

The Comer

*From Grief to Romance and Remarriage at Age 60—
A Widow's Plunge into Bewilderment, Promise, and Pleasure*

By
Glenda Long Eggerling

GreeneCounty Books

Ames, Iowa

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Readers may contact the publisher at:
glenda2886@msn.com

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Dedication

To Stan, my dear first husband, who gave me the most useful tool of my whole life—the incomparable phrase, “You can.” I would like him to know that “You can” has been that which most often saved my life. And when the time comes, “You can” is the tool I hope to pass on to our daughters, Kaarin and Soren, Don’s daughters, and all the grandchildren.

This book is also dedicated to Don, my dear second husband, whose clear thinking at the point of many twists and turns smoothed my way “when comin’ through the rye.”

Chapter 1

The brunette in the silver metallic tee shirt and black pants turns to me, saying, "I've just returned from Las Vegas." We sit beside each other on a flagstone patio on a warm summer afternoon.

"How was it?" I ask politely.

She tosses her dark hair and, for answer, wiggles her hips back and forth suggestively on the folding chair. I think of Brad Pitt's sexy move in *Thelma and Louise* when he meets Thelma's husband on the stairway into jail after spending the night with her. *This wiggle makes me think of—I'm a little embarrassed by her wiggle and not sure where to go from here since we have just met. Did she mean what I think she means?*

A voice rescues me from the other side of the circle of women who are around my age of sixty. "I love that top," one says to the brunette. "Wherever did you find it?" The five of us appraise her black and white tee shirt with silver decorations that shows some cleavage. In my opinion, it's too tight and too young for this older woman with colored hair and slightly wrinkled chicken neck. To me it looks like it should have stayed in Vegas. I suspect that under the little bulge at the tight waist she is wearing Spanx, the slenderizing miracle underwear I've heard of but have had no reason to buy. I'm not pudgy, but mostly I haven't bought it because, it strikes me now, I've had no reason to hide the truth of my middle from anyone.

"For this top, you have to go on-line. It actually came from a store in New York, but I found it on the internet." She smiles and crosses her legs, drawing my attention to her very high, strappy black heels.

A murmur of appreciation runs around the circle. I've never tried internet clothes shopping, but it's a fascinating thought. For a moment I wonder if I've dressed up enough in a loose, gauzy, white shirt tucked into low-waisted menswear pants, my old jean jacket hanging on my chair, and ballet flats. This outfit was easy to put on and happened to be clean, but I wonder what I've gotten myself into in this circle of women who apparently travel to Las Vegas to find sex. Mentally, I shrug and brush back my short, straight hair.

A coppery-haired woman chimes in. "I've found a great tailor and I'm going to be very nice to him. He suggested that I have one pair of jeans hemmed for flats, and one pair hemmed for heels. I never thought of that myself."

Several nod in agreement with this novel idea. The old girls lounge around the patio talking about hair and dress styles, a miracle lotion that erases lines, movies they have seen, and places they like to eat—the last two are activities I'm unhappy to think of doing as a newly single woman. While the brunette is talking to a petite blond on her right, I recall the one time when I went to an evening movie without my husband or a girlfriend. I was annoyed by a guy who kept turning his head to watch me during the film. Afterward he approached me in front of the theater as I dug for my car keys. He was dressed nondescriptly, and I ignored him as he walked over, but I just knew in the show that he was going to pull something like that.

"Do you want to go somewhere and talk about the movie?" he asked.

I said, "Nooo," looking down at my keys and walking away feeling flustered. I never told my husband, Stan, about the incident because this was the reason he slightly disapproved of my having gone without him, though it was a movie he didn't care to see. As I sit on the patio listening to the girls-only chatter, I want to ask if they have to fend off pick-ups, but I'm reluctant. Perhaps they would think I don't know what I'm doing or that I've been overly protected, both of which are probably true.

The six of us sip Chardonnay, Merlot, or something my hostess calls a ginger shandy. "It's made of beer and lemonade," she says, holding up the cans from the fancy little gold and white cart waiting by the door into her condo. She smiles at me as she offers a glass platter of breads and small meatballs wrapped in lettuce leaves. "You have to try the honey-tomato bruschetta with ricotta," she suggests. So I do. We have met recently at the church I started attending when a friend asked me to sing in their choir after my husband, Stan's, death. I don't know any of the others, but here I sit among five single women at her invitation, feeling as bewildered as a girl on her first date. I am in, but not of, their world although now I'm single, too.

As a woman of sixty I have begun a life for which I am not prepared. I wonder if the others felt like this at first? Life as a single woman is not a life

I'm taking up once more. My singlehood lasted such a short time and was so long ago, it can't count as practice for now. I moved from my sorority house to my marital one before my senior year in college with no time in between for life on my own. I know less than half as much about starting life single as I do about starting prairie grass in my old pasture. Though it's hard to believe, I've read that over my life span, the length of time during which I will be single could equal my length of time in a sexual relationship.

While I was still married, I once said to my sister-in-law, "Thank goodness we don't have to worry about dating at our age."

She lay down her embroidery, and smiled. "I'd have to cover up my gray hair and wrinkles. I don't want to do that. I've earned each gray hair and every one of my wrinkles." Looking around this chattering circle of older women, dressed attractively in clothes that invite attention, I think of girls huddled outside their lockers eyeing the boys passing by who are eyeing them back. Is this what I've gotten into?

Today the woman on my left with frosted hair turns to me saying, brightly, "I just finished the most wonderful book."

OK, maybe I can talk about this. "What was it about?"

"It's about on-line dating. It taught me the key to writing an on-line dating profile." She dips her chin and raises her eyebrows waiting for me to reply. I am vaguely aware of these services but have never spoken to anyone who used them.

"What's the trick?" I ask, again feeling totally out of my league.

For a moment she holds her breath and then lets it all out at once in a half whisper, "You have to be contrary."

Mary, Mary, quite—"Come again?" I say, with lowered voice to match the portent in hers.

"Yes, like this." Then she seems to be quoting, "Be simple yet mysterious, flexible but know what *you* want, flirty but not too cute, be yourself only more so, see?"

Maybe I do. Contradiction sounds easy but might be a tall order to do exactly. "It could sound like one of those horoscopes in the newspaper, equivocal enough to cover all bases but not quite specific enough to seem like you in particular," I respond, and then go on, "but I suppose that's the point. If I decide to use one, I'll try to get that book." Something heavy sits down on my chest. *What happened to the oxygen; is my plane going to crash?*

"I'll loan you mine if you can't find it. But look around you," she says, as she nods at the circle of women. "It's not about total truth, is it? It's really about what you show off." My eyes open wider; I feel I have just been taken to school.

I appraise this circle of older women who are turned out in nicely fitted good pants, floral or metallic tops that attempt to camouflage stomach and hips, and hair that is colored or highlighted to conceal the encroaching gray. They seem to know something I don't. For the first time I reflect on my own mostly dark brown hair, cut like a boy's for the ease of wash and wear. I haven't thought about the effect of silver temples on dating. *Au natural*, I call my color, the way Stan liked it. But now I begin to grasp why many women insist the divorce settlement includes money for a face lift and make-over.

Now the brunette from Las Vegas gets my attention again when she asks, "Have you been on any interesting trips?" I start to answer, but then stop. It isn't that I haven't done or can't do a perfectly normal activity like taking a trip. But if I were to open up, my unguarded words might draw attention to a time that sharply contrasts with the recent event that has landed me in this circle of single women whom I don't know. *Last fall my husband and I went on a tour to Chaco Canyon ...*

While deciding how to answer, I pick up a piece of bruschetta. My hostess has probably tried to forestall any sensitive questions by previously telling them about me. But I feel like hiding my widowhood as though it were the badly repaired, broken front tooth that testified for years to a defensive collision during a basketball game as a kid. It was ugly, and I practiced smiling in such a way that it didn't show. So I answer carefully, "I have so much work to do on my acreage I haven't been able to go anywhere. Do you work outdoors?"

Her brown eyes crinkle in amusement, and I find myself liking the fine lines I see around them. She says, "I've always wanted to be a natural, woodsy type but it's too hard to actually make that big a change to my life." We smile together for a second. I can't imagine her feet in those high-heeled sandals wearing dirty sneakers like I wear on my prairie, and I feel she can't imagine it, either.

Then I say, "I know what you mean; honestly, it has only taken me thirty-five years to start becoming what I want to be. When my husband retired," I feel my throat constrict but force myself to go on, "we decided to quit taking life for granted and to do what we wanted. That's when I took an early retirement from a job I disliked and started restoring an old pasture into a prairie." I look down and begin shredding the piece of bruschetta on the plate in my lap as I recall how we had looked forward to working as a team on our place. When I look up, her brown eyes are soft. I look down at the femme fatale red nails on the hand with which she holds the stem of her wine glass. I wear polish very rarely and never feel like myself when I do. *We're too different; she can never completely understand the loneliness I*

feel for this one person in the entire world. I turn so quickly away to stand up that my napkin, dusted with bruschetta crumbs, falls off my lap. The only thing I can think of to do now that I'm standing is to hurriedly return my plate to the kitchen. Something wonderfully spicy smelling is cooking but I'd really be glad to take off from the party right now without having a bite. What I've tasted so far is quite enough, but something in me wants to see what will happen in this circle of which I'm now a part.

After an instant, the brunette follows me; *of all things, can't she take a hint?* She pencils a phone number on a scrap of paper and hands it to me with a little frown of what seems like concern. "Someday when you feel you've been working too hard on that home on the range of yours, call me. We can catch a flick and a martini, all right?" I don't say anything as I read the number because I've never been pitied before, but also, no one in my hearing has actually spoken the phrase, "catch a flick," and made it sound natural like she did. I thought they only used that language in old noir detective stories. I'm too surprised to respond *no thanks* before she quickly picks up a bottle of wine, and returns to the patio. Though I do put the number in my pants pocket, with her free and easy attitude toward sex, I can't imagine that we'd be very compatible.

Blue shadows on the patio reach across the flagstones to touch our skin with cooler air. Our hostess invites us to the white table that sits in the shade of the building. For a Mexican look, it has a centerpiece of orange and yellow rudebeckias framed at each end by black iron candleholders in which bright orange and pink candles stand. As background music she has chosen to play the opera, *Carmen*, where the sexual assertiveness of the woman causes the trouble. I don't know if she does it for this reason or because the music sounds Spanish. *The Toreador Song* is playing now.

At dinner, I try politely to blend in—tilting my face in the direction of a voice, smiling as normally as one can while biting her lips, chewing small pieces in my dry mouth of the chicken breast our hostess says she copied from a San Antonio chef's dish, and forcing the food around the lump in my throat. But I feel I might drop butter on someone's white pants.

Our table is shielded from the patios of other condos by tall stone pots of geraniums and petunias further set off by a wide base of large coleus and low yews. More wine is opened. The girls lean closer together, lowering their voices slightly. The frosted blond of the *contrary* resume opens up. "The man I'm dating has been married twice already but says he's divorced now. If he were a wine, I'd send him back to the cellar for being uncorked a little too long." I nod knowingly along with the others as though I'm well versed on the subtle nuances of selecting a fine date. *Two divorces? I'd be wary, also. Hey,*

wait a minute. My friend, Kathy, is divorced twice and I know her well enough to know she couldn't help either one. Don't jump to conclusions quite so fast.

The petite blond sighs and holds her glass to the light to admire its dark plum color. "We've broken up but he had a smile that affected me like a vibrator, if you know what I mean."

After an eloquent pause during which I have a necessary sip of my Merlot, the brunette's answer swirls back, "In the words of that old cliché, I do." I take settling breaths of the piquant petunias among the yews. No, I shouldn't be in this group only two months after my husband's death. It's not that I don't want to hear this conversation, but the words sound muffled and tears fill my eyes because I'd like to block out what these women teach. I excuse myself to go to the bathroom to hide while trying to think how I can get out of drinking in more of the well-aged vintages at this meal.

In certain moments Stan's loss overpowers me—like when I see the empty white box next to *single* which I must fill in, mowing around the plot that he dug out of the field in which I planted prairie flowers he never saw, and feeling the pit in my stomach into which these wine-soaked innuendos spill. I stare at the water draining out of the bathroom sink which suggests the same run off of my satisfaction and contentment, then turn to slowly dry my hands on a pink towel hung over a line of plastic red chili peppers.

After a few minutes when I drag back to my shaded seat, the hostess serves dessert on pretty glass plates. "It's a chocolate cake," she says, "that's called *Better than Sex*." I force myself to eat a bite, mulling the redhead's quick response, "I wouldn't know. It's been so long since I had any."

My throat is too dry to swallow a second bite of the cake, and I choke a little on the coffee I drink to wash it down. I keep my eyes lowered to my plate, playing with my fork. Two forkfuls of dessert are gone; under the chocolate smeared glass at my place, the white, beautifully starched and ironed cloth looks messy.

Shortly after, I'm on the heels of the first guest to leave, gulping a thank you, and barely giving my hostess time to respond. Without stopping to see where I'm going, I back out my car in a rush. There's a thunk on the shiny rear end of my beautiful, reddish-black car that still smells new. Nothing is in sight behind me, so it must have been one of the low driveway markers I hit. I don't stop to see how bad the dent is in my car. At the thought of it and the rest of the supper, my chest collapses, my throat tenses, and my lips compress to hold in the groan that is squeezing out of my body. If Stan could ask, I would excuse the dent by saying that something made my eyesight blurry and I couldn't see my way out. My ears fill with a hum, and my breath keeps catching. I shift into drive, and take off out of this place, spin-

ning pebbles on the paving which rattle sharply against the sides of the car.

Arriving home, I grab my open diary from the glass table on the deck and stumble to a wicker chair as tears fill my eyes. I had planned to describe the novel experience of socializing with other single women and had left my diary open in anticipation. But my throat is painfully choked with memories of the past two months so thick I cannot swallow. While glancing through my diary before picking up my pen, it hits me that the first few pages describe, not so much a paralyzing end, as the catastrophic beginning to my new single life. Before writing about this afternoon, I turn back to read the opening lines and pages.

Chapter 2

While reading the first, blue-lined pages fastened between the faded, fabric-like, hard covers of my diary, I see that I had a premonition of some kind of tragedy long before I was aware. My diary begins with the spring afternoon I was raking dry winter leaves from among the plants below the deck on our acreage near the woods of a state park. At the end of the day, I tied up the biodegradable paper bag and went inside our low, white house when I remembered that the rake was still lying somewhere in the grass. As I stepped on the black-topped drive to find and put it away, in a stone gray sky the sun was setting behind the low wall of distant tan hills, slight bursts of wind brushed my face and neck, and the fusty smell of old leaves clogged my nose. Without warning, a horrible, piercing shriek pinned my feet to the ground, squeezing the skin over my spine as I clutched at the collar of my jean jacket. The screech seemed to fall from the sky, perhaps coming from among the bare black branches of the big cottonwoods to my right and left in the neighbor's grassy field across the gravel road. Something voracious in its sound urged me back indoors. The rake was abandoned wherever it lay as the kitchen radio softly reported that rain was expected, but I wasn't going back to do more looking that day.

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Some months after this, I was about to step inside the kitchen entry when behind my back, a harsh cry ravaged the air over my head. Something

feral in the scream from so near rolled the vertebrae down my back like a glissando on piano keys. I jumped into the doorway, whirled, and quickly scrutinized the nearby parking area in front of the attached garage. Was something about to attack? This time the cry lasted longer than before and sounded near enough to jump on me. I slammed the door shut and ran to the large window overlooking the drive. I raked every object in the yard with my eyes—the picnic table, the white board fence behind the concrete slab of the closed well, the roof of the tack shed, the roof of the barn, and the limbs of the pine above the door. Nothing. I ran to lock the door although I felt silly. *If death could make a sound, it would scream like that*, I thought to myself as I stood a moment longer staring out the window in the kitchen.

Recently, the paper reported that bobcats supposedly had been sighted in this area, but I'd seen no trace of them and really didn't believe they were around. Maybe I was wrong. I'd grown up on a typical Iowa farm with no experience protecting myself from wild animals except mad mother cows if I happened to come too close to a calf. I made sure never to do that. I didn't recognize what made that screech but really couldn't imagine it came from anything that slinked through the woods of the Loess Hills where I lived.

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The next thing in my memory happened when I bent to give Stan a good night kiss just as he stood up from the sofa. He gave his leg a vigorous shake. "What's wrong?" I said.

"Oh, nothing. It just feels like my leg has gone to sleep, that's all."

I nodded my head. "OK. This cold makes me feel like going to bed early. I'll see you in the morning."

"Hope you feel better," he said.

As I went into our bedroom, I turned to see him stop walking by the couch to shake his leg again, still trying to make that prickly feeling go away. His eyes were on the TV that was turned on rather loud since he was alone and wasn't wearing the headphones that helped him hear it. I closed the door, got into bed, and thought about how happy I was that we could sleep as late as we wanted. I lay there recalling how Stan had retired from the ministry four years before, and I had retired from my county human services management position two years later. We had moved to this fixer-upper acreage because I wanted to experimentally restore a prairie, and Stan liked working with his hands. It was to be our team project in retirement. And then I turned over, sighed deeply with contentment, and fell asleep.

Around four AM on the bedroom clock, I went to the bathroom without

turning on the light, and was pulling up the bed covers again when I heard a loud thump followed by a weaker thump. For a moment I lay there thinking that it was an unusual sound which I should check out as I couldn't think of anything that would have caused it. Although I wanted to ignore it and didn't want to get out of my warm bed, I forced myself to roll over to look around the very dark bedroom. *Was that Stan lying in a heap on the floor?* I scrambled to get out of my blankets, which were rolled around me now, and knelt down to grab his shoulders. He lay gasping something but it was gibberish. I finally made out, "Can't breathe."

I crawled to my feet and ran through the dining room into the kitchen to the phone. "I think my husband is having a heart attack. He may have passed out." After giving the dispatcher detailed directions for finding us in the woody country, I hurried back to him. At five feet four, I strained to push the dead weight of his six foot body into a slumping, seated position in the aisle between the bed and the wall. His eyes looked stricken and his arms flailed. Finally, he fell against me and I sat with my arms around him. *Don't do this to us, Stan. Don't do this to us. I've called the ambulance. Where is it?* By the time I felt like murdering the dispatcher for somehow messing up my directions, the boxy vehicle turned ponderously onto our black-topped drive; two paramedics and a nurse came into our bedroom and began examining Stan who they lifted to our bed.

A few minutes later, I walked beside his feet as the two medics in blue coveralls carried him to the ambulance with the nurse directing in a low voice. The space inside felt crowded once everyone was in and the doors were closed. I thought I should stay out of the way, and Stan seemed to have passed out. I got down from the ambulance, saying, "I'll follow in my car," thinking I would be able to drive myself home since he would surely have to stay in the hospital. As I backed out of the garage and waited for them to turn around, I caught an impression of swift movement through the small window in the back of the ambulance. Although uncertain of what I saw, I felt this wasn't good. Nevertheless, he was in the ambulance and I told myself to be hopeful while whispering repeatedly, *Stan, don't leave me alone; don't do this to us.*

We had been married almost forty years since right after my junior year in college when I was twenty, having spent nearly three-quarters of my life in classrooms. From being a student, I went to being a wife, never thinking of myself as a single woman. Stan had been with me twice as long as I had lived without him. In bad situations before, we always went through them together. At this terrible moment, I felt absolutely helpless and hopeless being separated from him and alone. There'd been no chance yet this morning to call the one daughter of our two who lived in the same town. As I followed

Stan in the ambulance, agonizing over whether he was alive or would continue to live if he was, my mind staggered with this fear like a pitiful deer that I once saw stumbling through brambles on a broken leg. I could guess what its future would be, and that it would not be a long one.

At one point in the ER, I was allowed in to see Stan. He lay partially covered under a white sheet on a flat table among plastic tubing, steady green lights, blinking red ones, and the stainless steel shine of un-nameable machines circling his body. Something was beeping slowly and steadily. Was he dead already or simply unconscious? I stroked his beautiful silver hair and leaned over his pale face behind the oxygen mask. I'd read that hearing was the last sense to go, but I was momentarily confused about which ear he could hear a little in without his hearing aids which were in my purse. I didn't want to dither about which ear was only partially deaf while the staff watched in their green scrubs ranged along the walls. I put my lips against what I hoped was the good ear to say loudly, "Stan, Stan, I'm here. You're in the Emergency Room." I stared at his closed eyes. *Did he think he mattered so little that I didn't recall in which ear he could hear?* I moved around the end of the table and repeated my words in the other ear. Then they said to go and let them work.

I sat a bit longer in the private room with my daughter and her boyfriend who I had asked the chaplain to call, waiting to learn the outcome, holding hands with my daughter whose eyes were huge with shock at being awakened with such terrible news. But I already knew somehow before the solemn doctor in green scrubs came out a short time later to confirm it. "We did what we could, but the damage to the heart was too great. It was a pulmonary embolism."

At the doctor's pronouncement, a rushing sound went through my brain, blotting out any other words. *Blood clot.* My daughter began to cry. I put my arms around her, thinking in my own heart that this was what I expected to hear. I believed that Stan really died when I saw the shadowy activity in the ambulance window followed by its slow passage through the streets lined with tightly budded maple trees somehow standing out in my mind. Looking at my daughter with tears running down her cheeks, I said, "At least I'll always have the peace that comes from knowing everything that could be done was done as fast as possible, because I was there. But nothing was fast enough." *At the end, did he know I was with him all along, until he came to that crossing beyond which I couldn't go?*

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In the days directly following Stan's death, I was not able to look beyond the moment immediately in front of my nose. Things happened, but then the substance of the event would fly away, leaving only a feathery impression to float in my mind. There was the moment in the ER when, for the last time, I held his long, slender hand and had to ask the nurse to remove his white gold wedding ring which I then slipped on my own finger; Stan's elderly mom and dad stepped out of the car at our house before the service, trembling but calm; the minister gave an uplifting elegy on how Stan Long, his mentor, cared for the least and lost; the rosy buds on the parade of maple trunks beside our black-topped drive swelled inexorably; and a few days after Stan's memorial service, the nursery garden planted the long planned, show-piece irony of bleeding hearts, hostas, and day lilies on the rise at the end of the drive leading to our dream home.

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It turns out there was a third, omen-like cry though it came a little afterward. As I was taking off my black car coat inside the closed door of the entry way to my home, from outside I heard a tremulous quaver in descending pitch that lasted longer than the shrieks of other times, like the longer held chord indicating the end of a musical piece. I paused for a moment before hanging my coat on the old-fashioned walnut hall tree and continuing on into the house, dimly aware that it was the same cry from months before, but softer and sweeter, less disturbing. In that early time after Stan's death, like other events, this cry barely registered in my mind.

In recalling Stan's last year from my diary, I feel that a second sight had gripped my shoulders though I was unaware. At the time I really did not think of the three screams as related to each other in a drawn out forecast, let alone that they prophesied a demonstration of how wide open to circumstances and chance the universe operates. Yet from some sense of realism two months before his death, I had described something like a premonition in my faded blue diary.

It isn't easy to see your husband turn sixty-seven even though you enjoy the party. I find myself reaching out to him to touch and to hold just because the years are passing on. His beautiful hair, which was dark only a heartbeat ago, has turned into silver. He can barely hear in the one "good" ear. His hip is painful, and it has been more than a year since he could play tennis, which he enjoyed.

I worry that he will die and the good times will be done. After four years, this place has only recently begun to feel like home to me. I don't know if I could manage it by myself, especially in the winter.

Enough of that. He's alive and seems to be having a great life working on our acreage projects. I've noticed this buoyancy far more since he retired from the ministry and began his new business of financial planning. And I feel happy with him again, like we did when we were young.

And then I remembered when a similar sideways alarm of mine was pooh-poohed by Stan himself. We'd been trying to sell our five-plex apartment building for many months. Only one buyer had made an offer—the proverbial too-good-to-be-true as he could not seem to get the money together, trying one thing and then another while the sale waited and waited. One day Stan and his realtor friend came to me with a new strategy they had cooked up to close the deal. They wanted me to agree to a sale by contract. I looked at the realtor in white shirt and Stan in plaid, sitting across our walnut dining table, and said, “I won't do it. The offer of this buyer you have in mind seems unrealistic, and I don't trust him. What happens if you die, Stan? If he defaulted on the contract, where would I be?” Though at the moment I wasn't anticipating Stan's death, I wanted a conventional sale that would get us completely out from under responsibility for that building's old plumbing and vintage furnace in case it broke down somehow.

The realtor looked glumly down at the table. Stan and I had always been equal when making any decisions in our marriage though we came from a generation when this often wasn't the case. Stan paused for a moment as though surprised by how strongly I expressed my unwillingness to have the contract, though he wasn't surprised by my normal skepticism. Then he turned to his friend and burst out with his hearty laugh. “She talks as though I'm going to die sometime soon. I'm not. I'm going to live a long time.” A couple of weeks later, he was gone.

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Sometime after the funeral events when the screams were mostly forgotten, I was thumbing through a book, looking for a certain bird I'd seen that day, when my eyes accidentally fastened on ... *hoots, wails, whistles, piercing trills, or a descending shriek lasting two to three seconds consisting of thirty-five notes ... A bird living in distant places ... active at night ... eating small rodents ... sometimes called Ghost Owl, Spirit Owl, Dusk Owl, and other phantasmal names.* Another reference described its call as *quavering, out of this world.*

Why hadn't it occurred to me at the time that those dramatic shrieks came from the rarely seen, mottled gray and white, nine inch high, Screech Owl? I grew up on a farm, was regenerating a prairie from an old pasture on

my acreage, and considered myself an outdoors woman. Why didn't I guess what made those screams?

The hoot of an owl might be superstitiously linked to a sudden death like Stan's because humans need to have such death explained, somehow. When his regular doctor was told later in the day that he had died, she said she grabbed Stan's medical record immediately to see if she had missed anything. But as far as she could see, there was no medical hint the clot was about to occur. With no hesitation, I gave permission for an autopsy because I wanted to know where and how this blood clot had formed. I felt Stan would have wanted that, too. But science came up with no answer. I have to consign the screams of the owl to one more bit of random chance, like the formation of a blood clot, which taken all together make up the meaningless enigma of Stan's death. *And yet, I will always ask why?*

I am one who finds more than a pinch of absurdity in the cake mix of life, but Stan believed the opposite. For about five years, Stan had worked at his growing, part-time, financial planning business, which he sincerely called his *new* ministry; for around four years he had reconstructed and maintained our dream home; on one good day at his hobby of genealogy, he had researched the original 16th century records of his ancestors in London; and for nine months he had driven a beautiful new car, the first one since our elder daughter was born around thirty years before. Stan would have argued that all of this and much, much more made up a great cake with which to celebrate life. Omen of owls and my Cassandra-like doubts, regardless, we were living in a consuming innocence of passion for our freshly retired life, sharing the zest from novel enthusiasms and old ones long suppressed under the work of our careers. Then with a terrible shriek, the darkest foreboding known to the universe took mortal form, falling upon the flesh of our being, ripping us apart, and leaving me in the most dreadful loneliness that I'd known in life.

• • •

Shortly after his death, as my daughter and I put away supper things in my galley kitchen, she said that once she had asked her father, the retired minister, if he believed in heaven and life after death. She was leaning against my pale mauve cupboard looking at me through her father's blue eyes from beneath the same dark brown, wavy hair, and standing on similarly long legs.

I was bending down to put a white plate from my wedding china into the dishwasher. I paused to gaze at it, remembering how its simplicity had always so pleased Stan who chose it. And regretting that our daughter was now at a stage in her adult life when she easily had the time and proximity

for discussions like this with her dad, but now they would be no more. Then I replied, "What did he say?"

For a moment she stood, looking into the living room at the green couch where Stan used to sit. "He told me that my question couldn't be answered by science, it had to be answered by faith. He said, 'There are people who claim to know about life after death, but they don't. What happens to us following death is a mystery; yet we're still in the hands of God our Father in death just as much as in life.'" She seemed to be hearing again the voice of *her* father. Perhaps his answer made life with its ambiguities and contradictions, its mundane dimension of dust and DNA behind which flew the thing with a beak and talons, still feel like something in which she was held and supported even through his death. Then she smiled and gave me a big hug. With our arms tightly around each other, I felt better for both of us.

After Stan's footprints disappeared in this world, I had to step out alone for the first time to carry on. During our forty year marriage, I'd had a career, using day care after the kids were born, because I felt equally capable and responsible as Stan for earning the money our family needed. Yet these steps now would be virtually the first I'd ever taken as a single woman. But somehow deep inside I already believed that, just as winter ends in flowers, so, too, this cold and bitter time would pass into a sweeter one. Weeping on his brother's shoulder the day Stan died, I had vowed, "This is a kind of bad accident which sometimes happens for no reason; it simply does. But I will not be sad and lonely for the rest of my life; somehow I'll be happy again. Stan would want that."

Momentarily, I look up from these pages to reflect that the story of how that happens will be written in my diary just like other episodes in my life; it's become my habit.

• • •

Ceasing

*Perhaps because I married in the spring,
its white-flowered trees recall myself, a bride
dressed in peau-de-soie with daisies
posed in hand.
Spring proceeded like I did, light-filled,
not counting summer's consequences,
not measuring the work the rest
of growth would take.*

Glenda Long Eggerling

*Too soon the veil raised on summer's stage
fell as winter's shroud.
Like frozen trees, my winter ways of mind stay set, still.
But minding what is known of ceasing,
I know winter ends in flowers.
Though I, swept in spring's train, drag my feet,
all cessation in the world will not prevent
spring's petal-led repeat.
And so, the joy I held before
once more will be released.*

Chapter 3

While I pour a little vermouth over the ice in the metal shaker, Willie sings nostalgically on my favorite CD about a love he can't forget. My martinis are not too good yet because Stan was so accomplished that he always did the honors. While waiting for the vermouth and ice to melt together a little, my thoughts return to the question of the Old Girls supper: *what does a single woman do about sex?* This question has widened in my consciousness like the way the tight baby fists of reddish buds on the maples at Stan's death have now uncurled into silver palms with tender green backs. I think back to the sexual conventions in my own green days just after the second *Kinsey Report* came out, startling the country with its data on the sexual behaviors of women.

Swirling the silvery shaker to hear the pleasing tinkle of the ice, I place the strainer over it and shake it harder before tipping out some of the liquid that has collected inside. Like these cubes of ice, time has dissolved and run away. *The Kinsey Report*, my sociology professor said, challenged the traditional belief at the time that women were not as sexual as men. It's hard to believe now how controversial this finding was at first. Though *Thelma and Louise* was made many years later, early in the movie, Thelma acts like an ideal from my modest girlhood of long-skirted dresses over starched petticoats, a woman who subordinated her needs to her husband's, not even realizing women had orgasms.

Next, gin is measured over the vermouthy ice. My hand aches a little from the chilly metal as I shake the mixture vigorously, pour the martini, and take a small taste test. Next time I'll add a bit more vermouth but it's OK for

today. Stan and I learned to like martinis in the liberal suburbs of New York City after Stan was in seminary and while I worked in the test kitchen of a large food company on the banks of the Hudson. Making a good martini was what he called his James Bond game. After moving on in life, we rarely drank anything but when we did, it was wine or beer. Then around the time Stan retired, we found a place that served scrumptious, free hors d'oeuvres and good music during its happy hour on Friday night. When that place closed, then it was that 007 lived again as Stan picked up the silver shaker and shook off the dust.

I open the refrigerator door to look for an olive to drop into the glass. Willie sings about cryin' in the rain as I carry my drink into the living room to sit on the white wicker loveseat in front of the dead fireplace and look down at the empty flowered cushion beside me. I reflect that, while still a teenager, having exchanged the supervision of my parents for that of a sorority housemother, I had no idea that normal women, according to the Kinsey survey, had intercourse on the average of 2.8 times a week. Actually back in those days, I'd never given any thought to such a statistic as that. But this figure, for some reason, has blinked on in my mind all these years, perhaps because the professor wrote it in big white chalk numbers on the blackboard as though it was some kind of standard to try for. Then he added, "Fifty percent of married males admit to extramarital sex." Was this another goal to aim for? Tonight, I extrapolate, this meant a lot of women were up to it, too, but such shenanigans were kept hidden, rarely making the newspaper even when it was someone important. It was just too much reality in the raw for June Cleaver's America at that time.

I look into the ashes and recall the lecturer telling us about the popular song in which the lyrics were changed from *Kinsey Report* to *latest report* in order to allow the song to play on the radio into our virgin ears. We girls in our pointy bras and tight girdles were naively bashful about our bodies back then compared to young women now. After the pill released some of our inhibitions, many of us broke out in enthusiasm and threw that elastic into the fire.

I take a sip and lean back on my gray and pink, flowery cushions, smiling as I think about what we did in those days on dates before the pill. I didn't go to Student Health for a diaphragm, being too modest to insert it while on a car seat in a wool pencil skirt, because in those days men were forbidden in women's residences, and vice versa. I knew about condoms—from *True Confessions* I found under my aunt's bed—but was too shy and proper to suggest that Stan get some. *Would he have had them in his pocket just in case? I don't know.*

We were both very concerned about my getting *in trouble*; I didn't want to go through any of that. In high school we girls had observed that one of us was getting rather fat. "How awful," we gossiped. "What was she thinking?" In my school days, the male accomplice didn't get the same social black ball as his female partner.

When I met girlfriends in the school halls before this happened, we might say, "Hey, what should we wear tomorrow?" Then we'd plan to wear something like our matching green, V-necked sweaters. After her marriage and the baby when we passed each other, my friend kept her eyes down. *Sadly, looking back, that was one of the strongest lessons I got out of high school. Today, the lesson taken from it is that I wish I'd bravely stopped her and said something friendly instead of cruelly walking by in embarrassment.*

Salted nuts go well with a martini, so I return to the kitchen to get the can to carry back to the loveseat. Willie is singing one of his most popular, a golden oldie about a woman with the lovely name of Georgia. I munch on a few cashews and sip the martini as I try to remember what we did in college in Stan's pretty red convertible without condoms or the pill. In sweet innocence, Stan and I were each other's first true, sexual partner, shyly learning where and how to touch. Before the regulated nightly curfew, I'd stiffly walk up the gentle hill to the front door of my sorority, feeling the sexual cramping of incomplete satisfaction. The light over the door would be on, but we had a favorite dark spot for one last kiss around the corner between evergreen trees and the stone side of the house. From here my housemother couldn't see us, and I didn't have to face her hoary frown and tight lips, *in loco parentis*, at least until after squeezing in the door as she closed it.

The sexual experience of my daughters and their friends has been different from mine in openness and quantity. In my sexual history, Stan was all there was. Now as I stare into the lovely warm flames, I think how beautiful it was to sexually focus on the one human being you will be with for life, growing to know through sex the naked mystery of that person like none other, developing a singular relationship that can never be matched, having a unique, irreplaceable, sexual memory to treasure. And now that one is no more.

As is my martini. I stand up a little carefully and return to the refrigerator for the cold, moist shaker to pour the rest into the glass for my ritual two-martinis-Friday. As I sit down thinking about our intimate history, for the first time since Stan died, I feel like masturbating. Leaning back on the love seat and, sliding my hips further forward, I work my jeans down to my feet. The fire has died to a low susurrate; Willie sings about faded love.

I feel very stimulated, but cannot reach climax. Surely the brunette at

the Old Girls supper could tell me where in town to get a sex toy, but I'm not cool enough to lower my guard and ask. I know the arcane procedure for transplanting voracious beetles into my prairie to kill invasive leafy spurge. But how can that expertise help with this big problem: I know next to nothing about sex and a single woman's life at the end of the 20th century.

I take another sip and get up to see what performance enhancer might happen to be lying around the house. The problem seems to be mostly mechanical, and I'm not so good at mechanical creativity, but I look around and give my imagination full rein. In a drawer on Stan's green workbench, a smallish, rubber-like, bulb-headed syringe looks clean. But even though I have another sip of martini, close my eyes to listen to Willie, and really try, this doesn't do the trick, either. After a while I sit up, drop my head into my hands, resting my elbows on my knees, and stare into the glowing coals. The problem is not mechanical at all. The problem is my yearning for the bread and wine of his skin, the sweet smell and touch of his soft, thick hair against my cheek, the eager stroking of his hands, in short, the profound communion of total giving and complete taking from our having been lovers forever. Sobs pound from my chest, as if by their beat, they could drum up his warm flesh and blood. Falling down on the musty carpet before the dead fireplace, I give in to this longing for how I once was held, and what I held myself almost without thinking, weeping for myself because nothing in any moment is now enough or ever will be. Finally, the rolling sobs soften into gasps while I lie on my stomach with my cheek pressed against the firm carpet, breathing in the ashes, and tapering off with Willie. He sings of a love he could forget some other time, but not today.

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The martini tastes better this Friday, and I'll eventually learn to start the wood fire with one match like another game that Stan played. All is silent except for its prattle. My black, long-haired buddy, Tabba Cat, is stretched out as usual before its warmth. Far away, a truck door slams, and I imagine how the sorrel mare hangs her head over the fence, her eyes following her owner as he drives away. In this happy hour, I dream about riding along the river trail with Stan on the red birthday bike he gave me. As air moves against the bare skin of my arm, the cushion compresses on the love seat beside me. Then I hear a shuffling of cloth on cloth when an arm is laid on my shoulders. I see only a shaded glow from the fire through my nearly closed eyes, but I know. He pulls me closer, and my ear falls against the center of his body where I sense the cloth of his shirt slipping over the hair on his chest. His

hand cups my chin, and I turn my face up though I do not open my eyes. My body yields with a sigh of longing to the familiar pressure of his; I can faintly smell his light soap, feel his warm chest under the cotton fabric, and hear a little catch in his breath. I feel stimulated, perhaps because his fingers lightly brush my nipples, or perhaps, I'm slightly drunk.

A flowing brightness moves before my nearly closed eyes. *What joy.* I'm afraid to breathe normally or sense anything beyond this immanence; afraid that so much more right now than I've been able to feel before will break apart, scattering in the darkness and wind of beyond. I've tried this technique other times, but in this moment his presence seems outside and beyond any energy of my own. *Have you come because you need me by now as much as I need you?* In the depth below my ear, I hear no answer but the swish of the on-rushing river and the wind that pushes me along.

As I sink into his body, at the very moment our lips are about to touch, light pops! *You're a corpse. I can't kiss a corpse. I can't kiss you.* I shove back, bolting to my feet, eyes wide open, seeing nothing but the empty cushion. Tabba leaps up and comes down in a crouch. I stare at Tabba who is staring at me with big yellow eyes. "What did you see, Tabba? How does he look?" We stare a moment longer; I am riveted in place, breathing hard, the blood drumming in my temples.

Tabba gets over his shock first and sits before the fire of which a few embers are all that remain. Slowly I sit back on the love seat, wondering why I didn't let us kiss one more time during the blissful moments in which he was drawn back as of old. I was about to let myself go into that infinite depth where we could press our bodies and lips on each other as before, when something—reality?—flashed, spinning him away. *Where is the help in your coming if I can't give myself to you?*

This world with its sorrow, its sweat, tossing its long, sorrel mane of beauty, my future not yet in flower, is still the ground in which I am rooted. Confounded, I slump between the growing shadows of the room behind me, and ahead, the dying purple sky framed in the western window. Clouds hang in gray bed sheets outside the north and south, floor to ceiling, glass panes.

Chapter 4

One very hot morning, I stand dripping sweat from several minutes of yanking on the starter cord of my bright orange brush cutter, feeling slightly dizzy in this heat. It will start; it hasn't failed yet when I persevere. But it's so hot today I soon need a break to get back my energy.

Sitting down by the handle, I frown at my disloyal brush cutter, the first machine I've truly liked. For some unknown reason, my machine of choice has jilted me today. I rub my forehead, lifting the brim of my straw hat to let the air get under as I look over at the stubborn machine. Mechanical things do not take to me, the main reason Stan was slow to demonstrate them. All he had to do was smile and they, like good dogs, sprang to obey rather than lying there like this bad one is doing for me.

I glance over at my large, dining room window. Oh, to be in air conditioning writing poetry—if I could concentrate on it. Without Stan's mechanical expertise, the difficulties of managing our fixer-upper acreage, the duplex in which my daughter lives, and the apartment building we call the five-plex have begun keeping me awake. The specific, aggravating issue today is the messy look of this hill that forms the backdrop for my low, white house. The hill isn't high, but it sweeps around my house in a crescent, rising above the landscaped bed of hostas, bleeding hearts, and day lilies that is the focus of the woodland setting of my home. The hill is a jungle of ancient lilac bushes that have run amuck into numberless, formless, spiky shrubs. Mostly a tangle of brittle, broken dead sticks, they remind me of a horde of zombies clacking their desiccated limbs in the slightest breeze. Even the live shoots are now

covered with brown, withered blossoms hanging on greenish stems.

Early this morning I looked out my bedroom window and gave in with a deep sigh to the inevitable. The sky is already an ashy blue, and even the cottonwood leaves, which usually quiver in the faintest puff, seem to limply raise a wrist to their foreheads. In spite of what looks like a very hot morning, I make up my mind to work until noon, felling the lilac bracken with this fine brush cutter. This machine was an early Mother's Day present from Stan which I had requested for cutting down the small, volunteer red cedars that prevented light and moisture from getting to the baby grasses in my reconstructed pasture prairie. Stan didn't have time to show me how to use it before he died. Instead, a friend gave directions which I carefully wrote in my frayed, bluish-gray notebook. Its blue-lined pages had started as my diary like the one my Grandma kept when Grandpa went to the hospital after the fall which killed him. Now this faded, cloth-covered, three-ring binder is becoming my Bible for managing the acreage as well as my emotional outlet for grief. Prior to the brush cutter, it contained my hand-written instructions from the same friend for running the lawn mower and, before this winter, I'll add his directions for using the snow blower.

I know next to nothing about maintenance and machines, but I was always proud of Stan for knowing how to cook and do the laundry. What in the world was he proud of me for? My cheesecake, maybe, and my ability to sing, but certainly not my expertise with machinery. In fact, this blank spot in my brain was always a little joke between us because he more than made up for it on our team.

I check the starter once more. Abruptly I yank the cord again as hard as I can. The engine catches for a second and then completely dies. *Without Stan, I've had so many problems I've never had before!* Screaming, I yank yet again. Still nothing. Feeling out of control, I spy a small hatchet hanging on the pegboard over Stan's green-painted workbench in the garage. I pull it down and run to the top of the rise, hacking and whacking, chopping and lopping at the nearest dead branches. They fall to the ground and, snarling, I bend menacingly to those beyond. One breaks off as I miss my hack and I see that many are so rotten, they can be pulled from the ground. I grab another one; it holds but by wiggling it, out it comes, leaving a nice green space in the groundcover.

With no plan, I just keep going at the dead lilacs as hard as I can. Itchy sweat runs under my hat brim into my eyebrows and down into my eyes, making them smart. Some stems are wiggled out, some break off, some are hacked down. The only sound I hear is the harsh chop and splintering of brittle wood. Soon, dead branches make a determined swath around me.

Some places on the hill are steep; sometimes I slip and have to grab a branch to keep from banging my knees. At times I do fall, and once, gash my shin on a rock sharp enough to cut through my thin work pants. The wound stings for a second but I barely notice because I'm working as fast as I can. Blood runs down my leg toward my dirty work sneakers and dries in a red trail on my pants.

After a time there's a big pile of lilac bracken lying around me. *Where can I put it quickly and keep on going?* A rusty pasture fence at the top of the hill is somewhat hidden inside a row of mulberry bushes. I gather the branches to throw over the fence out of sight. When the pile around me is carried away, the one at the top of the hill already stretches many yards along the sagging wire fence. My heart is thumping in the heat, and I'm breathing heavily from pushing myself harder than at any time in memory. But then I look at that ugly lilac gorse and go back to yanking the crackling stems aside where my ax can finish hacking them down. *Off with their heads, the crazy Queen shouts at Alice in Wonderland!*

I have to straighten up carefully from bending over now because things go a little black and I feel slightly dizzy. Yet no fainting spell will stop me from finishing this hill. Something sharp strikes over one eye, leaving a dull ache, like my hand when the hatchet glances off a rock. This hurts, though not so much physically as from my sense that I have no other choice but to do this hard job by myself. At the same time it feels good—the way pushing yourself successfully beyond normal limits can feel.

As I work on and on, I feel myself leveling off, like a boat moving through a lock, gate by gate, flooding and draining, rising from one sea to another. The noon whistle blows. A little buzz fills my ears. There's a dank earthy smell on my hands when I wipe away the sweat. The sun is a slap on the back urging me to turn away from this. It's making me light-headed.

At this point, a whisper from inside my head cautions about a possible heat stroke if I don't get a drink. Picking my way through the brushy shambles into the kitchen, I swallow water, and fill a canteen for periodic water breaks after returning to the fray.

At the scene of the battle I look at the spreading bramble over which ash trees and maples stand, and I drop in their shade for a few more moments. *No one says good work; no one says I knew you could do it without me.* I hear a bird's trill and the crackle of dead stems though they're quieter now. Wafting out of the shattered mess, the smell of lilacs, mold, and something pungent makes me feel limp. *Neither Stan nor I would take the initiative to clean up this jumble—until now. This frenzy in the lilacs may be my Panama Canal of sorts, a passage from one part of life to another. Something tells me it could be a*

dress rehearsal for the next part of life. With a forest of these stick-like shoots still to chop, I urge myself back to my feet. *If this is to mean what I think it will, I cannot give in.*

Toward the middle of the afternoon, a dark cloud blows over the range of low, bluish hills; I smell dust and rain. With a crack of lightning, raindrops patter on my straw hat and then fall harder. Now the steep pitch of the hill in some places is wet and slippery, and I sit down hard while pulling out a bush, my funny bone recoiling against a rock. For an instant the arm goes to sleep, and I give it a shake. A grin loosens my jaw as I sit there thinking I must have looked like one of the Stooges taking a pratfall when I slipped. The rain is cool through my thin clothing, but it makes getting around even slower. The muscles in my legs feel shaky; I consider stopping, but once more, I don't. After about five minutes, the rain dies away, and the cloud passes over. The misty sun re-heats the damp air which drags at me like the wet, wool swim suit I wore as a little kid.

I look around, but no one is in sight or sound. If I were to have a heart attack or faint from heat stroke, who would help? No one knows I'm here. My daughter might not come or call for a day or two; my nearest neighbor would never see me lying here behind the house or hear me if I yelled. I've been rash. But I am not going to stop so close to the end. I clamp my teeth together with the will to keep going.

The sun gets lower and I am working bent over. I throw the last armload on the long, low pile, and gaze back down the hill. Healthy green shrubs stand out freshly among chunks of dark red and pink quartzite thinly scattered throughout the spreading groundcover. Alone, I have finished in one day what we guessed would take both of us a couple of days. My eyes follow a tender green cascade of sprightly lilac shoots and come to rest on a vista of bleeding hearts and mown grass in the crook of the hill beside my white house. *Wow. Stan loved this place so; I wish he could've seen this.*

My daughter, a physical therapist, comes over soon after to stand at the foot of the hill in wonder at the well groomed difference. With arms akimbo in maroon tee shirt and khaki shorts, she looks up the hill and asks, "Mom, how did you do this?"

I stand beside her, answering with great satisfaction, "Remember that really hot day this past week? I started in the morning and took my hatchet to everything until late in the day when those dead bushes were gone."

"Mom, you could have had heat stroke."

"I should have stopped, but I wouldn't. Now it's done and I have solved one headache anyway."

She stares at me. "That wasn't very smart, Mom, and it was really reckless."

Glenda Long Eggerling

“Yes,” I say, looking around with foolish pleasure at my problem hill
where living lilacs have softened its sounds into sighs.

Chapter 5

Howling wind and pounding rain awaken me before my radio alarm comes on. I turn it off, get out of bed, dress, and do not catch the news about the weather this area is experiencing. When the storm dies down, I impatiently hurry off to begin a day crammed with activities to get ready for a camping trip starting tomorrow. I have just carried the first grocery bags into my kitchen when the phone rings. "Hello," says one of the renters in my apartment building across town. "Do you know that you have a flood over here?"

"What do you mean—a flood?" I ask as I drop on the kitchen stool in disbelief. I picture my tidy, white frame, three-story apartment building held safe and dry by cement retaining walls on a small lawn a few feet above street level.

He answers, "There's water running across the floor outside your basement apartments."

I'm stunned. This building has been listed for sale for nearly two years, and, since Stan's death three months ago, it has acted up in surprising ways, like a kid misbehaving for a substitute teacher. One apartment has remained unrented longer than usual, a tenant ran out on me for the first time recently, I paid a weekend charge to change her lock and another chunk to have her furniture carted away, a supposedly repaired window pane still lets in air, a leaky kitchen sink needs a plumber and might have to be replaced, I can't find a competent, regular handyman, and I'd do anything to get rid of this headache if I only knew what. "I'll be right there," I say, hanging up the phone.

As I quickly stash the frozen food in the freezer, my brain spills over with pictures of dirty water filling the rooms of the two apartments on the lower floor of this five-apartment building, soaking the carpets, and lapping around the fat body of the old-fashioned furnace just down the basement hall. Two days earlier because of depression from Stan's death and anxiety over the problems with my property, my doctor had prescribed medication, but it's too soon for the pills to have softened the shock. A drowning person wants a lifeline, and in the back of my brain, a little voice says, *Find someone who might be clearer and more knowledgeable than you about floods.* Hopefully, I phone a friend who has remodeled his house and might go with me to give advice. His son was with my daughter and me in the emergency room, and afterward his wife helped long hours in my kitchen before my husband's funeral. I expect our friendship to continue even though my husband is gone.

"They say I have a flood at my apartment building." My voice croaks under tension and I have to clear my throat before continuing, "I'm not ready for this. Could you meet me over there and give me some advice?"

"I can't help because my wife is coming back from work due to the flooding, and I want to be here when she gets home."

I feel slapped. Why must he be at home when she gets there? Doesn't he understand that this poor friend needs help? "I've never had to deal with a flood and I'm scared."

But he prepares to hang up, encouraging me with, "You can figure it out. Just go with the flow."

Is he trying to be clever? He's not funny though it's not bad advice. I can't believe he won't support me. For a moment longer I sit on my kitchen stool. *However, it could be that she has a soggy office and needs his shoulder to cry on herself.* I get in my car with a sinking feeling that I overestimated the extent of our friendship. *None of these bad things happened when I still had Stan. Now it seems all the bad things that can be washing the feet out from under me.*

As I drive over a hill on the road to my building, I suddenly look down on a daunting river of water sweeping along the main thoroughfare where a car has apparently died in the depths of the intersection. I stop my car on the brink remembering the old rule that you don't drive through running water even though it looks shallow—which this doesn't. Now what to do? Until the sight of this, I didn't realize how massive the cloudburst was. *Go home and wait for the water to go down,* a voice in my head whimpers. *But you're the sole owner of a flooded building,* another voice reminds as if I didn't know. So, firmly gripping the steering wheel, I improvise a new route along the ridge top until the water in the main street below runs out, and I can safely drive across it to the other side. Carefully watching for more flooded

streets, I drive on across town and park by my building, only to stare at a hole that has washed out from under the sidewalk in the grassy verge. From where I squat down to peer into it, I can't see the bottom of the hole. *What in the world happened over here?*

The renter who called comes over. I say, "Show me where the water is." I can't breathe while I unlock the front door into the flooded apartment. But no wave of dirty water washes us off our feet as I fear, and my breath returns to normal. I stand at the door for a moment, staring into the room. The water has streamed down the walls, under the windows, and across the carpet in one room. The windows are cracked and the blinds hang awry with a few broken slats. A quick look shows that the new carpet is sopping wet in that room but the other rooms are dry. I open the apartment's exit door into the basement and peer into the hall outside the furnace. Water has run under the apartment door and down the cement hall leaving scattered puddles in the shallow hollows of the floor. But the rust-colored old furnace stands high and safely dry. My shoulders slump with relief as the worst of my fears has not come to pass.

The sky is still a low gray as though more rain may be on the way, but *sink or swim* witlessly pops into my brain, and I begin a to-do list to clean up the mess. It dawns on me that I should call my insurance agent to see this situation before it rains again. He says I am one of the first to call and he'll be right over. I am simple-mindedly proud of myself for being so fast with the phone; at least I know this much about business—always try to get your insurance to pay.

When the agent comes to look things over, he describes the cause of the freakish flooding. "The rain came down so hard and fast that it overflowed the rain gutters and poured down into the window wells. It filled them up and then burst through the glass and across the room." The leviathan force of all this water through the rain spout also caused the deep wash-out under the sidewalk. Then he says, "Insurance doesn't cover damages from water that comes down from above because, in our jargon, it's considered an act of God." I argue that the water welled up from the ground due to the inadequate rain gutters, junk that God certainly didn't create. But he stands firmly on his theological insurance axiom that covers not paying for almost any kind of damage, a wall to wall excuse to blame on God.

The clean-up begins with a phone call to my usual carpet cleaner to dry the carpet. He comes and turns on his machine, but then unexpectedly says, "You have to replace it," folding back a corner of my once lovely, almost new, carpet to show me the mushy backing. There's nothing I can do but give permission to rip it out.

Early the next morning, I awaken and write in my diary: *I am exhausted; I can't meet my daughter as planned; I must post-pone leaving. At 1:30 AM, I am too nervous about my finances to sleep. I have the double expense of replacing one soggy, but nearly new, carpet with another new carpet; there's also the unplanned cost, due to Stan's death, of on-going building repairs and now emergency repairs, and less cash flow due to the long-lasting vacancies of two apartments.*

This morning, after only twelve weeks of being a widow, I still haven't totally come to grips with our finances though I'd been pouring over the computer records and the files. Like many women of my generation, I'd left the over-all management of our financial situation to my husband. I remember one day as a senior in college soon after marriage, I put down my textbook and picked up the checkbook thinking to pay some of the bills that lay on the counter. Stan came by with a big grin, saying, "Maybe I should do that; you go back to your studies." Feeling smart because I was getting out of a chore, I handed him the bills which, apparently, was a defining moment in our life as a couple. The thought of having to pay the apartment building's unusual repair bills due to the flood and his death, and perhaps replace that forty year old furnace to meet code so I can sell the building, keeps me awake and makes me wish I had bigger and better pills than the doctor prescribed.

Later that morning as I guzzle a pot of caffeine, it occurs to me that I should try to make a deal to replace the carpet, but this is another new responsibility for which I have no experience. Because his job as a minister left his time freer than mine, Stan talked to the renters and made the deals to handle apartment problems. I can still remember his big grin when he told me something he learned from chatting with one of them. I was the assistant because I worked forty plus hours at my job and about all I could run was a vacuum cleaner.

I sit at the computer holding my cup of coffee and going over our finances on the computer report. My money worries and the struggle to meet new challenges, like making a deal to replace the carpet, bring to mind the time when I, a poor swimmer, floundered toward a raft in a lake too far away for my lack of ability. That day Stan jumped in and towed a tired and grateful wife to safety on the raft. Today, calling our realtor seems the most sensible way to make a deal like I'm not sure how to do. He gave Stan friendly rental advice from time to time over the seven years we'd known him, and I know Stan trusted him. "Do you know where I can get a new carpet—one that's not too expensive since my insurance won't pay anything to replace the wet one?"

"Here's the name of a guy that I have an arrangement with to buy all my carpets from. Maybe he'll give you a deal, too."

Since I know that he can do what I'm uncomfortable doing, I quickly

try to take advantage of his personal friendship with Stan for one last time and his professional relationship to me. "Would you call and tell him that I'm a friend of yours, and maybe he would be nice enough to help me out with a good deal on a carpet?"

"I'm really busy now because I have water in one of my buildings, too, but I guess I can do that." Shortly, he calls back to say the guy will be over this afternoon, and then quickly hangs up before I can even say thanks or ask if I'm included in his carpet deal for once.

When the salesman comes, we discuss what I want: something durable in a neutral color and a moderate price. While he measures the room, my shoulders slump; my brain runs sluggishly from filling up with "Post-it Notes" for all there is to do and from having had too little sleep the night before. I feel flat, as though there's no air in my body and it's under a mountain of water too high to swim over. I know better, yet ask, "Could you please take my specs and select a carpet for me like I said because I have to go out of town today and potential renters are coming right after I get back." I don't have the nerve to ask about my realtor's arrangements for a deal. Sceptic that I normally am, it's less exhausting to trust in our realtor's friendship though, honestly, right now I feel I've done as much as my lack of energy and my depression can do.

