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RARE BIRD AND OTHER STORIES

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June, 1988

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MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

Fall, 2009

This thesis has been approved
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LISA J. SHARON

ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories and one novella use voice and setting to explore individual characters dealing with internal conflict, or relationships between characters who are engaged in conflict with each other. Each story is intended to be a “portrait” with varying degrees of detail and nuance. For the most part, the “antagonists” in these stories are not another person so much as they are circumstances in which the main character finds herself and which creates a need to confront and perhaps change her situation. Characters either take decisive action, escape into delusion, or merely cope with things as they are.

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Introduction

I was never one of those kids who sat under a tree and created stories for the entertainment of myself, my family, or my friends. I never kept a journal, or recorded my thoughts in a diary. When told to write something for school, I froze. Writing was not fun. At best it was a chore. At worst, it was an agony. I have, however, always been an avid reader and my interest in writing has grown out of that love of literature and a desire to enter into the world of literature as an active participant.

I began to write fiction in an effort to use words to create what I enjoy so much. When I quit my job as a lawyer, I embarked upon writing a novel. It was easy. I grew to love my characters and I was continuously fascinated by the plot. I had no fear of the empty page and I plowed onward getting my ideas down with the expectation that once I had the material to work with, I would simply manipulate it into a work of art like a sculptor molds clay. I researched and I wrote and rewrote, then wrote and rewrote again. And again. I made all the mistakes new fiction writers make. It was a dreadful novel.

It was then that I had my epiphany. Good writers choose their words carefully and think long and hard every step of the way. They don't just plow through the pages like a bulldozer clearing trees for a road. They take the time and make the effort to create tone, character, setting and ambience. Good writing isn't easy. Good writing is hard.

In his book, On Moral Fiction, John Gardner says, "Good writers invent style at least partly in order to be interesting to themselves and others – they mysteriously

‘find’ it as they ‘find’ their plots or subjects – and only then, as the style is emerging, do they try to work out the philosophical implications of the creature they’ve stumbled onto” (12). This writing philosophy is a lie designed to keep people like me from ever being writers. It suggests that if we are “good” writers we will miraculously stumble upon our style at the same time that we are happening upon our plots and subjects. The “good” writer is merely channeling heaven-sent inspiration to the page. I hear of writers who say that the book wrote itself. Or that they created a character and then stepped out of the way to let the character tell the story. It reminds me of long-distance runners who claim that if they run far enough, they hit “the wall” and then enter a state of euphoria in which their bodies seem to take over and carry them along. I’ve been a jogger for a long time but never achieved the point at which jogging was not a chore. I never reached that euphoric situation where my legs carried me without my brain forcing them to do so.

I turned to writing short stories largely because that was what was being assigned in my classes. But I grew to love the short story as a device that allows the author to explore an idea or a character in ways to which the longer form of the novel is less conducive. “Writers of short stories must forgo the comprehensiveness of the novel, but they often gain a striking compression by using language with the force of poetry” (Charters 3). The short story has the power to isolate and focus on, or twist, or talk around, a character, an event, a joke or a broad concept, to the point that the reader sees it perhaps for the first time, or at least in a surprising way. Truth is as the writer imagines it. In his essay “How to Tell a True War Story,” Tim O’Brien said “a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is

irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (83).

Beyond that, it appears that when it comes to theme, style, or scope, anything goes. From the mathematical precision and humor of Jorge Luis Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” to the subtle emotions and dreamy quality brought out by the magical realism of Elizabeth Graver’s, “The Mourning Door.” In form, the short story may resemble a prose poem, with little movement or narrative arc, as in the case of “Girl,” by Jamaica Kincaid, or it may resemble a novel, with broad thematic ideas stretching over the course of longer period of time and through significant action, as in the case of “Heart of Darkness,” by Joseph Conrad. “The range and quality of the writer’s mind are the only limitations on the shape taken by a story” (Charters 4).

“Voice” is a significant component of any work of fiction, but particularly a work of short fiction where the voice of the character can stand for so much of what is not said in exposition. In “Titanium,” a story in Primo Levi’s collection The Periodic Table, a little girl watches a painter in her house. So much of what he does is mysterious and vaguely threatening to her, though it is clear to the reader that his actions are in fact mundane and benign. When she pesters him, he draws a chalk circle around her and tells her to stay put. She understands that she is in an enchanted circle that she cannot leave until he rubs it away with his cloth. Then, having been freed from her imaginary confinement, she skips off, “happy and satisfied.” Because the perceptions and misperceptions of the child are essential to understanding the story, the “voice” is paramount.

Joyce Carol Oates' "The Girl with the Blackened Eye," is another powerful voice-driven story. There, the narrator begins her retelling of an event in her life with, "This weird thing that happened to me, fifteen years old and a sophomore at Menlo Park High." Thus, a mood of anecdote, perhaps funny, but at least interesting, is established. Oates then proceeds to drag the reader down an unexpected path through kidnapping, rape and murder. The voice at the beginning raises expectations that are belied by the events and which, by their very contrast, increase the emotional impact of the story.

In the set of stories that I have submitted, I have emphasized character and the often strained relationships that create internal conflict. I have used either first person narrative or close third person to get inside my characters' heads using voice and setting to establish context and perception. For the most part, I have not delved deeply into character self-reflection, instead allowing the situation and action to speak for the character's feelings and motivations.

In the case of my novella, "Glen Willow Gardens," I entered into the mind of Alma and expressed the world through her eyes. I attempted to give her the voice that would best convey a mix of childish rebellion and adult compassion. In "Air Force Ones," my goal was to show Sissy's nervousness and underlying fear of her boyfriend while at the same time allowing her to struggle to deny his obviously violent tendencies. "The Stag" uses magical realism to explore the sadness a woman feels as her son gains independence from her, and as his maturity intrudes upon her idealized memories of his childhood. Likewise, in "Rare Bird," a woman tries to hang on to her past romantic view of her husband eighteen months after he has died

and the reality of who he was is no longer paraded before her. Finally, in the short piece, “Helen, Anna and Catherine,” I simply had fun with the relationship between eleven-year-old triplets who each cope with sibling rivalry by relegating her siblings to the fantasy of clones.

These stories are my start down the road of fiction writing. They are my attempt to create what I have enjoyed for so long; characters that are recognizable and compelling, and stories that grab the imagination.

Rare Bird

Soon as he said, “Hey Bernie,” I knew he was out to get my goat. And it wasn’t just the smirk on his face that told me either. My name’s Bernadette, my nickname’s Bernadette, and my pet names are all Bernadette. And Sheriff Jimmy Drake, who I wrestled to the ground sixty years ago when I was four and he was six, knew that my name was Bernadette sure as he knew that his own mother was buried by that white oak tree up on Juniper Hill.

I was on my way up that very hill to find the nest of a male long-eared owl I’d been hearing over the last couple of nights, hooting its soft call into the night sky. It had become my practice over the sixteen months since Hank had been gone, to take a hike every morning. I’d hike up over Juniper Hill and into the valley by Deer River. From there, I could walk five miles in either direction through a variety of terrain and foliage, from flat, grassy flood plains where the least bitterns hid, to woods of pine, maple and oak where the warblers would tease me with their calls from deep within dense bushes.

It was one such morning that Jimmy and his deputy, Ralph Krakowski, stopped me just outside my house.

“I ain’t seen Hank in a long time, Bernie,” Jimmy said like he was interested in passing the time, and had just observed that Hank was gone.

It wasn't unusual for Hank to go missing from time to time. Three years after we were married and two months after my first miscarriage, he ran off with the cashier at the Tasty Mart who used to twirl her blond hair around her finger while she pushed the buttons on the cash register. He was gone for almost nine months. Then he came back like nothing had happened. The last time was three years ago when he and Fern Alvorson headed off to start a farm together in Kansas. She took her husband's savings out of the watering can, and the shovel off the porch. She must have thought a shovel was a good all-around tool to start off in the corn-growing business. They had a car accident right outside of town and I guess Fern saw the error of her ways right then, 'cause she dumped him, drunk and bleeding, on my front lawn. I took him to the hospital and they patched him up, but the doctor said it was one concussion too many. That's when he started collecting disability. Nine hundred a month.

Over the years, people in town and at church got so they hardly even remarked on his disappearances anymore. Course I don't go to church much these days. Mostly I meet up with God on my bird-watching expeditions. I quit going after I was cold-shouldered off the church bazaar committee when I asked Jimmy Drake's wife, Betty Sue, if I could have a chisel to cut through the crust of her peach pie. There aren't too many folks who venture to pry into my business anymore—which is just fine with me.

“Well, Jimmy, I haven't seen much of him lately either,” I answered like the thought just dawned on me too.

“Off on one of his adventures, is he?” Jimmy said. I caught the wink he gave Ralph, though he rubbed his eye after like it was a piece of dirt that worried him. “I woulda thought he’d a taken his car,” he added.

Ralph snorted and nodded. With his sweat-stained cowboy hat pulled down almost to his eyebrows, Ralph looked like a junior Jimmy. Fact is, he couldn’t hardly wait to step into Jimmy’s size eleven brown leather shoes and pin that star to his chest. In fact, the whole town was waiting for Jimmy Drake to step down from his thirty-year role as town-swaggerer and hippy-whacker. Everybody was tired of his airs and the fact that they had to treat Betty Sue Drake like she was something special even though her shriek of a laugh could cut through steel.

I guess it was inevitable that Jimmy Drake would come poking around eventually.

* * *

Now, Hank coulda been dead a few days before I found him. He had moved into the shed where he used to keep his bigger tools and equipment. Just a bed, the night table, and the trunk with his clothes, were all that could really fit in there. I never went in ‘cause it smelled like the dickens, but judging from the collection of bottles I picked up every few days from the lawn under the window, I could tell what he was doing.

It was when I noticed that there were no bottles collecting that I started in to wondering. So I crept out there late one evening when it was neither daylight nor nighttime and the world was in its gray nightgown. I tried peeking in the only window, but it was grimy and partly covered over and I couldn’t see a thing. I knew

I'd just have to open the door, and if he was waiting, hatchet in hand, I'd take my fate. The metallic thrum of the crickets covered the creak of the door. He looked like a pile of dirty clothes. He smelled like a pile of something else all together.

I didn't think twice about it. I took off his gold-plated watch that he'd gotten from the sawmill when he retired. The wedding ring was stuck on his finger so I let it be. Then I took the wallet out of his back pocket. I lifted the shovel off the hook and headed out to find him a nice burial spot, somewhere the dogs and raccoons wouldn't dig him up.

There was a great big rock in my front yard which I thought would make a fitting burial marker, but I couldn't budge it. I went back to the shed. I had to cover my face with my hanky so as not to retch over everything. Hank had a long steel lever weighing upwards of twenty-five pounds. With the help of a smaller rock I levered that boulder over on its side. The grubs and potato bugs and worms would make nice eternal companions for my Hank.

I waited 'til full dark to dig the hole. I didn't have neighbors to speak of, but you never know when someone wouldn't come moseying up that road toward the cemetery, and it wouldn't do to be seen digging a hole in my front yard. The hole only had to be deep enough to fit Hank, but still the digging taxed my strength. I sat huffing and wheezing for a time before I went back for Hank. I dragged him by his heels over to the hole. That took some doing as he was a big man, and I was mostly holding my breath the whole time as the stink was fearsome.

I covered him over with dirt and rolled that rock right down over my knight in shining armor. Then I sat back and looked up at the moon winking at me. I started cashing the disability checks that very week.

Now here were Jimmy and Ralph smirking all over my front lawn and preventing me from getting my early start to investigate that long-eared owl.

“Well, Jimmy, you just let me know when you find ‘im,” I said thinking that, after sixteen months in the ground, nature would have done her work and Hank wouldn’t be much more’n a pile of bones by now.

I turned to head off after my bird.

* * *

I took the path that led around the south bend of Deer River. I imagined the long-eared owl perched in the tulip tree that towered over the maples and birches. Truth was, I was surrounded by a certain contentment. It was a contentment I had felt from time to time during my marriage to Hank, and it always came when he was away.

The Hank I knew when he was gone was the very Hank I had fallen for in my teenage years—lively and happy, full of interesting things to talk about and do. It was like one of the fairy tales I used to read as a child, where the prince was under an enchantment which made him a ferocious bear during the day and only at night, when the day gave over to the softening of the moon and stars that the true prince emerged to reveal his innermost being.

Hank’s innermost self was only present when his outermost self wasn’t. And it was at those times, when he was gone, that I’d pull our honeymoon photo out of the

box in the closet and set it up at the kitchen table, right at Hank's spot. It showed Hank standing a full foot taller than me with his dark eyes flashing out from under his black hair, his arm wrapped around me and both of us with great big smiles. The Niagara Falls created a background of mist so we looked like we were caught in a land of enchantment. When Hank was off on one of his "adventures" I took to keeping company with the Hank of that photo, and I was content.

Now I still felt his presence. It's funny, I suppose, but the farther I got from civilization the less alone I felt. It was like Hank was keeping me company, traipsing through those woods with me. That young Hank who'd run his fingers through my hair and laugh when I blushed hot and red. I didn't find my bird but I headed home feeling satisfied nonetheless.

* * *

After a morning's walk along Deer River I always had a hankerin' for soup and a smoked turkey sandwich. I took the copper-bottom pan down from the hook on the wall. The pan had a dent in the bottom that went with the scar on my shoulder—a relic from the early days of my marriage. I poured the soup into the pan then collected the fixings for my sandwich, but damned if the turkey wasn't turned. I shut the refrigerator door and looked out the window trying to decide which hankering in me was stronger—the one for turkey, or the one to stay home and away from the crush of humanity in town. My grumbling stomach answered the question so I grabbed my hat and headed out the front door.

I had gotten into the habit of giving Hank a little nod every day when I headed down my gravel driveway. It was the most cordial I'd been to him in years. But

knowing that he was lying under a three foot boulder, consorting with the worms and grubs, I didn't find him so intimidating as I once did.

But something about that boulder stayed on my mind, and when I got to the car I turned to look at it. It's a fact that when I get hungry my eyes play tricks on me, but I would have sworn that that boulder, nestled amid overgrown forsythia and rhododendron, was angled just a bit different than it was when I said goodnight to Hank from my bedroom window the night before. I had to chuckle to myself. If Hank was trying to move that big old rock from the underneath, he wasn't having much success.

I tried to start the car but the engine seemed to lack the energy to turn over. I almost headed back to the house. Not having a car meant not being able to drive to Cole, seven miles away, where no one knew me. I'd have to walk into Millersburg if I was to satisfy my hunger. Well, maybe Jimmy Drake would have told everyone about our talk this morning and the town gossips wouldn't feel the need to worry me with their questions.

The trip from my house to the town of Millersfield is like walking down the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. Up near my house, halfway between the center of town and the cemetery on Juniper Hill, the world is wide open—just the trees and the birds providing all the company a person could want. Half a mile from my house the dirt road comes to be covered with black tar that in the summer feels like Hell is located just underneath. Next thing you know you're on a sidewalk and the wide world is covered over with buildings and benches, bus depots, and parking lots.

People come in and out of stores and you have to jump from side to side to avoid crashing into someone every few feet.

Well, wouldn't you know that the first thing I see as I walk past the Post Office is Mildred Sawyer having a smoke next to the door at the top of the stone steps. I looked away in the hope that she'd let me be, but that was like hoping that the squirrels wouldn't eat the seeds off your sunflowers before you could get to them.

"Well if it ain't Bernadette," she said. I looked up and gave her a nod, all business, and kept on moving. "Yoo hoo. Don't run off like that. I haven't had a word with you in ages, and I'm just dying to catch up." She dashed after me with her hips swinging and her cigarette held over her head like she was walking a tightrope.

"Hi there, Millie."

"How you been, Bernadette?"

"I'm just dandy."

"I ain't seen Hank around lately. He been laid up?"

"I ain't seem him for quite some time either, Millie, so I can't say whether he's laid up or no."

I could see Ted Phillips peeking out from behind a forest of rake handles leaning up against the window on the inside of his hardware store. Behind Ted, Stu Amati was laughing and glancing over at me, too. They were waiting to pounce on Millie soon's she was done with me, to find out what she learned.

Millie sucked in on her cigarette and looked around for inspiration to get me talking. "Well, you heard about Sally Ann's girl, I guess," she finally said.

I couldn't figure why Millie might think I could be stalled with gossip about Sally Ann Stevenson and her pack of brats. "No, I ain't heard nothin' about Sally Ann's girl, and I don't guess I'm going to." I walked off after my turkey 'cause my stomach had no time for Millie and her nattering.

It was when I was on my way out of town with my turkey that a strange thing happened. I was walking past the Autoglass with my head down so as not to attract conversation, when I heard "Bernie!" coming out of the depths of the Autoglass. Now if I don't recognize my own husband's voice then I'm a loon. It was Hank all right. I stopped at the door of the Autoglass and poked my head in. Once my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could see that the place was empty except for Rufus standing behind the bar with the newspaper spread out in front of him. He looked up at me. "Hey Bernadette," he said. "Hank ain't here."

"I know. I'm just looking," I said backing out to the sidewalk. I guess it's not just my eyes play tricks on me when I'm hungry.

* * *

The first night I slept in the shed it was after I'd been out on one of my rambles. It had been a good day. I'd seen a rare Mississippi Kite, and I'd managed to fill my canvas bag with spiceberries to add to my applesauce, and some poor man's pepper for my dandelion salad. Eating this way, I hadn't had to go in to Millersburg since the summer.

As I tramped past the shed I remembered that I had never cleaned up after Hank. I opened the door. The smell wasn't so strong anymore. I tossed a stale bottle of whiskey out on the lawn. Some clothes that looked like they had provided a nest

for a family of field mice went out, too. I shook out the sleeping bag Hank had used instead of linens, and then I spread it back down over the mattress. The room had a cozy feel and I thought I could smell a little of Hank's musky scent. I lay down on the bed and next thing I knew, the screech of an early morning jay woke me.

Over time I found myself in the shed more than in my own big house.

* * *

It was our anniversary that made me go back to church. I hadn't been since Hank died. Of course I wasn't paying much attention to dates, but the soft fall air and the deep red of the burning bushes at the cemetery brought to mind my wedding day and I knew the date was close. I woke one morning to the sound of the church bells calling me. I thought of the rose window that had shone over Hank's head on that day I walked down the aisle holding my bouquet of carnations in shaking hands.

It had been a mistake to go to church. People's staring eyes prevented my mind from traveling back to my wedding. I felt like an insect under a glass and I was anxious to return home. The choir warbled their last note and I heaved a great sigh, nodded to the folks that ventured to extend their blessings on me, and headed toward the open air. But Jimmy Drake stopped me just outside the big front doors of the church.

"Bernadette, could I have a word with you?"

"Have a word," he said. And no "Bernie" either, just my name, Bernadette. That was official talk.

We headed down the stone steps of the old church, and stood on the grass next to the walk that led to the parking lot.

“How’re you doing, Bernadette?” His face looked strained.

“I’m doing just fine, Jimmy. Thanks for asking. You look a might ill, though.”

“No, no. Say, I was going to come out to your place tomorrow. Got something to talk to you about.”

The congregation flowed around us like we were rocks in a stream. All except Millie Sawyer who sauntered by rummaging through her purse and lingering within earshot. I glared at her but she took no notice.

“It’s just, Bernadette . . . It’s just that we ain’t seen Hank in longer’n usual. It’s been years since he last took off and to tell the truth, I just didn’t think he had another adventure like that in him.”

“Listen to that,” I said.

“What?”

“It’s a Carolina Chickadee. Sweetest sound on God’s green earth.”

The look Jimmy gave me was much like a bird’s look, with his head a little cocked to one side like he was listening for a worm underfoot. It seemed like a full minute before he said, “What I need to know, Bernie, is just where Hank has got to.”

A whiff of smoke carried over the cool breeze, giving Millie away. I turned to find her leaning up against the oak tree that drops acorns on the church roof. She was puffing away on one of her extra long cigarettes.

“And just what do you have to say for yourself, Miss Millie?” She might have jumped out of her three-inch heels for the start I gave her. Jimmy nodded her off and she sashayed over to join Betty Sue. My eyes followed her toward the crowd that had

not yet left the fellowship of the parking lot. A black head of hair stood out among the stragglers. It was hair I knew very well and it started my heart to pounding. I watched that head expecting any second to see Hank's dark eyes look toward me and give me a wink. I felt sure he was telling me not to give over to worries about the gossip of townsfolk.

"Isn't that right, Bernadette?" Jimmy was saying.

I looked up at him then back toward the parking lot, but I couldn't see Hank anymore.

"Bernadette, Mitch, from the bank, called me on Friday," Jimmy said. "It seems you've been cashing in Hank's disability checks for him, these past months." He glanced at me then took to studying his shoe, though I couldn't see what was so interesting about it.

"Well he can't cash 'em, can he?" I wanted to see Hank again and I was losing patience with Jimmy Drake.

"That's just it, Bernie. We're all wondering why Hank can't collect 'em hisself. Where's he got off to? If you know, I think it's time you start telling."

I thought of Hank heading home ahead of me. I was anxious to get going, hoping to catch up to him on the road. "Why I was just talking to him this morning, it so happens," I said.

Jimmy looked skeptical. He probably knew that Hank and I didn't do much talking in normal times. "That's real good, Bernie." He squinted at me. "Mitch wants to talk to Hank. How about if I let him know that Hank's been poorly but that as soon as he's right again Hank'll come on by the bank?"

I remembered how proud I used to be of my Hank when he first started coming 'round to call on me. I was the luckiest girl in Millersfield when Hank Forman took notice of me. Weren't folks surprised to see that I could dress up so fine. How I used to love to show him off, and myself, too.

