drops things in Oliver's food dish. Won't even call him dumb cat. Not even dumb."

"This sounds so good, you know?" Addie said. "Being home. Like it used to be when we were all there together."

She slid her wedding band up and down, wiping an inch of her ring finger clean of dirt. "But don't let Momma make you feel guilty for wanting to leave. Remember what I went through?"

Indeed, Helena remembered the fights and how they always started at dinner so everyone's food went down half-chewed. Like her mother, Helena had felt deserted and sad when Addie married Tom, left the house.

"I feel sorry for Daddy," Helena bit at a cuticle. He made her nervous, even the thought of him. "What's this? A kind word?" Addie said throwing her muddy hands in the air. Helena and her father couldn't be in the same room together longer than five minutes before he left, and they all heard the aspirin bottle rattling. The older she got, the more nervous she made him--the more capable she was of disagreeing. One Christmas, he gave Helena a book. The inscription on the flyleaf said, 'To Helena, from Daddy with much love.' It was her mother's handwriting. Finally, they had found common ground. He worried about Helena's car--oiled it, tuned it, vacuumed it--and she let him. It was his way, Helena's mother said, of showing his love.

"A house full of women," Helena said.

"I think he liked it," Addie said. "Did you ever hear mom gripe at Daddy about Daddy?"

"Not much."

"She griped to use about Daddy."

"She does gripe at him now though, since he retired,"

Helena said.

Oliver used her computer as a springboard again. A litter crumb was wedged in a crack in the keyboard. The "t" stuck until she pryed the crumb out with a paperclip. This was one of the few times he came in her room anymore. Her desk was level with a window facing the wren house her father had wired to an unused flagpole in the front yard. Usually, she and Oliver shared the space for 30 minutes or so--he seated, wedged between the monitor and the printer, she pecking the keyboard directly behind him writing letters and making lists. Her mother bought her a computer, and it had taken weeks for Helena to figure out what to use it for. The salesman threw in a computer version of Wheel of Fortune software with a blockish Vanna White that clopped on and off the screen. At first, she and her mother played that game a lot, while Oliver sat on one of their shoulders and watched.

Like a Siamese's, his tail had grown unusually long. Excited by something outside, he chattered and switched his tail back and forth wiping it across Helena's nose and mouth.

"Must you," she said, catching his tail by the tip; it waggled like a fishing line.

He turned and stared at her, big black pupils pushing all that remained of his yellow eyes into a tight golden band. She let go of his tail and he held it against her face for a few seconds to remind her of her place, she supposed.

He began his tail switching again with a vengeance, whacking at a piece of paper Helena was typing from.

"Stop it," she said.

He bit her nose and left the room, stifflegged, offended.

Helena had no doubt in her mind where he would go from there: the back of the gold velour recliner to pat her mother's black hair. Being black himself, he blended so well that at first glance he could pass for an oblong bun.

"Monthly Budget" glowed on the computer screen, reflected in Helena's glasses. She'd spelled groceries wrong. Try as she might, she couldn't get the columns to line up or the figures to add. She spun round in her chair and looked at her unmade bed. Every night, Oliver slept stretched across Helena's pillow, batting at her hair if she moved. She'd tried leaving him on one pillow and rolling over to sleep on the other side of the bed, but he would have none of that. He wanted whichever pillow she had. And if she tried to move him, he hissed.

Just three weeks of carelessness on Helena's part had cost her his allegiance, his undivided affection. Each morning, Helena would get up early to feed him and find his bowl licked clean, find him washing his face already. He liked her mother; his snubbing had dampened Helena's spirits. She was losing momentum. He had forgotten his humble beginnings, forgotten he needed her.

Helena held the litter crumb out where she could see it. A green odor-fighting crystal found in only the best brand. She flicked it into the trash can and set out for the living room and the recliner, with determination. She plucked Oliver from behind her mother's head.

"What are you watching," Helena said, pressing him to her lap. With one hand she pinned his paws, with the other, she cupped his back. He chirped and his ears flattened to his head.

"I read a cat food ad that showed how they express themselves," her mother said. "He's mad."

"This is a repeat," Helena said.

"Don't tell me how it comes out--I've forgotten. Are you mad, Oliver baby?"

He looked at her mother and said, "Mom," like she'd taught him.

"No," Helena said, stroking his rising hind end. "You're sitting here." He fought to straighten his back legs.

"The archeologist murdered his wife with a cross bow," Helena said.