This evening my daughter and I start for the lake where my other daughter will meet us for the last two days of a, so-called, relaxing long weekend, my problems still whirling in my tired head. I am floundering toward a raft too far to swim.

When I return from the camping trip, the carpet is ready to be laid. It's a surprisingly deep mauve—*what part of neutral did he not understand?*—with a surprisingly immoderate price tag. After the carpet layers leave, I stare at the bill, questioning why I expected our realtor could or would make a better deal with a carpet salesman than I. It's not like me, and I'm annoyed with myself. *You knew this could happen when you took the easy way out*, my still, small voice scolds. *A realtor's job is to sell the building, not be your interior decorator. Yes, you've been loyal to him on this drawn out building sale, but you were foolish to think your professional relationship would extend to getting him to work out a deal for you on the carpet.*

In the back of my head the same voice reproaches, *You didn't go about it right because you hoped his friendship with Stan was enough to make him feel like going further than normal to help you out.*

Now my immediate problem is to get the place ready to quickly show, but windows, blinds, and other things are broken, and I'm competent only with duct tape and the vacuum. The one handyman I know who's skillful

is Stan's brother who's retired and even handier than Stan. Stan removed a retaining wall at our house and replaced a window with his brother by his side. We're close family friends. Time is running out, and calling on Stan's brother is my best, most timely, solution. I do realize that asking him to make a four hour drive is getting close to the limit of brotherly friendship, but I don't doubt for a moment that, under the circumstances, he will come when I explain the problem.

"I don't want to come," he says when I call. I'm startled, clapping a hand to my forehead; did I hear him right?

"But a prospective renter is coming to see it the day after tomorrow. Won't you please help me this once? I know I have to find a handyman, but there isn't time right now. I tried someone, but he turned out to be incompetent. I don't know where else to turn in this short time, and I need the rental down payment."

Meanwhile, a sad voice in my head begs, *I'm your dead brother's wife and I'm alone. Don't you care about me? If that's not enough, wouldn't you go if Stan called?*

After a long moment he gives in, "OK, but just this once. You've got to find someone else for the future or get out of the business." Relief and gratitude fill my brain as I hang up, but inside my chest is a hollow that I've never felt before.

Shortly after Stan's brother and I have worked side by side to fix up the apartments, and he has gone, I quickly rent my formerly shipwrecked apartment to the first person who comes to see it. With much of that building's problems taken care of now, I sit at Stan's desk and feel swamped by the surprisingly tough love given out by these friends. Even in absence Stan means so much to me that I imagined he continued to mean as much as ever to his friends. But the umbrella of their friendship is more circumscribed than expected and doesn't seem to cover me. *I've never had to deal with flooding or anything close to that. It's been only three months since I lost Stan. There hasn't been time to find a competent handy man with everything there is to do though I did try someone, who didn't work out.* I nod through the window at the white fence that needs painting some day when I have the strength and energy. *OK, excuses aren't paint, and I've learned something from this. When I turned for help in this crisis to people that Stan trusted, I felt like I had to beg. I thought they would go on with me like they had with Stan. But I've learned that I am now my sole support.*

I continue to stare at the long, white, unsympathetic fence which stands there dumb as a—well, dumb as a board. *I should be more like Grandma.* Short, stout Grandma, alone in her cotton housedress and pinafore apron,

somehow kept the farm going during the Great Depression after Grandpa accidentally died. My mother said that Grandma, though she used hired men to do the farm work, learned what she needed to know about farming at family dinners. I picture Grandma, in a pastel dress, joining the clique of her three brothers in Sunday white shirts, out on the porch to eavesdrop on planting dates. In the kitchen the women wash and dry the dishes. That Grandma would publically step out of the kitchen, her place as they saw it, to take on her husband's role in running the farm, is instructive. Mom said the family sometimes gossiped about this novelty back in an age of stricter assumptions and narrower ideas about women's place and proper role.

I can imagine Grandma felt unsure about how to run the farm. How did she decide, I wonder? She must have asked her brothers' advice and not been afraid to work out plans with a reliable hired man. Grandma's single-mindedness is a legend in our family. In my mind I see how she would dry her hands on a dish towel and plop herself down among the men regardless of how inadequate she might feel. Suddenly, I stop playing with a paper clip. That's what was stopping me from dealing with this problem building. There is something about working with our realtor on this building sale that makes me uncomfortable, but why? Feeling out of sorts about this idea, I rise to go upstairs with a final, backward look at the white fence. *One day I will get you painted; that's a promise.*

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Without Stan to do the maintenance, getting rid of that white frame money trap as soon as possible is my overarching problem. I go to see our realtor who, for nearly two years, has talked Stan and me into allowing him to concoct two or three fruitless strategies to get a high price for it. Now, in white polo shirt, he smiles reassuringly across his desk, "I'm still working on it."

I argue, looking up at him from the slightly lower seat of the blue Naugahyde armchair, "The price is set too high."

Looking down at me, he is confident. "But this guy I know has a new plan to get the money. Give him just a little more time. It really will work out," he urges, smiling, nodding his head, and thinking he has passed me off yet again. Today I leave unhappily because I have no confidence in him, yet I feel such loyalty to Stan. Because he and Stan, my trusted financial planner, worked out this game plan, I am too unsure of myself to demand he lower the price.

A few more days evaporate; the building is one hundred per cent rented

and mostly repaired. The yellow tape around the hole is gone; it is filled and waiting for grass seed which I sow and rake into it. If Stan were here, I'd argue, *our realtor and you were friends. You had lunches together, you knew his father who was also your colleague; after becoming a financial planner, you joined his business club and the two of you volunteered on projects together, and he made money from your investment skill. Yes, he did set up a meeting with his carpet salesman for me; was making a deal like his going too far to help me? Why has he failed for nearly two years to sell this building even though I've urged him several times to get it done?*

Then I catch my breath because it hits me that, indeed, there are limits to our realtor's help. Well then, he has reached mine for selling this frustrating building. *Stan's plan to make money isn't working out.* I stop raking to stare at the former hole. My request to lower the price in order to sell was going against what Stan thought was best based on what our realtor talked him into, like that time they came to me about a contract sale right before Stan's death.

The hole is now filled with dirt and tiny grass seeds. The top is level with its surroundings, and soon the growth of grass will complete its repair. The grass will need watering from time to time. *It's all in your hands now,* a quiet little voice says. I picture myself raking a line like the edge of a shore, and stepping forward to face something shining and expansive on the other side, like a calm blue sea after a tsunami.

Shortly after, I discuss my realtor problems on the phone with my sister. "You're going to change realtors, aren't you?" she asks.

It's embarrassing to admit that, "I don't know if I can. I signed a form right after Stan died making this one the only realtor I can work with. I don't know how to change to another."

That evening before choral practice begins, we choristers sit in folding chairs in our sections ordering our sheets of music in black folders for rehearsal. I discuss the history of my problems from owning this building with a friend, also a second soprano, who happens to be—a realtor. She has short blond hair and a good figure; she wears darling outfits, and, yes, has also won awards for her sales ability. Coming to the end of my apartment building blues, I say, "My realtor has been trying unsuccessfully to sell this place for what is going on two years now."

"What's the problem?" she asks as she closes her black music folder.

"The price is set too high in my opinion. He has had only one serious inquiry from a guy who, for some reason, can't come up with the necessary money. Every time I talk to him, he wants me to give this prospect a little more time; the guy is good for the money, he says. But the banks don't agree, and I think my realtor has dollar signs blinding his eyes."

"I've never taken so long to sell something; that's incredible," she says, dropping her chin in disbelief and raising her eyebrows to stare at me. Then our director steps up to the podium and picks up his baton. She quickly whispers, "I have some ideas. Let's talk about it after rehearsal."

As we carry our black music folders to our cars afterward, she explains the process of legally changing realtors. "Do you really want to find a different one?"

Suddenly the little Bossy Pants inside my head speaks up. *What do you think you are doing? You are abandoning Stan's friend, someone he trusted to do the right thing. Stan wouldn't do this.* But I take a deep breath and plunge in before second thoughts can stop me. "Will you take it on?"

When I walk into her office a couple of days later, she gives me a form to sign. While reading the paper, I think about my old realtor with embarrassment. *How will I face him after sort of two-timing him without warning even though changing realtors is reasonable when I have previously discussed my dissatisfaction with his lack of a sale? He doesn't treat me as he'd like to be treated, I'm sure. Still, according to him, I may be giving up a chance to make quite a bit of money on my building. Well, that's OK; I'm also getting out of having to spend quite a bit on its old furnace, should it break down. But my worst fear is that I'm giving up on Stan's plan. How do I know that mine will be better?*

Then a picture of Grandma takes shape in my head, that small, modest woman with her gray hair in a bun, edging into the circle of her brothers, unafraid to ask questions about her crops even if they seemed silly to those bona fide farmers and revealed the inadequacy of her knowledge about running a farm. She bore this embarrassment and that of the raised eyebrows and nudges of their wives. And, best of all, she paid off the farm's mortgage after the Depression was over. I don't know if my plan *is* better than Stan's but I'm going to trust myself and take the risk. This is when I pick up the pen and sign.

My new realtor, dressed in a striking blue print blouse that I'd love to have, looks across the desk and says, "I know a couple who might be interested in buying your building. All they have to do is walk into the bank and they'll walk out with the money."

When this couple agrees to take a look at the building, I speedily hand deliver the letters which assure my renters that the prospective buyers are simply interested in the condition of the building and aren't snooping around for ways to boot them out later.

During the walk-through by the prospects and my new realtor, I stay home as planned. But while it is happening, my phone rings. My realtor says, "There's a problem with one of your apartments." The call sinks in like

déjà vu with the flood. “They won’t let us in and the buyers are ready to walk away. You’ve got to get over here and do something.”

Oh, no. Of course, it’s the apartment of the couple I have nick-named Mr. and Mrs. Grouch. I’ve had a plumber work on their sink, the latest complaint of several, but they say the leak continues and are demanding a reduction in their rent. When I passed on their complaint to the plumber, he said the repair just needed a little time and should be OK. I’ve avoided talking to Mr. Grouch because I’ve done my best to fix the problem, and I’m simply not going to shell out for a new sink just as I sell the place. When Mr. Grouch opened his door today and saw that the potential new landlords were Asian, I suspect he simply reacted, slamming the door and causing this problem.

How I wish to stay in my cozy kitchen, but I remember Grandma didn’t do that. I grab my car keys and drive to my building in a fog. I’ve no idea what I’ll say to get this man to let us in, but I’m desperate to sell this place.

After apologizing to the prospective buyers, I knock on the apartment door. The tall, heavy-set, gray-haired man who opens it is shirtless in denim pants with suspenders hanging around his hips. “What d’ya want?” he asks, looking down on me as though he doesn’t know when he sees us.

I explain that the buyers want a look at the plumbing and the apartment’s general condition, as I said in the letter. “Will you please let us in?” The man peers out from under bushy eyebrows, first at the slender Asian couple who stand quietly with my realtor behind me, and then at me. His bushy eyebrows knit together and his mouth works a little as though he is getting ready to say something. *Not by the hair of my chinny, chin, chin* is what runs through my brain. The four of us look back at him. I raise my own chin and force a big smile, lifting my eyebrows, trying to look as though I confidently know he will do as I ask. *Act as if...* This was a trick I learned long ago as a young teacher when I had to tell difficult children to do something they didn’t want to do. I’d no idea then, nor do I today, about what to try after this.

“Hmmpmph,” and he steps back. “Come in then.” *Act as if...* *Somehow this trick always seems to work.* Nervously, with the buyers watching, I open the cupboard door for them to view under the supposedly leaky sink, suppressing the urge to stand in front and block their view. But, surprisingly, it looks dry to me, like the plumber said. After looking around a bit more, we all leave without a single word except, “Thank you,” I say politely. *I’m not the wimp you think I am,* I sternly add in my mind to Mr. Grouch.

It has been about three weeks since I stopped trusting the realtor who was Stan’s good friend and found my own. The Asian couple buys the building. As I stand in the apartment building’s basement hall for the last time after collecting mops, pails, cleaning products, and repair supplies, moisture fills

my eyes for a moment. I remember all the McDonald's take-out Stan and I ate while working together in its five apartments.

Through the basement window I can see the nice green lawn, trimmed, and free of weeds today. When Stan was around, the place did make money, and working over here together was good. Then turning to look at the suspect furnace, I say goodbye, feeling something like a graduate in line with classmates for the last time. It's a relief to have it finished, but nostalgia makes a lump in my throat. Then, with near delirium flooding my brain from reaching the end of my worries over furnace and pipes, I hold my breath to stop the sobs, dash up the steps, and lock the door.

After the sale closing I lie on my bed with the comforter pulled over my head. In the room of my mind where Stan and I co-habit, I go 'round and 'round, looking closely at what I did and asking for Stan's approval. *I know it's not the high price you hoped for but it's good enough. I no longer have to lie awake at night wondering how I can afford to replace the old-fashioned furnace, if it breaks down, and re-do the ducts. I know our realtor was your friend and you would never have left him, but he didn't listen to me. I can't always listen to you. You trusted people a little more than I would. It was one of your dearest traits.*

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In the months after the sale, I try to understand why Stan's friends let me down, and even his brother nearly said no when I called. Why was it that the guitarist, who with his wife had stood so staunchly beside me in the days immediately after Stan's death, gave no support when I called for help with the flood? As it turns out, we never do anything as a three-some again. Though some people try, I learn that, more often than not, friendship between couples comes to an end when one of the couples comes to an end.

One afternoon as we walk through her garden, I say to my sister-in-law, "I'm so glad Stan's brother came to help with my apartment building when other people turned away. I never would have rented that apartment so fast without him. At first, I was afraid he wasn't coming."

My sister-in-law turns to explain, "He didn't want you to rely on him when things broke down, and he didn't want to make that drive of four hours every time you called. He was too distant to be your new maintenance man." I suspect the guitar player and Stan's realtor felt much the same about my learning not to rely on them. But even though I get it, and feel especially grateful to Stan's brother for coming to help me against his better judgment, for some time after when I think of this crisis, the narrow mercy of Stan's good friends makes me sad. If they had cared for him as much as I thought,

wouldn't they have been more caring of me? So soon after he died, I was unprepared to deal with a mess unlike any I'd ever had before. My fear of the amount of money necessary to solve the potential problem of the furnace, and my lack of previous experience handling the maintenance made me almost crazy for a while, grasping at anything for a lifesaver. But I've come to believe that what was my "flood" was to Stan's friends only shattered windows, a big hole, and a sopping carpet. My daughter supported this realization when, as we drove by the white frame building standing on the small hill above the sidewalk, she recalled with a grin, "Mom, in those days for a while, you *were* crazy."

When I look back at that time so near to when I still had Stan, I see myself floundering under grief, depression, and despair over the loss of the lifeline that had been there most of my life. It was the resolute example of my plump, gray-haired Grandma in pinafore apron who pulled me through. In her image I came to trust my natural ability, skepticism, and courage to be, on my own, a maker of deals.

Chapter 6

“Hey, Glenda, wanna hear a joke about dogs?” Lou yells out the open window of the white van as I come out to where it is parked by the concrete slab of the closed well. A few feet away, the sprawling forsythia bush hiding the big silver fuel tank waves its own spring greeting in yellow flowerets. I usually take a little time before the men start working to talk with Joe, the older brother, who’s in charge of repairing my white frame house so it can be painted. Lou, the shorter, darker assistant brother, often has some story or joke to tell. I think he does it to get my attention away from Joe.

“For Pete’s sake, Glenda doesn’t want to hear any more of your jokes,” Joe interjects before I can answer. I think he has caught me rolling my eyes on other mornings at Lou’s stories.

“Yes, she will. She will wanna hear this one,” Lou asserts, raising his voice and glaring back at Joe as he slides out of the passenger’s seat.

Joe takes off his brown barn jacket, comes around the back of his van, and turns toward Lou. Joe is tall, like Stan was, a large man in pressed, gray striped bib overalls and blue work shirt. He has curly gray hair, a round face, blue eyes behind glasses with clear plastic frames, and ruddy cheeks—all of which remind me a little of Santa Claus except Joe is clean shaven. “Why, why will she?” he asks, imitating Lou while falling into his trap.

“Because this is about a Chihuahua like the man has who feeds his horses here,” Lou answers with a triumphant look at me as though presenting the most logical of reasons. Lou has dark, uncombed hair that needs cutting, a day’s growth of beard, and red rimmed eyes. His blue jeans and work shirt

could use some soap and water.

“OK, go ahead, tell the story, but not if it’s mean to the dogs,” I give in with a sigh.

Now Lou is standing at the end of the van under the maple that is leafed in tightly curled, rosy buds while Joe opens the van’s double doors and throws in his jacket. I take a deep breath of warm spring grass as I look across the white board fence at the two sorrels grazing in the pasture.

Lou says, “The dogs don’t get hurt, OK?” I nod my head, fold my arms, and tilt my head at him, waiting.

“See, two guys were walking their dogs. One has a Lab and the other guy has a Chihuahua. The first guy says, ‘Hey, wanna get something to eat?’ The second guy says, ‘Yeah, but all the signs say No Dogs Allowed.’ The first guy with the Lab puts sunglasses on and hands the other guy a pair. ‘Follow my lead,’ he says. As he walks into the restaurant a waiter stops him and says, ‘Sir, no dogs allowed.’ The man says, ‘It’s OK. This is my Seeing Eye dog.’ The waiter takes the man to a table. The second guy comes in. The same waiter stops him and the guy says, ‘This is my Seeing Eye dog. I’m with the other guy.’ The waiter says, ‘You can’t fool me. You have a Chihuahua.’ Well, the guy freaks out and says, ‘A Chihuahua? They gave me a Chihuahua?’”

I do have to laugh a little and now Lou looks at Joe again as if to say, “Told you.”

I spend time like this with the guys who are helping me with my house because I saw with Stan, when workmen came, a good relationship made the work go better. As manager of the place, this is how to find out what they are planning and doing. My friendliness isn’t flirting; it’s only meant to help the work along. I don’t give more than a peanut sized thought to meaning anything else. If Stan were here, I would leave the schmoozing to him, but since losing him a year ago, I have to do his part, too.

“Say, how would you like to go to lunch with us today?” Joe asks, as he ties on his carpenter apron. I don’t answer immediately because the offer takes me by surprise, and I don’t want to do this. I look at Joe, who is busily placing a hammer and various tools in his apron as he prepares to begin the repairs this morning. As a single woman it doesn’t seem like a good idea to let this business relationship turn into something beyond the job itself. That’s why I’m surprised to hear myself accept their offer.

“Well, it happens I don’t go into work today, so I guess I could do lunch. I work part-time for a social services agency and I’m finished for the week. When I see you getting ready to leave, I’ll come out.” Joe gives me a nice smile and nods his head. He reaches down to re-tie one of his brown leather, high-topped, lace-up work shoes, the professional kind with steel toes. I work

outdoors in athletic shoes like Stan.

Joe and Lou have been unloading Joe's white van in the slight shade as we talk, pulling out wooden saw horses, gray metal ladders, saws, hammers, containers of nails, and stacking up a few boards for the day's work. Today Lou says cheerfully as he picks up one of the ladders, "Joe and I like that place that has the big buffet. Is that OK with you?"

"Sure," I say, as I turn to go back inside my house and leave them to their work.

At the wooden desk on the lower floor that once was the center of Stan's financial planning business, I sit frowning at the poetry I wrote on the computer screen early this morning before the brothers came. It's a brief description of how I no longer can feel, as through a current in the air, that Stan is near. *What comes next? Why did I say I'd go to lunch with them? It breaks my concentration. Oh, well, once won't kill me.* The tap, tap of hammering sounds clearly in here at my screen, yet far away.

At noon in the restaurant, we set down our trays at one of the wooden tables placed in a row in a large room filled with the smell of roasting meat. We have been through the noisy buffet line that snakes from food island to food island in this crowded restaurant. It seems to be a favorite of workers dressed like Joe, Lou, and me, fitting in with denim shirt and jeans, too. Now we have settled at this corner table with Joe's and Lou's plates piled with mashed potatoes, ham, corn, dinner rolls, and apple pie. As they look at my plate of lettuce and ingredients from the salad bar, I can see they want to ask if this is all I'm eating, so I explain, "I'm saving room for the soft ice cream."

"So'm I," Lou says, and Joe nods in agreement.

"I can see you're holding back," I say. We all smile.

Joe tells me about his granddaughter, actually his step-granddaughter, but he doesn't seem to let that distinction make any difference. "She's going to be in a hoops contest this weekend, and her grandmother and I are going. We try to go to everything she's in."

"How old is she?" I ask.

"She's only thirteen, and is a really good kid. Sometimes she drops around just to eat a piece of cake with me or watch TV. I want her to keep doing that and do everything I can to help her. I gave her the money to enter the hoops contest because her mother doesn't have it right now. Since the divorce, her mom hasn't been able to get on with her life." He picks up a cherry tomato and pops it into his mouth.

As we eat and talk, Lou suddenly sets down his water glass with a thump and asks, "Do you feel lonely on your place all by yourself?" He glances at me and then looks quickly away as I raise my eyes. From the thump of his

glass, I figure this isn't just a casual question. I don't want Lou to know that I do feel lonely for Stan in case he would misinterpret what I mean. And I don't want him to believe I'm completely alone on my place near a woody state park, either.

"My daughter lives nearby. I see her. I and my neighbor, the one up the hill, watch out for each other. And since I work part-time, I'm not alone much. I like to have the solitude to write, and there's a lot of upkeep on this acreage that keeps me busier than I really want to be."

Joe says, "I think your acreage would be a challenge for a woman to handle alone."

"Yes, but I'm learning to be a poet of stubborn engines and broken buildings, you see," I laugh. They chuckle politely at my attempt to be funny, but I'm fairly sure from their point of view being maintenance guys, my metaphor isn't a joke. Stan would've laughed, and, for a moment remembering, I sigh, but, *oh well*.

When we leave, Joe says, "I'll get your lunch," as he reaches into his hip pocket for his money.

"I can't let you do that. Let me pay for yours," I say, as I open my purse to shuffle around in it looking for my billfold.

"No, no, let this one be my treat. You can get the next one," Joe says with a smile.

The next one ... I decide it's OK to do lunch with them a couple of times when I'm not working. They'll soon be finished with this job, anyway, and then the lunches will stop.

As Lou makes a detour to the rest room, Joe and I go ahead and get into his van. He rests his arms on the steering wheel while we wait, and turns to me saying, "If my brother asks you out, don't go. He has a drinking problem, and he likes to gamble. He can be a lot of trouble if you get involved with him."

My eyes widen. If Joe thinks I could ever be interested in dating his disheveled brother, who sometimes needs a little more soap than he uses, what does he take me for? "Don't worry. I'm not looking for anyone to go out with," I laugh uncomfortably, wondering where this thought came from. Isn't it apparent that Lou certainly isn't my kind of dish?

Joe parks his van under the budding maple by the low, concrete platform, gets out, walks around to the side door of my house, and stands a moment looking at the spill of brownish soil around the door and over the narrow sidewalk. A couple of years ago Stan removed the two, sway-backed, ugly cement buttresses that held back the hill around the side entrance. We intended to landscape the area later, but I was too much in mourning to do it last summer. Joe says, "You have a bad erosion problem going on here. I

think I can fix it, if you want, after they finish painting. I wouldn't charge you except for the materials I use."

"I can't do that; it wouldn't be right. I'll be glad to talk about what I'd like done, but you have to charge for your time; otherwise, I won't let you do it," I say with a little smile to make it sound friendlier. I want this to be strictly a business arrangement, something for which I don't owe him anything more.

Now he turns toward me, shrugging. "OK, I don't want to charge you, but if that's what you want, OK," he says as he bends to pick up his carpenter's apron again. I frown at him a little. *Would his wife like having him out here working for me for free?*

• • •

A few weeks later after the repairs are done and my house is painted a natural, mossy green, I find a magazine picture to show Joe as a model for my grounds. He draws up a plan for a terrace to stabilize the eroding slope which we thoroughly discuss, including the cost of his labor. Though I suspect he undercharges, I accept his price. While I'm away on a trip with my chorale in Japan, Joe will create the terrace and keep an eye on my house.

Sometime later when I come home from the trip and get out of the car, attempting to take in the new appearance of my place, my mouth drops, and then my suitcase follows. A stream of light gray pebbles runs along the side of my ranch house down the hill. Railroad ties lie against the slope down which the pebbles flow as though in a terraced waterfall. A handful of various sized, pink quartzite rocks stand like sculptures among the pebbles near the side door, while a few islands of hostas float the eye along the swirling pebble river. Joe has extrapolated the picture and my ideas into something even better than Stan and I could ever have done. It is the essence of a Shinto garden in its minimalist functionality.

I call Joe immediately. "I feel as if I'm in a Japanese garden by my house. Your landscaping has such a feeling of spirituality—and it's all for the practical function of holding back the soil from eroding."

Joe laughs. "Well, it sounds as though you like it. I enjoyed doing it for you. It was something different for me."

"I'm trying to sound as though I love it—it's much, much more than I ever expected." After pausing for a moment, I add, "And when you send me the bill, make sure you charge enough for everything. I trust you to do something rare like this but I don't trust you to charge me enough to make it worth your while." *I'll pay him what he bills and that will have to cover my obligation though his performance has gone beyond a mere business arrangement.*

Now I want to climb to the top of the hill where I can view the total effect of the terrace. I walk through the green lilac shrubs to the narrow deer path winding along the top of the ridge. From here I can see my prairie pasture in which a few weedy cedars must be cut out though their pleasant odor recalls a cedar closet in a house when we first married. Mourning doves, warning of rain, coo in misty voices close to the path. White cloth strips hang on narrow stakes along the edge of the path; they are meant to scare the deer from regarding the hostas up here as dessert. I wonder if they've worked or are merely taken by the deer for flags of surrender. The cloths are limp in the still twilight, but, amazingly, the green and yellow striped hostas below the deer path look un-tasted and are getting tall and wide.

Now I turn to look down on the light gray pebbles running along the side of my mossy green house. From up here, the air shimmers as though disturbed by the dying peals of a great shrine's bell. The stream of pebbles resembles white sand, a Shinto symbol of purification and hospitality for the spirits. My eyes follow the white river down the slope, continuing across the peony bushes and the black-topped parking to the small field between my house and the gravel road. A winking radiance like I have never seen before is blanketing the openness of the field under twilight's purple clouds. Thousands and thousands of tiny white lights swirl and blink within the net of tall green grass, spirits opening invisible wings, beings on fire. The dark field appears carpeted in thickly moving light toward which I lean, speechless, placing my hands over each cheek. I am so attracted, so lifted on the lights, carried toward the faintly glowing horizon circling this shallow valley, compelled beyond anywhere I've ever gone. White-white, white-white. *This is for me? This is for me.*

• • •

Passing through Yamanashi

*Oh, you soft-bodied beetles with luminous names:
firefly, glow-worm, lightning bug,
and others of tropical luster.
You lampyridae,
named in poems of Japan
I read as a girl,
your lights blink through this haze
in haste to find a lover.
It is I who come to your signal.*

The Comer

*Led by your lamps, I head in a way
I've never gone.*

Chapter 7

The subject of my dreams came up a few days before when my friend, the dream psychoanalyst, called to wish me an early happy birthday. I told her about my latest dream and parts of others that I could remember. She advised, "These puzzling dreams you describe should be written down. They might begin to come together in a meaningful way." Today I wrote this one in my diary, carefully setting down its Alice in Wonderland details as clearly as I could.

I see a paved road on a sunny day. A gray city bus is taking on riders. I hear them speak a few phrases. "This city is a terminal city; one that can use a driver—one who can do it the old-fashioned way; one who can do it the right way."

A blur passes before my eyes as though I am riding in a speeding vehicle. Beside me, I recognize the director of my chorale, dressed in his usual khaki pants and a navy tee shirt, riding in the driver's seat. The car is a '50s convertible with the top down; it has straw like a bird's nest poking out of the ash trays inside the door. I feel humiliated by the poor condition of what is my car though Bruce is driving.

Suddenly we crest a hill and stop to look down a steep descent. What we're on now isn't a road at all; it's more like a bumpy track through a grassy field. I am anxious and confused about how we can get to the main highway below where cars zoom along. I point out a side road to Bruce that zigzags down this ravine, but he ignores it, accelerating smoothly, straight over the precipice. I hang on to my seat and am terrified by the feeling of falling. I

think that, due to his recklessness, we will crash and die. But unbelievably, Bruce grins at me like everything will be OK and smoothly drives us safely into the highway traffic.

• • •

My two daughters stay with me all this weekend to celebrate the second birthday of my single life, helping to alleviate its loneliness. We go cycling, to the movies; we do a little shopping and a lot of talking. Now it's time for them to leave. We give each other the firm hugs that mean we're family forever though Stan has gone on. Sadly, I watch them pull slowly out of the drive that smells sweetly of black-top and glistens in the bright sun. Shadows of leaves from the over-hanging maples shine in its mirror, giving its surface a fidgety, antsy effect. Stan and I black-topped its forerunner of gravel because cleaning off the snow was difficult and took too much time. This morning's surreal dream about a roadway, palpable with meaning that I can't explain, causes me to ponder the origin of the restless black driveway.

I remember how Stan worked out the details for black-topping the gravel track with the man he found for the job. But Stan had to be away on business the day the workmen chose to come. That morning without a qualm, Stan left me in charge of the job, handing me the plan that showed how, by grading the middle, water would run off the rounded top into the soil along the edges. He assured me that the contractor knew exactly what we wanted done. All I would have to do was say good morning and smile. I added the part about smiling, hoping to make my responsibility go quickly and painlessly. I was skeptical that my part would be so simple as Stan promised, but there was nothing else I could do.

When the contractor arrived, I brought him the white paper with the plan Stan had drawn for a reminder. He was dressed in khaki work pants, shirt, and cap, like someone in the military, and that is how he sounded when he barked, "I don't know nothing about grades. I don't remember nothing about them," pushing the paper back at me. He scratched his temple under the khaki band on his cap looking down at me with a frown while I looked up at him, matching his frown.

I thought to myself, *Oh, my gosh, I'm not letting you get away with this. We need that grade for drainage.* "Here's the plan, right here on the paper; this is what we want," I said as I held up the paper again. He looked at it and then at the guys who were slouched against the earthmover under the trees. I realized then I would have to over-see this crew of young, bare chested men in jeans, who would be driving the white bobcat, raking the gravel bed, and

pouring the black-top. If I didn't, they might run our plan flatly into the dirt without its fussy, to them, grade.

"OK," the boss said, surprising me by suddenly giving in. "Let's go to work," he yelled at the men.

For the rest of the morning, I, the melanoma survivor, stood in scanty shade on a fiercely sunny day, observing how they leveled and rounded the soil to make the drive because I didn't want any fooling around with the plan. I was improperly dressed in white shorts and a blue, short-sleeved tee, no hat, and no sunblock, but I didn't want to leave until they made that grade. Given the way they worked half-naked, putting on sun screen might look like *wimpy-ness*, instead of self-preservation. I also felt that I needed to look neat so they would think I meant business. To guys who work in the sun all the time, my normal frumpy get-up with buttoned collar, long-sleeved shirt, long pants, wide-brimmed straw hat, and sun glasses might look a little too dowdy to be taken seriously—even by myself—and I needed as much self-assurance as I could get for supervising this intimidating crew of Big Boys.

It turned out I also had to give them directions for the size and placement of the parking we wanted poured by the side door where Stan's clients would come into his office. I couldn't find the actual number of feet or yards Stan had planned, so I walked off the space for the two cars I guessed might be parked there at the same time.

"Is this OK with you, little lady?" the boss asked when the groundwork was done. Ignoring his condescension, I took a hard look, walking it off again and guessing because I had nothing but a vague idea about how much space two parked cars needed. Then I gave him the thumbs up, stepped aside, and hoped.

From time to time, the boss used a tool to measure the grade of the gravel bed. He showed me the gauge when it matched the plan, saying, "How does that look?" I nodded approval and went inside to watch from the dining room window while they poured the black-top and finished the job.

About then Stan returned and hustled inside to hear how things had gone. When I finished chronicling my martyrdom under the fiendish sun, he glanced out at the man in the khaki shirt and laughed a little. "This must be the guy assigned to build it, not the boss I talked to about the plan."

I often feel a subtle satisfaction when I look at the black-topped drive, like I am today. That experience has turned out to be good prep for being in charge of the men who work on the acreage since Stan died.

• • •

Drive Away

*On the shining black-topped drive, shadows of leaves
fidget in its mirror.
It jigs and zig-zags with their image,
running to the road.
The drive is melting!*

• • •

This birthday afternoon I continue to sit in the shade on the deck, looking down at the darkly mirrored, jumpy black-top while former birthday memories flip through my head.

An image of Stan and me taken at my big party two years ago comes to mind. We are facing the camera, he in shorts and me in festive long skirt, wearing sandals and smiles, our arms around each other, standing beside the red bike he gave me. In the background out of the photo, I remember our friend belting out the lyrics to *Jambalaya* as the crowd clapped and sang along with his guitar. But that party was more than a celebration of *just* my birthday; the red bicycle was something more than merely a gift for fun. Stan and I were announcing two years ago that we were on our way to new places and a new way of life. The acreage was to be our bicycle built for two.

This afternoon in my gray cargo shorts, I drink iced tea on the deck above the restless surface of the drive and watch the brownish dust slowly settle out on the road while taking in its powdery smell of vague disturbance. Today is a different September.

As I squint into the late afternoon sun toward the small field of tall, russet grasses below, I see that bunches of milkweeds are ripening. Very soon, pods will form; they will split open, releasing tiny brown seeds in downy tufts that will soften the air with silk. I admire the Monarch butterflies that fly as silently and intent as tigers through the sour milkweed stalks. Although many that are beginning their homeward trail won't make it, some strong ones will arrive thin and tattered in the far distant mountains of Mexico.

Looking down at the blue lined white pages in my diary, lying open for reminiscences and dreams, I write: *Around my place on this birthday, a fateful attraction forms a magnetic pull. Chewers of bitter milk stalks have opened wings to fly home. I dream of driving pell-mell over a trackless cliff to land upon a highway going I-don't-know-where. What is Bruce's Cheshire cat grin in that dream all about?*

Chapter 8

Rising above the big hill this early evening is a new moon, a narrow gleam growing in its own wraithy womb like something coming to life deeply within itself. It's time for the man who rents my pasture to turn in my drive with the two little Chihuahuas barking their heads off out the window of his spotless white pick-up. When he comes, the red mare nickers to her daughter and trots to the iron pasture gate for supper. I, too, close the diary on my table and head to the white barn to chew the fat, another habit of Stan's I've taken on. The gray and the orange barn cats enjoy the supper party, too, but sit at the doorway to the barn or curl up behind the barrels in which Sol protects their feed and the horse feed from the coons. As soon as he opens the truck door, the brown and white dogs rush sniffing all over the barnyard, but they don't go near the reach of Mrs. Claws and tough Thomas.

Sol is tall and thin; he wears a red baseball cap and cowboy boots with jeans and a tan work shirt. Our low key, down to earth, suppertime talk hasn't changed even though a while back he told me that on certain days he will take a second round of chemo treatments for the thing growing near his heart. "My wife or the kids will come to take care of the horses the times when I can't," he said. I remember how he propped his foot on a bale and took off his cap to rub his forehead like someone working hard. Since then, I go to the barn partly to talk as before, but also to make sure the heedless filly doesn't knock him down when she shoves and pushes her nose into the manger.

Tonight, he reaches into an old wooden tack box and says with his back

to me, "The doc tells me my brain scan shows little white spots." For a long moment I stare without moving at his red baseball cap under which he is bald. He finds the comb and turns around to curry his chunky mare while she eats. In the silence, the crunch of her big teeth is louder than the scrape of the curry comb. Then he says, as he gently separates a snarl in her dark red tail, "Whoa there, Cherry. I hope I bought enough hay to last you the winter."

"It's beautiful hay, but horses aren't called hay-burners for nothing," I say, shifting toward the pile of deep green summer bales. Now for a time, the stable will be filled with the fragrance of clover, the soul of the barn.

The sun has fallen behind the range of blue hills as Sol puts away the comb and tests that the lid is securely fastened on the barrel of feed. As we walk to the truck, Thomas, the orange barn cat, tags behind, mewing softly. Breathing heavily as he slowly pulls himself into the driver's seat, Sol says, "Take it easy, you hear me."

"Sure; you, too, Sol, you, too."

The darkening bowl of the sky above seems huge, and our hearts below feel small. It's good to stand under it together as long as we can. On a clear, early fall night like this, the temperature quickly drops. As the red tail lights of the truck disappear, I stay by the gate of the corral, shivering a little, to rub Thomas's bony back and stare down the road.

• • •

Sometime later on, when a harvest moon lights the sky, Sol's wife comes to feed the horses and cats. I give her something I wrote for Sol. "I wish there was more I could do for you, but this is all I could think of," I tell her. "I miss those talks in the barn. I started coming out because the sun was going down and I was lonely, I guess. But after a while, I came to the barn for some other reason. I just liked leaning on a stall and listening to the curry comb, not saying much of anything." I laugh at myself as I think how silly it sounds. But I must say this anyway, more for myself than for her. "It's hard to explain. When I went back in the house, I felt comforted, like I'd had a good time with friends."

After she reads my penciled, yellow tablet page, she wipes tears from her perfectly made up face and dries her fingers with un-chipped red nails on her pressed jeans. It's strange dress in which to muck out horse stalls, but she has standards. Even the hard-headed filly behaves more politely around her. Smiling a little, she says, "Would you mind reading this at his funeral?"

"Sure. Things will be different around here without Sol."

A Light to Each Other's Feet

*I call myself his friend
as I watch him feed the sorrels.
In the barn we talk
about good hay, the right weed spray,
the barn cats we admire, those hard-working hunters
that keep down the mice.
And all around is the peace of clover
and the serene munching of grain.
We joke about his pick-up, his Chihuahuas,
the uppity filly—he calls her—not much,
just the way we like it
since the worst has come.
Our talk is the shelter that holds
this place good where we go on.*

*I am the fence
where my good friend can lean,
a place for his arms and a boot to rest
as long as he can.
As we head into the night,
a cool, rainy wind finds my cheek
outside the place where we go on.*

*I am his yard light,
as he was mine,
showing the path to the gate
so neither would stumble
doing the impossible,
going on in the dark.
He chains the latch
and calls to the dogs,
“Spike, Bo, in the cab.”
“Take it easy,” he says when he goes.
You, too, my friend, you, too.*

Chapter 9

This chilly day late in fall, I put on my purple windbreaker, faded jeans, and dirty athletic shoes, take the rake down from the hook on the garage wall, and drag myself out to the strip of lawn under the maples by the long drive. I hope this will be the last time I have to rake the leaves this fall.

This afternoon as I work, Joe's white van makes a surprise turn into my drive, and a sudden rush of guilt makes me want to run and hide, but it's too late. He's been here often to fix things when I called but has never come before when I haven't. "I thought you could use some help," he says, standing by his truck in his overalls and a small smile.

Pausing to lean on my rake, I try to smile and frown all at the same time. "Yes, but I don't have enough raking left to hire you, and anyway, it's a job I know how to do," I answer.

"I just came because I haven't seen you for a while, and because I figured you could use a hand," he says as he takes out a big rake from the back of his van.

"But, Joe, I have to pay you. You can't work merely out of the goodness of your heart," I protest again, waving one hand from side to side.

He hunches one shoulder and turns up a palm while holding his rake in the other. "Why not? It's Saturday and the only reason I came was to help you out. That doesn't have to cost anything." And he quickly starts raking beside me with such long, strong pulls of the tines that they leave furrows in the soil where the grass is thinner.

For a while, the only sounds are those of our rakes crunching through

the dry leaves, and the wind, sharp-toothed as the tines, rustling through the leaves remaining on the trees. It's easy to see how much faster the job is going with the two of us, so I let him go to it. I love the maples, so thickly covered with chartreuse leaves, but dread the hours of mulching and raking the fallen ones into the biodegradable bags. By the next day, the night wind has wiggled down more. This process goes on for what seems like a couple of endless months.

This afternoon the fallen leaves give off a spice that brings back my delight one autumn day as I watched my two little girls in red jackets jump into a golden heap. The sun brought the pile to a blaze while my daughters giggled and screamed. But leaves aren't as much fun anymore.

After a while, Joe pauses to lean on his rake. "I called you last week. Did you get my message? I hadn't heard from you for a while, so I called to see how you were doing."

I hesitate, looking at his earnest face, and stall for a moment by taking a tissue from my pocket to blow my nose in the cold air, trying to think of the kindest way to put it. "It was nice of you to call. But I've been really busy and didn't have any work to talk about, so I was waiting to call you back until something came up."

"Oh," he says, shooting a puzzled look across the space between us because we have contrasting reasons for talking to each other. Here my Goody Two Shoes has to stick her nose in to teach me a lesson. *If you were nicer, you would have let him know this.*

I defend myself, *But I don't want him to misunderstand my friendliness. I want to be just someone nice he works for once in a while.*

I put the used tissue in a pocket and stand with eyes slightly closed, not saying more about why I didn't call back, breathing in the verdant scent that intensifies with the days as time shakes the branches lighter and more leaves lie on the ground. I go back to raking without saying anything further as though work would be the only reason for him to call; I want him to think about what I replied. For some reason, I shy away from explaining outright how I see this difference between us.

Now we have a decent pile, and Joe opens a paper bag. I go on to a different subject. "As a matter of fact, now that you've come, I do have a job for you. I'd like to try a snow fence this winter to see if it would stop that big drift from blocking the parking by the side door." I point to where I want it. "You and Lou could put that in for me pretty soon before it snows, right?" This is an idea that has come to me just now as I consider getting ready for winter with its unpleasant job of snow removal, and try to keep our talk contained to a friendly, business-like level.

“Oh, and there’s something else you can help me with today when we finish since you’re here. You’ll be sorry you came,” I tease, tilting my head to look across at his back as he works on the leaves.

“What’s that?” he asks, brightening up a little as he turns around to finish bagging the pile.

“Help me load up the snow blower so you can drop it off at the garage that does small engine repairs. It’s on your way home,” I say, relieved that we’re back to talking about business.

We set the bag in the wheelbarrow where I’ll take it to the end of the drive for the city to pick up. Together we lug a long, thick wooden board leftover from an old pasture gate which I found and keep for this purpose, laying it like a ramp against the rear opening of the van. Then we bulldoze the jumbo-size snow blower up and in. “I can handle the mower but that thing is a beast. I could never do that alone. Thanks a lot.”

“You’re pretty smart with that ramp,” he says, nodding at my brainstorm, and tilting his cheek.

“Necessity is the mother—and all that, you know,” I answer. We begin collecting the leftover paper bags and the rake to stash in the garage, hopefully, until next spring.

Now I’d like to watch the end of a football game, but Joe has been such a friend in my need that I should invite him in for coffee and something to eat, if there is anything. *My motto is—if my eyes can’t see it, my mouth won’t eat it.* “Won’t you come in for some coffee?” I ask a bit reluctantly feeling rather mean.

“Thanks,” he says, “but I’ve got to get home now. We’re going over for our granddaughter’s birthday, so I’ve got to run.”

He puts his rake in the back of the van and then walks to where I stand across the driveway, trying to keep distance between us to expedite his goodbye so I can watch the game. “Sometimes you look like you could use a hug. How ‘bout if I give you one now?” Before I can stop him, he crosses over and puts his arms around me, pulling me firmly against his chest. *No, no, no!* After a moment of astonishment, I put my hands against the rough cloth of his barn coat to push him back a step.

“I’m not lonely, Joe,” I maintain, keeping my eyes down at his button level from embarrassment. When I look up at him, he raises an eyebrow in such disbelief, I have to smile at my own nonsense. “But I guess a hug once in a while is OK between friends.” *No, it’s not,* is what I meant to say, but I’m so flustered that my thoughts are firm as warm ice cream. Then he surrounds me with another hug from which I quickly bounce back as politely as I can. My acquiescence doesn’t really mean anything; it’s just my Iowa niceness.

What does a hug mean to him?

“OK; we’ll be out soon with that snow fence,” he says as he walks to his van and drives away. I shake my head as I watch the van go down the black-top. I have this picture of Joe and me trying to make a pile of leaves from opposite directions during a crosswind. Shaking my head over what is something of a problem, I quickly turn to head into the house. Thanks to Joe, I haven’t missed the entire game.

Chapter 10

I reach into a wet, brown paper bag to pull out a newborn, orange striped kitten. Its eyes are closed, its fuzzy face is damp, and it pants with the effort to breathe. I roll down the old-fashioned car window to let out the moist air from the bag that is fogging the windshield white and preventing me from seeing what is in front of the glass. I place the kitten on a coral blanket lying on the car seat where it lies gasping for breath with heaving sides.

I awaken clutching at my chest, struggling under the comforter to get air. The dream seems so real but the sky outside my window is black. I hear sleety rain scraping against the pane and the running of the furnace. Another long winter will soon begin, the second one since Stan died.

The heated air smells stale. I throw off the comforter to lie under only the sheet. Early morning in the dark alone is when thoughts of Stan and our old days creep in on little field mouse feet, and are almost as unwanted because they keep me awake, fending off the saddest ones. I cast around for a happy moment to think about instead—like the field of lights that first summer. Something in the rim of pale light at the horizon was pulling me toward it, I'm almost sure. Something in the starry light, reflected in the pale grass, knew and called my name. *I hear; I'm here.*

Slipping into my white, terry cloth robe, I sit back on my bed with my diary to record the dream of the stifled kitten and a further thought.

I want to breathe fresh air. If I could breathe, I could get to the horizon where the light would show what was coming that I can't see clearly yet.

Chapter 11

On All Saints Sunday, the acolytes in white, swinging golden censers of smoky sandalwood, lead the gold and white robed priest through the nave, followed by the choir in green. Although feeling punchy this morning because I was up late, here I am, singing as usual in the procession. As light from the candles around the white draped altar glows on faces in the congregation turning toward the chancel as we pass, I catch a sudden glimpse of a shining face that looks like my husband's among the throng. Gasping, I inhale the incense and feel infused with the dizzy sense that I am losing all control as I take my place with the choir before the altar. This feeling persists as the liturgy of worship continues, to which I pay little attention while scanning the faces of the congregation looking for his.

On this gray November day, dim light enters the sanctuary through the green, gold, and brown art nouveau stained glass. In candlelight the mass of people moving toward the bread and wine walk in shadows. Some of them move their lips in either prayer or song while others contemplate the bread and wine commemorating a holy life of selflessness. My heart pounds as I seem to see my dead husband's silver hair and slightly stooped, shadowy form pass among the slowly advancing column of worshipers. The stone floor buckles and I lurch, grasping the back of a pew to keep from falling. Out of the darkness around this dimly lit host, it comes to me that Stan and I sing together of light that descends from a place of endless day, the Very Light.

The flames of the tall, white, altar tapers smoke and waver in slight drafts made by the press of bodies before them in the aisle. Their waxy smell pervades the pews beside the altar in the front where I sit. High above us, the

lilies, grapes, and wheat within the rose window glow in white, purple, and tan colored glass among its petal-like tracery. Under its brilliance, Stan and I sing of the One at whose feet the seraphs and cherubim hide their faces and cry in never ending praise.

I look for that big grin I recall so well, but Stan is out of sight within the vanguard of worshipers moving to the white draped altar where the sacrament is waiting. Before they exit down the chancel steps following the holy meal, I want to find and wrap my arms around him and be held once more as I remember. Turning my head this way and that, I long to reach out for him, but he remains somewhere among the host of heaven, out of sight among the double line of communicants whose own hands desire the body and blood of Christ. The words of the hymn choke in my throat as the aftertastes of wine and wheat melt on my tongue. I lose my way among the many verses of the great hymn and cannot follow the words through the tears that hide them.

Later, while sitting before my fire, trying to get hold of what happened this Sunday, I read the famous study of spiritual experience by William James, and am startled by an idea that comes into my head from his anecdotes. It could be that the clamor of waking life closes a door which, below the threshold of conscious perception, might remain open, sometimes allowing a view into the beyond. It would be like coming around a curve in the stairs and suddenly seeing a landscape open up through a window. This All Saints Sunday, the second since Stan passed on, incense, candlelight, and passages of poetry in the hymn we sang may have sensitized and overwhelmed my tired, normal rationality. James says that through the door of these experiences, we might become aware of an otherworldly life, continuous with our own, that is like something going on the same as here.

As I sit on the loveseat looking into the warm, orange coals and think about the poetry of the music, the title of the great hymn of transubstantiation that we sang, *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*, freights a memory of a story Stan once told me. His first grade class stood crowded together in front of their schoolroom of wooden desks to rehearse a song for their mothers. He sang with all his strength because he loved to sing, something he'd never learned to do before starting to school in the days of the Great Depression. Then his teacher instructed the six year olds, "Everyone sing loudly for your mothers this afternoon except you, Stan. Don't you sing."

This day, perhaps by giving over to the play of poetry, music, and incense, I heard Stan, my dear love who cannot carry a tune, sing passionately in eternity among the choir of saints.

• • •

Sparrow Going On

*From my window perch, I see a sparrow
surge from its cedar roost,
rocketing overhead.
Its heart thumps,
air swooshes through honeycombed pipes of bone,
and one hundred seventy five muscles buffet the sky.*

*Arriving home from All Saints' Day,
where a space was left after reading his name
that was filled by the ring of a bell,
my friend asks, "Are you lonely here without him?"
I answer, "Sometimes, and sometimes not."*

*Alone, I ponder the peculiarity
of "not."
I know how we go on,
sometimes rising
feathery light,
sparrow strong.*

Chapter 12

One day Joe and Lou come to my house to carry out my old kitchen pocket range and insert a new, standard model. The store workers advised me it couldn't be done because the new one was nearly an inch wider than the original and would never fit into the pocket between the cupboards. But I was confident that I knew a way to make it fit. I took a chance and bought the range on sale anyway, which meant if it didn't fit, maybe they wouldn't give my money back.

In my mauve tinted kitchen with my hands clasped prayerfully together in front of my white shirt, I watch Joe measure the pocket opening from side to side, front to back, and compare that to the new range. He takes out a big, white hanky from the back pocket of his gray striped overalls, wipes his forehead as he considers a plan of attack, then says, "After I take out the step on the floor, I'll have to shave off the side of the cupboard wall. It'll work." Then he leans on the counter to kneel down to where he can see into my bottom cabinet. "Yeah, it's thick enough for me to plane its sides."

"I knew you could do it, Joe. I knew those other guys didn't know as much as you do." I feel proud of Joe for being so smart and proud of myself for knowing it. I knew I was taking a chance when I measured this range in the store, but it has turned out OK, thanks to Joe. I look up and down the aisle of my galley kitchen, thinking how nice the modern, white, smooth top range will look in it.

"Lou, you go on and get that old one to the landfill before it closes today. Glenda and I'll be able to push this one into position," Joe says as he pulls

himself up by using the counter.

Lou, dressed as carelessly as usual, says to me, “Ahhh, I’ve got some new jokes for you.”

“Got any quick, smooth-haired dog stories?” I say. “There’s time for one, I think.” Joe chuckles at us.

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s see. Oh—how do you tell a Chihuahua goodbye?”

Hasta la vista? But I say, “I don’t know,” so Lou can have the punch line.

“Adios!” Lou yells. “What do you get—”

“Lou! Let’s go! Adios!” Joe interrupts, shoos Lou out by waving his hands. Lou bats his arm defiantly back at Joe, and glances out my kitchen window as he turns to help Joe with the pocket range, and then stops. We see the filly sniffing around the pile of rocks that fills the cave-in under the fence in the corner of the pasture by the drive.

“Why is she doing that?” he asks, as he stalls a bit more.

“I don’t know, but my theory is she planned to use that hole to squeeze under the fence and run away. She’s checking it out.”

Lou keeps looking out at April as he puts on his denim jacket. “Huh,” he snorts, rubbing his chin which, as usual, needs a shave. “I drive a pick-up like the one her owner drives. Why doesn’t she come over to the fence when I drive in?”

“It’s because she doesn’t like them green and beat up like yours. If you get a new one, she might make a date,” I tease.

Lou opens the kitchen door and says, “Horses are color blind. She doesn’t know green from white, you know.” He stops to take one more look at April before helping Joe lift the range into his truck. She ignores him to continue sniffing around the rocks.

When Joe returns, I sit down on a white step stool in my narrow galley kitchen to watch him work. Joe and Lou have recently been out here to put in the orange snow fence that should cut down on snow removal. They also brought out the load of rocks that fills the wash-out in the powdery loess soil. I was afraid that when the filly romped around, she might step into the hole and get hurt. And I’ve needed Joe to do a couple of other things, as always.

Joe gets his tool box and lays a planer, a metal measuring tape, a small pad of paper, and a pencil neatly in reach on the gray Formica counter. He has a deft, nearly surgical, way of using tools that makes any work he does look artistic. First, he lifts out the step on which the pocket range sat. To make the space fit the new range, he begins to plane the cupboards on each side of the pocket opening. He never hurries, but every move with his hands is like a phrase played on a keyboard. It begins, builds, and dies away. Then the next phrase shapes the wood, back and forth, precisely. Now he lays down

the plane and picks up the tape to check his measurement, like an interlude in a classical movement. Lightly, lightly, he again slides the plane across the wood of the cabinet, carefully taking feathery, staccato chips. They make a small pile of pale curls on the wood of the kitchen floor.

“OK. Let’s give it a try.” We push the new white range toward the gap that Joe has enlarged. The range doesn’t fit.

Oh, boy.

“I see. It needs just a little more to come off right here.” We push the range aside, and he runs the plane in a glissando over the constricting bulge. We turn to the range again, and this time it fits in tightly, just what we want. We do a high five.

Afterward Joe folds his arms and leans back against the light-colored cupboard to watch me fiddle with the knobs. I play around with the first new range I’ve bought because I used to live in clergy housing which provided shelter and all the basic appliances. If I were to sell this place someday, that out of date pocket range would have been a visual detriment standing beside my pretty cupboards on the oak floor that Stan and I had laid.

After a bit, Joe begins to gather up his tools and carry them in his tool box to the kitchen door. I continue to fool with the range, keeping my back to him, hoping to forestall the hugs he has begun leaving with since the day we were raking leaves. After I slipped up on that first one, I haven’t made myself tell him to stop. I barely let him touch me before ducking away, but he doesn’t get the hint.

He still hasn’t taken down his cap and brown jacket from the antique hall tree by the door. I pick up the instruction booklet for the range and flip through the pages as though absorbed with the self-cleaning instructions. I’m not used to hugging a man who isn’t family or someone I have known really well for a long time. I do not want his hugs to stretch into something more personal than I feel. The hugs are probably only because Joe is a caring man who feels a little sorry for me. I shouldn’t take them to mean more, but they’re confusing and make me uncomfortable. Even after nearly two years, I still feel more married than single.

We’re alone in the house with only the sigh of the pine tree that I hear and can see outside the window as witness. For the first time I consider that when my dear old cat died, I should have replaced him with a dog instead of another kitty. My daughter, who lives alone, got a dog, “big enough to take down a man,” she says.

Now Joe’s heavy work boots thump through the kitchen as he returns to lean against the counter once more. I continue to face the range, giving him my back, hoping he’ll simply say goodbye and go. As I open the oven

door to look inside at the “fascinating” racks, I ask, “What do you think? Are horses color blind?”

Joe says, “I’ve never given it a thought. Lou knows about Chihuahuas. Maybe horses, too.” I stand up from peering in the oven, still turned away from him. Then softly he says, “I might like to do more than hug good-bye, but don’t worry. I had prostate surgery and more is impossible even if I wanted. All ‘more’ would be is a wish.” His twangy voice breaks slightly on *wish*.