I smiled at Jimmy. "No, no, Jimmy Drake. You bring that bank man by after lunch and Hank and I will serve you up a nice cold glass of lemonade. And bring your pretty wife."

He looked at me like he didn't remember what lemonade was. But he nodded all the same and said, "Okay, then."

* * *

It was after I had left the town and the church behind and was on the dirt road toward home that I heard that old familiar voice.

"Bernadette!"

I turned, and there he was coming out from among the mock orange bushes alongside the road—Hank. He was slim and smiling. It was my Hank—young and handsome—the Hank that I'd first seen when I was twelve. The Hank who could laugh so's anyone nearby had to laugh too, just to share with him that little bit. It was the Hank who sat with me by the river when I was sixteen, and braided dandelions into my hair and kissed the back of my neck.

"How's my girl?" he said giving me a squeeze.

My laugh sounded like a teenager, I was that glad to see him. I told him about our guests. He looked a little concerned when I told him about Mitch, the bank man. "Whatcha going to tell him, Bernie?" he asked me.

“Well, I won’t have to tell him anything, will I? You’ll be there to do the talking,” I reminded him.

He seemed just fine with that, so I took his hand and we walked back to the house together with him sheltering me from the gusty fall breeze that blew my hair across my cheek and dropped leaves under our crunching feet.

When we got home I told Hank to just stay put on the front porch while I got things ready. I admit that I had some tingling throughout my body at the thought of entertaining guests. It had been years since Hank and I had had visitors. I thought I’d put on my light blue blouse with the flowers embroidered on the placket over the buttons. I hadn’t worn that blouse since Hank and I got back from our honeymoon and we had that romantic dinner at Sal’s Eatery in town.

I had to think about where to have my guests sit. Hank and I once had big plans for the front room we called the parlor. Hank was going to build shelves alongside the windows and we had already picked out the matching furniture from Harrelson’s in Cole which we intended to buy once we had saved up the cash. Truth be told, though, Hank and I didn’t have much need for a parlor during the forty-five years of our marriage. Hank always did his entertaining at the Autoglass or in motels in Cole.

It was to be the front porch. We had a swing that just needed a pillow to make it comfortable, and I could bring out two of the kitchen chairs. If Jimmy decided to bring along more people, well, I’d just have to make do.

I swept the fall leaves off the porch, scooting Hank out of my way, and brought out the chairs. There was a small wooden table in the parlor that would be

perfect for setting the lemonade on. I could keep filling glasses as my guests finished them up and we would probably sit and chat for hours that way. The only problem was that I didn't have any lemons to make lemonade. Instead, I pulled out a handful of mint leaves from the plants that had taken over the grassy area behind the house, and crushed them with a hammer. With the right amount of sugar and ice water they would make a refreshing drink.

I thought about what Hank should wear. Before he died his belly had outgrown most of his old shirts, but I thought it likely that a shirt from his younger days would fit him nicely now. The red and black flannel shirt that he wore when we rode horses near Niagara Falls would be perfect. It brought out the sparkle in his eyes and made his teeth seem to shine extra white when he smiled. I took it out of the box and shook it to get the musty smell out. Then I went outside to get Hank. He was nowhere to be seen. He wasn't in the house either. Wasn't that just like him. I hadn't cried in many years, but I could feel some pressure behind my eyes. The crush of knowing he had disappeared again was too heavy for me to bear. I sat down on the top step of the porch and stared over the browns and oranges of the woods by Deer River. I studied two blackbirds intent on bringing misery to a soaring red-tailed hawk, until an idea brought a smile to my face.

I stood up and went out to the shed. I got the lever that I had used eighteen months ago. It was a struggle to roll that boulder over but I eventually had success. I huffed a few breaths before heading back to the shed for the shovel. The soil was packed down but Hank wasn't too far under it, so after a few good shovelful I hit bone. I moved more carefully then. I didn't want to hurt him. I dug the last bits with

my hands, gently wiping the dirt off Hank's grinning skull. He had a warm smell of earth and decaying leaves. I cupped my hands around the smooth bone and lifted him by the head. It came off in my hands leaving the rest of the bones behind. This was something I hadn't anticipated. I thought about trying to piece him together somehow but there seemed no way to do that. I'd have to make do with the head. After all, that was what people came to see. I found a long stick. Not as long as Hank but that was for the best because we'd be sitting and it wouldn't do for him to tower over us. I filled a bucket with dirt and set it on the porch then I stuck the stick in it and placed Hank's grinning head on the stick. Once I draped the shirt around the stick and held it in place with pins, Hank looked presentable.

Course, I looked a right mess. I was starting to fret about time. After-church lunches would soon be over and my guests could arrive at any time. I hurried through a shower, and got dressed as quickly as I could. I took my time with my hair, though. Having long, full hair requires extra care but it's worth it to see it shine. Hank always liked my hair.

I put the mint refresher and six glasses on a tray and carried them out to the front porch. There was Hank right where I'd left him, glad as could be to see me looking so pretty. I gave him a lady-like nod and set the tray down on the little table then I sat down in the chair next to Hank and looked out over the road.

Air Force Ones

Sissy stole a glance at Jimmy. He was using his finger to stir the ice around in his Bourbon. She couldn't tell if he had heard her so she said it again. "I'm pregnant."

She knew he must have heard her that time, even through the jumble of noise from the multiple TV's, the blaring music, and the middle-aged softball players who stood by the bar rehashing their game. She had said it loud enough that the girl with the straight black hair at the table next to theirs looked over at her. But still he said nothing, just watched the ice spinning in the amber liquid, his face showing no emotion.

She hadn't intended it to be like this. She had thought she would tell him someplace private. She pictured them sitting on the couch at his apartment. Maybe some soft music playing. They'd have a glass of wine even though he didn't like wine. He'd have his arm around her and she'd snuggle close, feeling safe and warm. After he'd absorbed the surprise, he'd kiss her hair and say, "That's great news, Baby."

But he'd insisted on going out. He said his boss at the yard had been ragging on him all day. He was out of bourbon and he needed a drink. It had taken two weeks for Sissy to get her courage up, and she was determined to tell him that night no matter where they ended up. Anyway, she thought, a public place might be better.

“Only six weeks,” she said. Then she worried that it would sound like she was offering to have an abortion, but she had already decided that another abortion wasn’t for her. Cassie had gone with her that time four years ago when she was seventeen. She had held her hand while they waited for the nurse to call Sissy’s name. Cassie had brushed the hair off her sweaty forehead when she threw up in the parking lot afterward. Later she and Cassie had sworn over burning incense in Cassie’s tiny living room that they would find themselves nice men to marry. Men who would take care of them. Men with jobs. But handsome too, like Jimmy and Roy.

Jimmy took his finger out of his drink and put it in his mouth, looking at her for the first time since she’d told him. He seemed relaxed and unconcerned, and Sissy dared to hope that he’d smile.

“But I’m sure,” she went on. “I took the test twice. Besides, I could already tell. A girl knows. Some can tell almost the next day. It’s amazing how you can be so in touch with your body that you just know when you’re pregnant. I read about it in a magazine. You’re more complete, you know? That’s how it was with me only it didn’t happen the next day. I felt it about two weeks later. I wake up and say to myself, ‘I’m pregnant.’ I just know, you know?” She stopped. His expression was unchanged and she felt embarrassed at having confessed so much.

Jimmy picked up his glass and drained the liquid out of it, making a sucking noise against the ice. Then he put the glass down on the table, careful to place it in the same circle of condensation that it had been in before. He leaned against the booth and put his arm along the back, his hand resting on the strip of silver duct tape

that covered a tear in the dark green vinyl. His black leather jacket opened to show a faded black t-shirt with a picture of a grinning skeleton on a motorcycle. He squinted at her through the smoke that snaked up from the cigarette in the full ashtray. The dull, yellow light that hung over the table illuminated the clouds of smoke and gave his face a washed-out look.

Sissy flashed back to when she'd first seen Jimmy, sitting in this same bar with Cassie and Roy, Cassie with a pink drink in front of her, and a bottle of bourbon on the table between the two men. He had given her the broad Jimmy smile when she slid into the booth next to him—straight white teeth, dark eyebrows raised. He and Roy were in a good mood, laughing about their co-workers at the yard and teasing Cassie and Sissy about their sweet drinks and the way they sang along with the music coming from the speakers in the corners. Sissy had found her mind straying from the laughter and conversation to the thought of Jimmy's lips against hers.

She wanted to see that smile now, but his lips were closed and his eyebrows remained in a straight line, conveying nothing. She took a deep breath. "Cassie'll help me out. It's not like I haven't watched her kids enough. I practically brought those kids up. When Brianna wants to know what to do about some problem at school, she comes to Aunt Sissy before she asks her own mother. Those kids are like they're mine. Well, maybe not Zack, but he's just like his father, you know. You can't do anything about him. He's only eleven and he's already out on the street." She paused, wondering if Jimmy's blank expression masked disapproval. "Oh, I don't mean Roy is a bad guy. He's got a job and everything. He treats Cassie okay, I guess. She's not the easiest person in the world to live with." She gave a short laugh.

“Don’t I know it. I lived with her for three years, don’t forget. Hell, I almost hit her once or twice myself.”

She wished she had a drink. She hadn’t ordered one when they sat down, hoping Jimmy would ask her why, and she could tell him about the pregnancy right away instead of having to think of a way to bring it up. But he hadn’t asked. Didn’t even raise his eyebrows. His mind didn’t seem to be on her. Now she needed something to do with her hands.

She looked at his pack of cigarettes lying on the table between them. She rarely smoked, but she wanted a cigarette. Maybe he would offer her one. But why should she wait for him to offer? They had been seeing each other for five months. She could just take a cigarette. That’s what couples did. They took each other’s cigarettes without asking. They ate off each other’s plates. They drank from the same glass. She could just take a cigarette.

She started to reach for the pack but he was still staring at her. She smiled and ran the hand that was going for the cigarette through her hair. Maybe she’d go to the bathroom. When she came back, he’d probably say something about the baby. But his eyes pinned her to the booth.

She took a quick breath. “Did you notice I colored my hair? It’s called sunrise. The color, I mean. Not my hair.” She laughed. “I thought a lighter color would look nice with my complexion and all. Cassie colors her hair too dark, don’t you think? It makes her look pale.” He raised an eyebrow slightly then shook the last cigarette out of the pack and lit it with the butt of his old cigarette. He inhaled deeply blowing the smoke toward the ceiling then he settled his gaze back on Sissy. Her

voice shook a little, but she kept talking. “Some people just shouldn’t dye their hair black. Like older ladies. It just makes them older-looking, you know? Like Mrs. Halvorson, my English teacher when I was in the eighth grade? She had her hair so dark she looked like she was straight out of a vampire movie. I swear to God her teeth were sharp, too. Uh huh. That was one scary lady.” She paused. She tapped her fingers on the graffiti-carved table top. “Course, your mom looks good,” she said quickly. “I didn’t mean that. I mean your mom looks about thirty-five. She could do anything she wants with her hair.”

He looked over her shoulder toward the TV at the end of the bar. He had a half-smile on his face. Sissy recognized the smile. It was the one she’d seen just before he took the tire iron out from behind the back seat of the car and went after those kids that night in June. Stupid, drunk kids looking for trouble. He could have killed the small one, the one who couldn’t run fast, but he didn’t. One whack across the shoulders to teach him a lesson and that was it.

“Of course, I could get an abortion. If you wanted me to. I could. It’s still early. I told you as soon as I knew. I mean, as soon as I knew for sure. I wasn’t going to tell you that day when I had that feeling ‘cause what if I’d been wrong. It would have been wrong to get you all worked up and then find out that I was just sick or something. I just wanted to wait until I was sure. I’m only telling you ‘cause I respect what you want me to do, and you have a right to know, you know? I mean, I want the baby and all. I would take care of it, and Cassie would help me for sure. You could help if you want. But, hey, you didn’t ask to have a baby. It’s not like it’s your fault. I mean, I could just take care of it myself.”

He stood up suddenly and Sissy gasped. He waved the waitress over. “Jack Daniels over ice.” The waitress looked down at Sissy. “Nothing for her,” Jimmy said.

Sissy laughed with relief. “Oh, yeah. I’m not supposed to be drinking. Being pregnant and all. Got to look after my health.”

He was still standing. Towering over her, his broad shoulders blocked the bar from her view. But he didn’t look down at her. He reached into the pocket of his jacket. Sissy watched, imagining the heavy, black gun that he kept in the drawer by his bed while he slept. She knew he carried it with him. She imagined the point aimed at her. She thought of what it would feel like to have her head explode and splatter all over the table. Brains would fly, maybe hit the ceiling and stick next to the wads of ancient paper napkins that had been launched there over the years. Maybe a piece of her skull would land on the plate of the black-haired woman at the next table. Sissy knew it would be loud. Louder than the music, louder than the boasting of the paunchy softball players, louder than a train roaring through the bar. She hoped she would be dead before she could hear the noise.

But he pulled out a new pack of cigarettes and smacked them against the palm of his hand while he sat back down. Sissy breathed again.

The waitress brought over another drink for him and replaced the ashtray. Jimmy’s eyes lingered on the waitress for a moment as she disappeared into the crowd then he took a long drink from his glass and jammed the butt of his cigarette into the ashtray with his thumb. He opened the new pack, wadding up the plastic wrapper in his fist and dropping it in the ashtray. He lit another cigarette.

Sissy started to say something, but she stopped when he made a sound.

“Yeah?” she said.

He leaned back in the booth and lifted his foot off to the side, so they could both see it. He studied his shoe. “You gotta love these fuckin’ shoes,” he said. Sissy looked at it. He was wearing some kind of basketball shoe.

“Huh?” she said.

“Air Force Ones. These fuckin’ shoes cost me a hundred fifty bucks. I got three pairs plus this one.” Sissy stared at him. “How much is that?” he said. Sissy said nothing while she tried to do the math. “Come on. How much? You’re the high school graduate. The smart one. A hundred fifty times four. What the fuck did you go to school for eighteen years if you can’t do that little math?” He took a drag off the cigarette then smiled at her. “Six hundred goddamn bucks for shoes,” he went on. “And you know what? They’re shit. You know why they’re shit?” Sissy shook her head. “They’re shit because of Nelly. I spend six hundred fuckin’ bucks on shoes then that mother fucker comes out with a song about them and every single goddamn pimply fourteen year old boy stops jerking off long enough to beg his mommy and daddy to buy him a pair of Air Force Ones.” He slammed his hand flat against the table top. Sissy jumped.

“That’s the trouble with kids these days. They’re like a swarm of bees with their stingers up their own asses. Don’t do a goddamned thing unless everyone is doing it. Not a single thought in their stupid-ass brains unless all their friends have the same thought.” He leaned back and crossed his arms. “Now when I was a kid, I was original. If all the kids wore black, I wore white. When they cut their hair short,

I grew mine long. I was the original original. Nobody tells me what to wear, or how to look. That's just who I am." He looked at her hard, as if making sure she had absorbed his point, then he turned to concentrate for a moment on the baseball game being shown on the TV over the bar.

Sissy fought back tears.

Jimmy sat back again and chuckled. "No one the fuck tells me what I can or can't wear." He sucked at his cigarette. Sissy smiled a tentative smile.

Jimmy looked at her with a slow considering look, squinting through the smoke. He picked up his glass in a decisive motion and drank the rest of his drink. Then he reached in his pocket, pulled out a wad of bills, and peeled off a twenty. He slapped it down on the table. "Let's go," he said and stood up.

"Okay, Jimmy." She put on her jacket and flipped her hair out from under the collar.

Jimmy walked behind her as they weaved over the sticky floor through the crowded bar. One bare bulb lit the narrow hallway that led to the rear exit. The beige paint was filthy from years of dirty hands holding up drunks as they staggered to the bathrooms. The odor of stale urine almost made Sissy gag. She was aware of Jimmy following her closely, but he didn't touch her. She pushed open the door to the parking lot. The cold air made her gasp, and she hugged her jacket close around her. Jimmy stayed just behind her as she headed out of the light over the door. After the noise of the bar, the thin night air magnified the sound of their feet crunching on the gravel of the dark parking lot.

As they approached Jimmy's car Sissy felt his hand press hard on the back of her neck. Here it comes, she thought.

Some things you just know.

Helen, Anna, and Catherine:

A Little More than Kin and Less than Kind

The three eleven-year-old girls sat close together on the bed and eyed the reporter warily, each of them wondering whether he would be able to see through the lies of her two “sisters.” For the interview they had dressed primly in identical black skirts and white blouses that buttoned up to their necks. They even wore their bushy dark hair in the same style, pushed back from their foreheads by broad white headbands. They could be differentiated only by their expressions. Reporters liked it when the girls dressed alike so their readers could see what eerily exact replicas they were of each other.

Anna, the middle girl, felt confident that morning. Her upright shoulders and raised chin exuded righteousness. She alone was able to smile for the camera.

On her left sat Catherine, looking concerned but resigned. For some reason, they never believed her. She would have been happy to skip the interview altogether, but that would have meant that there would be no one to speak for her, and who knew what Anna and Helen would say if she weren't there to protect herself.

Helen sat on Anna's right. She tried to look authentic. Her forehead was slightly furrowed with sincerity and her eyes projected earnestness that she was certain would appear in the photo if they managed to snap it before she blinked.

Anna answered the first question put to them.

“Oh it’s all right, I guess, having these two around. Although it’s not like they say in the jokes, where the person wants to have a clone to do all the work so they can just play. It isn’t like that at all. They don’t even know they’re clones. They think they should play and I should work.”

Helen, used to such defamatory statements from her “sisters,” was not going to let the interview run on this way for a moment longer than politeness dictated. She had learned that the one that speaks first gets the credibility advantage. And here, she had already let Anna say the first words. Well, that was just as usual. Anna was always ready to put herself forward.

“Well, I should say that’s right,” she jumped in indignantly. “You certainly should be doing the work around here. Daddy only made you as an experiment and so I could have a playmate, you know.” She turned to the reporter. “It isn’t even as if I needed a playmate. Let alone two.”

“Oh shut up, you two,” Catherine entered the fray. Though she knew that demure and polite tended to win more friends among the public, she couldn’t resist the impulse to snap at Helen and Anna when they started off on their fantasies. She rolled her eyes at the reporter as if he would understand that she had listened to this argument many times too often and had just about had enough of it. She said, “I can prove I’m the real one! I’m the only one of us who remembers Great Aunt Bessie. Just ask them. *They* don’t remember her, and her cherry pies. *They* don’t remember her hats.” She refrained from poking out her tongue at her two look-alikes.

“What?!” said Helen, and Anna mirrored her look of righteous indignation. “You’ve only seen pictures of her, you Blockhead!” She reached behind Anna and gave Catherine’s hair a great yank.

Catherine leaped up on the bed and leaned over Anna. “That’s just like you! Whenever you have nothing to say you have to go and act like that. Then we all look bad. Half the time the reporters say it was me who did it, ‘cause they can’t remember who’s who. I could just . . .” she began to step over Anna, her fists clenched in readiness for battle, but Anna grabbed her leg at the calf and shook it. Catherine fell down on the bed.

“Stop it you two. Have a little decorum at least,” Anna scolded.

Catherine glared at Anna and Helen then crossed her arms in front of her and tightened her lips.

“That’s right,” said Helen. “You know someday Father’s going to get sick and tired of your behavior and then you’ll see what happens. He created you and he can snuff out your life just as easily.” Helen snapped her fingers triumphantly.

Anna turned to the reporter and spoke to him confidingly, dismissing her look-alikes with an eye roll. “They fight all the time. It’s because they’re jealous that Daddy made two of them and that they have to struggle over second place.”

“Oh don’t you just wish!” said Catherine turning her frustration on Anna. She spoke accusingly to the reporter, “You see what always happens when you people come along? There’s no use trying to straighten it all out. You have to speak to Father when he gets back from Africa to find out the truth. These two here don’t know half what they think they know. After all, they’ve only been around for a

couple of years. Ask them when they first started crawling, how about. It was two years ago if you must know!”

They saw the surprise on the reporter’s face. The question always came up and the girls had an answer for it.

Anna, insinuating conspiracy with her listener in such a way as to make him feel that he was being privileged to the truth in the midst of lies, said calmly, “My father is very clever and he *accelerated* the growth of my clones so that they would be here for me when he thought I would most need them. After Mother died, you know. In a few years they’ll know who they really are.”

After mention of the mother’s death there was a brief silence. Catherine sat sulking with her arms crossed in front of her, and Helen put on a mournful face to illustrate the sadness only a true daughter could feel for the loss of her mother. Anna glanced at each of them with disgust and went on, “I tried too hard to make them feel welcome. I didn’t want them to feel that they were freaks or anything . . .”

“Freaks!” Helen said shrilly. “*I’m* certainly no freak!” She shook a fist in Anna’s face and said, “I could just punch your lights out, right now. And I don’t even care if it is caught on film.” Anna blanched, momentarily losing her calm demeanor.

The reporter intervened with a comment on the loveliness of all the girls.

“Well, yes,” said Anna, resuming her air of maturity. “Father wanted me to have friends just like me so that there wouldn’t be any need for jealousy.”

“That’s right, little miss lovely, that’s right,” Catherine said. “Go on and on like always. As if anyone could be jealous of *you*. *I* feel nothing but pity for you.

That's right, pity. Someday you'll see what you are, and then you won't have reporters eating out of your hand anymore."

"I do miss Mother, though," sighed Helen, on the theory that deep feeling for her loss was her best strategy.

Anna snorted at her. "Anyway, I've got proof. Look here." She bent her arm and pointed her elbow toward the reporter. There was a lightening of the skin on the underside of her elbow.

"Oh, here comes the scar again," said Helen rolling her eyes.

