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Elba

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Elba · *Marly Swick*

MOTHER, WHO WANTED TO KEEP HER, always thought of her as some wild little bird, a sparrow, let loose in the wide world, lost forever, but I knew she was a homing pigeon. I knew that at some point in her flight path, sooner or later, she would make a U-turn. A sort of human boomerang. So even though I had long since stopped expecting it, I was not surprised when I walked down the gravel drive to the mailbox, which I'd painted papaya yellow to attract good news, and found the flimsy envelope with the Dallas postmark. I didn't know a soul in Dallas, or Texas for that matter, but the handwriting reminded me of someone's. My own.

I walked back inside the house and hung my poncho on the peg by the door.

"Still raining?" mother asked. She was sitting in her new electric wheelchair in front of the TV, painting her fingernails a neon violet. Mother's sense of color was pure aggression. This was one of her good days. On the bad days, her hands trembled so that she could barely hold a spoon, let alone that tiny paint brush.

"Just let up," I said. "Sun's poking through." I handed her the new *People* magazine which she insisted upon subscribing to. "You know anyone in Dallas, mother?"

"Not so as I recall." She dabbed at her pinky with a cottonball. Mother was vain about her hands. I was used to how she looked now, but I noticed people staring in the doctor's waiting room. She had lost some weight and most of her hair to chemotherapy, and I guess people were startled to see these dragon-lady nails on a woman who looked as if she should be lying in satin with some flowers on her chest.

"Why do you ask?" she said.

I opened the envelope and a picture fluttered into my lap. It was a Polaroid of a sweet-faced blond holding a newborn baby in a blue blanket. Their names and ages were printed neatly on the back. Before I even read the letter I knew. I knew how those Nazis feel when suddenly, after twenty or thirty uneventful years, they are arrested walking down some sunny street in Buenos Aires. It's the shock of being found after waiting so long.

“What’s that?” Mother said.

I wheeled her around to face me and handed her the Polaroid. She studied it for a minute and then looked up, speechless for once, waiting for me to set the tone.

“That’s her,” I said. “Her name’s Linda Rose Caswell.

“Lin-da Rose.”

I nodded. We looked at the picture again. The blond woman was seated on a flowered couch, her wavy hair just grazing the edge of a dime-a-dozen seascape in a cheap gilt frame. I hoped it was someone else’s living room, some place she was just visiting.

Mother pointed to the envelope. “What’s she say?”

I unfolded the letter, a single page neatly written.

“She says she’s had my name and address for some time but wanted to wait to contact me until after the birth. The baby’s name is Blake and he weighs eight pounds, eight ounces, and was born by Caesarean. She says they are waiting and hoping to hear back from me soon.”

“That’s it?”

I nodded and handed her the letter. It was short and businesslike, but I could see the ghosts of all the long letters she must have written and crumpled into the wastebasket.

“I guess that makes you a great-grandmother,” I said.

“What about you?” she snorted, pointing a Jungle Orchid fingernail at me. “You’re a grandmother.”

We shook our heads in disbelief. I sat silently, listening to my brain catch up with my history. Forty years old and I felt as if I had just shaken hands with Death. I suppose it’s difficult for any woman to accept that she’s a grandmother, but in the normal order of things, you have ample time to adjust to the idea. You don’t get a snapshot in the mail one day from a baby girl you gave up twenty-four years ago saying, “Congratulations, you’re a Grandma!”

“It’s not fair,” I said. “I don’t even feel like a *mother*.”

“Well here’s the living proof.” Mother tapped her nail against the glossy picture. “She looks just like you. Only her nose is more aristocratic.”

“I’m going to work.” My knees cracked when I stood up. “You be all right here?”

Mother nodded, scrutinizing the picture in her lap. “Actually, truth to

tell, I think she looks like me.” She held the Polaroid up next to her face. “She’s got my profile.”

