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Wise as Serpents, Harmless as Doves: A Collection of Short Stories

Angela C. Fowle

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WISE AS SERPENTS, HARMLESS AS DOVES
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

Angela C. Fowle, M.A.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood
University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
in Writing.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of short stories inspired by many different women. While the pieces are truly works of fiction, the characters are an amalgam of individuals the author has encountered in her own life.

The collection focuses upon the experiences of several elderly women, each confronted with feelings of loneliness, envy, or longing. Although the stories address these sobering themes, they also present the reader with quirky, eccentric characters.

An important element in the collection is the examination of how the women interact with one another. One of the stories introduces a specific conflict between two characters, each vying for a much desired object, while another story finds a hostess trying desperately to impress her peers. Both pieces reveal women with competitive spirits and a touch of hubris.

A theme found in several of the stories is death. One character finds herself still healing after the loss of a mate, while another character gently cares for her charges and their loved ones as they make the difficult transition from life to death.

The pieces maintain a delicate balance between humor and reverence. To avoid creating characters in a stereotypical vein, the importance of emotional

attachment is brought to the surface, leaving the physical aspects of aging less transparent. While some of the women do suffer from the conditions often found in the elderly, the real focus is to look beyond the physical and into the psyche of the individual. These characters are passionate and they are not afraid to express that passion.

Most importantly, the stories are meant to offer the reader a different view of elderly women. The willingness of the characters to change their circumstances, often at an emotional cost, is a reminder that individuals can continue to grow and evolve in all phases of life.

WISE AS SERPENTS, HARMLESS AS DOVES
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Angela C. Fowle, M.A.

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts in Writing.

2008

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Dr. Michael Castro
Chairperson and Advisor

Assistant Professor Eve Jones

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is the outgrowth of my writing after many months of formal classes. The theme was developed in the early weeks of my fiction courses and continued to evolve as I focused on writing stories about mature and aging women. Through this process, I learned to quietly observe the women in my own life. I've always found the special connection between women to be both fascinating and complex. Drawing on this dynamic in writing these stories, the central characters and their counterparts introduce the reader to women who are lonely, comical, loyal, and at times quite fussy.

There are many literary heroines that have influenced my writing, including Alice Munro, Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor. Presenting stories as if they are small snapshots of life, or impressions, while at the same time containing them in deliberate and controlled settings, is something these three women have mastered. I greatly admire their individual works and I strive to infuse my own pieces with rich detail and meaning.

O'Connor succeeded in crafting characters that are sympathetic, while at the same time a bit manipulating. I'm attracted to this idea, and have tried to use it in my own collection. The best example of this in my own work can be found in the story, *WISE AS SERPENTS, HARMLESS AS DOVES*.

In this short story, the main character Petula, is fighting against the extermination of the doves living in the church bell tower. The doves represent more to the old woman than what is at first obvious. The birds are a connection between what was and what remains. I focused on the fact that much had changed in Petula's life. The loss of her husband Harvey has left her lonely, but she feels that she has a connection with him through the presence of his beloved doves. I wanted to leave the reader with the message that with the bell in disrepair, the doves are the only thing that is left to validate the love Petula shared with her husband.

With that in mind, I used the extermination order as the catalyst for Petula's trip up to the top of the tower. When Petula makes her presence known to Reverend Piper, she employs a bit of baiting to get her way. Playing on the tenets of the young minister's faith, the feisty old woman reminds him of his duties as a Christian. I found that by taking this approach, I was able to weave subtle manipulation into the plot. This helped me to portray the main character as vulnerable yet steadfast. While Reverend Piper is confronted with a situation he never anticipated at the church, he is touched by the underlying reason for Petula's trip up to the tower.

Another story in which I used not only guilt, but also a degree of shame is, *A WORTHY ADVERSARY*. This story introduces the reader to Eliza, a dinnerware collector who is driven to replace a broken bowl in her collection. While the character is somewhat selfish, she certainly is not incapable of knowing when she should relent. The competition that Eliza is engaged in with Stella Mae is really more adversarial on Eliza's part. Although Stella Mae would like to obtain the

bowl, she wouldn't go to the lengths that her counterpart goes to in obtaining it. It was my intention to write a story about two women vying for the same object, one more aggressively than the other.

To give the reader a sense of just how serious the competition is, I used the auction scene. This scene also provided an opportunity to add humor to the story as Stella Mae, although not quite as bold as Eliza, engages in a bit of taunting as the two women wait for the auction to begin. Once the bidding starts, the situation becomes serious. In order to create some tension and to build up excitement, I introduced the flamboyant auctioneer into the scene. This also allowed me to engage the women in a fight that is free of dialogue between the two.

Ultimately, Eliza's shame plays out in an inward battle. She wants the bowl, and she knows that she purchased it legitimately, but she also knows that the right thing to do, the kind thing to do, is to allow Stella Mae to have the bowl. My goal was to allow Eliza to perform an act of kindness, while at the same time preventing her from becoming saintly. The inward battle was one way in which I kept the character on a human level. In order to avoid an ending that would be all too predictable, I did not create a final confrontation between the two characters. In fact, Eliza and Stella Mae do not speak to one another beyond the banquet. I chose to end the story in a quiet way and I achieved that by allowing Eliza to leave the bowl at Stella Mae's bedside without being noticed. Stella Mae's reaction to the gift is subtle, yet effective.

One of the lighter stories in my collection is *THE ART OF HOSPITALITY*. This piece also deals with the subject of desire, although in the case of Cora, it doesn't rest with a material object. In the story, Cora makes preparations for a

visit of German delegates. The city has trusted the Ladies Auxiliary to entertain the visitors and to show them local points of interest. I envisioned Cora as a perfectionist and so I crafted the story around that aspect of her personality.

The contrast between Cora and the other members of the Auxiliary is an important element in the story. While Cora meticulously plans every aspect of the visit, the other members chide her for being obsessive. Cora's friends are more relaxed, and easygoing, much to Cora's chagrin. By leading the story in that direction, I was able to write a lighthearted piece. Once again, I allowed the characters to tease and taunt, but did so without cruelty. Cora takes the snide remarks in stride, and at one point in the story, she laughs along with her friends. I wanted Cora to be portrayed as someone serious enough to commit herself to a task, but at the same time flexible enough to adapt.

However, this story does find the main character guided to some degree by pride, in that she doesn't want her European contemporaries to think of her and her friends as hopeless country folk. I used the etiquette lessons as a way to support this and to suggest that Cora has an inward longing to be something other than what she is. It was important to me that the character remains sympathetic, so I resisted the temptation to make her too pretentious. The fitting room scene accomplishes that goal, as Cora and Gerta find common ground through a misunderstanding.

The sewer problem at the start of the dinner party provides the perfect obstacle to show some vulnerability in Cora. Up to that point, things are going smoothly. The other members of the Auxiliary are behaving in an acceptable manner, and the delegates appear to be enjoying themselves. I wanted to introduce

a crisis that would be both humiliating and laughable at the same time. The water not only ruins the dinner party, it causes the characters to move to a casual, comfortable setting. This was important in ending the story, as it allows the entire group to get to know each other without the concern of propriety. It is in this setting that Cora realizes that the delegates are more like her and her friends than she would have believed.

MENDING THE PIECES is a story in which the central character Hazel, allows herself to take a risk. By letting her guard down, she puts herself in a very vulnerable position. In this story I experimented with two characters involved in a budding relationship. I wanted Hazel to take a chance. Jack isn't sure how to react to Hazel's feelings for him as he struggles with the loss of his wife, and that has left him feeling confused.

The glass shop is the setting for the first encounter between Hazel and Jack. I used both Oliver and the broken window as an avenue to develop a relationship between the lonely artists. Without the common interest of the glass, it would have been difficult to make the possibility of a relationship between the two believable. Hazel is so focused on her work at the shop, she leaves little room in her life for anything else. Jack has been living the life of an itinerant artist since the death of his wife, and that has made it difficult for him to develop a friendship with a woman. The Resurrection window restoration awakens the two to the possibility of finding love.

One of the most important elements in this story is the attention given to detail. In order for the piece to be successful, I researched the process of restoring antique stained glass, and then applied what I'd learned to the story. An example

of this is found in the scene where Hazel meets Jack at the workshop on the first day of the restoration. Hazel carefully marks the glass with chalk before she attempts to score the pieces. Using the nippers, she finishes the edges before presenting it to Jack. For his part, Jack works at grinding the old solder from the window, and replaces the old copper foil. Details such as these lend authenticity to the piece.

The bonding that occurs between the two during the course of the restoration is vital to the story. Hazel opens up to Jack and admits just how much the angel meant to her. I didn't want this character to become fixated on the window, so I addressed her feelings toward the window in a more subtle manner. By confessing her attachment to the angel, Hazel takes an important step. I used the attachment to craft a story ending that would lead both of the characters into a situation where reconciliation was inevitable.