Anna ignored her. "I got this when I fell off my bike when I was five. Before *they* were here."

"Oh yeah?" Catherine said. "Then how come we don't have the same scar? Aren't we supposed to be identical to you?!" Her eyes flashed with victory.

"You little twit," hissed Helen to Catherine. "Scars don't come out on clones."

Catherine humphed to hide her embarrassment, and sank back against the headboard again tucking her chin to her chest.

"Besides," Helen went on. "That's not even a scar. It's just a mark. Probably a flaw in the cloning process!"

Anna turned her elbow toward Helen and jabbed her in the shoulder with it. Catherine used the distraction to take a page out of Anna's book and she turned confidingly to the reporter. "I'm the one that misses Mother. These two phony baloneys make me positively ill with their theatrics."

"Theatrics?! Ha!" said Helen, slapping at Anna's elbow.

“Ha!” said Anna.

Catherine, not to be outdone, replied, “Ha!”

The reporter couldn't get another word out of them, so he packed up his camera put away his notebook and left them sitting close together on the bed.

The Stag

“Just get out of my room!” Her son Charlie’s voice burst out of his bedroom overhead and filled all the space in the house.

She sighed and looked up from the sink where the dinner dishes soaked in soapy water. Looking beyond her own reflection in the window and out into the yard, she saw it. Behind the gray pole barn on the other side of the small pond, standing by the sweet gum tree where Alan had just cleared out the tall grass and brush the day before. It was stark white against the deep scarlet of the burning bushes that rose up under the glowering sky along the western boundary of their property. An albino deer. Alan had never seen it and she could tell by the way he said, “I’ll have to watch for it,” that he doubted that she had either.

The stag stood unmoving as if it were painted on the red background, its whole body visible and its head turned toward her. She stood just as still, her rubber-gloved hands hovering above the hot water. She could only just see its full brown rack where it rose above the burning bushes and melted into the browns and oranges of the trees that filled the back seven acres of their property. She could hardly believe that a neck could be strong enough to hold it up.

“Not until you answer my question!” Alan’s tone was sharp with the effort to maintain control.

“I was with Mike! Okay?”

She pulled off the rubber gloves one finger at a time and laid them over the edge of the sink. A loud stomp from above made the light that hung over the kitchen table swing slightly. She opened the back door and stepped out onto the porch. She hoped the deer would still be there when she walked around the corner of the house, but it was gone. She thought she saw a flash of white disappear into the trees.

It was not yet sunset but the sky was grey with the remains of the storm that had strewn leaves and small branches across the lawn near the house. The air was unsettled and occasional gusts of wind, redolent with rain and decaying leaves, blew her hair across her face as she headed toward the pond. The wooden fence that they had built when Charlie was a child sagged and the gate was never closed anymore. The pond was a black reflection of the sky. She heard the uncoil and splash of frogs as they anticipated her course along the pond's reedy edge.

The path through the woods was overgrown, hardly used at all anymore. Thick vines hung down from the branches overhead and she found herself veering off and having to backtrack and reorient. She remembered walking the path in the days that Alan maintained it. She had carried Charlie snuggled in the pack that hung down over her chest and stomach. He would sleep with his head at an impossible angle while she tramped along watching for the Indian pipes and false Solomon's seal that grew along path. She had bought an all-terrain stroller when Charlie got too heavy to carry. But it wasn't long before he wouldn't stay in it anymore. He would run ahead to find a stick so he could battle the ogres that lived among the trees. Their walks were halting, full of spaces when she would stand waiting and watching Charlie, the smell of earth, moss and water, enveloping her.

She didn't see the deer until Charlie was ten or eleven and would no longer walk on the path with her. She didn't see the deer until after the path had become obscure and shadowed by years of unchecked growth. But when she first saw it, it was like a vision from the stories of knights and magical beasts that she and Charlie used to read together. She had caught her breath then held it, not sure if the sight had wafted in on the air she breathed and would disappear as soon as she exhaled. But it stayed. For five minutes she had watched it until it suddenly turned and leapt through the bushes and disappeared behind a curtain of trees.

She crunched through the twigs and fall leaves that littered what was once the path, ducking under low-hanging branches, wet with recent rain, and avoiding the roots that hid underfoot. Now and then she stopped and surveyed the entire area, searching for that flash, listening for that sound that would tell her that she was on the right track. She had never seen the stag when she looked for it. She knew that deer were silent even in the densest forests. Even a white deer could disappear behind the branches and leaves that wove a labyrinth through the woods.

She swept aside some hanging vines and stepped off the path and down the short decline that led to the stream. The rocks that she and Charlie used to use to cross the shallow rivulet were washed over with the runoff from the day's rain. She stood, her shoes sunk an inch in mud, and gazed across the stream at what had once been a small clearing. She looked for the deer near the child's wooden picnic table that stood decaying amid the new growth of vines and bushes that threatened to engulf it. Her eyes lingered on the table, barely visible in the dying light, and she

thought of Charlie when he was first learning to walk. On sunny days, she and Alan would bring him to the clearing for picnics. She could still see him sitting on top of the picnic table, his short legs splayed, watching for the appearance of the puppet Alan held behind his back. When the puppet suddenly materialized, Charlie would gasp and laughter spill out of him until he toppled over and she would have to catch him.

Now, she didn't think the sun could penetrate the growth that had crept into the clearing and swallowed those childhood picnics. The deer was not there.

She could remember each time she had seen it, the images frozen in her mind like snapshots. While packing the car to drive Charlie to four-week overnight camp when he was thirteen, she had said "Look!" and pointed toward the pond, but Alan looked up from the trunk of the car a moment after the deer had disappeared through the row of arbor vitae and into the thicket of red maples and low pines. "Next time," Alan had said.

But the next time was in the winter and she was alone. She had just pulled her car into the driveway after picking Charlie up from ninth grade band practice – after she had seen him kiss Susan Adler's daughter in the instrument room—and there it was, behind the fence by the pond. Charlie had disappeared into the house before she could point it out to him. The rack looked like the bare branches of a sapling growing out of the newly fallen snow, and as soon as she noticed it, the deer melted into the background and vanished among the trees.

She saw it the day the crystal vase that she and Alan had gotten as a wedding present, broke. It toppled off the cabinet when Charlie stormed past. She heard the crash of glass and then saw the deer. A white flash through the hedge that separated the pole barn from the neighbor's corn field. Her mind followed the deer while she and Charlie swept up the broken glass.

The sky had grown darker and the woods dissolved into shadow. Even the wind seemed to have settled for the night. She was afraid that if she walked any further she would be lost in the gloom. She turned around. Cool evening air coaxed her onward to where the path opened up and gave way to grass around the pond. She could see a small yellow light hovering between the branches of the trees. The light in Charlie's bedroom. She followed it, settling the gate crookedly against the post that used to hold it closed, and avoiding the muddy dip in the lawn, no longer watching for the deer. She took off her shoes, setting them on the porch by the back door, and went into the kitchen where her yellow gloves hung over the counter by the sink.

All was quiet.

Glen Willow Gardens

The last thing I remember before finding myself here at Glen Willow Gardens is sitting high up in the cab of a truck with a strange man named Maurice who was telling me about his grandson and the great big fish they caught together. And looking down at me from over the windshield was a picture of a mutt sitting with his tongue hanging out and a real interested look in his eye. Then there were sirens.

That's what I tell the psychiatrist and my husband, Hector. No, I don't remember how I happened to be in Maurice's truck, and no, I don't know where we were going.

I have only vague memories of ever having been in the hospital at all. I guess it wasn't until four days after the accident that I woke up here at Glen Willow Gardens needing to go to the bathroom.

I tried to sit up and get out of bed but my right leg and arm didn't work. "Hector," I called out, but my voice was so weak I could hardly hear myself. "Hector!" I called more loudly, but still he didn't come. I lay back and stared at the ceiling. Then I looked around the room. Why had Hector changed the wallpaper and taken the ceiling fan out of my bedroom? He should have at least checked with me first. And I would never have chosen pale pink striped wallpaper.

The pressure on my bladder was becoming fierce. Finally, I couldn't hold on any longer. I felt the warmth seeping under my bottom.

A short, round, black woman walked into my room as if she lived there.

“Howya doing Alma? You finally awake?”

I stared at her. Had Hector hired a new cleaning lady?

She came right over to my bed and said, “It's almost lunchtime. Turkey with gravy today.”

“Where's Hector?” I said.

“Your husband? He's just out in the hall. I'll get him in here.”

I watched while she folded a blanket at the end of my bed. I didn't recognize the blanket either. I didn't want Hector to come in while I lay in a puddle of my own pee.

“I've wet myself,” I said quietly, hoping she wouldn't hear me.

“Huh?”

“I've wet myself.”

“Okay, then. Stay put.” She went over to the door and called out, “Connie, come help me with Alma. Bring the wheelchair.”

A young white girl with hoop earrings and a deep tan came into my room pushing an empty wheelchair.

“We're going to help you up out of bed,” the black woman said. She pulled my legs off the bed then she and the other girl hooked their arms under mine, lifted me off the bed, and shifted me over to the wheelchair. They must have been stronger than they looked.

“I want Hector,” I said.

“Wheel her into the bathroom and I’ll get a diaper,” the woman told the girl.

“Where’s Hector?”

“She’ll need some clean pants, too,” Connie said. I looked down at my lap and saw the bulge of a diaper under my blue pants. There was a wet spot at the crotch where the pee had leaked. I closed my eyes tight. I didn’t want to cry in front of them.

“We’re going to need you to stand up, Alma, and hold onto this bar. You can put your weight on your left leg.” The two women lifted me under the arms again but this time they made me stand up myself. My body didn’t feel right. My right leg and arm were numb and I had to balance on my left side. I held onto the bar and hoped they wouldn’t let me tip over onto the hard bathroom floor. I must have moaned or cried because the black woman said, “Now, you’re all right, Alma. We’re going to take off your pants and I need you to help.” She pulled my pants down.

“Go away,” I said.

“Honey, you can’t do this by yourself, or I would go away. Now lift up your leg,” she said as she lifted my right leg off the floor and took the pants off that side. “Now I’m going to lift your left foot. You’re going to have to put your weight on your right leg. It will feel strange but you can do it. You have to build up the strength in that leg.”

She said to the girl, “Hold her up, Connie.” So the girl pushed her shoulder into my side and kept me from falling over while the woman took my pants off. I was wearing a huge, blue diaper, heavy with pee. They took it off, cleaned me up,

and put a dry one on. Then they put a new pair of pants on me the same way they'd taken the other pair off. By the time I was sitting back in the wheelchair I was exhausted and my face was wet even though I had struggled to hold back the tears.

"I'll tell your husband to come in now," the black woman said, and she disappeared into the hall.

"Oh Hector," I cried as soon as he came into the room. He hustled over to me.

"You remember me," he said.

"Of course I remember you. You're my husband."

"That's right."

I tried to figure out if he was making a joke. He didn't usually joke with me. He gave me a kind smile, which made me wonder even more.

"I can hardly move my arm," I said, demonstrating by raising my arm about two inches off the arm of the wheelchair then letting it fall back. "And my leg doesn't work."

"I know, dear. You had a stroke. Do you remember the accident?"

And then I remembered the dog looking down at me from over the rearview mirror.

* * *

Those early days I felt like I was on a ship sailing over a foggy ocean. Every now and then an island would show through then disappear again, or sounds would reach me but I couldn't see where they came from. I also had a feeling of seasickness that the nurses said was because they were trying to find the right medications for me.

Other memories show through the fog from that time: a dull room with a man in a suit looking at me over a pair of small glasses, and Hector sitting next to me, explaining something to the man who then wrote things down. The smell of cloves. A lady throwing up at my dinner table. Hector's face looking down at me, forehead creased, patting my shoulder. Someone holding me up and telling me to straighten my legs. Lots and lots of television.

"I have a surprise for you, Alma," one of the aides said to me after I'd been here a day or two. "Your kids are here."

I imagined the two children from the photograph Hector had brought me from home. But when she wheeled me into the parlor and turned my chair around I found myself facing two grown-ups sitting together on a flowery couch. They smiled at me.

"Hi Mom," the young woman with long straight brown hair said. She shoved her hair behind her ear.

"Hello," I said.

"You know who we are, right Mom?" the young man asked. He wore heavy glasses that didn't suit his face. He looked very much like Hector.

"Of course," I said. They did look familiar. "Where are the kids?" I asked.

"What kids?" the girl asked.

"We're your kids, Mom. Do you know our names?"

"Of course," I said again.

They were observing me. I looked away. The rug under their feet was worn and there was a piece of stale bread or a potato chip or something right by the girl's foot. I thought that if she moved her foot just a little to her left I would hear it crunch.

“Mom?”

“Donna and Carl,” I said, as their names came to me. They looked relieved.

“This place is nice,” Donna said, inspecting the room. I looked around also. I think it was the first time I'd been in the parlor. It seemed like someone's idea of what a parlor should have looked like in the old days when women wore big skirts and men wore ties to dinner. The white lampshades had puffy balls hanging off them, and the curtains had a separate piece that seemed to have been flung over the top of the window frame. They were held back with tasseled ties. It smelled like cloves. Everything smelled like cloves.

“Yeah,” Carl said.

I took to studying them while they continued to gaze around the room. What did they want from me, I wondered. They didn't seem much interested in talking and I wouldn't have known what to talk about anyway. “It's too bad you're here,” I said.

They smiled as if they hadn't heard me. They talked about how pretty the sky was, and how long it had taken them to drive to visit me. Six hours. They looked at each other. They asked me questions.

“How are you feeling?”

“How's the food?”

“What happened, Mom?” Donna asked.

“Well, he threw away the sandwich,” I said.

One afternoon I was sitting in the hallway outside the dining room concentrating on buttoning my sweater when the nurse stopped by my chair.

“Alma, I have a letter for you,” she said handing me a white envelope. I stared for a long time at the unfamiliar writing. Since the stroke, reading was difficult for me. I could focus on words but my brain couldn’t hold on to each word to add it to the next, so I had to read things over and over before I could understand them. But even when I read the return address several times, and saw that it said, “Monroe Rehabilitation Center,” I still didn’t understand it.

“Would you like me to open it for you?” the nurse asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to read it to you?”

“No.”

She unfolded the plain white paper and handed it to me. I stared first at the dark block letters that ran at a slant down the page. Then I studied the name at the bottom. “Maurice,” it said. I had a sudden image of a large man turning toward me and sticking out a hand the size of a catcher’s mitt. I read the letter over several times.

Dear Alma,

I hope you are doing fine. I am recovering slowly. I’ve thought of you often. I couldn’t live with myself if I’d killed you. I guess I’m just becoming a careless old man so happy for the company of a lovely woman like yourself that I can’t keep my mind on my work. I was awful glad when

the nurses here told me you were okay even though I guess the accident made you have a stroke. I feel responsible for that. I'm out of the hospital now but I'll be in this rehab place for about a month or so. I've never been much for writing letters but I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry and I hope you recover quickly.

Maurice.

I wondered about Maurice. I tried to bring up memories of him. Were we friends? Where was he taking me? Why wasn't Hector with us? Did he try to kill me? If he tried to kill me why was he writing me a letter? But the only memories I could dredge up from the fog of my brain were a dog, Blue, with a smile and listening ears; the cab of a truck; the smell of mildew and stale soda. And I could remember rows of corn tilting.

One of the aides found me some paper and a pen. She carried them into the common room then she came back and wheeled me up to the writing table. I thought for a long time about my response. It took almost until dinner time to write it down. I felt like I was back in grade school trying to write an essay. I had to ask for a new sheet of paper so many times that the aide got exasperated with me. Finally, she just gave me the whole writing pad. Still, I tried not to waste too many pages on rewrites.

Dear Maurice,

I'm doing well. I don't blame you for the stroke. How is Blue? Are you hurt, too? I work with a therapist, trying to walk and remember things. My right hand doesn't work well, as you can see.

Thank you for your letter.

Alma

I folded the letter up and asked for an envelope. The aide wrote the address on the envelope because my hand was shaking so much from all the effort of writing that I didn't think I could write legibly. I felt satisfied as I licked the envelope and closed the letter away. Then I sat and looked at the picture of children on the beach that hung on the wall of the common room, and thought and thought about Maurice, trying to remember how he figured in my life.

* * *

The fog in my mind started to clear before my legs began to work.

For those first few days, though, wherever they put me, there I stayed. And stayed, and stayed, and stayed. Now, if you think sitting in a wheelchair and getting pushed here and there, is like being a queen on her throne with servants to fulfill all her wishes, you're wrong. The fact is you're more like a plant in a pot. They act like they have to pull up your roots and repot you every time you want a change of scenery.

So what do you do when you're sitting in the same spot for four hours and the only thing you have to look at is the other inmates and a bunch of shadow box pictures that I guess are supposed to show happy things?

You start thinking about your whole life, that's what you do. You start thinking about every little humiliation, every time your husband looked at you with contempt and every time your children looked at you with shame. That's what you do. You start thinking about every embarrassing thing you ever said or did. About how, when you were in sixth grade, you brought your diary to school to write in it

during free-writing time and Joey Markowitz found it and passed it through the class and everybody read it, including Craig Marshall who turned red when he read what you wrote about him. And you remember your husband telling you that he doesn't want you to come to his office party this year because he needs to impress his new boss. And about the time your kids asked you not to volunteer at the end-of-year party at school because Mrs. Fowler really knows how to do things the way kids like it.

You think about how your fingernails need cutting but you aren't allowed to have nail clippers, and even if you had them, you couldn't trim your own nails because your hands don't work right. You think about the fact that, even though you always avoided the outdoors and the healthy air that your husband tried to make you go out in "so you'll become fit," the outdoors has become only a vision outside your prison window. You think about the fact that you're sitting in a puddle of your own pee, or worse, with the smell so strong sometimes that your own eyes water.

You think about how you are where you deserve to be. How everything in your life has brought you to this point. How before you had time to build up a life, you were married and before you had time to adjust to being a married person, you were a mother, and then there was no you at all because you abandoned yourself.

You start thinking about why you were running away from home and you start getting mad that you failed at that, too. And then you get mad at the staff that runs around and doesn't even notice that you're sitting there like a lump on a log. So you start yelling at them. Sometimes yelling without saying anything at all, just trying to be louder than the vacuum cleaner that seems to run all day long, and the birds that

squawk in their glass cage at the end of the hall, and the radio in the dining room, and the moaning, crying and gurgling of the other inmates. That's what you do even if you're like me and hardly ever yelled at anyone in your whole life. You yell because you finally tried to change something and you completely and utterly failed and you just want to die.

That's what you do.

Unless they've given you something to calm you down. Then you just look around.

In between dozing and yelling, I started to take notice of some of the other people living in the rooms that opened up onto the long hallway outside my room. Ambrose was the wandering man with the long chin, who looked down at his feet, and slowly raised and lowered his hands as he shuffled through the halls. And the lady with the big voice, who barked out orders all day, was the same one who wore huge flowery hats to the dining room.

It seemed like whenever the staff needed some exercise they'd push a heavy recliner wheelchair holding some bent-up stick figure with sunken cheeks and long toe nails, out into the hall. I first got to know the Siren Lady when I was planted right next to her in the hallway. I woke up from a nap in my wheelchair to what sounded like an ambulance wailing in the distance. The noise kept going on and on and I found myself focusing on it, going from annoyed to angry. I couldn't tear my thoughts away from it. I couldn't go back to my doze, or think about what we would be having for lunch, or even listen to the radio.

“Stop that noise!” I said to the lady, but it was obvious that she couldn’t have stopped the noise even if it had been coming from her. Then I realized that it *was* coming from her. She lay with her eyes closed and her toothless mouth hanging open in a red circle, and every time she exhaled, her breath came out in a mournful wail as if her lungs were the only part of her still aware enough to protest her sorry state. I tried to turn the wheels on my chair to move away from her, but they were locked in place and I couldn’t see how to get them unlocked.

“Help!” I called out.

A fat lady with dyed blond hair and teddy bears on her shirt put her head out of one of the doors and said, “I’ll be with you in a sec, Alma. Just stay put.”

As if I could go anywhere.

* * *

“Okay, Alma, it’s time to stand up.” It was Gretchen, the physical therapist who wears her gray hair helmet style and has a body made of steel. She was going to get me up and walking if it was the last thing she did. I fought her. One thing I had come to realize since my stroke was that I hated being told what to do. If there was one thing I was passionate about, and there never was before except maybe my kids, it was that I hated being ordered around.

I felt sure that if I could just be left alone I could sink and sink into myself until my breath slowed and stopped and my heart gently pounded its way into silence and my soul drifted away and out of this painful world. Sometimes when I sat in the hall I could feel myself separating and going to what people at funerals always called “a better place.” But as soon as that feeling began to overtake me, someone would

nudge me, or push my wheelchair, or feed me lunch, or tell me my hair needed washing, and my breath would come back fast and my heart would start working again like a prisoner on a chain gang.

“I’m just going to die,” I told Gretchen, because at first I thought that was true.

“No, you’re not,” she said. “You’re getting better every day.”

That news made me cry and I said, “I’m not going to walk no matter what you try to do to me. Even if you beat me.” I don’t know where I got the strength to say such a thing but there it was.

It didn’t matter what I said. She won out in the end. She yanked me out of my chair, stood me up and let go. It was stand or hit the hard floor. I couldn’t take more than one or two steps with my walker for several days, though. I had to think about every step. Step with one foot, lift the walker, move it forward, step with the other foot. Repeat.

“Good job, Alma,” Gretchen said after I walked all the way across the room.

* * *

In the short time I’ve been here, I’ve discovered that it’s the small things that make life bearable. For instance, sometimes we have a special “cooking with Chef Albert” day when we bake cookies or something. Chef Albert is a pale, round-faced man who wears one of those white chef’s hats and ties a flowery apron around his fat stomach. He likes me because I answer him when he talks, and I ask him about his grandkids.