"Why don't you stay out here with me for a while," her mother said. "What have you been doing all alone back there." She pulled the afghan over half her face like Dracula. "Want to see what's on? Partridge family reunion. Two hours--long one--stupid one. What'll you say? You used to love that little red-head."

"Oliver doesn't like that. Why won't you sit on your sister Helena's lap, Oliver?" said her mother.

"Oliver and I are going for a ride."

"Another one? I don't think Oliver likes to ride in the car," Helena's mother said. "He seems nervous."

"That's what I want him to get over," Helena said. "The cat book says, while they're still under a year old, to make a habit of doing the things you want them to be comfortable with."

Oliver screamed, his legs sticking straight up like an inverted footstool.

"Don't you want him to like tv?" her mother said, holding up a bag of chips. "Come one--Partridge family-- little red head--. Why car riding? You planning to join a traveling circus?"

Jill, the quiet single physical therapist who, like Helena, never had a date, had invited all the women from Admitting to a Tupperware party. Helena liked Jill's apartment, the brown carpet, the ceiling fan. She could imagine living there.

In a game played by passing each gift item along when the hostess read the word "seal" in a Tupperware story, Helena won a tiny resealable bowl on a keychain.

"No more powdery aspirin at the bottom of my purse," she said, clapping. Caught up in the spirit of the evening, she

ordered a set of parfait cups and complimented Jill on her apartment and the decor.

"Early American," Jill said.

Helena's mother had furnished her entire house in the same knobby wood and earth tones years ago. Her house matched the magazine ads when Helena and her sisters still participated in things, when they had had friends over.

Jill wore coulottes like Helena's mother. Jill called them split skirts. Her church didn't think women should wear pants and these were a compromise since the rigors of physical therapy made wearing a dress even more unwise.

"I'm giving up some of my dreams," Jill said. Her plans, she told Helena, hadn't born fruit. According to them, by her late 20s, she was to be married and settled in a house with several children.

"Not that physical therapy isn't fulfilling. I just thought I'd have stopped doing it by now. I've lived alone long enough." She decided a roommate might be the next best step. Splitting the rent would allow her to put some money in her savings account. In a few years, she could buy a house and if she ever did get married, they could move right in.

"My folks offered me their basement apartment," she said. "That would be like giving up, going back to the womb, you know? Dark and kind of damp, too quiet, too secure. Want to be roomies, Helena? It would be fun. We could cook together."

"I don't know how to cook," Helena said.

"Didn't your mother teach you?"

"Probably tried--I don't remember," Helena said. "Do they take pets?"

Jill took her to the bathroom and opened the door. Filling a towel-lined box on the vanity was an orange cat with running eyes and a tail trimmed like a lion's.

"Hagi Baba. He has arthritis. But Mommy still loves him, doesn't she," she said kissing his nose.

He hissed.

"My folks didn't want him anymore," Jill had said. "My little sister found him a long time ago in a sack with his brothers and sisters. Someone had dipped them in tar. Hagi survived. Look, he still has a little bit of tar on his face that never wore off. I don't know what I'd do without him."

Over the next few weeks, Helena took Oliver on several trips to Jill's apartment to let him get used to the new surroundings and to Hagi Baba. She carried him around.

"This will be our room," she said, trying to keep him from squirming out of her arms. "This is the kitchen where we'll keep your dish. Here's Hagi Baba."

When she set him on the floor, he stared wide-eyed. He would scale the furniture and drop on the orange cat like a bomb. Too stiff to fight, Hagi Baba had only one defense, a rusty hiss. Then Oliver would scurry through the apartment, terrified, opening cabinet doors with his paws, scrambling

for a hiding place.

"He was a stray--had a hard time as a kitten," Helena said. "He's kind of spooked by other cats."

"Just get his claws removed, that's all I ask," Jill said, lifting out her roaster pan with Oliver cowering inside.

"Something's happened to him by the front door. Watch him," said Helena's mother. Oliver crept down the hallway sliding along the wall then sprang across the stretch of carpet by the front door, and he dashed into the bathroom. "We'll have to move his litter box to the kitchen so he doesn't have to walk down that way."

Finished in the bathroom, he hopped to the back of her mother's chair where she'd arranged a heating pad. He put one paw on top of her head.

Helena picked him up and set him on her lap. She noticed a patch on the back of his tail was bald, like it had been plucked clean of hair.

"Have you noticed this," Helena said, hoisting his hind end for her mother to see.

"Hmm--No. He doesn't like that," her mother said. "Do you want leftover meatloaf in your lunch tomorrow?"