In writing *THE NAME GAME*, I relied heavily on description. The main character is deaf, so in order to draw the reader into her world, I had to give special attention to details. I used little things, like the long beads around the child's neck and the seahorse swim rings, to infuse the story with necessary visuals. Because I portray Tilda as a woman who is happy to just observe what is going on around her, rich description is vital to the success of the story.

One device that I used in the story was to give all characters other than Tilda, memorable names. The Gigolo was appropriate for the male character that makes his rounds at the pool and I incorporated some humor into Tilda's thoughts about him. I delved into my own childhood reading experiences to name both Rapunzel the lifeguard, and Lilliput. I was not sure if this device would work, and had it not

been for the quirky nature of Tilda, it would have been difficult. I did experiment with naming just one or two of the characters in my initial draft, but that left the piece somewhat unbalanced, so I adjusted that in later drafts.

Another recurring theme in this collection of stories is risk. In this particular story, Tilda seems unwilling to talk to the other regulars at the pool. Although she has the capacity to speak, she is shy and unsure as to how she will be received. Rather than risk embarrassment, she is happy to watch from the safety of her favorite vantage point. Unlike Hazel, who confided in Jack in *MENDING THE PIECES*, Tilda keeps her thoughts and feelings to herself. I used the crisis at the bottom of the pool to force the character into making a drastic change.

I took advantage of the pool scenario to not only create a setting with a small town feel, but to use the inherent danger of water to propel the story forward into the classical crisis. Likewise, I used the antics of The Chain Gang as a believable method of distraction. Everyone at the pool is caught up in the excitement, including The Exhibitionist. Tilda's deafness is to her advantage, in that she is somewhat removed from the excitement and able to take in the broader picture.

The rescue scene is the point at which I allowed Tilda to break free from her self-imposed exile. When she finds that Lilliput is in danger of drowning, her love and concern for the child outweigh her disadvantages. It is important to show the depth of emotion in this scene, and I approached that by first sparking awareness in the character. Tilda realizes that something is not quite right. To show that gut feeling, I thought it necessary for the character to build on her uneasiness by walking the perimeter of the pool. When she realizes that her intuition is correct, Tilda becomes panicked. At this point, she takes a risk and reaches out for help.

I struggled a bit with the resolution in *THE NAME GAME*. It was my desire for the elderly character to find friendship and acceptance, yet I wanted to bring that about in an unconventional way. Although Tilda had reached out in her desperation, I didn't think that this particular character could have a life-changing experience from the single crisis. The resolution in this story rests in the coincidence that Connie has deaf parents, and knows sign language.

As I stated earlier, my life experiences influenced this story. My own childhood days spent swimming at the city pool, and my love of reading books from my small-town library, where I first learned of Rapunzel, and the Lilliputians, both played a role. Life experience also played a large part in the writing of my short story, *THE NIGHTINGALE*.

My father died when I was twenty years old. The funeral home that served my family employed an elderly lady to sit all night with the deceased. I found that both fascinating and thoughtful. Helen, the main character in this story, was born out of that experience.

While I found the subject of death difficult to address, I wanted to take a somewhat different approach to it. With that as my objective, I crafted a character that is sensitive yet at the same time tries to remain detached. Helen lovingly assures Tommy's parents that she will take care of him. Her gentle manner helps to alleviate some of the pain that the grieving mother is experiencing. But it is young Tommy that shatters Helen's brave front. The bathing scene was the point where I broke through that front to make the character vulnerable.

In writing *THE NIGHTINGALE*, I wanted to surprise the reader with the fact that Helen was working in a funeral home. I did leave clues along the way, as

there is never dialogue between Helen and her charges. After Tommy's parents leave the home, the conversation is one-sided, and I used humor to subtly disguise this. One example can be found in the scene where Helen accidentally brushes her breast against Mr. Murphey. Her reaction is playful and flirtatious, yet Mr. Murphey remains silent.

It was my intention that readers assume that the character Jennifer Gordon, is in a coma or a vegetative state. Her lover desperately wants forgiveness, and continues to send flowers. I used this to perpetuate the idea that she is in a coma. For the character of Tommy, I directed the focus onto his frailty, suggesting that the child is weak from years of illness.

An underlying element in this story is that Helen is coming to grips with her own mortality. Both the opening scene where she awkwardly boards the bus, and the closing scene where she notices that the fireflies have died, reveal her true feelings. As I mentioned earlier, I allowed those feelings to break through during the crisis that takes place in the bathing scene.

It is my hope that all six of the stories in my collection introduce the reader to characters that are laughable, loveable, and endearing. I placed them in hometown settings to keep them grounded and to give them an air of familiarity. Although the women are elderly, they are still passionate about the people and things in their lives. Petula is determined to keep the doves safe, and in doing so she validates the love she shared with Harvey. Eliza and Stella Mae are driven by their individual desires for acquiring the elusive covered onion soup bowl. Cora wants to show the German delegates that although she is from a rural town, she is well versed in the code of hospitality, while Hazel decides to take a risk and

begin a new relationship. Tilda is catapulted into her life-changing moment by unforeseen circumstances, and yet she embraces the change when it arrives. And finally, Helen gives in to her strong emotions and comes to terms with the inevitability of death.

It has been my pleasure to write this collection of short stories, and I look forward to growing as a writer, and to exploring new themes and creating new characters.

WISE AS SERPENTS, HARMLESS AS DOVES

WISE AS SERPENTS, HARMLESS AS DOVES

Petula was ready for combat. The church members had voted to have the doves removed from the bell tower, and her immediate action was necessary. Pulling the heavy knapsack from the closet, she winced at the cruel pain in her knuckles. The lines on her forehead deepened as she looked down at her twisted hands, now spotted and stiff. "I have to do this. Lord, please give me strength," she whispered. Bracing herself against the spasms, she reached back to pin her thinning hair into a bun before hoisting the sack onto the bed.

The vote had not been a surprise to Petula. The members had been complaining for several months about the droppings and mess beneath the tower. What had been shocking was that the entire congregation had voted in favor of the extermination. When she raised her hand to register her nay, she was astounded to see that she was alone. Glancing around at the others, she noticed that no one could meet her gaze. *Well then, she thought, I see what needs to be done.*

It was with this conviction that Hosanna Christian Church's most senior member marched home and began packing. Not willing to overlook any item which might come in handy, Petula gathered flashlights, canned tuna, lightweight braided rope, bread crumbs, and most importantly, extra clothing. Wrestling into her raincoat and galoshes, she hoisted her knapsack onto her Radio Flyer wagon and began her journey.

A light rain began to fall as Petula approached the church. Shivering, she gently chided herself for leaving her gloves on her dinette table. *Never mind, God will provide.* The key to the tower door was hidden behind the cornerstone just as she remembered. With some maneuvering, she propped the door with the wagon

and began the long haul up the steep stairs. Climbing one step at a time and dragging the pack up with her, Petula stopped every few minutes to catch her breath. Trying to ignore the pain in her knees and hands, she began to coo to the brood watching from above. Her calls roused the males who began to strut and bob in flamboyant gestures. Laughing, Petula called out, "Settle down. Settle down. It's just an old friend."

When she finally reached the top, Petula was a bit surprised by what she found. It had been some time since she had visited the tower perch, and although she regularly fed them in the yard, she hadn't realized that the flock had grown to such a great number. "I see that you've been busy! Well the Creator did say to be fruitful and multiply," she chuckled. "Night is coming, so don't mind me as I make myself a comfortable nest of my own." Moving slowly, she pulled a small broom from her knapsack and cleaned a littered corner before spreading out a thin blanket. The doves watched from the rafters, showing interest in the friendly visitor with the large green sack.

As the darkness invaded the tower, Petula bolted the door, wrapped her coat tighter around her and hunkered down on the hard pallet. In the long hours of the night, she gazed up into the bell and allowed her mind to wander. *Harvey took pride in his job. The bell rang every Sunday, rain or shine. The birds knew him. They trusted him.*

The sound of squabbling woke Petula from her uneasy slumber. Carefully coaxing her stiff back and hips into a sitting position, it was several seconds before she realized where she was. The skilled flyers were already leaving the tower, eagerly in search of their morning meal. "I've got a special treat for you

today, rye crumbs *and* seed,” Petula crooned. She rose to her feet and removed the food from her bag. Throwing the crumbs over the wall, she looked just in time to see Reverend Piper walking toward the church. Watching from her roost above, Petula muffled a laugh as the minister inspected the wagon and looked around the yard.

“Good morning Reverend,” she called.

The young minister continued to walk around the grounds searching for the owner of the wagon, and the source of the greeting.