The way cooking-with-Chef-Albert works is this. Chef Albert puts all the ingredients into a bowl then we all put on plastic gloves and take turns mixing the dough with our hands. We put globs of dough on the trays, sometimes with a great deal of help from Chef Albert, and look forward to eating the cookies. I like to save the extra chocolate chips from our baking events with Chef Albert. Well, to be honest, they only become “extra” when they land in my pocket. It feels a little like stealing but I do it anyway.

I keep my chip collection in a little empty flower vase on the shelf in my room then I eat them whenever we have a dessert that I don’t like, or when I need cheering up, which is often. It’s good therapy for my hands to tip the vase over without spilling everything all over the floor, and then to catch the chips in my other hand.

* * *

The next time I got a letter from Maurice, I recognized the handwriting and could get a pretty good picture of his face in the cab of his truck. It was several days after his first letter and I had changed a lot since then. I could read pretty well—they made me practice every day, sometimes reading out loud to the other residents who mostly slept while I read out the day’s news. The nurse still opened the letter for me because I couldn’t wedge my thumb under the flap of the envelope, but she didn’t even ask me if she should read it to me.

Dear Alma,

I was happy to get your letter and see you’ve forgiven me. The nurse here knows about the place you’re at. She said it’s nice enough. I won’t say that I hope you like it because no one should like being in rehab, but at

least I hope it's not too bad. My place sure's no Hotel Ritz, but I guess if it was, they'd have to start pushing people out the door with a back hoe.

'Course now I don't have a job to go back to. Thirty five years hauling stuff all over the country, and now, nothing. I'm about as useful as a screen door on a submarine. Oh well, I got a little house not so far from here. Near enough to my grandkids, but far enough away from civilization that I can go a whole day without seeing anything but birds and deer. I guess that's a good thing.

I'll miss being on the road though. I could tell you stories about all the interesting people, like your good self, who I've met alongside the highway. I once met a kid who dropped out of high school to hitchhike around the country bird-watching! He had collected over 400 birds already. And stranger things than that, too. Maybe someday, we'll sit over a cup of coffee (or tea if you're a tea drinker) and I'll tell you some stories.

I have my pension but I'm just not the kind to sit still for long. I've always had a knack for making things out of wood. My grandkids all have wooden boats and trucks and whatnot I've made for them over the years. Moving parts and all. I suppose I could settle down with a shop to work in and stay busy.

My leg's starting to heal up. It was broke clean through. I have a cast up to my hip and a Frankenstein scar across my forehead. Some of my grandkids came for a visit the other day and I thought little Alice (she's only

three and cute as a button) was going to run off screaming for her Momma when she got a look at me.

Sincerely,

Maurice

I set about writing back that very morning. I didn't have to bother anyone for paper because I had kept the pad the aide gave me last time. I couldn't really remember what I had written to Maurice in my last letter. It seemed to me, though, that it might have sounded, and looked, like a five-year-old wrote it. He must be a kind man to have written back after that.

I thought for a while before I started writing, so I wouldn't run out of paper. They act like you're demanding the moon when you ask for the least little thing here.

Dear Maurice,

I'm sorry to hear that you broke your leg. That must be terribly painful.

I had no broken bones, so you see, I'm not so bad off. I'm told that I was likely to have had a stroke at some time but that the accident just made it happen earlier than it would have. In a way, it was for the best because if I'd had a stroke in the middle of the night, I might have woken up dead with no one to notice me. Well, of course, Hector would have found me at some point, but with the accident we had an ambulance there right away.

My right leg and arm have felt like wet spaghetti ever since the stroke. But I guess they're getting better. The physical therapist is a real

sergeant at arms and she's determined to whip me into shape. I think the only way I could say no to her would be if I was dead.

You are so lucky to have grandchildren to visit you there. My husband, Hector, is my only visitor, though I receive letters from my children, wishing me well and all. But they're so far away and busy with jobs and they know I'll be up and around soon enough. Then we'll have a proper visit.

I guess I can't complain about this place. They accidentally put me in the ward with the crazy folks, though. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and the sounds I hear make me think I woke up in the zoo. You never heard such screeching and grunting. One time I woke up in the night to find wrinkled old man standing in my room, stark naked! You can bet the nurse heard me yelling. 'Course he didn't know where he was or what he was doing, but I don't need that kind of shock. Especially when I first wake up and can't remember where I am. I thought it was my husband Hector at first, grown about a foot taller.

My hand is tired, so I'll sign off here. Thanks for writing, and take care of yourself, your grandchildren need you.

Sincerely,

Alma

I read the letter over before I folded it up. I was surprised by how much I said to a man who I hardly knew at all. I almost erased my comments about Hector. They seemed disloyal. But in the end, I let them be.

* * *

“Where’s my brush? Hector!”

Someone had rearranged my nightstand and moved my bed to the other side of the room so that my closet was on the wrong side of the bed. This was too much.

“Hector,” I called again but still he didn’t answer. He must be in his office with the door closed.

I got out of bed. My leg wasn’t working right and I had to grab the top of the sink to keep from falling down. Why was there a sink in my bedroom? My hand wouldn’t grab hold of the bedroom door. I opened it with my left hand. Hector had left the hall light on. That was unusual. The hall was too long and what were all those doors?

“Damn, damn, damn!” I said loudly even though I don’t usually swear.

“What is it, Alma? Go back to bed, you’ll wake everybody.” A skinny dark-skinned woman with big glasses and a white smock came out from behind one of the doors. “What do you think you’re doing out here swearing and yelling in the middle of the night? Get on to bed. Go on.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m working here, and I’ve got plenty of paperwork I need to get back to. You get on back to bed.”

Then I knew. I was at Glen Willow Gardens.

Mostly I remember, but catch me in the middle of the night and you never know where my brain might be.

“Damn!” I said one more time, just because it felt good

* * *

Today was part bad day, part good day. I was tired and grumpy from hardly sleeping all night. When the night nurse left in the morning, I heard her complain that I kept her from getting all her work done. That made me mad but I held my tongue. Since I've been here at Glen Willow Gardens, I've discovered that I get angry a lot, especially when I haven't had much sleep. I've learned not to show it so much, though, because then they give me drugs which make me not feel anything at all and my days disappear. That was good at first, but now that feeling is scary to me. The fact that my day started out with a complaint from the night nurse didn't bode well.

The bad part of my day was that when I went to get some chocolate chips out of my vase, after looking forward to eating them all day, they were gone. I knew right away that it was the Naked Man who took them because lots of times when I go into my room he's in there—of course he's usually wearing clothes at least—and I have to practically shove him out the door. He's what they call a “shopper” which means he doesn't know the difference between his things and anyone else's. I don't complain to the aides about him anymore, though, because then they lock my door and even I can't get into my own room. I just take him by the hand and say, “Come on. Out of here, you.”

After lunch I headed back to my room with chocolate on my mind. But when I tilted my vase over, I found that it was empty. I was so mad that I yelled out loud, but I wasn't exactly knocked down by the rush of people running to my aid. I suppose that's just as well since I wouldn't have wanted to explain to anyone why I was upset.

The good part of my day came later when we were getting ready to have our butterscotch pudding. At dinner, seats are assigned at the aide's convenience and I sit at a table with three other people, including Mr. Naked. It's an unpleasant arrangement in my opinion, but of course, my opinion is never sought.

Now, I've noticed that Mr. Naked likes the pudding because I see his eyes light up and his mouth start working like he's already eating it as soon as he sees it. So, after the desserts were all handed out and the staff was starting in on whatever was extra, I stood up and poured my glass of red punch all over Mr. Naked's pudding. His eyes got big and teary, his mouth opened and shut like a nutcracker doll and he started tapping his hand against the table top in agitation. He couldn't find the words to describe his disappointment, but I knew exactly how he felt because it was just how I felt when I tipped my vase over and nothing came out.

I just sat back in my chair and watched the aides clean up the mess. They scolded me for being careless but I didn't mind in the least. I didn't care that everyone made a fuss, I didn't care that there was a mess all over the table. I didn't care that I was acting like a child. I don't think I ever felt such freedom or satisfaction in my entire life.

* * *

Over the last week or so, my world has shrunk to fit within the walls of Glen Willow Gardens. I've grown accustomed to the residents that wander the halls like extras in a horror movie. I barely notice the smell that makes Hector force himself to breathe through his mouth. I'm even less scared of the gruff people that work here

and who march through the halls like zombie hunters looking for ways to disrupt the comfort of the residents.

There is one woman who makes me nervous, though. It's because at first I thought she was a new resident and when I saw her walking through the hall before lunch I said, "It's lunchtime." Now, I don't usually interfere with people at all around here. If I see someone about to walk into a chair, I feel no need to leap up to warn them. I just watch curiously. I don't know what that says about me, but when it's all I can do to keep myself from falling over the furniture, I guess seeing other people do it has a certain appeal. But, for some reason, I took it upon myself to tell this woman with her rumpled clothes, big glasses and coarse hair, that it was lunchtime.

I thought her eyes would set fire to my sweater. She didn't say a word, but just turned to the nurse and said, "Buzz me out, Elaine." Then she pushed open the door to the yard and marched out. When I sat down for lunch at my usual table by the window I looked into the yard and searched until I saw her in the garden by the back of the property, taking out her anger on some low-growing plants.

The building has two wings to it. The south wing is for people staying short visits for rehab. They'll go home to their families after they can manage on their own. The other end of the building is the north wing. It's for people with dementia, and who aren't going to leave Glen Willow Gardens until they head through the pearly gates. It's where the Ambroses and Siren Ladies live—the people who use the wrong end of their forks, or try to take off their clothes during dinner.

I don't belong in the north wing but here I am. From what Hector tells me I'm here because when I first left the hospital no one was sure that my mind wasn't permanently jumbled. Now that my mind is clearer I guess it's just too much trouble to move me. Though I can't walk with ease yet, or use my right hand well, the way I see it is my biggest problem is that I can't stop from peeing whenever the urge hits me. I know it's coming and it throws me into a panic. Unfortunately, it doesn't throw anyone else into a panic, so I usually have to sit in my own pee for hours and hours (although the aides deny this) before anyone can be bothered to help me in the bathroom. I have exercises I'm supposed to do whenever I'm sitting. I have to try to squeeze that area of my body as if I'm trying to stop peeing even when I don't feel the urge.

Hector likes to tell the medical staff every time I forget things, like the name of his second cousin in New Jersey, or what year we visited Disney World with our kids. "Poor dear," he says, "your memory was never the best," then he smiles ruefully, "but now . . . Well." He shakes his head and the nurses cluck with commiseration. The staff reminds me how lucky I am to have Hector to visit me. Most of the folks in the north wing don't get many visitors. "What devotion," they tell me.

Hector visits every Tuesday, Friday and Sunday. He says it's over an hour drive to get here from our home so he usually sits in the lounge and relaxes for a few minutes before coming to get me. Sometimes we visit in the parlor with the flowery curtains and the squishy couches. Hector catches me up on the weather and I tell him

about what I had for lunch. If I can't remember what it was, I make something up. I don't need to add more forgetfulness to my resume.

Once, after I'd been there a few days, we met with a psychiatrist.

"She didn't even remember who the kids were," Hector told him.

"Of course I did."

"Not at first, dear." Hector gave me that smile that I had come to think of as his Glen Willow Gardens smile.

The psychiatrist was a handsome man in his forties or so. Sometimes while we talked he'd start flipping his pencil around his fingers in what looked almost like a magic trick. Then he'd catch himself and put the pencil down. His voice was smooth and I wondered why he wasn't sitting in a big office somewhere listening to the problems of pretty young housewives or executive types. Maybe Glen Willow Gardens was some sort of training facility for new psychiatrists.

"Confusion is normal after a stroke. Especially when there is a traumatic event connected to it," the psychiatrist told Hector.

Hector smiled a more familiar smile of indulgence. "Well, she's always been a bit absentminded," he said to the psychiatrist.

"Absentminded? In what way?"

"Tell him dear," Hector turned to me.

I was filled with panic. What was I supposed to say? Was I supposed to tell him about the time I put the plastic bowl down on top of the stove when the burner was still hot, and the smoke alarm went off and Hector had to rip the fire extinguisher off the kitchen wall? I'm sure there were other things like that that had happened in

our house over the years, but those kinds of things happen to everyone. Anyone could forget which way the radiator dial worked and turn it all the way up instead of all the way down. And I bet I'm not the first person to leave my credit card sitting on the counter at the grocery store when I was done with all my shopping and gone home.

“Well, sometimes I forget things,” I finally said.

“Yes you do,” Hector agreed. He turned to the psychiatrist. “I feel like I have to follow her around to make sure she's okay.” He patted my hand which had been clutching the arm of my chair. “And the mood swings . . .” he said.

The psychiatrists looked over his glasses and raised his eyebrows.

Hector went on. “One minute she's calm and reasonable, and the next she's crying, or shouting.” I stared at the dotted pattern in the green carpet, feeling my whole body get hot. Hector leaned forward as if making a reluctant confession. “I can't keep up with her. Being an engineer, I like things to be logical.” He smiled conspiratorially at the psychiatrist. “I mean just look at how she ended up here. Where's the logic in that?” He looked at me. “How did you even know this Maurice fellow?”

My voice wouldn't come. It seemed like there was a cord wrapped around my chest that squeezed my heart and lungs and kept my voice from coming out. Luckily, since the psychiatrist has a lot of patients to see and he only stops in now and then, he didn't have time to wait for the cord to loosen and release my words. He looked up at me over his half-glasses for a second then nodded and wrote something in his book.

“Well, maybe we'll give Prozac a try,” he said to Hector.

“Nope, Prozac makes her jittery. We tried it after the kids left home.” He turned to me. “It didn’t work did it, dear?” My mouth felt filled with ashes. “She had a breakdown after the kids left. It’s in her file. I already talked to the doctor about it. I never knew what I’d find when I got home from work. It’s part of the reason I retired early. To take care of her. Luckily, I managed my money well over the years.”

“I see.” The psychiatrist studied me with renewed interest.

It had been almost ten years since my kids left home and left me behind like a bag of useless bones rattling around an empty house. I slept as much as I could in those days because whenever I was awake my insides felt they had been twisted and squeezed dry. That was when Hector hired a maid and started cooking his own dinner. I was afraid Hector would tell the psychiatrist about the time I accidentally made myself sick with Tylenol. I used to get fierce headaches in those days, too, and I had one that practically made me blind. When you’re like that, you can’t be expected to keep track of how many pills you take to get rid of the pain. Anyway, they didn’t even have to pump my stomach.

“All right.” The psychiatrist said. “Just because Prozac didn’t work, doesn’t mean that nothing will. We’ll try something else. Let’s see how things go with the other medications first.” He addressed me for the first time since Hector and I had sat down across from him. “The meds you’re on now have already helped break through some of the confusion. You should feel clearer as time passes. Make sure you follow through with your physical therapy. It’s possible your mood will improve as your

body recovers. The mind and body work together, you know.” He started flipping his pencil and it was clear that he was done with us.

“What do psychiatrists know about anything?” Hector said under his breath as we headed back down the hallway toward the dining room.

* * *

“Heavy set girls like you shouldn’t wear horizontal stripes,” my mother used to tell me, “or white.”

But on our second date Hector told me that he liked girls who were nice and round.

Hector and I saw each other a lot because I worked as a secretary in my father’s office while I tried to figure out what to do with my life, and Hector worked as a clerk for my father while he studied electrical engineering at the University in town.

“He’s a go-getter,” my father used to say approvingly.

Hector had just moved from Connecticut, and his studies and his job had made it hard for him to make friends. Plus, he was short. Only five feet three inches tall. I think he had some trouble meeting girls. Hector used to make excuses to come by my desk and talk to me. He had beautiful teeth and his smile lit up my day. And when my parents saw that he had an interest in me, all their worries about my future melted away. My mother zipped me into my wedding dress with a sigh of relief.

* * *

Lately, they’ve been making me walk to the exercise room. My right foot drags on the floor like it knows where we’re going and is in no hurry to get there.

And the fact of the matter is that the walker is heavy. It's a slow process and by the time I get there, I'm already exhausted. But when I tell them I need a wheelchair, they just say, "No you don't," and that's that.

Gretchen makes me lie down on my back on the padded slab that she can roll around the room if she needs to. The first time I lay down on the table, I was so relieved to be able to rest that I was shocked and upset when I realized that resting was the last thing Gretchen had in mind for me. She grabbed my foot and pushed it so that my knee bent and it felt like she was going to rip my leg off at the hip. I begged her to stop. Then she twisted my foot all around and tried to straighten my leg up in the air even though it wouldn't straighten until it was almost flat on the pad. Then she did the same thing with my other leg. The whole time I was crying with pain and she either ignored me or scolded me like I was a three-year-old.

The more I complained the harder she pushed and pulled at me. She's always telling me, "Now Alma, stop making such a fuss. If you don't work on this, you'll wind up in a wheelchair. Things don't get better on their own. Vigilance and effort is what it takes."

I think she laughs with the nurses about the silly things she has me do. Like holding on to a ridiculously big ball when my arms are already shaky from having to push and pull against her hands.

One day I was supposed to throw the ball and not fall down, but I could barely hold the ball at all, my arms were that tired. "I will never throw a ball!" I shouted at her and then I started to lean to my right. She dashed over and caught me before I hit

the mat on the floor but I had had enough and I refused to do another thing she told me to do. "I'm not running any races or entering the Olympics! Leave me alone!"

She sat me down on the padded table. "Alma," she said, "you can spend the rest of your life in a wheelchair if that's what you want. You can stay here forever or you can go home and your husband can hire you a nurse to wheel you around like a lump of mud. If that's what you want. Because, you're right, it's going to take a lot of work to get your legs into working shape. The muscles are weak anyway, even without the stroke, and you're too heavy for them to carry you. It's your choice, Alma, not mine."

"Leave me alone!" I was crying but she didn't care.

* * *

I got another letter from Maurice. I realized that since I had already gotten two letters in less than two weeks, every time the mail came, I hoped for another one. I was even a little disappointed when I got a letter from my daughter, Donna, instead of from Maurice. Whenever I started feeling angry or miserable about my condition, I'd think about Maurice. It was like how I used to feel at home when I'd remember that I had a chocolate truffle hidden away to enjoy when Hector was in his office and couldn't scold me. A secret source of pleasure.

All letters to and from residents at Glen Willow Gardens go through the nurse's station. Letters are a big deal around here. The staff person brings it to the resident saying in a big voice, "Joe! It's your lucky day! I have a letter for you! Oh look, it's from your sister in California, Susie Mae, I wonder if she's over her gout," or some such thing. For most of the residents, the ability to read has gone the way of

using silverware, and brushing their teeth, so, usually, one of the staff opens the letter and reads it out loud for the entertainment of everyone.

Since they don't really know who Maurice is, I don't get the full announcement treatment, just an "Alma, you've got mail from your secret admirer!" And, of course, now I can open my own mail. I have begun to worry about the fact that someone's bound to take note of how much back and forth goes on between me and Maurice, though. It's not that I'm doing anything wrong. After all, Maurice is the kind gentleman who offered me a lift when I could have been walking along the highway until the hot sun turned me into a fat French fry. It would be rude to ignore his letters, especially since I know he feels so bad about the accident and all. I just don't need to have word get to Hector or the psychiatrist that I'm writing and receiving so many letters. When just going to the bathroom, or taking a shower is everybody's business, I don't need to be pestered by questions and suspicions.

Besides, Hector might think I'm chasing after Maurice and since Hector knows that the idea of another man being interested in me is impossible, he'd probably think I'm losing my mind and trying to act like a movie star or something. Then he'd tell the psychiatrist that I'm having delusions and next thing you know, I'd be locked up for good.

Dear Alma,

All physical therapists must be cut from the same cloth. Mine orders me around like I'm five years old. And the worst of it is that I obey her like I'm five years old.

I had to laugh when I read your stories about the people you're in rehab with. It sure sounds like they got you mixed in with some mixed nuts. I wish I could say that the people around me were so entertaining. But it's been one hell of an eye opener to be here. I thought I saw some tough sh—in Nam (pardon my French) but what do you think of a sixteen-year-old boy, in a motorcycle accident, lies in bed all day with his head wrapped up in a white cloth. His mother comes in to work on his physical therapy with him then she can barely make it to the door to leave before her face turns red and her shoulders start shaking.

And then here's me, a useless old man, who's had a decent life already, truck goes cab over tea kettle, and I'm still strong as a horse. Just a little bashing and bruising. It just goes to show that there's nothing to life but dumb luck.

Hell, my biggest problem, besides a big, ugly scar, and a leg wrapped in plaster and covered with pictures my grandkids drew, is that they can't make a decent cup of coffee here. Burned water with a spoonful of sugar is what they call coffee. Now, I'm a coffee drinking man. No booze, that life is ancient history for me, and a good thing too, I'll tell you. No cigars, no chew, no gambling and no spitting, but I need my coffee. That's what I miss.

Well, Alma, I'm sorry if I'm sounding bitter. I need my caffeine to give me a lift.

But it sure puts a smile on my face when I receive letters from you.

Your friend,

Maurice.

The whole day after I read Maurice's letter, I couldn't stop thinking about that sixteen year-old boy and his poor mother. Sure, I watched the made-for-TV movies where the teenager looked like he was about to die of some awful disease and his mother wrung her hands and his father yelled at the doctors, and then the boy came out of it and won the high school football championship, but the tears those stories brought to my eyes were different from the tears Maurice's story caused.