"I'll fix it," Helena said.

"I can fix it for you--I can do that," her mother said.

Helena flipped Oliver over on his back. She found two

more bigger patches on either side of his groin and one on his stomach.

"Look," her mother said, "the skin's kind of flaky. I bet he has dry skin. Mine is. Daddy's just going to have to put in that humidifier. This is the last straw."

When they touched the white skin, Oliver licked their fingers away from the spot.

"You want me to tell you what's really wrong with your cat?" the vet said. Their regular vet was out for the day. They took Oliver to see Dr. Cousins, the young man with uncombed red hair whom Helena thought almost too graphic in his language and diagnoses.

"Dry skin," Helena's mother sang into her sleeve from her corner of the examination room. "Paying him a lot of money to tell us what we already know."

Oliver walked into Helena's jacket, hooking his claws into the back of her jeans to steady himself. Only his tail was visible and he held it to her stomach.

"Yes--please. I don't want to wonder," Helena said.

Dr. Cousins pulled a book from a shelf and opened it. "He's neurotic. The specific name is feline eczema. A stress management problem. He can't bite his nails or tap his foot--so he licks his hair out."

"But he doesn't--he's a clean cat--but we've never seen him doing it," said her mother.

"He wouldn't let you see him do it," said Dr. Cousins. "He probably does it in private at night or when you're gone."

"What would cause him--What have I done to--?" Helena said.

"You've been nothing but good to him honey. You've given him everything a cat could want," said her mother. "Why aren't the strays bald? They have more to worry about than he does."

"It could be something as small as moving the furniture--moving him around. Changing his environment. Some cats are keyed in to routine--one place, one person. Sometimes they can't figure out who they belong to."

"Will he get any better?" Helena said.

"I'll give you some hormone pills that should dilute some of the worry and aggression he's feeling. Basically just keep things stable for him. He likes routine? Hates change."

"Yes," said Helena, "hates change."

"I have a friend in Overland Park who will come into people's homes and watch how they interact with their pets."

He handed Helena a card that read "Peter Sherman, Small Animal Psychologist."

Once home, Oliver darted up the stairs and leapt to the back of the recliner.

"You're home, sweet kitty baby," Helena's mother said to

Oliver.

"I've found an apartment," Helena said.

"Oh, you have?"

"I guess I really don't understand," her mother said.

"Am I that bad? Why live with a stranger? I just don't understand. Has someone been egging you on?"

"I've found a nice place with a nice quiet roommate."

"You must really hate your father and me," her mother said. "I lived with mother until I was twenty-eight. And I was happy to. There wasn't any pressure. I didn't listen to what anybody else said I was ready for. I did what I wanted."

"It's not you; it's me," Helena said.

"But you'd been engaged for three years--you knew you were getting out."

"Getting out! If I could bring my mother back and live with her I'd snap my fingers right now. She died when I was younger than you are now, when I was 25."

"Well--and?" Helena said. "Why are you so dead set against this?"

"I don't like it, but there's nothing I can do. I guess you're going to make your own decisions," her mother said, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I'd just like to understand what I've done."

"Nothing, Momma. Everything."

Oliver put both paws on top of her mother's head.

"Mom," he said.

"Oliver stop," said Helena's mother.

"Well?" Helena said.

"I don't want to fight about this. You've made up your mind," she stood up and walked in a circle around the living room, her arms crossed.

"I want to know why--what you think?"

"I'm an old woman," her mother said, slumping into the recliner, rocking Oliver until he nearly lost his balance. "And you don't know what could happen to you. You don't know what could happen to me."

"I know what will happen to me. What do you think will happen to you? Maybe you should talk to your father about all this."

"He wouldn't care," Helena said.

"That's a lie," her mother said. "Oliver will never warm up to you if you leave."

"The apartment takes cats."

"You heard what the doctor said. You move him and he could lose all of his hair. You think that's wise--what's best for him?"

"We'll be 10 minutes away. We can visit. You can visit. I wish you could be happy for me."

"This isn't about me. You've made that clear. I'm not happy--never was good at pretending. Do you want the bedroom set? I love having you here. Your father and I--. Just because you change your mind doesn't mean I have to. I like

having you and I always will." She wiped her sleeve across her face. "It's your life. He's your cat. It's your decision."

"My cat?"

Helena put on her coat and reached for Oliver. He backed up and fell off the recliner.

"He doesn't want to go," her mother. "You brought him here in the first place. He thinks he lives here. He does live here."