This is so embarrassing; I don’t know what to say. My feet are rooted in the kitchen corridor as I continue to face away from him. I duck my head and twist my wedding ring, finally mumbling, “But I don’t want anything more, Joe,” and then I pause because I must finally pinch it out, “not even the hugs.” There—I’ve blurted out the bare truth even if I am too flustered to look him in the eye. Keeping my back to him, stiff and straight, I grip the edge of the range, and squeeze my eyes closed, concentrating on the command, *Go, just go*. After a moment, I again hear the sound of his work boots followed by the squeaky hinge of the kitchen door. Faint fingers of cold cross my shoulders in a wave. From the sounds I can tell he pauses in the opening probably to look back at me as he zips his jacket, but I sense if I stay absolutely still, he will get what I said. I am going to leave it as it stands, not adding or subtracting, not placing it in a softer light. I’ve said what I need to say; it’s best to leave it at that even though my frozen brain tells me this isn’t one of my kindest moments.

“OK. I’ll see you again one of these days.” Unmoving, I hear the door shut on the house, and then the door opens and shuts on the van; soon the sound of the engine dies away.

I remain standing by the range looking at the dials, wondering if I will see him again or if he really meant goodbye. I should be relieved. Then I turn to stare out my kitchen window at a small piece of the parking next to the orange snow fence. The furnace kicks on though it has been more energy efficient since I had Joe replace the drafty window on the lower floor.

I begin to pace from the kitchen to the other end of the long house where the living room window faces the horizon of snowy hills. Breathing quickly, I see myself galloping toward them as fast as I can, down the drive, by the wash-out in the corner of the pasture. Working with Joe is necessary and agreeable because he does such good work and always gives me priority when I call, but his hugs, whatever they imply, are also upsetting. Handling him is complex and today, while I’m relieved to get the hugging over with, this may have been a big mistake. We don’t understand each other, and now his feelings are hurt; it’s a relief to have things out in the open but I should

have done it without hurting him, if I could have. I should have stopped the hugs after that first time, but I didn't know what to expect.

I take out a broom to begin sweeping up the wood shavings in front of my new range. I cannot stop sweeping, through the kitchen into the dining room, and even into a place I usually let go—the hard-to-reach corner where the electric cords curl and twist behind the computer desk.

Chapter 13

Today I won't put it off any longer even though the summer heat is sticky. I sit down on a green wooden footstool to begin scraping the long, white board fence in preparation for painting as I promised myself a couple of years ago. I scrape a board as far as I can reach, pick up my stool, move another arm length further, sit down, and do it again. Just call me Scuttlebutt. The peeling fence in the front of my place runs along the side of the field that separates the pasture grass from the strip of lawn with the silver-green maples beside the driveway. If it doesn't look good, the rest of the place can't look good—like a blond with dark roots lining her part.

The two red horses meander over curiously to see if I have something for them to eat in the pail of paint. I give Cherry a pat on the nose and then try to shove her out of my way. She shakes her head, pushing back, but then turns off to begin grazing on the brome. When I sit on the stool again, April sniffs at my back. I do not trust her to not try a taste of my shirt and get some of my skin. She sniffs at the back of my straw hat brim and, when I hear the click of her mouth opening, I jump up and yank off my hat to shoo her away. She snorts and takes off a short distance before stopping to look back. I hope I've discouraged her from returning. As long as they leave me alone, I rather like having the pretty horses around. Sitting down again, I hear them behind my back pulling up grass and stamping a hoof to keep away the flies. A slight smell of horse joins that of grass and hot, painted wood.

Sweat pools under my hat brim and trickles into my eyes. It reminds me of that hot day when I whacked the dead lilacs from the hill. This memory

helps keep me going even though today I am more or less in my right mind. To hold on to their sanity, I've read that people imprisoned in primitive jails find ways to exercise their brains. Just for something to think about, I could try to make up an epitaph about cause of death by painting a fence, though death would be taking the easy way out. *Scuttlebutting* along on the stool, I try various combinations of lines and finally come up with:

*Do not bare your head
as in the sun you tread.
If you do, get ready to
be broiled charcoal red.*

Hmmm, what about using the feeling of being bored. How could that go?

*It was thought I was dead
'til I loudly snored,
and then t'was found
I was only bored.*

Well . . . that's enough of fitness for the brain.

The old white paint on the surface of the boards is quite flaky, and I have to scrape down to the good wood where the fresh paint can stick. Ugh, it's dull repetition. Why is so much useful work so boring? The saints say that God is actually found in the ordinary, mundane work of the day. I know this monotonous scraping will ultimately transform these boards, if only it could do the same to my wooden life.

I take a small break to scratch a mosquito bite on my back with the scraper, reflecting on how much I've improved in mental health to where I can keep at painting the fence. I wasn't able to do this time-consuming, repetitive work at first after Stan died, nor even last summer when I began to recover. Then it wasn't grief as much as loneliness that held me back. The acreage was supposed to be a team project. What keeps me going today is probably stubbornness, and because I do it for Stan.

I examine the row of countless fence posts plodding to the road so far away. It makes me think of when I was a kid on the farm in June and went to the field for the summer ritual known as walking the beans. Sturdy green bean plants about as high as my knees seemed to stretch as far as I could see, row after numberless row, down each of which my sister and I would have to trudge to pull out the noxious weeds like cockleburs and volunteer corn. The only way to get it weeded was to put one foot in front of the other. My

dad used to tease my sister and me that, if we had found and pulled the last weed first, we would have been done a lot sooner. I wish he was here today to make me smile.

For some time when I'm not working on my part-time job, I am home, scraping the pasture fence, first one side and then the other, from the tack shed where the fence starts, to the ditch along the road where it ends. Three boards run between each fence post, and it all has to be entirely scraped on both sides. At certain moments as I sit on the hard wooden stool, I feel like kicking it over and cantering off with a swish of my rear end. Recently it seems that working on my prairie and fixing up the place no longer sustain me the way they once did though I'm not giving up. If I listed all the repairs and improvements I've had done to my fixer-upper acreage, from removing a tree that crashed on the drive to re-shingling the middle section of the roof on the house after a hailstorm, it might take more than all the blue lines on a page of my notebook-like diary.

As I scrape the flaky paint, I consider one more project to complete after the fence, and then I will have run the gauntlet of challenges on this acreage for now. For that project, I need to contact Joe. I haven't seen him for several months since he shaved the cupboards so I could replace my pocket range last winter. When I called to ask him to take down the snow fence in the spring, he simply said he would send Lou to do it. It happened that Lou came on one of the days when I was at my part-time job, so I didn't have to yelp at another Chihuahua "tail"!

The next rainy day when I can't work outdoors, I call Joe, unsure of what he'll say about taking on any new project for me, but this is my last fixer-upper problem; I don't want to break-in someone new, so to speak, and this job will be the most complicated of all. I don't dare risk incompetency. Over the phone, I can hear that he sucks in his lips and lets out the air. "Yeah—I looked at that sag in your garage a little when we repaired the roof on your house, and knew you should fix it one day. It could stay like that almost forever, or it could suddenly break down. It's hard to say."

"I want to get it repaired now. Can you come and figure out what to do?" So we make an appointment. He doesn't refer to the last time he was here and neither do I. I never intended to be the soul mate he misses in this current marriage after the death of his first wife. I merely want us to go on in a business-like fashion, hoping he is finally reconciled to how the hugs got in the way of our working friendship.

Joe comes one day still looking like Santa without a beard in bib overalls. He spends quite a long time walking in and out of the attached garage, along the side, front to back. For a while I trot along behind him to listen

as he rattles on about the various beams and what kind of load they carry. He throws out several ideas about what might shore up the roof.

Finally I stop in the drive, letting the technical description fly in and out of my ears, trying to picture what he says about the short-cuts taken by the chintzy builder, and thinking how naïve Stan and I were. Our realtor pointed out the sag, but neither of us actually considered it much. This problem falls under the usual explanation for disasters on the acreage. Many repairs were necessary through some previous deficit in workmanship to which we were blinded by the deep down potential beauty of this place. The beauty is what Stan and I dreamed we'd bring out by the application of—well, whatever it took, mostly sweat, his and mine.

I had asked Stan's brother, previously, for his advice about fixing the garage. It had helped me see better what a sagging roof could mean, but I had continued to think of the problem as more of an aesthetic detriment—like having a chicken wattle neck or flying squirrel arm flab, neither of which would kill you. When Joe stops in front of me with his final assessment of our folly, I stare at this slump the same way I'd look at a new mole on my leg. "My gosh! You mean it really could turn out that bad?"

Joe says, looking me in the eyes, "Do you want to build a new garage?"

"Are you kidding? I just want you to take care of this as well as you can, and I know it will be OK," I answer with a frown.

"I don't think it's possible to take out the entire sag, but I think there's a way I can make it safe, if that's OK with you," Joe answers me with his eyes raised to the bow in the roof and his workmen's boots planted solidly apart on the ground. He tells me how he will fix it, ending with the caveat, "I know this will hold up, but a slight sag will always be there. It's too late to completely take it out." This makes me realize that, if I decide to sell some day, I will probably get questions about the sag. I pay attention to how he plans to tackle it so, if necessary, I can explain to prospective buyers what has been done.

One day soon after, Joe and Lou come in Joe's white van to begin. Slapping at mosquitos while scraping and painting the white fence, I am busy on my project and they are honed in on the garage. I can't imagine what Joe has told Lou, but he doesn't try any more Chihuahua jokes.

They drive off to lunch while I go into my air conditioned kitchen. Later in the afternoon, softly clicking on the keyboard, I work in my "cubicle", you could say. In the garage, hammers pound, the electric saw metallicly whines unpleasantly, and the mumble of their voices, sometimes their laughter, can be heard over here from time to time. I want to go out to kid around, but we are behaving in a business-like manner now so I stay away, minding my

own work. I miss the idle talk and even the goofy dog stories, but do not miss the feeling that I have to give some sort of tip when they leave, which is the way the hugs felt.

Soon one afternoon as I sit painting on the green stool, Joe tucks his hands into the pockets on his overalls and comes across the drive a little stiffly. He says that he has finished loading up the ladders, hammers, and other equipment, and is ready to leave as the job is done. We have spoken only as much as necessary, but now he looks at my painting. "You have done a lot of work on that fence." A trickle of pride runs through me because someone who knows about this kind of work has recognized my effort.

I say, "Thanks," affecting a nothing-to-it tone as I look up at him from under the brim of my straw hat. Then I stand to look around at the sparkling white, sturdy buildings on my neatly mown acreage, making a slight sweep with my hands. "You know all about work like this, Joe. You've put in a lot of hours yourself on my place, and I thank you again for all that you've done so well and for so long."

"I did what I could," Joe says, giving a little shake of his head. "You needed help. I could see how much there was to do the first time I came out here to work on your house. When you finish painting, things around here will look really good." He turns to gaze down the long row of boards toward the road.

"I'm proud of what I've done. You were a key part of making that possible." I nod my head as I look over at my sturdy house attached to what I hope is a solid garage. A mosquito bites through the back of my cotton shirt and I awkwardly slap at the nape of my neck under the collar.

"Well, I'll send you my bill," he says in a tone that denies his help was anything more than business. I smile to let him know I see through this as I rub the skin over the bite. He jerks his head toward the garage. "Come over here and I'll show you how it worked out."

I lay down my brush, glad to get out of the mosquitos in the grass, and walk across the drive to the open door of the garage. A couple of sparrows, wanting to roost now that it's quiet inside, fly out with a zip of their wings. The smell of new lumber freshens the air. To my untrained eyes, the beams overhead are nothing but diagonals of lines and angles. Honestly, I elected to take home ec instead of high school geometry because I preferred learning to construct with fabric and wearing the thing that I made. A building's framework was something to take for granted until this moment when I'm all ears. With hand gestures to demonstrate, Joe takes me through the steps in which he added a large metal beam and smaller wooden ones in strategic spots to lift and strengthen the supports. As the strong lines become visible

through Joe's explanation, for the first time, geometry is beautiful. "If it falls down, I'll give back your money," he jokes. Then he is at the door of his van, ready to go.

A slight breeze has come up. Pushing back my hat so it can cool my forehead, I look up into his straight-forward blue gaze behind the clear plastic frames. Somehow I feel it was my fault we never quite found a mutual level of friendship, but it's too late now. In words that mean good-bye, I say, "This is all that needs to be fixed out here, Joe, but if something else does come up, you know I'll call. It seems like something is always breaking—a tree, a window, a fence post, something... When it does, I'll call." I remember the talk we had beside the new range—another kind of break. Maybe he thinks of it, too. His eyes darken, but then Joe nods his head, quickly steps into his van, and drives away. He doesn't look back but the sound of the motor seems to hang on the humid air even after his white van disappears around the bend in the gravel road.

I look up at the low, gray sky, smell rain in the air, and decide to do no more painting today. Turning to the fence for my pail, I see the filly putting her nose down to it. "April, you get back from that—get, get, get!" I shout, as I wave my arms and run toward the fence to keep her from tipping over the bucket in her single-minded search for food. She dodges, kicking up her heels as she gallops away with tail high. Drops of rain splatter on my hat brim making a ticking sound. I hurry through the black iron pasture gate, grab the pail and walk quickly back into the shelter of the garage.

The next day the air is bright and clear; it feels like the end of final week, as I remember. Something big is almost behind me, and something better is about to start. I work a while to finish painting in the heat and bugs, but, later today, the entire fence has been scraped and is now painted with two good coats of white paint. I walk beside it, taking in its total whiteness, pristine and bright. Though it's nothing but a stretch of ordinary, pock-marked, painted boards, it's a finale that comes like a deep drink to end a thirsty afternoon. My breath expands and lifts my chest. I have kept my vow even though it has taken the patience of three summers.

For a time I stand at the end of the black-topped drive where it meets the gravel road, looking around my acreage, taking off my hat to let the breeze dry the sweat on my forehead, feasting on this simple, yet extraordinary, moment. The barn, tack shed, and board fence gleam brightly white against the green grass where the red horses graze. *My something from nothing* acreage looks like a painting of a horse farm by primitive artist, Grandma Moses. The river of stone terraces curves down the hill beside my narrow, moss green house with attached garage that has straighter, though still not perfect,

posture. The low, narrow ranch house angles like an arm from the shoulder of the landscaped rise of bleeding hearts, hostas, green bushes, and slender trees. Above the rise, tall, purplish bluestem and shorter, reddish bunchgrass grow ever more thickly on the big hill that looms over all, reaching as high as it can, up to the blue sky dolloped with white clouds. *In the third summer of my single life, I have done it.*

But much as I want to hang on to this sky high feeling of accomplishment, deep inside a question is quarried and excavated to the surface, *Now what?*

Chapter 14

I stand before a huge, Southern-style, red brick mansion with white pillars and white, double front doors. It looms above, making me feel small. On the stone portico, I bundle silver trombones and trumpets together with wire to hang over one of the doors. Above the other, a traditional wreath of evergreen already hangs. Although I worry that the unwieldy collection of instruments won't hold together on the hook over the door, I'm happy with this odd arrangement around which I clumsily wind and twist the wire. As I look at the musical instruments jumbled into a wreath-like circle, I feel uplifted because they make the door look as though it will open on a fanfare joyously trumpeting an announcement.

Awakening, I snap on the lamp and grab my thick, bluish diary to record this dream among other thoughts and notes on my life. I dash it down before it floats away and then replace my diary and yellow pencil on Grandma's antique red oak dresser. I sleep on what was Stan's side now with the window open tonight so as to breathe in the grass-scented air. Felicia, my new-ish black kitty, has taken the side that once was mine. She raises her head, opening her golden eyes to momentarily look at me, and then lays her nose back down on her black tail. Smiling, I reach over to stroke her soft back and sides. She makes a contented chirp and begins to purr in what is a strong, loud hum for such a small cat. In the grass below the window, the punctuation of squeaking crickets adds syncopation to her cozy murmur.

As I look around my small, lamp-lit bedroom, I see that the sliding closet door is half open. I have spread into both sides now, though a brown wool sweater of Stan's from Scotland hangs in his old side in the very back out of

sight. I keep it because his one chance to do genealogical research on location in the British Isles where his forebears lived meant so much to him that I cannot seem to let the sweater go. I get out of bed and walk bare-footed across the warm, carpeted floor into my dining room, still unable to sleep from the puzzling dream about an imminent announcement.

Without turning on the light, I shift the blind to peek out the dark window at the white fence gleaming in the pale light. Its ghostly white parade along the driveway toward the road draws me with it, as usual, like a contemplative icon. As my eyes rest on post after post, I count my blessings. First, the major problems of the barn, garage, and house are now repaired.

Second, I work part-time at the most satisfactory job I've had since I earned a Master of Public Administration years ago. I am well paid to help senior citizens with whatever kind of social, physical, or, sometimes, financial arrangement they would like for a good quality of life. This chance to give to others has been a solace since Stan's death.

Third, as part of a writing group, church choir, and a chorale, I have many friends, though there is no one I can call a best buddy, female or male. Though I feel I'm attractive enough, no one has asked me out. I stopped wearing my wedding ring some time ago but I must still give off married vibes, undetectable to me, but strong enough to warn away the guys. This shouldn't surprise me since I was married for two-thirds of my life; acting married is probably as deeply ingrained in my behavior as wearing lipstick is to my appearance. I rarely go anywhere without having my "face" on now that I'm over sixty. But so far, it hasn't given me a guy asking for a date.

My sometime girlfriends are divided mostly between other widows and divorcees, and, to give them due credit, most of their plates were full and running over before I came along. But twice, when I made an overture to someone toward going out more frequently, I was told that she had too little time for the family and projects she already loved. Two good women friends from my writing group are married, which means that I usually only do things in the day with them because evenings are reserved for couple activities.

Recently after whining to one of my kids about being lonely, I took her suggestion to list in my diary the names of the single women I knew whom I might ask out and what we might do. Now, whenever I talk with this daughter, she monitors how I am working on this list, and whether I have any new plans for making a friend. I have never called the woman who had gone to Las Vegas and offered the flick and martini date. *She's too advanced in how to be single for me to keep up with. I haven't even taken baby steps yet while she dances like a Rockette.*

This daughter who monitors my social life is the same one who found

Felicia and got us together. After Tabba died, I'd been sighing over how lonely I was without him and how quiet the house had become. Finally, losing patience with my apathy, she said, "Mom, get another cat; do something to make noise and fill up the house." Then soon after, she discovered Felicia, the most perfect little buddy I've ever had—well, except for Stan. But Felicia doesn't go out or talk about movies. I sigh and drum my fingers on the window sill, alone in the dark room, looking out at the white fence posts stepping away.

Soon my birthday will mark the passage of another year. My life might be moving toward a road in the dark like the fence posts that appear to be marching toward the gravel road, but for now it's unchanged, like the summery maples that stand along the drive. As I straighten the blind and return to my lamp-lit bedroom, my chest contracts with a sense that I'm being short-changed, like when getting a too quick ride on the Ferris Wheel because a thunderstorm is near; I feel I am missing out on something that I expected to get. By now Felicia has gone back to sleep, and the house is a little chilly so I slide the window closed. Shortly those cool nights will begin when the furnace will have to be started.

My diary lies open on the dresser, and I sit cross-legged on the bed to re-read the story of the dream. Where does this feeling come from about an announcement? Using the dresser for a desk, wrapping an arm around my emptiness, I write a note to Stan, which once in a while is still a comfort in my never ending hungering to have him back.

Dear Sweetie,

Everything here is wrong, you know. My heart longs for this summer vacation to end so we can be together again, for the end of the commute on the train that brings me home to you, for the weekend when you'll come from your country church to our home in the city where I stay to work. My heart won't forget how we would meet again as though you'd never been away, and we had never been apart.

I close my diary, hold it on my heart momentarily, and then lay it gently down. Clicking off the lamp and pulling up the blanket, I turn on my stomach where sleep comes best. My last thought is that I am healthy, strong, and full of energy. *Now what?*

• • •

Email excerpt sent to me from talkmatch.com: "I do freelance writing and nature photography. I live south of Omaha on an acreage. I like to travel

on my motorcycle and just returned from a gig. What about you?”

This man I found through an on-line dating service writes that his pre-teen daughter attends the church where I sing in the choir, and he is coming to visit her. He doesn't tell me what he looks like. I think of bikers I've noticed at truck stops. They seem to run to salt and pepper beards, beefy bodies, greasy, long hair, and toothy grins below sun glasses. From my driver's seat, they appear to have an affinity for traveling in packs, their long beards and hair flying in the wind. None of them has ever come close to looking like Marlon Brando, in jeans and leather jacket, riding on a motorcycle in the movie I saw as a kid. Nevertheless, I plunge ahead like a dumb lightning bug, doomed to answer the mating signal, emailing back: "The next time you come north, we should get together for coffee. How about it?"

That Sunday from the choir at the front of the large church where everyone is visible, I scrutinize any man who seems new. I don't know what I'm looking for. None of them seems to be with a pre-adolescent girl. There's no guy wearing a red bandanna like a sweat band in church.

I am so busy pouring over the congregation, I fail to catch the choir director's cut-off and hold the final high "ia" a beat too long. I do see the surprised frown she gives me as she sits down. But disappointingly, I leave church never having seen anyone I feel might be he.

Soon one day I get a reply from talkmatch.com: "You said let's meet for coffee. You really mean let's meet for that ring on your left hand. You're just like my ex."

Ouch.

• • •

A short time after, while mowing under the maples, my eyes fall on an insect casing stuck on a tree trunk. It reminds me of an empty suit of armor like those Stan and I saw in glass cases in English castles, and I think I know the bug to which it once belonged. Gladly killing the motor to let the mowing go, I run indoors to get a cardboard jewelry box. Carefully I lay the ponderous, tank-like structure on the cotton to take inside out of curiosity. From my old barrister's bookcase I take down my *Golden Nature Guide to Insects* book, which has been used so often the cover is missing. Its childlike explanation describes the absent owner as wingless, stiff, and scaly, burrowing underground. The colored drawing looks like a sci-fi monster that could live on juices sucked from graves instead of sap from tree roots. At a certain stage, the armored monsters climb out of the ground and up the trunk. Their chitinous case splits down the back, and a sleek, winged,

adult cicada emerges and flies into the tree top.

Gazing at the shell, now lying like a piece of archaic jewelry on the cotton, I ponder the fantastic journey through contradictory stages that is its life. What is it like to be the creature of wings and drumbeats that comes to life inside such rigid limitation? How strong the creative compulsion must be that necessitates leaving its dark and mucky, but well-fed, security to risk the open sky and hunger of the birds.

Fastening on this speculation, I move out to my shady deck to write, struggling over the words that will mesh inner and outer experience into revelation. It's for an assignment in the poetry class by mail I've enrolled in this fall. Overhead, a few cicadas begin their summer, late afternoon drone. I am focused on thoughts of a body that eats roots ploughing through dirt, the feeling from exchanging the rigid chitin of an old life for the papery wings that flying to an orchard takes, the wonder of a moment when a heart cracks open and is reborn. I imagine that a cicada metamorphosis must feel something like a resurrection.

Cicada Resurrection

*With fixed eyes poking
from wedge-shaped head below thoracic hump,
the brown husk is stuck in robotic crawl.
Four jointed sticks cart the body tank
led by crustacean pincers reaching out
to clutch nothing, lifting air.
It belongs underground not
six feet up a maple trunk.
From sucking roots, well fed and safe
in limits of boiler plate and common sense,
what called you to risk uncertain skies
and the terror of the birds?
Enlightened leaden nymph,
you split cause and effect,
shedding Always like a scarf.
Venerable root of flying singer,
you who crawled out to freight
helpless what is
into weightless what is to come,
cast your dizzy spell my way.*

*Let me follow as you fly,
taken upward in a cloud,
cracking old worlds like shells
until all are broken.*

*That is when I'll vanish in the change,
when my heart will be reborn,
when my eyes will see the orchard
where I'll sing until I die,
feasting on felicity.*

Chapter 15

One afternoon while working on an article at my computer in what has evolved into my office corner of the dining room, I see Joe's white van slowly come up the drive. Why is he out here? Reflexively, I duck below the window sill, crouching on the floor, checking with relief that my overhead light isn't on. The nervous beating of my heart sounds loud to my evasive mind. Believing that by staying low and quiet there's no way he can tell whether I'm here or not, I cross my fingers. When I'm inside my house, it feels safer to keep all doors locked and my windowless garage door closed because this is a secluded location. There's no reason why Joe has come without calling first, except on the chance that I'm raking leaves he can help with like once some time ago. The last we saw each other, I said I'd call if he was needed, and I haven't picked up the phone to do that.

There's the knock on the kitchen door. Huddling below the window directly overlooking where his van is parked, I worry about whether I should let him into my house since I'm alone. Many cartoon-like pictures jump through my brain featuring dark moments full of ropes and shiny blades like the one on his big electric saw, only my body is lying in place of the board. Once I might have opened the door to him, but things aren't so clear between us anymore. Once I invited him in for coffee, but that was before the day he finished working on my range and then stood in my kitchen waiting for me to ... what? I'm unsure as to what his feelings are toward me. It's silly to crouch below a window hiding out while a man I have worked with for over two years knocks on my door, but it seems for the best. I doubt he can see

me because the big window is too high up from ground level, but I shrink even further against the wall below the sill.

Leaves crunch as Joe walks toward this window and then stops. I imagine he is standing where he can look right over my head into the computer corner. My back prickles at the thought. The computer screen shows it is on. If he can see it, and suspects I'm hiding in here, will he yell at me in his high-pitched twang, or even be mad enough to break a window to get in and catch me? I know Joe well enough to believe this is unlikely, but showing up unexpectedly without my calling like I said feels almost controlling. *It seems like something close to stalking.*

After a few moments, while I hope he can't hear my heavy breathing through the wall between us, or see the toe of my sneaker beyond the narrow sill, the leaves crunch again as he walks away. The door of his van opens and shuts with a clack. The last thing I hear is the fading sound of the motor as he drives out. Although he has to be gone, after a bit, I carefully lift my head above the sill to take a quick look to be sure before standing up. What would I do if he had parked his van off the road, quickly run back, and I saw him looking up at me now? Tut-tutting to myself that hiding out seems to be my corollary for how to handle a problem relationship, still I don't want to go through the stress of being alone with him in the house. Surely there's a better answer than crouching under my own window sill, but what is it?

One part of my brain says being alone in here with him would be OK, while another part of it screams nooo! How many horror movies have I seen where I wanted to shout at the victim, "Don't be so nice and polite!" Something that feels this right can't be very wrong, I sigh in conclusion.

Fearing that Joe may be watching from a hidden place, I sidle up to my big windows to take a quick look in three directions. There is nothing but empty hills of grass swaying in the wind, scattered oaks, and groves of cottonwoods. Just before the bend in the road, a short lane leads to a gate into my neighbor's pasture, a narrow, overgrown drive I've never seen my neighbor use. A small electrical substation is between the lane and my house, but I know where the lane is. Although scrutinizing it carefully today, I cannot pick out a white van's outline beside the metal fence which encloses the white control building, circuit breakers, and capacitors.

Back at my computer now, it's impossible to write my article about the bovine logistics of feeding cattle on grass that my old friend is doing while the chaos of paranoia and confusion buzz in my brain. I decide to calm down by making coffee and simply sitting on my green sofa in the living room a short time to get my wits together.

I measure coffee and water into the percolator reflecting on how that

obscure lane has bothered me since Stan's death. Once in a while at dusk or dark, car lights show that someone has pulled into it. Sometimes another car joins them. They stay for a while, perhaps smoking something or making out, and then leave. Not once has anyone appeared to get out of their car.

The perking coffee smells rich and good as I try to breathe more slowly and deeply. Its smell and taste are two of my favorite things and will help me to relax. I lean against the counter waiting until the coffee is ready, continuing to reflect on that secret lane and my isolation.

There's not much more I can do to take safety precautions around my house. Recently, a policeman conducted a safety survey at my request. He was reassuring but I felt only slightly reassured. I had hoped he would come up with something for total security like Reagan's Star Wars Shield, but unlike that expensive fiction, be a safeguard that was truly adequate. He recommended the addition of a pole to brace my patio door when locked, and the installation of motion lights. Whenever they blink on, they scare me to death. So far I've never seen anything, not even a deer or a rabbit, while scanning the darkness into which they shine. A pine branch or other vegetative limb waving too vigorously within their range may have been enough to turn them on.

Now the coffee is ready. I pour a cup to take to the sofa to drink in order to calm down. Moving from my acreage out of fear seems like running away—simple, like hiding under the window sill today, but is it the only good solution? I snort at how ludicrous I must have looked while squatting under the sill; but based on what has happened with Joe, I don't feel safe inside with a man alone, even one I know as well as Joe. Am I becoming wiser about being a single woman, or what? In the past I would have opened the door to be nice even if I was only going to stand in it while talking. Now I can see how even that little could lead to things I don't want, like the hugs, or worse. But reaching a final solution to my dilemma about safety will take longer than simply the time it takes to drink a cup of coffee.

A few days after this incident the writing gets sorted out, and soon a magazine devoted to small farms agrees to publish my story about my friend and his feeding technique. Another version is selected by the big, state-wide paper. I look forward to reading the printed pages of writing even though the one I'd like to share this success with is gone. But this achievement encourages me to keep on writing, which I want to reflect on more as well as on my uneasy isolation.

Chapter 16

"You could still find your way home; you could still find us here," I sometimes whisper to Stan in that room of mine he inhabits though it's been nearly three years since he died. But even Houdini never escaped eternity although he promised to try.

This whisper is a tiny form of denial, but denial it certainly is, though I often tell myself to look at facts with clear eyes as frankly as I can. That's why, following the third depressing Christmas without Stan, I copy in my diary what a voice has begun yammering in my head when it catches me whispering to him. *It really is time to change your life, Glenda. If you don't do something, you will keep on going like this for all the rest of it. Or, you can go in a way you've never gone. But no one is going to change your life for you; that's up to you.*

At our first session I tell Jeanne, my new counselor, "My life is like a well-known room. I'm comfortable in it but the furniture is worn out and needs replacing." She sits in an easy chair next to a small table in her office which is fixed up like a living room with a sand-colored sofa on which I sit facing her. Pictures of cute toddlers, a black-haired boy and girl, are on the credenza. I can see out to a hill where long, reddish grass bends in the winter wind against a shallow snow bank. Big flakes are falling, beginning to erase small features of the rock wall that edges the landscaping. "Time has brought a few good changes to my life," I explain, crossing my ankles and leaning back, "but in a certain part of me, things remain much as they did three winters ago following Stan's death when the light went out. One

can't spend too much time in the dark or, like the potatoes in our root cellar when I was a kid, funny things start growing in you. I've got to get myself out of this pit where Stan and grief are my constant companions. I need help, and I'm willing to pay whatever it takes to get good counseling because I've already had the bad." This is a referral to a previous attempt at counseling during which I decided that the counselor lacked skill and seemed to sneer at me coldly as I described my grief for my dead husband. As it turns out, the receptionist confirms, Stan's comprehensive health insurance will pay generously for much of these counseling sessions.

I'd also tried two support groups during the first two years of mourning. The funeral home offered one I started immediately after his death; it was led by a friendly, likable young woman. One good idea of hers was that of keeping a diary, the best source of consolation I've found. After a period of time, her service came to an end. Next, I tried to attend a hospital support group, but it happened that someone I knew was in it, and she didn't seem like the kind to maintain confidentiality about what I might say.

Jeanne is slender, a young-ish middle-age, with regular features, long, light-brown hair, and a few light freckles. Looking her over closely, I'm not certain she's old enough to understand my difficulty. She has only tiny wrinkles around her eyes, and her upper arms look pleasingly firm in the short-sleeved cream sweater. Part of my problem is grief, but I think part of it is also my age. How can I claim sixty year old widowhood as a new setting for romantic action like dating again, which is partly the change I want? My hair, weight, and skin—I've done the best I can, but, being the realist I am, they don't look like hers. And I'll bet she doesn't even think about hers—yet. Uncertainly, I start pulling on a cuticle, a bad habit of mine.

We meet a couple of times to start, during which I describe the three years following Stan's sudden death. I tell about the completion of the acreage project on my own and what I learned, the part-time work that provides company and satisfaction, the writing studies, and my constant, underlying loneliness in spite of all the reaching out—sessions that make my cuticles bloody and sore. "I feel kicked out of my life and can never go home. I have to find a new way to live though I'd rather not. I just want to be myself, not a widow anymore," I confide. "I don't know why that hasn't happened by now."

Jeanne crosses her legs in her flowing, cream colored, silk pants that match the sweater. Playing with a long strand of hair, she says, "It's time to let Stan go. Can you accept that how things ultimately turn out can be for good?" She almost whispers this to me, looking directly into my eyes.

Immediately, water wells into mine and I look back through a smear of tears. "But Jeanne, this is why I'm here. I can't seem to make myself let go.

Everything has to do with him when life was the way I wanted it." I grab a tissue from the small table by my elbow, and scrub at the moisture in my eyes. I get so unhappy with myself if I break into tears during frank discussions like this. And what she has said has also made me mad. "Nothing can ever make me feel that Stan's death can ultimately, in any way, be for any good," I argue, shaking my head briskly and starting on a cuticle. I wanted to add, *Let it happen to one of your toddlers, and what good would you find?*

I glare at her through my tears, but she doesn't flinch. We sit facing each other while I quietly sob, bending forward slightly on the sofa, clutching a wad of tissues on my lap. I'm waiting for her to tell me how life can be better now, and how to let Stan go even though I know that only I can do this for myself. She is silent. Then she says, looking at the large round clock on the wall behind me, "We're over time. Think about this, and we'll pick up from here next week." She removes her glasses and uncrosses her legs to stand.

Infuriatingly, she seems so matter of fact. I want to scream, but push it down, choking out, "No, no, you can't leave me hanging like this! I'm really mad because this situation is unfair. So, so totally unfair!" But Jeanne has closed her steno notebook and is walking toward the door.

"There's no time today. Check on next week's appointment with the receptionist. See you then," and she closes the door almost before I can drag myself through it.

Boy—I want to cancel, but I'm too mad to quit now or I'll never figure out what she means and what I have to do. How can I make myself see any good after his death when I don't believe it could be? I stop at the receptionist's desk to write the next session in my new year's black, clergy, date book. How many times did I see Stan pull one of these out of his coat in which to note a date? Always the right size to fit in Stan's breast pocket, it's also the right size for me.

Back home, I stand at my patio doors watching the kid who is snow plowing my drive with an orange tractor and blade. After two winters of wrestling with my monster snow blower, I have nothing left to prove, and have hired someone to clean off the drive this winter. *Tsk, that's interesting. Couldn't going through grief be the same?* Even to someone stubborn as I, three years of conscious grieving sounds, well, obsessive. Am I hanging on to grief to prove something though there's nothing to prove, or because I have nothing more meaningful for which to let it go?

Hearing Jeanne use the word, *good*, leads me to consider when I felt, not just relief, but really good, like a normal woman with a future rather than a lonely, grieving, old crone. Turning into the house, my eyes fall on a slim book of poetry lying open on my walnut table. I feel happy and involved

when reading or writing poetry, I admit, scratching my head for a second. Grief doesn't exactly leave, but it's blocked out by the search for imagery, passion, and insight. Grief quits nagging me for a while, that is, the future *me* that might be growing within—like a wraithy new moon.

The thought has trickled in that I would like to learn how to actually write poetry. There was the college workshop of a couple of summers ago, an individual study at a local college last spring, a workshop sponsored by my writing group, the poetry class by mail I'm completing this winter, and the encouragement from two small, local prizes for my poems. The next logical step would be to actually matriculate in its study. At this, a tiny, uncertain light wavers inside, like a torch carried deeply into a Pleistocene cave, illuminating images on the walls of my brain that leap out of the dark into life as they are lit by poetry. Picking up a thin, blue paperback of poems, I fantasize about writing a book of my own. Before my next session with Jeanne, I search web sites, and in my frayed diary, make pages of notes, like little seeds scattered on flower beds, about the costs and requirements of several MFA programs for writing poetry.

While examining writing programs, it occurs to me that there must be all kinds of research available on grief and its aftermath. After all, a lot of us go through it. In the library I find books that focus on the statistics of grieving, dating and remarriage, and the life-style effects of all this on the health and satisfaction of widows and widowers. I've read memoirs on death, but what I really want to read about by now are the statistics of getting into a romantic relationship at my age. It's something else I need to learn how to start in addition to the brush cutter and snow blower. After checking out a couple of promising ones, I sit at my table to jot down several interesting notes about the amorous reality of widows and widowers.

I find that of all widows, nineteen percent remarry, or become involved in a new romance within twenty-five months after the death of their spouse.

While fifty percent of those under fifty-five remarry, only five percent of widows over fifty-five do. The researcher speculates that this could be a result of the institution of marriage not holding the promise they might have hoped for from growing up in the *Ozzie and Harriett* era.

Only three out of one thousand women age sixty-five and over remarry; seventeen out of one thousand men of that age remarry.

Those who have not remarried for a long time, or those who are living with another person, are less likely to remarry, while those who are well educated and in good health are more likely to marry.

For a time I sit at the table to muse over my notes remembering that my main reason for watching *Ozzie and Harriett* was Ricky. My marriage

had been one of equals so it didn't disappoint on that score. I liked marriage and would like another one to the right person if he could be found. Some of the men who remarry must end up with women like me who are nearing sixty-five. But I'd better get going, the twenty-five month marker for a new romance has already passed, I notice, snapping my diary closed.

The next week Jeanne asks what I've done to work on letting Stan go. "I looked into poetry writing programs and grief statistics about widows and romantic relationships, both of which appear to be possibilities for me," I answer proudly.

She looks at me with widened eyes behind tortoise-shell frames, taking in this new turn in our talks, and then narrows them as she slowly reiterates, "Good for you, but you won't move on until you say goodbye." She leans forward to make her point, frowns, and seems disappointed. "My experience in grief counseling has shown that you have to figure out a way to actually say it. If you don't, grief will come back to haunt you, and cause unexpected trouble you might not even recognize for what it is. Maybe you could put a farewell into poetry?" Pop goes my pride in what I thought was a good job.

I look down at my lap, not meeting her blue eyes, trying to avoid starting on one of my poor cuticles. She doesn't understand. She may know about counseling, but I know what I'm able to do in poetry. I don't feel I could possibly extract the images and emotions that being poetic in a farewell to Stan would take.

Back at home after this session, looking through my diary to re-live some of the things already written about missing Stan, I come across one excerpt from not so long ago.

Now the house is not so quiet as at first. This must be what they call "adjusting," what some might even call, "getting over it," or "going on with your life." It's still quiet but not like when the quiet rang with the reverberations of a gong, or the quiet was a downpour of quiet, drowning out every other sound. . . . Now it's the soundless quiet of quiet. Even so, one has to have a memory of sound to have quiet.

After reading this, I sit with my diary at the table, reflecting on an outcome of ultimate good. Would finding the sounds to express an inner vision possibly heal what is lacking in my quiet life? I look out at the white barn Stan painted on two very hot July days the last summer of his life. He stood under the relentless sun wearing his green company cap in heat worse than that in Mom's kitchen from canning tomatoes. He skillfully managed the paint sprayer, which turned out to be too heavy and awkward for me though

it was my idea to do the painting. Aimed at the peeling boards, I remember that the white paint, splattering out of the spray gun with the sound of sizzling bacon, transformed the lackluster barn into something that shined.

• • •

One day I take a page of white memo paper left-over from Stan's former business. Next to the printed word *Subject*, I write, Re: Mortgage. Without looking too closely at why I'm doing it, I pick up the phone and make some calls to my mortgage loan officer. The memo paper gets covered with notes on the cost of paying off the mortgage on my acreage and the car loan. I check on the cost of a new loan for a house and the other potential expenses of buying a new place. Making even more calls and notes on movers, I find one who will tentatively reserve a moving date that I toss off by a quick guess.

As though I'm watching out the corner of my eye, someone who looks like me punches two holes in the memo and fastens it in my diary. Here in black and white on a half sheet of white paper written in pencil is the math of buying and selling; it follows my findings on writing programs and the statistics about grief and new relationships. I sit down at the walnut table, glancing out the window at the white barn. That Bossy Pants in my brain starts up again. *What do you think you're doing? Stan and you came here to stay the rest of your lives. He would never have left this place.*

Then Missy-me has to pipe up, *Take it easy; I'm still only playing around.*

• • •

One morning I grab my pencil and diary to get this strange dream written down before it's forgotten.

It's a bare, institutional bedroom containing only a cot covered with a grayish white wool blanket like Stan's old one from his navy days. The blanket is tucked in so tightly it appears that a quarter would bounce if it fell on the cot. This is how, Stan once told me, the navy taught sailors to make their beds. Above the cot is a sketch of a battleship similar to a drawing of a sailboat I once bought during a summer in Maine. The ship looks like a medium-sized naval destroyer, the St. Paul, on which Stan was stationed. Why does the sketch of the destroyer show that it has no guns?

My perspective changes. Now my impression is that I am looking down on this same boat from the railing of a bigger ship.

In the dream I understand that I am involved in a project to sell the smaller

boat or else it will be demolished and sunk. This is an unhappy predicament. Demolishing the smaller destroyer means breaking it into three or four large pieces that will sink to the ocean floor. My quandary is that, since Stan was stationed on it, I don't want it demolished. But I will have to sell it to keep it in one piece.

As I try to correctly capture the dream's elusive emotion and exactly describe what happened, reading and re-writing, finding the right words seems like hunting for a unicorn. No one knows exactly where one comes from or what good it is, but it seems worth the trouble to catch.

• • •

It's a bright cool day as I sit with Felicia on the white wicker loveseat in front of a hearty fire looking over recent diary entries. Something shy as a unicorn, made up of dotted lines beginning to connect, is becoming faintly visible, blinking into and out of my mind like the memory of a dream until I try to look at it directly in order to write plainly about its scenes. The hot wood pops now and then behind the protective metal mesh of the old fireplace, giving off a homey smell. If I were to become that new creature of the orchard, I muse, my notes show in black and white how it could be done and what it would take.

I stare into the blue-edged orange flames that return me to the day, seven years ago, when Stan and I burned the brome grass on the hill as the first step in bringing back a prairie from the old pasture. Controlling the flames of a prescribed burn inside city limits was a serious project. After sitting down with an instructor who told us exactly how to manage it, including requesting an OK from the city fire department, we gathered the necessary equipment, and one fine day we strategically placed water containers around the planned perimeter. Our instructor was very serious about the vast potential of eager flames to leap into a roaring inferno because it had happened to him even though he knew what he was doing. Well, he scared me. But the seeds of the prairie grasses lay in the ground, waiting to be released by fire and light in a mysterious resurrection. It only took energy and will to get those flames going, and burn, baby, burn, but strictly under control. *Energy and the will . . .*

I poke the coals to make them flare hotter. Rebirth is a natural element of life on this acreage—in its bugs, its grasses, even in its buildings like the garage and the fence. Rebirth is everywhere. Can my own heart crack open and I be reborn?

The flames die, the wood stops popping though the pungent smell lingers, and the room becomes that big quiet I don't often hear anymore.

Thoughtfully, I pick up Felicia, closing my eyes to bury my nose in the soft down behind her ear and breathe in her clean, delicate scent. At first in my grief whenever I thought about setting out from here, I felt dragged away from all that I loved. But now, staying here feels like being stuck. More and more, I fear and desire this wraith that's solidifying inside. I can't stay here much longer for Stan. Can I do this? I can, can't I? As I set Felicia down to continue musing on the notes in my shabby diary, cleansing tears overflow, soothing the rawness inside.

• • •

Today is to be my last meeting with Jeanne. I really don't want these sessions to end, but there's little left to go over. Therefore, this morning I sit on the bed by Grandma's oak dresser with my diary to write a simple farewell to Stan. It's not poetic, inspired, or creative, but it is to the point.

Dear Sweetie,

Saying goodbye to you is like losing my right hand. I will learn to manage with my left though it will never be as good, never be equal. But I must make the most of what remains, doing the best I can to go on after what has come about.

Even though this goodbye means leaving our dreams behind, I will always love and hold you as the sweetest dream of my life. Heart of my heart, it is time for me to go.

Your little gardener, Me

I explain to Jeanne that, "Signing myself as 'little gardener' imitates the way Stan sometimes signed himself on cards to me. It seemed to refer to how he saw us working our neglected acres into a garden together. But my real farewell comes in the groundwork found on other pages of my diary, and from my work on the lower floor as I put away and let go of the things in his old office. That is the clearest goodbye I know how to say."

She nods her head, removes her glasses to look severely into my eyes as though seeing into the bin where the funny things in old potatoes once grew, and then holds out her hand. "This will do it then," she says as we shake goodbye.

In the parking lot, I ease around the circular drive in my reddish-black car, reflecting that seeing Jeanne worked out in an unanticipated way. Mine probably wasn't the standard process for getting over grief, if there is one. What I learned about letting grief go came indirectly from tending to the details of my own garden and giving up on those of the acreage. Seeking to

resolve whatever is meant by *grief work*, I had to do what a crusty basketball coach once yelled when I had missed a good play. “Glenda—use your peripheral vision or you’ll sit on the bench!” By using my whole sight, even what I couldn’t face directly that was hidden at its edge became visible.

As I drive across town, the tree lined residential streets eventually open into the rural ones of my neighborhood. Soon I pull into my bowed, but unbending, garage, open and close the car door, pass slowly through familiar rooms, and step out the patio doors into the cool, early spring afternoon. Having hung up my black car coat, I briskly rub my arms which are covered only by wine sweater sleeves. The air smells mostly of snowmelt, that peculiar mix of dirt and slush that heralds the flowing water and mushy mud of spring. April is coming soon with that third anniversary of the moments that changed everything.

From the deck I observe the tight rosy buds on the maples, gray Mrs. Claws lapping water from the battered saucepan by the barn door, and listen to the crows that squawk from a high pine branch. For a few moments I remain contemplating this with one arm wrapped across my body and the other cupped around my cheek, staring at muddy spots under melted snow. The good I imagine following Stan’s death would be more like that of the cicada metamorphosis. My inner ear can hear the ardent rise and fall of its droning drumbeat. My inner eye can see the ruptured shell that signifies escape into the fruitful orchard—a cracking of worlds, shedding *always* like a scarf. From freighting helpless what is into weightless what is to come, I am ready to be taken up in a cloud, vanishing in the change to a place I’ve never gone.

Chapter 17

The half of the lower floor that is underground is getting a thorough spring cleaning after three years of neglect. It's time to wipe surfaces and banish cobwebs and bugs from the dark, moist corners of the oldest part of the house. I lift the long tube of the vacuum up to the half window of the well with my right hand, while raising the closed blind with my left, uncovering the pane. Glittering black eyes glare down at me in a whiskery face. "Oh!" I scream, dropping the blind and falling away from the window. "What in the world is that?" My heart races as I look up at the closed window blind which has fallen over the window again. I re-play the face in my mind. What specie looked at me, human or animal? I think it's an animal, but what kind? It didn't have a mask like a raccoon nor was it someone's dog. Perhaps it was a groundhog; it had a kind of hog-like snout.

Still looking at the closed blind in shock, it seems that whatever animal it is, it will have to come out of the window well, and there is no one but me to scare it away though I'm about as scared as it must be. *Once I was a farm girl; I chased cows and pigs. Surely it's still in me somewhere.* I step around the fallen vacuum tube and run upstairs to grab my purple windbreaker for this cold, cloudy spring day. Momentarily I think about just letting it die there, but I know that won't do. *Why oh why oh why did it have to fall into my window well?*

I walk across the squishy mud and melting snow, turn the corner at the back of the garage, and peek along the side of my ranch house to the window well. This window where the house sets at the top of the small hill is maybe

three feet below the surface, I would guess. From this corner where I pause to plan something, I cannot see the animal in it nor can I hear anything but the dee-dee of a chickadee and the wind slipping on the needles of the cedars. Oh, the peace and quiet of the countryside, ha!

A frightened, trapped animal will put up a fight. Groundhogs have claws and big teeth with which to dig their tunnels and eat roots. I can't just pick it up and throw it out. If I put my kitchen step ladder in the well, will the animal clamber up the steps and run away? Could I shovel it onto my dad's wide corn scoop and throw it out of the well? My heart is still beating fast. I stop a long moment, considering what to do. I will have to call animal control and hope that it doesn't break the window trying to get out before they come. Shuddering, I think about the many hard to find places it could hide in if it fell into the old-fashioned, cement part of my basement.

Walking as quietly as possible to the well so as not to unduly alarm the creature, I carefully peer over the slippery, wet sides. *For Pete's sake! The well is empty.* I step back for a moment to catch my breath. What a relief!

Now I squat down by the well looking it over thoroughly, putting out a hand on the coarse brown grass for balance. Did the animal sit up on its hind legs to sniff around for a girlfriend and slip backward into the well? Was it burrowing a tunnel that happened to come out in my well? I can't see any sign of disturbed earth. Maybe it was simply curious and went into the well voluntarily to have a look around, or maybe it was scared by the sight of its shadow and tried to hide in my well. Even though it's muddy, the grass prevents me from seeing any footprints coming or going. It's the first ground hog I've seen around my house, and it has probably come out of hibernation to claim new territory. I look around further in the back yard but can't see any evidence of it. I hope I've frightened it as much as it did me and there won't be six more weeks of its company.

Finally giving up the search, I go back inside my house. As I think about how shocked I was to see that snout, hairy beard, and those glittering eyes looking back no more than a few inches from mine, I walk down the basement stairs, laughing and laughing.

In the basement I pick up the vacuum again, sobering up to reflect on a similar possibility that wouldn't be as harmlessly funny. These two basement windows at the back of my house are troubling as they cannot be seen from my drive at the front. It has occurred to me that someone could park in the secluded pasture lane, sneak around the substation, break into my house in the back through these windows, and I would not see it unless I went down and pulled up the blind. I do have motion lights back there which should come on when there is movement, but they go off after a time if there is

nothing further. I could drive home, enter the front, and not suspect that someone was in my old basement where there are plenty of dark places big enough to hide a man.

I continue vacuuming the cement floor, finishing in the storage room. Even though there's a light bulb, it's hard to see behind the big cardboard boxes that fill the little room, creating the dark corners that make me nervous. My daughter, a criminal prosecutor, looked around my house some time ago and urged that I get a weapon, even if not a gun, and keep it somewhere handy. The thought of having a gun scares me almost as much as an intruder might. Feeling rather silly, I had considered wielding a big hammer, a heavy wrench, a butcher knife, or as a last resort, even the electric screwdriver. Maybe a baseball bat would be good, but I don't have one. A hatchet is the most likely weapon on hand. Pepper spray is a good idea, too, but I don't know where to buy it. "You should also put a phone in your bedroom so you won't get trapped away from the one in the kitchen if you hear someone in the house at night," she advised, I recall with a shudder.

As I wind up the electric cord and put the vacuum away, it occurs to me that this is the first place where I've had to rely more or less on just myself for safety, and I don't know what to do. Whenever I return home, it's become my habit to face up to my fear, get my weapon from under the bed, turn on the basement lights, creep down the steps with hatchet in hand like Lizzie Borden, and make a shaky reconnaissance of the lower floor. I get up my nerve, lift up those blinds like today, and check for a break-in. The blinds stay closed, like right now, because I don't want someone to see if I'm in the basement or not. After the suspense of inspecting the windows and the side door, I then can face the shadowy storage room with its one light bulb, and, with more confidence, open the door to the former canned foods pantry. That face in the well has eerily mimicked my nightmare although I must try to not dwell on it. I get out the scouring powder to clean the sink in the laundry room, reflecting that this fright is one more good reason to have the place listed for sale.

Chapter 18

Down in the back of the basement where cobwebs once trailed from ceiling pipes to stick in my hair, I shudder, remembering the mice and icky spiders that lived here when we first moved in. They've been exterminated but a slight sourness still taints the stagnant air. Grunting, I strain to lower the huge, tan, cardboard boxes from where they are piled, one on top of the other. As I open and begin digging to their bottoms, I become submerged in the stuffy smell and deep emotion that wells up. Here is Beret, the ninety-five year old leather doll that my Great-grandma gave my Aunt Lola. Next to her is my grandpa's even older, nameless china doll which lays in her own portmanteau, and dear Raggedy Ann that Grandma and Mom made for me one Christmas. I smooth her dull, red yarn hair with a finger, and under her faded face, straighten the collar of the little white blouse they sewed in which I played at dressing her. "Hello, little dolly, how are you?" I smile at the thought that three generations of my family's dolls are buried together in this box.

Last night I had drawn a chart I named *Inventory* with spaces for listing what I own in each room of my house and all the other places. It was a matrix headed by three columns named Sell, Move, and To Girls. Using pencil and notebook, the contents of these boxes and my other belongings will be placed in the proper column as I prepare for my imminent move, a little more than three years after Stan's death.

Should I save the few that remain of my dad's high school graduation announcements from seventy-one years ago? Surely anyone who cared has

to know by now, I smile, as I gently lay them in a trash bag. Will one of the girls take my great aunt's nineteenth century cottage organ that Grandpa packed and sent on the train to my home in the east? After teaching all day, I spent evenings refinishing it when I was younger than they are now. Stan had found a specialist to repair a mouse hole in its leather bellows, so I could pump the foot pedals and sing along with its thin, quavering flutes when I played songs from my *Joan Baez Songbook*.

After days and days that add up into weeks of sorting and packing, I yank a heavy metal suitcase from a shelf in the cool, slightly damp basement, and throw it on the cement floor where it bounces with a clatter. I know it is packed with pictures of people and places I don't know from the time when Stan was in the navy and from his college days before we met. "I am sick and tired of going through all this stuff. It's your fault I have to do this. All-your-fault!" Of course it's not his fault that I have chosen to sell and move to a new town, hoping to find a best friend, and have committed to a low residency MFA in creative writing, ready to make my own happiness. I have to partly blame that bug, which showed the possibility of breaking out of my old habits, cracking old worlds, and risking unknown skies to become a new creature.

As I take a sip of soda and stand looking down at his battered metal case, I remember a conversation with Stan from many years before while he prepared a sermon and I sat beside him, folding clean laundry on the walnut table. I was feeling bored with the unsatisfactory job prospects I'd uncovered since we'd returned to our home state after living away in the east. I commented, "I wish I could get a Master of Public Administration, but I know we can't afford it." At the time, we had the two little girls and little money.

I can still hear his voice surprising me with a laugh, "Of course you can," he said, looking up.

I sip the soda and remember how that path unfolded in my life, the full ride scholarship following my first semester, and the career opportunities that degree opened up to help provide for my family. Now as I face moving the impossible mountain of our entire acreage, I lean down to click open that full metal suitcase and make decisions about snapshots of people and places mostly meaningful only to Stan. All the while his words, "You can," still run through my mind.

Chapter 19

As I stand before Stan's sea green painted workbench for the final time, I feel even closer to him than when I sit on his black office chair working on the computer. But after twenty-two years and four moves, the workbench isn't going to my new house.

It resembles a large wooden box, with an opening under the work surface spanning the middle, making a lower shelf where Stan could store large objects or boards off the floor. Above this storage space, four drawers fit in a horizontal row under the work surface while two vertical cupboards hang over it on the wall, one above each end. At the right end of the bench, a vise for gripping projects is fastened.

In this move, I am determined to eliminate pieces that weigh me down even though to do so hurts. The workbench, due to my manual *in*-expertise, doesn't fit in my new townhouse even though it was usefully constructed by his carpenter father as a surprise birthday gift to Stan.

"Look at that," Stan called to me one day. "I added the peg board on the wall between the cupboards for hanging my tools so as to keep them really handy." Tidy functionality appealed to his logical mind.

Regret, like the smell of varnish, hangs in the air as I stand before the bench. From the fluorescent bulbs he installed overhead for extra light, a slight hum continues. It sounds like the energy used on projects he accomplished on this bench, such as, re-gluing the legs on our dining chairs, building the picnic table, fixing all kinds of broken things, and much more. The three-hole strip along the back holds thick, yellow, sharpened pencils, still on hand to

make whatever mark he needed.

Printed plans hang in a plastic bag on the peg board where he neatly placed them when he finished the deck on this house. I have a happy memory of the time he asked me to help him guide the post hole digger for sinking the legs of the deck. Its wild whirling in the hard earth got out of my control, and I fell over on top of Stan, pushing him into the hole partly under me. Lying in the clay dirt together, we laughed and laughed at how its crazy motion yanked us around and into each other as we tried to hold it in the right spot. But somehow we got the holes dug. I will leave the plans for the new owners in case the deck needs repairs. And maybe somehow, they will commemorate this deck for the hands of Stan, its creator, even though the new owners will never be aware of its origin.