“Hello?” he called. “Who’s there?”

“Up here, Reverend. It’s not the good Lord, so don’t worry.”

Shading his eyes, the minister squinted and looked up toward the bell tower.

“Mrs. Wilson? Is that you up there?”

“You can call me Petula. When I stand before God on Judgment Day he won’t be callin’ me Mrs. Wilson, so you can call me Petula.”

“Ma’am, what are you doin’ up there?”

“I refuse to allow anyone to kill these doves, so I’ll be up here until everyone comes to their senses.”

“Mrs. Wilson, I’m not sure what this is all about, but if you would just come down here we could discuss it.”

“Can you promise me that the birds will be left alone?”

“No Ma’am. The members voted to have them removed and...”

“I’m a member and I voted against it.”

“Yes Ma’am, but the members agreed that the birds are a nuisance. Cleaning up the droppings is becoming a full-time job, and the gardener has threatened to call the health department.”

“I’m well aware of the complaints Reverend, but I won’t allow these birds to be poisoned, Petula replied. “You haven’t been here very long, so you don’t know how important the doves are. This church is known for the bell tower doves.”

“Mrs. Wilson, please come down and I’ll discuss this with you face to face.”

“No Reverend, I’m staying right where I am. You can go about your business because I won’t be any trouble to you.”

Reverend Piper turned and headed toward the church office. The seminary had guided him on how to serve the elderly, and he had dealt with a fair share of testy nursing home residents, but he had never anticipated anything like this when he accepted the position at Hosanna Christian.

Just as he was about to enter the office through the side door, he heard Petula call after him, “He sees every sparrow fall, Reverend!”

Pleased with herself, Petula set about folding her blanket and cleaning up the small tower loft. The bell had been broken for several years, and it was evident that no human being had visited the space in some time. She covered the small copper pot which was her makeshift toilet, and, once satisfied, the old woman rummaged through her sack and withdrew some cheese and crackers. “Bless this meal and please give me the courage to do your will,” she prayed. Leaning against the waist high wall, she quietly ate her breakfast and waited for her next engagement.

The doves spent the morning preening themselves and vying for the crumbs their benefactor tossed to them. A youngster ventured close to Petula and gingerly pecked at some seed in her hand. "Don't worry dear, you're safe," she assured.

"Mrs. Wilson? Uh, Petula? Are you there?" Reverend Piper called from below.

Petula leaned over the wall and answered, "I'm still here. Have you changed your mind about the birds?"

"I called my superior, that is, I called Reverend Wood, and he advised me to carry out the wishes of the members. The extermination company will be here in a couple of hours to remove the birds."

"To kill these peaceful creatures is what you mean! Don't sugarcoat it, Reverend. Do you know that they use cyanide pellets to poison them? We're to be stewards of the Lord's creatures. You'll have to answer for this at the Great White Throne Judgment."

The minister paused to consider the pronouncement his feisty parishioner had just leveled. Pacing back and forth in front of the tower door, after some time he looked up and asked, "May I come up?"

"Yes," she replied, "I'll come down and unlock the door."

The journey down the stairs proved to be just as excruciating as the trip up had been the night before. Petula stopped midway to tuck a few loose strands of white hair back into place, and to rest a bit. Reverend Piper waited patiently and after several minutes she released the bolt, allowing him to enter. They climbed the steps slowly and quietly. Petula was breathing heavily and the young minister didn't want to cause further distress by asking any questions. When they reached

the bell, Reverend Piper grabbed the blanket from the top of the sack and put it on the wooden floor, motioning for Petula to sit down.

Reaching for a bottle of water, she took several long drinks and succumbed to a coughing fit, her delicate frame shaking with every gasp. The nervous minister knelt down and gently patted her back until she regained control.

“You must think that I’m a silly old fool,” she began.

“No Ma’am. I don’t think that at all.”

“Things have changed so much, so much. Harvey and I attended this church together for forty-five years. We were married here, on a beautiful Saturday in May. The bell rang loud and clear, and we released a pair of doves into the air. Did you know that?” she asked.

“No, I didn’t know that. I’ve heard that your late husband was a fine man,” he replied.

“Oh, he was, he certainly was. He was the bell ringer, you know. Every service rain or shine, my Harvey would climb these stairs and ring the bell. The good Lord called him home a few years ago, and none of the members were willing to take over his job. Can you imagine that? I tried to ring it, but the arthritis in my shoulder had other plans. Just look at the rust on the iron! Harvey would never have allowed his bell to fall into this condition. Why, the rope is rotted straight through.” Looking at the minister she shyly added, “Sometimes, he would give three extra tugs on the rope which was a code between us that meant, I love you.”

Reverend Piper stood up and examined the cast iron bell. Petula was right, it was in need of some tender loving care. The drum and the internal clapper seemed

to be in pretty good shape, but he noted the wooden support and rope needed to be replaced. He manually struck the clapper against the side of the bell and was pleasantly surprised by the lovely hum.

“No Petula, I can’t imagine not having this wonderful bell ringing.”

“Harvey loved it up here,” she continued. “He especially loved the doves. I would toast bread for them, and he would bring it over every morning. The birds ate right out of his hand. They would start circling overhead when they saw him coming. He called them his ‘Heavenly Host.’ I think some of these older ones would remember him; they can live up to twenty years or so. They’re loyal and they use the same nest for years. They mate for life.”

The youthful minister listened quietly as his elderly charge spoke of her husband and the birds. He had been curious about this faithful old woman but had never taken the time to speak with her at length. When he’d played his guitar during his first Sunday service, he’d noticed that she was the only member of age who clapped her hands and stood. In fact, he noted that she was the only older member who wasn’t sitting in the pew with wide eyes and pursed lips. Eventually the senior members stopped attending meetings, some mumbling about the wild, rock-and-roll services. But Petula remained.

“Did you hear me, Reverend? I said that they’re Mourning Doves.”

Reverend Piper shook himself back to the moment, “Yes Ma’am.”

“I was saying, isn’t it interesting that it was a dove that brought the branch back to Noah after the flood? And the Holy Spirit descended like a dove at the Lord’s baptism in the River Jordan. We’re commanded to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. Yes, these doves are very special,” she continued.

"Petula, I need to leave for a bit. Will you come down with me?"

"No thank you, Reverend. I'm stayin' put."

"Can I bring you anything?"

"No."

"Why don't you stay here and not go down to bolt the door? I'll take the key and lock the door behind me. Will you agree to that?" he urged.

"Why should I trust you?" she replied.

"Well, although I admit that I'm fallible, I've never been known to lie to members of my congregation. I give you my word that I'll return alone, and we'll work this out."

Petula turned and looked out over the trees for a few moments before she nodded her head in agreement, "I'll take you at your word."

With that, the minister walked down the narrow stairs and locked the door. Glancing up, he whispered, "Please help me, Lord."

The birds were settling down for their midmorning rest, so Petula took their lead and spread the blanket just enough to stretch out on. *He's a fine young man. The others should have given him a chance*, she thought. *He's humble, like my dear Harvey was*. Reaching down to pull her raincoat around her shoulders, the self-appointed guardian closed her eyes and slept.

A low rumbling roused Petula. Taking her time and rising in stages, she finally lifted herself to her swollen feet and peered over the ledge. Just to the right of the stone tower sat a large truck. When the engine stopped, two men emerged and immediately began removing burlap bags and other equipment from the truck bed.

"We'll take a count first," a tall man shouted as he made his way to the tower door. Damn! That preacher told me the door would be unlocked."

"I'll thank you not to curse on church property," Petula called down.

"What the?" the other man asked.

"That's right, you ruffians! I'm up here to stay so you might as well beat it!"

"Glen, we weren't told anything about a crazy old kook living up there," the man continued.

"Don't you think I know that, Frank?" Glen sarcastically replied.

"Go back home. There's no work for you here," Petula informed the two puzzled exterminators.

"Get that preacher on the phone," Glen ordered his companion.

"Nope. No answer. Look, that door won't be hard to pry open. I'll get my crowbar," Frank offered.

The door gave way without resistance. The tower had been breached, so Petula swung into action.

"Now I hope that you boys are prayed up because you just might get hurt," she cautioned.

Frank let out a hoarse laugh as they began to climb the stairs. Petula was standing at the top holding a cloth bag. Wasting no time, she shoved her hand inside and in one surprisingly agile move, she grabbed a fistful of rocks and began pelting the men.

The retreat was quick as the two men ran to the safety of the truck.

"I've got a slingshot up here boys!" she yelled down. "You don't want to mess with me!"

"This broad is cracked," Frank whispered, "let's get the hell out of here."

"No," Glen replied. "I've got a plan."