I felt the pleasant warmth of the sun on my shoulder blades as I walked along the path paved with sodden bougainvillea blossoms to the garage I’d had converted into a studio a few years back. I’d moved my painting paraphernalia out of the house and repapered the spare bedroom. Mother sewed some bright curtains and matching pillows for the day bed. We were ready for guests, and I guess we enjoyed this illusion of sociability, even though the only person who ever visited us—my mother’s sister—was already dead by the time we readied the guest room.

I spent hours in the studio everyday, painting still lifes, and they were hours of perfect contentment. From my studio, I could hear the ocean across the highway, but couldn’t see it. Sometimes when I was absorbed in my painting, in this trance of light and color, it seemed as if my brush strokes and the rustle of the waves were one and the same.

After mother and I moved to Florida, I developed a passion for citrus fruits. I liked to look at them, I was always fondling them, and when I was pregnant, the only food I could tolerate was oranges. I lived on oranges. One afternoon while I was wandering around Woolworth’s, wasting time before returning to the motel, I bought a tin of watercolors just on impulse. That afternoon I sat down at the formica table in our kitchenette at the motel and painted a picture of a red china dish with one lemon in it. As soon as the paint was dry, mother said, “My, I never knew you had such an artistic bent,” and taped it to the dwarf refrigerator. Even with my big belly, I felt like a proud first grader. From then on, hardly a day went by that I didn’t paint something.

My father back home in Baltimore made it clear he wasn’t awaiting our return. Seduced by sunshine, we decided to stay in Florida after the baby was born. We moved out of the motel into a rented house on Siesta Key and mother enrolled me in an adult art class. The teacher, an excitable Cuban, nudged me to enter some local art shows. Now galleries as nearby as Miami and as far away as Atlanta sell my work on a regular basis. A local newspaper reporter interviewed me a few years back and quoted me as saying, “Painting is meditation on the moment, no past and no future.” Mother sent my father a copy of the article, which he never acknowledged, although he continued to send us monthly checks, like clockwork, until the divorce settlement. I thought maybe the quote offended him.

The evening of the day we received the Polaroid, after the supper dishes were cleared, I spent a good long time in front of the medicine chest mirror. I felt as if I were saying good-bye to someone. Then I climbed up on the toilet seat and onto the rim of the sink. Using a washcloth as a pot-holder, I unscrewed the lightbulb. It was one of those guaranteed-to-out-last-you 100 watters.

I carried the offending bulb into the living room. Mother was hunched underneath the pole lamp browsing through some old black-and-white snapshots, the kind with the wavy edges.

“Just hold on a sec,” I said as I unplugged the lamp and fumbled to exchange lightbulbs.

“What’re you doing?” Mother said. “It was just fine the way it was.”

Mother always got nervous when I tried to change anything around the place. She would have appreciated living at the scene of a murder, sealed off by the police, with no one allowed to touch a thing.

“I’m putting in a brighter bulb,” I said. “You’re going to ruin your eyes.”

“That’s too glare-y.” She squinted up at me as soon as I plugged the lamp back in.

“It’s much better.” I slipped the 60 watt bulb into my pocket.

In the bright light I recognized the pictures she was looking at and, even after all that time, my stomach muscles clutched. They were snapshots we had taken on the drive down here to Florida, from Maryland, almost twenty-five years ago. I had a new instamatic camera my father had given me for my birthday, before he found out, and I couldn’t resist using it, even though I knew that I would never want to look at those pictures.

“Look at that.” I picked up a picture of mother holding a basket of nuts at a pecan stand in Georgia. She was wearing a patterned sundress with spaghetti straps and she had a bird’s nest of blond hair. “Imagine,” I said. “You were younger there than I am now.”

I handed the picture back to her and squeezed her boney shoulder. She reached up and patted my hand. It was hard to guess who felt worse.

I picked up another snapshot. Mother in her bathing cap with the rubber petals that resembled an artichoke, posed like Esther Williams in the shallow end of a swimming pool.

“I’d forgotten that bathing cap,” I laughed.

“I’d forgotten that body,” she sighed.