"He'll adjust. I'm gonna take him over now to get him used to the new place. Come here Oliver. We're going for a ride," Helena said.

He slid behind the couch. Helena found the yardstick and herded him out one end.

"Don't hurt him, honey. Oliver, calm down, baby. He doesn't understand."

He leapt to the top of the china hutch and licked his stomach.

"Mom," he said.

"Look what you've done to him," Helena said.

"What? I haven't done anything but feed him and love on him."

Helena stood on a chair near the hutch and lifted him down. All the way to the door, he tried to climb to her shoulder and jump off.

On the drive to Jill's apartment, he rode pressed to the

window in hatchback, yowling. She could leave him there. Maybe that would be best. It seemed right and terribly wrong. Her stomach cramped.

"You are going to like it there. You're going to learn to like it there, Oliver. You hear me? You are going to like it there."

1-800-Athiest

Ella Park's television set said, "Is there or isn't there?
Tired of trying to convince yourself there's a God?"

She pulled a loose thread dangling from the arm of her recliner in her apartment on the ninth floor of Heritage House, a retirement condominium built with donations in memory of the Reverend Charles Cummings, dedicated shepherd of St. Mark's Church and School 1922-1984. She lived on the sixth floor, 12 windows from the right. When she and her nephew Robert had taken the last box of her belongings inside, she'd stood in the parking lot with the moving van and counted across so she'd know where she was. Because once you're inside, she told herself, you think yours is the only square.

She tried to imagine what Robert would see when he drove

up today: her face like a tiny can of beans behind a window he could slide to one side. He could, if he wanted, reach in and lift her out.

On the television, two people, a woman with white hair and buck teeth and a man in a striped polyester blazer, pointed to a blue shaded box at the bottom of the screen that read: Dial 1-800-Atheist.

"You are not alone," the woman said.

"No, I'm not--and neither are you," Ella said. "That's the problem." Well-meaning, she thought, but she knew too much to pick up the phone. Sometimes it had been nice to think like that, and she had used much effort to think that way off and on during the five years she tried to give Joe a baby. The doctors said no. All she'd ever wanted to do, all she'd ever thought she would be good at was mothering.

"There is no God," she remembered sitting in their yard and telling herself. "Someday the earth will loosen from the sky like this dandelion fluff--like it has never even been here--and no breath will blow it--it will loosen of its own accord." In spite of her attempts to persuade herself, she knew better. When Ella was six, she had crouched by the side of the road near her house drawing horses in the pebbles and dirt with a stick. She looked toward the booming voice and answered, "Yes."

The voice called her again. "Ella" it said.

She ran to it, all the way to the front porch and turned

in time to see the neighbor's new black farm truck swerve over her drawings and crash into a clothesline in a yard at the end of the street. The neighbor's son had never driven before and later admitted he needed to practice his steering. Ella saw him crumple under his father's flapping arms, scoop up a dirty sheet and try to fold it.

"But I did turn it," he finally yelled. "It didn't do no good. Like it went backwards to the way I meant."

Ella's story hadn't take long to tell, just time enough for her mother to iron two shirt sleeves and pour her a glass of milk. But Ella promised to tell the story to herself often. Today's telling, even stronger than each before it, had reminded her to keep busy, to volunteer, to show up, until she found what it was she was supposed to do.

Popping the lever on her recliner, Ella stood. She took a few urgent steps across the living room rug. The edge of her nightgown floated to the t.v. screen and clung there, crackling. She brushed a piece of string from the top of an end table than turned around and eased back into the recliner before the wrinkles her back had left on the vinyl had a chance to disappear. She felt the same fluttery feeling she did when her neighbor Alice clicked her purse open and shut, waiting to drive her to Sunday school. Sometimes Ella laced and tied her shoes three or four times while she tried to think if she'd forgotten anything--her Bible, to unplug her heat pad, to put the cap back on the pen she used for the

Sunday crossword. How simple it would be, she thought, if people lived and then they died, and they dissolved into the dirt. People could pick up a handful of Ella and let it trickle through their fingers, plant nasturtiums--her favorite flower--in her; they could say, "this is good soil." Soil richer for her passing.

"And that's all you must do, simply give us a call and we'll send you absolutely free . . . 10 Steps to Non-Believing."