Here I was, surrounded by lost lives. Empty people whose souls had been plucked out of them and squashed between God's thumb and forefinger. The old Alma thought she believed in God, but that Alma seemed so far away now, like I was looking at her sitting at the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. I could see her tiny self, on her tiny couch. Maybe reading a tiny book. If God reached down from the Heavens to extract her soul, he wouldn't find it. She had stuffed it behind the cushions of the couch.

Dear Maurice,

It's raining here and I'm stuck in the recreation room which doesn't smell so nice this morning. You know that smell? Like old people, throw-up, cologne and lemony detergent all rolled into one. There are six people here in the rec room with me but they might as well be mushrooms for all the socializing they do. Every now and then a boom of thunder shakes the walls and no one even looks up except Ambrose. He just raises his

eyebrows and nods and says “Yep” as if he’s involved in a personal conversation with God.

When I read your story about that poor boy and his momma, I was so sad, I cried during Hector’s Friday visit. He tried to get the nurse to give me some medicine to settle me down but I said, No. I couldn’t make that boy get better by covering over my feelings and it was the first time in a long time that I had felt anything at all. I bet you can’t imagine such a thing as not feeling anything. I can tell that you’re a sensitive man and that you aren’t afraid to show your emotions. I don’t mean that my husband is cold, but he likes to reason things out and if he can’t do anything about a situation he says, “just forget about it. No use suffering for what you can’t change.” He’s sensible, I know, but I could never adopt his view.

I guess I’m chattering on and on. I hope I don’t bore you with all my nonsense. I sure do enjoy reading your letters.

Send my love to Blue and all your grandkids.

Your friend,

Alma

I was amazed to read what I had written to Maurice. I didn’t even know I felt that way until I read it in my own letter. Once I sealed the letter and wrote Maurice’s address on it, it became part of my true self, unburied and out in the open.

* * *

When I don’t have Hector visiting, and I’m not being tortured by Gretchen, I make the best of my situation. I guess I’m not going to die. I can’t get that feeling

anymore that all I have to do is close my eyes and float up to Heaven. And TV just isn't so fun now that I have to watch it in a room filled with people moaning and crying all the time. I've found that there are some things that I look forward to, though. First, of course, are my letters from Maurice. Then are my letters from Donna and Steven. Then it's going outside. Who'd have thought that just going outside could make me feel happy.

Anyway, with my walker I've got so I can go just about anywhere now, as long as I'm not in a hurry and it doesn't involve stairs. I can even go outside. I go to the rehab wing for my exercises in the morning and then, to escape the noise from the other inmates, and the smell of nursing home food, I go out into the yard behind the Home.

I have to be careful when I leave the building to go outside. Ambrose sometimes hovers near the door to the yard. I don't know if he has any idea about what he would do if he got outside, but he's determined to try. The people with dementia aren't allowed outside without an aide. I ask the nurse to buzz me out then I hold the door open just enough to ease myself and my walker out. Actually there's a lot more crashing and banging than easing, but I'm still quicker than Ambrose. Sometimes, I have to pull the door closed after me if Ambrose is quick enough to grab the handle.

"I'm sorry, you can't come out," I say.

As soon as I step outside I feel like Dorothy stepping out of her drab Kansas house into the colorful, magical world of Munchkinland. The air is sweet because of the lilacs that bush out around the patio and the fence that runs around the yard is

covered with ivy that opens up in purple and pink flowers every morning. Just outside the back door is a shallow ramp to the patio with round tables shaded by green and yellow striped umbrellas. From there, a paved walkway runs in a circle through the small trees that are scattered around the yard.

When I go out, I head for the path that takes me as far away from the building as possible. There's an old bench that I like to sit on near the back of the property where the trees are bigger and the bushes aren't trimmed as often. From the bench I can see the whole yard. Despite the name of the place, there are no willow trees, but there are flowers near the patio and, out by my bench is a large vegetable garden. The garden has a high mesh fence around it, to keep deer and rabbits out, maybe. It's nice to think that I share my yard with animals out of Bambi.

Because I only see the back of the building, it's hard to get a sense of where Glen Willow Gardens is. Hector tells me that it's "in the middle of nowhere." I think that means that it's off in the country with no WalMarts or Rite Aids around. When I sit on my bench there's just wilderness behind me with tall trees and bushes and rough grass that grows up along the fence. I think I can hear a highway along the back of the woods.

But it isn't quite nowhere because there is a pretty, white, country church with a rose window on the steeple off to one side of the property. The church is small, but the first Sunday I was outdoors I saw the parking lot fill up, and lots of colorful hats climb out of the cars and head through the rear door of the church. I imagined the people with their sherbet clothes and ribboned hats all sitting in the wooden pews like a row of flowers in a neat garden. I thought God must smile down at them. Behind

the church is a cemetery that stretches as far as I can see. I can't decide if a cemetery next to a nursing home is a sensible convenience or a cruel joke.

There's also a little house on the right side of the building. Not too close. There may be another house on the other side of it, but I can't tell from my bench. The house has red shutters and some sort of vine climbing up a trellis by the door. I feel like I should see Snow White sweeping off the back porch, with a little bird singing from her shoulder. I have to laugh. Rows of flowers in the church and Snow White next door. My imagination seems to have woken up here at Glen Willow Gardens.

I've come to enjoy my bench and the chance to be alone. I enjoy the fact that the yard isn't as well kept up here by my bench. Hector keeps our yard trimmed and neat all the time so that I feel like an intruder if I venture into it. But here the tree that shades me has some dead branches, and there are weeds growing under my bench as if the back of the yard is just too far away for regular upkeep. Also, the chain link fence between Glen Willow Gardens and the house next door is broken and coming off its post. I could probably squeeze through and escape if I were skinnier and had any place to go.

My bench has a plaque on it that says "Joan Margolius 1921- 1999." Seventy eight years old. Twelve years older than I am. I imagine myself living here for twelve years. Then, after I die, I'll be the honoree in one of the memorial services they have around here every so often. A stranger will read a poem for me and lots of people will cry because that's just what you do, and most people around here have

tears at the ready for just such an occasion. In the eleven days that I've been here two people have died already.

The day I really met Cara the tomatoes in the vegetable garden were starting to turn orange. She came outside when I was sitting on my bench listening to the cars on the highway beyond the woods. She didn't say a word to me and I thought she must still be angry that I mistook her for a resident. I watched her for a while because it was clear that even though I was sitting only about ten feet away she wasn't going to talk to me. She was wearing a straw visor and her gray hair stuck out above and all around it. She held her lips tight like she was holding back from scolding her tomatoes for drooping.

After about ten minutes, I thought I heard her say something, but she didn't look over at me so I wasn't sure if she was talking to me or to her plants.

"I'm sorry?" I said.

"Huh?" She looked over at me as if she hadn't realized anyone was sitting there.

"Did you say something to me?"

"No, I didn't say anything at all."

"I heard you say something. I just wondered if you were talking to me."

"Well if I said something, and I'm not saying I did, it wasn't to you."

"Oh."

She went back to her work. Then she said gruffly, "So you can talk huh? Some of them can't you know."

“Yes.”

“May as well be statues, sitting out here.”

“Well I can talk.”

She grunted and nodded, and that was how we got to be friends. I started meeting up with Cara about every day. We’d talk or just be quiet. She was a hard worker and I found it very relaxing to watch her at her work.

I had never had many friends. Even when I was a little girl, I was shy. When I watched the other girls with their pigtails swinging and their dresses looking so pretty, I felt like I was from another planet. My mother tried to dress me up, but my legs were thick, and my frizzy hair never cooperated with pigtails or braids. After an afternoon trying to play with the daughters of my mother’s friends, while my mother and her friend drank coffee, I would hear on the way home about why I couldn’t laugh without snorting first, or why I had to knock things over all the time when the other little girls were so careful with their tea sets and doll houses.

Life at Glen Willow Gardens isn’t all gardens and benches, though. I’m finding that the more my head clears and my body recovers, the more frustrated I get with situation I’m in. Two days ago they moved my seat in the dining room. I like to sit at the small table by the window where I can at least look out at my bench. So when I went into the dining room for lunch, I headed toward my usual chair, but there was someone already slouched over the placemat. The aide who wears the tight t-

shirts under her smock said, “No, Alma, you’re sitting here today.” And she waved me over to the seat by the counter where Ambrose and the Siren Lady were sitting.

It was one more indignity added to my already dismal day. That morning, Gretchen had decided to get all her frustrations out on me, and she apparently had a lot of them. She was working with my hands so that I could start doing things like brush my teeth and write better, but I was still clumsy and weak in my right hand, especially since my fall when I hurt both my wrists. Then, even though my knee was still sore from my fall, she made me raise and lower my leg until I was ready to kick her if I’d had the strength and she’d got close enough.

So when I was pushed out of my seat at lunch, it just heaped one more trouble on an unhappy day. “I sit here at lunchtime,” I said.

“Well, today, we need you to sit here with Ambrose and Sophie because I need to be able to help Maude. Besides, now you don’t have to sit by yourself.” She said this like I was a three-year-old and she was telling me I could have a red lollipop.

That’s the way around here, helping you whether you want it or not, then acting like you should be grateful. You get moved around like a Twinkie in the Hostess assembly line. When you need someone, there’s no one to be found, but just try to mind your own business and do what you want, and you get five people telling you you can’t do it, and move here, or move there, or go to bed, or eat this, or take that pill, or raise your arms and kick your feet. It was like living with a dozen Hectors who all know what is best for me and don’t bother to ask what I think.

I was so mad I threw my fork across the room and hit the Hat Lady. It was a pretty good throw, considering. I wished Gretchen could have seen it.

The Hat Lady didn't seem to even notice the fork flying in her direction. When it hit the brim of her hat, she looked up and barked, "I need coffee."

I had to visit the psychiatric nurse later that day. I felt like I was in school detention. She frowned and asked me if I wanted to hurt myself or anyone else. I said, "Of course not," even though I sometimes did want to hit some of the people who live or work here. I know better than to say something like that to a psychiatric nurse.

Hector looked grim when he visited me later. He said that he heard that I was having adjustment problems. "What's come over you?" he asked me.

"I think the people here are the ones having a hard time adjusting to me," I surprised him and myself by saying.

Hector frowned. "You know, insurance isn't going to pay for you to stay here forever. And now you have a new drug to keep you calm that costs over one hundred dollars per month. And all the gas I buy just getting out here three times a week. I don't need you making trouble here. We have to sort things out."

I didn't know what things needed to be sorted out. I'd get better and go back home, plunk myself down on the couch in front of the TV, and Hector would disappear into his office. What was there to sort out?

Sometimes I find Hector looking at me like I'm a refugee from Mars. It's a look of concentration and puzzlement. *Where's the old Alma?* his look says. *My wife didn't throw forks.* *What have you done with the old Alma?* is what his look says.

It's the same way he studies a financial document at home when he suspects he's being taken for a ride and he has to search out the source of the deception.

Nothing gives him greater pleasure, I think, than to discover that someone's trying to give him a raw deal and to research his way into a bargain.

He looks at me, wondering. But he doesn't ask about Maurice. He doesn't ask where I was going, he doesn't ask why I left home, he doesn't ask what I was thinking. He doesn't say, "Alma, tell me what was troubling you. Tell me what I can do to help." I'm a new puzzle, a new scheme to uncover and emerge victorious over.

* * *

Just when I thought things were sailing smoothly in my recovery I had a setback. Two days ago, when I stood up from lunch, the dining room swirled around me and the faces of old people spun over my head. I had the sensation that the floor was rising to meet me and a plate of food was hurtling toward me. Then a black cloud came down over me. When I opened my eyes I saw table legs, and the fat knees of the nurse. She was patting my cheek and saying, "Alma, Alma."

"Oooh," was all I could say at first. My whole body ached and my head was still caught in a whirlpool. I put my hand to my heart and it was covered with a soft, wet, stickiness. "Call Hector," I croaked. "Call Hector. Tell him I'm going to die."

"You're not going to die," the nurse said.

Two dark-skinned men came into the room and the nurse stood up. The men knelt on the floor near me.

"I'm bleeding," I told them.

"Where?"

"Right here," I patted the dampness on my chest.

“It’s sweet potatoes, Alma,” the nurse said. “You knocked your plate over when you fell.”

Both men laughed.

I refused to speak another word as they loaded me onto the gurney and closed the ambulance door with a bang.

Hector arrived just as they were wheeling me into the emergency room. I heard his crisp voice, “I’m her husband.” Then I saw his face peering down at me, his forehead creased. He was there when they wheeled me down for x-rays. He was there when the girl put the plate under my knee for the x-ray. He was there when the doctor put bandages on both my wrists and on my right knee. He dashed out into the hall to demand medication every time the pain in my knee flashed like lightning through my whole body. Hector made sure no one mixed me up with an appendicitis case and carted me off to surgery. He saw to it that my heart didn’t stop while I was sleeping.

After they finally finished poking me with needles and moving me around and feeling my wrists and knee, they closed the curtain around my bed and left me alone with Hector.

“Thank you,” I said.

“What for?”

“For staying with me.”

“I’m your husband. Of course I’ll stay with you. I’ve been taking care of you for over forty years. Do you think I’m going to stop now?” He smiled the smile I remembered from the front desk at my father’s office.

It turned out that I had a urinary tract infection.

“You don’t drink enough water, dear,” Hector told me after I’d been returned to Glen Willow Gardens. “I told the nurse to give you two extra glasses of water a day. You must drink them or you’ll keep having problems.”

I nodded even though I groaned inside. I had been avoiding drinking too much because of my bathroom problem. Now I’d have another thing forced on me. I guess it was my own fault for leaving half my glass of water on the table after every meal. Even surrounded by nurses I can’t seem to take care of myself.

* * *

I finally received another letter from Maurice.

Dear Alma,

I’m surprised to find myself writing another letter. I’ve hardly written three letters in my entire life and here I’m writing like a school kid with a pen pal. Your lady-like handwriting makes me think of the sad, tear-faced woman I picked up that day along the side of the road. Though it wasn’t a good day for either of us, I suppose, what with both of us ending up in the hospital, rehab, and me with no more job, I still think of it as my lucky day! How about that for craziness? Maybe it’s because I have nothing to do around here but think, and you’re a bright spot in my gloomy thoughts. I thank you for that.

That boy I told you about is showing some signs of recovery. Slow, but it's there. He opens his eyes and looks around. I've gotten to talking to his mother. She's a real nice lady. Divorced with just her son to look after her and now she's looking after him. Her ex-husband hasn't even come to see his own son. That's a bitter thing. I'm sure your Hector would look after his family, even if he's not one to show his emotions. Look how he visits you. Hell, even my ex gives me a call now and again. We're on good terms.

I want you to think of happy things, not sad. I think I told you already, but I have a special sense about people. Must be from running into so many different kinds of people on so many different adventures. I don't know you well, but I know you were on some sort of adventure when we met and I sure hope that our accident doesn't turn you from your course. Obstacles are there to overcome. There's a spark in you. Don't let it go out!

You must think I'm way out of line giving you advice and all, and maybe I am. A great big scar on my forehead doesn't give me special powers of insight. So, if I'm out of line, you just tell me so and I'll stop.

They're calling us to lunch now. Let's see, chicken with potatoes and green beans? Yum!

Your pen pal,

Maurice

Even though I didn't tell Hector or anyone else at Glen Willow Gardens, I had long ago remembered everything about Maurice. I remembered his face and I remembered how I met him.

I met Maurice on the morning that I ran away from home.

It was early morning. I was up and out of the house before I was really awake enough to think about what I was doing or to scare myself out of doing it. The car keys were hanging on the hook by the back door where Hector always hung them. It had been so long since I had driven the car that I had to think about which key was for the ignition and which was for the trunk. I gunned the engine too loud and startled myself and worried that I'd wake Hector. Good thing he slept at the other end of the house.

I headed straight for the grocery store because the grocery store was about the only place I ever drove to, so it was automatic to go that way. I pulled into the parking lot. The store wouldn't open for a couple of hours so the lot was empty. I took out the packet of maps Hector kept in the glove compartment. All I knew was that I wanted to find a long, straight road that headed as far away as possible. I-90 looked promising and I knew that I'd seen signs for it when I was out with Hector.

At that hour, getting on the highway was easy. Hardly any cars at all and the ones that were there could easily go around me as I got used to the high speed. I saw the sun come up in the rearview mirror. It was a lovely sight.

It was almost lunch time when the car started to slow even though I pressed my foot down on the gas pedal and clenched my teeth, begging it to go. I steered over to the shoulder of the empty highway and sat with my hands in my lap, looking at the heat curling up from the asphalt road. I had been so worried about the other cars and not accidentally getting off the highway at a random exit that I hadn't even bothered to think about gas. The crows on the fence by the highway cawed,

crouching and rocking like a scolding finger. They yelled at me and accused me of all sorts of things. I gave them my blackest look.

I remembered seeing a sign for a gas station a little ways back. I figured I'd have to call Hector to come and rescue me. I looked warily at the crows that glared back at me demanding to know what I was going to do to about my predicament. I got out of the car and started out walking toward the next exit wishing I could remember how many miles the sign said.

I was glad I wore comfortable shoes—my blue almost-leather ones with the low heels and the Velcro strap. None of those high heels like some women wear. Those were fine if you were just staying in the kitchen, but for walking along the highway when your car has run out of gas and your husband doesn't know where you are and you might be killed by a car or a traveling murderer at any time, comfortable shoes were the way to go. Actually, as I found out after about ten minutes of walking, they weren't all that comfortable.

Not very many cars went past. I tried to remember how many cars I had seen on the highway once I got past the town and started driving by endless rows of corn. I wondered what the people in the cars thought when they saw my big butt waddling along the side of the highway. And me with just my purse, which was getting heavier and heavier as my shoes got tighter and tighter, and not even a hat to keep the blazing sun off my nose and cheeks.

The sun burned unpleasant pictures into my mind. Me, lying in a ditch by the side of the road weakly trying to lift my arm over the tall weeds. "Water," I'd croak at the passing cars. Or me walking and walking forever as night fell, stars came out

and the temperature dropped. Going on as my flesh was used up by my walking and my bones stuck out and I became a skeleton that wandered the highway scaring children and haunting the roadside diners. But the worst image that I couldn't shake from my overheated brain was Hector pulling up alongside me, in what car I don't know, and telling me to get in, he was taking me home.

But Hector didn't pull up next to me and neither did anyone else. Except for the truck driver who pulled over just ahead of me and opened his door. He had to step out on that little step next to the door to talk to me because when I saw the truck stop, I stopped too. Just as much as I wanted someone to come to my rescue, I didn't want to have to deal with some strange man who drove a truck. But the man just yelled, "Hey. Need a lift?"

When I didn't answer right away he said, "That your car back there a ways?"

"Yes," I finally said, wiping the tears and sweat from my eyes.

"Well, how about I give you a lift to town?" He was talking real loud because I was still planted in the road. When I didn't answer he said, "Or if you'd rather walk, I guess that's okay. It's only twenty five or thirty miles."

The next town hadn't seemed that far when I looked at it on the map. I took a couple steps forward. "Oh, I guess I could use a ride," I said like it was six-of-one, half-a-dozen-of-another. He hopped down from the cab. Even though he was a big man, with a stomach that his shirt could barely cover, he moved fast. My heart started pounding when he came toward me, but then he turned around the corner of the truck and went over to the passenger side door.

He put his hand lightly on my elbow while I hoisted myself into the cab. It smelled like mildew and cigarettes and the seat was sticky when I put my hand down to turn to reach back for the seat belt. After I buckled in, I put both hands in my lap and tried not to touch anything. He went back around and swung himself into the driver's side of the cab and settled in.

Then he turned suddenly toward me and stuck out his hand. "Maurice," he said. I was taken aback. I couldn't remember the last time that I had met someone outside the company of my husband, Hector.

* * *

Dear Maurice,

I must say, no one has ever seen a spark in me before. It sure is a nice thought. Though, if Hector saw such a thing he'd put it out right away. He's very fire-conscious. Safety first!

Of course you're right to remind me how lucky I am to have a husband to visit me. I'm like the pet dog who runs away from home only to find out it can't take care of itself and develops new appreciation for its owner. I guess I've got my tail between my legs. I don't mean to be critical.

I suppose it doesn't matter, though. They tell me I'm heading home soon. Hector has lined up a nurse to look after me at night. I don't think it's necessary. I hardly ever wake up during the night anymore, and when I do, I'm not so confused. I don't think there's any danger of me getting up to make omelets at three o'clock in the morning. Oh well, Hector has always been real careful about taking care of me.

But really, I don't think I'm ready to go home yet. I get dizzy at the oddest times, and my knee swells up like a pumpkin if I walk too much. And that's because I took a fall here a couple days ago, not because of the truck accident or the stroke. I guess you could say I'm moving in the wrong direction with my recovery. Who knows what else will happen? People are always falling around here. Even the people in wheelchairs somehow manage to slide out of them and land smack on their faces, though I don't see how they do it. I don't mean to be a pessimist but I could have another fall and that will just delay my release again.

If I'm a bright spot in your day there at rehab, I want you to know that you're a bright spot in my life here and outside here. You have a kind and warm face and I know that you're a loving father and grandfather. I don't know what kind of woman would have let you go, though you speak kindly of your ex, too. And if you think you're out of line in what you say to me, then I suppose I'm out of line just the same.

Your good friend and pen pal,

Alma

Cara was already out in her garden when I hobbled out to the yard. I hadn't been outside since I had my fall two days ago. I was using the large frame walker that I used when I first started walking, and I had soft braces on both my wrists. I had to stop and lean against the walker every now and then to rest. By the time I made it to my bench, I was breathing hard. I sat down slowly. My knee protested against every movement.

“What happened to you?” Cara asked.

“Fell,” I puffed.