Some of the motels had small pools. Looking at the picture, I could smell the chlorine. At night, under the artificial lights, the water turned a sickly jade green. It was summer, and after a hot, sticky day in the car, nothing looked more inviting than those little concrete pools surrounded by barbed wire, but I was embarrassed to be seen in my bathing suit with my swollen breasts and swelling belly. I would post mother in a lawn chair. Sweating, chainsmoking, she would dutifully keep watch in the steamy night. If anyone headed towards the pool, she would whisper, "Pssst! Someone's coming!" and I would scramble up the chrome ladder into my terry cloth beach robe. But more often than not, we would have the pool area to ourselves. Sometimes after I was through in the water, she would breast-stroke a couple of slow, tired-looking laps before following me back into our room with its twin chenille-covered beds.

Mother leafed through the little packet of snapshots as if she were looking for some particular picture. There were more shots of her—smiling beside the Welcome to Florida sign, clapping her sandals together in the surf, lugging a suitcase up the steps of an unprepossessing motel called The Last Resort. I was struck by how tired and young and lost she looked in those pictures. In my memory of those days she was strong and old and bossy. You could see in the pictures just how much it cost a woman like her to up and leave her husband, even if he was an inflexible, unforgiving, steel-reinforced ramrod of a man. The irony was that right up until he stopped speaking to me, and for a long time after, I loved him more than I loved her. I had always been a Daddy's Girl. I still dream of him occasionally and in my dreams he always treats me tenderly.

"There!" Mother suddenly held a snapshot up to the light—triumphant. "There you are!"

There I was. Sitting behind the wheel of our '57 Buick (which we just sold ten years ago, all rusted from the salt air but still running), my tell-tale belly discreetly concealed by the dashboard. Trick photography. I seemed to be scowling at the gas pump. I was moody and sullen during the entire drive south. She did what she could to cheer me up—bought me fashion magazines and let me play the radio full blast. I had turned sixteen but didn't have my license yet. At night, even though all she wanted was a hot shower and a soft bed, she would give me driving lessons in the parking lots of the motels we stopped at. She would smile encouragingly while I stripped the gears and lurched in circles, barely missing the few parked

cars with roof racks and out-of-state plates. She rarely mentioned my father, who had promised to teach me how to drive, but once I sauntered out of the Ladies Room and caught her crying in a pay phone booth at a gas station just across the Florida state line. Her tears relaxed something in me, just long enough for me to put an arm around her and say, "I'm sorry. I know it's all my fault."

"No," she hugged me and petted my hair. "It's his fault. He loved you too much. He thought you were perfect."

I jerked away. "I don't want to talk about him," I said. "Ever."

The whole time Mother and I were packing up the Buick, my father was in the backyard pruning the azalea bushes. I heard the angry little snips, like a dog snapping at my heels, as I trudged up and down the stairs with armloads of books and clothes. When the car was all packed, Mother and I sat in the driveway warming the engine. We sat there waiting for him to stop us. Finally, Mother cleared her throat. "Well," she forced a brave smile. "I guess we're off."

I opened the car door and ran to the backyard. I threw my arms around my father's bent waist as he stooped over an unruly azalea. "I don't want to go!" I cried. "Don't make me go."

He shook me off and went on snipping.

"Don't you even love me?" I wailed and stomped the ground like a five-year-old.

"Look at you." He pointed the pruning shears. "Who could love that?" He swiped at the oversized man's shirt I was wearing and returned to his shearing.

I turned and ran back to the car.

Mother shuffled the pictures into a neat stack, like a deck of playing cards, to put away. She used to be a dedicated Bridge player. After we moved, she tried to teach me a couple of times but I have no head for card games, and anyway, you need more than two players.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What's that one there?" I pointed to an oversized picture on the bottom of the stack.

"I don't know if I ever showed you this," she said. "Come to think of it." As if this had just now occurred to her.

The picture had its own private envelope. I slipped it out and turned it right side up. It was the kind of picture that hospitals used to give you, of

a nurse wearing a surgical mask and holding a sleeping, wrinkled infant.

“Where’d you get this?” I sat down on the edge of the sofa.