"What have I done so far?" she said to the ceiling. "Can you give me a hint? Can you stop me when I come to it?" She had been through the mental list several times in the last week and thought it should be longer. Surely after all these years, something would catch her eye. She grew up on a sheep farm in Chinook, Montana and helped her father who liked sheep as well as she did. When her family moved South for opportunity and warm weather, she--like many of her brothers and sisters--trickled from the family into the soil of a stop-over. She stayed in Kansas City, Missouri. During the war, she swept gun powder from the floor of the Lake City Ammunitions Plant. One day, Joe Parks grabbed the end of her broom. He made bullets there, but he was really a carpenter. He built a house for them on Dodgen Street in Independence where Ella perfected the best chicken and dumplings he had ever tasted. "You're the joy of my life," he said and licked tears from his cheeks as she set the last dish of it she ever

made on the table in front of his stomach. Joe's feet turned gouty, his arteries clogged. Too much grease. Chicken and dumplings. The doctor said so. She persuaded Joe to the first church service he'd sat through in 60 years, and he made friends with the pastor. She decorated wedding cakes to buy Joe a rowboat. The last two years on Dodgen, she played checkers every Thursday with a neighbor who wouldn't move her kings. Sometimes Ella brushed out the woman's hair because she had forgotten to. When Joe couldn't push the lawn mower anymore, she held his hand and asked him to reach a dish on the top shelf of the cabinet. She sorted through all their things and helped him moved them onto the front lawn for an auction where they served lemonade and burgers that Joe barbequed himself. Before the bidding started, she saved a salt and pepper shaker in the shape of a toaster from her collection and gave it to Robert's wife, Margie, because she'd seen her pick it up and smile. The white slice held salt; the burnt slice held pepper. Two days later and the week before they moved to Heritage House, Joe died with his head cradled in her lap. Then she bought a twin bed and gave their mattress and box springs to a friend's granddaughter who packed it in a truck and drove it to a college in Virginia.

"I've done these things," she said to the ceiling.

"Enough? What?"

Ella squinted at the thermometer suction-cupped outside

her sliding glass door. The temperature was dropping. She watched Robert walk to the door, sleet bouncing off his head and the black umbrella he held over Margie and and his son, Jerry. The purpose of this visit was two-fold: Christmas dinner and a discussion of Ella's finances. Last week, it occurred to her that she wanted to leave all of her money to Robert. Deciding that had made her feel like she'd rolled back the rug and found a missing puzzle piece.

When she lost sight of Robert and Margie and Jerry under her balcony, the phone rang.

"We're here. Where's the beer?" Robert said. He was just like Joe, always making jokes that didn't seem funny.

"There's none I fear," she said, amazed she'd pulled off a rhyme. She pushed the asterisk, the button that would unlock the door and let them all in.

Since both Robert's parents had been dead many years, Ella looked to Robert as a son, and he obliged her somewhat. She felt sewn to him; when his life moved, she felt a tug. But he made a joke out of everything she said to him. And he never called her. If he answered the phone when she called he'd say, "Doing O.K.?--When?--Why that's great--Good--Here's Margie."

Ella had called him from the payphone outside the grocery store the time she leaned over the cart for a jar of pickles and cracked a rib.

"Robert. I'm at Food-4-Less. I've hurt myself. . ." she

said.

"Hang on just a minute Aunt Ella," he said.

"She's your aunt," Ella heard Margie say, "you should talk to her too. How do you think that makes her feel?"

He was a little better about calling until the doctor took the tape off her ribs. Margie came once a week to bathe her.

Ella loved their company, and couldn't hear their voices often enough to suit her. She missed the dinners when Joe's big family would collect in Healy, Kansas, and how they would play hearts to see who had to do the dishes. And how they would tell stories. So many nights lately, she'd awaken with a thought in her head that she couldn't straighten out or a story she remembered about the family or herself.

Rocking from one foot to another, Ella stood at her door while Robert and his family rode up in the elevator. The waiting was best, the time just after they buzzed from the lobby to the moment they knocked on her door. The rest of the visit drained out fast like water down her bathtub which had a stopper that didn't fit tight so she had to fill it near to overflowing. By the end of the bath, the water was all the way down to her knees, circling them like islands. The rest of her would goosepimple against the cold, wet enamel.

She asked Robert and Margie and Jerry to come a half an hour early so she could see them sitting in a row on her couch and serve them coffee in her special thin china cups

with the pink roses hand-painted on the bottom. She only brought the cups out for company. She couldn't remember if she'd brought it to Robert's attention before so she mentioned it again: "When you drink about half your way down, look and see if that rose doesn't look like a face, a pink angel face? Do you know where I got these cups?"

"Dad and Joe's sister Ola from Salina," Robert said.