Cara studied me for a moment. “I thought you’d gone home or something,” she finally said.

“No, still here. Longer now, I suppose.” My breath was coming back to me.

Cara observed me for another moment, then she nodded and reached into the latticework of sticks along one edge of her garden and gathered up a handful of sweet peas that hung from the ivy. She came over to me and tucked the peas in the pocket of my sweater. “Eat these,” she said. “It’s good exercise for your hands.”

She was right. Delicious too.

Cara liked to tell me about the things she was growing. Like black seeded Simpson which turned out to be nothing more than lettuce. And cilantro which is dishwashing detergent disguised as parsley. She grew marigolds to keep the bugs from eating her tomatoes. “My garden is Mother Earth’s pantry and marigolds are the medicine cabinet,” she said.

“I don’t know much about gardening,” I said. “I used to grow impatiens in my front yard in the summer but I never bothered with vegetables. Hector always said after the money you spend on buying the plants and the peat moss, and after the time you spend planting and watering and weeding, it comes out cheaper to buy the vegetables at the store.”

Cara closed her lips tight and her eyebrows came together in a “v” over her nose. “That man is aptly named,” she said.

That's why I try not to talk to her too much about Hector. Somehow, she's gotten an unfavorable impression of him.

* * *

"I could sure use some company," Maurice said after I'd settled into the cab of his truck and shaken his hand. "No one to talk to but Blue for the last three hours."

"Blue?" I asked. My feet were hot and swollen and my nose still wanted to run, but it felt good to be sitting.

Maurice nodded toward a photo stick-pinned to the roof of the cab. It was a big dog that looked part German shepherd. "That's Blue. He doesn't talk much but he's a real good listener." He laughed a big, rumbling laugh. "The real Blue lives with my ex while I'm on the road."

After a while, I could tell that he had a fine relationship with that photo because he didn't really need anyone to do much talking. After Hector, who sometimes seemed like the only way he could get himself to talk to me was if I was in his way and he had to say excuse me or knock me down, this man could really talk. Every now and again he'd surprise me though, and ask some kind of question that I had to think fast to answer, like, "Where're you from?" or "Where're you headin'?" Then he'd look over at me, his eyebrows raised making furrows on his forehead that disappeared under his brown cap.

Now, even though he seemed like a nice enough gentleman, I knew that the worst of them, the folks who trapped people in their basements and ate their flesh, seemed like nice folks at first, so I didn't want to give too much away about myself. I felt loose and elastic while I reinvented myself talking to Maurice. Oh nothing big,

like I was some kind of nuclear scientist or anything. I just told him I was going to Springdale to visit my old high school friend Lucille, who “we girls always just called Lu.” I looked at his large hands on the steering wheel while I told him where I was going. There was hair on his knuckles and his fingernails looked strong enough to pull a nail out of piece of wood. His hands seemed like just the right tools to maneuver a huge truck around the road.

There really was a Lucille in my high school class. She had blond hair and wore a pearl necklace, and the boys used to fall all over themselves to get her attention. She always made me feel like I was just a puff of smoke.

“We meet once a month for lunch,” I told Maurice, “with some other girls from school who are still in the area.”

“Friends are the cream in the coffee of life,” Maurice said, then he chuckled at his cleverness.

“That’s sure true,” I agreed.

“I’ll tell you what,” Maurice said, “I’ll take you into town and we’ll get you some gas, then maybe one of your friends can take you to your car. Do you know how to fill the tank with a gas can?” I shook my head, so he explained, real patient like he was sure I could do it.

“Oh, yes, I’m sure one of my friends can help me out,” I said.

We drove past a barn with the roof sagging low like it had held up too many winter snows. Maurice nodded toward the barn. “That there is where I picked up my strangest hitcher. Young boy. Not more than seventeen, eighteen. Thought he was a girl at first. It was night and raining with that cold rain that hits you like pins falling

out of the sky. Well, I thought he was a girl, staggering along on high heels and wearing a skinny red gown.” He looked over at me to see what I made of this.

“Oh my,” was all I could think to say.

“I wasn’t going to pick her up. You have to be careful, especially with the ladies, you know. But she looked so pathetic, like she could hardly take another step, and no jacket or nothing. So I stop and say, ‘climb on in,’ and she does, and here, she’s a boy.” Maurice stopped to laugh. “Talked to me about football. All the time mascara running down his face and bare shoulders shivering. Not a word about the get-up and I don’t ask. Not my business. Took him about five miles then let him off at another barn. Don’t know where he was going. Like a ghost in the night.” He shrugged. “Go figure.”

Maurice had lots of stories and he seemed so happy to have someone to tell them to. He had a voice that was almost too generous for the small cab we were in. Hector’s voice was crisp like fresh lettuce and when he had his say there was usually nothing more to be said. Maurice wasn’t so efficient and sometimes his stories helped me to think up more things I used to do with my friend Lu, who I found myself referring to just like that, “my friend Lu,” like he was going to forget who Lu was between my tales.

Of course, my stories were all made up. About how me and my friends helped each other get dressed for the prom and Lucille let me borrow her white shoes to go with my gown. Now I never went to the prom. If any boy had asked me to go I think I would have hidden in my hall locker until he went away. Not that I could have fit in my hall locker.

But it was fun to create a new me, and I actually started to look forward to my imaginary lunch date with my friends.

I found out that Maurice had nine grandkids. Grandkids were something I wished I had like a burning ache in my breast, as romantic as that may sound. He started to tell me about little Joey and him fishing in the pond by his house. “You wouldn’t believe the size of some of them fish in that little puddle of a pond,” he said. But just when he took his hands off the wheel to show me the size of the bass his grandson caught, I saw the yellow line in the middle of the road take a sharp turn to the left and leave us behind.

The picture through the windshield tilted and the rows of corn were suddenly right in front of me. When the wheels on my side of the truck hit the ditch I felt like I was on that airplane ride at the amusement park where you tilt to the side then swoosh into the air. But we didn’t swoosh. We kept tilting until I was pressing against the door handle and the view out my window was grass and weeds. A tree rushed toward the windshield. It fell like a domino against the next one as we came crashing through.

At first I thought one of the trees must have fallen in on me and was holding me tight to my spot, but then I realized that the tree was Maurice, who had slid down the seat and come to rest on top of me. I was wedged with the window underneath me and the door handle digging into my arm, and by Maurice on top of me, not moving. My arms were free from the elbows down but I couldn’t do anything with them. I couldn’t reach to the side to push Maurice off me and, anyway, when I tried

to move my elbow and lift him off so I could have room to breathe, I could tell that I would never be able to budge him.

I knew I was being punished for running off with the car and the credit card and no idea what I was doing or where I was going. I was being punished for eating an entire loaf of white bread, and for imagining killing my husband, and for when I was seven and let the car battery die just so my doll could have light. Tears ran down my cheeks as I thought longingly of my couch and my TV.

Hector's face flashed before me, full of scorn that I should have been so foolish as to get myself into this situation with this strange man on this highway that curved when it should have been straight. Somehow I knew Hector would be the first one to see my body. He'd find me even though he didn't have a car and he wouldn't know where to look for me. My face would probably be blue and my eyes would be bulging. He'd know I couldn't even run away from home right.

I shut my eyes and waited to die. Then I heard the sirens.

* * *

Chef Albert came today. Ambrose smiled like a little kid in a mud puddle when he felt the gushy dough. It was nice to see him smile.

I had become more of an assistant to Chef Albert than a participant in the baking. I didn't steal the chips anymore. There just wasn't as much pleasure in it as there used to be. I could measure the ingredients so Chef Albert could concentrate on keeping people from eating the chips or handfuls of flour. The amount of concentration necessary for some of these people to place a glob of dough on a tray is amazing to see. They'd raise an arm like a crane at a construction site then wave it

around over the tray, or the table, or the head of the person next to them, until Chef Albert guided them to the open spot for the cookie. I found that I could get Alice to put her dough down by tickling her under the arm. Chef Albert was so pleased with this discovery that he said I just made his life a whole lot easier, since getting the residents to release the dough ball can be the toughest part of his job. It was fun chatting with Chef Albert while we worked.

“Oh sure, I know Cara,” he said to me when I told him that I was heading outside to visit with her after we were done with the baking. “Let’s see, I’ve been coming here for upwards of twenty years, if you can believe that. Cara grows the best tomatoes in the state and she gives me her extras.”

He dashed over to stop the Hat Lady from spilling the Kool Aid jug that had been left out after breakfast. “So she talks to you,” he said when he came back to the table.

“Sure,” I said.

“Well, you know, you must be something special because it took me three years to get her to say a word to me.”

“Really?”

“Yep. ‘Course that was just after Mary died. Cara shut right down for a while.” He began reaching around the table picking up dirty utensils and cups and putting them in the empty batter bowl.

“Mary?”

“Her daughter. Didn’t she tell you? Eight years old.” Chef Albert clucked his tongue and shook his head.

I thought about how I had sat on my bench jabbering on and on about my kids while Cara worked away in her garden. How funny Donna and Carl were as children, how smart they were in school, like Hector, how they wrote me letters and said they were looking forward to me getting back home. How they drove six hours to see me when I first got here. And all the time Cara worked away in her garden, smiling even, listening to my nattering. Did I stop and say “So tell me Cara, do you have children? Where do they live?” Did I say, “What is your daughter like, does she look like you?” Did I show any interest so that Cara could tell me, her new friend, that her daughter was dead at eight years old?

Thinking now about how Cara’s face sometimes disappeared behind the leaves of the tomato plants, and how her hanky came out of her hip pocket before she blew her nose with a loud rush while I talked, I remembered the cold emptiness I had felt after my children left home. I remembered the metallic taste that I always had in my mouth no matter what I ate, and the panic attacks that would leave me shaking and panting among the shelves at the library or in the grocery store. I thought that here I was at the age of sixty-six with my first real friend that didn’t have anything to do with Hector or my kids and I had not even been a good enough friend to find out about her dead daughter. No matter how much I wanted to change I was stuck with being me.

Chef Albert looked up from the dishes. “Oh, now, look what I’ve gone and done,” he said. “Look what I’ve gone and done.” He patted my shoulder and tugged on his white chef’s coat until I stopped my blubbing and stood up.

“I’ll be back,” I said. I went and stood by the patio door and looked out the window toward Cara’s garden. How could I go out there and talk with her now? How could I ask about Mary now? But how could I say nothing about it at all? I watched until I saw Cara come from around the front of the building and head back to the garden. She was carrying her mesh bag and she walked with a looseness that reminded me of the paper scarecrows that my first grade teacher stuck on the window of our classroom in the fall. She paused at the edge of her garden and looked toward my bench then back toward Glen Willow Gardens. I ducked behind the curtain and closed my eyes. Then I took a deep breath and stepped back into the kitchen. Chef Albert was collecting the cooled cookies and putting them in a plastic container.

“Chef Albert,” I said. “Could I take some cookies out to Cara?”

“Of course. Here take these two.” He put two cookies into a plastic bag and handed them to me. “Tell her I say hello and I can’t wait for those tomatoes.”

“I will.” I tucked the cookies into my pocket and headed outside.

Even before I’d said hello, Cara looked up from her vegetables and smiled at me. Her cheeks pushed her big round glasses up, and the skin around her eyes crinkled. “Well, I thought I’d missed you this morning,” she said. “Look at this beauty.” She lifted a yellowish gourd out from under some large leaves. “It’ll make a fine butternut squash soup.”

I nodded then remembered the cookies. “I have something for you,” I said. “Chef Albert was here and we made them.”

The cookies were too big to feed through the mesh fence that surrounded the garden so Cara said, “Toss them over.”

I looked at the top of the fence which was just over my head. “Oh, I don’t think I could do that.”

“Sure you can.”

I tossed the bag toward the top but it hit the mesh almost directly in front of me and bounced down to the ground. “Try again,” Cara said. “Get some loft.”

The second time it hit the top rail and bounced back down at my feet. I remembered why my son never wanted to play catch with me after he joined his little league baseball team.

“Almost,” Cara said.

I readied another throw. Cara had a look of concentration like she was ready to dive if the bag made it over the fence. I tossed the cookies again and they just cleared the fence. Cara put out her hands and reached for the bag as it sailed past and landed on the ground. “Great toss,” she said as she picked up the bag. She opened it and handed me a piece of the broken cookies.

“I’m awfully sorry about Mary,” I said quietly, surprising myself with my boldness. “Chef Albert told me,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “Thank you.” She took a bite of a cookie then smiled. “These were her favorites. Except we used to make them with nuts.”

“We can’t use nuts,” I said. “Some of the people are allergic.” I sat down on my bench and Cara returned to her garden. She was quiet for a while so I took to studying a white puff of a cloud that was hanging lazily over the roof of Cara’s house.

“When she was about four her grandma bought her a red dress with bows and birds on it.” Cara’s voice came from among the green leaves and brown stakes. “She

wore it every single day for six months. I had to wash it after she went to bed so she could wear it in the morning.”

“I bet she was cute.”

Cara nodded but I don't think she was paying much attention to me. She talked about Mary from when she was a baby to when she died. Chicken pox. Attacked her brain. Cara talked as the cloud made its way past her house and touched the tops of the pine trees that stood beyond it. She pulled up a weed and then sat in the dirt and pulled it apart slowly. Her voice floated on the breeze, nudged the leaves of her vegetables, and entwined itself in the fence and the branches of my tree, until Cara and I were woven in a blanket of words. Finally, Cara looked up at me and said, “Well, that's that, I guess, isn't it? My life's no easier or harder than anyone else's.” Then she sat, unmoving in her garden, and I sat, unmoving on my bench for a few more minutes, until the cloud disappeared behind the trees and we both realized that it was time to go in.

* * *

I was on my bench with another letter from Maurice. I had gone out right after breakfast because Gretchen was on a four day weekend and so my torture session was cancelled. The grass was still wet with dew, and the flowers on the ivy that grows on the fence were trumpeting their colors through the fine mist that lingered over the lawn. Cara was not out yet and the only company I had was a squirrel staring at me from a low branch as if trying to figure out what I was doing on my bench so early in the day.

Having Maurice's letter in the pocket of my sweater, I felt like a six-year-old kid with a handful of stolen candy, heading out to enjoy my treasure. I didn't open the letter right away. Instead, I savored the feeling of being in my own world where I could be confident and happy.

There must have been something in the way the fall air was just nudging out the heat of summer and the way the oranges and reds were beginning to creep into the leaves in the yard that brought the sense that things were different now. I suppose I've been the pampered housewife, with a husband who looks after me, and kids who don't need me anymore. Ever since Hector retired he's taken over the small, annoying tasks that I used to do. He does most of the grocery shopping because he remembers to bring the coupons, and he's careful about comparing prices. He makes sure the laundry gets done and that his shirts come out of the dryer before they're wrinkled. He arranged for the cleaning lady to come once a week, and the lawn service to mow the lawn and trim the bushes. With a husband like that, I've hardly had to lift a finger in years.

But here, at Glen Willow Gardens all sorts of demands are made of me. Not just for myself either. When an aide can't get to someone right away in the dining room, she sometimes asks me to help. I cut food for people. I can get the Hat Lady to put on her bib by pointing out how lovely it looks with her hat. I'm the only one now who can get Ambrose to sit still through all of dinner. I do it by telling him that if he sits still he'll have lemon meringue pie for dessert. Luckily, by the time dessert rolls around, he's forgotten what he stayed in his seat for, since we only have lemon meringue on Saturdays.

Sitting on my bench surrounded by an unaccustomed sense of well-being, I had a feeling of having left myself behind. As if the old Alma was a different person from me and was probably still planted on the couch in front of the television thinking about nothing more earth-shaking than what she was going to have for dinner. I wanted to sit down on the couch next to that Alma and put my arm around her.

“C’mon,” I would say to her. “Let’s get up and do something. Remember when you used to bake chocolate chip cookies with oatmeal and raisins? Donna would help, and Carl would lick the beaters? Remember that, Alma? Let’s go bake some cookies.”

The old Alma would look at me. “No,” she’d say. “I don’t feel like it.” And I’d know that she was thinking about Hector. If he heard activity in the kitchen he’d come out of his office to investigate. He’d stand and watch to make sure she didn’t get eggshells in the batter, and he’d advise her about how to clean up as she goes so the job at the end would be easier. Or he’d scold her for baking food that she wasn’t supposed to eat.

“No, I’m not in the mood for baking,” the old Alma would say to me. Then she would turn her head back to TV screen.

“C’mon, Alma,” the new Alma would persist. “Let’s go outside for a walk.”

But she’d look down at her legs and remember how tired she gets walking up stairs and she’d say, “Maybe later.”

I would look at the old Alma and shake my head. “You can’t spend the rest of your life sitting on a couch,” I would say. But then I’d feel bad, because only I know how much the old Alma didn’t want to spend the rest of her life sitting on the couch.

By the time I pulled Maurice’s letter out of my pocket the mist had risen so that it hovered in a thin veil of clouds that wouldn’t quite let the sun peek through. Glen Willow Gardens seemed to give off an odd glow with the sun lighting up its white paint against the dark sky.

Dear Alma,

I don’t mean to scold, heaven knows it sounds like you get enough of that, but I hope I never hear you compare yourself to a pet dog again. Now I love my Blue and I think he’s a happy animal, but just the same, he’s a dog and he’s dependent on me for everything. A pat on the head and a meal every day is all he needs to make him happy. I know you need more than that. It’s not my place to guess at your life with Hector, but I can’t help that feeling that you’ve been kept like a pet dog all these years and you’re ready for something different. There. That’s all I’ll say about that.

Though I’m preparing to leave here soon, I’ll say that there are some things I’ll miss. I’ve made some friends here. There’s a man, Douglas, who was in the Korean War. He lost his right leg from the knee down, to a land mine. He lost the other leg to diabetes. If one thing doesn’t get you, another will. We play checkers. He’s good but he didn’t know what he bargained for when he started playing against me.

Did I tell you that I joined the army after high school? I missed the Korean War but I did some time in Viet Nam. No action, that was left to the younger fellas, but plenty of trucks. I'm a whiz of a mechanic, if you want to know, and I kept the army jeeps and trucks operating. Looking back on it now, and I hope I don't sound like a coward because I would have fought for my country if I'd been called to it, I'm just as glad to have had my head under a hood rather than in a helmet. But I'm sure to give Douglas a stiff salute just before I sit down at his table to trounce him.

I had to laugh when you talked about the smell there, and the people sprouting up like mushrooms. Don't I know how that is. There are some people here for rehab who spend more energy fighting against their therapy than they spend trying to recover. It's like they're happy to be taken out of commission and just sit and watch TV while the world goes on without them. I just want to shake them by the shoulders. But I guess it's not my business to go telling other people what to do. Preaching the gospel of Maurice. Ha ha.

It's been so nice writing to you and talking about life. I hope we can keep writing even after we've both been released.

Your dear friend,

Maurice

I let my hands holding the letter fall to my lap and closed my eyes tightly. What would Maurice think of the old Alma—the real Alma, the Alma I was going back to soon. What had I done about my therapy other than complain? I cried and

moaned and fought. Though I was getting better, maybe even better than I was before the accident, it was only because Gretchen was a fighter. Not because I was trying.

There was no need to fool myself about what my life would be just as soon as I got home. The new Alma would stay here on her bench, and the old Alma would be back in charge. It was like Maurice had seen right into my house and looked straight at the old Alma plunked down on the couch, eating a loaf of white bread.

I turned back to the letter. Maurice couldn't be part of my life after I left here. There was no way that I could receive letters at home without Hector knowing about it. Hector almost always brings in the mail. I thought about getting a post office box, but I dismissed that idea almost as soon as I had it. How could I leave the house without telling Hector where I was going? I'm sure after all that'd happened, he'd never let me take the car by myself. No, once I left Glen Willow Gardens I couldn't keep up a correspondence with Maurice.

The golden warmth that surrounded me when I first came outside that morning evaporated with the mist. My shoulders felt heavy. I wrapped my sweater around me, and the old Alma came to visit me on my bench. "See?" she said. "It's not so easy, is it? Real life's not as easy as lying to Ambrose about lemon meringue pie, and tickling Alice under the arm. Maurice only knows the Alma you made up in his truck. He thinks you have girlfriends who you have lunch with. He thinks you're a lovely lady who goes out and does things. A lady who just had a little bad luck one day. What would he think of the real thing?" the old Alma taunted me.

“You know, it’s possible that you belong here at Glen Willow Gardens,” the old Alma told me. She wasn’t being unkind, just realistic. “Where else would being able to go to the bathroom by yourself be cause for celebration? I can’t imagine Hector standing up and cheering when you remember to flush the toilet and zip up your pants.”

A chill had entered the air. I stuffed Maurice’s letter back in my pocket and folded my arms across my chest, pulling my sweater tighter around me.

“It’s okay,” the old Alma told me. She put her arm across my shoulders. “I’ll stay with you.”

Later, before dinner I read Maurice’s letter again, and I wrote back. First, I wrote back telling him about the weather, and the food and everything except about me. Then I crumpled up that letter and wrote a real one.

Dear Maurice,

I’m sorry, Maurice, but that person on the couch in front of the TV, that’s me. You’ve never seen anyone fight as hard against physical therapy as me. I have no friends. I have no hobbies or interests. I’m an embarrassment to my husband and to my children. If Hector treats me like a pet dog, it’s because I act like a pet dog.

That’s why I was on the highway that day. I was running away from me. I was running away from the TV, from Oprah, from the soap operas. I was running away from my bedroom where my brush and comb are laid out in the same spot on the dresser, and the same orange flowered curtains have

hung ever since I got back from my honeymoon. I was running away from the Alma who doesn't know how to drive a car without running out of gas, the Alma who embarrasses her husband at business parties, the Alma who can't even make a sandwich right.