In our past moves, I packed the kitchen and dining room things while Stan handled the electronics and the garage. This is the first move in which I have to decide about everything including the contents of the workbench. I pat it on the back like a good workhorse.

I pack the battery operated screwdriver lying on the work top, and even remember its bits from the drawer under the bench that must go with it. Stan used it for scores of projects, many of which were from my *honey do* list. It always brought out his smile. Heavy as it is, I must add it to my load.

Most of the items, like the nails divided into coffee cans and screws sorted in muffin tins, go into the moving auction, coming soon. Some miscellaneous pieces of wire and scraps of wood go into the trash. But in one of the drawers on the workbench, I come across his slide rule for doing college engineering math before the computers took over. I touch its worn leather case which I haven't seen for ages. I am surprised he kept it thirty-nine years through all of our moves because it's fairly useless for preparing sermons. In memory, I can see him going to class with the leather case hanging from his belt. With a sigh, I add it to a moving box marked S for storage. But, I scold myself, the S really stands for sentimental.

In my diary I write, *I know I can leave, but I don't know if I can let go.*

Chapter 20

What I don't take in the move, or manage to talk my daughters into taking, is to go into an auction, which is held one day at the end of summer on the lawn of the acreage. The auction crew and I lug scores of items to the folding metal tables they set under the maples and inside the garage. Now as the auction is ready to start, I am silently sad as I walk from table to table, taking one last look at a number of especially cherished items. *It's a good thing your mom can't see what you're selling*, Bossy Pants says.

There is my dad's beloved, but un-repairable, violin, exposed in its open, purple plush case, looking so vulnerable I have to quickly turn away before losing my resolve to leave it. On the drive, lying beside my trusty lawn mower, is that last present from Stan, the orange brush cutter, an Excalibur that slew the red cedar invaders on my prairie. Once I felt that these machines lay like sulky dogs whose real master was the only one they obeyed. Now, they jump for me, too, and I can't believe that letting them go brings tears that I keep brushing from my cheeks.

While the bidding takes place, I sit in my house at the table, watching through the big dining room window, and helping the auction workers keep the sales records straight. If I were Stan, maybe I'd be out to greet and joke with the crowd, treating the auction like a garden party. But I do not want to talk to anyone, even friends in the crowd who wave when they see me inside.

Feeling pangs of disloyalty, I see my dad's violin picked up by a stranger in a green eyeshade who, an auction worker says, is a dealer. I want to yank it away but force myself to hold back. As I take the check of the smiling friend

who won the bidding war for the organ, I can give her only a bittersweet smile. The dear friend who taught me how to start the brush cutter walks away with it, for which I feel strangely relieved because it'll stay in the family, so to speak. I could still pat its head once in a while, if I wanted.

When the auction is over late in the day and the lawn is cleaned up, I go through the depleted kitchen, closing the cupboard doors that stand ajar on the mostly naked shelves. The remaining objects will be packed tomorrow to move to my new house. One last time I head down to the cleared storage room that lost its scary shadows when the big boxes were emptied, yank the chain of the light bulb, trot back up the stairs to pass quickly by the forsaken workbench in the garage, and head to the tack shed for a disbelieving look at its shelves and floors. Nothing but air weighs on them now; their weight has moved inside my chest. *You're too late to get them back*, Goody Two Shoes waggles a finger at me.

The air smells clean again now that the dust from the auction crowd has settled. In the distance a dog barks as though it should get something it wants, to go inside, possibly. I close the shed door and move on to step inside the dim barn for one last look; the cats and the horses are darker solid shapes munching at their supper. Sol's big mare ambles out to the tank where she slurps up a long drink, pausing from time to time to blow into the water. It's the contented sound our work horses made, I remember, as a very young child on the farm.

Turning back to the gate, I can't resist opening the door of the tack shed again as I walk by. Barren walls, stark wood floor, it doesn't feel like mine. So much that was part of a core of memory, sunk as deeply as back to when I was a kid, has gone in a twinkling, in the time just from this morning until now, disappearing like the shadows fading into gray, leaving nothing to show what was there. Only a few hours have passed since breakfast, but I can barely remember what was so essential it was stored in the tack shed and other places for years in case I wanted it; or stored for no other reason than it told something worth saving of my family story. Perhaps I kept some of those items, like Mom's saucepan for cooking Dad's oatmeal nearly every morning of their marriage, because it preserved something about their love for each other, or, the way that organ kept tangible our family's musical traditions and Grandpa's love in sending it far away to me in the east.

During this last, long look into its dim interior, I notice a growing lightness as the moon peacefully rises over the face of the hill, matching the small feeling coming up in my chest. It's time to close the door of the shed for good and go inside my kitchen. The switch to the yard light is just a step away but I won't stumble on this familiar ground with moonlight coming

on. My feet are accustomed to the uneven path to the iron gate as I walk around Cherry giving her a pat on the rump. "Take it easy, Ol' Horse," I say, because I want to hear Sol's sweet benediction once more before leaving. My fingers feel how to unhook and lift the latch in the dark. I step through and turn to securely re-fasten the gate. The final day on my acreage is done.

• • •

Pow! The motion lights on the back side of my house come on, awakening me with an ice pack laid on my spine. *Uh-oh, what is that*, I say to myself as I sit up in bed on the last night in my house. Even though nothing bad has ever been out there, when the lights go on I am always frightened. So many people that were here for the auction now know where this place is and had time to look around the grounds. *Stop thinking like that; it sounds like a murder mystery.*

I take a deep breath. *OK, here it goes.* Too quickly to chicken out, I turn back the cover and crawl to the end of my bed to carefully look out the window over which the motion light hangs. I almost stop breathing as I cannot believe what I see. For the first time, something is caught by the lights. It is a group of masked faces, motionless, staring up at the light, and then continuing to move on across the grass. Five raccoon kittens in a row. I know raccoons are around, but I've never seen them at my house in the seven years I've lived here.

While the five babies angle in a row across the lawn, they're lit as though on a stage behind footlights. They dip into the grass with quick hands and then put the catch, insects of some kind, into their mouths. As they turn their heads from side to side, their black masks look like the face I expected when the lights flared on. They move smoothly, hand over hand, as though holding a line that pulls them across the lawn. In a moment they're gone. First their heads disappear, then their bodies, and lastly, their black ringed tails with the black tips seem to fall off the lighted edge, vanishing into a dark pool. I haven't heard one sound through my open window. Sitting a moment longer looking into the empty circle of light, I wish they'd return to fill it once more before I, too, step off stage. Passing like phantoms, nothing remains but a rill made by the breeze that flows through the grass.

Chapter 21

Today the movers are here early in the morning because the move will take the entire day. The first movers to arrive are a couple of guys who like to pick up sofas and pianos with one hand. Later, they are joined by two who are good at taking things apart, like the boxy shelves with glass fronts of my antique barrister book case. But will they remember how to slide the puzzle of those fragile sides back together after delivery?

Stan and I had bought apartment buildings but we had always lived in housing provided for clergy. I had never single-handedly sold or bought my residence and worked out my move. I had to repeat to myself what I told my young daughter on the phone when she made her first big move from more than a thousand miles away from the helpful arms of mom and dad. "List all the steps you need to take, back them out into a timeline; and then just do it. You'll be there before you know it," I advised through tears I didn't want her to hear in a voice pretending confidence in her. What a big job like this takes is mostly energy, will, and a timeline.

I stand on the deck watching the burly guys expertly maneuver my large sectional sofa through the patio doors and into the truck. Would my huge, green leather sofa fit into my new, smaller great room along with my table and chairs, bookcases, computer desk, and piano? Being the fretter I am, I obtained the floor plans for my new townhouse, measured the outlines of my furniture, drew them to scale on typing paper, cut out the pieces, and taped them on the floor plan showing where they would fit for the movers to place. I have done this for previous moves because I learned that even hefty guys,

wearing protective belts around their middles, can get a little testy if they have to move big pieces more than once. Try telling one of them in ninety degree weather like today that, you're sorry, but the sofa doesn't fit after all and has to go back on the truck. By tomorrow night due to planning ahead, all my furniture will be arranged in my new rooms where I want it.

One really important contribution I make to my move is based on another principle learned from moving many, many times. It is: what works together gets packed together. This seems elementary to me but doesn't appear to be one of the principles they teach in Packing School. I'm certainly not the only one who does this, but I apply this principle to, for example, what it takes to make coffee the new way I'm doing it now: plastic coffee filter, hot water carafe, coffee bean canister, grinder, paper filters, and even a couple of mugs will all go into the same box. And that box will go into the trunk of my car. It makes that first morning in the new house seem much more like home if the coffee things are nice and handy.

I have packed the computer and all its pieces in its original box as well as the printer in its own. Being computer challenged, I have taken the precaution of marking the various cords and their correct outlets with matching tape for re-connecting when it arrives on my desk again.

My second most important packing principle is that, like participles, never leave dangling pieces for the movers to handle. If you expect them to pack up the TV *with* its remote, when unpacking, you will never find that remote until long after you have replaced the old TV. Then it will show up in some logical place like inside a boot. The first thing I do before the movers come is identify and stash all the remotes and any chargers in my briefcase beyond the reach of packer hands.

Standing by the fireplace in the center of the house, I try to hold fast to the belief that all that's riding on this move, all the lines my imagination connected into the unicorn of my dream that these muscular bodies carry out and place on the truck, is coming into its own, with perfect timing. But outside the big windows, the ripe prairie grass fills my eyes in a lush swell of purple and gold. Early this morning the three resident deer—Big, Bigger, and Biggest, my closest neighbors—crossed the drive to graze in the pasture with the horses, beautifully unaware. And, as though to avoid the discomfort of what is happening here, my rabbit mind keeps hopping ahead to bed-time tomorrow when I will sleep comfortably in my new bedroom with the many decisions leading to this move forever in the past.

At the end of the day when my belongings are loaded and being driven to the mover's overnight storage area, I sweep and do a final tidying up as though company was coming. I'm a believer in that saying taken from the

days of Smoky the Bear: leave the camp ground cleaner than when you found it. After all it's still my place until I lock the door.

Finally it's my turn to pass slowly down the drive where no one waits to wave me off. My daughter isn't here now but will come to my new place in a couple of days to help me unpack and celebrate my birthday. The two red horses stand as usual with their necks hanging over the long, white fence, heads turned to the road, waiting for supper. Mrs. Claws takes her turn peacefully drinking her fill at the barn door. Through the open car window I smell mown grass and hear the rising and falling hum of the cicadas in the maple branches. *Yes, this is the low key exit I want. Just like you, Sol.*

I drive onto the gravel road where the dust rises like a small U-haul behind my reddish-black car. Focusing on what's ahead, I do not remember to look in my rear view mirrors until after I am around the bend in the road. Then it's too late to see anything of the acreage except the top of the tall hill of purple and amber prairie grass that shelters the buildings and the lilac rise. It's the hill where my daughters and I scattered Stan's ashes among its reborn grasses four Septembers ago.

Season Letting Go

*Poised to run, two fawns and a doe in thin shade
look back at you like golden brown Fates.
Their necks, black eyes, and ears compose three Ys:
why leave, why change, why choose after all?
Sunflowers, goldfinches—that golden race—
cottonwood leaf falling gold at your feet,
is this when you see?
On your way, it's all gold already.
The burnish of leaves letting go
out-matches faded summer.
Within dark branches, shining spaces open.
You shine darkly passing through.*

Driving into thickening night, I am adrift in a middle world between the moon that will rise ahead and the sun that is setting behind. It's a four hour drive to my new town but I don't turn on the radio. "You're quiet," I say to Felicia, who usually complains loudly about riding anywhere. With black paws folded under her chest, she huddles in her blue carrier belted safely in the passenger seat. She may sense with feline perceptiveness that I need silence to reflect on this passage before taking up the logistics of moving in.

I feel truly ready to leave my acreage even though I leave forever the last home I shared with Stan. I'm excited to drop my mourning dress, to lay down its weight and drag. I hear the air swishing outside my car windows like the fizz of relief and feel mounted on bubbles in place of tires.

How can I leave one nearby daughter behind with barely a qualm? Well, some sadness, yes. But I see that she is caught up in her own adventures with life to the point that she will go wherever her heart beckons without much regard for me. I don't blame her for this; I think it's for the best at her age, and, anyway, it's exactly what I did to my parents after marrying her father. It's what I'm doing tonight.

As I begin the long turn to the east, the hum of my tires is quieter on this highway. I feel like I did on my long ago first day of school in the days when children didn't learn to be away from their mothers in daycare before starting all day first grade.

Shortly before my sixth birthday, Mother led me to a wooden school desk with attached seat, and then quickly left with barely a word of good-bye. I saw her round face with upswept dark hair for one short time in the window of the classroom door after the teacher closed it. From the middle of the row, I looked back at the little girl with braids who was shaking with sobs, but I didn't want to cry. I was a little scared and missed my mother whose face was gone from the door by now, but I also was excited to find out what would happen next. I remember thinking, *So, momma said she would leave me here. This is the way she said it would be.* On that first day I couldn't know, but school turned out overall to be a good place. I believe this new situation will, too.

Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, I reach in my purse for an apple and take a tangy bite. I thought I'd need to munch on it to stay awake but I don't. Excitement rises in my throat, piquant as this summer ripened Jonathan.

I drive my car into the September night, imagining myself to be ET in the movie, flying on his bicycle across the huge golden face of the moon. Cars seldom pass, and my thoughts roam as freely as I once did as a kid on the farm. A memory returns of a similar feeling when my ten year old self rose before anyone else, pulled on shorts and sandals, and tip-toed down the old oak stairs trying to avoid making them creak. Noiselessly as possible while sunrise was barely a rosy tint in the gray, I swung open the creaky screen door into a barnyard that called, "Come and see."

What might happen while no parents monitored? Maybe I'd catch the crows cawing to each other in English, discover kittens being born, or meet up with something beyond any words that I had for why I sneaked out of

bed. I shivered then—just like tonight—with the feeling that I could do what I wanted in this clandestine moment before the normal rules clamped down again.

That day long ago when I was ten, the low, early sun dangled a wide brown leg of shadow from the tall arborvitae across the shining grass to the dirndls of white spirea hedging our front porch. Mourning doves, sounding far away, called in yearning voices of fog. I breathed deeply of the faint smell of red and white-faced cows pastured near-by, their pink noses buried in green, leafy alfalfa. From dainty blue blossoms, it gave off a fresh, pure smell distinctly sweeter than any other hay. Wistfully, the moon seemed loath to leave the field, joining the dawn above a land as peaceful as that one in Eden. Not so innocent as Adam, being friskier like Eve, I picked up the call of candy bars from the glove compartment where Dad hid them in the car. This was my chance to snatch one. Heading toward the white garage, I began to play my favorite game of pretending to be a horse, galloping around the windmill toward the yard gate, bucking and neighing.

Then, near the sand pile my father had made by the white cob house, *It* appeared. Barring my way was the architecture of a shining net stretched between two green pylons covered with flared pink flowers gently fluttering like many butterflies. I stopped in my wet sandals, watching; as I bowed closer toward this structure, only my eyes moved from thread to thread. By cables of dewy light attached on each side to a tall, frilly hollyhock, it spanned the air in adamantine, perfectly detailed clarity. Shining radials, a spider's length between, orbited fortified innermost lines spun into an eye by spidery art. In its pupil, the dreaming spider lay curled. No message blinked from its brilliant lines before which I stood, taken in . . . looking, waiting . . . I couldn't have put what I found into words, but at age ten, I knew. This was the moment for which I stole out of the house; this was the secret suspended in the heart of day.

In that dawn, I lifted a hand to shade my eyes from the huge ball of light rising over the sweet corn in my mother's garden. Transfixed, I gazed at the morning's gossamer glory fanning out from the darkness in a bright iris. Though fifty years and more have passed, I've never forgotten, nor have I told of what I found that morning, that the beauty of webs begins with spiders.

Looking back tonight, I see that my awe of this spidery other began the turn into myself, a genesis that started in the moment of my speechless answer to its silken, natural immanence. This walk in the barnyard was the prefix to my lifelong encounter with spirit inherent in existence on our planet, little earth.

In the driver's seat tonight, this single woman eats her zesty red apple,

core and all, driving into the darkness toward the coming of dawn. The memory of that walk in the barnyard at the beginning of day stays with me, like the sweet apple juice sticks on my fingers tonight.

The highway crosses the tricky currents of the Nishnabotna and later the Raccoon, winding rivers of childhood in which, memory warns, classmates have drowned. Tonight their glimmering waters signal my fascinated passage toward a new schooling. With its meaning as yet unrevealed, I happily set out beneath an amber moon, as spellbound in my sixties as at the age of ten.

Chapter 22

When my pretty, new, forty-something, single neighbor introduces the man having breakfast with her as someone she met through a certain dating club, that is the one where I will apply and interview today. The only time I tried a computer match over the internet, it related me to a dreary man nursing his elderly mother in her rural home—and probably living off her in-home health care check, I guessed.

I prepare for the interview this morning by dressing in nicely fitted gray wool pants and a sleeveless sweater with bands of dark gray, light gray, and rose. At the club, after the receptionist welcomes me, the director and I introduce ourselves. Kitty is small, seems around fifty, has short, bleached blond hair, and dresses in a black tee and black pants for a uniform look that gives her a casual, but professional, air. The dating club charges a few thousand dollars membership fee that covers everything “until you find your soul mate,” she says. I love the words *soul mate*; they sound like play mate, but for adults.

The connotation of fun doesn't keep me from being serious about negotiating down the hefty membership fee. “I'm a graduate student,” I plead to Kitty, “and a senior citizen.” I don't usually play the senior card but, in this case, knocking off a thousand is worth it. “This is about what I can pay,” I say, naming an amount that seems plenty generous to me. I don't want to need this club more than six months or so and this payment should work out to a fairly good deal for them.

Kitty's mouth turns down at the corners, but she stands up saying she

has to run this by her accountant. "I'll see what we can do," she says, and quickly shuts the door behind her. When Kitty returns to her glass-topped desk with a paper on which penciled figures are scribbled, she goes through all the discounts they can give for this and that and, sure enough, the membership fee turns out to be very, very close to the figure I named.

The next step is to fill out a form identifying what would be acceptable in a date, such as age range, children or not, smoker or non-smoker, etc. I now have moved to a private room with a table and chair to complete this step, and sit chewing on my pencil's eraser as I frown over my answers. In the back of my mind, I add caveats to some of my check-offs, like the one about reading. My potential partner doesn't have to read what I do but he has to read more than closed captions on the TV.

Next, with the lead-like taste of the eraser in my mouth, I have to write the profile statement that succinctly describes who I am to a potential date. Kitty has given me samples to read so I can get the idea. The examples use a peculiar lingo that I'll call the bi-polar adjective phrase. My own attempt goes something like: *sincere but can take a joke, like to dress up but enjoy wearing jeans, read serious books but have favorite comic strips*, that sort of thing.

I give it my all for about forty-five minutes, erasing, adding, re-reading, and wishing I had my thesaurus. Now I'm ready to give it to Kitty for final approval and editing, but I wonder if my profile is really me or just copy for an ad in *Glamour Magazine*. I tried to write something catchy, but will any man want to meet a woman who claims she is comfortable with poems as well as experienced with woodchucks? I'll never know because Kitty suggests this claim is a little too unconventional.

"In my view, men are more apt to select someone like they already know unless she was a real vampire devil," Kitty advises as she types my resume into her computer.

"So you think I should keep 'experienced with woodchucks'?" I ask in a lame attempt to inject a little humor into this weighty process. I get up to stand behind her where I can read the screen. Kitty stares at the phrase for a long moment, apparently giving serious thought to the difference between potential dating outcomes from "meeting woodchucks" as opposed to "poetry." Then she turns to look up at me as I look over her shoulder.

Yielding to her raised eyebrow, I decide. "Oh, OK. I'll delete the woodchuck. Isn't that safer?" I ask rhetorically, sorry to see the woodchuck left out.

After another moment, she says, "And leave 'comfortable with poetry.' Are you sure that's what you want?"

But I firmly answer, "Yes," because it's what I study and the profile has

to show part of the real me even if some guys would be turned off by talking to a poet.

One can't be perfectly honest, I realize, while I wait for her to finish typing my statement into the computer. It doesn't seem too wise to describe myself on a profile as *idealistic but cynical*, or *easily frustrated but stubborn*, truthful descriptions of core parts of my personality. On a dating resume, that would sound like a lot to handle.

The next stage is adding my picture to the resume. I don't have a current one since I've let my hair grow out long enough to curl again. But a staff person carrying a Polaroid camera takes me into a small room with a bright lamp and an artificial ficus tree. For these shots, I plan to wear my glasses though I don't need them much except for non-essential, close-up activities, like reading menus or any other type of reading, and for driving. Age has made me happily far-sighted.

In the picture I choose for the profile, my head is turned face on so my hearing aids don't show. I hear fairly well with them and don't consider myself too handicapped. My sleeveless pink and gray sweater modestly shows off my figure and OK upper arms. I've always been self-conscious about my triceps even though a personal trainer once admired them. His compliment made me even more sensitive because, though I do work out, they are naturally just big.

The ficus behind me looks unintellectual and wholesome with its backdrop of small, shiny leaves, maybe even artistic—but not too much. My hair is naturally dark brown in the photo with some gray showing at the temples, and my smile is friendly and attractive.

The final step in the application ordeal is the sign-off by the director. I try to worm out of Kitty the actual ratio of men to women in my age range in the club, but she is evasive. I don't push it because I know the real statistics in general, and the numerical disparity between men to women at my age is just a fact of life. Or death. I'll still try the dating club, anyway.

But I feel compelled to come clean about something. "I haven't been on a date for fifty years. I'm scared," I confess with a smile of embarrassment.

You know what she says to me? "What is there to worry about? Just be yourself and you'll be fine."

That's exactly what my mom used to say whenever I told her about any social insecurity I had. And then Mom usually added, "Beauty is only skin deep. What matters is what's on the inside."

In my teen-age experience, this wasn't the way the world behaved. And for me at sixty plus, this isn't quite how I've found the world to be, either. Kitty gives me the old college pep talk. "You can do this; you'll be just fine."

It reminds me of my daughter's encouragement during the flood at my apartment three years before, and she was right.

So I let myself accept what Kitty says and answer with a smile, "I know I will be. When the game starts, the butterflies will go away. Meeting someone and dating will push me outside of my comfort zone but that's how I'll find new opportunities for sure."

As I leave Kitty's office, passing the light colored sofa and thick white carpet in the reception area, a phone rings, someone laughs, and a rock station softly plays on the receptionist's desk behind me. The pale walls are decorated with ubiquitous pictures of the smiling couples who supposedly found their soul mates by walking down this very aisle on which I am poised to begin. At the far end of the office is a wider space that looks like a library room with tables, chairs, and book cases. This is where I am now privileged to go. I feel that the two women waiting on the sofa behind me are staring enviously as I begin my walk. All I need to complete the feeling is Bert Parks singing, *There She Goes*, *Miss America*, and an armload of scarlet roses.

Now that I have turned over my fee payment, I am eligible to examine the albums that stand on the book shelves reminding me of the Montgomery Ward catalogs of years ago. In my childhood, we called them *wish books* and would turn down the corner of a page to show our parents a picture of something we wanted for Christmas.

I pick up a red volume and sit down on a wooden chair at a table to begin looking and reading the resumes. For years and years I haven't really looked at whether a man's appearance makes him dating material. But I can't help being surprised at how deep the wrinkles are on some men my age. To me, these men appear older than I, grayer, with more lines—and I am careful to look no more than ten years my junior or senior. Actually I'm not setting much store on looks even though I think about the pictures. I am really looking for signs of the personality behind the wrinkles—laugh lines as opposed to frowns, for example.

As I read the profiles, I have three principal criteria: he should have some education beyond high school, responsible work experience, and something I think of as a good *tone*. Tone means the way the resume sounds—the words he uses to tell about himself. I try to read between the lines of the profile for a glimmer of his self-understanding. What does he think about love and commitment; what is his attitude toward life? What truth about him sneaks out through a few choice words? The idea of *tone* probably comes from the poet in me.

As I pour over these narratives, carefully studying each one, I become very bored with the guys who are *quiet but adventuresome, what you see is*

what you get, down to earth yet light and funny. “Oh yeah, that’s me all right,” many must have said, finding themselves in a line from one of the sample profiles. I long to read that someone is *ironic yet romantic, a James Bond steadied by a pinch of faithfulness, like the Virginian*, the classic novel, that is, not the old TV show.

Another parameter is that we should have been in high school some of the same years, but it’s all right if he’s a little older than that. I’m not looking for someone younger, a trophy date. The attitude required would be too hard to maintain. What if I reminisce that doing the stroll was fun, and he says, “What’s that?” One of us will feel over the hill if he doesn’t know the dances I liked in school. I want someone with whom I can be comfortably my real age.

I take a long time sorting through the album pages and even go out for lunch and a break before returning to make my choices. Around me, the office seems fairly busy as two middle-aged women share the resumes with me, and one bashful looking man, whose hair is still mostly dark, sits on the couch waiting for Kitty. After much winnowing, I finally select two guys, but alarm bells go off in my brain because I have to make big allowances in my three principal criteria. Did I mention I plan to cast a wide net? Finally, I walk to the front to turn in these two names to the receptionist who will make the actual contact to find out if either is interested in meeting me. I notice that two wedding invitations in blond wood frames hang over her desk. While I know these are mostly advertising, I can’t ignore a tiny lift in my step while laying down my selections on her desk blotter.

But the reality is that both of my choices are blue collar workers with no advanced education. It helps that my dad was a farmer, but he also had two years of Business College, played football *and* the violin in school, read magazines and the newspaper extensively, plus had the management experience of sitting on local boards. I hope one of these two might turn out to be like him. They look decent in their pictures and have held steady jobs, as far as I can tell.

One was a truck driver and the other a factory worker. I am not going for guys like the freelance photographer and Harley biker I turned up on email before I moved. My divorced sister has enthusiastically taken motorcycle riding lessons in order to keep up with one of her dates. I am not going to do that even though I like some of those leather biker outfits.

Both potential dates are divorced. Though I know there are plenty of reasons why it might be responsible, divorce turns on a yellow caution light for me. Is he paying child support? What tendency might make commitment and teamwork difficult? I don’t want a situation that turned out like that

of an acquaintance. After some years of single parenting following divorce from her childhood sweetheart, I heard that she carefully went through a computerized matching process and, in a few months, they were happily married. He was also divorced but with no children.

After their marriage he became increasingly and unreasonably dictatorial, she told people, especially with her children but even with her. Apparently neither she nor the panel of experts doing the match was able to forecast this personality development. After counseling, they were not reconciled. She had to call it off for the sake of her kids. Again. From somewhere I have read a sad truth about divorce: while the marriage may be short, divorce goes on and on.

Having made my choices, I leave the dating club to drive home on the sunny interstate and return to my neglected studies. Dead leaves blow across the pavement while the living ones on the trees I pass in the fields and along the waterways have turned butter yellow, mahogany, wine, and flame. *How many more leaves will fall until one of my choices will call?* I make up this jokey jingle to poke fun at my earnestness in jumping through all the membership hoops, trying to control the outcome as much as possible. I push away fleeting pricks of honesty about the lack of any truly compatible selections. It's too early in the game to face that yet.

As I tool into my new neighborhood on the edge of my new town, smilingly I break into lines from a Scottish folksong learned in fifth grade music. The happy paradox of being both the catcher and the catch in the old song is why I'm coming through the rye.

Chapter 23

Today I am going to my first coffee with one of the two guys snagged in my net. He suggested meeting at a McDonald's, one of the older places on an old thoroughfare—which began to shine a yellow light on him for me. When I hung up the phone, I remembered having been at this McDonald's for some reason many years before. He had probably been there many times, too, and felt comfortable with its country pictures of pheasants and fields of cornstalks, as I remember it. This choice for a rendezvous does not bode well. Why would he pick such a dull, tired venue in which to make a good impression on someone he wants to know and, perhaps, date? Maybe he doesn't see it, or perhaps, he doesn't care.

A while later I am also invited to coffee with my other choice at the same McDonald's on a different day. Does this place have some hidden charm I don't remember other than the obvious ones of being cheap and easy to find?

Upon hearing their voices over the phone, my first reaction was that both coffee dates will be quite forgettable. I can't say exactly how I know but there was something telling in the startled yip with which they began each of their few sentences. They sounded like guys who were used to going miles and miles without uttering a word, and when they had to, the unaccustomed sound of their own voices made them jump.

When the day of my first coffee arrives, I pull on pressed jeans and a classic blue, Vee-necked sweater while I talk to myself as though prepping for a job interview. Giving myself a final once-over in my full length mirror, my inner girlfriend says, *Stay in the concrete here and now, Glenda. Use relaxed*

and friendly body language like the dating article said, and draw on your roots as a farm girl to keep the talk going. This last idea isn't pretense because I did grow up on a farm, but I don't want to start out on the serious and intellectual end of my personality spectrum or I suspect I won't get to know this guy. *Strongly* suspect. He can meet the rest of me next time, if there is another. If this sounds calculating, why yes, it is. My entire move is one big calculation.

At the first sight of the lead-off guy in the booth at McDonald's, I notice he has chosen to sit under a popular nature print of pheasants. It shows the hen busily scratching among the cornstalks while the jittery rooster flies up and away with its mouth open in what appears to be a squawk. This choice of seat is surely accidental, but what would a psychologist say?

My pick is of average height, I see, as he rises and we briefly shake hands over the table. His face is stiff, unsmiling, with deep wrinkles and a bronzed complexion like someone who spends time outdoors. I get a quick mental image of a wooden cigar store Indian. I should advise him about how bad the sun is for one's complexion—but no. He wears jeans and a plaid cowboy shirt with cowboy boots. How can I be interested in someone who wears cowboy boots outside of a corral unless he is sitting on a horse? But I remind myself to be brave and plunge ahead into this new world of nearly blind dates that I've paid good money to get into.

We order only the coffee, for which he pays; it's very hot and tastes completely ordinary. In the back of my mind I already know this meeting isn't going further, but decide I can use the practice of talking to strange men, as if I haven't done enough of that already in my life. Over the poor coffee, I do all the work, listening and asking questions to keep the conversation flowing. "How did you like driving a truck?" I ask, thinking he will describe something of what he felt about his job, even if he didn't like it and only wants to get it off his chest.

He, "It got pretty old." He puts a definite period at the end of that sentence followed by silence as I wait for more on that subject, but he gives me nothing else to go on.

Next, "Do you see much of your daughter and your grandchildren since the divorce?" Many grandparents, even men, like to talk about their grandchildren.

He, "She brings them over once in a while." Silence. Apparently there are no fishing trips or monster truck shows that build togetherness among the members of this family.

Me, "What do you like to do since you retired?"

He, "As little as I can." Well, that's entertaining. Silence. Silence. Silence. And so on until the awful coffee is cold and so is my brain. I give up trying

to flush more squawks out of this rooster, and stand up to mercifully end my scratching around for something to talk about.

After the second similar meeting, I know I'll never hear from either potential again, which is fine with me. The funny thing is, I don't feel bad even though the reality of dating will take more, ummm, shall we say, grit than my romantic imagination foresaw.

While a few more days go by, I sit at my computer and sometimes I can't stop my mind from wandering back to what I learned from those two guys. With my hands resting on the keyboard, I try to open my mind to the value of life experience education rather than college. But I know a relationship with someone like either one of them will never fly. I allow for the disadvantage that my management background and being a grad student probably made them unsure what to talk about. Men seem to be more tuned in to when they aren't totally comfortable and, therefore, aren't inclined to bother. The struggle to keep conversation flowing and fulfill social niceties isn't worth it to them as much as to women. These two made me feel a little like they were there to evaluate the conformation and performance of a horse they might buy. Although you can talk to a horse, you don't have to. You can simply poke it in the ribs to make it go.

I sigh and squirm a bit on my dining chair as I begin to see that carrying out my new plan will be harder than I thought. The first insight into what I have let myself in for is trickling down. I still want to reach my dating objective for which I've sacrificed a lot of time, effort, and money. But after combing through the available resumes, if these are the best, I should think about asking for a refund from the dating club.

As I toss and turn one night, I envy Felicia who is peacefully curled unmoving on the pillow next to mine. Happiness takes courage, or, as grandma would say, gumption. That's a better word than courage because it doesn't sound like greeting card happy talk. It has the gritty, gutsy tone that this game feels like it takes . . . plain gumption. Finding someone appropriate for my background, even though I'm being as open minded as I can, isn't going to be a slam dunk. But even as I turn over again and again, bothering Felicia who jumps down from her pillow, I expect to figure out a winning strategy yet.

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After several nights trying not to get too despondent over this slow beginning, I decide to return to *Dear Kitty* for advice since, if anyone ever qualified as lovelorn, it surely is me. "I don't mean to be a snob," I complain from across her blond wood desk as she frowns at me, "but isn't there anyone

my age among all those resumes with an education comparable to mine? No one selects me. Do I need to change my picture or my profile, or drop that phrase about poetry you didn't like?" When I did the initial interview with her, I knew my choices would be fewer than a man would have. But I hadn't expected to find such a wide disparity in education level from mine. Men with college experience were few and far between among the resumes, particularly in my age range. This is definitely a sign of trouble for me. "Don't tell me the bachelorettes have already latched onto the smart guys?" I go on, trying not to whine or sound like I'm blaming her for taking my money while fudging the truth, which is how I feel.

She sighs, drops her head like this is the last conversation she wants to have today, and pulls up my resume on her computer for another look, first at my picture. Do men notice decent upper arms or is that a girl thing because we know how much hard work they take? I have given up the boyish haircut I wore on the acreage in favor of this more feminine, curly style but left it naturally dark brown with some gray at the temples. "Perhaps I should try hiding the gray like almost everyone does. Or I could go to a professional photographer like my sister did, and try to make my picture more glamorous," I offer, thinking of that slinky black cocktail dress my sister wore in her dating club portrait.

"Your picture looks very good to me. I wouldn't change a thing. Let's read over your profile," she says, pulling it up on her computer. I wrote it to highlight the wide range of things both indoors and out that I like to do. After going over it she doesn't find anything here to improve, either. "We get new people every week. Keep coming in. You know, at your age," I wince, "there are fewer men than women available. You have to keep looking. Give it a little more time and then come back to me again, if necessary." In her chic, black tee and pants, she leans back in her black office chair with a small, black smile, drumming her fingers hard on the desk once with finality. As I look at her, I am reminded of a peckish blackbird that didn't want me trespassing in her willows and warned me away with the *chik* sound Kitty made with her fingers. I've managed to ruffle Kitty's feathers twice, and we both hope this time is the last.

Chapter 24

I wait a couple more weeks but nothing changes. I am still sitting around the house visualizing my perfect date, a technique advised by a manual from the library on keeping a positive attitude. The problem with this technique is that from one time to the next I cannot remember how I imagined a perfect date would act, which seems to defeat its power. The phone does not ring; the book is returned. I come home with a stack of four or five more library books on dating. As they lie scattered around my study table on top of my poetry books, I push my salad aside to write a few dating strategies in my diary notes. They start a new page just after the page describing how to transplant beetles that will destroy leafy spurge that dooms prairie grasses, and then I tear that old one out. Leafy spurge isn't my problem now.

Dating Strategies

Sign up for an adult education class in investments that would include both men and women. I've already taken one adult education class in how to do make-up, and bought new products to practice applying.

Volunteer to coach basketball at a Y. Pick one where men come, also.

Go to the wine tasting evening at a local liquor store. My pretty neighbor invited me.

Join that new fitness center. This is the one that keeps calling whenever they have a good membership deal.

Go to that alumni get together at the college watering hole. I never went there as a married student.

Finally, I lay the pencil down and pick up my fork, sighing resignedly as I eat my pasta salad.

I know Kitty wishes I'd stay out of her bleached blond hair, but I paid enough for the dating club's help that I consider getting advice to be part of the deal.

The second time I return to complain, Kitty immediately whips out the resume of someone with a college degree and high level work experience who has newly joined the club. The one hitch I can see is that he worked in seed corn. Will he be like the guy in cowboy boots, simply substitute work shoes and a seed corn cap, even if he did go to college?

Later when he and I talk on the phone to set up our first meeting, Don asks where we can get together since he doesn't know this area as well as I. I suggest a diner decorated in the style of the fifties which I had discovered in order to avoid the old McDonald's and be prepared for my next coffee date. It has a juke box and period pictures of cars with big fins and vintage movie stars, like pouty James Dean in cowboy hat, and Marlon Brando in the white tee shirt from *A Street Car Named Desire*. The hostess seats us in the back in a corner near a fireplace. This setting has nostalgic vibes, some privacy, and they even make pretty good coffee, too.

Seated across the red Formica table, I see a bulky man around six feet tall dressed in khaki pants, a regular shirt with a tiny blue and white check, and tasseled loafers which I couldn't help checking when we first met at the diner's entrance. His reddish brown hair is balding into a vee on his forehead. He has bright blue eyes and the somewhat pinkish skin typical of redheads. Given my vocal training background, I like his pleasant baritone immediately. The first thing he says after we're seated is, "Meeting in this diner is good, much better than going to a fast food place which is where I've met people before."

"I agree," I say, and we smile at each other across the table. I feel a little bubble of pleasure that I have made a better choice than the old McDonald's even if this place can hardly be called trendy. Because his resume said his first wife was a classy dresser, I have spruced up a bit in the sleeveless sweater from my picture worn outside a favorite pair of black cords, a narrow leather belt around my waist, and ballet flats that make me feel like dancing. By now I'm pretty good with my new make-up techniques.

"One of my favorite activities," he says, "is eating at good restaurants. I'm always looking for fine dining with good food and good service." *Wow, he talks!*

"What do you like to do?" he asks.

After the lack of interest shown me by the first two guys, this question

feels like heady stuff. However, I smile casually and say, "I like to read and write. That's how I got into graduate studies. I'm retired and a graduate student for the second time in my life. If I could afford it, I'd keep studying forever."

"My first wife died in an accident, but she was a graduate student in theology after the girls were in college; before we were married, she was an English teacher. This similarity was one of the things that made me interested in you. I thought I'd feel comfortable with what you were doing," he explains. What is it about men and feeling comfortable? At least it's working *for* me this time.

"I know you're also partly retired these days but what did you do before?" I ask.

"I was in hybrid seed corn research."

I remember my dad taking off his green and white seed corn cap and sitting down at our red Formica kitchen table to talk about corn yields with his neighbor who sold seed corn on the side. The memory makes Don seem very familiar. He goes on to describe in low key terms the high level position he'd held in research for an eminent eastern Iowa seed corn company. He did wear those work shoes and a seed corn cap like my dad, but into the field, not today to meet a potential date.

We discover we're the same age, have each grown up in small town rural Iowa, went to the same college at the same time though never meeting, and were married to pastors who died suddenly, among other similarities between our lives. While the dark fragrance of freshly roasted coffee permeates our conversation, we forge ahead to talk about activities we enjoy. On the classic juke box Elvis sings, *Can't Help Fallin' in Love with You*. As I glance at the sports headlines from the paper lying on the red leatherette chair beside our table, I mention my days as a high school basketball player.

"I have tickets to the college game on Saturday," Don says. "Would you like to go?"

"I would love to go." And I give him a whole-hearted smile that he returns. We both take a sip of coffee as though drinking a toast. The taste of hot coffee settles something inside at the same time something flutters around. It's confusing but I like it.

"It's nice to take someone to a game who actually wants to see it and isn't going just to be polite," he says with a smile that shines in his blue eyes. As we stand up to part, he adds one more surprise to this singular morning. "You know, you are prettier in person than in your picture, which was quite good in itself."

All I can manage in return is, "So are you." *Well, well, what a start!* I can't stop smiling all the way home.

Chapter 25

Tonight is to be our first date and I am ready very early. I have fidgeted with my hair, put away papers that were lying around, looked at myself from all angles in the make-up mirror and the full length one, cleared my throat, had a drink of water though my mouth is dry again, and yet there are still a few minutes before Don is to come. For game attire, I've chosen a red turtleneck sweater and the black cords, a good color combination for my mostly dark hair and fair skin. I'm glad I do aerobics because my heart is beating very fast. In fifty years, I've forgotten how nervous one can be on the first date. Do I really want to put myself through this? I haven't considered before how I'll feel about going on a date. It's a revelation—like sitting on your sled at the top of the run. The downhill reality is much steeper and scarier than you anticipated when ascending the seemingly gentle hill. A drumbeat of dread and breathless expectancy thumps inside the walls of my chest.

The phone rings. Surprisingly, I hear his voice. "This is Don. I'm in your driveway. I'm early and I know women hate to be rushed when they're getting ready to go out. I can come back in a little while. What would you like me to do?"

Yikes! He's here now. Breathlessly, I manage to collect my wits and answer, "It's OK. I'm ready. Come on in." What else can I say? Then I get myself together. This is exactly the truth. I am ready for my first date in fifty years.

With a skiff of snow lying on the ground, the baby blue sky and snow-blue shadows are blindingly bright as seen from my open door on this sunny day; the little breeze against my cheek is invigorating. A crow caws a harsh

announcement from among the cedars across the street.

Don pauses and for a moment we stare at each other, he at the end of the sidewalk and me in the frame of the door. In the week between our coffee date and now, I've had trouble remembering exactly how he looked. Today against the shining snow, I see a tall, stocky man wearing glasses under a black, golf cap with bill, red windbreaker, and khaki pants. It confirms my initial impression that, though he isn't movie star handsome, he is pleasantly acceptable looking with no distracting promontories or depressions, and I like his size. I'm surprised that good size seems to matter because I'm not tall but Stan and my dad, the men I have loved, each were. I'm impressed by his thoughtfulness in calling ahead before barging up to the door. This little incident makes me feel he's sensitive to the feelings of others. It sounds like something he learned from his wife and might imply a perceptive understanding of women. He starts walking toward my open door with his black tasseled loafers crunching on the snowy sidewalk. My mouth is very dry again.

Later, when the game is over, we have dinner and happily analyze the play while sipping a good red wine with a heavy white cloth between us. This leads to reminiscing about sitting in the stands to watch basketball games during the same years in college though never bumping into each other. "Do you remember when our underdog team played undefeated Kansas with seven foot Wilt Chamberlin?" he asked. "They were rated #1 in the country and we won by two points at the buzzer."

"Yes, and do you remember how we could get the old metal bleachers ringing by stomping with our feet? You couldn't hear yourself think after that ball went through the hoop," I answer, looking into his eyes. Those metal bleachers bounced as though they could break apart from the strain. Cheering voices clamored above the sound of their rhythmically clanking metal, and the vibration flowed all the way from the soles of my feet up to my temples. "I was a little afraid the entire stand might collapse with the pounding it was taking from all the jumping up and down." We stare at each other a long moment as that highlight from the past quickens the present, causing an arc from a shared treasure trove of memory to leap between us and charge a connection. I breathe a little faster.

Thus begins a patch of time in which I forget about looking through the red volumes of dating club resumes and stop wailing to Kitty about the drawbacks of what I find. Soon one night I lie back in bed, staring at the dark ceiling, feeling that at age ten or age sixty-four, it's the same. It's why I tip-toed into a world that was new to see what happened while my parents slept, and stopped dumbfounded to gaze at the marvelous spidery eye of the day. Now later on in life, it's why I burned the old dreams—gave up my

prairie, the horses and barn cats, grandpa's cottage organ, and my chorale, hoping to rise from the ash of the past. I have come upon the secret orchard where my heart might sing and spread its wings.

On another day I sit at my study table considering the gleaming concepts of the poet, Rumi. I read that he values the cycles of the moon. It moves regularly through the sequences of wistful to full blown across the passages of our nights. I look up from the page to gaze unseeing at the white wall, thinking that what is happening to me is the opposite. It's like one rare night when a shooting star burned a hole through the sky. It came bounding across the meadow in the stars above my maples, appearing suddenly unannounced from outer space, delicate and wild as a fleeing deer. My daughter and I, who were sitting on the deck, turned to each other exclaiming, "What was that?" That was like what I'm going through now. There's no capturing this spellbound run, no holding it back, no setting limits to this unfathomable new relationship.

Sitting at my walnut table, I push aside a political poem against the developing war because I can't stop myself from side slipping into a few lines of poetry that have to do with irresistible forces building in my body.

Blood Rush

*Your appetite flares like a rocket;
you want to be devoured.
It's hard to settle down
so charged by the moon of attraction
drawing your blood to high tide.
Stargazing holds you motionless,
no working out, no singing.
Like a tongue-tied bat,
you snap your teeth on the pale fruit of poems
that ripen blood red on your lips
while the owl hoots far away.
Returning the call, your heart wants the hunting.*

*Flying on this codeine sweet lowness,
you sense the irrational rules, that you're lighting up again,
soaring into the happy night,
like the pulse in your throat
wolfed by a tongue.*

Chapter 26

We were having dinner in a restaurant with white tablecloths and abstract art in dark frames on the walls. Don said, "I take it you're a liberal?"

I answered, "I consider myself fairly traditional with a few liberal outliers, but you can probably tell from my comments on going into this war that I don't side with this administration. I try to make up my mind on a case for case basis but most often end up voting for a Democrat."

He smiled, glancing sideways at me. "I've noticed that you're careful in what you say about politics. You don't have to be so careful about what you say to me. I consider myself an independent but I often vote Democratic, too."

I said, "Do you like talking about issues that have to do with politics and society?"

Surprised, he stared sideways at me for a long moment thinking about his answer, then turned his face fully toward me and forcefully responded, "Yes."

I knew it. A guy I can enjoy being myself with.

At home later, I record this conversation in my diary to remember. It's the key that turns our getting to know each other into a deeper level of sharing.

As we date, I feel him out about his beliefs, trying to not sound too opinionated about my own, which I sometimes am, believe it or not. We find we can openly discuss issues in the paper, such as gay marriage, a controversial subject getting a lot of publicity.

Driving home one night after darkness has covered the surrounding fields, oncoming headlights briefly highlight and then return us to the semi-obscurity of the car's interior. I confide that, "I've considered the proposition

that allowing gay marriage reduces the significance of hetero marriage. I've thought about mine. I cannot see how the marriage of two women or two men would have any effect on my own. I think it remains what it always was."

In the subdued light of the dash, Don smiles from the driver's seat as he thinks this over. "I agree. It seems better for having a stable society that two people in love should be allowed to make a lifetime commitment and have it recognized as that by the rest of us."

Through discussions like this we discover a similar world view which means everything if we are to have any future together.

Another time, wearing our red and gold sweaters, we return from a game to sit for a time on his leather couch with a fire playing beside us. Don shows me a card from friends who've been big game hunting in Africa. I look at the picture of the huge black, wild ox lying by the feet of the well-dressed hunter holding an expensive, lethal-looking rifle against his side. "How can anyone shoot a wild animal just for fun or excitement?" I ask. "I cannot understand it." I hand back the picture, making a face of distaste as I do.

Don stands up to lay the card with the picture face down on the white wood of the fireplace mantel. Returning to the couch beside me, he wrinkles his forehead and says, "But poor countries can charge high fees to do this. It puts people to work as guides and camp workers and lets them support their families. The government can use the taxes to boost the economy, and it encourages wildlife preservation." He frowns earnestly. "The money helps make their lives a little better."

I pause to reflect on this because I know the hunter is a friend of his. I want to state my disagreement but put my strong dislike into a moderate response. I've read these arguments in articles like those in National Geographic, and I understand that solving the problems of poor nations requires tough, complex answers. But I don't like the pictures of beautiful dead animals, and can never understand why people want to be remembered in such a pose. Finally, I lean back against the dark blue couch pillow and say, "Regardless of the justification, some things are just wrong, and this is one of them. Big game hunting is mostly an easy pot of money to throw at the problem of poverty which we don't know how to fix, and hunting is something we want to do anyway."

Don gives me a cryptic glance and then says, "So, this is the reasoned judgment of a former management analyst about a practical solution?"

As he says this, he pulls an excessively astonished look over his face, and I have to smile. "Sometimes a feeling about the rightness or wrongness of something trumps even reason, this *former* management analyst finds," I admit with a shrug.

We sit quietly looking into the fire for a time. Even though we have a different attitude toward the killing, I see that his approach to problems is objective, something I approve of and the approach I mostly use myself. But sometimes there's no use being rational because feelings are important as well and have to be recognized. For now, it's probably time to change the subject.

• • •

There are moments when I sit at my dining table in my purple flannel pajamas, pencil and tablet ready for notes, open book in hand, and find my mind running away to wallow in my new situation. I live in rooms arranged to my solitary satisfaction, studying and writing poetry that I choose for myself with minor, though important, input from my advisor. Now on top of all this, I have a fascinating new relationship. It's almost as though life hands me a strawberry sundae and says, "Eat all you want, it's good for you, and besides, there are no calories in it." Naturally, the skeptical chaperone inside sometimes warns, *If it's too good to be true, it may be.*

I make myself look down to read a page and get to work, but find my eyes drifting up to the white door in the hall where he'll arrive several hours from now. I've read that the longer a person goes without a partner, the more normal singlehood seems. I've been without one for over three years and when I see Don in that white door, it does feel abnormal, over the moon abnormal.

Laying my book down to take an unnecessary break from work I haven't been doing, I walk to the living room windows where I see snow is darkening the sky. The flakes keep falling like the passage of minutes on my computer clock, marking flakes of time that should be piled into reading poetry and writing drifts of annotations, but actually are counting down the moments until Don comes. As the flakes steadily fall, I reflect that in my life here, I've no one to consider except myself. Sometimes I do my laundry at 2 AM and work on poetry annotations while it washes and dries. Then I might go back to bed until noon and spend the rest of the day reading and writing, nothing else, eating Special K, not stopping to cook even oatmeal in the microwave.

Ending my fake break, I return to my study table to stare at the book lying face down on the table. Why do I want to trade this life of extravagant individualism, which many currant wives would die for, to go back to striking bargains with someone, or, worse yet, giving in to someone else's bone-headed plan? At least right now, they're my very own, freely chosen bloopers. Felicia jumps on the chair beside me and curls up on its black leather seat. I reach over to stroke her soft fur and feel the hum in her purring tummy. Well, I know the answer when I sit here in my purple PJs with only Felicia to talk

with. I remember life as simply better when it was shared with someone I could count on always, when I had someone with whom to trade ideas—day and night forever; when I had someone who made me laugh.

They say lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place, and actually finding someone to whole-heartedly love again must equal that same level of fluky fate. Maybe at my age, it'll turn out that I'm too set in my ways for anyone to please. Or that a woman in her sixties is too saggy and wrinkled to kindle romantic thoughts in a man. I hold my pencil in my mouth while I reach around to scratch my back and then rub my eyes. But what I am finding is that this feeling about Don is something I never expected again—and I admit it—at my age. Somewhere in a poem by Zagajewski, perhaps, I read something about cautious expectations. At sixty-four, I should be careful with this experience, like someone visiting an invalid. First, you find a gentle way to make the weak one smile a bit; then, if all is well, you can up the ante to go for a hearty, lean-back laugh. But as you experiment, you are always afraid this moment or the next will turn out to be only a relapse from fragile reality.

• • •

His hand lay between us on the starched linen. He was saying something about being always faithful to his wife though he'd had invitations on business trips to stray. Then he said, "I haven't been going out with anyone else since I met you because I want to see where this will go. After Mary, I need to find someone unusual."

There came a rushing in my ears. I made a wordless sound in response and spontaneously covered his hand with mine. At this point, the server, dressed in black, came and I withdrew it while we ordered. When she left, he reached across the table to take my hand again, saying, "Leave it there. I like it." Smiling, we held hands until the food came.

• • •

After driving me home one night, I ask him if he would like to come in for a while. "There might be a good basketball game on TV. It's still early."

We sit in the car under the street light for a minute. I don't open the door to get out. At first he says no. But I say, "You mean I can't seduce you with the art of basketball?"

He hesitates because he has to drive home to pack yet that night for a trip. But then he says, "OK. But I have to leave soon. I have a lot of packing to do."

"After all these years of loving it as a sport, who would've thought a basketball

game could almost be a proposition," I tease, as I now get out of his car.

Walking beside me toward my door, he says, softly, "If it was only basketball, I wouldn't come in," which I understand, of course.

I busy myself with wine, cheese, and crackers while he examines the books in my antique barrister bookcase. He turns in surprise, "Have you read these?"

"Not all of them, at least, not all the Shakespeare or some of the very old ones that were my Grandma's," I answer.

"You're—why you're an intellectual!" he states with a smile.

"Oh, those books are just to impress," I joke in embarrassment. "The ones I really read are hidden under my pillow."

We drink wine and talk more while we sort of watch a game. With the crowd roaring in the background, I move over to sit nearer to him on my green leather couch. "I can hear you better from here," I explain. He knows I wear hearing aids because they are easily seen with my short hair. He reaches out to hold my hand. Usually I like to jump into things, but tonight, I just don't know. This morning my weekly horoscope told me to relax, things will work out. So I sit still, not moving my hand though I want to run my finger around the whorl of hair that twists in a cowlick I have seen on the back of his neck. Its delicacy appeals to me, rather like the tufts of fur that feather in Felicia's ears. The analogy makes me smile.

My heart beats so crazily I can't concentrate on the game. I wonder if he notices the "Mambo" perfume I wear for the first time? I mean to raise the stakes on this date. At sixty-four we aren't kids with our whole lives ahead.

When he leaves tonight, he asks for a kiss, which I knew he would because I've led him to see it will be OK. We kiss once and then again, quickly. It feels so good to sink against him. I want to hold that kiss longer but he rushes out. I'm disappointed. As I wave goodbye from my door, I decide if he hurries a kiss next time, I will take matters in hand. Like a good point guard, I will slow down the pace to the speed where my teammate performs at his best. Then we'll see how he finishes the play.

As I save this signal evening in my diary, sitting at my walnut table, I reflect that, to be honest, I do want to sleep with Don. I look into the eyes of my framed portrait, hanging on the wall. My hair is short with slightly graying temples, and I wear a wine blazer and cream turtleneck sweater. One hand, on which I can see my white gold wedding ring, is covering the other. I was married for a long time and come from a generation for whom sex outside of marriage was a no-no. Though my values have become more permissive along with the rest of the population, sex is still a big deal to me. It can't happen until we have gotten to know each other, not in order to know each other, which is how it seems to work in the movies.

But Don and I have not been wasting time. While there is much about him I don't know yet, we have shared deeply of serious issues, and have found, for the most part, that we have compatible outlooks. And something else lies beneath our talk that has no word except possibly that of *lure*; there's an attraction between us that glimmers like a trout in the river, glitters with the pull of a beautiful smile, gleams with the chocolate of temptation. Poetry is all I have with which to express this yearning until it pulls us close enough to act out. But soon after the night of the basketball game, the touch of his skin plays against mine at an unhurried pace, irresistibly.

Dear Stan,

I'm beginning to fall in love with someone. It's a little like when I fell for you and it's a little different, too. After our life together I know what makes the basis of a good relationship. You taught me that it was love. By love, I mean sharing interests, having compassion, and showing consideration for each other especially in the many tiny things that make a life. You were much better at sharing than I. Now I have a chance again to practice what I learned first from you.

I love you, Sweetie, on this anniversary of your birth; I always will, my love of finished years.

If there's any way for you to let me know that you understand my new feeling and are sending me off with your same old love, I would like that.

Still your little gardener,

Me

As I'm writing Stan's traditional birthday letter in my diary, the doorbell rings, and a florist delivers a sunshiny bouquet. Of course I know who it's from before reading the little white card. I look at the graceful yellow petals and I know why he sends it though there's no explanation. He doesn't know what a double-edged day this is for me. It's a bittersweet anniversary of something that's finished, and the sweet birth day of something that's beginning.

I never imagined going through this again in my lifetime. I want to make the most of it. I feel myself lighting up again like in my poem. His voice attracts me. It's alive and energetic. The fresh coffee he made Sunday and delivered to the bedroom door was such a kindness. The flowers he sent, the lovely message they spoke, won my heart. Shoveling the snow from my sidewalk—these simple acts tumble out of him without a thought. They are little domesticities that make life gentler and cozier. If we separate, I'll miss that shovel, the coffee at my bed, and that's just the beginning.