“I make friends,” mother said. “I talk to people.”

I stared at the sleeping infant, wishing it would open its eyes.

They never showed me the baby in the hospital. Back then, they thought it would be harder on you. I suppose maybe today it’s different. Most things are. They told me she was a girl and she weighed six pounds something and that she was perfectly normal, but that was all and I never asked to know anything more. I was just a kid myself, a school girl. Since then, I have read novels and seen movies where these unwed mothers—cheerleaders and prom queens—suddenly develop superhuman maternal instincts and fight like she-cats to keep their babies. All I can say is I never felt any of that. I felt like this thing had leeches into me and I couldn’t pry it loose.

Your body recovers quickly when you’re that young. Sixteen. I remember walking along the beach a few days after being released from the hospital, just bouncing around in the waves and screaming. The pure relief and joy of it. Suddenly I didn’t even care that my whole life had been ruined; my parents were disgraced and now separated as a result of my wantonness; I didn’t have a high school diploma; and I had only received one post card from Tommy Boyd. I wasn’t even in love with Tommy Boyd. It happened the first and only time we ever went out. My boyfriend of two years had just thrown me over because I refused to do anything below the waist. I went to a friend’s party with Tommy, hoping to make my boyfriend jealous, but when we arrived, the first thing I saw was him making out with Julie Mullins on the Mullins’ riding lawnmower. I was so upset, I started drinking and flirting, and somehow I ended up in the back seat of Tommy’s brother’s car, doing everything. I was crying before he ever touched me. It started out as comfort.

His postcard was of the Painted Desert. He and his older brother were driving cross country that summer, before college started in the fall. In an exuberant scrawl he listed all the places they’d been. Then at the bottom, when he’d run out of room, he printed in letters nearly invisible to the naked human eye that he was thinking about me and hoped I was doing OK. He even called me from a pay phone once in California and held the receiver out of the booth so that I could hear the Pacific Ocean. I listened to the surf and sobbed for three minutes before the operator said our time

was up. I try not to think back, but when I do, I don't blame Tommy Boyd. I never did. And I didn't blame my boyfriend because I loved him. Who I blamed was Julie Mullins. That is the way girls thought back then, before the Women's Movement raised their consciousness. It came too late for me. I feel closer to Tess of the D'Urbervilles than Germaine Greer.

I handed the hospital picture back to mother. We sat there for a minute listening to the geckos and the rain and the palm fronds scratching against the sliding glass doors. Mother picked up the remote control device and hit the "on" button. As the picture bloomed into view, I said, "Did I ever thank you for what you did? Taking me away and all?"

She just nodded and mumbled something, flipping through the channels. She settled on Masterpiece Theater. We had watched that episode together earlier in the week, but I didn't say anything. I picked the new *People* up off the coffee table and said I was going to read in bed. She nodded obliviously and then, just as I reached the hallway, she said, without taking her eyes off the screen, "You going to write to her?"

"Of course I am," I bristled. "I may be some things, but I am not rude."

"You going to invite them here? Her and the baby?" She swiveled her eyes sideways at me.

"I haven't thought that far," I said.

"Well, don't put it off." She slid her eyes back to the television. "She's been waiting twenty-five years."

I went to my room and changed into my nightgown. It was a hot, close night despite the rain, and I turned on the overhead fan. Mother and I dislike air-conditioning. A palmetto bug dropped off one of the blades onto the bed. I brushed him off, whacked him with my slipper, picked him up with a tissue, and carried him arm's length to the toilet. I'd forgotten it was dark in the bathroom. I had to go back for the lightbulb, climb up on the sink again, and screw in the 60 watt bulb. Crouched on the sink's rim, I caught sight of my face in the mirror and instinctively, like a baby, I reached out and touched my reflection. Then I brushed my hair and creamed my face, satisfied in the soft light that no one would ever suspect I was a grandmother.

The next morning by the time I had showered and dressed, mother was already in the kitchen, eating her cereal. In the stark sunlight, she looked bad, worse than bad. The spoon doddered its way between her bowl and

her mouth. The trembling spoon unnerved me. I feared it would not be long before I'd have to tuck a napkin under her chin and feed her like a baby. I felt my eyes swimming, and stuck my head inside the refrigerator.