And Maurice, we can never write to each other after I leave here. The old Alma would never write letters to a strange man. And you wouldn't want to write to me. I would have nothing to say, unless you want to hear about what's on daytime TV. Hector has known for many years that I can't take care of myself. He does so much at home just to make sure it gets done right. He tries to help me. He tells me what to eat, and to exercise, so I can improve myself. But I don't do it. I don't want to do what he tells me. I want to be left alone. Alma, the mushroom sitting in the dark with nothing but the light of the TV.

Maurice, you are such a kind gentleman. I will be sorry to say goodbye when I leave here. I hope you remember the new Alma, because she won't be coming home with me.

Sadly,

The New Alma

I read my letter over and crumpled it up, too. Then I uncrumpled it and smoothed it out as best I could. I folded it and put it in the envelope and put it on the outgoing mail pile on the nurse's desk. Well, that was that. The new Alma folded up into a rectangle and mailed off.

* * *

Hector called today to say he couldn't make his visit to me. He said a belt on the car was broken, so he was going to have to sit in the car shop all day until it was fixed. "Trading one headache for another," he muttered. But he must have felt bad about that because before he hung up he said kindly, "I'll see you soon, dear."

I cried a little then headed out to my bench.

* * *

Sometimes I feel that the person responsible for the turn my life has taken is Oprah Winfrey. It was from watching her show that I got to thinking about changing my life.

After the kids had moved out and after I had mostly groped my way out of the blackness that had taken me prisoner, Hector retired and we bought a one-story house in a new development. I still lacked the energy and desire to be the kind of Susie Homemaker who found projects like organizing photos or knitting mittens, so it became my habit to spend the day in the living room reading or watching TV. Hector spent most of the day in his office where he had his computer. He seemed to need to feel like he was still at work during the day.

On that day, Hector had gone out on an errand and I was sitting on the couch when I was hit by some kind of strange energy. Maybe it was Hector's comment before he left, that my housedress looked nice. Well, he didn't exactly say "nice," he said it looked comfortable but that was like nice, and from Hector, that's about as close to a compliment as you're going to get. Besides, it was comfortable. The loose cotton was light and airy and, if I closed my eyes and spun around, I felt like a ballet dancer.

Really, though, I think it was the woman on Oprah that inspired me. She had gotten lazy in her marriage, no longer trying to please her husband, and she admitted that he had some legitimate complaints. Her husband even went on the show with her to talk about how much better their marriage was since she started dressing up more and having the house clean for him when he got home.

Now I'm no fool, and I realize full well that a good marriage is more than just a clean house and nice clothes. But I also know that little things can make a difference, and to tell the truth, it had been a long time since I'd really tried.

My first thought was that I might do some cleaning up, but that's a joke around my house. Hector always cleans up in between the maid service so there wasn't anything I could see that needed doing. Besides, he has some kind of radar that lets him find dirt that's totally invisible to me, so that plan would be doomed to failure from the start.

Then I thought of it—the perfect thing to do. I'd make his lunch. He said he'd be home by noon, and he's nothing if not punctual. When he'd come through the door, hungry from his shopping, he'd be greeted by his sandwich laid out on the table, just the way he liked it. And, since he wasn't at home, he wouldn't make me nervous by huffing and puffing and dodging around me like I'm four feet wide and determined to be in his way no matter what he tries to do. He'd be pleased that I had thought of him, and that I knew how much mustard he liked and that he would want the low fat cheese instead of the cheddar. He might even make some comment like he hadn't realized that I paid attention to those details. That would be some compliment coming from my husband.

The point was that those small gestures could be the first step in turning our marriage around. I was excited by optimism that I hadn't felt since Donna and Carl had gone off to college.

I got the sandwich ready fifteen minutes before he was due home and put it on the table. Then I took the plastic flowers off the dining room table and set them near the plate to make a nice presentation. As the final touch I took out a paper napkin and folded it neatly on the diagonal and placed it next to the plate. Then I sat down at the table and waited to hear the car in the garage so I could get up and be at the sink when he came through the door.

Now anyone who's ever sat around waiting for someone to get home so you can give him a surprise is going to know that that's when the clock starts moving like the Little-Engine-That-Could trying to get up over that big hill—just that slow. I looked at the sandwich and it was like I could see the bread getting dry,

I got the plastic wrap out of the drawer. It's always so hard to tear that wrap. The tear strip bends and the plastic stretches and stretches over the sharp metal before it finally comes off. I managed to get a lopsided piece torn off and I placed it over his sandwich. A tiny drop of blood where I cut my finger on the tear strip made a bright dot on the white bread of his sandwich; as hard to ignore as a bug on the TV screen. I noticed it just as I heard the garage door opening, and all I could do at first was stand there and feel my heart thumping. There wasn't time to get a new slice of bread. I lifted the plastic wrap and turned the sandwich over so it looked perfect again. Then I quickly replaced the plastic wrap. He would be pleased that I had thought to keep it from going stale and he'd probably not notice the little spot.

As the door handle turned, I hurried over to the sink to wash the knife and cutting board but, in my rush to get the dishwashing gloves out from below the sink, I knocked the box of powdered dishwasher detergent over and it spilled across the bottom of the cupboard. I closed the cupboard door and made a mental note to clean it up while Hector was on his computer later.

“Hello Dear,” I called out.

He hurried past me into the living room. That was just how he walked. No matter where he was going he seemed to think that he was running late. I could see him over the short dividing wall between the kitchen and the living room. He picked up the book I had left open on the coffee table and closed it, then smacked it down on the table next to my end of the couch. I should have thought of that. After all, it’s not like he hasn’t told me how annoyed he gets by my habit of leaving my books lying around.

“Did you get what you wanted?” I asked him, just to show interest in his day. I couldn’t remember what he’d gone to the store for, if he even told me.

“No. The person in front of me in line got the last one. They advertise a rebate then they run out before noon.”

“Did you buy a different one?”

“What do you think I’m an idiot? That’s the whole trick. It’s called bait and switch. I’m not going to fall for that.”

No wonder he seemed annoyed. At least it had nothing to do with me.

“That’s too bad,” I said.

He started to head into his office. “I’ve made you some lunch,” I called out to him.

“Huh?”

“I’ve made you some lunch.”

“I’m not hungry.” He walked into the kitchen and saw the sandwich with the plastic wrap over it.

“It’s ham with low fat cheese.”

“My ham?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ll have to eat it or it goes to waste doesn’t it?” He stood looking at it for a moment. “Thanks,” he said.

I realized that I hadn’t gotten him anything to drink. I took a glass out of the cupboard. “What would you like to drink, dear?”

He took the glass out of my hand and filled it with water and placed it on the table. Then he picked up the plastic flowers and took them into the dining room and put them where they usually sat at the center of the table.

Now plastic flowers are no big deal and he does like things to be in their place, but even so, I could feel the ocean tide getting ready to spill over and head down my cheeks, if you know what I mean. I told myself to breathe deeply as I stood in the kitchen staring at the back of his bald head. I could count his stiff hairs struggling to hang on, like trees in the arctic. Why did I ever think a sandwich would change anything? Saying a housedress looks comfortable is hardly a compliment. Just the opposite really.

“What is this?” he said examining the spot of blood. He sighed heavily and pushed his chair out from the table. He threw the sandwich into the disposal then he took a banana out of the bowl and walked out of the kitchen.

I dragged myself into the living room and fell onto the couch. My housedress crumpled up under my bottom so my thighs were showing. I looked down at them. Fat and fleshy like dimpled bread dough. I could hear Hector pull his chair up to his computer. He’d stay in his room until dinner. I listened to the tapping of keys on his keyboard. The sound was light and efficient, just like him. I sat staring at my thighs while the blotch of sun moved across the floor and disappeared. Then I went into the kitchen and got a loaf of bread out of the freezer. I sat back on the couch and ate the bread, one piece after another until it was gone. I always liked how the first piece was hard and cold and the last piece was soft and warm.

Finally, he came out of his room to go to the bathroom. I stuffed the empty bread bag between the seat cushions behind me and looked up to see him standing at the opening to the living room. He studied me like I was a broken toaster. “Don’t you want the TV on?” He turned it on and handed me the remote.

He went into the kitchen and I could hear him cleaning the countertop where I had made his sandwich even though I had already wiped it down. And his plate and glass were still in the sink. Suddenly I remembered the spilled dishwashing powder. I felt my housedress become wet under my arms and down the center of my back. I heard the cupboard doors open as he went to get the dishwashing gloves. “Jesus,” he muttered, loud enough for me to hear. He sighed and ran the water again. I could

picture him on his knees scrubbing the powder. It would be hard to clean up since the water would only make it sudsy.

I stared at the ripples on my thighs wishing I were alone with my fat body and frumpy housedress. I could leave crumbs on the counter and put the plastic flowers on the kitchen table. I thought of the gun on my closet shelf. Hector showed me how to work it once, in case a burglar broke in while he was out. I enjoyed the thought of getting the gun off the shelf. That would be no small feat since I'd have to climb up on a chair to do it. But never mind about that when you're in the world of imagination. Then I'd just walk into the kitchen quiet as you please. Hector would be kneeling with his head inside the cupboard under the sink, grunting while he scrubbed, to make sure I could hear his efforts. I'd go up behind him and point the gun at the back of his head. He'd never even know I was there. All the mess would probably stay in the cupboard. Maybe I could haul his body out to the garage and heave it into the wooden trunk where he stored our winter boots. He was pretty skinny from all his walking and low-fat diet.

Hector finished cleaning the soap out of the cupboard under the kitchen sink and went back into his computer room. I think he came out later and got some more food from the refrigerator. Neither of us said anything about dinner. Sometimes, he'd forget to say goodnight to me. I'd hear him go into the bathroom and brush his teeth. Then the toilet would flush and I'd hear the door to his bedroom close, and I'd know he'd gone to bed. I heard all that happen, but I just couldn't bring myself to get off the couch and go into my room to go to bed. The thought of waking up in our little house the next morning, and starting a new day, weighed me down so heavily

that I couldn't lift myself up. I must have dozed most of the night on the couch, because I woke up when my living room was lit with that gray glow of the sun getting ready to put in an appearance. My neck was stiff and my calf cramped when I stretched out my legs.

I got up and went into my room and put on a going-out dress, and stockings and outdoor shoes. The blue ones with the Velcro strap. I made sure that I had my sunglasses, and my wallet and credit card. I hoped the sound of the garage door and the car starting wouldn't wake Hector. I didn't need him charging after me as I drove out of the driveway. I get nervous enough when I'm driving.

* * *

"Are you ready, Alma?" Cara held the flap in the fence open and gestured me toward it. We were standing at the far end of the yard where the fence separated Glen Willow Gardens from the little house next door. "That's where I live," Cara had told me with a laugh. "Didn't you know that?"

"How could I know that?" There was no end to the mystery that surrounded my friend Cara.

We were having our own adventure. Cara had invited me to her house, to play hooky from rehab. I would sneak out of the yard and she would show me her house, then I'd sneak back to Glen Willow Gardens and no one would be the wiser. She looked like a kid who'd found her parents' cigarettes when she showed me the break in the fence. "I never use it, really. What do I want to sneak into Glen Willow for?"

I squinted at the opening in the fence. It looked very narrow. “I’m too fat to get through there.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What if someone comes out looking for me?”

“That’s never happened before. At least not before lunch time. It is a risk, though.” Cara frowned as if reconsidering.

I was afraid she’d change her mind. I glanced back over my shoulder at the door to the patio. Then I looked toward Cara’s house. It wasn’t so far away. I could make a quick visit and then be back on my bench before I was missed. It was an exciting prospect. Like sneaking out during school—something I’d never done.

“Okay,” I said. Cara held the fence back as far as it would go and I scrunched down and squeezed through. I found myself on the other side looking at Glen Willow Gardens through the gray metal diamonds of the fence. It seemed remote and foreign.

Cara took my hand. “We’d better hurry, Alma. I made a treat for you.”

I followed Cara through her yard. It seemed cooler and a deeper shade of green than when I looked at it from the other side of the fence. Her house, which always looked to me as if it came out of a fairy tale, seemed forbidding and inviting at the same time.

When she first mentioned the idea of my coming to her house, I found myself imagining our visit the way I used to imagine the easy friendships of the girls I went to school with—sitting around on pillows or beanbag chairs, chatting and laughing about the boys at school, trying on each other’s clothes, experimenting with make-up. The kind of friendships I never had. My friendships were halting and awkward, with

girls who were shy, like me, and who said the wrong things and wore clothes that weren't quite in fashion and that hung uneasily over round hips and sloppy breasts. We were the girls who stood in the corners at the school dances and pretended we were more interested in what we were talking about than in the boys and music. But we even felt uneasy with each other, because what brought us together was not that we liked each other but that no one else liked us. So, while I hoped for friendship and ease with Cara, I was afraid.

But I could tell Cara wasn't thinking any of these things. She seemed excited and happy, like I was a special treat that she was bringing home. I wondered how long it had been since she'd had a visitor. I wondered what kind of girl she had been. Had she been one of the popular girls, or had she been like me, trying to fit in while at the same time, trying to be invisible?

"I've made something I'm sure you'll like. Butternut squash soup. With cream and a little cinnamon," Cara said as she opened her back door and ushered me into her house.

I was not prepared for what I saw. Cara kept the garden neat and orderly, with her peas in climbing rows, her squash confined to one area, and her tomatoes obediently climbing stakes. But her house was a chaos of piles. Piles of newspapers stacked by the back door, yellowed near the bottom and white at the top, coats for a family of three hanging from hooks along the wall, hats, and scarves were a jumble on the shelf over the hooks. Boots and shoes of variety of sizes were lined up on the floor underneath the coats.

Cara noticed that I was looking at a pink coat with fur around the hood hanging next to a man's quilted jacket with flannel lining.

"Oh," she said, her hands fluttering nervously, "silly to have these here. I just don't get around to putting things away." She laughed a short, sharp exhalation. She took the two coats off their hooks and looked around for a place to put them, finally tossing them over the back of a kitchen chair. "I'll get to them later," she said.

I moved through the narrow passage into Cara's kitchen which was equally cluttered and close. The sweet smell of cinnamon and squash filled the space between the small table and four vinyl coated chairs. Clothing was tossed carelessly over the backs of the chairs and another stack of magazines and catalogs threatened to fall off one of them. The countertop was covered with bowls of vegetables, ceramic holders and spoon rests made by a child. There were pictures taped to the refrigerator and on the walls with masking tape that would crumble into dust if disturbed. The pictures were mostly crayon or paint with bright colors filling the pages. Small rag rugs were scattered over the floor and a rocking chair with flowery pads was by the window. All along the windowsill were knickknacks of china, wood, metal, and clay. Some obviously hand made, some bought. They were of animals, mostly cats.

"Have a seat, Alma, we don't have much time and I want you to try my soup." Cara bustled over to the table and cleared off two seats, carrying the clothes and papers that were on them into the next room where I could hear her drop them. Then she picked up the pink, girl's coat, and the man's flannel-lined coat and carried them back into the hall by the door where she hung them on the hooks they had been hanging on when I arrived.

I sat at the table. There were three sets of salt and pepper shakers in the center, surrounding a napkin holder filled with mail. One set of salt and pepper shakers was in the shape of Jack and Jill, but Jack's arm was chipped and broken, never mind his crown. I picked up the pepper shaker that was a clay blob painted a variety of bright colors in no particular pattern.

"Mary made that. She used to love the clay class at summer camp. I have lots of things she made." Cara waved around the room. Then she ladled out two small bowls of soup and brought them over to the table. The soup was a thick orange color and Cara had sprinkled cinnamon on top. It looked and smelled inviting, especially after eating only institutional food for so long. Cara put out two cloth napkins which were already rolled in napkin rings that looked like Mary's work. She handed one to me and put the other next to her bowl. Then she sat down. "Bon appetit," she said and we dug in.

As the soup warmed my insides I felt as if I had been drawn into a crowded but cozy nest and Cara was the mother bird, taking care of me and seeing to it that I had enough to eat and was comfortable and happy. The rest of the world was shut out. No danger or discomfort could find its way past Cara's memories and the clutter of her lost family. I found myself telling Cara about what I was like as a child, not making anything up like I had with Maurice, but not telling about the loneliness either. I told her about the books I had loved to read, and the tree that I used to climb because it had a low branch and a root that I could use like a step to swing my leg over and sit back. I told her about my pet hamster which lived for almost three years and which loved to climb up my sleeves and under my shirt.

When it was time to go, I was sad but happy at the same time. Cara stood and took the bowls over the sink saying, “Well, wasn’t this nice. We’ll have to do it again.”

I picked up the napkin ring that sat among the salt and pepper shakers. I examined it for a moment, then, looking at Cara’s back at the sink, I slipped it into my pocket.

* * *

With my discharge from Glen Willow Gardens coming up, Hector has become all business. No more tiptoeing around me, patting my arm and saying “Poor dear.” No more sugar-free chocolates and teddy bears. I’m not looking forward to when he finally starts talking to me about what happened that day. Of course, he might not raise the subject at all figuring that I’d learned my lesson and wouldn’t make that mistake again.

He’s been laying down the law for me for when I get back home. I guess when you spend your whole life being in charge of people at work, and they all look up to you and call you Sir, and such, it’s easy to expect everyone to stand at attention when you’re around. Once when Hector was telling an aide about how to administer my meds, she said “Okay, Doctor,” and I don’t think she was being sarcastic. He just has that way about him.

For me, there’s to be no cooking, no candy, no driving by myself. “I don’t want to see you get hurt,” he says. “You should exercise to keep off the weight and keep your strength up,” he says, but it’s clear that he doesn’t think that will happen.

It's easier to stop me from doing things than it is to get me to do something. I'm stubborn that way.

"The nurse is named Susan Lindemuth." Hector was visiting at lunch time so we sat at a table in the dining room. He had brought his own sandwich and I had a plate of chicken and mashed potatoes in front of me. There were green beans that were faded and waxy looking. "She's got fifteen years experience. She takes care of her invalid mother during the day, and she's a very sweet woman. You will like her I'm sure. Medicare won't pay for her," he said, as he took a bite of chicken off my plate and ate it. He picked up my glass of juice and held it out to me. "Drink. I don't want you coming home with a UTI."

Ambrose stopped eating.

At first everyone thought he just didn't like what they were serving and so they made him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. But he wouldn't eat it. He sat in his chair at the square table. The Siren Lady reclined on the other side with an aide feeding her brown mush, and the Hat Lady dug into her food on his left side. Ambrose's bushy gray eyebrows went up and down in successive expressions of bewilderment and annoyance. His hands trembled on the table top. His mouth remained steadfastly closed.

"Try feeding him, Connie," the nurse said. "His hands have been shaking so much lately it may be that it's too hard for him to hold his fork." So Connie sat next to him at the table. She put a load of mashed potatoes on his fork and raised it to his lips. He looked at her with his milky eyes but didn't open his mouth.

“C’mon, Ambrose, you like mashed potatoes,” Connie said.

Ambrose juttled out his jaw and curled his hand into a fist on top of the table.

“How about some yummy chicken?” she tried again. His mouth turned down into a frown and his lips disappeared.

“Alma, you try. He likes you.”

The look in Ambrose’s eye told me that I wasn’t going to get him to eat either, but I gave it a try. “Ambrose, if you eat some mashed potatoes you can have lemon meringue pie for dessert,” I said. I patted him on the shoulder and leaned over so I could look into his face. His eyes were staring past me at nothing. His mouth was firm and his knee jerked up and down a few times.

“It’s okay,” the nurse said. “Maybe he’s not feeling well.”

But he didn’t eat the next day or the day after that. The staff tried being stern, “Ambrose, you have to eat your food. Your son is worried sick about you and you’re causing a fuss,” or cajoling, “Ambrose, there will be a special treat for you if you eat just two bites,” or pleading, “Ambrose, you’ll get me into trouble if you don’t eat. Please, just try it.” Ambrose’s long, unshaved jaw stuck out like a hedgehog. He didn’t shake his head, he didn’t say “no, no I’m not hungry,” he didn’t wave the food away with his hand, he just sat with his hands on the table top or in his lap, his eyebrows moving up and down and his mouth firmly closed.

He still shuffled through the hall but he seemed more bent over, and I was afraid that if someone walked past him too fast, the breeze would knock him down. The nurse had to start giving him his medications in shots because he stopped taking his pills.

After a couple of days of Ambrose not eating, I was sitting in the hallway getting ready to go out to my bench when I saw tall thin man knock on the nurse's door. His long jaw and narrow shoulders reminded me of Ambrose, but he was younger with only a hint of gray in his short hair. The nurse opened her door and I could see her consulting with the man. The man kept shrugging his shoulders and raising his palms. His thick eyebrows went up and he shook his head. Finally, he sighed heavily and left the nurse's office. I saw him later sitting with Ambrose, holding his hand. I couldn't hear what the man was saying to Ambrose, but Ambrose seemed to have said good-bye already.

I found myself looking at Ambrose with admiration as his hunger strike wore on. His aimless wanderings through the halls, his blank look, his hands rising up and down as if he were conducting a very slow orchestra, now seemed to have purpose. Ambrose saw death coming toward him and he was walking to meet it.

* * *

It was only four thirty in the afternoon but a melancholy quiet had descended over Glen Willow Gardens. As if a blanket had been laid over it and everything was breathing softly in sleep. More and more, I had been coming across the old Alma lurking in the halls, sometimes disappearing through a door as I rounded a corner, or sitting in the armchair by the dining room. I tried to ignore her, but there she was, reminding me that I was going home soon.