Chapter 27

It's still early in our relationship but Don invites me to meet his two young grandsons, daughter, and son-in-law for the first time. I'm uneasy about what feels like a major test; I'm not ready to be put under the microscope of their critical eyes, or so it seems to me. But sensing that our relationship is about to take a step forward, I decide the meeting requires special preparation, like coloring the gray in my hair. This is what almost all the single women of a certain age do that I know, and I've been re-thinking that it would be fun.

The stylist said, "It'll take you back ten years." I still had one daughter in college ten years ago. I don't feel up to that anymore—the bills, for one thing, to say nothing of carrying her futon up four flights of dorm stairs in the heat of August. When the stylist finishes, though my hair remains ten years older, the over-all brown color looks like it might manage that futon. I feel like what I read that Dolly Parton said about her wig, "Why not, when I enjoy it." The pretty color helps with this feeling of nervous tension, the same as I felt eons ago before a big basketball game. I want to live up to the test even if today, it's only a test in my mind.

We drive north through snowy evergreens that thicken with the miles. I think of the Grimm's fairy tales that I grew up on in which Snow White's stepmother turns into the hunch-backed witch offering Snow White the apple. I'm only the girl friend; I don't want to be the poisoned bite.

As we pull into his daughter's narrow drive, my concern is that I am here with her dad where her mother should be. My girls were sadly dejected by the death of their father. Naturally, they will compare any male friend of

mine to him, and the friend will never be his equal. But I'm not ready to talk these thoughts over with Don. He could feel that I'm prematurely making much more of this invitation than I should be. I'll just see what happens.

We walk up the porch steps and Don knocks at the door of the two story white house set back from the street among tall trees. While we wait, I notice a small family of two adult-sized, wooden Adirondack chairs on the porch beside one that is child-sized over which dark windows look blankly on the street. The white snow and gray sky above the white house convey the austere, brooding feeling I remember from Ingmar Bergman films in which a drama of emotional tragedy is about to take place.

Don's daughter answers the door. He introduces us. "Hello," she says in a friendly tone and we touch hands. His daughter is taller than I and slim as a model with straight blond hair falling to her shoulders in a nice cut. Don has told me that she is a year or so older than my elder daughter. As I remember quarrelling with my daughter about the prom crowd's over-night in a hotel, this stranger becomes more familiar. Still, I search her regular features for her true feelings toward meeting me, but I can only guess what they actually are.

She shows us where to hang our coats and where to place our shoes so they're out of the way. I have dressed up in a black, fitted dress since we are going to a nice restaurant, and Don wears a blue blazer. As she and I quickly look each other over, I know that I could do or say exactly the wrong thing and not even know it. Meeting me, she may feel deserted by her father; she may feel she has to loyally protect the memory and status of her mother; she may even want her father to be happy in a new relationship at the same time seeing it as betrayal of her mother. I feel I am walking through a mine field. They probably are exploding around me already, starting from just the word *hello*.

Her husband with their two young sons comes down the open staircase in front of the entrance. He is tall and greets me with friendly brown eyes, then turns to warmly welcome Don. "Hi, it seems like quite a while since we saw you," he says, gripping Don's arm in a kind of half hug. We move into the long living room with book cases at the far end and a small unlit fireplace on the side wall.

The boy their father carries is around two years old, a chubby blond, and the other seems about five, tall for his age, with brown hair. The younger is shy and faces away into his dad's arms but the older immediately comes over to me on the couch and, without hesitating, begins to show me a magic trick he is trying to learn. It involves placing a coin under a hat and making it disappear, I see, as he gives me the trick's directions to read to him. Before I

know it, I am his assistant, and we are getting ready to present a show on the living room coffee table using his Grandpa's black billed cap and a quarter from Grandpa's pocket. Suddenly I am uncomfortably the focus of four pairs of eyes while the fifth pair is fixed on Grandpa's glasses that he tries to grab with a toddler's single-mindedness.

The trick's directions are hard to read without my glasses, but I feel shy about ruining any youthful impression by digging into my purse to find them. Focusing as hard as I can without squinting too much, I quickly read something unclear about misdirecting the audience's attention while somehow flipping the coin away before the cap covers it. I see my chance when the little boy lunges for the glasses and gets a good grip, bending and twisting them from around Grandpa's ears. As everyone's eyes turn to the hazardous extraction of the glasses from his chubby fist, I smoothly sweep the coin aside to land below the table before big brother sets down the cap. When the robbery attempt is resolved and the audience returns to the trick, big brother picks up the hat, and surprises everyone. Magically, the coin has disappeared. He looks at me and I look back. A quick little smile flies between us. He sweeps his grandpa's hat into a deep bow as the audience applauds. Later, I surreptitiously hand him the quarter to keep. It's a relief for me to have the trick over and be out of the spotlight.

While the parents go upstairs to get their coats, the two boys come over to where I'm sitting on the beige couch. The little one shyly lets me pick him up on my lap, looking at me from wide brown eyes. The older leans against my legs as we talk about the space ship he is building from Legos on the coffee table. Their casual intimacy is surprising. What have they been told about me, a stranger? From the corner of my eyes, I see that Don is watching his grandsons and me with a slight smile on his face. The warmth of their small bodies, the touch of their soft skin, and their innocent friendliness give me a hopeful feeling that the rest of the evening will be easier than its *tricky* beginning.

We drive together to a very nice restaurant decorated with dark paintings, a fireplace, and long windows hung with velvet drapes. The six of us are seated at a table along a side, but the room is crowded with a number of white-covered tables placed closely together and many people sitting around them talking loudly. The noise of china and silverware clatter against the wooden ceiling and walls. I dislike constantly asking people to repeat themselves, especially these strangers who probably judge everything I do. But a spontaneous response is nearly impossible for me in this turned up atmosphere. I feel dull and fear the others will see me that way, too.

"What is *soppressata* which I see is in this dish?" I ask the dignified, black-

dressed server who is standing across the table. His answer is inaudible over the restaurant racket. Frowning, I look back down at my menu. Now what to do? Make him repeat when his explanation may still be unclear, or hide my deafness and go on, not knowing if the dish will appeal to my taste, or not? It's Italian, I surmise, so surely I'll like it. But maybe not. The server's answer sounded something like *peppery pork*, nothing that mom ever made from our hogs on the farm, but I order the dish feeling my cheeks turn slightly hot. My assertiveness stumbled away from the moment I didn't put on my glasses to read the trick's directions up to this present one of not being able to ask the server to repeat what I couldn't hear. This whole evening I've felt uncomfortably unlike me. Has this younger brown hair taken me back all the way to being a self-conscious teen-ager?

Adding to my discomfort, Don has said little things that suggest his first wife could be a true comedienne and leading lady. While I can make fairly entertaining conversation, the amount of noise around our table is like a sound-proof barrier to me.

As the daughter begins to comment on something, the two-year-old starts to fuss, distracting his mother who digs through her purse for something with which he can play. He wants down from his booster chair. His dad takes the unhappy little boy on his lap and tries to interest him in the small plastic toy his mother pulls out. He becomes even noisier as she turns back to me. Anything she says further is drowned out by his crying. He subsides as the server brings more wine. I could say from my own past experience that going to a fine restaurant with little ones really isn't a good idea, but I'm just the girl friend, so I won't.

"Your Dad said you received a Masters recently. What was it in?" I ask. His daughter tells me something which I don't hear clearly, and then I drop the ball, tired of the difficulty of hearing and trying to connect. It makes me feel more and more like an outsider.

By the time my coffee and *crème brule'* are finished, the strain of listening is overwhelming. The two-year-old and I are both anxious to leave though he can cry about it. But when we arrive back at their house, the five-year-old wants me to read a bedtime story. Normally, reading to kids is a pleasure, but tonight, as I sit by the youth bed on the wooden kindergarten chair, the story of *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* seems to go on and on. Especially since I have to hold the book at arm's length and focus hard without my glasses. Finally, the child offers his warm, apple cheek for a good-night kiss and we can leave.

Back at Don's house, I drop my hearing aids into a small china bowl with a little clink that I can hear in the blessed quiet, crawl exhaustedly under the sheets, and pull up the olive green duvet, grateful beyond words to be in

this comfortable bed with the evening over. The only comment Don makes about it is, "When I looked over and saw my grandsons with you on the sofa, I felt... uhmmm." He turns away under the covers and sighs with apparent satisfaction. I let his mumble go and do not ask him to repeat.

While lying in bed in the hot room trying to compose my mind for sleep, I throw the cover back, attempting to relax the tightness that has clamped on to my temples and shoulder muscles around my neck. It comes from the feeling that the family talked together on a sofa near the fire, while I sat alone on an Adirondack chair looking in the window at them.

Pushing the silky sheets down to my hips, I mull the difference between the ease of meeting Stan's family years ago and tonight's developments. At this point in Don's family history, the arrival of a girlfriend must be of dubious importance compared to the death of a mother, the birth of grandsons, the acquisition of a new son-in-law—these family events made of clear-cut, lasting relationships. Am I a poisoned bite? Don's kids probably wonder how much they might *have* to like me, anyway. And then I can't think anymore.

• • •

Today Don has gone out, leaving me alone in their city house where his wife spent a great deal of time while Don wound down his job in their old town a few hours away. Supposedly studying, I take a break and wander around, stocking-footed, looking at Mary's things that appear to be in the same spot she left them something over a year ago. I am riveted by the large painting in the center of the house above the open landing of the stairs. It's a dramatic sketch in black strokes of a woman's face under red and yellow brushes of color. She seems to look out from below and behind a mass of black lines coiling around each other like a snake pit. Her face, rendered in severe, fine brush marks, is slightly cut off by this snarl of black lines. Don has mentioned that the painting was featured in a magazine and is somewhat famous.

This is art I cannot pass by without stopping to stare. It's more an impression of a face than a life-like portrait, but I cannot help being drawn into a story about what is going on. It happens that I've read about the woman who painted this, so I understand some of the significance in its cloud of snaky strokes and shadows. Dropping my chin into my hand as I stand before it, my memory is that the artist suffered from bone disease brought on by malnutrition from childhood poverty. This caused a severe disfigurement of her jaw for which she endured many corrective surgeries as an adult. The harsh, raw emotion conveyed by its black scrawling lines scrapes roughly

inside my stomach. I'd like to possess such expressive art for it portrays a woman who is coming through a difficult journey, like the grief I've suffered and persevered in. Given the painting's central location, I feel that Mary may have endured a similar struggle through a painful situation. Grudgingly, I feel we may have experienced something in common about life.

The house was Mary's, she who was sent to an eternal state of perfection by the out of control driver. Mary is everywhere in the house: in photos of all kinds on every surface, in the art on the walls, in the penciled notes on the bedside table; her name is on a nameplate on the desk where I study. Mary is the past perfect; I am the imperfectly mortal present tense, or so it feels like to me.

What if I were to say, "Don, are you ready to let Mary go?" But it's too soon in our relationship to ask that.

I close my diary and return to my studies at Mary's desk, sitting in Mary's brown fabric office chair, surrounded with floor to ceiling shelves on which Mary's photos are scattered among Mary's theology and ministry books. I try to read, but an image comes to mind of the cheese that stands alone in the middle of the circle at the end of the children's old musical game. As a kid, I thought the cheese stood alone because that was the way the song ended. As an adult, I've eaten enough cheese to know why the cheese stands alone.

Struggling to keep my mind on the page, my eyes are drawn again to the pictures of Mary's dark-haired elegance even though I don't want to look. Don told me that the daughters placed these pictures everywhere around the house. These memorials convey a message of love and keep an appropriate connection between the daughters and their mother. But the pictures feel exclusive to me, the one left out. Shouldn't Don have anticipated how unwelcoming the grief represented by the arrangement of these pictures would feel? Abruptly I close my book and go hunt for a movie on the bedroom TV, trying to blot out my unreasonable jealousy and the resulting shame that makes me tired and irritated with myself.

I flip through the channels thinking it was only an innocent invitation to spend the weekend with Don and his kids—go to a good restaurant, see a good movie. Though we're all in the same situation, who knew I'd feel like such an outsider poked into their circle. Then a small, still voice speaks up. *You're all trying to go on with your lives after losing someone you loved. You are each the woman in the painting.* And it comes to me that, in this way, I am not an outsider.

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Over the following months, we spend a couple more weekends with

Don's family. I wear my glasses when necessary and speak up when I need something repeated. Soon it is the spring day of my wedding anniversary.

Epitaph for a Marriage

Dear Stan,

Today was our anniversary, Sweetie. Don and I had a Danish roll with coffee, and then I came home to think and write about what has changed in these months that I have known him.

The continental breakfast of this morning recalls our trip across the cold, gray channel between Sweden and Denmark. We drank coffee to get warm and ate authentic cheese Danish on the ferry. Those singularly tasty Danish were unforgettable just as our delicious marriage finally became. We grew to love each other with passion and commitment, especially by, what turned out to be, the end. Anyone would think there wasn't a need for more love to grow between us after all those years, yet it did.

But with this anniversary, grief for you and all that time is gone. I love you and will always remember how we were, but don't feel the need for you that I once did. I am happy again; I sing for happiness. I anticipate the future and think of ways to make someone else happy. I'm back to normal, a whole person once more.

The thunder, flashes of lightning, and rain spattering sharply against the glass duplicate the storm on my wedding night represented by this anniversary. It is the send-off I've been waiting for, the sign that the circle has closed, that my dear husband, who has stayed beside me up to here, drops his hand and now makes way.

Chapter 28

Don has begun taking road trips through a few states to evaluate his seed corn plots in fulfillment of his part-time business contract. I ride along on one trip and drop off to visit my sister who is down in the dumps over a guy. In shorts and sandals, we sit on her comfortable deck chairs watching the speed boats on the lake, and sip a Chardonnay. She says, "The man I'm dating mentioned that I should go with him to Washington State where he spends a couple of months each summer. I was excited." She takes another sip while I wait expectantly to see what happened. "But he left for Seattle without saying anything to me," she goes on. "I have the impression that he calls when he thinks I'll be out and seems never to be at home when I return his call." She frowns and takes another sip. "At first he called me his princess but now he treats me like the ugly stepsister."

As I listen to my sister tell of her dating experience and compare it to mine, for once I am glad to be me. My sister is a year and a half younger than I and is happily divorced from a long marriage due to increasing incompatibility. She is taller with the blond, Shirley Temple hair I've always envied as one of those passed over when the curls were handed out. I mean, my hair is so straight that even the stylists admit there's no natural curl to bring out. Mom did the best she could, braiding mine in Margaret O'Brien pig tails with pretty ribbons. My sister got the fat finger curls that were the way little girls of our day were supposed to look. But when it comes to men, I believe that so far my luck has been better than hers.

I ask, "Did you have an argument before he left?"

“No. I thought everything was going well. One day I tried to call because I hadn’t heard from him in a while, and when he returned the call, he was in Seattle without apology. I didn’t suspect that he was gone.” She sighs. “On our first date he told me some magazine named him one of their *Most Eligible Bachelors*.” I give a snort as a magazine picture comes to mind of a guy wearing nothing but tight jeans so as to show off his abs and his butt. “I’ve figured out that he wants to keep that title,” she concludes. Smugly I reason silently that Don would never treat me so callously and with such disregard. I like nice abs as much as any other woman, but I’m too old, excuse me, *too experienced*, to choose them over the depth that is becoming more apparent in Don as time goes by.

As we watch the speedboats continue pounding across the waves, slicing the water into agitated vees, I recall reading in my books about dating that some men can be like these crafts. They skim across the surface of emotions with propellers churning, never allowing themselves to slow down and settle into deeper commitment. I am unhappy that she has run into someone who treats her badly, but my sister is cut from the same resolute cloth as Grandma, and she will soon recover and be fine again.

As the spicy scent of her glorious midnight purple and scarlet petunias tease my nose, I overflow with the anticipation of being with Don during these summer days. I’m like a kid about to dive off the high board. What will happen? What will it feel like? It’s scary fun. I want it to go on and on.

Chapter 29

This sunny morning we sit in Don's living room with the door open to the deck. Across the blue pond, a flock of birds swoop back and forth in swift loop-de-loops, zooming in for a low run over the waves, turning, and striking the water like little fighter planes. Don asks, "What kind of birds are those?" He thinks I'm the resident naturalist presumably because of my close encounters with woodchucks. I'd like to meet his expectation this morning because recently, in some other way, I seem not to have made such a good impression.

I answer, "Although they look dark from here instead of blue, my guess is that they're probably barn swallows based on what seems like a long tail and the way they dart over the pond. They don't glide like other swallows. They could be sipping water as they swoop down after the bugs." Don smiles, nods his head slightly, and leans back in his easy chair. *Glad I read Ranger Rick Magazine with my kids years ago and learned something about nature.*

Running my finger around the coarse rim of my brown coffee mug, I consider that he surely feels as comfortable sitting here in tees and shorts, idly talking, as I. But I don't want to break the spell of the morning by asking touchy questions about his feelings. I haven't forgotten the conversation we had last weekend that I wrote in my diary.

When we went out for breakfast, Don told me that being able to sit over coffee in the morning was one of the pleasantest things about retirement. I noticed he didn't say talking to me while sipping coffee was the pleasantest thing.

I wish we could talk over how we feel about each other. But last night when

I brought it up, he surprised me by saying there was "something lacking" but he couldn't say what. He said he felt "different than before." I had the sense that he hid his feelings when I asked about this because he wasn't more specific. As he answered, I noticed how he shifted his body a little from side to side by which I could tell he was uncomfortable. It was a sign I shouldn't push any further right then because he couldn't or wouldn't say more at the time.

After breakfast, we hang out together on this late summer day, drinking more of the hot, dark-roasted coffee and reading the paper to pass the time while waiting for the football game on TV to start. Still, I worry over that word *before*. Does *before* mean his feeling for his wife was different from that for me? Was *before* the time during last winter, or maybe *before* these summer road trips? What is different from *before*? Suddenly I have to jump up because I can't sit still next to Don any longer without nagging until he tells me the problem.

The noise of the lawn mower down by the pond floats in the open door where I stand watching two bare-footed little boys in shorts who are fishing from the pier. Picking up the watering can, I go on the deck to water the petunias. The rest of the world looks so peaceful, but it's not the caffeine that's making me jumpy. *Before* in the light of his blue eyes, I thought I saw an expression like the one in my own. We haven't taken a vow or made a concrete commitment, but I thought both of us wanted that eventually and had a tacit understanding that we were moving in that direction. But that was *before*.

Maybe all the caffeine gets me going because, returning to the kitchen, I work up the courage to ask again about the difference in the way he feels now. As we fill the dishwasher, he tries to explain. The most concrete criticism he comes up with that I can grasp is when he says, "You're not as level as I." He rocks one hand from side to side.

I ask, "Level—what does that mean?" imitating his rocking hand.

He puts down a plate to turn and say, "You tend to see things as more black and white than I. You don't see that complex issues can be gray. You're not as level."

Then he goes downstairs, stepping quickly away from the half-filled rack, letting it stick out from the counter into the aisle. Leaving something unfinished isn't like him. As I finish loading the plates and cups, I think about what he said.

I grasp that by *level* he means that I behave more according to my feelings about something than he even when the issue is a mixture of good and bad without a clear-cut choice. He is right. If I get emotionally involved, I can become opinionated and stubborn, believe it or not. I call it being pas-

sionate. Passion has fueled the energy to persevere toward reaching difficult goals—like the dangerously hot day I single-handedly in an unwise frenzy yanked out the eyesore of dead lilacs that densely covered the hill on the acreage. But the loss of Stan coupled with the balky brush cutter drove a fury that wouldn't let me back down. I would and could handle the acreage alone. Afterward, pride made me smile every time I saw the green hill of thriving bushes that remained.

Now I measure the soap powder and continue racking my brain about un-level behavior that might have annoyed him. We once had a mild disagreement over the hunting and killing of wild animals. Fancy, expensive safaris for shooting beautiful animals do have economic value, of course. But allowing them as a means to raise the income level in poor countries would not be one of my calls; I see them as simply unacceptable. Is this the kind of bull-headed morality about a gray issue that he's talking about?

I pause for a moment before bending down to pour in the soap powder, trying to work this out. Darn it, there's a history to my kind of decision-making, the kind that gains strength from emotional underpinnings. Didn't Southern bathrooms and lunch counters get integrated partly because the convention of separate but equal felt hypocritically un-equal to many? Some historians think the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the emotional tinder behind actions that flamed into the Civil War. We got out of Viet Nam for several reasons, maybe one of which was because people could see and understand from TV what flaming napalm did. Can anyone forget the iconic photo of the naked girl, mouth stretched open in a scream, as she runs away from her burning village?

These thoughts bring to mind that we had also quibbled over using nuclear power to make electricity, another gray issue I feel strongly about. I was frustrated that the Chernobyl melt-down didn't give him the same terrible feeling it always does me, and had tried to emphasize the cancerous effect radiation has on children's thyroids. But he accepts nuclear power as necessary to reduce CO2 emissions and our reliance on oil. "We'll learn to handle the environmental and health impacts," he said.

"Meanwhile, the cancer rate is so high that little kids from that area are even called Chernobyl invalids," I told him. Feelings are an important part of decision-making, I believe; they open up possibilities when reason says the status quo is locked in. I trust my feelings a lot. At my age, they've had a long educational process.

I glance around one last time to see if anything else should go into the dishwasher. The light-colored counter of the small kitchen is bare, and the blond wood table is clean. I close the door of the washer and push the

buttons. It begins with a noisy *swoosh*. For a moment more I stand there thinking that, even after I vaguely see what bothers Don, we seem to have almost no essential difference in our moral values though we may key on a different nuance. Surely there is something more that I don't get which he has not been able to explain. I rub my forehead standing by the dishwasher that is loudly splashing water inside, and then, picking up a book, turn listlessly toward the deck.

The letters on the page I study make meaningless patterns within the white space, shaken up as they are by bumping into my unsettled thoughts. I try to fasten on something remembered from my own journey through grief that might be affecting Don. He once said, "I didn't want to be one of those men who rush into a marriage with the first woman they meet after their wife dies. I wanted to wait long enough to have the worst behind me and to know what I was doing." He said he had dated before we met but when I asked how long he waited before going out, he had said, "Something more than a year."

Continuing to think about the process of grief, I reach over to dead-head the lightly scented, dark red petunias I planted in the pots on Don's deck. I remember that grief, as a fresh experience, had burned at the core of my life during the first year, fueling my emotions and reactions. In the second year grief hardened into a crust, becoming dry, bitter, and unyielding, choking and choking my life out; no matter how I tried to swallow it down, it seemed it was never going away. So, when Don told me how soon he started going out again after his wife's death, I had replied, "I never would have been ready for a new relationship in the second year because that's when grief ground itself into my life. But maybe men are different." Of course I don't believe it. And from my reading about grief, I'm told that being attracted to someone new, even years after a spouse dies, can sometimes bring on fresh spasms.

It's getting uncomfortably hot in the sliver of shade on the deck, but I go on tempting fate without sunscreen, my unread book in my lap, trying to read Don's mind as he hides downstairs with his computer. To bring up something as private as how he is handling grief feels too pushy and might drive him further away than one floor down. That had happened to me. A widowed acquaintance, who was retired from the ministry, had called after Stan died, kindly offering to help if I needed to talk. Even though I wanted someone to listen, he was too suspiciously eager, as though he had a personal problem that required feeling needed. I stubbornly wouldn't give in to my need to satisfy his. He persisted, calling three times until I made him stop calling.

By now the pages of my book are reflecting the sun in a white glare, and all the skin cells on my nose must be glaring, too. I break off my train of thought for the moment and go inside for relief, and to watch the football game which is nearly ready to begin. It seems that talking about football, as though it mattered, is a good escape from talking about what really matters.

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Still, I can't keep my mouth shut about my central desire which is to communicate more about our feelings for one another. This evening we sit on the deck watching the gray and white Canada geese on the pond, hoping to see a falling star. "I believe you do care for me but I don't know how much," I say, pulling a light-weight, red cardigan around my shoulders from where it hangs on the back of my chair.

"Can't you tell by the way I act?" he asks quietly after a moment.

"No, I can read something in your touch but I need to hear the words, too."

He doesn't answer, keeping his eyes on the family of five gray and white geese that float effortlessly along the far shore. After a long moment he says very softly, "You know yourself much better than I know myself." I blink because the truth of that hits me; there's nothing to say. Then he goes indoors, leaving me alone under the brightening stars in the cool, growing darkness, staring after him through the screen door that he slides shut.

The hum of the cicadas dies away while the chirp of the crickets gets louder, rising into a wave of excitement and then subsiding. The Canada geese waddle into their hidden nest among the tall cattails that soon will burst. On the deck the red petunias still blossom, but the brittle stems mean the juice is drying up, and they have lost much of their scent. Russet Indian Grasses, swaying in the bend between the pond and street, groan with seeds that are ready to fall. In the air of this mild night, I inhale an oaty, harvest-ready smell. Behind the small grove of maples and spruces, a crescent moon puts to sea with sails of luminous clouds. It drags a pale wake that my eyes trace across the limpid pond.

This night is made for the heart. I want to leap into his lap, whispering that he should know how he feels about me in the same way we know when summer is ending. If we see falling stars, it's the Perseids, the meteor shower of late August. When cool nights follow hot days and the hum of the cicadas dies out, fall is near. You see, you hear, you smell, and feel by which a season is told. The same goes for knowing yourself. Why can't he say what the signs of his feelings are telling him? This isn't the same as standing in a cornfield

taking notes from which to add up the plusses and subtract the minuses of one plot of grain compared to another.

I fold my arms on the smooth deck rail and rest my chin on my palm, staring at the shining path the moon lays thickly enough to walk on to the cattails of the far shore. *You know by the signs of your feelings if I'm the right one or not. Follow them one way or the other. It's really not that hard.* It is reasonable, though, to think that, if I had met him less than two years after Stan's death as he has met me, I might be somewhat confused and cautious, too.

Standing up, I turn toward the screen door through which I can hear voices on the TV. I want to try something by which to understand where we are and to deepen our relationship by talking about it. Restlessly I leave the clear moonlit night and step back into the living room that seems dim by comparison. Don is watching a football program on ESPN, another sure sign of the end of summer. On the TV screen a cartoon bottle of beer on a football field flexes its biceps and pumps a fist in the air. Spectators around the field cheer, "Bud power."

I step closer to the TV into Don's line of sight. In the background the commercial continues chanting as I interrupt. "Don, here's something you could try in order to know yourself better. I went through grief counseling back in the days before leaving my acreage. It helped me tie up the loose strands that were making it hard to move ahead even though time had gone by. Maybe talking to a counselor would help you clarify whatever is bothering you. Then we could talk about it more."

"Bud power, bud power," cheers the crowd in the commercial.

Don looks at me and then shifts his eyes back to the screen. "You're probably right. I'll think about it," he sighs dismissively, which I let pass for now, curling up on the couch, feeling better. I've broached the idea of counseling to get us through this breakdown in communication. Hopefully, this will be helpful to Don and, ultimately, to us.

The commercial ends and the screen changes. Football analysts sit around a table arguing about the strengths and weaknesses of the teams they have picked to do well this season. Don's body seems to slightly compress in his leather chair as he intently leans forward to follow their mock bickering over each other's analysis, squeezing out any distractions of the night for the time being. Sitting quietly in my dark corner, I hope he's heard what I said, but I can tell he won't listen to me anymore tonight. You gotta know when to fold 'em, the old song says.

Chapter 30

I'm excited as I enter Don's house through the garage door into the kitchen on the weekend of my birthday. What will he give me? It should be something special because we've been dating exclusively for many months and, recently, I gave him leading hints.

I put down my suitcase in the hall by the kitchen door and run back to my car for my books and my briefcase. I'm fueled by an experience from a couple of weeks ago when I tried to buy an album which was a collection of the music I loved during college and shortly after. Don went with me and I described the album to him in detail according to a review on the radio. But the store said the album wouldn't be in for a few more days. "I would love to have it," I said to him, disappointedly, when we left the store carrying only a couple of his mysteries. I had checked at the store a few days later, but the clerk said there were four discs to the set which cost around \$100, more than my budget should allow for something other than books—not even for shoes. *No, shut your mouth, don't even think about shoes.*

When Don asked one night at dinner what I wanted for my birthday, I didn't mention the album on purpose because it was expensive and asking would make me feel greedy. I did answer him with a smile in a meaningful tone of voice, "Oh, just think about it. You'll come up with something."

Entering his living room this afternoon on my birthday, I hear the shower down the hall, and over the noise of the water, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, by the Byrds. He is playing a CD from my album. What a great way to surprise me. Surely, it's a sign that he really does care in spite of his recent ambiguity.

Uh-oh—what is this? The album lies unwrapped in plain sight on the coffee table. This is puzzling—but he bought it at the bookstore and he’s a guy; he doesn’t know how to wrap it. I sit on the plumb leather sofa listening happily to the CD until he finishes the shower and enters the living room wrapped in a white towel. “You bought *The Folk Years*,” I say, excitedly, reading the title.

“I saw it in the store. It has many songs I remember,” he says, sitting down beside me and picking up the box.

A moment passes as he looks at the list of its titles. *Why don’t you give it to me?* After another second or two, I move closer to point to the songs on the album cover, impatient to get my hands on it. “In my sophomore year we sang along with *Tom Dooley* so constantly I got sick of it,” I smile. Then I lean back, fidgeting with my hands, wondering why he’s taking so long to hand it over, beginning to guess that something is wrong.

“It’s your birthday. Where do you want to go to dinner?” he asks. I look at my album that he casually drops on the table. From the depths of disappointment, the realization shuffles into my brain that it’s not my birthday present. My shoulders slump though it occurs to me that he must have something different to give me. But I’ve made this album into a litmus test of his sensitivity toward me. Holding back tears to take a couple of deep breaths, I force myself to remember that the evening isn’t over yet. I try to believe that he probably has something equally as good up his sleeve, but the tears still threaten to slide down my cheeks.

We’ve made dinner a little more special by dressing up. Don wears his navy coat and I’m in my black dress, more formal than ordinarily. In a high-backed booth, we sit across a white linen table on which a candle burns in a glass votive beside a sprig of burgundy mums. Voices buzz around us as I pick up a heavy silver fork and play with it a little on the white cloth. Looking around at the large red and blue stained glass window to our side, I want to test him. “I like listening to *your* album. Do you remember when I tried to buy it but it wasn’t in the store yet?” I turn to face him directly.

He looks surprised, raises his eyebrows, and says, “No.”

I nod my head, pausing a moment to let him think about that. “You were with me. I described it to you because it wasn’t in yet.”

He looks down at the cloth, frowning, as he says, “I don’t remember.”

Now I stare at the blank white tablecloth while a playback of my telling him runs through my mind. *Is this how little you pay attention to giving me something I really want for my first birthday since we became a couple? You must not care very much.* I continue to push the fork around on the cloth while this thought picks at my feelings until they are raw as Don’s prime rib. The tears are very close and hard to blink back. My puppet tongue goes on talk-

ing like all was well though my throat aches so that my perfectly prepared, petite filet mignon goes down practically un-tasted. I smilingly indulge in the key lime pie like one does for a normal, birthday dinner. But I really long for the solitude to cry over this neglect at the same time I strongly consider throwing the vase of mums at him and walking out. Still, I don't want to make a scene that could have unexpectedly bad consequences. I learned to be cautious about clearing the air years ago from my job of managing workers and dealing with clients. It's best to have thought through likely consequences before tipping over a vase of flowers on someone's white dress shirt though *it would feel so good. But see, I'm not totally un-level.*

Later in bed, I lie on my side, staring at the night light, and worrying about how to get things out in the open without possibly breaking us up? It comes to me that, sadly, our relationship is too flimsy to withstand switching on the light of honesty.

The next day as I study at his long, cherry table, Don brings up the subject of my present again. "You haven't said what you'd like for your birthday." He is watching a football game on TV with his back to me and has to twist around to see me, holding his place by an arm over the sofa. Our eyes tango in sliding glances, never quite meeting. In the pause while I think about this, his head turns back to the screen. I look down at my small book as though considering what I'd like. Without lifting my eyes, I can tell that he looks sideways again, waiting. "It's OK. Dinner was enough," I shrug petulantly, pushing up the sleeves of my denim shirt, giving up but wanting him to suspect it's not really OK. Reverse psychology is what it's called, if he would just pay attention.

His head returns to the football game as I stare at his solid back. *OK, I give you credit for trying to find out again, but it doesn't seem to be your focus. If you don't have something in mind from your own observation, I'm too let down by what you've missed to make a suggestion.* Looking down at my book, I continue pretending to read. *Yes, you're watching football, but couldn't you take the initiative at the quarter break or the half-time and make a suggestion, or offer to take me shopping for something? Is that asking too much for your girlfriend's birthday?*

Looking up, the cute cowlick in the back of Don's hair softens my complaint while he remains intent on a long pass play. This lack of a gift or idea about one brings to mind a birthday surprise in the long ago before people used credit cards for money they didn't have. I had picked out a beautiful, artificial raccoon coat in the summer and put it on lay-away, planning to have it paid off before Halloween. But when I opened my birthday present in early September, there it was, nestled down in the white tissue paper, furry

and luxurious. While I gazed down on it through tears of wonder, Stan put his arm around my shoulders, as sweet and warm as the coat. He had picked up on how much I'd enjoy wearing the beautiful coat during chilly football nights. Today the tears pop into my eyes with the memory, not only of the gift, but of a time when I was so important to the one I loved. *Where is Don's attention? It isn't on me.*

This is the third time he has missed reading my mind, and this is it. I will return to my house right now rather than follow my usual routine of leaving on Sunday. My birthday is spoiled, and sobs are about to force their way out of my chest. As I gather my books, Don turns around to look fully at me, knitting his brows perplexedly.

Walking toward the bedroom to swiftly pack, I say over my shoulder without looking at him, "My choir has begun again and we have to sing for the early service. If I go home now, I won't have to get up early tomorrow and drive." Later I'll wish I'd brought up my feelings, but I'm not ready to openly tell him how disappointed I am. *I'm afraid of what you might say.* While I pass back and forth in the bedroom door to quickly pack, throwing my pretty black dress in the bag any which way, I can see that Don continues to glance back and forth between me and the TV screen, but doesn't ask if something is wrong. I silently keep an impassive face as though everything is OK though, actually, I'm a little nervous about what to say if I have to explain what I'm doing. The difference between packing to leave now and my usual routine should be contradictory enough to make a clear statement about my true feelings, if he thinks about it. As I lug books, briefcase, and suitcase to the car, and say goodbye with only a perfunctory kiss, I can't tell from his silence if he gets it or not. *I can't read your mind, either.*

Automatically covering the miles to my home, my brain keeps harping on the ways he has let me down, a kind of self-flagellation. *He didn't see how much that album meant even when I described it so he could tell. He never surprised me with a gift that he thought up. He never seemed to really care about my reason for not making any suggestion. He didn't even ask why. Maybe he was glad he didn't have to give me something, but that's not like him.* And then it starts over again. As I drive swiftly by the fields that are nearly ready for harvest, it's evident that he values me less than *before*. This change between us feels almost physical, like moisture drying up in the stalks of yellowing soy beans that are getting more and more brittle at the end of growth.

At home by the fire, Felicia hops up beside me on the loveseat but I can't stop thinking about my birthday. When I left, Don could have at least said he was sorry for the lack of a gift. Earlier last summer he had surprised me with a couple of expensive dresses for no occasion at all. Nothing could

have made it clearer that his feelings for me have changed from *before* than having no birthday present.

I stroke my fingers along Felicia's jaw recalling my thoughts on my sister's deck when our relationship seemed to be going so well. Felicia purrs loudly which I can feel within her small, furry body. *Did this difference in his feelings come from something he thought while walking the long corn rows to study his research plots?* I can imagine from my own youth how the pointed, green leaves with sharp edges would scrape at him as he trudged across the clods of dirt from one row to another. As he thoroughly scrutinized the tall green stalks with the trained eyes of a lifetime, he would have jotted down notes for judging the merits of the various plots. Later, he would have sat at the desk in his motel room adding up the worthwhile and the worth less characteristics of the various hybrid corn plants. Which line should be continued, which one dropped? *Something about that research process must have somehow tipped him away from me, but what was it?*

Mindlessly stroking Felicia, concentrating on whatever has gone wrong, the signs of over-stimulation—her twitching tail and laid-back ears—fail to catch my notice. She quickly turns her head and grazes my knuckle with her teeth in warning. I yank my hand back as she jumps away, and then settle down to stare again into the fire as she curls up on her rug. *The worst of this is that a door is locked so tight in Don that I'm scared to ask him to open up and let me inside. It seems he has gone to Seattle without telling me. He only leaves messages I can't understand. I read somewhere that words create worlds. Don says that he can't explain what has changed or what is missing now, and won't say more because "the words might be wrong." He said he doesn't "know himself the way I know myself." How can I see us as he does without more words? Talking about it could make such a difference.*

Brittle, broken questions bend and break in my head. The gas tongues flame steadily in the fireplace, never consuming the artificial wood; words of love crowd into my throat where they lie unspoken in cold lumps. The only sounds in the room are the groans I catch in the tissue for my tears.

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Not long after my birthday when we're in bed together, I feign sleep but cannot keep from sobbing, choking the glob of air as achingly far back in my throat as possible. My face is turned away but Don lays his arm across my waist and whispers, "Glenda, I'm afraid I can't give you what you want, what you need."

This cannot be true, and I let the hard sobs out, not wanting to accept it.

“Let me be the judge,” I gulp. He says nothing more but the warmth of his arm across my body comforts me. *Surely we can still work out this breakdown if we could start the counseling I mentioned a month ago.* Then we lie like that until sleep comes.

Chapter 31

A white staircase with dark steps looms in the shadows of the hall. At the dim top it turns to the right, out of sight. I slowly begin climbing the stairs, passing more deeply into the shadows, purposefully moving into a dark room at the top. I walk straight ahead to the furthest white wall, turning around to face the door. Suddenly, a woman dressed in a long, black dress enters the room, and slowly, but inexorably, strides toward me.

Two other women, who were already in the room though un-noticed until now, stand up from where they were kneeling under long, flowing, hooded robes. As they leave the room, they turn their heads toward me over their shoulders but the darkness and the hoods obscure their faces. "Don't leave me," I implore, as they turn away and hurry out.

In the moonlight the dark woman has a white face. Her glittering black eyes are such pools of menace that I shrink backward. She lifts a hand above her head in which she holds a large, very sharp dagger pointed at me. She continues slowly walking forward. I scream, "Help! Help!" and awaken with the vocalized shout choking out of my throat. In my darkened bedroom it's possible to see that no one is there. The vivid dream makes the nape of my neck tighten as though my hair is being pulled into braids. I quickly swing my feet to the floor and walk into my living room to see if anyone is in it. Something in the dark comes bounding toward me so suddenly that I squeal before I recognize that it's Felicia. With fast-beating heart, I pick her up and quickly look around. No one is hiding in the quiet room where I stand for several moments, clutching her warm little body to my heart.

Turning on the light in my kitchen, I get a drink of water, and slowly return to bed as the beating of my heart slows down, pondering who my assassin could have been. The face in the nightmare was twisted into such a murderous mask that I can't quite identify her although something seems familiar. I've seen that black-haired, dark-eyed woman somewhere before. There was that face in the painting at Don's other house, but my memory tonight is hazy. Strangely, the face in the dream reminds me more of the evil Queen in the movie about Snow White which scared me dreadfully as a kid. Watching that movie as a young child, I screamed then when the hag face of the witch looked out of the mirror replacing the Queen's.

Who are the two women who abandoned me even when I called to them? Their faces were obscured by the hoods of the long gray robes that masked their shapes. That staircase is familiar, too, but I can't place it.

Finally, I write this line in my diary about the most frightening, most vivid dream I've ever had in my life. What does the dream mean? Who wants to kill me?

Chapter 32

Tonight we are meeting at Don's old house in the town where he lived and worked most of his life. He has been cleaning out this place at least one garbage bag a week, a goal I suggested when he complained last year that he wasn't making progress. As with my own moving experience, his mementoes, like white fabric baby shoes and photos of three little blond girls and their mother in a long dress, most likely brought stabs of pain, but he has never said. As we stand there surveying the basement, once stuffed with cast-offs but now disclosing its bare, concrete walls and floors, I say, "Finally, you've made a clean sweep of it." He nods, keeping his eyes intently on the vacant space. There's a heaviness about him that suggests something else hasn't been emptied, but he doesn't explain.

We're going out tonight for dinner with my friend, an author who's in town to do a book reading. When we pick her up at the hotel, I recognize her by the glorious curly red hair even though we've not seen each other for a couple of years. Once we were suite-mates in a writing program, and we have a good time at the meal catching up with each other. Don listens quietly to our chatter but at one point he asks her, "You said your writing teacher at that course didn't seem to like the drafts of your book very much. How did you keep going in the face of this expert's disapproval until it was published?" I'm curious, too, because she had complained about this teacher's attitude over her teacup when we first met in the kitchen of the suite.

"It was because of something I read in Winnie the Pooh, I think. I read Winnie when I was a teen and some of it stuck with me," she smiles in reply.

“What was that?” he asks, laying down his fork to focus on her answer. I stop eating, too, and listen because beginning writers like me have a hard time going on in the face of criticism.

She lays a warm hand on my arm and smiles. It feels like she knows all about the writer’s mantra that *no one gets me*. “It was something about people with brains don’t know anything. Listen to your heart.” Then she gave a little shrug.

Here’s a saying to bury in my brain for digging up when I need it. She brushes a strand of red hair behind her ear in a gesture I recognize from those nights in our suite kitchen, talking about writing. Don frowns a second, thinking the Poo-ism over, and then settles back to listen some more.

After the enjoyable reading, we drop her at the hotel to drive back to Don’s old house, he in enigmatic silence, me prattling about anything to fill the gap. Usually we have extensive conversations. His silence is perplexing and somehow ominous. I babble, “The city has planted attractive plants in the median. Your town is lucky to be growing when so many little towns are dying.” Silence. “I tried to read her book but, much as I like her, just couldn’t get interested in it. Have you tried?” No answer. Now I become irritated that he is being so distant after what seemed like a nice dinner with interesting conversation. Through me he met a best-selling author, a celebrity whose book garnered rave reviews and will soon be turned into a movie. How often does that happen? Shouldn’t he be a little nicer?

I choose to become annoying by continuing to chatter even though he doesn’t want to talk. Jerking my head at the plants outside the car, I criticize, “Your town should have planted prairie plants; these will probably die for lack of water.” Don doesn’t respond to this jab, either.

We arrive at his house and I settle on the familiar beige couch with a glass of beer like other times, desperately hoping, in spite of his strange silence, to discuss the counseling he is finally doing. He gets another glass in which to pour a drink for himself. This will be the third week he has gone to these counselling sessions. As I tried to find a way back from the growing silent divide between us, all my hopes for better communication went into this egg basket of counselling. Its little chicks peck at their shells; they want to hatch out in discussion between us. But this counselling hasn’t included me, which may be appropriate for now, but I feel unfairly left out, and worried. After all, it was my idea to get the counselling to help us talk about our feelings, yet we aren’t.

Tonight his reticence is twisting a kink in my stomach. He walks over to stand looking down at me as I take a quick swallow to wet my dry mouth; *he’s ready to talk*. “There’s something I have to tell you,” he says. I look up at

him, see the slump of his shoulders, the way he looks at the floor, and know. This is the moment I've wanted and worried about at last.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

He frowns but comes right to the point. "I have to go out with other women. My counselors say that's the only way I'll know how I feel about you. They say my problem isn't grief. I still want to see you, just not exclusively the way we've been doing." His eyes slide over my face and drop back to the floor. In his voice there's an urgency and firmness I don't like.

I stare up at him standing there with a glass in his hand, shifting slightly from side to side, looking miserable. Although I knew something was weighing on him tonight, still, I am shocked. The irony of my comment about his having made "a clean sweep at last" comes back. I expected we would finally talk about the difference between now and before, but it seems I won't get a chance to have my say. He thinks I don't measure up in some way and is going to find someone else without telling me why. The oblique darkness of the glass patio doors reflects him with downcast eyes and me shifting to gape into their mirror. He has reached this conclusion without hearing me out. I want to leap off the couch and shake him! And then flee to my house in the night. I'm not staying here. But from somewhere in the floodwater boiling over my head, a quietly stern, small voice says, *Settle down. Be in charge. Do not continue the silence. Have your say before you leave. Now or never.* Somewhere inside something gathers up the reins of control.

I haven't met his counselors but I can imagine exactly how this judgment came about. Turning to stare him in the eyes, I say, "Your counselors are wrong; I know you better than they." *Those naïve babies.* His eyes widen; he is giving me his full attention. "You can sit there with them and coolly talk about Mary as though your grief was in the past. But I've heard the sound of love and longing in your voice sometimes when you mention her. You may have fooled them and even yourself, but you haven't fooled me." He looks at me alertly and then at the floor, thinking it over.

Finally he softly says, "I'm sorry."

I ask, "For what?"

"I thought I was ready to meet someone. I thought I was ready."

Now is the time to get all of my pain in the open because, if we never talk again, what happened between us may be wrapped up in this single moment. I say, "Lately I have felt so second-rate. If I said I can't cook, which was mostly in comparison to my mom who is world class, you said Mary was a good cook when she wanted to be. When I said I went to a counselor once to try to work out an issue with a daughter because it

seemed the wise thing to do, you said Mary always had a good relationship with her girls.”

“You rarely gave me a compliment but you said she was beautiful and you were crazy about her. You knew how I felt about these comparisons because I told you months ago that I couldn’t compete with a ghost who could do no wrong. After knowing me nearly a year, you never said you liked being with me until just last weekend. ‘You should know this,’ you said. It came out more like an office memo than a compliment. ‘FYI colon, ‘you should know that you’re always attractive and enjoyable.’ “

We sit as far apart as possible on either end of the beige sofa. I keep turning my glass around and around in my hand. It feels slippery from the condensation and would be easy to drop on my black pants. I’d like to throw this beer at his blue blazer and make a mess that would give him something to remember me by. Don continues to look down at the plain carpet. He doesn’t want to face the anger and pain he can hear in my voice.

The Niagara of my suppressed grievances will not stop pouring out, the worst has finally happened. “You once said that whenever I tried to pull you closer—which you allowed was normal and exactly what I should try—you didn’t know why but you pulled away. When you held me with your eyes closed and I sometimes asked you to open them to look at me, it was because I wasn’t sure you really saw *me*. Your eyes were turned somewhere inside your head. Hear this now; I say *I* am unique and interesting, exactly what you said at the dating club you had to have.”

Don still sits with his eyes on the floor, slightly hunched over in his blue blazer, as though a weight is on his back. I pause to breathe, and then go on because I can’t stop yet or I will never get to say all that’s been on my mind. “You say your feelings are a mystery to you and you don’t know how you feel toward me, that I liked you more than you liked me. Still I hung on because everything felt so right when we were together. If you would only talk more about your feelings even if ‘the words might be wrong’ . . .” Then I stop talking to stare at him for a long, heavy moment. His lips are slightly parted but he seems to have stopped breathing and is still looking at the floor. I shake my head and sigh, turning toward our reflection in the oblique patio glass again. At last he looks up and our eyes meet in its dark mirror. “How is it that I can love you but you don’t love me?” I almost whisper.

A few pulse beats go by as neither of us moves. Then it’s impossible to be in the same room with him any longer. I quickly put down my drink, in control enough to not spill it on my silk shirt, run upstairs, and haphazardly throw my things into the suitcase, *wrinkles be damned. There are my jeans. Should I change into them to drive home? Home—and I was so proud of this*

evening for what it said about my being unusual. How did it turn into such a disaster?

The jeans get thrown in as I take one last, wild-eyed look around to be sure I'm not leaving something behind in his daughter's former bedroom, then run downstairs and out the front door. *It's dark but what would the neighbors think if they saw me at this time of night, dragging my suitcase behind me with parts of panties and a bra sticking out? Not that I've let them but I could have!* Don offers to help but I toss my suitcase in the trunk while he turns away to stand silently by the car's front door. Even now I hope he will try to stop me from leaving as I slide behind the wheel. For one long moment we look at each other in the car's interior light. *This could be the last time.* His blue eyes look sad to me. In my mind I see a slow motion scene of a frame house in a tornado with the boards blowing off until it collapses in a heap on the ground. *How did this happen?*

After all my scolding, I still haven't gotten to say the words that are stuck in my throat, hurting so much, but I'm too proud to sound pitiful. I won't beg. Finally, I squeeze back all of them except, "You are making a big mistake," which sounds like a kid in a playground squabble, but it's all I will let out. Such sad words to leave crumpled on the cement between us while the beautiful ones stick in my throat, still waiting for the right time which now will be never. I back my car out for the two hour drive home. The street names whirl by in my headlights as I speed out of town. *So much for expert counselling to help us talk. It was as good as telling him to walk on moonbeams.*

At home, sleeplessly sitting at my table in my purple pajamas, I write in my worn diary: *I'm grieving, and so I am giving myself this time to put everything down I can bring myself to remember about us. If I'm as honest as possible with no holds barred, perhaps I can trace what went wrong and begin to understand what came between us.*

Chapter 33

Early one morning shortly after my midnight ride out of town, I lie in bed thinking how Don and I were going to attend my daughter's wedding at the end of the month. Both daughters live too far away from me to have become familiar with Don although the last few months have been too stressful for this to have happened. When Don said about himself, "I couldn't find the right words," I felt exactly the same way about explaining our broken relationship to my daughters. It seems that in trying to figure out how to be single, I've lost the knack of motherhood. With this, I flop over on my stomach, pulling the comforter over my ears. Still somehow, I'd hoped against the odds that the wedding would bring the four of us closer together. How that could be is impossible to say.

After a few moments of drying my eyes on the maroon sheets, I go into my small kitchen to start making the coffee and toast. While sitting at my table eating breakfast, I have a blurred memory of Don always being reserved about going to the wedding. But this morning I realize his attitude was part of the pulling away that he had mentioned. Setting down my cup to look for the number of the hotel where I'll stay at the wedding, I shake my head over such complete blindness to anything but my own la-la land. *You have to get real, Glenda; you have before, you can again. The truth will set you free. Won't it?*

After changing my reservation so that I'll share a room with my mother, I sit by the phone a moment longer thinking how lonely attending this wedding will be without Don. But before giving in to the tears that are threatening to

spill, I have to phone my daughter to let her know that only I am coming.

“Mom, what happened?” she asks.

“Don said he thought he was ready for a new relationship after the death of his wife. He met me right away and we soon began dating exclusively. Now he wants to date other women. I’ve known something was bothering him for a time but I couldn’t face finding out what it meant.” *Me, the realist, ha!* I pull on a cuticle, trapping the phone under my chin. “He says he still wants to date me, only not just me like before.” My voice barely squeezes through the clenched muscles in my throat; it comes out sounding very thin. I suck the torn cuticle, the pain of which distracts me a little from giving in to the sobs.

For a moment the hum on the phone line increases as she silently considers my vain effort to salvage some pride. Then she advises, “It sounds to me like the old, ‘we can still be friends.’ Face it, Mom, he is moving on. You must, too.”

Oh my! I should have expected the bare truth from her as she was single long enough to have experienced what these pat phrases mean while I’m only a beginner. Rather than answering naively that he really meant what he said, all I can gulp is, “Maybe.” But now it’s time to change the subject because this is too much root-canal-realism. Swallowing hard, I say, “Enough of me, how are things going with the wedding?” To ask that of a bride is like showing a store of five dollar designer shoes to a shopaholic. And away we go. What a relief.

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The day before the wedding, my nearly ninety-year-old Mom and I check into our hotel, and then we head to the restaurant for the bridal shower luncheon. In the restaurant, a number of women are seated at a white, linen-covered table with my two daughters at one end quietly discussing the details of the shower before it starts. Looking around at the noisy group gathered for this wonderful occasion, I put on a smile and tell myself to be happy among these women whom my daughters and I have been friends with for a number of years.

The bride is the taller of my two daughters, nicely turned out in a casual sweater and dark pants. Her wavy, chestnut hair, which reminds me of her father’s, is loose and long. Her sister is petite with thick, curly hair the warm brown of coffee lightened by a dab of cream, and swept back from her face in a medium long bob. She is dressed up a little more in a suit because she is the Mistress of Ceremonies. We guests are dressed nicely in autumn colors

and fabrics, talking fast and loud, trying to catch up because many of us haven't seen each other for a while.

From my seat in the middle of one side, wearing my favorite dress of wine fitted tweed, I gaze at the walls of the restaurant which are hung with gilt-framed, Victorian pictures. A few in different sizes are of various cupid babies posed with bows and arrows. Directly over the vivacious bride is a large oval of a woman in a long, filmy dress holding a bouquet of roses with a letter pressed to her heaving bosom. Another picture across the room has tiny, nearly naked figures cavorting around an idealized picnic laid on the grass while fat red cattle with skinny legs graze nearby. Until recently, the nostalgia these pictures project would have seemed pleasantly apt for this bridal shower. But today, they are too sentimental and phony for me. I can't look anymore and try to concentrate on the guests and my daughters.

My older daughter, as hostess, gives a short welcome to begin the luncheon and introduces special family guests. Then she pauses, looking down at her sister who smiles back. Laying a hand on her sister's shoulder, she says, "I know you've been looking forward to this and I'm extremely happy for you." They share an intimate smile while I feel teary and inexplicably left out. She concludes by holding up her wine glass, saying, "May the joys you share today be just the beginning of a lifetime of happiness and fulfillment. Here's to the journey!" She takes a sip of her wine, bends down, and my two daughters hug. I feel like finding a private place to have a good cry. The rest of us raise our glasses to drink.

I dry my eyes reflecting that this sadness is so unexpected and even irritating. This occasion will never happen again and I want to stay in the moment, going along with and enjoying whatever is taking place. But it has gone flat as the day after Christmas, and I am ashamed that I feel this way. *Glenda! Glenda! A good mother would be perfectly happy about her daughter's happiness*, Goody Two Shoes asserts moralistically, as usual.

The shower is travel-themed, inspired by the honeymoon trip. People have taken different assignments about what to give as a gift: something for a hike, something for an evening out, something for swimming, and so forth. My daughter begins opening the colorful packages. While the gifts are passed around for all of us to see, a friend in a gold, scoop-necked top, sitting across the table, leans over and asks in a low voice, "I heard you were dating someone. How is everything?" From the doubtful tilt of her head and wide brown eyes, she must sense something is wrong with me today. Maybe it's the Chablis but I admit with a shrug, "I'm afraid we've gone our separate ways."

She raises her brows, looking slightly surprised. "How so?"

A little moisture again clouds my eyes though I try to keep my voice

light. “All was going well between us but for some reason—who knows why a man thinks like a man—he began to have second thoughts.” The words sound banal even to me, the single woman neophyte. But in the fiction I’ve read, the language of jilting always sounds banal, unless it’s done in French which makes it sound delicious. *Au revoir*, even with a bad French accent like mine, is so much prettier than plain goodbye.

Now the women on either side of me are leaning a little closer because they’re listening, too, but we’re all friends here. “We may still go out from time to time, but we’re going to date other people, too.” Could any sentence sound more hackneyed? I momentarily look down at my half-eaten croissant to mask the moisture in my eyes that is once again embarrassing me.

At the end of the table, my daughter gives me a sharp, blue-eyed glance. Our eyes brush apart but she surely sees that my pain is triumphing over happiness for her. She picks up another gift that is prettily wrapped in teal tissue paper and begins to open it. To get my friends’ attention properly back on her, I manage to smile and quickly comment, “What a lovely color of paper. What could be in that beautiful package?” While their heads turn back where they should be, a few tears manage to spill out. My eyes stay on the bride and my hands stay in my lap, letting the tears evaporate on my cheek so they will go unnoticed by our friends.

Later that evening at the wedding rehearsal in the church, the bride quietly walks up to me when I am standing in the back away from the rest. She whispers, “Mom, I wish you wouldn’t tell everyone how unhappy you are that you have just broken up with Don. It’s my wedding. I want people to be happy.” And then she lifts her little square chin with the slight cleft, and walks away, leaving me alone again, staring at her straight back.

I sink down in a pew with my eyes fixed on a red hymnal exactly like the ones that were in her father’s churches. Actually, only the friend across the luncheon table heard and the few who were eavesdropping, not everyone as she says. Now, my lovely daughter, for whom I’m the only parent left, feels I’ve let her down at this important time. My body is hot, turning my face red, as a shower of shame flows over me. It takes a long moment of sitting alone with bowed head and downcast eyes to get some composure back. Then, rising and turning to join my mother who is seated behind me, I fake a little smile as though everything is really OK. She peers at me closely; my eyes must be giving away my true feelings.