"And they were passed on to her--" she said.

"By Dad and Joe and Ola's mother who brought them from England wrapped in handkerchiefs," Robert said. "And when she unpacked the box, not one was broken."

"Do you remember those Sunday dinners, Robert?"

"Indeedy I do. Always left with wrinkled fingers. Always lost in hearts," Robert said. "You have two pins on, Aunt Ella."

"And they look nice," Margie came across the room to see each one up close. One was a silver cat with a green bow and red Christmas eyes, and the other was a gold bell with a dinger that tinkled when Ella walked. She wore one on each lapel. Ella had four Christmas pins in her jewelry box, and one didn't seem to be enough today. It was the bell's turn, but she didn't think she could wait four Christmases for the cat to come round again.

"I only wear pins on Sunday," she said. "And holidays."

"And they look so nice--she looks pretty as a Christmas package," Margie looked at Robert.

"Like a Christmas cookie," Robert said licking his lips to tease Ella. He had a voracious sweet tooth that gave her endless delight.

Ella opened the box of chocolates she'd taken from the freezer to thaw after Margie called to say they were coming.

"I remember how your mother had to yam forkfuls of food in your mouth," she said, passing the box to Robert. "I thought you'd never eat. Now look at you. I can't even dress up nice. You wouldn't eat a harmless old lady, would you?"

"You want a chocolate, Jerry?" Margie held the box under the little boy's nose. He had a Parks nose, too big for his face just like Joe's and Robert's. It looked like it was made of clay, and somebody hadn't taken care to mold it just right. He took a chocolate and closed it in his fist.

Ella especially loved the Christmas dinners at Heritage House, and this year it was appropriately cold. Heritage House held its annual Christmas dinner in the recreation/laundry room. The custodian draped the washers and dryers with red and green plaid vinyl drop cloths and borrowed all the folding tables and chairs the church could spare. Early that morning, she'd ridden the elevator down before breakfast to check the room. Sure enough, fine slopes of frost hugged the edge of each picture window. This year they'd hired musical entertainment—a piano player, two violinists and a young tenor from the church.

Ella and her family arrived in time to catch the tail end of an accompanied recitation of the "The Littlest Angel." Dressed in a white choir robe with a hoop of shiny gold garland sitting on top of his head, the tenor's son knelt on the top of the piano, picking his nose.

When Ella and her group filed to their table, all the clucking and cooing turned their direction. The angel faded in the blaze of Ella's accomplishment. She had assembled a group most residents only dreamt of--three people from her family and one of them a small boy wearing a tie. Jerry sneezed and some of them laughed and clapped. A flurry of wrinkled hands reached out with hankies.

Jerry pulled one from his suitcoat pocket.

"Oh look, he has one already," fifty voices sang.

"Aren't these the prettiest tables you've ever seen?" Ella said, circling theirs before they sat down. In the center, wedged between two branches of real holly, was a placard with "Ella Parks" written in large red and green letters. She circled the table once more, her face shining like the back of a spoon, lingering over her seat assignments so that everyone could get a good long look at her gift to them.

"Very nice," Margie said. "Very Christmasy."

Ella pointed a finger at a man seated at their table staring at his folded hands.

"He's blind," she whispered, leaning close to Robert's

ear. "Just like your Grandfather Parks." She thought the man amazing. Every evening, he wove in and out of the chairs and tables on his way to the serving line without a cane.

"Not too loud there, Ella," Robert said, holding his finger to his lips.

She knew the man hadn't heard. She only said what she did because she was proud of knowing him.

"Hello Mr. Speas," she said.

"Hello Ella, my dear--thanks for holding a seat for me."

"This here's my nephew Robert, his wife Margie and their little boy Jerry."

Again, she leaned near Robert's ear, "Shake his hand, he likes to be touched. He told me so."

Once they were seated with their plates, Ella took the man's hand and said, "Mr. Speas, your chicken is at 2 o'clock, mixed vegetables at 6, and rice at 10."

Throughout the meal, a steady stream of residents filed by Ella's table to pour the contents of their party cups atop the mound of peanuts, chocolate chips and red and green striped mints forming beside her little Jerry's plate.

"Like the wise old kings bringing gifts to the baby Jesus," Ella said.

"Eat your string beans, Jerry," Margie said, scraping the mound of candy offerings into a napkin. "Momma will keep these in her purse."

Ella closed her eyes and sniffed. Sheep. A dirt road.

She tilted her head toward the ceiling and opened her eyes a peek. She saw nothing but the light fixture.