When she was certain the truck had pulled away, Petula dropped down onto the sack to rest. The battle was won for now. *I won't let you down, Harvey*, she promised. *You were a faithful and loving husband, and I'll make sure the birds remain as a testament to your memory. The bell may be silent now, but the birds are still here to remind everyone of your love for the church...and me.*

An hour later the truck pulled back onto the church grounds. Petula poked her head over the side and called, "Are you ready for more? I learned these tactics from a movie, so you can't win!"

"No Ma'am. Don't worry, we're not comin' up," Glen shouted.

Petula watched as the two killers pulled pellet guns from the truck and began loading them. Her heart pounding, she screamed, "You're not allowed to shoot birds in the city limits!"

"Yep, that's right. You're not allowed to shoot birds within the city limits. Unless you're a licensed exterminator with a permit, that is," Frank answered coolly.

"No! Don't do it!" Petula begged.

"You've got two minutes to get down here or the feathers are gonna start flying," Glen said, pointing his gun up and aiming at a dove flying overhead.

"And guess what? We learned how to do *this* from a movie."

"I'll come down! I'll come down!" she screamed.

When Petula reached the stairs, she slipped and fell down several steps. Crying out in agony, she rolled over onto her right hip.

"Hey, are you comin' down?" Glen called. After a few more seconds he tried again, "Lady, are you all right?"

"Excuse me, what is going on here?" Reverend Piper asked, running up the sidewalk.

"We're here to get rid of the birds," Frank replied.

"No. I spoke with your manager an hour ago. The church won't need your services."

"Well good," Glen sneered, "we don't want to deal with that crazy lady up there."

"Yes, well thank you. You can pack up and leave the grounds. There will be no bird killing here today, or any day."

The young minister opened the door and his pulse quickened when he saw the dark form of Petula on the wooden stairs above him. Taking the steps two at a time, he was at the old woman's side in seconds.

"Don't worry," she gasped, "it's not a heart attack."

"Where are you injured?"

"I think my left hip is broken. But never mind that. You've got to stop those men," she pleaded, tears running down her face.

"I stopped them. The doves are staying. I made some calls this morning and I think that I've worked out a plan that everyone will agree to. Now rest quietly while I call 9-1-1, we need to get you to the hospital."

Petula was loaded into the ambulance under watchful eyes from above.

A WORTHY ADVERSARY

Eliza snatched her paddle off of the table and headed for the auction room. She stood and studied the neat rows of chairs for several moments before deciding her best vantage point would be to the right of the podium. The sale wasn't scheduled to begin for two hours, but she was determined to give herself every opportunity. The china and glass sale was held biannually, and she was certain that this was the year she would acquire the coveted medium green Fiesta covered onion soup bowl. Placing her cushion down on the seat of a straight-backed chair near the front, she glanced over her shoulder before dropping her umbrella onto the floor and settling in.

The quest for the bowl had started three years earlier, when Eliza accidentally dropped her own during a luncheon. Although she had glued one of the handles back on, the chip on the base wasn't as easily disguised. It was from that moment on that she became obsessed with finding a replacement. The compulsion consumed her to the point that Eliza spent her weekends scouring resale shops, consignment shops, and antique stores. Unfortunately, she knew that the medium green Fiesta soup bowl was also on the must-have lists of several other collectors. In fact, it was another local collector that Eliza was hoping to avoid. Every few minutes, she turned and peered toward the door, praying that the auction would begin and lot 227 would come up before anyone else arrived.

While she waited, Eliza paged through the auction catalog, quickly locating a glossy picture of the soup bowl. Taking a deep breath, she began repeating a mantra that she had learned from a guest on one of her favorite afternoon talk shows. The self-help guru had assured her over the airwaves that repetition of an

affirming statement would align the Universe in her favor. "The bowl belongs to me," she chanted. "I'll win the bowl because I deserve to, and the Powers of the Universe will grant me my heart's desire." On and on she repeated her affirmation until movement in the row beside her caught her attention. Looking over, Eliza groaned when she saw Stella Mae Hudgens negotiating her large backside onto a narrow chair.

Eliza had met Stella Mae two years earlier, at a Fiesta exhibition and convention. The two women had chatted in the registration line, both of them giddy with the knowledge that shelves of colored dinnerware were waiting just beyond the swinging doors. Eliza rattled on for several minutes, explaining how she had let her prized bowl slip through her fingers. The other woman watched with interest as her lively line-mate acted out the unfortunate event.

When Eliza paused for a breath, Stella Mae confessed that she was after the same bowl. "I haven't been able to acquire the medium green bowl. I've been searching for it for years, but it has eluded me," she laughed, good-naturedly. "It looks like we just might become competitors."

Instantly, Eliza's smile disappeared. She hadn't thought about the possibility of having to compete with another collector. What had started out as a friendly conversation took a very different direction when Eliza boldly stated, "Well, I've made it known that I want that bowl and I intend to get it." From the look of surprise that swept across Stella Mae's face, Eliza knew that she had driven her point across.

With the episode still fresh in her mind, Eliza continued flipping through her catalog, pretending not to have noticed Stella Mae, in her cotton candy blue

colored stretchy pants, staring cautiously at her from down the row. To Eliza's displeasure, it wasn't long before the other woman ventured, "I see that the rain didn't deter either of us from attending the sale today. I can't wait to see the bowl. I heard from a reliable source that it doesn't have one scratch on it. Can you believe that?"

"Instead of concerning yourself with *this* bowl, you should be worrying about where the next one's going to be found, because I'm here to win," Eliza replied.

Before Stella Mae could answer, the auctioneer entered the room and began preparing for the sale. Eliza watched as several workers began bringing the auction items into the showroom. A young woman carried the soup bowl in and placed it on the table in front of the podium. Stella Mae left her seat and walked up to the table to inspect the coveted piece. Eliza watched intently as the old woman stooped to get a better look at the bowl, her silver hair fairly glinting under the bright stage lights. When she had taken her fill, Stella Mae turned and taunted, "It's magnificent. I know just where I'll display it." More determined than ever, Eliza picked up her paddle and prepared herself for the battle.

The room filled quickly as the gavel sounded and the bidding began. Eliza kept track of the sale, noting the high and low bids in her catalog as each lot came up in turn. She watched as excited men and women bid on tea services and china of all patterns and styles. One middle-aged couple embraced when as the only bidders, they obtained a Haviland plate, and a local restaurateur clapped when he won a cherished tea service. After the first few lots, Eliza allowed herself a quick sideways glance toward Stella Mae, who was busy talking to a man in a tweed jacket.

When lot number 227 came up for bid, an attendant picked the soup bowl up off of the table, held it up high in the air, and walked back and forth in front of the podium. The auctioneer sang, "Now who will start the bidding on this Homer Laughlin Fiesta covered onion soup bowl, with the highly sought after vintage medium green glaze? Depression era, 1930's. Let's start the bidding at one hundred. Do we have one hundred?"

Stella Mae quickly raised her paddle into the air, followed closely by Eliza and several others in the crowd. The auctioneer sang on, "We have a hundred. Do we have one fifty? One fifty?" Again, the paddles flew into the air. "We have one fifty. Do we have two hundred?" The paddles continued rising and falling as the auctioneer prodded his captives on to higher bids. Finally, when the bid was at the five hundred mark, the others dropped out, leaving Stella Mae and Eliza to fight it out.

As if he sensed that a record was about to be set, the auctioneer began courting the two ladies, calling first to Eliza, "What say you, Madam? Are you going to let this gem slip out of your hands? Will you go five fifty?" Eliza raised her paddle in answer. Turning to Stella Mae he called, "And you Missus, will you go five seventy five? Don't let this one get away from you. It's not often that a piece like this comes along." Stella Mae licked her lips and raised her paddle high above her head.

"Six hundred, do we have six hundred?" he called.

Eliza raised her paddle.

"Six fifty?" he questioned.

Stella Mae looked over at Eliza, gave her a haughty smirk, and once again raised her paddle.

The auctioneer continued his method of back and forth goading until the bid reached the one thousand mark. Pointing at Eliza, he called, "Do we have ten twenty five?"

Eliza sat in silence while all eyes in the room focused on her, waiting for her paddle to rise. She knew that she was already well beyond what she had been prepared to pay for the soup bowl. If she went ahead and bid at this point, she would have very little left of her retirement check to live on for the rest of the month. Although she was hesitant to do so, she nodded her head and raised her paddle.

Just as he was about to continue, a shout from the back caught the auctioneer's attention, and he pointed to a woman who was manning the phone bids. "Do we have a bid from the phone?" he yelled. The woman raised her hand to signal the bid.

Stella Mae glanced around the room as everyone stared at her, waiting to see what she would do. The auctioneer yelled, "Ten fifty, we now have ten fifty. Are you still in Missus?"