"You sleep?" I asked her. Mother and I are both thin sleepers.

I grabbed some oranges off the back porch and started to squeeze myself some fresh juice.

"I dreamed she came here with the baby. We were all sitting out on the lanai playing cards, even the baby. We had a special deck made up just for him. Isn't that wierd?"

"I've heard weirder." I tossed some cheese and crackers into a baggie. "I'll be in the studio," I said. "You want anything before I go?"

Mother shook her head, dabbing at some dribbled milk on her robe. "I thought I'd just write some letters," she said. "You got anything for the postman when he comes?"

"No I don't." I plunked her cereal bowl in the sink and sponged off the counter.

"You worried she's going to be trouble or ask for money? For all we know, she's married to a brain surgeon with His and Her Cadillacs. Dallas is full of rich people."

"She didn't mention any husband at all," I said, getting drawn into it despite myself.

"Maybe you're worried 'like mother, like daughter,'" She was leafing through a rosebush catalouge now, pretending nonchalance. "It's no disgrace these days, you know. Nowadays you'd be hard-pressed to think what you could do to disgrace yourself."

I lit a cigarette. Since mother had to quit smoking, I tried to limit my smoking to the studio, but every once in a while she got on my nerves.

"Give me one," she said.

"You know you can't." I exhaled a smoke ring, followed by another one. They floated in the air like a pair of handcuffs.

"Just a puff," she pleaded.

Mother had smoked two packs of Camels a day for over thirty years. She liked to say that nothing could be harder than quitting smoking, not even dying. I put the cigarette to her lips and held it steady while she took a couple of drags. She closed her eyes and a look of pure pleasure stole over her features. Then I felt guilty. "That's enough." I doused the cigarette under the faucet.

“Maybe you’re worried she’ll be disappointed in you,” she said. “You know, that she’s had this big fantasy for all these years that maybe you were Grace Kelly or Margaret Mead and who could live up to that? No one. But you don’t have to, Fran, that’s the thing. You’re her flesh-and-blood mother and that’s enough. That’s all it’ll take.”

“Could we just drop this?” I wished I hadn’t doused the cigarette. When she got onto some topic, it didn’t make the least bit of difference to her if you preferred not to discuss it.

“You call me if you need me,” I said.

She nodded and waved me away. When I looked back at her through the screen door, she was sitting there frail and dejected, with those watery blue eyes magnified behind her bifocals, massaging her heart.

The studio was mercifully cool and quiet. I stared back and forth between the blue bowl of oranges on the table and the blue bowl of oranges I had painted on paper clipped to my easel. I dipped my brush in water and mixed up some brown and yellow on my pallet until I got the citrusy color I was after. I wondered if she, Linda Rose—there *was* something in mother and me that resisted naming her after all these years—had inherited my eye. Maybe she had it and didn’t even know it. Maybe she had been raised all wrong. Which was entirely possible, starting out with a tacky name like Linda Rose. She probably grew up twirling a baton and never even picked up a paint brush. I would have named her something cool and elegant like “Claire,” not something that sounds like what you would call a motorboat.

As I focused on my oranges, the rest of my life blurred and faded away. I didn’t give Linda Rose another thought that afternoon. Then I did what I always do when I finish a painting, my ritual. I lit a cigarette and sat in the canvas director’s chair against the wall, facing the easel. As I stared at the painting, I gradually became more and more attuned to my other senses: the clatter of birds in the banyan tree, the salty breeze, the ache in my lower back, the taste of smoke. When I was satisfied that I was satisfied with the painting, I reached for the blue bowl, selected the most fragrant orange, peeled it and ate it with slow deliberation, section by section. Then I washed my hands and headed up the path towards the house to fix mother her lunch.

Mother was crying in front of the television set when I walked in.

“What happened?” I peered at the set expecting to see some melo-

drama, but it was just a quiz show. The contestants looked hyper-cheerful.