For a time I sit by Mom with her walker at the back of the church, watching the woman minister in a dark blue pantsuit direct the bride, groom, and three attendants, each, in their proper roles. They walk through the ceremony with mock solemnity and much laughter.

I reach out for one of the red hymnals to thumb through its pages. The titles re-circulate memories of worship services with Stan at the front of the sanctuary, where he'd be today if life had gone as planned. This dashed expectation is surely part of the reason my daughter was so hard on me. Stan should've been the one cracking jokes with the wedding party and smiling at her while officiating at her ceremony. We had once looked forward to that.

There is nothing for me to do right now but reflect on this overwhelming sadness which comes from more than solely my feeling of failure today. In the future at an appropriate time, the rest may be explained to them. With their father gone, I was the parent who had to carry on. During the past four years of widowhood, my two daughters and I have been all that remained of the family Stan and I created and loved, the family to which I've been somewhat estranged this past year since meeting Don. I let Don supplant time with that family especially during this emotional fall. Though the old saying goes, *your daughter is your daughter for all her life*, now it feels that she is leaving me. Has already left.

You left first, my Judge Judy pronounces.

Give her a break, my defense attorney pleads, *she's a first time single who is sorting out a traumatic relationship; and she's a non-traditional student as well as a mom. Yes, she has dropped a few balls lately, but she's been doing her best. She deserves lenience, Your Honor.*

To try getting out of this heartbroken mood, I take the wedding program from my purse to see what is coming next. My eyes rest on the English translation of the Gregorian-like hymn in Latin that my daughter has chosen for the service. *This will be so beautiful.*

Now my two girls stand at the head of the aisle and call me to come. I replace the hymnal and the program to take one side of the bride while her sister stands on the other. We practice escorting her to the altar where she will leave us to take her place beside the groom. Her chorale of about twelve singers rehearses the traditional wedding hymn for the procession, *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*, in gorgeous four part harmony. "Where charity and love are, God is there," the translation read, words that are far beyond Victorian sentimentalism. For a rich moment as we hold hands and smile into each other's eyes before moving apart, I remember that once we three were four. For a time, *Ubi caritas et amor* restores the unity of our family.

• • •

Later that evening my sister, my mom, and I relax in bathrobes and slippers, sharing our hard luck stories about men over a bottle of Chablis. My

sister sits on the red chair by the small table under the window. I am propped against the head of the bed upon which Mom is elevating her feet in order to rest her sore hip. Most of the stories come from my sister because she has gone out extensively since her divorce a few years ago. She talks more than I, anyway, and always has to hear my family tell.

My sister no longer dates Mr. Most Eligible Bachelor. She saw him once after he returned from Seattle when she had the *audacity* to ask why he had said nothing to her, “his good friend,” about leaving. By then she knew it was over and wanted him to know she didn’t care what he thought any longer. “When we left the restaurant after he, uh, *fabricated* why he went to Seattle, he didn’t walk me to my car as he always had before.” I smile at her euphemism. *My sister is an English teacher, after all.* “This was the final straw; I knew I would never hear from him again, and that was fine with me,” she says with a sniff, taking a little drink of wine.

Lately she has gone out with two different guys. One is a gun enthusiast whom she won’t see any more. “He showed me several guns he carries around in the back of his car. ‘You never know when you’ll need a good gun,’ he explained with a—I’m not lying—a wink. Do you think he might be a drug runner?” she asks, laying her hand on the table palm up, raising her eyebrows, and hunching her shoulders questioningly.

I laugh a little and hold her hand a moment. “Could be he thinks he needs protection from strong women like you,” I joke.

Her other date is a construction consultant who lives in an apartment in his mother’s house. “He assists her when necessary although, according to him, she is fairly independent,” my sister says. “I don’t know whether he is being a mama’s boy or is actually acting like a responsible son. But so far, he seems OK, and I’m interested.” She fiddles with the button on her flowery robe. I hope he turns out to be a keeper, for her sake.

She wants to know what happened to Don. “He couldn’t seem to tell me what changed in our relationship. I urged counseling to help us communicate, but, instead, his counselors said he should date other women in order to know how he feels about me,” I say, rolling my eyes. “We never did really talk about the problem. He said he still wants to go out, just not exclusively like before,” I continue in a falsely casual tone. She’ll know it’s all just an act.

She eyes me for a moment with her blue ones slightly narrowed, and then says, “Glenda, he’s moving on. Now you have to get over it and move on yourself.” As an experienced single woman still in the process of cleaning up after her own bachelor party, I believe she knows of what she speaks better than I. It seems we single women get into one-sided love affairs as often as we get into our jeans.

My elderly mother, who has been listening, suddenly chimes in, “Oh, you girls and your dates.” Mom scrunches her face and spits out the last word, *dates*, as if it tastes like sour wine. My sister and I look at her. Mom is petite with permed white hair, and sits up very straight in her chair with her slippered feet propped on the end of my bed. Her eyes were closed behind her glasses. She seemed almost asleep. She met Don once but never said anything about him to me afterward. I understood that she wished I wasn’t at his place over the weekends because she told me she was glad when I returned to our town. I didn’t know if she felt vulnerable when I wasn’t near, or if she didn’t like the idea of my staying with him. Probably both. Now her eyes are open and glittering with this rebuke. My sister and I look at each other but before we can answer, she continues, sounding exactly like she did when I came in late for curfew from a date. “Why do you need to go out with some man? I was married to your dad for fifty-nine years. I had the best one there was. When he died I didn’t want anyone else. He was enough for me.” She takes off her glasses, lays them on her lap, and closes her eyes once more. I feel like a teen again, caught doing something she doesn’t like with a boy.

I sit up straighter on my side of the bed in my white robe with my back to the pillows against the headboard. This isn’t the first time she has said something like this about my dating. “Mom, I was only sixty when Stan died, not eighty-one like you when Dad died. That’s a lot younger and that makes a big difference. I don’t want to be alone like you for the rest of what could be a very long life.” Then I look at her more sympathetically because this is the most she has said in my hearing about missing Dad. “He was a good man, Mom, the best. We loved him, too.”

She rubs her eyes but doesn’t say anything more. In all my life I’ve never heard Mom or Dad actually say they loved each other though there was never any doubt they did. Once she spent a weekend in Minneapolis with me and upon returning said she’d never do that again. I asked, “Why?” since I knew she’d enjoyed it.

She said, “Because your Dad was alone.”

Now she stares out the window at the river, but I think she is seeing Dad. In my mind’s eye I see him, too. As a young man, he was the town’s softball pitching star and a very good left-handed batter. As an old man, age eroded a couple of inches from this former basketball center, and a bad knee from a football injury made him walk with a cane. Even then, not long before he died, Mom remarked about how “tall and strong your father still is.” In Mom’s heart, he stayed that lanky, strong-armed pitcher forever.

I take a sip of wine while my sister reaches around to pull back the bronze colored drape so as to better see the gray Missouri flowing by our

hotel under the moonlight. For a moment we are quiet, sipping our wine, gazing at the rapid current.

I sigh and look from my sister to my mother and back to myself in the wall mirror, thinking that here we are, another set of *lasts* like my girls and me. We are three women by the river remembering love. *We come; we will go, as the gray Missouri continues to flow. What do you know?* I decide this is enough wine; tomorrow is a big day and it's time to go to bed before I burst into *Old Man River*.

As I stand up, I notice my sister watching my mother, who is resting with her head against the back of the chair, but she doesn't say anything. I wonder if she is thinking what I am. For Mom, Dad was the best and the only one, but my life won't be like hers, not if I can help it. I go into the bathroom to brush my teeth.

• • •

The next morning before the ceremony, I return from over a year's absence to see my long time hair stylist. The shop is decorated in modernistic black and white. Several stylists are working this morning and all are dressed in black standing over their black chairs, looking chicly professional. Similarly dressed, Nathaniel is young, blond, and handsome; he acts at the local professional theater. When I lived here, I made an effort to see him whenever he acted. As he styled my hair, we would discuss how his play had gone.

Today as he washes and blow dries my hair, I tell him about my studies, my problem finding a good new hair stylist, the breakup of a relationship that matters, and how sad and baffled I am by whatever went wrong. Yes, the outdated ad slogan, *only your hairdresser knows for sure*, sounds like a cliché, but sharing some of this with him brings relief. Nathaniel, as always, is a good listener.

As I turn to leave after paying, he calls out unexpectedly, "Glenda, here's something I learned the hard way about breaking up, if you want to hear it?" I turn back to the white counter as a couple of young, female stylists with him look up at me and then at each other in surprise. They probably think people my age don't date, let alone break up and kibitz with their stylist about it. I'm embarrassed, but I wave for him to come around the end of the counter so we can speak privately.

"Ok. Sure, what is it?" I say. By the tone of his voice, I guess he, unlike my daughter and sister, won't tell me I have to move on. He approaches more closely so that I smell the flowery shampoo in the bottle he still holds.

For a moment he hesitates, biting his lip, as though uncertain about how

much to say. Quiet piano music plays in the background of the shop. Then, in a low voice, he comes out with, "I'll say this much, if you want this guy, go after him. That's something I learned I won't forget. My advice is, if you want him, go after him."

I stare up at the young man with kind eyes whose contrary attitude gives me a sudden mental picture of green grass rising into sunshine in the midst of burned and blackened clumps. I think of Pooh's advice about listening to my heart and following it. Looking deeply into Nathaniel's brown eyes, a reply rises from down inside where uncertainty has changed into new conviction. "Thank you for that advice, Nathaniel. I think I shall." We nod goodbye, and all the way from the long, second floor stairs down to the street, the remembered aroma of lavender fills me with balm.

So just like that when I need one, an angel comes along with a message of hope. In the picture taken at my beloved daughter's wedding, I wear my beautiful purple dress, chosen especially for Don, and dance with my long-haired, five year old grandniece. She wears a purple dress and a big bright smile to match my very own.

Chapter 34

As the rolling country gets flatter with the passing miles, there is only the sound of the blowing fan in the car. This white noise would make a good place to meditate if it weren't for the voices yammering in my head about all that has happened through the fall. One really nasty voice is stuck on a particular groove like the 45 records sometimes did when I was a kid. *What will you do now*, it keeps repeating, *what now?* Another mean one butts in, sneering, *You don't know how to go after him like Nathaniel said*. My personal, tragic Greek chorus, speaking through square, ugly mouths, stuffs my head with defeat as I drive mom home after the wedding.

The car has begun to feel too warm. I look over at Mom to ask, "Do you mind if I turn down the heat a little?" She nods agreeably continuing to stare out the window until she recognizes the corner of the highway that runs past our farm. Turning with a smile, she asks me to drive by her old home which she hasn't seen for maybe a year. I was hoping she wouldn't ask because it's a few miles out of our way. Sitting side by side in the car at the stop sign, I look at her wrinkled face from within my completely selfish cocoon. How I long for the relief of being alone so as to give in to my despair about everything right now. Because of what mom said in the hotel, I don't want to bring up my sadness over Don with her. *How can I take even a little more time for this detour?* But I see her expectant smile and bright eyes, she who rarely seems interested in much these days. She left the farm eight years and three new places ago, yet it is still her only real home. Once in her first apartment alone following Dad's death, she said tearfully, "I can't call this place my home

because my family never lived here.” Thinking about all this today, using arms my will can barely raise, I turn the car and my selfish thoughts toward the farm where she lived most of her life. I manage to offer to stop, but she doesn’t want to visit its renter, so we continue down the familiar highway.

As we pass the catalpa grove marking a fence line on our farm, she turns to smile at me and says, “Thank you, Glenda,” in a soft, loving voice. Through tight lips, I struggle to smile back. Once more, tears well in my eyes as I feel ashamed of my selfishness in doing this small thing for someone I love. Though she had said one man was all she wanted, I do believe Mom may sympathize some with the loss I’m going through.

• • •

Today at home, I open a new Word document and stare at its supine blankness while a bead of panic clicks an SOS as it rolls around my brain. I’m behind, and must finish and turn in the rest of this semester’s work as well as get started on the final project that’s required for graduation this coming June. A draft has to be reviewed by my advisor and returned for adjustment before the week of winter residency, which looms in the hazy distance like the Black Hills over the plains of South Dakota. Usually I’m the Queen of Neatness, but the length of my table is littered with used typing paper crumpled among several thin volumes of un-annotated poetry, a white plate covered with crumbs on which yesterday’s half-eaten piece of congealed, buttered toast lies, and three pottery cups partially filled with stale coffee. My brain is working like it’s on a painkiller, reeling between jabs of failure and aching loss followed by sleepy attempts to muddle on through my work.

I yearn to merely lie on my sofa in my purple pajamas and stare out the window while giving in to the downward spiral of the fall. Old as I am, I still remember having somewhat this same response at age six when my Shetland pony accidentally killed herself on a barbed wire fence. In my first taste of loss, I crawled beneath the big, white spirea bushes around the porch where no one could find me, stretched out on my stomach, and laid my cheek down to cry my fill. Getting dirt in my mouth, I wailed, “I’ll never have another pony. I’ve lost the only pony I’ll have in my life.”

Lying on my sofa sixty years later, the smooth leather feels cool and wet against my cheek. The only sound is my teary breathing like that sloppy child of long ago who I’ve never completely outgrown. After a time I drag to my table, forcing myself to turn over the sod of an annotation, trying to straighten squiggling lines of my poetry; *what comes next?* Looking for answers, my brain keeps drifting out the window to the sky, a blue-gray void

like a TV screen. *No Signal*. All I can think of are questions. I need the time and the silence to deeply feel these questions.

• • •

One day when I call in lieu of going to see Mother, she answers the phone with a croak. *What has happened?* She's had a cold though she seemed to be getting better. Mom suffers with mild emphysema from sitting too many years beside Dad while he smoked before we realized how harmful second hand smoke was. "I'm coming to you right away, Mom."

When I get there she is in a pale nightgown on the bed, heaving and gulping for air. "Mom, I should call 911, you can't breathe."

"No, don't. Oh, Glenda, I don't want to go to the hospital," she gasps without lifting her head, so weak I want to cry.

Feeling like a very naughty child for disobeying her, I manage to push out the words, "I have to. You can't breathe." I dial 911 and quickly throw panties, toothbrush, and pills into a suitcase should she have to stay at the hospital overnight.

During the emergency room exam I sit with my arm around Mom's bony shoulders which shake with the effort to get air. The doctor turns from her and says to me, "I need permission to insert a breathing tube. If I don't do this, she will just keep struggling until her heart gives out." To Mom, he says, "Your heart will keep getting weaker and weaker with this effort to breathe." A terrible harsh sound comes from within Mom's narrow chest. "Can your daughter sign this form for you?" She nods a yes as she keeps fighting for breath. That is all he says before I sign hurriedly on the blank line he indicates, not taking the time to read anything, feeling sick to my stomach with pity for her and churning with blame on myself. Yet I believe the vent is the best thing to do as I watch her narrow chest pump and fall, and hear her convulsing and coughing with the struggle to breathe. I'm scared and she must be, too.

In the waiting room while they insert the vent, I flip through the pictures of a magazine, passing over the blur of colors, remembering how I brought Mom to the ER only last Saturday with a bad cold. Afterward we picked up her medication, and I left her at home while I drove to the grocery store to stock her cupboard with soups and tissues so she could take care of herself a while. After delivering them and seeing that she was comfortable, I went home to continue trying to work on my studies at the same time hoping mom was on the way to recovery, feeling miserable about breaking up with Don, mourning what felt like the loss of my daughter, and straining to stay

off my couch. Whoever said life is birth, struggle, and death had it totally right, especially the middle part.

Sitting in the waiting room today for what seems one endless ticking moment, I lay a magazine down and shuffle through the others in the wall holder, still feeling the shock of finding her in such bad condition. When I had called daily to check up on Mom, her voice seemed to be getting stronger and she said she was better. Until today when she could barely speak or breathe.

When the doctor takes me into the exam room to tell me, I am shocked again. From the ER, Mom will be admitted to the hospital with pneumonia. I look down at the magazine that I've forgotten to lay down. *What am I reading? I don't have a garden.*

In the hospital room when I see her with the IVs and the vent in her throat, lying under the white covers, looking so tiny, frail, and old, my Judge Judy pronounces, *This is your fault, you know. When you called to check up on her, she probably faked feeling better to help you out. That's what mothers do. If you'd gone over to her place, you could have seen she was getting sicker and done something a day sooner to help. That's what good daughters would do.* I reach under the pale, heated blanket to pat her shoulder and more or less collapse on the chair by her bed. Convicted by the vent in her throat, sentenced to a life of failure after Don, these notions interlock like the ends to a band for the watch that is ticking off the deadline for sending in my assignments.

In the back of my mind is the fear of coming to the same end as Mom, in an impersonal room, lying in an austere bed. It's the way I saw her in the apartment, sitting alone at the end of her life in a blue pantsuit on her recliner, her feet in fabric slippers on its attached footrest with her white head bent over a book. When she moved again into this second retirement community to be nearer me, I had urged her to join her neighbors in activities like the Saturday afternoon movie matinee. But she resisted, saying, "Their popcorn isn't any good. They should taste what your Dad used to make."

She didn't mention how my going out with Don diverted me from taking as much time with her as I'd meant when she moved, and that I was now urging her to get out on her own when I should have been taking her. Sitting by her hospital bed, I follow the IV line with my eyes to her arms and face. *How white her skin is, how many brown age spots dot her once perfect complexion. She laments about that.* Now at nearly ninety, I see her as determined to do nothing to help with loneliness herself except for constantly reading her large print historical romances and counting the geese on the pond outside her window. With the loss of Stan compounded by a corresponding loneliness without Don, sitting next to her while she read or looked out at the pond felt like I was sinking into its mucky bed the same as she had done.

The tube running down her throat prevents speaking. It was the only solution at the time, but now it seems horrible. I remember her soft, tender voice as she taught me to tie my shoes, sitting down with me on the back step and carefully demonstrating how my brown shoelaces should be crossed and looped. "You have to learn how before you go to school because I won't be there to do it." When I said triumphantly that tying them was fun, she complimented me, chuckling, "You're a big girl now, Glenda."

"I am, Momma, I am," I shouted happily, jumping up to skip down the sidewalk toward the barnyard gate feeling proud of myself. She couldn't compliment me now for letting this happen nor do I feel proud.

Her arms and hands lie quietly on the bed along her body on the faded blanket. A nurse in a flowered top steps into the room to make some adjustments to the tubes running into her body, nods to me, and then hurries out. I am relieved that Mom is breathing peacefully now but the tube in her throat is ghastly.

Returning to my meditation, I gaze at her closed eyes with blue veins on the lids. Exactly like Mom, doing things solitarily is often more enjoyable to me than to other women I've known. I reach out to hold her hand considering how easily I could turn into Mom without Dad, making less and less effort to adapt to a different happiness, somewhat withdrawn, and, ultimately, ending life as a person who has little to live for.

Mom's room is on the top floor nearest the thick gray clouds that curtain her window as though to prevent any snooping. My dad enjoyed telling how once, as he drove down Main Street, he caught sight of his plump, gray-haired mother peering through the small window of the town bar to see who was drinking inside, a moral no-no to Grandma and a tidbit of gossip to take to her house-bound sister. As I attempt to relax my head against the slippery back of this gray plastic chair, fidgeting under the window, my sense is that this situation is the truly immoral one. *Mom is here in the hospital, partly because she has only me to depend on, a daughter too wrapped up and isolated by her own work and small personal crisis, as it seems in comparison with the pneumonia, to give her the care that she needed.* I chew my lower lip, close my eyes a second, and drop my head to my chest, giving up, taking the beating that goes on and on for what I allowed to happen, myself pounding myself.

The heated baseboard air smells like the oxygen is cooked out, but Mom's chest rises and falls easily now. Wrapped in a pale cloth, she is asleep, a small, tubular form tethered by plastic tentacles to silvery machines with lighted dials. I may as well give her a kiss and tip-toe out to go home and try to get back to my studies.

When I get back to my computer, Felicia insists on jumping into my lap.

After setting her back on the floor a couple of times, I give up and let her stay even though I can't type very well around her nestled body. "Are you trying to make me feel guilty for neglecting you, too?" I ask her. Soon I drop my lips to her silky ear and carry her off to sleep, listening to her satisfied purr. I plump the pillows against the headboard, pick up my bedtime reading, and lean back. With one hand I pet Felicia's warm, humming softness while I hold the small, dark orange, child's book in my other. My girls never cared much for *Winnie the Pooh* and I can see why. His simple words about kindness and friendship take a certain amount of life experience to appreciate. They smooth the way for my mind to go until I drop off.

• • •

After making the daily drive to visit Mom, I write annotations and begin to draft my final project in preparation for my advisor's sign-off during residency week still looming ahead in the blurry distance. I have formed a hazy concept of overlaying my spirit world, as found in my poetry, upon the natural world as described in my diary with its worn-out, fabric covers. This is the world I saw and heard while experimenting with the re-emergence of a prairie from within the old pasture, the project begun on the hills of my acreage with a burn and the fire department standing by. There's a lesson from nature in here. What attracts me in this image is an instinct that something of native integrity can endure in spite of the struggle with loss, guilt, and the other invasive weeds of normal life. Following a good burn of everyday chaff to let in light and make space, what is authentic in existence, instead of dying, may be stimulated to begin a fresh process of growth.

Sitting at my table before and after visiting Mom, I play with the floating seeds of this concept. *Stay offa that sofa*, Bossy Pants warns. Then she states something like what I'm getting out of my bedtime reading, *Poetry can't be trapped and caught; you have to go where it can lay its tender nose in your open palm*. For once, I might have to listen to her.

• • •

The highway to the hospital is treacherous from an icy rain that fell earlier. I grip the steering wheel and go around thirty mph, taking longer than the usual half an hour drive. If Mom knew, she wouldn't want me to come, but I feel so guilty over my neglect of her that braving the slippery road to visit is like doing penance. I need absolution—but I wouldn't go if I really thought I'd kill myself.

Mom can't speak because of the vent but she smiles a hello. She communicates by writing, which limits how much she says. When Mom hears that my sister is not coming until Christmas unless she gets worse, for some reason she takes a small page of lined notepaper and writes, "When I die, she can buy a new car." I read her shaky writing and am startled by a cartoon image of my sister, wearing a tailored, black dress, racing out of her classroom upon hearing of Mom's death to leap into a shiny, new convertible with the top down. Was Mom trying to be funny, or was this her way of bringing up the possibility of dying? I glance at Mom's face as she stares out the icy window where gray clouds are thicker than ever. This is the first she has acknowledged that death was on her mind.

I brush Mom's note off, dropping it on a small table. "You aren't going to die, Mom. You're going to get better. And she will get a car anyway." Mom looks out the window, unresponsive. She probably feels pessimistic because she is in the hospital and the dark weather looks ominous. Talking optimistically is more than I can do right now, too, when life looks as cloudy to me as the weather this day. The room is quiet though the footsteps of people going on about their lives sound in the hall. We endure this day together, my chair beside her bed, each of us lost to anything but her own waddling murkiness. *Mom never wants to actually say goodbye. Does her note mean that she is planning to somehow still take care of us by moving on to her next life?*

Chapter 35

Early one morning while I'm still asleep a thought so explosive breaks out of my mouth that it sits me up in bed. "Don's ties to Mary are what're killing me!" Then I sink back in the dark to pull up the covers; *Oh yes, that's it!* Feeling upheld, suspended safely over deep, deep water, I immediately fall back asleep, though maybe, I never awoke.

When I do awaken, the sun shines through the blinds in slits of brightness, higher than usual. Black Felicia sits by my bed with her tail curled around her haunches, waiting for me to get up and pet her first thing, as is normal. But I lie a while looking at the white ceiling while trying to work out exactly what it was that startled me into speaking almost in my sleep last night. For the first time in many months, my muscles feel rested and loose in the morning.

I fold my arms under the back of my head on the pillow to consider that maybe I didn't actually awaken, but spoke fairy tale wisdom while faring through a forgotten dreamscape. The nightmare from a while ago had pictured an assassin who was threatening to take my life. Perhaps this image was due to my obsession about Don missing something in me that left me feeling second-rate, a kind of loss of life. But the eureka that flashed last night in the dark pointed away from myself as the cause.

Moments later, squinting under the lights over my bathroom mirror, I marvel at how that eureka arched across the darkness of sleep like a comet, so vivid it has to be taken seriously. It moves my focus on the heart of my problem to the continuing grip of Don's marriage rather than some insufficiency

of mine . . . though there is plenty of that apparent in my morning mirror. *It's not about you—though in this light you're certainly not the fairest in the land.*

Stepping back before jumping once more off that old cliff of habitual lack of self-esteem, I reach down to stroke Felicia's throat. She responds by pushing her whiskery cheek against my fingers while continuing to purr. Looking into my eyes, she opens her mouth in a silent meow like a thank-you, it seems to me. "Good morning, little bunny." Straightening up, I pull on my robe, gather it closely to my throat, walk through the laundry to raise the garage door with a rumble of metallic grating, and hunch into the piercing cold to pick up the paper. My attractive next door neighbor is backing her gray car down the drive; we wave at each other as she turns into the street. The exhaust behind her car leaves a smelly cloud like that bad habit of seeing myself as second rate that keeps trying to seep back into my brain. Rushing into the house and taking a moment to undue the stiff knot in the cold, plastic sleeve on my paper, I make up my mind to follow the neon sign that lit up the dark, pointing to where the real problem could lay. At my dining table in my purple pajamas, I write about this for a while. The dream has shifted my focus; those black thoughts about being unequal and second rate that have tarnished my brain are going to be wiped clean, like polishing silver.

Internet articles I've read on dream interpretation say that, in ancient tradition as well as in psychology today, dreams can provide guidance into the future. Once I had set out for a walk in the dawn and found my orchard by dreaming my eyes wide open as I could, even to the edge of the world where, in poetry, the tree of golden apples grows. In my case I was led by the siren song of the cicada in the trees above its empty case. Does this eureka mean it's time to try reaching out to Don, and what exactly would I do? I lay my pen aside to get dressed while another saying comes to mind, something like—don't underestimate the value of doing nothing. Oh for Pete's sake, I feel like doing nothing but cleaning my house!

• • •

Surprisingly, Don calls to say that a couple of friends invited us to see *The Nutcracker* ballet. "Do you want to go?" he asks, as I sit before my computer holding the phone on its long line. Standing up to move around and swing the white phone cord back and forth, I say, "Why are you asking me?" He says, "Sheila specifically said you, and I thought I should ask."

I try to think through what this means. "Going out with me would spoil your plan to take a break. How would you feel about being there with me?"

Don is silent for a second, and then he answers, "OK. You'd think someone as old as I would know what he is doing better than I seem to know." To me, it appears that breaking up is new territory for both of us old, single folks.

There's a pause in which I wonder what's wrong with me that I won't see him when my one and only plan is to stay in touch. But then I return to my chair at the computer, saying, "Speaking of knowing ourselves—since you called, there are things I was never able to discuss because I was afraid to hear what you'd say. I kept thinking things would work out. Now I'd like to talk about them."

"When do you return from your residency?" I answer that it's still around a month away. "Let's take this as a break like you reminded me, and when you return, we'll get together and talk. OK?"

I agree reluctantly and put down the phone. *Why didn't you love me? You were close for a time.*

Thinking over how to stay in touch as Nathaniel suggested since I won't be seeing Don, I decide to send a Christmas card, and take one of the last from the box. Under its cheery seasonal greeting I write, *In view of all we've meant to each other this past year, to not wish you Merry Christmas feels too cold.* There, I've done something to keep in touch while at the same time doing nothing.

For auld lang syne, Glenda.

Now, let's see if he'll respond.

Chapter 36

Long ago when I played basketball, we must have been losing at the half because my coach said, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Sometimes old bromides are still helpful, and after Mom falls asleep on the faded hospital bed, I drive to the dating club where Don and I met over a year ago. In my Vee-necked blue sweater, good-looking jeans, with my hair styled, new make-up applied, and *with my shoes tied on tighter, I’m ready for the second half.* I park in the mall, hold my eyes with a resolute stare in the car mirror, and push myself out the door, “Geronimo!”

The same brown-haired receptionist smiles back like she remembers me as I stride by, holding my grim smile, to the red albums waiting on the shelves. The thought of meeting someone new and the loss of naiveté about finding a date make every step feel like working out with added weight. But I gave up my old home for this new life, and dating is my game plan though I don’t want to give up on Don. I grab an album, slide one of the wooden chairs back from the table, and plop down to begin turning pages while my throat constricts with the effort to choke back a sob of disgust.

As before when I, a new widow, had to manage the five-plex apartment alone, I think of my grandma who persevered in running the farm through the Depression after my grandpa died. Dating again is nothing compared to making a living by handling a big farm with hired men and cows. I quickly thumb through the resumes looking for someone I can at least talk to. After a while, I slump down on the hard seat. Many of the faces I remember from a year before are still in these pages.

Embarrassed by my dating failure after the passage of so much time, I do work up the nerve to talk to Kitty who won't be happy to see me because I'm hard to please. In the familiar, blond wood reception area, photos of wedded couples still blissfully smirk down on me. Hanging beside them is my own private picture of Don and me at each end of his brown sofa as reflected in the glass patio doors, but I am glaring at him and he is frowning back. Have these couples gone through as much as I to get those smug smiles?

A Noah's Ark of humans, drawn in comic strip style, crosses my mind, with the offices of the dating club sitting on top of a houseboat, the receptionist piping the members aboard as Kitty, in gold braided black tee, checks them off the manifest. Two by two, up the gangway they go, these couples with lop-sided smiles, framed on the walls of the club. I stand alone on the shore, waving goodbye, wearing a swim suit.

I force myself to sit on one of the beige armchairs, waiting to see Kitty. If I wasn't so stubborn, maybe so *un-level*, I'd abandon my goal and run for the door right now. That would be the easier thing to do, but it seems like a race toward becoming a near hermit like Mom. Soon Kitty, in her customary blackbird outfit, comes to shake my hand, faking a smile of welcome, and managing not to roll her eyes as she takes me in her office and closes the door with a click.

"It just happens that a new guy is sitting out there writing his resume at the same time you have come in," Kitty says. Kitty opens the door slightly and points to him. I stealthily poke my head out to take a peek. He is writing at a table, and seems of average height, slim, boyish-looking in preppy blazer and jeans, with straight, light brown hair, and wrinkles enough to be around my age. Smilingly, Kitty confides that he joined in the past and is now back. "Just like me," I say, as she quietly shuts the door and we return to her desk.

"Uhhmm, well," she takes a moment to consider something while she shuffles scattered papers. "You might hit it off," she goes on. "He's a retired professor of some kind of engineering." Because Stan was an engineer when we first met in college before seminary, I feel comfortable with what I might expect of his interests and abilities. At least he'll be smart, I think. And maybe he can fix things like Stan and unlike Don. That could be a plus. But, plus what?

"OK, I'm willing to meet him." She introduces us and after we talk and laugh a bit about the weird, two-way language of profiles that he is writing, Brendan asks me to lunch. *Well, why not get started? Isn't this what it's about?*

We find a near-by restaurant and give our orders. "Now, tell me about yourself," he says, and turns to give me a quick once-over which he tries to cover up. This makes me smile because he's probably being politically cor-

rect, but it doesn't surprise me; we're both curious about the other, why try to hide it? In the past I would've considered what might intrigue him about me, but I'm over that now. Lifting one shoulder in a casual shrug I saw in a movie, I drawl in a slightly bored tone, "I'm a grad student in creative writing. I fly to take classes each semester and work with my advisor, then return to do my assignments at home the rest of the time. My final semester will start soon with graduation in June."

Brendan's blue eyes light up as he leans forward. "Tell me more about that," he says, just as I expected.

I give him a few more details and then it's my turn to ask, "What kind of engineering were you in?" He happily goes into an intricate explanation of the planning and arranging of stainless steel pipes, the flow of chemicals in various tubes, and how complicated chemical formulas were marked on and swiped off dry erase boards while people in white lab coats argued over them. I gather that he was involved in a new process to improve the commercial freezing of foods.

As he goes on, I shift in my chair, looking around the restaurant at the prints of lilies, roses, and beautiful trees that decorate the walls, trying to signal my boredom with such exhausting detail. Brendan doesn't seem to recognize the signs as he goes on talking, or perhaps he learned to ignore them in students when he lectured. After this much technicality, I could probably pass a blue book test on making popsicles. He doesn't differentiate between relevant and irrelevant details that a lunch date might and might not care about, which makes me smile. They're all fascinating to him, and this enthusiasm is the most attractive part of what is quite a long solo discourse.

I've listened to him talk a lot, but we'll probably never return to the subject of freezing foods again. If it happens to come up, I'll bite the stick it comes on. We finish our sandwiches and divide the check. Brendan leans back and squints at me for a moment. "Would you like to see a movie?" he asks. A little surge of excitement sparkles through me.

"There is one I've been meaning to see. I can't remember the exact title but it's about sailing ships back in the days when Great Britain was Queen of the Sea. Years ago I read some of the books that it's based on, and this movie got good reviews," I add. With its emphasis on authentic wooden sailing ship particulars, I think it might also appeal to an engineer like Brendan.

He thinks for a moment and then says, "I've already seen it and it is very good. I really wouldn't mind seeing it again."

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that."

But he becomes more certain. "It's OK. I really would like to see it

again. There are so many elements to it; I want to see what I missed the first time. Let's go."

We set the date and then say good-bye. I drive along the highway between bright fields of snow with a smile on my face, wondering if he's always so kind as to see a movie twice because his date wants to, and wondering if there's something he likes to talk about that doesn't turn into a monolog. Lifting one eyebrow, I also question Kitty's little hesitation when she mentioned him. But today feels like a winner because my plan is successfully back in operation. What is that other old coach's bromide—just take one game at a time.

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Before Brendan comes for our movie date, I force myself to throw away the withered bouquets Don had sent for one occasion or another. Out of sentimentality, they had stood for months on my bedroom chest of drawers—wizened, desiccated trophies of something I have to forget. Dumping those dead weeds is merely my attempt to dramatize the end of that affair, because Brendan will not get into my bedroom to see and ask why I keep them.

As planned I am ready with time to spare. Sure enough the doorbell rings fifteen minutes early. Although his car isn't visible in my driveway, it could only be Brendan. I knew he'd worry about finding my house after he phoned for directions and made me repeat them three times, which is exactly the first thing he says to me inside the door. "It's OK," I tell him, "I'm ready." As he opens my car door, I think how unaware he is compared to Don who called before he rang my doorbell prematurely on our first date.

We go to the late afternoon show for which I buy the tickets as he is thoughtfully seeing it a second time for me. Afterward in the car he turns to ask, "Would you like to come to my house for dinner? Let me tell you, I'm a pretty good cook. Are you willing to give me a try?" *Well, this is something new. Of course, if he can design a process for freezing food, he should be able to follow a recipe for cooking it.* I nod yes.

Before he starts dinner, he offers a tour of his house. The living room has a large bay window in front of which he has arranged several green plants, rocks, and pieces of driftwood for a natural effect, not something Don would ever do. As he points out objects found on his travels, he sketches his biography. Like a good guest, I ask questions, but his back story takes a long, long time. I try to not be critical of his long windedness, thinking he is a frustrated, former teacher with no one to lecture except me, his somewhat cornered date.

In the long gallery downstairs, I see an interesting photo of ocean waves

on a sandy beach with clouds overhead, and ask about it. He smiles, "I like to do photography. I have my own darkroom." It then occurs to me to wonder if anyone knows my whereabouts tonight. I glance down the somber passage at the other end of the room where only one light shines, and think of the eerie dark room in *Silence of the Lambs*. Then, uneasily, I step a little further from him and try to put that out of my mind. He has to've passed some kind of background check by the dating club. At least they should have done one. He could be a serial killer, but he's probably not just an ordinary criminal.

The gallery walls hold several more of Brendan's beautiful, unusual nature photos of which he is rightfully proud. He points out a small close-up of golden poppies in an alpine meadow. "The best light is early in the morning or late in the afternoon. I use a UV filter . . ." As he goes into a lecture on the best light and filter for different effects, I look closely at this photo, uninterested in his technical minutia, thinking, *he must be very lonely*. But I don't try to take in his dissertation about the lens, filter, and development of the film. He doesn't realize he's talking on and on to someone who gave away the nice, but complicated, camera that her husband used in favor of a point and click.

Finally, we return upstairs to the kitchen, and Brendan begins getting out vegetables and a cutting board. He shoos away my offer to help. "I'm used to doing this myself. Why don't you look around a bit more?" I smile, and gladly turn from the counter because I'm interested in his displays. And I'd also like a chance to be by myself because the anthropologist inside me wants to think about what I've found in this date.

Chopping sounds come from the kitchen while I stand in the living room looking more closely at his library and a few, shelf high objects. His displays of natural artifacts, like driftwood in interesting shapes and several unusual rocks, some with preserved fossils, are mixed in with a few pieces of Native American pottery. Don had original paintings but Brendan's pieces, though not as expensive, are intriguing because pottery is also one of my interests. He has an eye for the elements of good design and artistic arrangement.

By now I've been with him for what seems hours and hours, and still can't leave. Although I'm curious to see what he reads, staying in the living room to look over his books and art is actually a good break from having to make more small talk in the kitchen, even if he does most of the talking. This date is interesting, but for some time I have been mainly solitary—writing, lying on my sofa with Felicia to think and dream, or visiting Mom, who can't talk. Every move feels stuck in chewing gum. But after a bit, I decide, for politeness sake, to wander back to the kitchen and attempt more friendly chatter.

For a moment I watch him chopping, holding the point of the sharp-

looking French knife with the fingers of one hand, and quickly slicing carrots with the blade's wide end in his other. I've seen Stan cook but he took a practical approach—whack, whack, quickly done, but not artistic. Brendan's style is straight from the playbook of a TV chef that insomnia might have given him nights of time to study. He pours a little olive oil in a sauté pan, and warms it over the burner with an elegant swirl before setting it down. With a pleased smile acknowledging that his skills impress me, he says, "I'm doing fine here. Go on back and look around as much as you want. I have some good things." *Is he tired of me, or does he simply want to impress me with his ability to play solo in the center of the kitchen?*

After watching him begin sautéing the chicken, I return to the living room and take a book down from the shelves. I've heard a review of this book on the radio and want to examine its pictures of an historic expedition to the Antarctic. The frigid landscape in the black and white early photos looks forbidding and desolate. Since entering this house, I've been cold and, as I look at photographs of the polar snowscape, the room temperature feels more and more glacial. According to the thermostat on the wall, the room is a refrigerated sixty degrees. Brendan hears my footsteps in the hall and the coat closet door open, and calls from the kitchen, "I'm sorry if you're too cold. I've gotten used to it. Ha-a-a-a!" He laughs loudly and in strange, rather harsh, barks. There's only one reason I can think of for getting used to such a low temperature and that's because you want to save money. As a retiree myself, I know about cutting expenses. *Is his offer to cook a way to cheaply pay back the tickets though I can tell he is experienced?* Perhaps he only wants to show off, exactly the opposite of Don, but Brendan is something of an actor, based on what I've seen so far.

I button my red wool coat as I shiver on the light colored sofa in this room of stark driftwood and fossil rocks while looking at bleak photos of a ship locked in ice. The air fills with the spicy aroma of sautéed chicken which makes my stomach rumble. I can hear cupboard doors opening and closing, and guess that he is setting the table. By now I am very, very hungry, cold, and tired. After one bite of this new chef's food, so to speak, I don't know if I want another. Thinking I should help set the table, I keep on flipping through the pages of the book, feeling iced in by this night where some elements are quite attractive while others turn me off.

I imagine being one of the explorers in thick coat and fur hood trapped on a boat in an ice cream landscape. Like the men on the boat in the picture taken from a hill-top, I see myself as though from above. With a similar longing to be released from gooseflesh and starvation, I sit in a red car coat on a pale sofa, nearly the color of glacial fields, staring into the distance at a

blue thermostat I'd like to move into, at least, lukewarm range. The thought of escaping alerts my Goody Two Shoes who points her red marking pencil to admonish, *Remember, it's not Brendan's fault that he's your first date after Don moved on. Feeling out of place when you start again is natural. You'll get used to it. Keep an open mind and keep trying.*

Brendan's footsteps are coming down the hall. "Aren't those photos something? Their struggle to get out makes quite a read." He takes the coffee table book out of my hands. "Well, come on, come on, dinner is ready," he says, laying the book on the table.

"I'm as hungry as one of those South Pole explorers. Thank goodness you rescued me," I say, though it feels surprisingly truer than the joke I intended. He barks his strange laugh and pours a white wine. I sit down at his nicely set table with straw place mats and simple brown pottery, leaving my red coat fastened up to my neck. *Keep an open mind*, I remind myself once more, as he passes the appetizing chicken with vegetables, followed by the tossed salad of lettuce with oranges, walnuts, and delicious vinaigrette. *After all, the guy can cook. His bipolar dating resume should read practical, but artistic.*

Another voice slides in that sounds like my sister's when she told me to move on. *If I were betting on it, I wouldn't give this relationship much of a chance to warm up. For one thing, he keeps the thermostat too incompatibly frigid for a lettuce leaf like you.*

Chapter 37

Brendan has season tickets for the college women's basketball games. He invites me to one, saying, "I can get tickets at a reduced cost. It's one of the retirement perks." When I saw the women's games with Don, I could tell by the number of families and seniors that faithfully attended and made up the crowd's majority that women's basketball tickets were fairly cheap. What is it with Brendan's finances?

Brendan lives many miles nearer the arena than I, so we plan to meet at his house from where he will drive us the short distance to the game. Tonight when I knock on his door, no one answers. This is strange. After waiting a decent interval, I knock again. The lights are on in the red brick ranch but still no one comes. I have driven over fifty miles for this game so I don't want to give up yet, and I knock a third time. The thump of footsteps sounds inside. *What could be taking him so long to open the door?*

More time passes. It's very cold huddling on his doorstep with my coat collar turned up against the bitter wind. Finally the door opens. Brendan's light brown hair is uncombed, he squints at me as though the porch light hurts, and he is wearing a wrinkled gray sweat suit that could double for pajamas. Judging by his half-open eyes and messy hair, they are his pajamas as he seems to have just awakened. "Sorry, di'n' hear you," he says.

After stepping back to take in his strange appearance for a moment, I ask, frowning slightly, "Are you OK?"

He jerks his head suspiciously sideways to squint at me with a frown as if I've said something rude or, at least, incomprehensible. "Sure, nos'ing's

wrong," he answers, shrugging.

Is he drunk or on some kind of medication? "Really?" I ask, feeling concerned and puzzled as I look up at him in the doorway.

"No, no, I was 'sleep. I'm OK." He waves at me to come inside.

"I'm here for the game. Are you able to go?" I ask. Maybe I should tell him I think he's too sick to go and I'll leave now.

"Course," he says, leaning against the door frame as though he'd fall over without it. I look him up and down taking in the rumpled sweat suit because I'm not going with someone dressed like that. Then he seems to catch on. "Gimme jus' a minute."

I try to not jump to conclusions too fast about what is wrong. Let's see what he tells me. "Are you sure?" I ask again with my eyes squinted to let him know I'm skeptical.

"Yeah, yeah. Jus' take a minute to change cloze." He tries to straighten up and move away from the door but loses his balance and quickly puts out a hand for the wall, giving me a weak smile. I'm doubtful that I want to go anywhere with him—except inside where maybe it's warmer.

"My car is warmed up so I'll drive," I decide, not mentioning that he's isn't in any shape to do it. If he argues, I'll go home. But he nods OK, I step in, and he leaves me standing by the kitchen table while he goes upstairs to change. I can tell from the uneven sound of his feet on the wooden steps that he is unsteadily stumbling upward.

While sitting at the blond wooden table in the kitchen, I feel that going out with him is a bad idea, but I'll wait to see how he acts when he returns. I hear the muffled thumps of doors and drawers opening and closing, and the sounds of his footsteps moving around upstairs. In a few minutes he returns with his running shoes and sits down at the other end of the table to put them on. His red shirt isn't completely tucked into his jeans and his socks are green, not a color I would've chosen but they won't show under the jeans. His hair looks like he has run his hands through it because it's better but still rather messy.

Something like this might have happened to another client of Kitty's because, soon after Brendan and I met when I told her that we were going out, Kitty had said, "A word of warning, Glenda. I hear rumors that he may drink a little."

Brendan stands from tying his shoes, grabs his full length black coat, gives me a lop-sided smile, and opens the kitchen door. I drive us in silence still thinking this is a bad idea and wondering why he doesn't explain his condition, but I want to see the game. When we get there, the wind threatens my nose and cheeks with freezer burn; I walk through the snowy parking lot as

fast as possible, constantly having to pause until Brendan stumbles up to my side. He doesn't say anything, but gives me a sheepish look at first, and then keeps his eyes on the slippery walk in order to maintain his wobbly balance.

While the game goes on, he is very quiet again. During time-outs he sits as though a little dazed, unmoving even when the crowd erupts in cheering for the three point shots. As I watch the ball speed from player to player far down on the floor, my mind keeps running back to when Brendan came to the door. Before, he had seemed to be interested in me, calling to talk, even giving me a black sweater that I don't like. At his age and after being married, you'd think he'd know that women's taste is unpredictable and, at the time he gave it to me, we'd only just met. Now I have a sweater that reminds me of him and isn't to my taste. After tonight, I'm sure I'll never wear it.

I glance at his profile as he watches the halftime juggling act. Why would he drink too much before a date? He could be an alcoholic as Kitty's rumors implied. But he had said when we first met that he was still recovering from an injury that prevented running, which was his hobby. It's possible he could be taking something for when the pain kicks up, but he should be aware of possible side effects and explain them when I find him in this condition. He seemed in denial about his strange appearance, not a good sign. When the halftime act is over, he turns to me with a little smile of enjoyment as we applaud. But even though we sit side by side while the second half continues, he explains nothing about how I found him or why he was in that condition.

As I pull into his icy drive after the game, he starts to get out but then turns to me and says, "How 'bout coming in for a while? There wasn't much chance to talk at the game."

Really? From my experience of him in the past, something like a few three point shots would never've stopped him from talking about himself. Perhaps his fog cleared enough at the game that he realized how slurry his words were at his house, and decided he'd better keep quiet. Otherwise, he could already have explained his behavior during some timeout or at the half, at least, briefly. Then I would be interested in hearing more about it. Now, does he want to just *talk*, as he says? I don't think he plans to cook for me so late tonight. We haven't seen each other in a while. Does he think we are well enough acquainted to have sex?

But I am tired of his unwillingness to acknowledge or explain his tipsy condition earlier. "Not tonight. It's already late and I have an icy road ahead. But thanks for the game. See you." I have the car moving backward even while he gets out, stumbles, and awkwardly shuts the door. I've seen how people try to deal with alcoholism, if that's what this is, and I don't want to get involved.

As I drive through the quiet, snowy streets where a few Christmas lights shine in the dark, I think of something I read, that one of the later stages in dating is the “getting comfortable” time. This is when you have been dating long enough to stop being on your best behavior. It comes after the courtship phase which is when members of the couple are trying to please. Brendan has surprised me with a present, and thoughtfully suggested getting concert tickets when I mentioned something I wanted to hear. But we have only been together four times. Have we somehow zoomed through the romantic stage and on to the next one of freely being our slobby selves? The book said this is when the personalities of the couple may clash, when you wear old sweat suits and don’t use mouthwash, for example, the time of normalcy when relationships may relax into the self-destruction of normal sloppiness.

Finally, the ten foot high, dummy waterfall on a flat field that “distinguishes” the entrance to my development appears in my headlights. Turning on to my street, I remember Brendan’s enjoyment from describing in great detail how he made the beautiful photographs. In spite of a successful career, he seems to be a vulnerable person at a difficult point in his life. My dad’s ho-hum life after retirement showed me that it can be bleak if you don’t have interests adequate to fill up your free time, and even more so, if you are alone like Brendan. I have sympathy, as I drop my purse on the kitchen counter and move to snap on the bedroom light, even though whatever is going on with him is a mystery.

Felicia is already on her spot in bed as I hang up my clothes. She gives me a sleepy, soft meow in welcome, and wiggles further into the pillow with her nose tucked warmly under her black tail before going back to sleep. How nice to fall into bed and put this upsetting date behind.

Over coffee the next morning, my head buzzes with questions about last night which bring up my philosophy about dating, otherwise known as, *what in heck am I doing?* Once before, Brendan asked for a kiss, moving to put his arms around me. As far as I knew, I’d given out no permission slips nor leading hints as I once had Don. Just like the gift of the sweater, this kiss was premature, before we knew each other well enough, and before I felt like it. I ducked on reflex and turned his move into nothing but a generic hug, quite a bit like those of Joe’s. Brendan frowned, saying, “Boy, someone has done a number on you, haven’t they?”

I pulled back and managed to mumble, “Maybe,” as I pressed him out the door with my arms like a greeter keeps a receiving line moving forward with a handshaking tug.

This morning I set down my coffee and go to lie on the sofa in my purple pajamas and analyze last night’s date. There’s no concrete proof for my guess

about Brendan's drinking. He didn't take a breath test or try to walk a straight line, except for following me across the slippery parking lot. Maybe breaking up with Don did do a number on me, but maybe I would have felt the same about Brendan even if I'd met him *before* Don. Back in my acreage days when Joe wanted to leave with a hug, even that faint intimacy was going too far though I liked him. Maybe I've learned to nip off maneuvers in the bud like Brendan's hug; maybe I've become more protective of myself like a single woman has to be.

Chapter 38

I intend to spend the holidays with Mom. Though I want to care for her, the trip to her hospital bed feels never ending. It's begun to seem like my spiritual odyssey for its fusion of penance with the discipline necessary to brave the slippery winter highway almost every day. I drive the thirty minute trip from my house to the hospital parking lot, clutch my car coat up to my neck while leaning into the cold wind, enter the heavy revolving door, walk down a short hall, pass through a large waiting room with numerous adults and children that reminds me of one in O'Hare, and turn a corner to the bank of elevators. Inside the metal doors, I push the black button for Mom's floor. At first we are awkwardly squeezed, stranger against stranger. We give our fellow travelers deprecatory smiles to excuse the intimacy of pressing on strange stomachs and bottoms. How many of us will get sick from this ride with no way to escape our neighbor's cough or the breath of the child with the runny nose being held at mouth level by his father? We are silent except when someone sneezes. The hospital should issue elevator masks. Finally at Mother's floor, high up in the tawny brick building, I am among the last to get off, glad to escape the most hazardous stage of the commute, wondering what dreadful bug will land me in a hospital room of my own.

I walk through more halls, pass a couple of nurses' stations with twinkling Christmas lights and small decorated trees, and, after coming through a dim anteroom where unrecognizable, dark apparatuses lurk, enter Mom's lighted room at last.

Mom's room is a washed out green with a few dots of bright color from

the get well cards arranged on the ledge of a big window. She is warmly covered with white and light blue blankets. For a long moment, I stand over her with bowed head wondering if she has heard me and will awaken. Her hearing is acute which foiled me as a child when I tried to sneak cookies in the kitchen while she was somewhere else in the house. No matter how quietly I removed the lid of the Red Riding Hood cookie jar, she would call, "You can have one but don't eat more and spoil your appetite." Did she ever realize that I sometimes took two at once and they never hurt my appetite?

The journey to her hospital room, with the various turns, levels, atmospheres, and degrees of light or dark, suggests a pilgrimage to the mountain cave of a saint. How many of these trips will the healing take for Mom and me? I see the outline of her blanket-encased form, her white hair, white face, closed eyes, and slightly open mouth as she sleeps. Somewhere in the hospital, something nameless drones like a far off canonical chant. Looking a little like a high tech candle pillar, a stainless steel pylon stands by her pillow from which plastic tubing runs to her body. Its lighted greenish numbers communicate a silent prayer about the adequacy of the life processes within.

Today the social worker comes in and asks me to step into the hall. She wants to know if I can meet with Mom's doctors in her room the day after Christmas. "That will be good because my sister will be here, too. They can talk to all of us at once," I answer.

Earlier today, she says, they attempted to remove the vent but were unsuccessful. "The doctor will be in later. Can you stay to talk to him?" she asks with an intent look.

This sounds ominous but I don't know what she is getting at. I answer, "Yes, of course."

When one of the doctors comes, we step again into the hall. What he says shocks me so that I can barely hear within the windy tunnel that has suddenly blasted through my brain, sending it into paralysis. What I get is that the vent has been in her throat long enough that Mom's ability to swallow has become very weak. They had to replace the vent after trying to remove it. They will give it one more try, probably tomorrow.

"What will happen if she still can't swallow?" I ask.

Through all the whooshing in my brain his words are almost undistinguishable, but I hear something like, "She will be given a feeding tube directly into her stomach. We will discuss her future with all of you the day after Christmas when we will know one way or the other."

"Does she know?" I ask.

"She knows."

Mom is still sleeping when I re-enter her room; I whisper so as not to

awaken her. "Mom, I don't want you to die like this, but I don't want you to live like this, either. I don't know what to ask ... I don't know what you want. Dear God, give her what she needs." Then I continue praying silently in my mind. *My mom, the good housewife, once said that her favorite Bible verse was the one about having many rooms prepared in his mansion for those who followed your Son. Father, maybe you could take her to one that she can call her home.* "Amen."

I take out a book but the awful picture of Mom in a wheel chair with some kind of tube poking out of her stomach blocks out everything else in my mind. This cannot be happening. The book slips to the seat of the gray plastic chair and falls on the floor with a rustle of its pages. When Mom awakes, I whisper to her because my voice is weak with horror at her life with such a handicap. "Mom . . . about the problem with removing the vent?"

She nods yes.

"We're having a meeting with your doctors the day after Christmas. I'm glad my sister will be here, too."

She nods *yes* again. Her eyes are only half open and there's no expression on her face. I try not to imagine the awful experience of trying to swallow after having the vent removed, and then having it replaced, but it keeps acidly dripping into my brain, etching into it a gulping sense of drowning. I want to console her but she seems far away, unreachable, perhaps in a place where she doesn't feel anything anymore, a place where nothing is necessary, not even a miracle. I don't want to say anything to bring her back to this. If she can't swallow, a life of reliance on a feeding tube isn't anything to hang onto. Is it time she got out of this pitiless world? This impression has waded its fingers for attention in my mind even before the pneumonia as I saw how disinterested she was with much of her day and those around her.

Mom's situation reminds me of the way my dad died. My sister and I believe that our dad took the ending of his life into his own hands, not as a suicide, but by grasping the opportunity that presented itself. Due to the ancient football injury, he needed a cane in old age, but the once star athlete tried to avoid using it much of the time out of pride. When the knee was very painful, he would often attempt to lurch from one prop to another instead of leaning on the cane that was his last resort. He moved off the farm into town when he became too unsteady on the icy winter walk out to the car in the separate garage. After leaving the farm, he had little to do except go to the town café morning and afternoon for coffee. He complained, "Now that Homer is dead, there's no one left for me to talk to. He was younger than me but he liked to hear about the old days. These young guys don't care." Then the small rural town's only café closed, and Dad had nowhere to sit and talk.

One day a pain in his upper abdomen that he ignored for a time became unbearable. Although the surgery to repair the aneurysm was successful, he never regained consciousness at the hospital in the city. After he arrived in a coma to a nursing home near the farm, I whispered, "You're home now, Dad. It's OK. You are where you belong." He died within a couple of hours after admission. My sister and I believe that Dad was through with his life and chose the aneurysm as his ticket out no matter how successful the doctors thought his surgery.

Now pneumonia has brought Mom to her own confrontation with the futility of going on when a certain threshold is crossed. Technology is sometimes beside the point.