"Let's have it now, will you go ten seventy five?" the auctioneer pressed.

In defeat, Stella Mae lowered her paddle and dropped out of the bidding.

The auctioneer turned his attention to Eliza and called, "Will you go ten seventy five?"

Eliza raised her shaking hand to register the bid.

The woman receiving the phone bid shouted, "He's motivated! He'll go twelve hundred."

With that news, Eliza threw her paddle down and shook her head.

"Sold for one thousand two hundred dollars to the phone bidder!" the auctioneer shouted. "A new house record for Homer Laughlin Fiesta."

In the months that followed, Eliza consoled herself with the fact that although she had not obtained the bowl, Stella Mae had also left the auction empty-handed. She continued making her rounds at the resale shops and antique stores, always on the alert for that familiar dinnerware sporting the medium green glaze. The annual convention was just two weeks away, and she was hopeful that she just might get lucky this time. In any case, she had saved enough money to allow herself to pay top dollar, although she prayed she wouldn't have to pay above market value.

When the shuttle bus dropped her off at her hotel and same site of the convention, Eliza stopped and looked around before she headed to the registration desk. She was not about to let this convention pass by without her finding her bowl, so she began repeating her mantra under her breath, "I'm going to have a wonderful time. I'll be successful in finding the soup bowl, because I deserve it. Let the Powers of the Universe bar any negative energy that may try to penetrate my peace and optimism."

The next morning, Eliza had a leisurely breakfast before heading to the hotel lecture hall, where free workshops and seminars on every topic pertaining to Homer Laughlin dinnerware were held. Eliza liked to sit and people watch at the workshops, and she was always amused by the number of ladies wearing crazy getups and costumes. She remembered one year when a woman with a tea cup

and saucer glued atop a straw hat sat right in front of her, while another was decked out in jewelry made from broken Fiesta shards. *Marie Antoinette had nothin' on those two*, she thought to herself. Checking her watch, she was surprised that it was almost noon, the time when the vendor hall would open and the shopping and swapping would begin. She quickly walked toward the other side of the hotel, leaving the crowded rooms behind.

Walking by the registration table, Eliza experienced a sudden feeling of dread. It was here that she had first encountered Stella Mae. On a whim, she stopped in front of the table and asked the man behind it, "I'm looking for my dear friend. I mean, she was supposed to meet me here an hour ago, but I haven't been able to locate her. Would you be kind enough to look and see if she's registered yet? Her name is Stella Mae Hudgens." For added appeal, she batted her eyelashes at him several times. While she had never been very good in the art of flirtation, she knew that it always seemed to work in the movies. In any case, it certainly couldn't hurt.

"Yes Ma'am she has," the man clicked in his set of ill-fitting dentures. "She checked in earlier this morning. Would you like me to page her for you?" he offered with a smile.

"No thank you," Eliza replied. "I'll just check the lecture hall again."

"Well if you need any help, let me know. I'd love to escort a fine looking woman like you around," the old man called.

"Thank you," Eliza tossed over her shoulder as she quickly escaped the registration area.

Having had enough of her own sleuthing, Eliza went through the lobby and into the vendor hall to search for the soup bowl. The first booth she stopped at had several rare tureens, but no covered bowls. Six booths down, she found an interesting demitasse pot with an indented trademark, quite a rare find, but she pressed on. She asked every vendor that she spoke with if they knew of any other booth which might possibly have what she was looking for, but she had no luck. Still, she was having a wonderful time looking at everything and talking with other collectors. She was having such a great time that she was taken totally by surprise when she turned around and found Stella Mae standing right behind her.

For several moments, Eliza was speechless. It had only been a few months since she had seen Stella Mae at the auction, but in that short time something had ravaged the otherwise large woman. Eliza noticed that Stella Mae's skin hung from her arms in loose rolls and that her silver hair was thin and balding. When she finally recovered from the shock she said, "Hello. How are you Stella Mae?"

"I haven't been very well at all, I'm afraid. I've got cancer. I've lived seventy years without skipping a beat due to illness, and now I'm sick. Never mind that though. You and I both know what I'm here for. Oh, and this time *I've* made it known that I want that bowl."

Not knowing how to reply, Eliza mumbled, "I'm sorry," and walked down the aisle to the safety of another booth.

Stella Mae stuck to her usual routine of trying to get ahead of Eliza as they walked up and down the aisles, but this time she was quite a bit slower and had to stop to rest several times. Eliza was grateful for the breaks and tried to move through the booths just as fast as her arthritic knees would allow. She was

saddened by the fact that she had less time to linger over the shelves of gleaming juice pitchers with their trademark concentric rings, and the splendid casserole dishes, but she knew that she had to find what she was there for before her rival beat her to it. With Stella Mae engaged in the hunt, Eliza had to not only spot the soup bowl before she did, she had to obtain it. Unfortunately, she had only made it through a quarter of the hall by the time it closed for the afternoon. *That's okay, there's still time*, Eliza told herself.

The banquet hall was already crowded when Eliza entered. She stood marveling at the beautiful streamers and bows, all in the many colors of Fiesta. Each place setting was a different color, creating a rainbow effect. She checked her name badge for the printed number on the bottom, and stepped forward to find the corresponding table. Pleased that she would be seated in the middle of the hall, she greeted her fellow dinner partners and sat down at the space with the Fiesta persimmon colored dinnerware, and matching place card.

It wasn't long before Eliza noticed Stella Mae shuffling around the room with the assistance of a cane. When she turned around in what appeared to be slight confusion, Eliza was shocked to see a portable oxygen tank strapped onto her back. She continued to stare until Stella Mae turned toward her and began approaching the table. Eliza immediately took an inventory of the table, and was sorry to see that the turquoise place setting was still open. She busied herself with her napkin as the other woman slowly navigated around the room and found her place across from her. In an attempt to avoid coming off as rude, Eliza stopped playing with the napkin on her lap and greeted her additional dinner partner.

“Hello again, Stella Mae,” she began. “What are the chances that we’d end up at the same table?”

“Well, some fellow at the registration table told me that he changed my table assignment to this one,” Stella Mae answered.

Eliza groaned inwardly before she replied, “We’re happy to have you join us.”

After the announcements had been made and the keynote speaker had given a rousing speech on the hobby of china collecting, the servers began delivering the courses to the hungry diners. Eliza struck up a conversation with the man seated next to her in an attempt to distract herself from Stella Mae, who was repeatedly adjusting the tubing that wrapped around her ears and crossed over her cheeks to her nostrils.

“Do you collect anything in particular Miss Hudgens?” asked the man.

“Yes, I collect the covered onion soup bowls,” Stella Mae answered. “I have one in every color except for the medium green. Once I have it, my collection will be complete, and I can finally relax.”

Eliza coughed and reached for her glass of water before the man turned back to her and asked, “And you, Miss West?”

“I collect anything with the Fiesta stamp on it,” she replied.

“Tell the truth Eliza,” Stella Mae grinned. “You’re also in pursuit of the medium green bowl.”

“My, my,” the man teased. “We have a competition here.” Raising his wine glass, he proposed a toast, “May the best one win.”

The next morning, Eliza skipped the seminars and went straight to the vendor's hall. She quickly found the booth where she had left off the afternoon before, and began slowly and methodically combing the shelves. She met one of her dinner partners along the way, and received a hardy slap on the back and well wishes. Embarrassed, she excused herself and continued on. An hour into the hunt, she began to calm down and enjoy herself, stopping to talk with several other enthusiasts she had met the previous year, and asking them to let her know if they happened upon the soup bowl. She continued on until the lunch hour and then left the hall for a much needed break.

Eliza was sitting alone enjoying a turkey and artichoke sandwich and some iced tea, when a voice from behind startled her.

"Miss Eliza, may I join you for lunch?" the man with the dentures clicked.

Trapped, Eliza had no choice but to say, "Yes, please do."

"My name is Paul, by the way. I met you the other day at registration," he reminded her.

"Of course, I remember you quite well," Eliza replied.

Paul sat down and began picking the sesame seeds off of his hamburger bun. Eliza concentrated on her sandwich, carefully balancing on the fine line between being polite and impolite. Breaking the silence, Paul ventured, "Have you purchased anything yet? I've seen you in the vendor's area several times."

"No, I haven't found the piece that I'm looking for yet," she answered.

"What are you lookin' for?" Paul asked.

"I'm trying to find a medium green covered onion soup bowl. I've been searching for about three years now, but I've had no luck so far," she said.

“A medium green one, you say? I know where you can find one,” he offered.

Eliza quickly swallowed the bite of pickle she had just placed in her mouth and asked, “Are you sure? I’m looking for the covered bowl, the one with the handles.”

“Yes, I know exactly what you are talkin’ about. I saw one in a booth along the west wall, this morning. The seller wants a few hundred for it,” Paul insisted.