"I can't get this open." She handed me her pain-killers which were in a plastic vial. "You forgot to tell them no safety caps." Her quivering lips and trembling voice were a study in reproach.

"What if I did? It's certainly nothing to cry about." I pried the cap off and handed her the pills. "Here."

"I need some water."

I brought her a glass of water with a slice of lemon, the way she liked it.

"It seems like a little thing," she said. "But it's just one little thing after another. Like an old car. This goes, that goes. Pretty soon you're just waiting for the next part to give out."

"That's no way to talk," I said. "Come on now."

A couple of times she lifted the water glass up off the table and then set it down again as if it were too heavy.

"Here." I picked the glass up and tilted it to her lips. She took a few sips and then waved it away. Water cascaded down her chin.

"I don't believe in my body anymore," she said. "It won't be long now." She closed her eyes, as if she were trying out being dead. It scared me.

"I sure as hell don't know what's got into you," I shouted. I was rummaging through the kitchen cupboard. "You want Gazpacho or Golden Mushroom?"

"Don't shout," she shouted, motoring herself into the kitchen. "I'm not hungry."

I sighed and opened a can of soup. Even in summer, mother and I live on soup.

"We're having Gazpacho," I said. "Chilled."

I poured the soup, threw an ice cube into each bowl, and stirred it around with my finger.

"I was thinking about what you'll do once I'm gone," she said.

I pushed her up close to the table, like a baby in a high chair. She ignored the bowl of soup in front of her.

"You've never been alone before. I don't like to think of you here all by yourself," she said.

"Maybe I'll like it."

"Maybe." She picked her spoon up and pushed it around in her soup.

“But I doubt it. Just close your eyes for a minute and imagine this place is empty except for you . . . Come on now. Close them.”

“Jesus Christ.” I sighed and slammed my eyes shut.

“How’s it feel?”

“Peaceful.” I glared at her. “Very peaceful.” But, in truth, this shiver of loneliness rippled along my spine.

“You write to your daughter,” she said.

Then, as if she’d exhausted that subject, she nodded off to sleep, wheezing lightly. When I turned my back to wash the dishes, her spoon clattered to the floor. I wanted to stuff her nylon nightgowns into an overnight bag and drive her to the hospital, where experts would monitor her vital signs and, at the first hint of failure, hook her up to some mysterious life-support system until I was ready to let her go. I picked her spoon up off the floor and rinsed it under the tap.

While mother slept, I sat out on the lanai staring at a blank sheet of stationery until sunset. I had never been a letter writer. Even Thank You notes and Get Well cards seemed to call for more than I had to say. Once or twice I’d tried to write a letter to my father—in the spirit of reconciliation or revenge, depending on my mood—but the words seemed to stick in my mind. In the old days, when mother still kept in touch with her friends up north, I used to marvel at how she could fill up page after page, her ballpoint flitting across the calm surface of the scented page like a motorboat skimming through water, her sentence trailing along in its wake like a waterskier holding on for dear life. “Chatting on paper,” she called it. I preferred postcards. When mother and I took a 12-day tour of Europe for my thirtieth birthday, I sent back El Grecos from the Prado, Turners from the Tate, Cezannes from the Jeu de Paume. I don’t have many friends and those I have wouldn’t expect more than a couple of hasty lines on the back of a picture postcard. Mother didn’t even bother with postcards. Over the years, her letters had shrunk to notes and then to nothing. At Gatwick Airport, going home, I bought a biography of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor to read on the plane. I have since read everything I can find about them. I understand them, but I don’t pity them. Their fate was a simple equation. When someone gives up the world for you, you become their world.

I sat on the lanai for hours in the wicker rocker—the smell of oranges from a bushel basket at my feet mingling with the lilac-scented station-

ery—pen poised, trying to think what I could say, what she would want to hear:

Dear Linda Rose,

Last night I slept with your picture under my pillow. Every year on your birthday mother and I would try to guess what you looked like and what you were doing . . .