I had spent the afternoon watching Cara hard at work. She wore overalls and her visor, and she frequently pushed her big glasses back up to the bridge of her nose with back of her gloved hand. She had dug up her horseradish and put it in her mesh

bag. She pulled all the tomatoes off the plants, even the ones that were still orange, because she said they didn't get enough sun to ripen on the vine. She pulled out the last batch of cilantro because it had gone to seed. Seeing her pulling out the brown plants, shaking off the dirt, taking up the stakes, and trimming the parsley, because, she said, it would come back another year, I felt as if she were putting a loved one to bed for the night. It all seemed like an ending.

* * *

“Oh there you are, Alma. C'mon, there's a visitor for you.”

“A visitor?” They wouldn't refer to Hector as a visitor.

I had been looking through the books they kept on the shelf in the common room and that I'd never seen anyone pick up. Lots of Stephen King and Danielle Steele. There was a whole set of hardcover Horatio Hornblower books that looked as if they'd been well-loved at one time but ultimately dropped off at Glen Willow Gardens and forgotten, just like most of the residents here. I didn't intend to start reading one now. I doubted I would be here long enough to read a whole novel.

“He's in the parlor. Hurry up, dinner will be here soon.”

I headed toward the parlor feeling unaccountably nervous. When I entered the room there was a large man standing at the window looking out toward my bench. I stared for a moment in wonder, my heart pounding and my face hot. It was Maurice. I was sure of it. Not so big as he was when he picked me up in his truck. His gray sweater hung loose as if it were used to covering more belly and shoulders. He turned toward me and smiled showing his strong teeth and the dimple he had in only one cheek. He took off his cap and tucked it under his arm.

“Alma!” He came toward me, heavily favoring his left side. He had an angry scar across his forehead. He extended both hands toward me so his cap fell to the floor. “Oh. Clumsy.” He bent like a rusty jackknife to pick it up, groaning slightly at the effort. He put the cap on the arm of the couch. I suddenly thought of the last letter I had sent him and I felt a rush of embarrassment. He took my hand and wrapped it in both of his. “Alma,” he said again.

“Maurice,” I said because it was all I could think to say.

“Sit, sit,” he said, as if I were a guest in his living room.

We both sat on the couch. He sank so low into it that his knees rose up to chest level. When he put his hands in his lap, he looked like a school boy. I sat next to him even though I wasn’t sure I’d be able to get up again out of the cushy pillows and broken springs of the old couch. Maurice rubbed his hands on his knees and looked around the room, nodding. “Nice, nice,” he said.

“Do you know someone here?” I asked.

He raised his eyebrows at me. “Do I know someone here?” he said with a chuckle. “I know you.”

“Oh,” I said. “Of course.”

He rumbled a laugh that broke through the awkwardness of his being in the parlor of my temporary home, of our knowing each other without knowing each other, of his looking so healthy and happy with his scarred forehead and limp.

I wanted to say something but my mind was filled with wonder. All I could think was that here was Maurice, sitting next to me, like a phantom that had existed only in my imagination and now had appeared before me. I could smell the grease

that had left old stains on his jacket, I smelled the vinyl seats of the cab of his truck, I smelled coffee on his breath when he talked, I smelled a mysterious, full odor like damp earth.

“You’re out, then?” I said.

“Yes, yes. They let me out yesterday. Good as new.” He rubbed his freshly shaved chin. “Can’t go home yet, though. Got a guy meeting me tomorrow to look at my truck. Can’t be driving a big truck around with nothing to haul.” He chuckled self-consciously.

“Oh, that’s a shame,” I said. I felt the urge to touch him, to put my hand on his arm and sit quietly as if we already shared a past. Instead, I said, “Just like that.”

“Well, it was about time to hang up my hat. Once you get to a point that just having a lovely lady in your cab with you makes you drive off the road, you know it’s time to hang up your hat.” He nodded, and I flushed. “Hang up your hat,” he muttered again.

I looked at the clock. Dinner would be served soon and Maurice would leave. I wanted him to stay. “How’s Blue?” I asked.

“Ah, Blue,” he said, his eyes crinkling and his scar turning red. “Yep, Blue died. Yep. Guess he was playing with my grandson, Joey. Well, playing doesn’t hardly say it, since Blue was past the playing age, but he was on the floor with Joey, and just up and stops moving. Yeah. He was an old guy. Sure wish I had been there, though.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Tears filled my eyes. They must have been there all along waiting for a reason to come, because, though I thought Blue was probably a good dog, I didn’t really know him.

Maurice looked at me with concern. “Oh, now, Alma, don’t you go crying on me, or I’ll be at it too.” He took my hand in his. “Such a sweet lady, crying over my dog.” He patted my hand and chuckled.

“Oh, Maurice,” I said.

“Now, now. I got your letter. I know.”

Suddenly the tears started flowing in earnest. Tears for Blue, tears for leaving Cara, tears for going home. I cried tears for my children growing up and leaving home, tears for having a nurse standing guard outside my door at night, tears for the sad old Alma I would be going back to. Maurice put his arm heavily across my back and said, “Oh dear, I sure didn’t mean to make you cry. I sure wanted to see you.”

The afternoon aide put her head in the door. “Alma, dinner time.” Then she stopped and looked at me and Maurice on the couch. “You just take your time,” she said.

Maurice pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket. It was gray but clean. I wiped my eyes and held it over my nose. Maurice would leave and all I’d have done was cry like a baby.

“Lu isn’t really my friend,” I sobbed. “I just said that.”

“Lu?”

“Yes. My friend who I was going to have lunch with? You remember?”

“Of course,” he said. “But I already know that, Alma. You were running away from home.” Maurice started to lean back but the couch was never made for leaning on unless your legs were very long, and so he sat back up and smiled at me. “Alma, I’ve been picking people up on the side of the highway for a lot of years.” He chuckled. “I bet I can tell their stories within thirty seconds of them getting in my cab. I’m that good. You had running-away-from-home written all over your sad face.”

I laughed but it sounded like another sob. “You knew that?”

“Well, I guess I didn’t really *know* it, you know, like know it for a fact. But I thought, maybe. I would have made sure before I dropped you in town. Had to see if you could get back to your car, and all.”

“You’ve picked up other ladies who were running away from home?” I loved the idea of a stream of unhappy housewives hitchhiking out west to seek their fortunes.

“Well, no, honestly. Most of the runaways were teenagers. Not too many ladies wander the highways.”

“I’m a silly old lady,” I said.

“No,” he said. Then he cleared his throat a couple times and rubbed his palms on his knees. “No,” he said again.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I saw the empty dinner cart get wheeled past toward the kitchen to fill up with dessert.

Maurice patted his knees. “Well, I’d best be off. I wish I could have come earlier, so we could have had more time.” He put his hand on the arm of the couch

and pushed himself up then caught himself to keep from falling back into its soft jaws. Once he was steady, he reached out a hand to help me up. We walked to the door together. Maurice kept inhaling as if about to say something, then stopped with a short exhale. When we got to the exit he turned to me and said quickly, “Alma, you can come with me. You’d like my house, and we’ll get a dog.”

I gasped.

“Don’t go back to Hector. You were leaving him. Leave him. I’ll take care of you, and you’ll take care of me.”

I put my hand on his arm.

“Now don’t say anything right now. It’s something to think about.” Then he leaned over and put a piece of paper in my pocket and kissed me. I walked into the dining room with Maurice’s handkerchief in my hand and the feel of his lips on my cheek.

Hector came on Wednesday.

I was sitting on my bench watching a cluster of dark clouds menacing the sun, and waiting for Cara to come outside. Gretchen had told me I didn’t need her help anymore. “You’ve graduated from torture school,” she said. I laughed. “Well done, Alma.” So I knew it was just a matter of days before I would leave Glen Willow Gardens, and maybe never see Cara and Chef Albert and Gretchen and my bench again.

One of the aides came out the back door to the building. I expected to see her hold the door for one of the residents out for a rare stroll, but she shut the door behind

her and headed straight toward me. I hated to be the subject of such focused attention. Most of the time it meant that a doctor was there and he wanted to poke and pry at me. The aide wound her way over the path and stood in front of me huffing at the effort of having marched so far. She pressed her hand into her side like she was in pain. She would have benefited from Gretchen's services but it wasn't my place to suggest it.

"Alma, your husband's here," she said, as if scolding me for being the cause of great inconvenience.

"Hector?"

"You have another husband?"

"Oh dear." I didn't want to miss Cara since my time with her was almost over. What would she think when I wasn't on my bench at my usual time? But there was no help for it. Hector was here and I'd have to go in.

Hector was in my room examining the contents of my closet. "I'll need at least two suitcases," he said as I entered the room.

My knee felt swollen and painful though it hadn't been bothering me when I went out to my bench. I put my walking stick aside and sat gingerly in the small armchair by the window. I noticed that my get-well cards were no longer displayed on the table but were stacked in a pile, ready for packing. I had a thrill of panic. Where were Maurice's letters? Then I remembered that I had started keeping them inside the drawer of my night table. I glanced over to my bed to see if anything had been disturbed there. The card from Donna was still standing by the lamp, so Hector must not have gone through that side of the room yet.

Hector turned to me. “I’ll be picking you up after lunch on Monday. The doctor is coming Monday morning so he’ll check you over before you leave, and give me instructions for your care.” I felt like a mutt being brought home from the Animal Protective League.

“Monday?”

“The nurse can’t start until Monday, and I don’t feel safe having you home at night with just me. I can’t help you in the bathroom . . .”

“I don’t need help in the bathroom.” I fought to squelch the tears that seemed always to be lying in wait these days. I should be happy to be going home. There were some residents here who the only words I ever heard from were “I want to go home,” and here I was getting teary-eyed at the prospect.

“. . . or with whatever you need. I don’t need you running off in the middle of the night again. Who knows what would happen the next time. You might not be so lucky as to get in an accident and be found by people who care about you and take care of you.” I could sense the control he was exercising over his voice. Maybe the prospect of my coming home wasn’t bringing tears of joy to his eyes either. I thought he muttered something but he was half-way in my closet and I didn’t ask him to repeat it. It seemed wise to let it go.

Hector sifted through the sweaters hanging on the left side of my closet, sliding each hanger over with a hard shove. “Seven,” he said. “What do you need seven sweaters for? I wear two sweaters. One cotton one for summer evenings and one wool cardigan for winter.” But I could tell that it wasn’t the number of my sweaters that was making him angry. I tried to think what I might say if he finally

asked me what I was doing and where I was going that day that seemed a lifetime ago. I could imagine Hector's disgust that I would be so foolish as to put myself entirely at the mercy of a strange man in a truck.

I looked at Hector's back where he stood framed within the square pocket of the closet. After he was done looking through my things he would figure out exactly how many suitcases would be necessary to carry everything home. It was as if he could mentally pack all of my things, measure the total space they'd take up, figure out how much space was in each suitcase, and he'd know. And he'd be right.

"The nurse will come in the evenings and make dinner. I'll do the cooking during the day. Then she'll stay until after breakfast. She'll be off on Sundays and every other Wednesday, but that can't be helped. I'll arrange something."

"Why do we need someone so much?"

Hector closed the closet door and looked around the room as if further assessing my accumulation of personal items. "I can't watch you all the time."

"I don't need watching all the time," I said.

"What?" Hector said.

"I don't need taking care of," I said louder. A bolt of pain shot through my knee and up to my hip, leaving an ache from my knee to my ribs. "Ooh," I moaned. "Besides, when the doctor sees my knee on Monday, he'll tell me I can't leave."

"I've already talked to the doctor and to Gretchen. She gave me a list of exercises you must do at home. Oh! I forgot to tell you," Hector said excitedly. "I got something for you." He was smiling. "A new flat screen TV. It's on the living

room wall. It's state of the art. Last year's model so it was marked down. It's perfect."

I didn't mention to Hector that I hadn't watched TV in almost three weeks and hadn't missed it. Besides, once I got home, I knew that I'd be grateful for a new TV.

"Now, I'll have some papers for you to sign when I come back on Saturday. We'll get you packed up then."

"Papers?"

"Yes. I've been talking to a lawyer. He's got a pension and maybe some savings."

"Who's got a pension?"

"Maurice. Divorced, three kids and six grandkids. Probably a womanizer."

"Nine. He's got nine grandkids," I said. But my voice sounded harsh and raspy. Hector looked over at me sharply.

"Okay, nine. What the hell difference does it make? He's done for. A truck driver who can't stay on the road." Hector looked at me with his face pinched into a mask of contempt.

"Get out," I said. "Get out of my room." I was shaking and my teeth began to chatter. I stood up and lifted my walking stick. I'm not sure if I was trying to whack Hector with it or if I was using it to point to the door.

"What!"

"I feel sick. I'm going to throw up."

"I'll get the nurse." Hector scurried out into the hall. "Nurse!"

* * *

Ambrose died during the night. I woke to the subdued sound of the authoritative voice of the night nurse and the aide fussing quietly about their business. Once, I thought I heard someone running lightly past my door. Then there were the sounds of male voices, less quiet, not so concerned about waking the other residents. I got out of bed, and after catching my balance on the doorknob to the closet, I peeked out my door into the well-lit hallway in time to see the gurney get wheeled out of Ambrose's room with his frail body outlined under the white sheet.

The nurse noticed me as she walked by. "It's all right, Alma, go on back to bed."

I watched Ambrose get wheeled around the corner and then I took the nurse's advice and went back to bed.

* * *

Hector skipped his Sunday visit saying that since I was coming home the next day, he felt his time was better spent getting ready. I hated to have him go to a lot of trouble for nothing, but I could hardly tell him that. It was just as well, anyway, since Ambrose's memorial service was planned for Sunday and Hector didn't know Ambrose except as the man who hovered by the door when Hector was trying to leave.

After I got off the phone with Hector I pulled the piece of paper that Maurice had given me out of my pocket.

Sunday morning before breakfast I saw Ambrose's son talking with the nurse. Then he and his wife packed up Ambrose's things. By the end of breakfast, the room

was emptied of all sign of him, and was being prepared for a new occupant. I asked his son if I could have the picture of Ambrose that hung outside his door. It showed him in late middle age, sitting in an armchair with a small brown dog in his lap. He was smiling at the camera and his eyes were alert and lively. His son said “thank you” when he handed me the picture and I felt bad that I had done nothing to deserve his gratitude.

Since the memorial service was scheduled for lunchtime, I was able to go out to my bench for my usual morning visit with Cara. I played with the napkin ring that was still in the pocket of my sweater with Maurice’s handkerchief. Cara pulled out the stakes for the two tomato plants that had stopped producing fruit, and rolled up the lattice that one row of sweet peas had clung to. “Some things will keep on producing up to the first frost,” she said. “That’s why I plant in shifts. That way, there’s always something just getting ripe all the time. But it’s too late to plant a new batch now.”

“I’m going to try my hand at planting next summer. I’ve learned a lot from you.”

“Well you can always write to me for advice if you need it.”

“Okay.”

Cara began cutting the marigolds that remained on the browning plants and collecting them in a small bouquet. “So, the funeral is today, is it?” she said.

“Yes. After lunch.”

She handed me a bouquet of sharp-smelling marigolds. “Take these with you,” she said. “They’re Mary’s favorites.”

“Yes. I will,” I said. “Thank you.”

The dining room was as pretty as I’d ever seen it. There were white table cloths and vases with real flowers on all the tables, and the sun streamed in through the sheer curtains. I asked for a glass of water to keep Cara’s marigolds in and I set them at my table. Some sort of lively violin music was playing in the background, and the Siren Lady and the Hat Lady seemed to have entered into a competition to see who could make the most noise during the brief readings.

Ambrose’s son and his family were there. Chef Albert was there, too, because it was his regular baking day. I got to read a poem out loud about daffodils that had words in it like “jocund” and “oft.” Ambrose’s grandson read a letter that Ambrose had sent him many years ago. The letter was kind, wishing the boy well in college and reminding him to study hard but to be sure to get out to a movie or to the park now and then.

Since it was nice out they decided to turn his burial into an outing, so they got us all bundled up for the outdoors. They hauled out the people in their wheelchairs, and with their walkers, and they put us on the bus to go down the driveway, turn left on the street and head up into the next driveway. Then we all unplied out of the bus. We maybe traveled a quarter of a mile and it probably took an hour to get everybody on the bus and then off again. The complaining was fierce. “Ooh, my leg!” or “I want to watch my stories on television,” or “it’s too cold,” or “it’s too hot.” Everything an ordeal.

During the speech by the minister, Chef Albert took my arm. “I’ll show you where to put the marigolds,” he said. We walked along the path that wound away from the church and Ambrose’s open grave. The stone was small and plain, but it looked pretty in the shade of a young tree whose branches flowed out from the center of the trunk and wept down in a canopy. Chef Albert put a bouquet of flowers from the tables in the dining room on the headstone. I read the etching on the headstone, “Mary 1975-1983,” and underneath that it said “Beloved daughter of Cara and Joseph Hopper.” I realized then that I never knew what happened to Cara’s husband. I put the marigolds next to Chef Albert’s bouquet. Then we walked back to Ambrose’s service in time to sing “Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer.”

I hummed that tune all the time it took to drive back to the nursing home and unpack us all. I hummed it while I went through my few belongings and while I wrote a note to Hector.

Dear Hector,

You will be surprised to get this note, I think, but maybe not too sad about it. Do you remember the TV show about Lewis and Clark? How they took a “journey of discovery?” Well, I feel as if I’ve been on a journey of discovery, too, and I’ve discovered that in my old age I’d better try to get some happiness out of life. Or at least continue the adventure I started all those weeks ago. You have been a good husband, in your way, and I’ve tried to be a good wife, but I know I haven’t always succeeded. I don’t need to tell you to take good care of yourself, because you always do and I know

you always will. I'm glad you taught the kids to have your self-discipline instead of my lazy nature.

All my best,

Alma

At 5:00 I was out on my bench. I wanted to sit for a few minutes next to my tree, looking at the white pillars that held up the roof over the patio by the back door of Glen Willow Gardens. No one questioned my going outside at that unusual time. They didn't pay much attention to me these days. The staff knew I was scheduled to go home on Monday and they were just itching to clean out my room and move the next person in.

The old Alma came to visit me. When I turned my head, there she was sitting next to me on the bench with a secret smile on her face. The fearful look that had settled in her forehead over the past ten years or so was smoothed over. A light breeze blew her gray hair so that it flattened out on one side. Her plastic-rimmed glasses were askew. One thick sock was gathered in folds around her ankle. Her hands rested in her lap and I could see her plain gold wedding band.

"You know," she said so quietly that I could hardly hear her. Her voice seemed to come in on the light breeze, or through the leaves of the tree above our heads. "There was a time, when the kids were little, that I did everything for them. I got them where they needed to go. I made sure they had their school projects, and their lunches. I bought them new clothes when they outgrew the old ones. They came to me when they fell off the swing, or had a fight over who got the last cupcake. I made dinner and had it ready when Hector got home, and then we all ate it."

“I remember,” I said.

She nodded while her fingers played with the edge of her sweater.

We sat for a few more minutes, not talking. We turned to watch as two squirrels chased each other frantically in circles over the lawn and then up the trunk of the tree that shaded the bench. We looked up at the screech of a hawk overhead, and we watched it circle lazily down to the tree line, where it disappeared. I put my hand over the Old Alma’s warm hands where they lay on her lap, and kept it there until it was time for me to leave. Then I leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Good-bye,” I said and stood.

I couldn’t bring a bag out to the bench without someone noticing, so I had worn as much as I could, and stuffed whatever was small that I wanted to keep, into my pockets. It wasn’t like I was leaving much behind. Hector had taken most of my things back home with him.

I squeezed through the opening in the fence by Cara’s house and walked slowly up to Cara’s back porch. I had written her a note because I was worried that she’d be upset if I left without saying goodbye. I would have been sad, too.

Dear Cara,

I decided to leave on Sunday instead of waiting for Hector. Maurice is picking me up in his truck. Hopefully, he’ll stay on the road this time.

Thank you for the sweet peas and soup. I will miss our conversations. I’ll send you a letter just as soon as I’m settled.

Love,

Alma

I put the letter on the porch where she would see it when she came out to work in her garden. I took the napkin ring out of my pocket and set it down on the letter to keep it from blowing away then I turned to go on my way. But before I was down the first step I stopped and turned back. I picked up the napkin ring and returned it to my pocket. The weight felt good there. I found a stick on the steps and placed that on the letter then I headed down Cara's driveway toward the narrow road that crossed in front of her house.

The other side of her street seemed to be a wilderness, or a park. I could hear the cars through the trees and sometimes see a flash of light reflecting off a windshield. Maurice had told me that I could cut through the woods and meet him at the highway on the other side. Right by the sign for Route 422, he said. But I couldn't see a break in the trees. And the ground was uneven with roots and rocks. I would surely fall. A tightening in my stomach and chest made my breath come fast. What if I got lost in the maze of trees? What if Maurice didn't come for me? The flash of cars seemed farther away, out of reach.

"Alma." A low voice emerged from the darkness and Maurice appeared out of the forest in front of me. I smiled, even laughed, I was that happy to see him. He took my arm and we walked through the woods. There was a paved path after all, and a wooden post to show the entrance to the woods, but I had looked right past them.

"Do you like tea, Alma?" He patted my hand where it lay on his arm. "Or coffee? I'm a coffee drinker myself but tea is fine, too."

“Yes, I like tea,” I said. The twitter and chirp of small brown birds accompanied us through the trees.

“Well, I have black tea, but we can get some herbal tea. Or green.”

“That sounds nice,” I said.

In no time, we came into view of his truck parked by the side of the road with its flashers going. It was just a pick-up truck but it seemed right for Maurice. Maurice escorted me to the door on the passenger side and helped me up into the passenger seat. Then he got behind the wheel and turned to give me a smile.

“We’re off,” he said.

“Into the sunset,” I said.

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