"Yes?" she said to the ceiling, growing impatient. "What is it?"

"Ella," Margie said. "Can you hear me?--Robert, is she choking?"

Ella rolled her head forward. "No honey, I'm right with you. What can I do to help?" she said. That wasn't the answer she'd wanted her mouth to say. She'd never listened so hard.

"Ella, you're covered with goosepimples."

And so she was.

"Ella, do you think they'd mind if we take the centerpiece?" Margie said. "Jerry learned a song about holly, and he's never seen the real thing before."

"I'd love for him to have a bush of his own--but these cuttings will have to do," Ella said. She collected all the sprigs from all the tables that still had them.

On the way up in the elevator, a woman named Fran who lived on Ella's floor leaned over the arm of her wheelchair admiring the holly.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked.

"Off our table." Ella beamed. "Aren't they pretty?"

"Fourth floor," Robert said, "Men's furnishings, housewares. No takers? Going up."

"We didn't have any of that," Fran said. "Our centerpiece was a snowman made out of foam balls and straight

pins. Agnes took it for her coffee table."

Ella squeezed her fist around the holly.

"Would you like one of these?" she said, thrusting her arm straight out like a messenger with a scroll written expressly for the eyes of the king.

"I like giving people things," she said. "It's what I'm good at. This is a good time of year for me."

"I don't want your money," Robert said. "I think you should spend it on yourself. You didn't work all those years just to go handing it out to people."

Ella looked down at the pile of papers spread out on the dining table in front of her. CDs, IRAs, savings bonds, quarterly savings and checking account reports.

"Not people," she said. "You. I want Margie to have this crystal bowl of my mother's--would you like that, dear? And I want you to have this quilt."

"That is absolutely beautiful. Did you make this?" Margie said running her fingers over the stitching.

"At the church circle. It's a little yellow around the edges. I'll put it through the wash. You can get it next time you come."

"No. That's too much," Robert said. "Why don't you give that to your sister's girl, Rose. It would mean more to her, coming from you."

Several years earlier, Ella had sent a Christmas card to

Rose at the last address she could find, one in Oregon. It came back stamped "Address Unknown."

"Really Aunt Ella, you've done too much already."

"But I need you to take these things--I've got it all figured out. You could put some of this away and Jerry could go to school. I feel like this is what I'm supposed to do."

"And who told you you were supposed to clean yourself out? One of those stupid t.v. shows? I simply won't take any more from you Ella. You've done enough. Joe's gone now and we really appreciate--I really feel you did right by me."

He took the quilt from Margie's hands and pushed it along the table toward Ella.

"We don't need anything," Robert said. "Dad and mom left me a little, and I've put it to use. Now I have my own savings and nesteggs that we can use. We have a fund set up for Jerry. You'll be richer than your old man one of these days, won't you, Jer?"

He laughed and patted the table several times, Joe's old signal to Ella when he was ready to leave.

Robert leaned in close, "Margie's folks don't have much to give and we don't want the boy getting the idea that you--well, we don't want them feeling bad."

"You're my family. I don't have anybody else. Your Dad and Joe were so close. Do you want this to go to waste?" she said, laying her hands on the papers.

"Robert you know I don't think my folks would--" Margie

said.

"You know what I think you should do?" Robert said. "I think you should spend this money on yourself. To heck with us."

"Take it," Ella said. "Please."

"Ella, your just being around is enough for us, right honey?" Robert said, taking hold of the back of Margie's arm. "And I really think you're going to be around to need some of this for yourself. Some mad money."

"That's it. I'm not so sure," Ella said.

"Now--don't be talking like that," Robert said.

"Are you feeling alright, Ella?" Margie said.

"Funny, I suppose. I don't know."

"Are you sick?" Margie said.

"No."

"Well then there's your answer, huh?" Robert said.

"Now is the time to kick up your heels. You've got good health insurance when the time comes to worry about something like that."

"I really feel like this is what I'm supposed to do," Ella said.

"Well we just simply won't oblige you. You've got plenty of life left in those old bones." Robert nudged her in the ribs with his elbow. "I say you go out and start shooting your wad. Right now. What's your will say?"

"I leave most to the church and some to Esther's

daughter and some to you, but I don't know where Rose is anymore."

"She'll find you, Ella," Robert said. "When the time comes. I guarantee it."

Ella took some artificial oranges and grapes out of the crystal bowl and held it out to Margie.