Dear Linda Rose,

What is it you want from me? Our connection was a purely physical one. I have never shed a tear on Mother's Day.

From behind me I heard the faint whirr of mother's electric wheelchair crescendoing as she steered herself down the hall and across the living room to the lanai. The blank white stationery looked gray in the dusk.

"Did you write her?" She was wheezing again.

"Yes." I shut the lid of the stationery box. "You take your medicine? You don't sound good."

"Never mind me. What'd you say? Did you ask her to come here?"

"Not exactly." It was cool on the lanai, a damp breeze from the ocean. I buttoned my cardigan. "Are you warm enough?"

Mother dogged me into the kitchen. I took a package of lamb chops from the refrigerator.

"Where's the letter?" She was sorting through some stamped envelopes, mostly bills, in a basket on the sideboard.

"I already mailed it." I stuck the chops in the toaster oven. "You want instant mashed or Minute Rice?"

"Don't lie to me." She jabbed me in the rear with her fingernail. "I'm your mother."

"Just leave me be." I turned the faucet on full blast to drown her out, muttering curses, but I knew she would wait. I shut the water off and set the pan on the burner to boil.

"Even half dead I'm more alive than you are," she said.

In the bright overhead light she looked more than half dead. She looked maybe sixty or seventy per cent dead.

"You need a swift kick in the butt!" She wheeled her chair up behind me and tried to give me a swift one, but her toe only grazed my shin.

"Goddamnit. I tried to write it," I said. "I kept getting stuck."

“I’ll help you!” She stopped wheezing and something inside her rallied. Her spine snapped to attention. “I always could write a good letter.”

I imagined I could hear her brain heating up, words hopping around in there like kernels in a popcorn popper.

“Get some paper and pencil!” she commanded. She was chipping nail-polish off her thumbs, something she did when she got worked up.

The chops were spattering away in the broiler. The water was boiling on the stove. “After dinner,” I said.

I was fixing our plates when the phone rang. I hurried out of the kitchen and answered it in the hallway. “Hello?” I said. There was a silence, then a click, then a buzz. I hung up.

“Who was it?” Mother asked as I set a plate of food down in front of her.

“No one. They hung up.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said.

“Eat it anyway.” I dissected the meat on her plate into bite-size pieces. “There.”

After dinner, to make amends, I offered to paint mother’s nails for her. Mother graciously accepted. One thing about her, she can recognize an olive branch. Her chipped purple nails looked unsightly in the 100 watt glare. She closed her eyes and swayed her head in time to the music on the radio. I shook the little bottle of Peach Melba and painted away with the furious effort of a child trying to stay inside the lines of a coloring book. My breathing slowed. My hands steadied themselves. My concentration was perfect, dead on. Nothing existed except the tiny brush, the shimmer of color, and the Gothic arch of each nail.

“What’s that?” mother said. She opened her eyes.

“Schumann, I think.” I started on the second coat.

“Not that. I thought I heard a car door slam.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

A second later there was a loud pounding on the front door. It startled me and my hand skittered across mother’s, leaving a trail of peach.

“Told you.”

“Whoever it is, we don’t want any.” I set the brush back in the bottle. “Religion, encyclopedias, hair brushes . . .” I stood up and patted mother’s hand. “Be right back.”

“Don’t unlock the screen door.” She peeked through the drapes, careful

not to disturb the wet nailpolish. “Well, he’s got himself a flashy car for a Fuller Brushman.”

I put the chain on the door and opened it a crack. “Yes?” I said, peering into the darkness.

“Who is it?” mother yelled from the living room.

“It’s George Jeffries,” a man’s voice said.

I flicked on the porch light to get a good look at him.

“Who is it?” mother yelled again.

I didn’t answer her. A second later I heard the whirr coming up behind me. She came to a stop right beside me.

“Hello, Lillian. I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said. “I would’ve called. I guess I was afraid you’d hang up on me.”

“You’re right. We would have.” She was wringing her hands, smearing the nail polish all over.

“You could still slam the door in my face,” he said.