Jumping up, Eliza questioned once more, “You say that the bowl is at a booth along the west side of the hall?”

“Yeah, I think it was booth 487, because my buddy has a booth right next to that one and his is 486 and...”

Before he could finish, Eliza was heading out of the dining room door and toward the vendors. She elbowed her way through a group of women who had gathered around an author hocking his new book, *Let’s Dish*, and ignored the pain in her knee, brought on by her sudden race-walk, all in her desperation to reach the west wall. When she finally made it to booth 487, she was panting so hard, the man tending the booth jumped up from his chair and motioned for her to sit.

Waving him off, Eliza gasped, “Do you have a... medium green... covered onion soup bowl... for sale in this booth?”

The man looked uncertainly at her before he answered, “Yeah lady, right here.”

Eliza watched as the vendor stepped aside to reveal the bowl she had searched so long for. Tears welled up in her eyes as she held out her hands to receive her prize.

“I’ll take it,” she cried.

Back in her room, Eliza removed the brown paper wrap from the bowl, and placed it on the end table near a chair where she could both rest and admire it at the same time. She marveled at the quality of the glaze, the way it glowed in the light from the window. Her left hand shook as she stretched to run her fingers along the delicately carved handles. She followed along the rim and dipped down to track the body, delighting in how it flowed smoothly into the footed bottom. She tapped the stick-handle with her fingernail, half expecting it to resonate like a fine crystal goblet. The bowl was more exquisite than her original one, it would be the showpiece of her collection.

With her long search finally at its end, Eliza closed her eyes and allowed herself to let go of all of the frustration and anxiety she had suffered along the way. The competition was over, and she had won. She had beaten Stella Mae fair and square. She lifted her hands to the Powers of the Universe and spontaneously sang a song of thanks.

Eliza decided to stay in and order room service instead of going to dinner. She packed up her things while she waited for her steak to arrive, taking special care when wrapping her beloved bowl. She assumed that Stella Mae must have heard the news, as there had been quite a commotion when she left the hall with her bowl. The man who had toasted her the evening before had yelled, "Bravo!" as she walked toward the swinging doors and another acquaintance had whistled. It was an experience she knew that she would never forget.

The alarm clock sounded early the next morning, and Eliza slowly coaxed herself out of bed. She was immediately reminded of her sprint through the vendor hall the day before, when she stood up and felt her calves tighten. Ignoring

the pain, she smiled as she limped by her wrapped bowl sitting prominently next to her purse. "It was all worth it," she said to herself.

Exiting the elevator with her suitcase in tow, Eliza walked in the direction of the registration desk. As she rounded a corner, she noticed Paul speaking with the keynote speaker. When he saw her, Paul excused himself and walked over to her.

"I want to thank you for helping me find my bowl, Paul," she said smiling. "I may not have found it if it hadn't been for you."

"You're welcome," Paul replied. "Are you on your way to the hospital?"

"The hospital?" Eliza asked, confused.

"Yes, your friend Stella Mae was rushed there last night. Surely you know?" he asked, surprised.

Eliza felt a sudden sick feeling in her stomach as she asked, "What happened?"

"She collapsed at dinner. She didn't look good when she left in the ambulance. Someone said that she's dying of cancer," Paul said.

"Yes, she is," Eliza replied. "What is the name of the hospital they took her to?"

"They took her to St. Carmella's. It's about twenty minutes away," he answered. "Say, what will you search for now?"

"What?" Eliza asked.

"Now that you have your prized piece, what's next? There has to be something else. Come on, that's the thrill of it. It's the hunt that drives us onward, not the object, don't you agree? I mean, I see people come back year after year, and they're always in search of some special dish. No one is ever really satisfied."

"I guess I'd better get going before I miss my ride," Eliza quickly answered.

In the cab, Eliza thought about Stella Mae. Looking out of the window, she thought back to their first encounter. *What does that matter now?* she thought. *Okay, maybe I was a little overzealous at times, but what is wrong with setting a goal for yourself and pursuing it?*

The closer she got to the airport, the worse Eliza felt. *This is ridiculous*, she reasoned. *I got that bowl because I found it first. Simple as that. Why, Stella Mae was nowhere to be found.*

Although she tried to convince herself that she had every right to the bowl, Eliza knew in her soul what she should do. She knew that she would never be able to enjoy it, never be able to display it without thinking of Stella Mae. *How did I come to value material things over people? Stella Mae will die before her collection is complete, but I still have the opportunity to continue searching. I'm a horrible person and I'm ashamed of myself. Even though I was mean-spirited, that woman never did anything to me.*

"Driver, please take me to St. Carmella's Hospital instead of the airport," she cried.

"Won't you miss your flight?" he asked.

"Never mind that," she replied. "Just get me there as quickly as you can."

The driver dropped Eliza off at the entrance, assuring her that he would wait. She carefully lifted the wrapped bowl from the seat and cradled it in her arms as she walked into the hospital. The charge nurse directed her to the gift shop, where Eliza purchased a card that was decorated with purple pansies on the outside and

blank on the inside. She quickly scribbled something on the inside, and slowly walked to the Intensive Care Unit.

Stella Mae was sleeping, so Eliza walked softly over to the bedside table and quietly placed the package and the card on it. She paused for a moment, watching Stella Mae's chest slowly rise and fall with each labored breath. The various machines by the side of the bed beeped and pumped, all in an effort to support the dying woman. Eliza whispered a tearful, "Goodbye," and left the room.

Later, Stella Mae watched as her nurse unwrapped the package. She smiled weakly when the nurse read from the card, "For a worthy adversary."

THE NAME GAME

Tilda could see the steam rising off of the pool as she wrestled her way through the turnstile. Like clockwork, the lifeguards unleashed the public precisely at ten every morning, and Tilda was the first to enter. She always arrived at the facility early in order to claim the best poolside location, one where she could watch both ends. Just as she finished arranging her oversized towel, another swimmer strolled into her view.

That man is obscene, she thought to herself.

Trying not to acknowledge the unnatural bulge in the trunks of the man she had dubbed The Gigolo, she concentrated on tightening the straps of her swimming cap. Although she wouldn't admit it, Tilda had been watching the newcomer, and she had noted that the bulge had become increasingly larger with every visit he made to the pool. *I know exactly what he's up to,* she thought, *he wants to take advantage of Rapunzel, up there in her lifeguard chair. He's just obscene, that one.* Pretending to examine a spider vein on her leg just as he walked by, she was proud of herself for avoiding any unnecessary eye contact with the beast.

The pool area filled up quickly as parents and children staked their claim on the choice spots in the sun. Towels were unfurled and seahorse swim rings were blown up and handed over to waiting toddlers. Tilda watched the mothers slather their children with sun block and wag their fingers with the usual warnings about not peeing in the pool.

Of all the children that regularly came to the pool, the one that Tilda enjoyed watching the most was Lilliput. She loved the way the little girl gingerly dipped

her feet into the pool, toe by toe, inch by inch. The old woman was relieved to see that The Gigolo was on the far end when Lilliput arrived with her mother, The Exhibitionist.

Lilliput wasted no time in setting up her miniature lawn chair next to her mother's lounge chair. She was dressed in her full mermaid regalia, complete with sandals decorated with starfish, and several long beaded necklaces hanging to just above her knees. Tilda craned her neck to see what the little girl was cradling in her arms, and she smiled when she recognized the toy whale that the child often brought with her.

Movement near the men's shower room grabbed her attention, and Tilda turned in time to see The Chain Gang roughhousing their way to the diving board. She had cleverly named the trio of teens after they arrived at the pool one afternoon sporting matching heavy gold chains and medallions. The teens pushed and shoved each other as they fought to be the first to dive into the pool. Tilda watched as Rapunzel raised her whistle to her lips to give the trio an early warning.

The late night rain showers had left the water cloudy, but the children didn't seem to mind. Several boys and girls quickly organized a game of Marco Polo, and began bobbing up and down in the shallow end, while another boy tried to entice them into what appeared to Tilda to be a game of shark. She laughed as the boy placed his hands above his head in a mock shark fin and attempted to infiltrate the ring of players. *He's got the sign for shark right*, she thought to herself. Easing onto her stomach, she closed her eyes and rested her head on her folded arms. She thought about how her own mother had brought her to the city

pool to play with other children. She remembered how she had felt normal, equal to the others when she swam with them.

Feeling the sun beating down on her back, Tilda turned over and stretched out. She knew she wouldn't burn with the thick amount of sunscreen she had rubbed into her brown wrinkles, but she was vain enough to worry about an uneven tan. The Chain Gang was still up to their antics, and she watched as they played keep away with a semi deflated beach ball. The teens zigged and zagged around the wet quilt of towels on the concrete surrounding the pool. Once again, Rapunzel gave a warning and the threesome slowed down to a walk.