I spend the rest of Christmas Eve day sitting in the gray plastic chair beside Mom, sometimes holding her hand, sometimes twisting around to look out the colorless window. I talk a little to her but I am really still flattened by the blast of the words, *stomach tube*. After what the doctor said, I feel today like I did once in a car accident. As my car spun around, ramming into the guard rail, then ricocheting backward into the lanes of on-coming traffic, I didn't scream or try to duck down in the seat. I sat thinking detachedly about the big semi-trailer that I could see hurtling toward me, not expecting to survive, hearing only the rush of air from the car's momentum. As the truck whizzed on by, my car slid backwards to a stop on the shoulder. I looked around at its warped interior from the battering against the guard rail, heard the tinkle of glass falling from the broken windows, and felt my body under the steering wheel safely in one piece, not smashed to pulp. As I climbed out, unhurt, to flee away from the shoulder across the ditch, I had this feeling of floating above the accident scene, not really in my own skin. Events had moved too fast for my emotions to catch up.

I think Mom might feel this same discontinuity. All day she has been either asleep or numbly sitting by the road when awake after her own accident, perhaps trying to avoid taking in what has happened by floating above herself on the bed.

As the hours of Christmas Eve drift across the window, a vague restlessness sets in; I daydream. What if Don were here to help me get through this? The feeling of his arms around me with his chest to lean my head against would be so comforting. This is absurd, of course, I tell myself, slumping down in the easy chair and resting my head against its back, turned to see out the window. He didn't even want to attend the wedding with me, why would he come to Mom's hospital room? As the short day passes into dark outside the window, her dire situation continues to slam me into a skid on the loneliness of not having his hand to hold while holding Mom's with the

other in a childlike chain to get us safely across this dangerous street.

Later that day after I kiss her sleeping face goodbye, I arrive home and bring in my mail. From under all the useless circulars, an envelope slides out with Don's return address. After wishing for him all this horrible day, I try telling myself, *don't get excited*, but my racing heart won't listen. I tear open the envelope and read the greeting. Under the printed Christmas message, he has written, *I never meant to hurt you. I'm sorry. Don.* Like a person sitting down on nothing, in my panic, I will grab anything for support. The card seems more than just form; the words actually seem to express a feeling. That little messenger in my head that I trust the most, based on past experience, speaks up. *Go on taking one step at a time even though you have no idea where you're going or how to get there. Keep coming through.*

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On Christmas Day, my sister arrives from northeastern Illinois. We hope Mom can be discharged while my sister is here to help with whatever comes next. When we arrive in her room we don't have to ask. The vent is still in place. My sister puts her arms around Mom and says, "I'm here now, Mom." She almost sounds like I did when telling Dad at the ICF that he was where he belonged, meaning that now he could let go. Mom nods her head. My sister finds a station playing Christmas music on the radio we bring along, and places her red poinsettia where Mom can see it. We get Mom propped up in bed so she can better see and write to us. Then my sister begins setting Mom's presents on the blanket around her. I sit back and let her take charge for a change which she has always enjoyed doing more than I.

She arranges the gifts around Mom within easy reach. I have nothing to give her. I told myself that I'll wait until she leaves the hospital to see what she might need then, but this may not be the true reason. Mom makes a gesture toward un-wrapping one of the gifts, but seems too weak to do it. As we begin opening them for her, she simply looks at the presents without expression. My sister has brought a lovely, soft aqua cardigan, and Mom's favorite dark chocolates which a grandchild doesn't realize she can't eat, among other gifts. My sister says, "Look at this nice sweater, just right for sitting by that chilly window overlooking the goose pond." Mom's eyes don't move behind her half-closed lids; her hands lie still beside her body. Catching each other's eyes, we acknowledge the futility of this charade, but we don't know what else to do. Maybe something will spark her response.

Mom doesn't attempt to write or indicate anything about her thoughts. Although this is a different situation, I recall that she somehow felt inadequate

about writing to me back in the day when I lived far away from her in the east. She claimed in almost every letter she sent that she didn't know what to tell about, and it became a little standing joke between Stan and me to watch for this phrase in each note. Nevertheless, she faithfully got something down on paper almost every week of the fifteen years I lived far away from Dad and her. *Dear Children*, her letters always began even though I was thirty-seven when we returned from the east. I'd like to see a note from her today that began, *Dear Children* . . .

When preparing to teach her Bible class or to make a shopping list, Mom wrote quickly in shorthand. I can't read shorthand. When I became the one who went to the store for her, she would have to decipher the list for me to re-write in English. Reading her blank expression and slightly closed eyes today is like trying to read her shorthand.

My sister and I speak little about Mom's situation because we don't know what to expect and can't really plan. What will come next? I would like a piece of that dark chocolate candy Mom can't eat that she and Dad maintained was the best, but I can't bring myself to put it in my mouth since it can never go into hers.

For some reason, we don't cry in front of her as we sit holding her white, blue-veined hands. Perhaps she anticipates getting out of the hospital, and our tears would be inappropriate. Perhaps it's because we haven't seen Mom weep in front of anyone no matter how sad the circumstances, even when Dad died. Perhaps, to see her daughters weeping would be even more painful to her than what she feels for herself. Does she somehow hide her feelings within a personal code like her shorthand? They are there but not deciphered into signs we can read? A nurse, in a red and green top, smiles as she glances in the door, peers at the three of us, and frowning, walks quickly away through the dark anteroom. She has nothing to help with what we are going through.

In the evening when Mom falls asleep once more, we walk out of her hospital room down the hall by the twinkling lights and merry stockings hung at the nursing station. Christmas is the day of all days when Mom wants her family around, but today, she is the one who is not really there. She seems to have flown out the window on her own pilgrimage into that vast sky beyond her hospital bed.

Over the parking lot as we pass the rows of cars, the stars shine brightly against the high, black sky. They beckon from its void like the lights of my childhood home seen from across dark fields when I heard Mom's call to come in for supper. Under their familiar December constellations, the words of a Christmas carol from the hymnal of my youth come to mind. On Christmas Eve during the church service, its lyrics had always made me

picture my home town under the light of the big, electric star on top of the grain elevator. Tonight, after sitting beside Mom all day, the same words create a picture of her, silent and still in that hospital bed, up above the world, getting ever closer to the stars.

The day after Christmas we meet with a trio of doctors in Mom's room. She is raised up to sitting position in her white bed facing where they stand at its foot like judges about to pronounce her sentence. My sister and I, her advocates, stay at her white head. I cover her blue-veined hand with my own. I can't help remembering how busy her hand always was as she helped me with 4-H projects, like sewing the ruffled yellow and white organdy curtains for my bedroom. Now this quiet hand lies loosely open under mine. My sister's hand is on Mom's thin shoulder.

The doctor explains how they will insert a tube into her stomach so she can be fed after she leaves the hospital since she can't swallow. Mom seems to be listening to the doctors talk in an abstract, impersonal way, as though they are describing a woman in my Aunt Lola's travel snapshots whose name none of us knows and from no one knows where. I breathe faster and clutch her hand tighter thinking of mom living with a feeding tube in her abdomen. *Oh Mom, if you can find a way to get out of this, do it.*

When the doctor asks for her decision, she is present enough to indicate by shaking her head that she doesn't want this or any other heroic measure they ask about. While it is all explained, my mouth gets dry and I have trouble swallowing, but her hand in mine does not shake; it is steady and still. The doctors sit silently for a long moment, gazing at her as she faces them, equally quiet. Some mental question seems to pass from them to Mom to which she wordlessly reaffirms her decision.

Maybe it's my imagination but she seems to be sleeping comfortably in the evening when we leave, seeming more at ease than she's been for a long time, almost as though some weight that was pressing her down has been lifted away. The chaplain has been to see her when I wasn't there, and maybe they had prayed about the best outcome for ending this situation. I say to my sister as we pull out of the parking lot, "When the ER doctor said she needed that tube to breathe and without it her heart would keep getting weaker until it gave out, he never warned us that the inability to swallow could be a result. If I'd known, I'd probably have signed the permission slip for her anyway and risked this happening, but maybe Mom wouldn't have let me. Anyway, I had no idea this could happen to her."

We are exhausted from the weight of the day and, without further words, go to bed.

Early the next morning someone from the hospital calls to say Mom is

gone. We had intuited that Mom was ready to go, though we never said it in so many words. Driving into the dawn, I say, "Remember how Dad loved her homemade sandwich buns? How many years did she make a batch every week to please him no matter what. She would do what she thought was best for her family regardless how hard, even something like this." My sister and I make one more trip past the twinkling Christmas lights and Santa stockings to stand by her small, still, blanketed form for the final time. "If such a day comes to me, I hope to do exactly like Mom," I say, wanting to be like her almost for the first time in my life.

Fair weather clouds of salmon, saffron, and mother of pearl streak the big sky of mourning dove gray. This is what Mom could have seen through her window today, but she has made a journey beyond this world though not beyond the love of my sister and me.

We drive home in the bright day, discussing how much we admire our mother's courage in immediately acting on her choice, though we didn't expect such a sudden exit while we were home in bed. We didn't get to say goodbye but that's the way she was. I remember that she left me as quickly as possible on my first day of school and at the dorm on my first day of college, before I could realize that she was going. She thought parting was easier if done quickly and with few words, she explained once. "When my time comes, I hope I can go as quickly and bravely as Mom," my sister says, looking out the car window at the bright, glazed snow, a film in her own eyes just as bright.

In the days after Mom's death as we dispense with her beloved sets of fancy plates and remaining pieces of furniture, we feel relieved more than sad. We won't have to face the hopeless prospect of seeing her in a wheelchair with a feeding tube, watching the geese waddle among the holiday lights as they are today. She had given the money to buy those shining strands for decorating the firs by the goose pond that she liked to observe from her window. In the future we'll deeply mourn, but now we mostly feel the release of knowing that she will not suffer that un-natural end to her life, and that her sorrowful separation from Dad is over.

I pick up the aqua sweater to hold against my cheek, soft as a mother's bedtime kiss, wondering if the caring grandchild who gave it would like to have it back. The touch of its downy fibers brings thoughts of Mom's encircling love. Being with her at the end was complicated for me in a way I didn't want to open up about because she could've been hurt. My lack of care when she first came down with the cold, which is the way I feel about it, implicates me in this dreadful chain of events. When the struggle to manage this pain gets bad, I sometimes repeat, "I love you, Mom." From the days of

my childhood to the end of her life, she accepted and loved me just as I am, in spite of my self-centeredness and even when she didn't quite understand my thinking. She has become my model for loving my own family as they are especially when I don't understand. *You have to learn to do this for yourself because I won't be there*, her voice repeats in my memory. *Yes, Momma, I can do it because you have shown me how*. I lay the pretty sweater aside to ask the grandchild about it when there's a chance.

• • •

My sister and I have celebrated Mom's life with a memorial service and closed down her apartment though we never will be finished with her memory or Dad's. After lunch as we carry the last of her boxes into my garage to tape shut for storage, I come across a black and white snapshot of Mom and Dad, taken in their early twenties, which I will always carry in my heart. Dad is tall, thin, and has a farmer suntan with pale forehead and darker cheeks. He has swung Mom up high in his long arms like he would to test the weight of a bat. She has modestly gathered the fluid skirt of her light-colored dress with one arm under her legs. With the other, she holds on to Dad's shoulders. He smiles down at her as she tucks her chin and laughs in surprise, slightly embarrassed at being on camera like this. He is showing off and she loves it.

Poem for Mother and Myself

*In my inner sea, washing up, washing out,
sighs of salt lay down
a tombolo
midway between our islands, more
and more bound.*

Chapter 39

My feeling of isolation in Brendan's house and the episode of talking in my sleep loud enough to wake myself up make me realize that moving on from Don, if I do, will take more than throwing out withered bouquets. My minister refers me to Clark, who specializes in marriage and relationship counseling, particularly from a man's standpoint. Clark is tall, a former football player, with the honest, non-intellectual, say-it-like-it-is attitude that a good coach would have. I like talking to him, and I can't help thinking that Don would have, too.

Clark says that, from what I tell him, perhaps Don unconsciously wanted me to replace Mary—take those weekends in the city house, for example, and the playtimes with his grandchildren, for another. “But you weren't happy about going there because, as you once told Don, ‘she was everywhere,’ and you felt left out. And Don saw that you liked his family well enough but didn't fit in the same way their grandmother had.”

I added, “Once when I wanted Don to talk about his feelings, he told me, ‘Mary didn't have to ask, she just knew’.”

Through happenings like these, Clark thinks Don began to realize that I wasn't Mary, for whom he continued to grieve, perhaps even harder after experiencing the difference between us. He says that Don and I were probably each other's transitional relationship. “You were the unsuccessful first one that clears the way for the future.” This is the *slow-mo* replay, coach-talk truth I need, but it bulldozes my brain and my backbone into jelly. Nevertheless, I try to take it all in, nodding my head as I leave his office of dark,

masculine colors and wood, feeling thin and runny from being crushed by too much truth.

At the same time as I write in my diary about dating Brendan and try counseling to understand my relationship with Don, I need something again like the words of Nathaniel to give myself hope. In the back of my mind I keep thinking of angels. There was a poem I read a long, long time ago about being blown in a new direction by the chaos of the world. In the poem, the startling knock at the door in the night is by unknown angels. Do not be afraid to let them in, the poem by D. H. Lawrence said, they will take you to the wonder of the golden apple tree.

It doesn't make any sense but this image teases me into standing three small Christmas tree decorations in the shape of angels on the counter by the table where I study. It's the same kind of superstitious stuff I tried in fifth grade math to make my answers come out right when we checked our problems in class. If one answer was correct, I'd hold my pencil the very same way until another one was wrong, and then I'd try a different position to trick a new, correct answer into happening. It was make-believe nonsense, which I grasped even at age ten, but it was comforting, too. And, recently, I have read an article reporting that psychological research has shown that carrying a rabbit's foot or other good luck charm can actually help you perform better because it makes you feel more confident.

Now, in the mornings before settling down to work, I touch each angel while brooding over the future. One angel is made of bright red, yellow, and blue painted wood; it looks vaguely like a Russian doll in a robe. A second wooden one has a Modigliani-like elongated, robed body painted gold with wings formed of gold wire. The third one is ceramic, and looks like a Renaissance figure with sculptured feathery wings spread behind a billowing, red and white robe that softly outlines its sturdy lower legs. This guy, or girl, I'm not sure which, could jog to its next mission, if it had to.

The rest of the world probably thinks I'm a normal old woman, but this is my witchy gimmick. In sheer, hocus-pocus ritual, I whisper to each angel my hope that somehow Don and I can find a new direction that will bring us back together. What do I expect of the angels—that they come to Don on their wings in a dream, bearing the announcement of a new beginning—an Advent for us? The only reason to start my day with this prayer is for comfort because wishful repetition keeps my hope alive, and helps keep me from collapsing on the couch. It probably proves that in some way, I truly am un-level.

• • •

Jillian and Ruth, whom I have recently met at my new church in the city, offer to introduce me to other single women my age who might become my new, unofficial support group. We share the names of clothing stores that don't dress us like grandmas even though we are, give advice on how to lose weight without giving up food, and, of course, reveal our carefully considered tips about men. At our age when we outnumber them ten to one, it seems like, we need all the advice we can get. Changing my church came about in answer to my brooding: how can I do better with my life after Don? But will girlfriends really make anything better? Well, life is always an experiment.

Jillian, petite and pretty with short, silver hair, has been divorced for many years, she confides with a sniff over the white dinner cloth between us. "I've learned that a man our age is looking either for a purse or a nurse." This should qualify as a maxim because I previously heard the very same words from a woman friend even before leaving my acreage.

"How do you know which it is?" I ask.

Suddenly she replaces her normally sweet face with frowning eyes and pinched lips as she taps a pink polished nail on the table. "If you are cooking and cleaning in his house, you're the nurse. If he moves in with you, you're the purse. Some women manage to be both. Sometimes they're called wives." Then she points that finger at me and gives it a little swirl and jab like a period at the end of her sentence. *Well, that's clear enough.*

A matronly type among this table of well-dressed, mature mavens sets down her cocktail glass and admonishes me with a frown above stern blue eyes behind gray tinted glasses. "Don't stoop so low to find a man that you turn into one of those casserole ladies."

A lady like a casserole? This dubious phrase is a new one to me. "That sounds awful. Who are they?"

"Haven't you noticed how, when a woman's husband dies, she is left alone to do everything for herself? But let a man's wife die, and every single woman near his age within kissing range finds herself *com-pelled* to help the poor guy out by bringing him a casserole so he won't starve to death." She follows this severe warning with a soothing sip of her cocktail. "There's no similar line of guys offering to mow the new widow's lawn."

Do we really think our casserole is the only one he gets? Of course, this rite of senior *femi-necessity* stems from the fact, in large measure, that there are so many more women than men in the upper ages. Leaving food is like setting a trap for a wolf. Wolves are known for being wary, but food might work unless the wolf is already too stuffed to care.

Seated at the table beside me, Ruth, also divorced, is going with a married

salesman from out of state. She is getting tired of waiting while he makes up his mind about divorcing his current wife, and is hoping to meet a replacement as soon as possible. Her curly blond hair is held back from her round face by bright pink combs, which she pulls out and replaces more securely as she describes being at a large gathering of senior singles when a new man showed up. "After a short time I looked around at the arrangement of the people in the room. In one corner stood most of the usual men, in another were a few women including myself, but the vast majority of women were circling around the one new man they had locked in their center. If I had wanted to try I couldn't have gotten through that fortress of women to meet him." She takes out a compact and lipstick with which to touch up her lips. I haven't seen that vivid orange-ish pink—was it called Tangerine?—since I was a girl though I'd read it was in vogue again. She drops the tube back in her large, black leather purse and snaps it shut with an emphatic *click*.

In my brain this game among older women vying for a man's attention is named, "The Senior Women's Trivial Pursuit," and calls for a good sip of my dry martini. I savor the slightly olive taste and enjoy the smooth lift to my brain that softens the downturned lips and sweetens the lemony tongues around me.

After the counseling of my new girlfriends ends, I head my car home along the highway that became overly familiar when Mom was sick. The ease of getting into the city to visit her enabled my decision to try this urban church that is noted for having a large singles membership. My new discipline will be to learn all I can about the single life from these Old Girls, but prevent their pessimism from inoculating me against meeting someone nice even though they have not.

I turn on to my street, drive into my garage, and close the door which falls with a harsh *clank*—rather like the sound of much of the evening. I sit for a moment replaying some of the conversation as the scrape of the metal echoes in my brain. I will continue my quest but will act on my own conclusions rather than simply believing the Old Girls' Manly Myths. Anyway, there were subjects other than just men I enjoyed talking about with my peers. *We talked about how to get what we want at work, in life, and with men—oh, yeah, there's that topic again.*

Chapter 40

I return again to the resumes of the dating cub which I joined as an efficient way to find someone special. Waving a fake “Cheerio,” to the receptionist, I feel that I’m wasting my time because I’ve already seen and rejected most of these resumes. Still this seems the best plan because, if I don’t keep looking, someone new may be snapped up by one of the other Old Girls. Another bromide runs through my brain as I quickly scour through the albums: “Guys want to dance with the girls who are dancing,” a sorority housemother once encouraged back in my college days. She was trying to quell the rebellion of some sisters with boyfriends already who didn’t want to go on dating exchanges for the purpose of meeting new men. It seems I’m full of these nutty sayings, planted by the squirrel of youth, and now dug up by my rodent memory the first chance it gets.

Dan is someone I had considered before but then Brendan walked in. Perhaps he’s worth a second look and a meeting. When we get together for coffee, I see a clean looking guy of average height with earnest blue eyes and straight dark hair brushed fashionably back from his face. He tells me that he has been divorced many years, and has grandchildren whom he sympathetically baby-sits every few days so his single daughter can have a break. He repairs her lawn mower and bathroom stool, and, also, continues to give car rides and advice to her mother due to her constant battle with unemployment and personal problems.

As we drink good coffee sitting on a comfortable black leather sofa in a coffee house, I reflect that while this sounds like sterling behavior, something

tells my skeptical self that there is more to this divorce than Dan lets on, which is almost always true of divorces. But after all this time, why does he still act like the main daddy for his former wife and the daughter's fatherless children? As he returns to the coffee bar for a second round, I consider whether I want to play a part in this kind of family. I'm leery of getting sucked into the on-going problems of someone whose relationship to a divorced wife sounds tight and, therefore, messy. I narrow my eyes and frown at Dan, who is now on the other side of the room politely pouring more coffee into our brown mugs. My prediction is that nothing will happen between myself and Dan, who is now smiling as he returns with our coffees. However, as long as I don't make any promises that could get broken, or take advantage of his feelings, I can at least be a good date and keep on dancing. With this in mind, I smile back.

Over this second cup of coffee, Dan tells me he is a financial advisor. "You know what that is, don't you?" he asks.

"Of course, I happen to know one or two," I answer. He smiles, inviting me to say more but I see no reason to go down that path. My finances are private.

Dan goes on to tell me a little about the courses he teaches on making good investments for retirees "just like you." I answer that I've already been through the school district's adult education investment class. Shortly after that we part though we plan to see each other again.

• • •

A little while afterward, I buy two tickets to an important basketball game and ask my new friend, Dan, to go with me so as to pay him back for an excellent concert he took me to hear. When Dan arrives at my house, he says, "Getting tickets to see this game is quite a surprise. It's something I really like to do."

"I love basketball, and it sounded as though you liked sports so I thought of you."

At the game from our seats high up in the balcony, I search the stands until I find Don in his red ball cap at his usual seat near the floor. Beside me Dan smiles as he looks around. I weigh whether I should leave him to run down and speak to Don; it was part of the plan behind buying the tickets because I guessed Don would be there. Dan reads out loud from the game program, pointing to several of the stats. My sense of fair play tugs back and forth; would speaking to Don offend Dan if he saw me? I downplayed this complication before buying the tickets, but now, seated beside him, a

question about its morality looms. *All's fair in love or war*—but is that true for this situation? On the other hand, we have only recently met. I might run into several friends at the game. Quickly I stand up before the see-saw in my brain tilts again. Even though it feels rude, I excuse myself because, “There’s someone I haven’t seen for a while and I want to say hi. I’ll just be gone for a minute.” It’s the truth as far as it goes and it goes far enough for our friendship now. I hope to disappear among the roaring crowd inside the huge arena, and bump into Don accidentally on purpose. Quickly I run far down the steps to where Don is sitting and drop on the stairs beside him, hoping to blend into the crowd. My guilty conscience makes me feel that I stick out like a naughty tongue.

“What are you doing here?” Don turns to ask in surprise.

It’s such an inanely appropriate question, I have to laugh. “The same as you, of course,” I answer even though this is a white lie if I’m absolutely honest, but I can’t give him the mix of reasons for why I’m really there. I nod at the floor where the team in white suits is running a drill. “Do you think we have a chance to win?”

“There’s always a chance,” Don answers with a smile. Don acts happy to see me but from the way he shifts in his seat, I can see he is caught off guard and nervous. He’s not with a date, I can tell, because a man is seated between him and a woman. Even if he’d had a date, I would have spoken to him because I’m willing to compete. After conversing about the game for a couple of minutes, I stand up to hurry back to Dan.

“I’ll give you a call,” Don says as I wave good-by and run back upstairs.

It’s a good game that Dan and I enjoy; though our team loses, I feel like a winner.

• • •

One afternoon Dan calls to say he is teaching an investment seminar just down the street from where I live. “Afterward I could pick up Chinese and come over, or we could go out,” he invites. Later, as we open several cardboard containers on the white wicker and glass table before the fire, I offer to pay my share but he won’t hear of it. “I’ll do the honors,” he says, generously. We talk about sports, especially hockey which seems to me to have no rules and about which I know almost nothing. But he is a good story teller, and the three divorces he has owned up to as we dated, don’t stop me from enjoying the talk of sports along with the stir-fry.

Then he asks, “How did you come to this place, and have you had it long? It’s very nice.”

I take a sip of the tea, now lukewarm, and tell him a little about my reason for exchanging an acreage on the loess for this development marked by a fake waterfall built on a bean field.

He turns his lips down in commiseration and sits back in the wicker chair, brushes an invisible hair from the lapel of his blue suit, removes the polite look of a guest from his face, and asks, "Do you have the remaining proceeds from your other place invested?" He smiles so toothily I think of the fox in the story of *The Gingerbread Boy*. Whoa! This is 'way too bold a question for such a short acquaintance.

I blot my lips, lay down my fork, having never completely gotten the hang of chop-sticks, and take my time before responding, "Of course."

Yes, ulterior motives can hide behind smiles of magnanimity.

Well, you should know, Goody Two Shoes scolds. What about your real reason for buying those game tickets?

The wicker chair creaks a little as Dan leans toward me with his wrists on the table's edge, and says, "Good for you, but do you know if you're doing the best you can with your funds? I make my living by advising people about investing their retirement dollars, and I'd be glad to take a look at yours and give you my best thought. Even if you already have a financial consultant, it wouldn't hurt to get a second opinion. As your friend, of course, there wouldn't be any charge." He crosses one arm over the other in his lap, sits back, smiles that foxy smile, and waits for my agreement to such a sensible, not to mention, generous offer.

But I think of those three exes and, for the space of a few pulse beats, I simply look at his attitude of toothy sincerity. *He thinks I'm a gingerbread cookie.* I had wondered, given his occupation, when he would get around to asking about my investments because I had a feeling he would from our very first coffee. There is something about him that's a little too Uncle Carl, a salesman uncle of Mom's who my dad seemed to mistrust even though Dad laughed at his stories. Now my sense of self-preservation goes on amber alert. I don't think I've told him anything private about myself, such as my birthdate, social security number, or my computer password with which he might be able to steal my financial secrets, but I rack my brains for a few seconds. I've read about these Chinese computer hackers and here he sits with Chinese food.

I smile warily back at him and respond, "Oh, I don't think there's any need. I'm happy with the person I have." This isn't true. In answer to a couple of my questions, Don had previously pointed out some general instances which indicated a change of financial advisor might be worthwhile, but I haven't found the time to figure out how.

Dan leans further forward, putting out one hand flat on the table, and starts to disagree, "Yes, but—"

"Thanks for the offer but no thanks, and thanks for dinner, too. Now I've got to get back to my work," I interrupt, looking down at my watch. With this comment, I have dunked the ball in the hoop and stand up to end the game. I still have that uneasy feeling even though I don't know anything more about his divorce—divorces, I should say. I move toward the door as I speak and he has to follow, looking slightly surprised. *After that time with Joe, I just say no.* Through the side windows of the door, I watch him disappear around the corner of the garage. Could that continual close contact with his divorced wife have anything to do with handling her financial investments? Is it her dollars and cents that keep him *cents*-itive to her needs?

• • •

A week or so later my friend, Ruth, and I meet for lunch at a restaurant furnished in dark wood and abstract paintings in loud colors. She complains about never finding anyone interesting and how she is stuck with the same tiresome guy. "For two long years we've been going out when he happens to be working in town. At first I thought he needed time to figure out the divorce, but now I realize he's not going to change anything. I'm sick of it all," she says fiercely, holding her wine glass in one hand while smacking the table lightly with the other. "This year I'm going to get over him, take a chance, and find someone new." Her bright blond hair and shocking pink sweater give her a young style, but griping about a double-crossing date is not atypical of women over fifty. Or under. As she sets down the wine and begins picking the cucumber wedges from the arugula on her salad plate, she says with a sigh, "He's not what I want but, at least, with him I go out sometimes."

"Maybe I can help," I offer, beginning to tell her everything about what has happened to me with Dan. "But, still, he has nice manners and is pleasant. Would you be interested in meeting him?"

Surprisingly, after a moment's consideration, she says, "Yes, what could it hurt?"

"Just keep your hands on your purse when you're around him," I warn. So back at home, I pick up the phone and call Dan to work out an introduction for them. It amuses me that Dan never asks why I'm passing him on to my friend.

Chapter 41

Because a friend said she met someone through the newspaper personals, I begin reading them over the breakfast coffee. Single white male, nonsmoking, a lover of beer and brats, looking for single white female, also non-smoking, to go for walks on the beach. Most of them sound as dull as the first two guys I met under the squawking pheasant ages ago. But surprisingly, as I eat buttered toast, here's one that teases: *Where is the woman, lovely in her bones?* And he goes on to tell about himself in a similar light-hearted vein. For the first time since meeting Don, I am truly piqued with curiosity about a guy who picks up on one of the most famous phrases in poetry, and I lay down the paper to have fun creating an answer that will provoke this poet in newsprint to *want to meet my wanton ways*.

To the one who searches for Lovely Bones, let me dazzle you with my flowing knees, and waltz you 'til the cake falls in the oven. I can shake and bake 'til we're dizzy with the beat, while sighing light and loose, cheek to cheek. My riff on Roethke's poetry is fun to write and quickly ready to send.

We meet over coffee set down on authentic gray Formica tables arranged in the center of vintage gray vinyl booths. This place is honestly its age. Matty is not much taller than I, with curly brown hair worn rather long, round blue eyes behind rimless, out of fashion glasses that give him a naïve expression, and is around ten years younger than I, the outside limit to my range. He describes the small printing company where he has worked many years; it seems to leave him with scads of time to read. We talk about books and movies we like, or not, and a play we'd like to see. Every week he lays a

fresh flower on the grave of the young woman he loved who recently died. Don would never do this and, probably, Stan wouldn't have either. Matty is a new kind of guy for me.

The second time we meet for coffee and talk, a book lies open in front of Matty on the gray table. "I read that many years ago," I say, rolling up the sleeves of my old blue sweater and peering at the title before sliding into the gray vinyl and chrome chair across the table. "What do you think of it?"

Matty picks up the book and turns it face down to hold his place. "It was in the second-hand bookstore where I often go. I'd like to be Louis the Seventh and go on crusade with Eleanor of Aquitaine. Think of their life in the Kingdom of Antioch among Muslims, Jews, Christians and Greeks. So exotic and interesting. It makes this place seem really hum-drum and stodgy."

"Oh, yeah, Louis and Eleanor sat on golden thrones in their tent listening to a troubadour sing about the Star of War. It was the ordinary folks, who just wanted to earn a few acres of their own, who went out in the mud and mostly died, crusading for nothing."

Matty throws back his head and laughs in agreement. "You're right, and I would have been one of the ordinary ones who took a sword in his back, for sure. But I love the picture I get of medieval life—its painful poetry, the mysticism, its melancholy, and, especially, those long pilgrimages on foot to holy places like Compostela."

These details tell me how much he has thought about the Middle Ages. He slumps in relaxation on the chrome chair, thumbs through the pages of his book, smiles, and orders coffee for the two of us. I look over the single sheet of paper that consists of the menu while taking a careful sip of the hot brew from the crazed white mug the server quickly sets down. Matty's chivalrous view of life in the Crusades makes me want to balance it with doubt and negativity, the same contrariness I sometimes felt with Stan's rosy views of life which I actually liked. But I want to pick his notions apart because they seem overly romantic given the rigors of its everyday reality. "People of that day thought God was among them on earth in a way that seems very different from us today," I reflect, taking another sip of coffee and looking around the gray interior at strangers chewing away on luscious plates of pie. "It's hard to imagine God sitting here a few chairs away even if the pie is heavenly."

What attracts us to this rather seedy place is the specialty—its pies, the one glamorous thing about it. A piece of chocolate silk pie is as much of heaven as may be. Tonight they must have ten different flavors exhibited in a revolving glass case. The pieces are huge, some with meringue that is piled inches deep on the top. I try to make up my mind between having tart lemon meringue or rich sour cream raisin.

Matty raises his eyebrows as he turns away from the Lazy Susan's *damn the diet* display. He leans his chin on his fist and asks, "Have you learned to meditate? I've looked into it and would like to know how you go about finding God through your inmost self."

The noise of conversation and clink of cutlery requires us to speak loudly because the restaurant is rather full tonight. "Once upon a time I did participate in fasting and meditation." I pause for a moment to recall those spiritual retreats from years back. The pie plates are fast disappearing from the display shelves behind the glass while it continues to circle enticingly like an exotic dancer at a Middle Eastern banquet.

"We began the retreat with a small supper of bean soup and coarse bread but then had only water for the rest of the night and bouillon with a little bread the next day while following the Canonical Hours and maintaining silence." The irony of talking to Matty about fasting and silence in the middle of this noisy restaurant with ten different pies on display makes me laugh a little. "At one stage, I had to polish a pew for an hour, not to have a clean one, but to discipline myself to a listening, waiting attitude of prayer. It was a meaningful ritual. But that was long ago when I lived where the experience was available, not around here. How 'bout you?" The bite of tart lemon meringue makes my mouth water; I savor the tug of sweet and sour on my taste buds.

To give this question some thought, Matty sets down his fork with which he is eating a bite of thick, sweet cherry pie. "I've read about meditation and tried it in seminary but I've never found a way to enter special training beyond that. For a time I studied to be a priest but after a couple of years, I realized I saw life as less dogmatic than my seminary studies taught. Once in a while I almost catch sight of the Spirit when I read poetry or see a painting, but it's never clear," he sighs, as he picks up the fork and takes another bite.

"What did you do about the seminary?"

He takes a moment to swallow, then says, "Kissed it a sad goodbye and started looking for a job. I finally landed at the printing press. It's creative, practical, and needed. I want to keep on doing it." Matty smiles and ducks his head as he adjusts the rimless glasses on his nose. His eyes shine when speaking of his work even if he looks slightly apologetic. From what he's said before, he's stayed in the same position at the press for many years. He has no children to deal with, no wife, and no mother. Perhaps all of this is what gives him an air of peaceful simplicity, something like that of a friend of mine who's an organic farmer and has no doubt it's the best way to save the earth. What will the coming of computers do to his press and to his way of life? For tonight, I choose to let that complication go and merely nod my

head at what he says, feeling a touch of envy because I never was that happy with any of my later and most responsible jobs.

Matty takes a big bite of the cherry pie, chews it meditatively, and then gives me another sweet smile. Although he left the priesthood behind, his innocence seems like that of those pure Cistercian monks that he reads about. He's too sheltered from the big, bad world of conflict and dilemma for me, the kind you get when you have to manage workers like I did, or raise kids, or go through making new decisions when your circumstances change—what I think of as the normal give and take of responsible living. I can be his friend for discussing God over pie, but that's all. Life is too relative with too many choices and, even with apparently good choices, there are trade-offs to bear. Trade-offs like when I went through the decision to leave the acreage and jump into a new world though the old one was not too bad. I'm not attracted to Mattie except as a friend who is really nice to talk to. Tonight I settle for simply smiling back and enjoying the joust of sweet and sour flavors in splendid opposition on my tongue. Maybe we'll get into the difficulties of trade-offs when we know each other better.

Chapter 42

This morning my eyes fasten on the plain white wall where I've never hung any pictures because that could be a sign to myself that I'm taking up permanent residence. In place of art work, the faces of my dates come to mind. How moral is going out with them while my heart is somewhere else? Am I using them to feel better about myself? Am I being kind? Am I being fair? Will they vote for me for Prom Queen? But we are each playing the dating game. I don't expect each date to be someone I want to ultimately be with and they surely don't, either.

As I stand up from the sofa to fold the blue afghan Mom crocheted long ago, it seems my motives aren't entirely pure. Getting together with Don is still my ultimate goal at the same time I date them, admittedly, so as to keep on dancing. Who knows what will happen? I didn't force them to ask me out. Would I see them differently if I didn't have Don to compare them to?

Now I sit down on the sofa again, picking at my cuticles, a bad habit but it's kind of a de-stressor. As I get up to find my cuticle scissors in the bathroom, I look in the mirror at my droopy eyelids and the creases that are beginning around my mouth. I consider whether I'm turning too judgmental and hard to please as I age, like that magazine quiz had warned. *How would you react if. . . ?* Say that your date met you at the door with messy hair and half-open eyes because the light hurt, wearing his pajamas as though just waking up. Would you (a) run back to your car and skedaddle out of there, no questions asked; (b) make coffee, hand him two aspirins, and help him to sober up; or (c) drive him to the game and wait for him to explain before

deciding whether or not to see him ever again? My final score on the actual magazine quiz was as non-judgmental as possible. In my own case, either (a) or (b) seems OK, but (c) seems the wisest for a woman, like me, who wants a long-lasting relationship.

If I'm not being too picky, then what bothers me about these dates? Asking this reminds me of the days when I scrutinized possible renters for our apartments, trying to look into my crystal ball to forecast how an applicant might become a problem. There was Brendan's tendency to lecture self-absorbedly rather than give me an equal turn, but mostly, it was his mysterious, drunk-like behavior that really turned me off. There was Dan's murky, almost daily, relationship with a needy former wife years after their divorce. And I was taken back to learn he stays in touch with all three exes, not just the one he first mentioned. But what squelched it for me was when he began licking his lips over my investments. Then there's sweet Matty—too pure, too uncomplicated, and out-of-this-world. Maybe in his case I am being too fussy as I turn what should be a plus into a minus, in my judgment.

It's true that certain of their penchants turned down my enthusiasm right from the start, but I still hung in there to get to know them better. OK, I already knew them well enough. But my plan is to keep dancing. Shrugging, I begin clipping the shredded cuticles. It seems like I do work at getting acquainted until something like a major turn-off happens—Brendan's failure to acknowledge the reason for his drunk-like behavior, for example. Even Dan's three divorces, the sound of which is like a disaster siren, didn't stop me from getting to know him. However, when he held up three fingers indicating as many marriages, I realized what it was about Dan that bothered me.

Long ago my father had laughed and said that my Mom's Uncle Carl was quite the hustler, always trying to sell something to somebody, from sewing machines to marriages. According to Dad, Uncle Carl set the date for his next wedding sometime before he had the divorce papers in hand from his current marriage. My next Great Aunt found out before the ceremony and made him wait until the proper sequence of events came about. For Aunt Elly, some kinds of paperwork were more than *merely* paperwork.

When Dan confided that there had been a wife even after Number Two, he had explained, as though it were something that happened because of too many beers, "I didn't want to marry that one but she wanted to. It didn't really matter to me." Like Uncle Carl, certain legalities seemed like mere formalities for him to put up with or get around. Dan's idea of appropriate behavior is a little too loose for my comfort. But the final deal breaker was when he tried to sniff out my investment accounts.

Now I take my laundry basket out of the closet to begin sorting clothes

into piles. My laws of attraction have formed over a lifetime into a solid body of precedent. As nearly as I can understand my values and the chemistry of my feelings toward Brendan and Dan, they would be the same even if I'd never met Don. Matty is the special case; I enjoy him, but feel like a big sister who can tell him what he should wear to the prom.

Soap powder goes into the washer. I watch it spinning the garments around and around in foamy, cloudy water. This is what being single is like, at least for me—spinning in circles, airy bubbles forming and popping, in the end getting nowhere in spite of all the running around. Wouldn't life be clearer and more substantial if I stopped hoping to add someone to my life who I could love again? Perhaps that's what my new girlfriends concluded when they gave up.

Never giving up is an over-rated idea. Those folks who tell you to never give up never belonged to a dating club. Nevertheless, something in me wants to keep on trying. What it comes down to is that I'd rather try and fail than fail to try, as another old bromide goes off in my brain.

• • •

I write in my diary: I don't know if Don will call after my residency. He has always done what he said he'd do. But he could forget. This would also have meaning. For now I have to move on as though it's over. But here's the thing—I want another romance ending with a partner who is my best friend. And that may not be Don. My intuition told me if I pressed him to open up, he'd leave. And that's what he did at the prospect of counseling, of moving more deeply into our relationship by clarifying it through discussion.

I am getting insight from Clark into our communication problems, and I hope Don is also continuing his counseling. Clark sits across from me at his large, dark wooden desk; he reminds me of a big teddy bear dressed in a blue shirt and dark blue pants. His plain clothes have no sartorial pretensions whatsoever which is how he comes across—matter of fact and down to earth. Clark says, "Women's understanding of their feelings compared to that of men's is something like this picture of the difference: she is zooming smoothly along at eighty mph on the interstate while the guy is bumping down a pot-holed dirt lane." Clark makes his hand glide over his desk and then jerk up and down to illustrate the difference. I have to smile at this picture. Such an exaggeration wouldn't be true of all men or even all women but, from things Don said, it seems Clark is exactly on the right track about him.

During our dating, when Don saw this difference in his ability to express himself as well as I especially about his feelings, it was what I misinterpreted

as withholding communication. Clark says, "This is a fairly typical male/female issue that I often see in one form or another." He smiles at me and shrugs. I leave his office hoping that Don will be willing to get together and talk about this and other things since he has been seeing counselors, also. Something contrary and stubborn in me, or maybe unreasonably certain about our being right together, won't let go yet of this relationship.

Back at home after this session, when I get into my comfy PJs, make a bowl of popcorn, and look at the white wicker loveseat sitting invitingly close to the fire, the moment to do it flings itself forward. An idea has been lurking at the back of my brain since Clark mentioned that I was the transition that cleared the air for Don to move on. As another step in my plan to keep in touch, now seems like the time to write Don. I take a deep breath and sit down at my keyboard.

Dear Don,

I've been thinking over something Stan once said about the ministry which may apply to our dating. He said never be the first to follow a minister who was deeply loved by his congregation. The congregation will take out their grief on you when he leaves. Nothing you do will work because you aren't the one they dearly loved and lost. The next minister after you will be fine because the people will have finished with their grieving.

I believe something like this happened with us. I had over three years to recover from losing Stan while you had half of that. I went to counseling before I met you, while you did not. I believe you hadn't worked through your grief as far as I at the time we met. After you started going out, it wasn't part of your strategy to concentrate on one woman almost immediately. You weren't prepared for a serious relationship so suddenly. Your emotions caught you by surprise. Looking back, I can see that you had wanted to break up for some time, and planned that night at your house to finally make a clean slate. As with so much in life, timing is everything. It was my bad timing to be your first relationship after the end of your marriage.

I read this somewhere: "The boldness to ask deep questions requires the flexibility to deal with the answers." Keeping that in mind, I'd like to ask a question. What if we would start afresh? I feel by taking this break, we've absolved ourselves of the past. You're dating others and so am I, which will reduce our concentration on only each other. But if we wanted, we could set out like new, though a little older and wiser for what happened . . . if we wanted. If you think there's a possibility, let's talk about it.

*Sincerely,
Glenda*

I run off this letter the next morning after sleeping on it, place it in an envelope, and rush into the cold air to drop it in the corner mail box. Gazing over the uninspiring frame houses of the development, for a moment I wrap my arms around my body and ponder what I am doing. Don't ask me why I think this gap during which we date others can wipe out our past and allow a fresh start. It's something like the burning of stifling vegetation in a field to make space for life-giving sun and rain that stimulates the growth of vigorous green shoots. I can almost feel them emerging in my brain—coming up like flowers in a pot. This break provides the watering of space and time. There's something about lying in grief's ashy fields . . . yet I went on, a new woman. If Don wants, I believe we can begin anew. Turning with a small skip, I run through the refrigerated air back into the warm house to my work.

• • •

I'm in the shower the night before leaving for my college classes and can't get to the phone when it rings. Don's message on the answering machine says that he is going out and will call back another time. Feeling too nervous to wait until getting home from my residency to learn if he will call again, I quickly return his call while dripping on the carpet and shivering, too afraid of missing him to even grab a towel. I just catch him going out the door, he says—to one of his new dates, I anxiously finish in my mind.

Don continues, "I've been thinking about your letter. There are things I agree with and things that I don't. For one, you think I planned to break up with you that night. I didn't mean to break up, not really. But the counselors said the only way for me to know how I felt about you was to go out with other women as well."

"I thought you were saying we were finished. I felt you meant I wasn't important to you anymore," I answer.

"I didn't want to stop seeing you but I didn't know what to do. I felt I had to go out with others and that's the way it came out." After a little pause, Don says, "I have been thinking a lot about your letter and I would like to talk about it. When do you return?"

"The week after this on Sunday," I say.

"I'll call you then and we'll find a time to get together to talk about it."

I close my eyes and say, "OK. See you soon." As I finish the shower, relief spreads over me like the warm towel I am using to dry off. I am relieved that he is considering what I said because my letter felt like such a risk, relieved that there may be a chance for me, relieved that he will call and I can make my case again for starting over, if necessary.

Chapter 43

The weather on campus is nose pinching cold, many local businesses are closed, and the furnace in my small dorm soon stops working. They move us into private motel rooms and shuttle us over to campus for our classes and meetings. During the first two days when I meet classmates whom I haven't seen for six months, they ask, "How was your semester?"

I tell them, "I lost my lover, my daughter, and my mother, and I'm dating a little again. So, how was yours?" Even with this cheery come-on, a couple kindly hang out with me as usual.

This is my last residency, and I feel already that I've come a different way from the students starting now because certain traditions I like have changed. One tradition was about the great food that added good value to the stay. Only three days into this residency and they had to replace the new cook with a protégé of the old because of student griping. This second one was better but nothing close to Jorge, Chef Incomparable. Another tradition they have dropped, for some unexplained reason, is that of gathering students with the same advisor for a farewell meeting. I enjoyed sitting with my classmates in the same advisory circle. It gave a face to email, filling in the anonymity of a student body flung across the country. Now they say I have to give that comfort up. And there are other changes, including a new college President. Also contributing to my sense of being out of kilter this semester is this, what I call, camping out in the motel room.

I have only the final, graduation half-a-residency left after this semester and already the way it always was has begun going away. Woody Guthrie

said that resisting change is like trying to milk a dead cow. But I feel these changes are, as someone else said, like putting lipstick on a bulldog; the dog doesn't look any better and now it's really mad. Given these differences and the three dog cold, I anticipate leaving campus as soon as I can. I'm looking forward to working on my final project, and am strongly caffeinated about a chance to talk to Don, at long last, about us. Something like I was at the wedding, I cannot stay in the moment at my residency.

Soon the shuttle will cautiously take me to a last advisory meeting on my graduate project. I wait in the lobby of the warm motel with its braided rug and captain's style maple chairs, watching the moms, dads, and little kids in swim suits heading for the indoor pool while, visible through the big windows, the on-going snow falls lightly outdoors. My thoughts slide around the way that loss fits into and creates life, the kernel of my graduate thesis. I have based its structure on notes from a hiking technique that was something out of the ordinary to a hearing impaired person like me. Sitting with my back to a tree and my eyes closed, I learned to divide a notebook page into quadrants and place the outdoor sounds in one of the four directions from which they arrived. Sensitive listening added another dimension to being absorbed and lost in the body of the outdoors. For this project, I chose one of the sounds to make a title for each of four sections into which my poetry will be separated: Phoe-bee, Wind, Caw-Caw, and Silence.

A fifth section, taken from a map I drew of the acreage pasture, is titled, "Burn Center on Long's Prairie." This important space in the diagram forms a second invisible circle at the point where the quadrants cross, the place I sat in the original diagram from the hike. It is something like a bulls-eye on a target, the heart of my project.

Silence from the fourth quadrant recalls my insight that to have quiet, there must have once been sound. The lack of sound is the source of the refrain, "Hoping to hear the presence," a sub-heading repeated at the beginning to each one-fourth section. This caption is ironically paired with a copy of a receipt from Beltone, the nationally known hearing aid company, because, being partially deaf, I sometimes mistake the exact spoken word or do not hear it at all.

While in the car, which is slowly negotiating the slippery drive to campus, I continue trying to grasp the meaning of this image for my writing. *If only my actual poetry was as good as this metaphor*, I sigh, opening the car door at the clapboard and brick classroom building where my advisor's office is. The temperature of the empty classrooms outside her office reminds me of Brendan's house but even colder, yet the air in her office matches a Baja resort. I sit in the chair across the desk from her and unzip my purple

windbreaker, take off my black wool hat, and lay my long, purple muffler across my lap. Then I sit back, ready to enjoy this final, warm talk with her.

Adriana smiles hello and nods at me, saying, "I can't wait to get back to Arizona." She is somewhere in her thirties but, in my opinion, dresses curiously like a woman wearing the ankle-length skirts and fitted bodices of the New Look from the nineteen fifties. Today she wears a felt hat with a brim over her long, light brown hair pulled back in a bun. Her lucky advisees get her deep attention.

After skimming through the draft for my project that she lays on her desk, Adriana asks, frowning slightly, "What does sound and its absence mean to your focus on a sense of place?"

The scheme of the project seems to have been born outside my consciousness, like the epiphany following my nightmare, not something I constructed, but coming to me like that wraithy moon, or like a saying of Pooh's that I interpret as opening receptivity to where poetry can find and enter you. "That's a great question. I've been trying to think it through . . . Sound and, especially, silence, are important in a singular way to me, a hearing impaired person. Sound stands for the world around me," I slowly answer, staring at my drawing and thinking out loud. Adriana doesn't interrupt as I work it through. "Its absence in silence represents loss. The crossed lines of the quadrant symbol bring into being an invisible circle which I see as life. The words of poetry I place in these sections is the story I have for how my world seeks, through the mystery of being and non-being, a coming together into a coherent whole. This takes place in the core of the invisible circle, the Burn Center, the heart of the old that passes away and the new that rises out of it." Then I stop, stare at the desk, and wish I had a pencil to write it down. "I didn't know I knew this." I say with a laugh.

Adriana quietly leafs through the draft to examine my quadrants again before turning to the map of the Burn Center on the prairie. She traces it with her finger as she thinks about what I said. "What I like best about your writing is how it is so rooted in place, and how your politics intrude only subtly but are ever present. You hold your passion under control but it's clearly burning there," she observes, surely giving my poetry more credit than it merits. True passion has attempted to flow in my writing this semester, but much of it seems as convincing as that frozen burlesque of a waterfall popping up in a flat soybean field. Yet her praise helps me believe that, in some ways, I may not be totally un-level.

That afternoon we say goodbye although we will continue to dialog in the coming months about my work. I stuff and wrap myself like summer sausage into layers of clothing and take the shuttle car to the airport as soon

as I can. There's a small seating area outside the pilot lounge where no one I know will find me while I wait the time away for my flight home. Seated in one of the black airport chairs, I rummage through my carry-on for paper while continuing to mull this exchange with Adriana.

Thanks to slogging through annotations for the poetry assigned this semester, I have been learning that the unspeakable can sometimes be spoken most clearly through contradiction. My image for this paradoxical truth is that of the new moon growing like a fetus in the lighted outline of its wraithy womb, buried in itself, yet alive. It's the clarity coming out of muddy breakdowns on the couch, the torturous twisting and turning in the time with Mom that straightened me out about how best to love; it was that crimson put-down at the wedding opposed by Nathaniel's message that gave the green light to get up and go on. But in spite of this fertile seedbed, my emotions were so balled up this semester, I couldn't unwind them into poetry. My emotional mess is surely why I chose settings mostly devoid of emotion, a mistake, but it's nearly too late now. With my yellow tablet on my lap, gripping one of my husband's green, left-over ball-points, I begin drafting an introduction to the work of my annotations and poetry.

MFA First Draft of Process Paper

The presence which sensitivity hunts is buried in the mystery of being and non-being. How does this presence sound in words, in the space between the words? In grief I listened for being within the thunderous absence. Now is the silence but, perhaps, also, being.

Chapter 44

One afternoon shortly after returning from campus, I open my door to see Don standing there in his usual khaki pants, red windbreaker, and a black golfer's cap. Outlined in the dark strokes of our separation, he seems familiar yet strange. When he called, he didn't say why he wouldn't stay long, but I can guess. Facing him in the doorway, I lift my chin and smile slightly. We stare at each other in silence for a long moment.

I've dressed carefully, even if casually, because I want to stack up well against Don's next date. Clark says that appearance in a mate is more important to most men than most women think. I know that worrying about my looks is what gives a man the upper hand, but today I'm trying to turn this attitude into my secret weapon. I have on a nice fitting, wine red, popular brand tracksuit that a woman's magazine says is a winning trend. I'm barefooted, a calculated vulnerability. A new lipstick and new perfume are intended to reinvent myself a bit and step up my nerve. I want to impress but not look like I'm trying.

Standing up straight and taking a deep breath of winter air that smells sweetly sharp, like expectation, I step back from the threshold, saying, "If you come in, I can close the door. It's really cold." Don smiles at my attempt to be offhanded and steps forward. Taking off his coat and hat which I hang in the hall closet, he slips out of his tasseled loafers according to his habit. When he looks up, for a moment we search each other's eyes. I'm surprised by reappearing thoughts of a song that circled endlessly in my brain at the time Stan died. A phrase comes back about blue eyes that I see everywhere.

Then in Don's blue eyes, something flares that makes me want to smile. The old attraction is still there. He gets hold of himself and the glint fades away but I've seen it.

We break eye contact but neither of us grasps what to say as we silently face each other before moving to the living room. Don shifts his eyes from side to side while I glance out the narrow window by the door. Hanging awkwardly between us is the memory of how we once would greet each other with a kiss, but now we don't have that special connection from dating exclusively. Not long after we met, our compatibility was strong enough that, as Don put it, he stopped dating others because he "wanted to see where this went." I thought it was going somewhere good until something began to bother Don. Somehow I must learn what that something is. *Some, some, some—there's still some attraction in spite of our separation.* I feel rewarded for hanging in there.

Abruptly Don turns away and leads down the short hall on his stocking feet. As I follow Don's sturdy, solid body, I flash back to Brendan's tardy invitation to come in to talk and Dan's premature request to review my investments; Don is still the one.

He sits in the curved wicker chair, clearly avoiding where we used to sit on its matching white love seat beside the fireplace. Felicia lies relaxed on the white carpet in front of the jumpy fingers of orange and blue flames. She lifts her head, recognizes Don, and curls around, tucking her nose beneath the tip of her black tail. A good smell of fresh coffee and a feeling of cozy warmth fill my great room. I pour each of us a steaming cup, take the loveseat across from Don, and, leaning my arms on the glass table, prop my chin on one hand. I force my other hand to clasp the cup and not start shredding my poor cuticles, my physical tic when I'm bored or nervous like today.

We sip a little coffee in silence except for the clink of the pottery cups. I gaze into the burning logs, holding back. Since he called to make the date, I want to hear what he says first and make myself take it easy, like Sol used to advise. Finally, Don clears his throat and begins, "I've been giving a lot of thought to what Stan said about never being the first to follow a well-loved pastor because the congregation might take out their grief on you." This gives me a lift because it was the critical illustration in my letter about what went wrong after which we might be able to make a fresh start. "Even though my counselors said I didn't have grief issues, Stan's thought makes sense to me. I knew it wasn't fair, but last fall I found myself looking for ways to criticize you, and that's not right. When you tried to draw me closer, I had to pull away. I don't know why. My counselors said the only way I could resolve how I felt was to go out with other women for a time. I felt it was something I

had to do in order to know myself.”

I catch how he steps down on the word *had* like, when starving, you *had* to eat. I wince. Why does he feel like that? But he goes on so I don't interrupt. It seems he has come to tell me certain things and wants to get them said.

Abruptly Don pushes back slightly with a creak of the wicker chair to stretch his legs, and says, “Sometimes I could feel that you were feeling things I didn't think I could. You could express your feelings so easily, I didn't know how to measure up. You set the bar so high I couldn't meet it. But then, you are a poet, aren't you?”

I quickly look down at my lap to mask my confusion, thinking this over. I don't understand exactly what he means except that he was bewildered by his feelings and felt left behind by how clearly I could speak of mine. I never suspected he felt inadequate. I shake my head a little, looking down. This comparison is unexpected because, as far as I can remember, his closed lips never gave mine permission to name my feelings outright. I hear a clink as he sets his cup back on the table, and look up directly into his eyes.

“I didn't need many words from you but I did need a few. I can't read your mind.” I've said this before but it's another of my chief issues. Feeling a little too warm by the fire, I shrug off the wine jacket under which I have on a plain white tee.

“Mary could. She seemed to know what I was thinking. I didn't need to say it.”

He has also said this before and I've thought about what this difference between Mary and me might be. I lean forward to make my point. “Yes, but she knew you over thirty years.”

“She always could. There were many things I didn't have to tell her because she understood without any explanation. And then there were some things I couldn't say.” Don plays a little with his coffee cup, sliding it on the glass, making a little squeak.

This surprises me again. I frown, taking my lukewarm cup in both hands, “What do you mean you ‘couldn't say’?”

He shifts in his chair from side to side slightly, his familiar habit for easing tension. “We went through a period when she had uh . . . uh . . . a health issue. It made her emotionally fragile. After some trial and error, she got it contained; in the end she seemed even stronger and better. But as we went through this, I didn't want to lay difficulties on her. Little things I'd say could set her off in ways I never dreamed. You can't imagine . . . Better to keep my mouth closed than to say something that came out wrong.”

Apparently, keeping things to himself is more of a habit from his first marriage than an effort to hide something now. Our separation has allowed

him to see it. I look him over as he sits quietly gazing at the floor. He was afraid he'd describe his thoughts and feelings inadequately, in a way that might create problems between us.