“Good idea,” mother said, but I was already unlocking the screen door and motioning him inside.

The disturbing part was we didn’t shout or cry or bare our souls to one another. We drank iced tea, then brandy, and conversed like three old friends who had lost touch with each other and were trying unsuccessfully to recapture something. Mother made a few barbed comments, tossed off a few poison darts, but my father just bowed his head and said, “You’re right,” or “I’m ashamed of myself,” or “I deserve worse,” and pretty soon she gave up. I could sense his shock every time he glanced at her. He didn’t look that well preserved himself, but she could have been his mother. I was mostly quiet. I couldn’t believe that this thin-haired, mild-mannered old gent was my father. The main thing I felt was gyped. He told us how he’d been married again, lasted about eight years, then she left him. He wouldn’t say who it was, but once he slipped and said Genevieve, and mother and I exchanged glances. We knew it was one of her old Bridge club members, a divorcee with three kids I used to babysit for. My father went on about those kids—the drugs, the shoplifting, the wild parties, the car wrecks—and implied it was what did the marriage in. I figured it was his backhanded way of telling me he realized that I hadn’t been so bad after all.

“Why now?” I said when he finished. “Why’d you come here after all these years?”

"I don't know," he said. "A while back someone named Linda Rose Caswell contacted me, said she was your . . . said you were her . . . that some agency had given her your name and wanted to know how to reach you. After that, I started thinking."

I nodded. The three of us were silent, not a comfortable silence.

"Then a couple of days ago—" he fumbled in his breast pocket "—she sent me this." He offered it hesitantly. It was another Polaroid, almost identical, except in this one the baby was crying.

I nodded and passed it back to him.

"We got one, too," mother said, not one to be outshone.

"Then I don't know," he shrugged. "I just packed my suitcase and started driving." He tucked the picture back inside his pocket and cleared his throat. "What about you? You haven't told me much about what you've been up to. I'm here to listen."

"We lead a quiet life," I said. "There's not really much to tell."

"It's a nice place you've got here," he said. We'd bought it with his money, mother's divorce settlement, but, to his credit, he didn't seem to be thinking about that.

"You should see Fran's paintings," mother said. "She's famous around here."

"That so?" my father said, smiling.

"You know how she exaggerates," I said.

"Well, I'd like to see them. In the morning." He looked at his watch. "I'm beat. You gals know a reasonable motel nearby?"

I looked at mother. She shrugged.

"We can put you in the spare room," I said.

"If you're sure it's no bother . . ." He looked at my mother, but she was busy chipping away at her thumb nails.

"It's no bother," I said. "The guest bed's all made."

That night, after they were both asleep, I sat down again with mother's stationery and a shot of whiskey and wrote to Linda Rose. It was a short note but this time the words just came. I told her it would mean a lot to mother and me if they could come visit us—mother was too sick to travel—and I offered to pay their plane fare. It wasn't much of a note really, under the circumstances, and once I sealed the envelope, I found myself adding lines to it in my mind.

It was after midnight and stone silent on the island except for the waves. My mouth felt dry, as if I'd been talking out loud for hours and hours. I chose an orange from the bushel basket sitting on the floor next to the rocker, bit into it, and spat the peel out onto the porch floor. They were runty greenish juice oranges from the small grove out back. The trees were so old they'd sprouted dark, spiny thorns. But their fruit was sweeter than those picture-perfect oranges you see in the supermarkets. From California. Imports.

As I sucked the juice out, I closed my eyes and imagined Linda Rose sitting across from me on the wicker sofa, telling me all about herself while the baby slept contentedly in my lap. I breathed in his baby smell of powder and sour milk. I felt his soft warmth, a pleasant weight against my belly, radiating inward. I began to rock, crooning in harmony with the squeaky floorboards, and as I rocked, I began to pile oranges on my lap, one after another, hugging them to me, until my lap was full of oranges, heavy with oranges. And then, for the first time all night, I felt something. It could have been the avalanche of oranges shifting in my lap, but it felt more like it was on the inside, more like something under the skin, something moving there inside me.