Glancing over at The Exhibitionist, Tilda noticed that she had chosen to wear the string bikini. She never understood why the woman came to the pool wearing as little as possible. *She seems to be a good mother though, she thought. I can't fault her there.*

Sometime around the noon hour, Rapunzel climbed down from her tower and roped off the two lanes near the west side of the pool. Tilda rose from her towel and navigated her way to the steps that were located to the left of the rope. She had started swimming laps a few years earlier when her doctor had pointed out that she was several pounds overweight, and she had quickly become addicted to the exhilarating feeling of pushing herself through the water. The constant aches and pains in her joints seemed to float away as she performed her strokes, and she often found herself reluctant to give the lane up when someone else signaled that they wanted to use it. Her long-term goal was to swim ten laps without pausing to rest, but she was pleased with her short-term progress of making it halfway. Tilda

crammed her cap onto her head and tucked in a few stray curls before swimming over to the end of the pool to begin her workout.

For her first lap, Tilda decided to warm up her muscles a bit with the backstroke. She had added the maneuver to her repertoire after watching a nature show about sea otters. The ability of the creatures to swim and float on their backs had fascinated her, so she committed herself to learning the style. She launched herself off of the end of the pool and into the dog paddle for her second lap, followed by the difficult butterfly stroke for the third. By the time she reached her fourth lap, Tilda was wearing down so she decided to freestyle the final two laps. *Oh well, I'm still better than I was at the beginning of the season*, she assured herself.

Back at her spot near the fence, Tilda removed her cap and settled down on her towel to rest. She rustled through her bag and found the nectarine she had brought along with her for a snack, and then sat back and relaxed as she ate. She noticed that the children had tired of playing Marco Polo, and had given in to the shark game. The boys were attempting to harpoon the boy-shark with a long, thin water float, while the girls thrashed around to avoid being both harpooned and bitten. Tilda looked over and saw The Chain Gang jealously eyeing the entire scene. *Ah, too old to join in, but young enough to want to*, she mused.

The Gigolo was making his rounds, so Tilda turned her attention to him. She couldn't believe how obvious he was in his mission to attract the women. She caught him sneaking several sideways glances at The Exhibitionist as he walked by her lounge chair, but the woman was too busy with Lilliput to notice.

At first, Tilda had felt guilty about naming the regulars. After all, it wasn't their fault that she was too self-conscious to try to speak with them. She had learned to read lips as a child, but she had never been comfortable using her voice. The School for the Deaf had stressed sign language, so she had never been forced to speak. When she became an adult, she found it too difficult and embarrassing to talk, so she chose to just observe other people in public. The naming game was something she invented for herself to ease her loneliness and isolation.

Feeling refreshed from her snack, Tilda wrapped the nectarine pit in a tissue and rose to her feet. The garbage can was stationed near the entrance, so she grabbed her large scarf from her bag and wrapped it around her waist. She waved at the children as she passed the shallow end, and gave the boy-shark a playful wink. After depositing her trash in the receptacle, she stood for several minutes observing the many sunbathers and swimmers. Placing her hand on her forehead to shield her eyes from the afternoon sun, she turned from side to side in order to get the full view of the pool. When she spotted The Gigolo staring at her, she quickly tightened her scarf and strolled back to her vantage point near the fence. On her way back, she saw Lilliput playing contentedly with her whale on the edge of the pool near the lap lanes.

As the day wore on, The Chain Gang became increasingly restless. One of the teens had stolen the harpoon from the children and was engaged in a mock sword fight with his buddies. Rapunzel blew her whistle and repeatedly held her blow horn up to her mouth in an attempt to stop them. Tilda watched as the young lifeguard stood up in her perch above the pool and pointed at the troublemakers.

The other sunbathers seemed to be enjoying the ruckus, and many of them were laughing and egging the boys on. After several minutes, Rapunzel gave up and climbed down from her high chair, much to the amusement of the others. Tilda watched as several of them stood and clapped. The teens didn't put up much of a fight as the lifeguard escorted them to the office near the exit, but the sight of them being hustled off of the premises was quite an exciting event. The crowd seemed to be energized by the disturbance, and many of the regulars were gathered together in groups, laughing and waving their arms wildly.

Tilda looked over to the edge of the pool where Lilliput had been playing, and saw that the little girl had left the area. Shifting her eyes over to The Exhibitionist, she noted that The Gigolo had taken advantage of the situation and that the two of them were engaged in a friendly conversation. The old woman began to walk around the perimeter of the pool, looking in all directions for Lilliput. When she reached the lap lanes, she peered down into the murky water and saw a dark form on the bottom of the pool. Quickly, Tilda turned around to the lifeguard chair, but Rapunzel had not returned from the office. Panicked, she began running down the length of the pool.

"Lilliput!" she screamed. "Lilliput, Lilliput!"

Several nearby sunbathers watched as the old woman ran by signing with her hands, but they did not respond. Seconds later, Tilda dove into the pool and began kicking her way down toward the little girl. Struggling to get to the bottom of the deep end, she kicked with all of her strength. When she reached the lifeless child, she grabbed her and pulled up, but to her surprise, the little girl didn't move. Confused, she pulled again, but Lilliput was held fast to the bottom of the pool.

Tilda felt around and found that the long beaded necklaces around the child's neck had been sucked into the water filter. The suction from the powerful filter was keeping the child pinned tight against the bottom. Without hesitation, the old woman yanked the necklaces and broke the strings. The little girl was released immediately, and Tilda grabbed her and headed to the surface.

When she reached the rope, Tilda was met by Rapunzel, who had just realized that there was an emergency in the pool. The unconscious child was pulled from the water and placed on the concrete, where the lifeguard performed CPR. Two men rushed to Tilda and assisted her as she climbed out of the deep end. She dropped to her knees beside Lilliput, and watched as the little girl coughed and spit out the water that was forced from her lungs. The Exhibitionist was close by, supported by a group of women. When the little girl was finally raised to a sitting position, her mother ran and collapsed by her side.

A crowd gathered around Tilda, and one of the women brought over a dry towel and wrapped it around her. She read the woman's lips and nodded that she was okay. Rising to her feet, she shook all of the hands that were offered to her, and slowly walked to her spot near the fence.

A few days later, Tilda was surprised when Lilliput and her mother entered the facility and immediately walked over to her.

"Thank you so much for saving my daughter," the woman said. "I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

Tilda shook her head and held up her right hand to signal that she didn't need anything in return.

The woman smiled and said, "My name is Connie, and this is Chloe. I'm sorry, but I didn't get your name."

Tilda looked down at the ground before she offered, "I'm Tilda. I'm deaf."

Grinning widely, Connie signed as she replied, "My parents are deaf. Would you like to join Chloe and me over by our chairs?"

MENDING THE PIECES

Hazel stepped down from the footstool when she heard the door chimes tinkling in the front of the store. Business was brisk on most Tuesdays so she had arrived early to get a head start on stocking the shelves. As she maneuvered around the boxes, she slowed her pace when she caught a glimpse of a familiar tattered brown fedora.

“Good morning, Hazel. How are you feeling on this fine and most blessed of days?” asked the stout man from beneath the hat.

“Never better, Oliver,” she curtly replied. “And yourself?”

“Can’t complain, can’t complain,” he answered.

“Are you here alone this morning?” Hazel reluctantly asked.

The old man slowly pulled back his tan overcoat to reveal a Pygmy Parrot sitting on a perch which was attached to the front of his thick black belt. If Hazel had not seen the contraption before, she would have sworn he was about to flash her. The bird looked coyly up at her, as if sensing in his own bird way that something was wrong with the whole scenario.

“Nope, Wing Nut is my constant companion. He’s better than a dog, that one. The only thing that could replace him would be a beautiful woman,” the old man hinted.

“Well, you’d do well to keep him away from the door then,” Hazel returned.

As if on cue, the telephone rang and Hazel excused herself and all but ran to the large oak counter near the shelf of pattern books. She lingered behind the cash register pretending to be busy with an order until the old man finally gave up and

waved goodbye. Only when she was sure that he was on his way down the street, did she come out from behind the counter to resume her work.

Autumn was always a busy season at Ye Olde Glass Shoppe, the shop Hazel had owned and operated for over thirty years. One of her greatest joys was giving lessons in the art of stained glass, and she was considered to be the local expert in the craft. She was stocking the new line of opaque glass around midmorning, when the door chimes brought her attention back to the front of the shop again. Hazel was relieved to see that the visitor was Dottie Daniels, the lady who owned the ice cream parlor on the other side of the street.

"Hello Dottie," Hazel called from behind the wooden crates. "I'm just back here unwrapping my new glass."