"Well it's time we were moving on," Robert said, taking the bowl out of Margie's hands and setting it back on the table. "We've got to get Jerry to some kind of scout meeting. You try not to worry about all this. You and Joe worked up that will and were both happy with it. It's what you leave that we divie up, not the wad you have now. I think you should go to the bank right today and take out some money. You and some of your friends go on that mystery trip we read about on the board downstairs."

"Call me as soon as you're home or I'll worry," Ella said to Robert.

"We'll give you a call," Margie said and kissed Ella's cheek.

From the window, Ella watched Robert scrape ice from the windshield. She stared at the black spot where their car had been until the pavement was white with snow.

She still didn't know any of the other ladies well enough to travel with them. She'd tried to make friends. First week in the building, she volunteered for the bereavement committee. She was fifth floor resident in charge

buy flowers.

An envelope marked "Bruce Dempsey" lay flat on her dining room table. She heard he died on the way to the hospital. The Dempseys had lived at Heritage House for two weeks. Like Joe, Mr. Dempsey hadn't even had time enough to feel caged up. The idea must have killed him.

If she hurried, Ella could make a collection run down her side of the hall before dinner. She usually wound up sitting on several couches and drinking too many cups of tea.

At the first three doors, no one answered. After dinner napping, she supposed. The door to 305 moved when she knocked.

"Mrs. Lunceford," she said. "It's Ella Parks. The grim reaper again. I need your flower money dear. Seems like I never let anybody rest lately."

She pushed the door open a crack.

"I'll just come on in and wait. Mrs Lunceford?"

Staring straight at Ella, the woman sat bolt upright in her wheelchair, an apghan draped over her lap. In her fist, she clutched the holly sprig Ella had given her.

"Fran?" Ella touched her arm.

"Mrs. Rivera," Ella ran to the nearest apartment.

"Just a minute."

"Could you come across the hall with me," Ella said.

"It's Susan Lunceford."

Mrs. Rivera came to her door tugging at the waistband of her pants. She took Ella by the hand and they crossed together.

From her recliner, Ella could see the ambulance pull away, its siren quiet. The medics said she had probably been dead since shortly after lunch.

For nearly half an hour, Ella had heard a steady stream of telephone rings coming from her own apartment; it sounded like an alarm clock. Robert said Margie was worried when Ella didn't answer and made him keep trying.

"Been to see your travel agent?" he said.

When she told him the story, he said, "You don't suppose she ate any of that holly? It's poisonous."

Although it was still early, Ella put on her pajamas and watched the sky turn from gray to deep blue.

"The woman had never seen holly before in her life. You teased her with it--gave her thirty minutes, tops. You didn't even give me a chance to see her enjoy it," she said to the ceiling. "Everything I try 'no, no--that's not it yet either Ella.' And the one person left to me--you convince him not to let me do a thing.

"Is anybody there? I know you're there. I'm going to ask you again, What do you want?"

Gripping the arms of her recliner, she talked into the

darkness. "You wind us up and set us, don't you. We can hear the ticking. Who are you? Give me an ultimatum at such an early age. You give me this urge to do something and then tell me I can't. I've tried my hardest. Every idea I have you say, 'Nah.' Let me help."

She sprang to her feet, spun in as defiant a circle as she knew how. She knocked over her plant stand and the African violet. The plant lay on the floor in a white tangle of roots.

"Look what you made me do.

"Anybody knows what a bargain is. What did you expect me to think? Let me pay you back. You can't spare me one little crumb of satisfaction? I can't scratch one little itch on your back? Do you even have a back?"

She picked up a leaf that had broken off in the fall.

"How can I compete with this? I could sit here all day and pant and grunt and pray til I felt roots growing out of my ears and could I sweat out one dirty little leaf? But haven't I done what I could?"

She raised her fists in the air until all the blood drained from her arms.

"Well? Not one word from you? After all these years not one peep? I know you're there. Don't pretend you aren't. Not one thank you? Not one, 'that's enough. Ella?'"

She lowered one arm.

"What's this? I feel one more trick up my sleeve. I can

just choose to believe the idea of you is too irritating. I can choose simply not to believe. I can sit here and starve myself, huh?"

The phone rang.

"Oh no. You're not distracting me again. This is long overdue. I want an answer."

It stopped ringing.

"What was that number again? 1-800-Atheist? What would you think if I made me a little phone call? 'I'd like to write you into my will--to leave a legacy.' Don't you suppose they have plenty of costs that need defraying?"

She picked up the phone and poised her finger over the buttons.

"Dare me?"