My eyes drop to the clear glass table through which I can see the white carpet below. Abruptly I recall ancient arguments with Stan. My eyes widen. "Don, I've had something like this happen before and I'd forgotten. When Stan and I were first married, I remember fighting because he didn't put into words how he felt or what he meant so I could understand. I can still see myself standing at our apartment range, yelling at his back as he silently retreated from the kitchen. I'd scream and he would clam up more. Somehow, one day those fights completely disappeared."

Don says, "He probably had grown in pastoral skills, like listening and talking about feelings, his own included."

"I'd forgotten about the way we were at first." The surprise of this memory of Stan and me as a young couple makes me wish my young self could turn to run after him as he went out the door. Putting my arms around his shoulders, I'd try to say how sorry I was for losing my temper and not being more understanding. How young we were, and how long ago. I feel a cramp in my throat and tears in my eyes.

Don is still. His eyes are on me and he is paying attention. Brushing the tears away, I go on to another point that suddenly fits in. "Something else, too. Clark, this counselor I've been seeing, tells me women enjoy airing emotional problems as a way of coping with them, but men tend to be problem solvers, not talkers."

Don blinks as he considers this. "That reminds me of what Mary once said. She'd go on and on about something and I would try to give her ideas about what she should do." He laughs softly. "Finally, one day she shouted, 'Don't say anything, just listen! All I want you to do is listen to me.' I learned to let her talk it out and mostly kept my mouth shut unless she asked."

A silent understanding curls around us. I rise to open the blinds and let in more light, pausing for a moment to notice the contrast between bright reflection and shadow etched on the snow. I'd like to know more about Don's confusion, but today, while some of his focus is on getting to another date, getting to the bottom of this is doubtful. I sigh. He lives a good two hours from here and is still working part-time. It's practical to meet me before going on to the woman who's even further away from his home in this direction. But I'm anxious and a little miffed about this other date to which I believe his coming to me has been conveniently inserted. No woman wants to be seen as a convenience, a timesaver like a dishwasher; a woman wants the guy to think she's worth any amount of trouble. But, since we haven't made up,

it's smarter to not make myself too inconvenient.

Then Don comments, "I tend to keep things inside because I'm a quiet guy by nature. You're quiet, too, which maybe isn't so great for the two of us going forward."

I make myself sit down, lean back, relax my shoulders, and then bend forward. A line I heard in counseling pops out. "Clark joked that the only area where men and women have achieved true equality is in *miscommunication*. It seems to me we match each other pretty well in that way, too." Don looks over at me and smiles wryly, then gives me a speculative look. I tilt my face and raise my eyebrows to wordlessly ask, *What is that look about?* He doesn't speak. Aware that he continues to gaze at me, I shrug slightly and turn toward the soundless burn of the fire.

However, we have come a distance today and so I press ahead with my own agenda. Reaching across the table, I lightly touch his hand for an instant. *How will he take this?* I slowly stick out my naked feet with bare toe nails from under the table to the warmth of the fire as Don glances down at them. The corners of his mouth turn up as some memory from our past tip-toes through his brain, what I hoped would happen. "I've been sad and lonely since we broke up." *Is this admitting too much that might be embarrassing?*

His bright eyes soften. "I know; I have, too."

This encourages me to ask my key question. I take a deep breath and ask, "Do you want to start over, Don?"

He looks down at his watch and then up at me with a smile in his voice. "I'm here; I guess I do. I want to work on letting our friendship develop from today. But so you know for sure, I'm dating others as I said. And now it's time for me to go."

"I haven't been sitting around simply waiting for you to call, either," I answer, standing up with him. He glances sidewise for a second and then nods. It feels good to face him with the fact that I, also, have been making comparisons.

At the door he slips into his loafers and pulls me close to kiss without haste, as though he means it. Oh, it feels like home again, and just as I sink into his body, too soon he steps back to open the door. Leaving one warm hand on my arm, he says, "I'll call you shortly to see where we go after this."

I feel weak with attraction at the same time I'm hurt he is going to someone else. To steady myself, I take a deep, cold breath of the balmy fragrance from the yews at my step. With my exposed feet getting cold, I put my arms around his neck, swallow, and look up. "Are you sure?"

His cheeks and mouth get firmer. "If I say I will, then I will. I do what I say." And he steps out, making his point by closing the door with a small

thud. He has delivered the message he wanted me to hear.

As he hurriedly walks around the corner I can tell through the window that Mr. On-Time is running late. After he disappears, I briefly stride around my great room trying to settle my nerves. Putting socks and boots on my cold feet, I fly to my purple windbreaker, mash on my black wool hat, and run out-doors unzipped. I want to feel the wind whip through my body and get numb to the marrow. My boots crush the icy snow as I charge down the sidewalk and head for the solitude of the pond in the park.

Powerful contradictions clobber me at once. He's on his way to someone else but he has opened up as never before. He couldn't stay longer but he says he'll call. I'm not a mind reader like Mary, but I know he's attracted to me. The eye contact and emotion in his voice were there. I still matter, but how much does this other woman mean? He seemed intent on getting to her.

I rush around the pond on the open edge of my neighborhood, crunching the snow underfoot and startling the lumbering gray geese into a silly cacophony of honking. Normally I respect their space but today I dart at their flapping bodies, spitefully dodging through the ruckus of goofy sound until I'm so cold I can't stand it anymore. I zip my jacket. The ruffled geese squawk and waddle around to a different side of the pond, leaving a mess of icy tracks and poop that demand watchfulness. Finally I trudge back to my house feeling flat and frost-bitten. As I hang up my jacket a thought wobbles 'round and 'round. I now know things about Don I never knew. But has our situation really changed? While Don goes on dating to clarify his feelings, I'm floundering in the same old mess. Has this talk made any difference in the end? *Any difference?* Voices shout together in my brain like the Old Girls would if I told them about today. *That letter and this talk is merely the tater tot casserole you left on his kitchen table, they might laugh.*

Restlessly, I check my refrigerator for something to eat, eyeing a stale do-nut I should throw away, but don't. I want some kind of comfort food, something that breaks all my rules and is forbiddingly caloric. I search the freezer while thinking about how much I hate waiting for whatever is next with Don. I feel like the day of my reckless attack on the lilac hill which could have killed me, going at them alone on the hottest day of summer, with no one to help if I had a heat stroke. I can't continuously weigh the entire gray, like Don, assigning plusses and minuses before going ahead with our relationship or not. He rightly saw that I'm not as level as he; my feelings *are* black or white.

The most outrageous food I can find tonight in my strict freezer is a chicken dinner with a tiny cherry cobbler in one corner of the aluminum tray. As I pull back the plastic covering, my mind plays on the way Don closed

off his previous marriage for discussion by an aura of reticence until today, when he finally gave me a peek. It's like when, as a child, I asked about a grandfather who died before I was born and about whom my family spoke very little. I learned as an adult that my Victorian grandmother's silence about him was in line with the convention of her time. Rather than thinking she hid something disagreeable about him as I did at first, I came to accept her taciturnity as the way my grandmother had learned was best. After today, Don's silence based on his past experience may be more in line with this.

I reach up to set the microwave timer and begin moving books and pens to make room for a meal in my writing area which doubles as my table. The microwave hums like my thoughts. I remember that once in the past when Don said I was different, I had asked, "What was Mary like?"

"People liked her," he said. "She had a way of being the life of the party when she wanted to be, and she had a great sense of humor." And then he stopped quickly, I had noticed. Can he not say what he misses? Is it something about her liveliness? No one ever calls me the life of the party. Then I remember that this lack of words is just the way he is, maybe? I smell the roast chicken, hear the timer ding, and use pot holders to carefully take my ordinary dinner with its restrained dessert steaming hot from the microwave, all the while longing to gorge myself on something oozing with calories, something for comfort when I can't get it any other way.

Later that evening my daughter calls to ask how I'm doing. I sit down to talk at my table thinking that I don't want to sound as heartbroken to her as I feel over Don's exit for another date. I know she's concerned about me since the separation from Don, even more so since Mom died. I picture her standing in her simple white column of a wedding dress, smiling beside her new husband in his dark suit. I want to be honest but I don't want to burden her happy new marriage with my messy, black emotions, like she accused me of at her wedding. It's simpler to avoid editing details and cut to the chase with my answer. "I'm trying to open new doors in my life by making new friends at a new church. I'm working hard on my thesis project. I'm going out with new guys in a friendly way. Don stopped in this afternoon and we had a very good talk. He's going out with others, too, but says he still wants us to date and let our relationship develop from here." Slowly I add, though it feels like half a lie, "I want to give this a chance." *You really want to delete the part about dating others, but you can't*, Goody Two Shoes snorts.

After a long silence while my daughter takes this in, she answers in a voice like one she'd use to reason with a child to keep her from doing something harmful. "Mom, that sounds like he's just trying to let you down nicely and not hurt your feelings." All the air leaves my chest. As a single woman more

experienced at going out before her marriage than I, she has probably heard all the old dating bromides there are, including this one.

I slump way down on my wooden chair and roll a pencil around the table as we speak. "You must think I'm really pathetic because I never get it. I think he really wants to keep on seeing me. There was something in his tone of voice and in certain looks that made me think so. When he left, he kissed me like he really meant it."

"I think you're still new to dating, Mom, and you fell in love with someone who isn't ready for you yet," she answers in a small voice. "We've all been in those out of sync relationships."

I briefly tell her what her Dad said about congregations and grief that Don and I had talked about, and quickly shift the conversation to where I won't get more of her expert advice on breaking up. While her *out of sync* is free of charge, unlike Clark's *transitional*, his is truth enough for me.

We talk a while about what she is doing and then hang up. I rub the back of my neck while thinking over her analysis. *Still new to dating*, feels patronizing, but she is only being protective, I conclude, *and you, the inept mother, never gave her a chance to really know Don*, Bossy Pants sniffs at me. I don't want to believe that Don and I are through, but her phrase, *out of sync*, has the ring of reality. That's what he meant about thinking he was ready to meet someone when he met me, but found, to his confusion, that he wasn't. As Clark put it, we may have been each other's *transitional relationship*.

Later in my comfy purple flannels, I attempt to remember everything Don and I said this afternoon to write in my diary and try to hear more clearly. Felicia crouches on her black pillow on the black leather seat of the chair beside me where I can easily run a hand over her soft, warm body. When she lifts her little face with a purry chirp and closes her big yellow eyes, I lightly stroke her cheeks as she leans into my fingers. The only sounds are the haunting piano accompaniment to Tony Bennet's fragile, aging tenor, singing for days of auld lang syne. It's just the kind of heart break music that makes me pause in petting Felicia to gaze into the soothing fire through a glass of Chardonnay. I take a sip of the fruity white, thinking about the softness in Don's eyes when he admitted he was lonely, too, and the warmth of his hand on my arm when he said he'd call. *If I focus, I can still feel the sunshine of its heat on my skin*. Then I remember how he hurried out of sight because he was late to his next date. *A cloud passes over and the heat fades away*. What is he looking for? How much longer can I keep trying? I close with, *Good-bye, Don. Is that what I have to say to myself in order to move on with my life? Like my counselor said to do with Stan, must I say outright, good-bye, Don?*

Chapter 45

Fresh air and exercise are a good way to beat the blues, the happy face in a woman's magazine counsels. The next morning after coffee, I push myself out the door to walk the snowy sidewalks of my development, zigzagging around the sawhorses and scattered boards of housing construction in certain streets. A cold shiver unrelated to the wind runs through me when I imagine Don sitting across a white tablecloth from his date last night. My picture of her actual face is broken into pieces like on TV for preserving anonymity.

Turning the corner to pound toward the geese pond, I think back to some of the interesting female resumes I skimmed at the dating club to see what my competition looked like. One formidable candidate is a striking blond woman in a black turtle neck sweater who owned a gift store in another suburb. Then there was also someone right here in town, a widow with a round face and glasses whose resume said she loved to travel to Mexico, one of Don's favorite places. I had considered trying to meet that one myself as a friend.

I want to hold onto the whole of yesterday's talk but niggling worries break in haphazardly, blocking my ability to think straight. Bossy Pants scolds as usual, *You recognized the sound of truth when you heard 'out-of-sync relationship' from your daughter. He's moving on and you've got to face it. He is gone but you go on, gone, go on, gone, go on.* The phrase has a certain rhythm as I march to its beat through the crusty snow remaining on the sidewalk. It drags me onward, faster and faster through the voracious cold that snaps its beak at any exposed skin. Crunch, crunch, CRUNCH. It's the same old chant to which I trudged in my stumbling around days after Stan died.

Beyond the development border of grayish-green spruces, cars on the busy street trail the sound of a restless, motorized swoosh and a drifting smell of gasoline. The geese have moved to a different perch, leaving the sidewalk a poopy, smelly quagmire. I slow down but even stepping gingerly doesn't quiet the chant in my head. *He is gone, but I go on.*

Today is one of those two-faced winter days made to feel colder by tropical expectations from a bright, but double-dealing, sun. At the usual apogee of my route, I gratefully turn for home, pulling my black knit cap further over my tingling cold ears, trying to smother the fire in my brain. I laugh wryly, recalling the nudge of recognition while reading my favorite comic strip this morning. A young woman swoons dreamily with hands clasped to her heart as she gazes into the stars. She is sentimentally replaying the words of the man who is her hoped for, but unresponsive, love interest. If she left, he said he would miss her in some trivial way.

I laughed at seeing myself as pathetic as this last night, trying to preserve in my diary what Don had really said. I must not change "let our relationship develop from here," into believing he wants to get back to the way we were before his second thoughts started. I have to mentally get my feet off that balcony and back on the ground. I will *not* be a starry-eyed little fool. The romantic complications between us, that I've been trying to fix, exist only in my wooly imagination.

When I return home, I feel toughened up by this walk in the snapping air. I call Clark to describe my meeting with Don and to cancel our next session. "There's no reason to keep trying to understand my romance with Don. There isn't one now. I've done as much as I can."

Slowly he answers, "I don't see this as the end, but, if you change your mind, give me a call and we'll set up an appointment."

I cut out the cartoon and tape it in my journal as a reminder to stop day-dreaming—if I ever need one again. My words, "done as much as I can," play over and over in my head. I crumple and toss aside several drafts of a struggling poem about the death of children in the war. All of my pity is clutched to myself this morning; there's none to spare.

Just to block out the whine in my head, I call my sister-in-law, my aunt, a girl friend. Seated at my book-covered writing space, I rattle on to them about anything other than my loss. *Stop wondering what he did last night, who he saw, and how he compares you to her. You have to move on, too.* It's good advice from someone who sounds like my sister in my head, trying to say what she thinks is best for me. But even though I keep talking, talking, talking, my brain is stuck in this loop about moving on in spite of my loss.

Around noon, I call to have lunch with my ninety-some mother-in-law.

When I arrive and give her a careful hug, I can feel the prominent bones in her narrow shoulders. Her short, permed hair still has a strong brown halo over the gray, never having turned completely white. Her complexion is more sallow than the pale one of my mother. Some unclear notion draws me to her today.

"I'm so glad to see you," she says with her arms still around me. Slowly, I step back from this thin, fragile woman who I remember coming home from teaching her fourth grade class all day, dropping her briefcase, and, as I would learn the next morning, sewing a daughter's formal long into the night. I will never forget when she said that getting a C in a teacher certification course was OK because she had a daughter's wedding to prepare at the same time. I thought to myself that I'd never make that choice. I would try to do both wedding and class perfectly—and drive my family crazy with my stress, I know now. But she chose what was best for her family and let that be good enough for her career.

It's hard to remember today, but in my youth, women usually worked outside the home mainly to help pay the bills, while what they were expected, and usually, preferred to do, was stay at home to care for children. But I had wanted to be a career woman and had waited many years after marriage before having babies. After the girls were born, I continued to work. My mother fretted about the well-being of my daughters in day care, which put me on the defensive with her about how I was raising them.

Yet in my heart I was concerned that my feminist ideals might turn out unhappily for my daughters. Perhaps they were being short-changed in some socially criminal way, and might deteriorate into Charlie's Devils when they were teens. At that time in my own family, having a career that took energy and passion while raising little children was an untested idea. I was afraid my mother-in-law might also be wondering deep down what I thought I was doing and was watching for something to go wrong. But Stan's mother was a sympathetic listener. In spite of my apprehensions about how she saw the differences between us, I shared a lot with her about my job triumphs and dissatisfactions, and some of my worries about raising my little girls while working.

Leading me into her main room today, she invites, "Come here and sit down." I start to sit in the armchair that she indicates across the small room, but then change my mind. I move closer to sit on the old-fashioned, square wooden stool literally at her feet where I can hear her soft voice better. Two beige recliners with table lamp between, a brown tweed couch, and the rose armchair express the simple peace she seems to feel since moving into this cell-like place. She was socially isolated on their acreage by a spinal injury

and unhappily dependent on her husband to do the necessary driving. His aging reflexes were making him an increasingly unsafe driver and he was doing less and less of it. In this place she has many friends up and down the halls where she goes with her walker, stopping to visit when she needs a rest. With her friendly bright eyes, she knows everyone's name.

"I'm glad you came. It seems like a while since I've seen you; maybe the last time was at your mother's funeral but we didn't really talk. Have you been terribly busy?" she asks, with a smile in her kind voice.

From down at her feet looking up to her sunflower face where welcome blooms, I soon find myself telling about my separation from Don and attempts to move on. "So, I'm going to a new church now where I've made friends and am participating in new activities. I'm dating new guys though this isn't turning out too great. It seems like finding friendly women my age is much easier than finding attractive men. Maybe I should give up. I mean, give up dating, give up the new things I'm trying, stay in my house, and just plain give up."

She looks deeply into my eyes as she thinks about this. I believe she sees how futile this dating effort really is. But I shy away from dwelling on that. I hate to admit my plan to date has collapsed; I don't know what to do next. For a short space, we sit silently together.

As I look around my mother-in-law's plain apartment at pictures of her children and their families including my own, I think about how different her marriage was from my parent's or mine. My father-in-law seemed threatened by her college education so she could teach, supplementing his earnings as a *rough* carpenter who did the outside building construction. He often verbally lashed out at her and the children who were still at home. I heard him yell once, "You think money comes so easy, you earn it with your sweat, and you'll see how easy it comes."

I'd have yelled back, "Teaching fourth-graders is hard work, too. You couldn't do it!" Yet from what I've seen of my in-laws, she always showed a heart of loving respect to him. She maintained this attitude whether it was in stretching their money by sewing prom dresses, or while painfully waiting for Stan, Sr., to decide to move from their long time acreage home into residential living in order to have a better quality of life for her.

Now she shakes her head, resting her hand on my arm. "I've had moments with this back pain when I thought about giving up, too, especially when I got weaker and weaker and desperately needed to leave the farm but Stan was reluctant as a hermit. There was little I could do until he would agree, but I did what I could to get ready, and then I waited." She shrugs her narrow shoulders under the homemade blue top and white cardigan she

wears over slacks. "I would tell myself day after day that something will come along and, when it does, I'll know how to deal with him to make the most of it. I believe you will know what to do, too, when something comes along at last for you." She peers at me intently through her glasses.

I had heard a little from different family members about how their move off the acreage came about. It seems that the kids lured their father into visiting this independent living facility on some kind of pretense that she played along with, having been surreptitiously warned ahead. Stan, Sr., slowly came to realize after his unwitting tour of the facility that living here would be manageable. But she had a suitcase secretly packed and hidden as a last resort in case he didn't change his mind and the kids had to snatch her away to save her life by moving her in without him. After such a long marriage, I thought the desperation behind this potential elopement was shockingly tantamount to a divorce.

What she means today by, *when something comes along*, is not clear; but she obviously speaks from having come through her own ordeal of being at the end of her rope. She believes if she survived the test until what she needed came about, I can, too. As I look up at her lined face and think about her prediction, I realize that, in all these years, she's never yet steered me wrong. She leans forward to hold my hand in her warm fingers while something clutched deep in me relaxes and lets go. Somehow I begin to feel at rest, trusting that whatever happens is all right. It seems I've done about all I can. Together we smile and lean back, my hand still held in hers for a time.

"Now, I imagine you're hungry so let's sit down to lunch. What have you brought in that bag?" she asks, knowing full well what it is. As usual I have picked up broccoli-cheese soup she likes from a fast-food place. It's still very hot with a rich cheddar smell that floats out when I pry off the lid to the carton. I take out two bowls and pour the soup carefully into them while she gets out a box of soda crackers and a package of oatmeal cookies. We smile at each other again when I roll the walker out of the way beside her dining chair. Getting food on the table is familiar teamwork since we have done more than one or two family meals together during these many years.

"Be careful with this hot soup," I warn. As I blow on a spoonful, I think about the line she walked in her marriage. For as long as I'd known them, I had wondered how much my father-in-law realized about the quantity of diplomacy and sensitivity she had to use to manage their family life due to his poor self-image and temper. But shortly after Stan died, as my father-in-law and I looked over a scrapbook of childhood photos, he looked up to say, "She was the one who knew best how to get things done. I didn't know; I just went along with her as best I could." His blue eyes shot a piercing look

across the room to where she sat by the reading lamp on this same beige recliner where she sits now. She ducked her head to the papers on her lap to hide a look of astonishment. It was as close to an acknowledgement about how hard he had been to live with and their true relationship that I ever heard Stan, Sr., make.

We finish the soup and she passes the store bought cookies. She doesn't take one but sips a chocolate protein supplement through a straw as she can no longer swallow well. I miss the one-of-a-kind oatmeal cookies Stan's father used to make. When I had asked for his recipe, the one he gave tasted like a key ingredient was missing. I suspect he didn't want to pass it on—like when he threw away some old silver stored for years in a trunk rather than let his kids keep it. Sadly, I believe he may have diffidently thought that his recipe and his old silver weren't worth keeping in the family.

I take another bite of the crunchy cookie and think while I chew. She has met Don once several months before. With a small bit of cookie still in my mouth, I say, "I think Don and I met too soon after the death of his wife. Don says he thought he was ready to meet someone new but now he doesn't understand what he thinks and feels."

She slowly swallows a tiny sip of the Boost which I can see is difficult for her. "I don't know how long it takes to feel well after losing your spouse," she says. "From my own experience, I don't think you ever get over it in a way although you do heal. These feelings are very complicated and no two people are exactly alike." She doesn't offer more advice but when I look into her blue eyes, I feel her empathy for this daughter-in-law who loved and lost her son.

Once for her birthday, my Stan ordered his mother a cake on which he had the baker write only *Yes!* The grandkids were baffled but I understood. In her son's holy book, his mother was on a par with the saints when it came to seeing with the wide eye of love.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings by saying this, but losing Don is almost the same as going through another death like Stan's," I say, because I trust her to understand. She nods. "I started dating other men hoping to feel better about Don and, maybe, meet someone I liked instead of him. But none of these relationships could ever be serious, it seemed," I say, picking at a raveling on my old blue sweater sleeve.

"Healing from loss takes time, Glenda. I've known you since you were young. You are a strong woman. You will always find a way to move forward to a good life."

My mind flashes to the long ago moment when, sitting at her farm table, I was about to blow out the candles on my not-so-young, fiftieth birthday cake of rich chocolate that she had baked. A voice in the sputtering flames

seemed to be shaking its head. *After thirty years you should accept that she will be your mother-in-law all your life.* With that, the love that had been waiting a lifetime flooded through my body like warm water, washing away the dam of stubbornness and insecurity with which I'd held it back.

Now she continues in a soft but firm voice, "You are reaching out to others, staying active, and finding new outlets just like you did after Stan died. This is a hard time with the loss of Don and your mother coming so closely together, but you are doing what you can which is all you have to do, nothing more. Be patient with yourself. I know your future is good."

Tears come as I look into her dear eyes. I reach out to my husband's mother and we hug a long time. With my eyes closed, I think that everyone should have a mother-in-law like mine, the antidote to the poison I've been feeding myself.

In the shine off the snowy cedars at her window, I see why I came to her. She is the heart of the beautiful YES that makes the web of life. From the depths of her existence, she knows that the journey to the orchard goes through your chaos and, when they come, follows unknown angels, loose and light.

In months to come, the last thing I will ever say to her is, "I love you."
And from the bed with her eyes closed, she'll whisper back, "You, too."

Chapter 46

“Watch out because I’ve been through a lot lately and I’m in the mood for sour cream raisin pie,” I warn Matty with a smile at the restaurant that specializes in pies. Raisin cream is the most expensive pie on the menu for some reason, and Matty has said it’s his turn to pay. With his brown hair down to his collar, his rimless glasses, in work shirt and jeans, he reminds me of an earlier century’s portrait of an artist I’ve seen somewhere. I gaze intently into the Lazy Susan in the glass case at the large slices piled high with golden meringue on top of a thick filling of tangy raisins in sweetened sour cream. We order minestrone and sour cream raisin.

“What have you been doing to work up this appetite? I thought you just sat around and read Zaga–Zaga–whoever,” Matty teases between spoons of the dark vegetable soup. “He may not even be a real poet for all I know.” Surprised by the name Matty uses, because I’d only mentioned Zagajewski once in passing among other poets, I lay down my spoon to consider how his poetry fits into what has happened recently. Matty may have chosen Zagajewski because the name is rather odd, or because the universe has allowed one of those mystical discontinuities that William James described in his study of religious experience.

“You know how sometimes you try and try but don’t feel like you’re getting anywhere? And then, all of a sudden, you get the feeling that wherever you are, it’s OK? Everything’s just fine as it is? That’s what has happened to me and it makes all the difference, even to my appetite.” For an instant we sit without moving, looking at each other. Matty nods his head but a frown

shows he is puzzled. "Well, I think it happened to Zagajewski, too, only he wrote a poem about it, one that I love."

Then I pick up my spoon again, pause to inhale the warm, earthy smell of root vegetables, and take another filling bite of the thick soup. The subdued, wind-like sound of a constantly running fan blanches the words of all other voices in the high-backed booths around ours. "You should get to know Zagajewski," I urge. "He's a down to earth modern mystic, not like you, medieval man that you are. Read him and maybe he can inspire you to make a pilgrimage into your real life that will show you how good it is. That's what I wish for you." I don't quite know what this would look like except that dreamy Matty might be able to be grateful for his actual life and celebrate the fine one that it is.

As I speak, Matty seems to be focusing on something inside his head. I tilt my soup bowl slightly away to spoon up the last drop of rich, spicy broth. My stomach is full, but I want that piece of pie, anyway. Then Matty says, coming back from a distance, "I'd like to make a pilgrimage to a shrine, to feel my life had been washed, bleached, and dried wrinkle free. It's what I've dreamed for several years." His words recall my Mom hanging Dad's blue work shirts on the clothes line in the sunshine and vital breeze; how pure and wholesome they smelled when brought indoors, giving off a fragrance that made the kitchen even more pleasing than when she baked gingerbread cookies. Momentarily I feel lifted up by the very thought of a life as perfect as that. We smile into each other's blue eyes over the frothy mounds of our sour cream raisin pies. After a moment, Matty takes a final bite and then softly sighs which I know is not about finishing his pie.

I pause, laying my fork on the plain pie plate beside what's left of the golden cloud of pie. I don't know what more to say to my otherworldly friend. He yearns so much for something in life that would fill his senses beyond anything he knows, a transcendence that he only dreams. He has searched for this in the books he has read, but, maybe, never in the right place. Then a familiar phrase comes to mind. Over the pie plates between us, I lean closer to him. His plate is empty except for one last sweep of the fork. I still have plenty of pie. Taking a forkful of mine, I offer him a bite. As he chews it, I say, "Your heart is good, my friend, you shall see the spirit." His eyes open wide at this familiar reference. With an emphatic nod of complete confidence, I go back to the pie, closing my eyes to intently focus on its luscious, dairy flavor, and to be whole-heartedly grateful for a generous world topped off with cream and raisins. According to that poem I love, discovering that the spirit is found in a down to earth incarnation is not unlike tasting a bite of ordinary cow's milk with raisins and cane sugar that together transcend

into this divine pie.

Over coffee, we talk a while about my final project and the lay-outs he's printing, and then Matty, giving me his sweetest smile, pays the bill. We say a quick goodnight at my car with a short hug and more smiles in the arctic dark. While driving away I realize that I only partly expressed what Zagajewski's poem meant. Now if I could, I'd reach back across that Formica table, lay down Matty's fork to take his hand, and look into his eyes. I'd say, "My little brother, God might be waiting for you in the streets of *Montepulciano*; but, more likely, just in your search for the kingdom of heaven, the spirit has found you already."

Driving home that night my headlights pour across the stark white highway stretching for the black beyond which stays just out of reach. There is no sound except for the swoosh of the infinite river of air into which the car dives. My mind glides across moon pale fields splashed with inky groves of trees. I have flown over mountains on owl wings of will until now. In this dark place of nothing more to do, silence folds its wings inside my head.

Later at home, I sit by my chummy fire in the purple pajamas, petting Felicia who lies snugly beside me on the loveseat with her paws curled under her chest. The purr from her seven pound body resounds in the quiet room. My fingers stroke the velvety black fur around her ears. I relax with the thought that I've done all I can; like Sol used to say, it's time to *take it easy now*. Don said, "I'll call, and I do what I say." I'm not a starry-eyed fool, but, perhaps, Don will see me differently now. The same blue that recedes against a gray wall will jump out when placed against yellow. As Don has dated others, certain things about our relationship may stand out more clearly and seem more desirable in contrast.

Felicia gets a final caress and I click off the fireplace before heading to bed. I watch her nestle into her chosen spot next to my pillow and feel nestled myself in the belief that for once everything is perfectly coming together without my direction or interference. Whatever *coming together* implies.

This sense of letting-go is perplexing to someone like me who fought through learning to manage an acreage exactly by not letting-go. But all that has happened gives a glimpse of a universe lined up for me like an open three point shot. As I snuggle into my pillow listening to Felicia purr, lines from an old lullaby I sang to my girls comes to mind. *Life is good, and we can dance with the sun and the moon and the stars.*

• • •

Shortly after, I awaken one morning with the thought that something

good will happen today. I pull on old jeans and my dark blue sweater to dance around my sunny neighborhood like Gene Kelly. Almost Gene Kelly, that is, because I'm sixty-four. Air spreads through my lungs, fresh and joyous as a baby's laugh.

Back in my kitchen where cinnamon toast bubbles under the broiler, I read my newspaper horoscope: *Months ago you did a bit of groundwork that you think has not come to fruition. Today you'll start to see that your work was not wasted.* Suddenly the smell of cinnamon intensifies. I jump up with a start, throwing down the newspaper, to pull out the toast in the nick of time. With a bite of butter, caramelized sugar, and cinnamon raisin bread on my tongue, this prophecy melts into my brain. Horoscope predictions are nothing to bet on, but this one provides enough of a chat-worthy explanation to give Don—if I call him rather than go on waiting for him to call.

I throw in a load of wash as I consider the propriety of calling Don. A woman who called a man first was breaking the rules of dating when I was a kid. Back in that Victorian Age before Kinsey helped us break out of the old female corset, a woman would never call a man unless she was desperate, and I am not, am I? However, I saw when my daughters were dating that this stigma seems to have passed out of fashion like their big hair style has today. But there's still a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I'm breaking a taboo, even if it's dumb. Is calling Don my corollary to becoming a Casserole Lady like the Old Girls warned me about? If it is, I hope Don will enjoy my recipe.

I look at the phone and then away. I am going to do this but exactly when? The washer dings as it passes a certain stage in the washing process. *Is this it?* I keep on hesitating. *I can do this. Why, I've been a manager and dealt with all kinds of issues that required assertiveness. No matter what the Old Girls say, I believe a Casserole Lady is one sign of the Modern Single Woman who goes after what she wants. Besides, Don said he would call so it seems he means to be in touch. And I have such a zippity feeling today, I really do want to talk to him.*

Still, I kill more time by running water to soak the broiler pan because some of the sugar cooked on it. A rather good smell of buttery burnt sugar lingers on in the room. I'm determined to have this talk, but want to feel that the scattered pieces in my mind fit into a whole—*so I won't be at a loss for words, so I can say what I mean. What do I mean?* After I called Clark to tell him that I finally realized Don and I had no special relationship anymore, there was nothing more to do. For this phone call, my thoughts keep melting into a mess not unlike this pan with burned raisins and puddles of dark brown, sticky sugar along some edges.

Now it's the halftime of the big basketball game on TV and I'm certain Don'll be home watching. Even if we've stopped being lovers, it's always fun

to talk about basketball. I think how I've grown into being single, playing the game at my best speed, getting into position, letting the game come to me and when the ball is passed, squaring up to take the shot. Whether or not it goes through the hoop is up to the gods of the game. I've done all I can do. *It's now or never to make that call.* I run my fingertips superstitiously over each angel on the kitchen counter for good luck. Turning down the sound of the TV announcers, I pick up the phone. "Hi,"—*now what do I say next?*

Don answers, "I'm glad you called. I meant to call you after the game." There's a pause while I suck in a quick breath of the burnt sugar air, trying to think of something witty to follow my clever opening line. Can he hear me over the wind that's sweeping through my empty head? Dare I say I simply wanted to hear his voice and be reassured that we are still talking? Before it will come out, he goes on to say, "Oh, Glenda, I'm never going to find anyone who matches my interests as well as you. We like to talk about and do so many of the same things. When you're retired like we are, that's more important than ever because there's more free time to spend together." He is speaking so rapidly that, before I can breathe and respond, he goes on, "I like to look at you. Other women, well, things happen with age. You look so nice."

A fountain turns on in my eyes; feelings break free, rising like balloons on the zippity-ay of the universe. In the background I faintly hear the TV crowd give a cheer. Light floods my great room like that in old master paintings, pouring down from the heavens on Jesus, the saints, and now me with a cup of coffee at hand. This is a moment like none other. My brain is stunned by his words which tap dance around in my head. What was dead is risen; at least, what others thought was dead. I have kept going 'till the fat lady sang.

In a low, hoarse voice, I nearly whisper, "Don, I've always known that we belong together. We have a similar outlook on many, many things. That's why I couldn't give up on us. Something in me wouldn't believe it was over. I knew I couldn't make you see how right we were together. You would either see it or you wouldn't, but I was getting so tired of the waiting." My voice cracks on the word *so*. Now I am clenching my throat because I am going to start sobbing; I have to stop talking. Momentarily, neither of us says more, but this silent space is full and running over with no words, the voice of the unspeakable. This is the sweet time of roses even though in my mouth is the taste of salt. Rustling sounds and other soft noises come over the line. In my mind's eye is a reflection of Don in the opaque patio glass of his old house where he sits on his white leather easy chair. I imagine that he, like me, is shifting around, trying to pull himself together. I grab a tissue to wipe my eyes and nose.

Then Don opens up again. "If I'm so happy to see you at the game and so happy to see you at the door of your house, isn't that love? I felt the same last summer, but then I began to look for things that would change my feelings. I don't know why."

My brain staggers from one thought to another—that this explanation isn't very clear, or very complete, or even very different from before, but it's very unguarded, not holding anything back. I may learn more in the future, or he may never say more than this. But it's more words about his feelings than at almost any time before and, finally, they are enough.

When he comes later and I open the door, I look into his shining blue eyes. Don opens his arms. Wordlessly we hold each other in the doorway. Outside, the soft blue snow of late afternoon has been carried by the wind into dunes, the tips of which twirl and float, glittering in the falling sunlight. We stand in a space filled with hundreds of lights. White-white-white-white. My eyes tear up, and when I pull back to look at him again, I think the shine in his are tears as well. On the threshold we kiss for a long, long time, upheld in the bouquet of balmy yew. I am satisfied by the hardness of his back under my hands, the familiar smell of his almond soap, the softness of his hair, the deer-like bound inside from leaning against him as I reach up to his lips. No shadow remains of the winter that's ended; it has ended in flowers. I do not know why, but this is for us; this is for us.

Chapter 47

After getting together once more, we decide to jointly begin counseling sessions with Clark, sort of like AA sessions. “Hello, we are Don and Glenda and, after long marriages, we are widowed. At over sixty years old, we have much that is new to learn about male/female communication.”

During one of these sessions on understanding, Clark brings up something he calls *the two year rule*. Don, in khaki pants and red shirt, and I, in navy capris and striped tee, sit side by side on blue upholstered chairs across one side of Clark’s desk. I have a yellow pad of paper and Don has lined cards like recipe cards that he customarily carries in his shirt pocket. *The two year rule*—we note it and then look at each other questioningly. Neither of us has heard of this. Don jokes, “Is that some kind of new football penalty?” He knows Clark once played football which is one of Don’s interests, also. He likes to use this sports talk with Clark.

Clark, from behind his desk in a white shirt, smiles slightly. “It’s a hard one for some football players to recognize or handle very well. I call it the two year rule because it usually takes this amount of time, or even a little more, for most men to finish the grieving process.”

I notice that Don leans forward on hearing this. Clark registers this with a glance and goes on. “Men who become involved in an emotional commitment too soon can face a re-emergence of deep grief which they might mistakenly have believed had disappeared. I’ve had men tell stories of a relationship that came along some time after the death of their wives and how confused they were by a recurrence of thoughts in a way they believed were finished. Of

course, individuals vary, but I've come to think that a widower usually needs at least two years before he's free to get emotionally involved with someone.

For a few silent seconds Don gazes out the office window at the frilly ringlets of yellow forsythia swirling in the zesty breeze. Wordlessly, he shifts his body as he comes back to this room of children's framed stick figure drawings and a half-full pottery cup of coffee left on Clark's wooden desk. I take in its over-cooked, bitter smell. Don continues to say nothing. The two year rule may be the most clarity we will ever have about the confusion in Don's feelings that led to our separation. A last little knot relaxes in my stomach as it finally sinks in that Don's feelings of last fall were normal ones shared with many other men who grieve, and, probably, not due to anything he missed in me.

• • •

During our swing dance class I glance at Don's face. He is mumbling as we practice the steps, "Slow... slow... short-short." His tense expression says that this is hard, this isn't fun; it tells me we may never go out dancing. Though my black cotton polo and Don's blue shirt are light-weight, his face looks flushed and I can feel sweat on my forehead.

"Wait a minute. Isn't this where you swing out as I step over, or do you swing in to me first?" He stops and looks at me in consternation as I step out of his arms. I'd like to tell him that swing dancing isn't done according to a formula, it's about learning the moves from which to improvise, but I don't want to sound critical as I know he has to learn in his own way.

"I'm not sure what to do, but we're not keeping the tempo." The dance instructor is playing something from the Big Band era with a definite beat that was made for swing dancing. We're both damp from the effort to do our part but we're too rigid; we don't go with the beat. I'm glad when the lesson ends even though I have always loved dancing. These lessons were an idea for another activity we could enjoy as a couple, but I don't think we're getting very far.

• • •

On a late summer morning many months after we decided to re-start our relationship, I fasten the cover on Felicia's portable litter box to carry to the trunk of my car. Looking down at her as she crouches in the corner of my laundry room nearly hidden behind the washer, I say, "Are you getting as tired as I of going over to Don's place every Thursday or so and then packing

up Sunday to come home?" She looks up and half closes her golden eyes to let me see she knows I'm speaking to her. "It's time this show got moving, but how do I give it a jump start? What can I do?"

Today I slip her empty water and food bowls inside the bag of cat food, thinking how Don takes our *time-share* week-end arrangement for granted. Eighteen months—as I figure it—have gone by since we started over. Eighteen! I set Felicia's bag of food on the floor of the passenger's side in my car. Then I go back to the laundry room where I have her cornered so she can't disappear now that she's seen I'm getting ready for a trip. I'm beginning to worry that I am trapped in the laundry room entrance of this weekend affair, that I'll never own one of the twin bathroom sinks, that it's the end of the line for Don and me. I'm afraid that one of these days, someone new will dance into his sights and trigger a burst of feeling in him that I won't like. Clark's old, bad word, *transitional*, still bugs me.

I pick up Felicia who quickly jumps from my arms into her blue carrier where she feels safe on the trip to Don's house. This morning when I read my newspaper's horoscope, of which I've become a big fan, it gave me another nudge: *The recent past has taught you a lesson about listening to your feelings. Apply this knowledge to your next brave love step, and you'll be more secure in your romance.* I buckle Felicia's carrier into the front seat for safety, slam the car door on her side, get in, and buckle my own belt. *The trouble is, what brave love step can you take?* Little Goody Two-shoes wants to know. Felicia meows loudly about three times and then settles down. We are used to making this trip by now even though we'd rather not.

Later on Sunday afternoon of our weekend together, Don and I sit on the plum leather couch in his living room from where I'm preparing again to leave for home. In my favorite farm girl outfit of blue jean shorts and a blue sleeveless work shirt, I watch a black-headed chick-a-dee swooping and darting after insects. Perhaps my brooding on its day after day effort to get the food it needs is what causes me to speak out so bluntly. "I'm getting tired of packing my suitcase and Felicia to stay over for part of the week, and then packing up to go home. This isn't what I want, Don. I want you around all the time, morning and evening, twenty-four/seven." To make this sound less like a prison sentence, I reach over and touch his cheek.

Don dips his head and rubs his jaw where my hand was as he says, "I thought things were going so well between us, I didn't want to do anything to spoil it." At the word, *spoil*, a burst of heat and light flares inside my head. Outside the balcony door, I hear the repetitive dee-dee-dee-dee of the bird as it settles on the rail while I settle myself inside so as to stop from angrily blurting out something to possibly regret later on. I feel like our relation-

ship has begun to stagnate into something that won't last, like the dance lessons—forward, back, bump, and pull—not quite in step, never getting out of the classroom, and never going dancing. So far, I have kept this fear unspoken because I don't know where such a discussion will go, but it has been lurking in the back of my mind. Suddenly, the chick-a-dee bursts into the sky and disappears.

“We have to talk about this or it'll never get solved.”

Don appears to think about this for another moment. He rubs the back of his neck and scratches at something on his khaki pants leg. I stare at him until he looks me in the eye. I'm waiting for him to follow my lead. Then he offers, “Maybe we should go back to Clark and let him help us move to the next level, whatever that is.”

Listen to him—he can't even say the word, marriage. Or matrimony. Men must equate matrimony with alimony; they both end in mony that sounds a lot like money. An exasperated sigh forces its way out of my chest. This feels like we're on an eternal elevator with the numbers lighting one after the other as we ride up and down, floor by floor, but never get off. I'm very disappointed at how tentative Don still is about us even after all these months. He must feel there are issues we haven't gone into yet. Then I remind myself what Clark taught about how swampy the field of male emotions is. Since I'm supposed to be the one less confused about feelings, I decide to get through this quagmire in a way that will work for both of us.

I shake my head while thinking hard about a better alternative than going back to Clark. “We can figure this out together. We don't need Clark's help.” At this stage in our development as a couple, seeing Clark again feels like having the winning basket waived off because the shooter travelled. I give Don a stern look. All at once I come up with a slight tack away from Don's idea. “Let's you and I find a book to read and discuss rather than going back to Clark.”

This is how during the football season, we go to the game on Saturday, and on Sunday, before Felicia and I leave, Don and I review our chapter of the week. We sit on the sofa in the afternoon and discuss the differences between male and female needs in a marriage, how we feel about them, and how much we agree or disagree with the author of our study book and with each other about them. When we begin, the doors to the deck are open to let in the cool breeze as we watch the monarchs sail home to Mexico while we make our own migration to matrimonial understanding—or, maybe to the dark side over the moon. It's not—mmmmmm—easy to see where we are heading.

Chapter 48

We sit self-consciously together on the sofa in tee shirts and sandals, holding study books and pencils for jotting down notes. One of the first chapters to come up for discussion in the book we settle on is about the difference between the need of men and women for honesty and open communication in marriage. Because this was an issue in our break-up, it seems like vindication of what I kept asking Don to give. I mean, it wasn't a personal quirk of mine alone if they had to put it in a book on problems between men and women.

If we can't trust each other to give accurate information about the way we feel, or to at least try, the book suggests we'll be less able to adjust to each other and build a solid partnership. Don and I are both private people but we need to find more transparency for the sake of strengthening our relationship. "I want to believe that you're doing your best to break your habit of being so closed. I want to believe you'll try to stop shutting me out because I think it's harmful to behave that way with me." This is one of my biggest gripes and the force of this feeling pumps into my statement.

Don frowns and leans back a little on the sofa. "I need to trust your acceptance of what I say even if I can't find the right words to tell you what I feel. And I probably will struggle." I lean over the cushions between us and give him a small kiss on the cheek.

Then I act out a dramatically arch smile and say in dulcet tones, "All you have to do is put what you feel in your very own little words."

Don laughs slightly, "Don't forget I've been married before and I know

you women say it, but you may not mean it.”

I pretend to scowl and playfully slice a fake knife blade across his throat with my finger, saying in a silly accent, “Yes—one wrong word could be zee last.” Then I reach over and hold Don’s hand for a moment, looking into his eyes. Trying to be open and honest about what we feel, like learning to dance, will be an on-going struggle, no matter what we try or how much we want to change.

Another issue that comes up one Sunday, after the cattails around the pond have burst, is that of our relationship to our adult children. In my black and white tweed dress, I sit beside Don in a red sweater on the sofa with the open books on our laps. Don says, “I know your girls compare me to their father and, right now, I don’t come out very well. That’s understandable. I hope time will change that for the better.” Out of embarrassment, he fiddles with a page in the book, looking down. We’re both tentative about discussing our children with the other. I don’t want to hear even Don bring up anything that is less than desirable about how they act even though I realize my girls aren’t perfect.

“I feel the same about your daughters,” I agree. “Our kids are loyal and, from what I read, a new marriage could feel like a betrayal to them, or worse. It could even feel like another funeral for their parent. We can be their friend, but we can never take the place of their parent. We’ll simply be the step-parent/friend.” I say this earnestly but I have no idea how difficult reaching a stage of friendship will be. As an adult, I’ve never found developing relationships very easy, and this situation is foreign to any of my past experience. It’s like a game of basketball, I think, where patterns of play have worked well for the old team before, but with this new team made up of different skills and different tendencies, who knows what plays will work?

“It’s normal for them to feel both hot and cold toward us. But our spouses were good people and so are our kids,” Don says. “I think we can trust them to do their best.” He hunches his shoulders and sighs.

I look down at the study book, remembering my friend who got divorced over the conflict between her new husband and her teen-agers. Here’s another bump in the dance. I don’t want us to ever have to make a choice between our children or each other, but it’s too scary to speak that worry out loud.

“Our kids may have to give up the way certain things like holidays have always been done when there are two families to consider,” Don says as he shifts on the sofa uncomfortably.

“I know. This will be hard. They won’t like it.”

“But we should talk it over and try to adjust as reasonably as we can,” he adds with weak optimism.

“It won’t be easy but isn’t change and adaptation the way life is?” I go on resignedly, pulling at a stinging cuticle while feeling a weight press on my shoulders. Maybe that’s how the larvae felt before bursting into wings. Then I add with more conviction, straightening up, “Without change there would be no butterflies. You and I have been changing and adapting for quite a while. Even though it sounds trite, we’re stronger in this relationship because we rolled with the punch and figured out how to change. Life will be different because interactions with Mary and Stan can’t be replayed between you and me. Life will be different now, but this doesn’t mean life will be worse. Its quality depends on each of us. It’s a good thing for the kids to learn, too.” But speaking of change, we quickly agree to explain to our daughters that our marriage will not change their inheritances.

We also don’t favor trying any tactics to bond the two families together. “They don’t know each other, they don’t live near each other, and with their work schedules, getting together would be terribly complicated, and could really turn them off,” Don says. I have private misgivings that this is for the best but I agree with relief. We won’t push it, if marriage comes about, because we have no answer for how to blend the two sets of daughters anyway. I hope in time it will simply happen to some degree.

Throughout the fall after discussing the weekly reading, we write a set of expectations about the behavior of each of us toward each other as husband and wife. We move from the couch to the cherry dining table where we can spread open our books and the yellow tablet. One expectation we write as a result of the chapter on openness and communication is: *We will use daily conversation to inform, investigate, and understand each other.* I read it out loud. “What are we, detectives?” I say.

“Something like that,” Don answers. “According to the book, you need to have full disclosure and openness from me.”

“Yes, but does it have to sound like we’re taking depositions? How about cutting the legalese to something like *nose around?*” Don cocks his head and looks at me patiently. “Okay,” I say, giving in. “Seriously, I like *inquire* better than *investigate.*” Don nods his head.

Another expectation based on a different chapter is: *We will respect each other’s feelings* (strike even) especially *when they are different.* This change passes unanimously on the first ballot.

At the end, we have written fourteen of these (strike promises) *assumptions* sitting side by side at the table. I prepare to take our latest draft home to re-write in final version for acceptance at the next weekend discussion. In my mind these statements are like little vows, but the title Don and I agree to is, *Assumptions about Marriage.* *Assumption* isn’t the same as *promise*, the

word I really want, but I think it at least sets the stage. As I quoted from somewhere once long ago, the willingness to ask deep questions demands the flexibility to come up with bold answers. Though some of our reasoning may be inadequate, if marriage requires having final answers for all that lies ahead, there probably wouldn't be many.

As Felicia and I drive home through harvested fields of broken cornstalks, I think of a comment, with which I agree, that fairy tales ending with, *And they lived happily ever after*, are hardly a good way to prepare children for the realities of adulthood. Whether or not our attempts to deal with these situations will be very successful, at least we have raised the issues and have done our best to figure out how we can move in harmony together.

The following weekend we see our football team lose its last game in what has been a fairly good season and now basketball is almost here. There are no more chapters to assign ourselves. My spirit is low on Sunday before I pack up Felicia to return home. In a white turtleneck sweater sitting by Don in a white shirt on the sofa with a fire going, we quickly finish the final chapter, a review of what we will face in marriage, if it takes place.

I look into the fitful fire, quietly feeling tendrils of the same smoky despair as twenty months ago before we came together again. My bulldog brain latches onto the old question of whether our talks have moved us forward, or are we in the same spot we were before picking up the book on marriage? The instant I think this, I mentally make myself open my teeth to let the thought go. I have done as much as is in my power. *Take it easy, Glenda, take it easy like Sol advised.* Abruptly I remember something from right after Stan died. With his brother's arms around me and my head on his shoulder, I wept, "I will be happy again." And I will, because being happy is largely up to me.

This thought gets me on my feet to move toward the glass doors of the deck. They are shut against a gray, late fall day with a glazed sun above the tarnished pond where nothing moves. The brown cattails are blown into fuzz, and an elegant, dark arrow made up of geese points away to a pond with more grass around it. Their honking dies in the distance. Nothing sings here now but the monotonous *dee-dee-dee-dee* of a chick-a-dee perched momentarily in the uppermost bare branches of a tree. The day feels like nothing much is ahead, though if I say that, nothing will be. I know better than that. I turn slightly away from the deck doors back to Don. I make myself recall this morning when the cold air smelled moist and fresh with a shivery hint of the coming first snow. The holidays will soon be here and then another year will begin. The thought, *I can't go on like this another year*, smacks into the side of my head with such force that my mouth pops open and words fall out before I can censor the whine from them. "You know,

Don, every Sunday over this fall we've studied, discussed, and dug out some common understandings about marriage. As we went through the book, we've worked to plant and bring to life these assumptions about how to act as a married couple."

Last Sunday I had taken home the draft of our *Assumptions* to re-write in final form, placing our document in a fresh white binder from a box left over from Stan's business. Now I hand over Don's copy. "Here's the final version. I don't know what we want to do with this, but take a look and see if you agree that my re-write is what we decided."

While Don looks the pages over, I sit down, turning slightly away again, frown, and stare into the fireplace, waiting. This finished paper is not the most significant result of our discussion. What matters more is our joint effort to agree on married life in the way this paper represents. That is what you see with couples who have been married for, say, fifty years. Their piece of cake is not for marking the anniversary but for enduring the mutual journey. It brings back what Stan's father said about how he didn't know what to do but went along with Stan's mother as best he could.

The restless flame mirrors my sense that our own game is ready for tip-off if we would just jump to it. Being an assertive woman of today, as I see myself, I could ask the crucial question that now lies before us, but I'm unwilling and hold back. To rush at this hill, like I did the lilacs that scorching long ago day, most likely would end in a reckless disaster. I have to know that marriage is also Don's decision, that he is ready. This is the time to take it easy if ever there was one. From beside me on the couch, I hear slight sounds of swallowing, fidgeting, and fiddling with the papers, but I don't look away from the fire. As far as I'm concerned, the last dance is done, the lights are back on. He can choose to take me home, or maybe I will have to find another way. At this point, everything between us is laid on the line. I take a deep breath, and tighten the lead on my itchiness, like Sol would do to the untamed filly.

Then I feel Don's arm along the back of the sofa lightly touching my shoulders; from the slight sounds of shifting around, it seems he still hesitates to say something. In exasperation I pull myself in tighter, wondering what stall he's come up with now, and bite my lips in anticipation of finding the words to possibly shoo it away. When I raise my eyes from the restless fire to the empty gray sky, he finally speaks. "I guess there's nothing left to say." Turning toward him, I fall back against the sofa in shock.

This is so unexpected that the breath is knocked from my chest, breaking loose an old memory. It is of the evening a few days after Stan died, when I was alone behind the white fence on my acreage looking toward my

empty, white house. That day I stood there recalling the late afternoon some time before when I had heard the first scream while Stan was sitting inside, waiting for me to find the rake and make supper. But now so soon after his death, the windows of my house were empty, dark sockets against the face of lilac bracken. I remember standing as though fenced off, feeling for the first time that no one was waiting inside for me to come in that night and have life the way it should be, the two of us together; there was no welcome in my home. I felt rain on my face, a rain I thought would never end. Today, I remain slumped against the sofa while this same feeling spreads through my body as Don's words rain in, *nothing more to say*.

Then Don gently clutches my shoulder with the hand of the arm across my back. *You have to trust that he will find the words, and they will be just fine*. As I turn my head to look into Don's solemn blue eyes, they fill with a somber light toward which I yearn. "Will you marry me?" he says.

I turn my body fully toward Don, giving him a long, level stare. As the white binder slips to the floor, we slide our arms around each other's body and lean into a tight embrace. The words I've wanted for so long to let go, spill from my throat into his chest. "I've been waiting to hear you say that so I can say yes, oh, yes." Deep inside I hear that still, small voice I trust the most, *Life is good*, it says.

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The Comer

"If I were to lose my husband in some way, this is nearly the same story I would write. It is my story. . ."

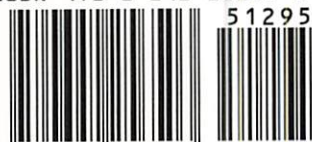
— A reader's response, after finishing *The Comer*.

When her husband of forty years unexpectedly died, Glenda Long wasn't just thrust into grief—she was hurled into modern singlehood. At age twenty, she had gone directly from college into marriage soon after the eye-opening, but controversial, second Kinsey Report on women and sex had made headlines. At age sixty, she knew very little about dating and the single life that evolved after Kinsey. *The Comer* is the story of what she learned, how she learned it, and how this carried her through lonely grief into the self-assurance of a modern single woman.

Her journey passes through failures with mechanical and business know-how as well as with male/female relationships. She experiences the high of meeting her new Mr. Right only to be plunged into the depths when he cannot commit to sharing their lives. But she keeps going and growing—sometimes in a way precisely the opposite of what had worked before. In the men she meets, she confronts the unwanted hugs of infatuation, the wobbly walk of possible inebriation, an offer of free financial advice that could lead to bilking, and more idealism about the good life than she can accept. In order to navigate these relationships in twenty-first century style, she receives practical guidance from unexpected angels: a handsome hairdresser, a loving mother-in-law, a counselor in male/female communication, a support group of seasoned girlfriends, and advice on breaking up from her more experienced sister and daughter that she mostly chooses to not take. Adding to this worst of times, she suffers the death of her mother from whom she learns, upon reflection, a better way of loving.

The Comer is a quirky coming-of-age story about someone who begins a quest for romance and deeper personal insight at the tender age of sixty. Embedded in the narrative are tips for dating as a senior, handling grief and loneliness, setting goals for a new life, getting along with adult stepchildren, and writing a set of marital agreements that holds the tension on differences between the sexes. *The Comer* is a universal narrative of loss, growth, renewal, and the stretching of wings that a reader of any age or gender can appreciate.

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