"Oh, these colors are delicious," Dottie sang. "I may have to take another class before Christmas."

"Well you certainly should. I gained twelve pounds over the summer eating your triple fudge waffle cones and your rainbow sherbet. The least you can do is to throw a little business my way," Hazel joked.

"Say, did you hear about the vandalism at The Church of the Resurrection last night? A group of hooligans broke in through the baptistery and made off with the silver candlesticks and the money from the Sunday service," Dottie announced.

"No, I didn't hear a thing about it. Was anyone injured?" Hazel asked.

"Only Jesus and the angel in that big window over the choir," Dottie said.

"They tossed the collection plates through it like they were throwing Frisbees."

“Oh no!” Hazel gasped. “That window is well over a hundred years old. Do they know who did it?”

“Nope. But I’ll bet it won’t take long until someone spills the beans. Kids just love to brag about their shenanigans. They’ll get caught,” Dottie predicted. “Well I’ve got to get back to the store. That woman with the lisp always comes in around eleven or so for her spumoni. I wish she’d mix it up once in a while and try something different. See ya later,” Dottie called as she shut the door behind her.

Hazel went to the storage room in the back of the store to fetch her photo album. She had many photographs of the church window, as she had always made a habit of taking pictures of stained glass windows and doors to use as a point of reference and inspiration in her own pieces and classes. The Resurrection window had fascinated her since she was a child, and she had always loved the way that the morning sun hit it in such a precise way that the angel’s wings glowed brilliantly. *That craftsman was a true artist*, she thought to herself. *He puts Tiffany and La Farge to shame.*

Later that afternoon, when she had closed the shop, Hazel put her heavy sweater around her shoulders and walked down the street in the direction of the church. Several other spectators were gathered on the lawn when she arrived, including the head of the congregation, Pastor Davies.

“Hello, Miss Williams. Have you come to assess the damage?”

“Yes Pastor. They left something to work with at least,” Hazel offered.

“Thankfully, whoever did this either didn’t have time to finish it off, or else they weren’t total criminals,” he replied. “Can you fix it?”

"It can be repaired of course, but it will take someone with more skill than I possess, I'm afraid. I'll be happy to help in any way that I can, but I'd be afraid to work alone on an antique window like this."

"Thank you, I appreciate your honesty," Pastor Davies answered.

The following days were filled with gossip and speculation. Hazel contributed to the church reward fund in the hope that the culprits would be found. When she arrived at the shop on Saturday morning, a gentleman was sitting on the bench near the door waiting for the shop to open.

"Are you Hazel Williams?" the stranger asked.

"Yes. How can I help you?" Hazel replied.

"I'm here about the broken church window," he continued. "What can you tell me about it?"

"Am I under investigation? Are you a detective?" she questioned.

"Oh, please excuse me," the man said. Holding out his hand, he introduced himself. "My name is Jack Ward. I've been hired to repair the window, and the minister over there suggested that I pay you a visit. He told me that you own this stained glass shop and that you have some good pictures of the window. I hope you don't mind."

Hazel breathed a sigh of relief. "Not at all. For a moment there, I thought someone had suggested that I broke the window in an attempt to drum up some business for myself," she laughed. "I have many pictures of the window. If you'll step into the shop, I'll get the albums from the back and you can sit at the workbench and look them over."

"I'm indebted to you Madame. I'm in from British Columbia, so I'm not familiar with this area. I spend most of my time in Europe repairing cathedral windows."

"Don't mention it. I'll do anything to help. Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I'll be right back with the photographs," Hazel said.

Peeking from behind the curtain in the storage room, Hazel watched the visitor for a few moments before she brought out the albums. *What a handsome looking gentleman*, she thought. *He's quite charming*. Suddenly feeling ridiculous, Hazel swept the curtain aside and took the albums over to the workbench.

As she was about to sit down on her stool, the door opened and Oliver Fritz and Wing Nut entered the store. Ignoring the duo, Hazel opened a large leather-bound album and began pulling out pictures of the window. Not willing to be put off, he walked over to the bench and leaned over Hazel's shoulder to see what was so interesting.

"How can I help you Oliver?" Hazel asked sharply.

"Oh, I just thought I'd drop by to see if you had posted your new classes yet. I'm itching to learn how to use that new grinder. Are you giving a class on that this time around?" the old man asked.

"No, I don't usually give a class on using the grinder. Most people just follow the directions that come with it, or else they learn to use it by trial and error. Practice is the key. Is there anything else I can help you with?" Hazel asked.

Oliver stood and studied the stranger at the bench. With each second that rolled by, the old pest's eyes became narrower and his brow more furrowed.

Reaching down to adjust Wing Nut, he asked, "Um, how about having dinner with me tonight, Hazel? I'll take you to that new chicken joint over on Delaware Street."

"I'm sorry but I'm busy," Hazel answered, squinting to study a photo.

"You've been putting me off for months. Tonight's the night. What time can I pick you up?" Oliver pressed.

"I'm sorry but I'm not available for dinner tonight, now if you'll please excuse me, I have some very important business at hand," Hazel admonished.

"You can't get off that easy," Oliver teased. "How about six?"

Jack gave Hazel a mischievous smile before turning to face Oliver. "I'm sorry but Hazel is having dinner with me tonight. So you see, she will be otherwise detained. Now if you don't mind, we were having a wonderful time here until you interrupted," he said.

Oliver turned abruptly on his heel, causing Wing Nut to teeter precariously on his perch. Tossing a cold "Goodbye," over his shoulder, he crammed his fedora down onto his bald head, and left the shop.

Jack turned to Hazel and said, "Someone should call the Humane Society on that man. I'm concerned for the welfare of that bird. Please forgive me for being so presumptuous Miss Williams, but I hate bullies, and that man just wasn't taking no for an answer."

Hazel looked down at the album in an attempt to hide her face, which by this time had become quite hot and flushed. "It couldn't have turned out better," she replied. "That man has been pestering me for months. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. Now, I'd appreciate it if you could show me everything that you have concerning the window. I'd like to start the repairs as soon as possible," he added.

"Of course," said Hazel. "Here are pictures taken from several different angles. The window has been a favorite of mine since I was a girl and I'm just sick over what those rascals did. Such a shame."

"Well, with some luck, I think that I can recreate the design. I may have trouble with some of the glass though. That window goes way back to when artists actually painted the glass, as I'm sure you know. The art glass used today just won't work with the original pieces that I salvaged. I do have quite a bit of painted glass in my own reserve, but replacing the angel may prove to be a bit tricky. Unfortunately, that section of the window took most of the abuse. The wings must have been quite extraordinary, but I'll see what I can do," Jack added optimistically.

"I have quite a bit of antique glass that I've collected myself," Hazel offered. "Please feel free to look through my storage room for anything that you can use, Mr. Ward."

"Thank you Miss Williams. And please, call me Jack," he replied.

Hazel smiled and said, "And call me Hazel."

Later that evening when Hazel was preparing her dinner, she thought about Jack and the excitement of the morning. She had never seen Oliver Fritz so speechless. *That old fool*, she thought to herself, *maybe now he'll get it through his thick head that I'm not interested. I could get used to the bird though.*

It had been eight years since she had been to dinner with a man, and in that time Hazel had convinced herself that the shop was enough to fulfill her, but deep in her heart she knew that she was only trying to protect herself from pain and disappointment. She thought back to her youth and the years she had spent comforting her mother after the untimely death of her father. *I've allowed myself to become an old spinster*, she decided. Still, she was surprised at how flustered she had become earlier in the afternoon. As she sat alone at her dinette, she began to consider that maybe it was time to explore the possibility of a new relationship.

Hazel was cleaning the tip of her soldering iron when Jack entered the shop. It had been three days since their first meeting, and she had wondered if he would return. She wiped her hands on her work apron, as he approached the register, and silently chided herself for not taking the time to roll her hair the night before.

"It's good to see you again Jack," she warmly greeted.

"Thank you. It's nice to see you again as well," he returned. "Say, I'm here to take you up on your offer of the glass. I searched the church records and found the name of the artist who made the window. His name was Hallerin O'Brian, and he was from a neighboring town."

"Why yes, I'm familiar with that name," Hazel exclaimed. "It just so happens that the upstairs window of the old Pinkerton house was made by him. I had no idea that The Resurrection window was one of his. In fact, I heard that he rarely took commissions and that he never designed anything figurative.

"Well, he took great care in mixing his colors. I don't have anything that comes close to the magenta and gold shards," Jack sighed.

Hazel smiled and said, "This is your lucky day. I bought the Pinkerton window from the land developers before they bulldozed the old place. It's stored down in the basement."

"May I have a look?" Jack asked anxiously.

"Follow me," she replied.

The two made their way to the basement, where they found the window neatly stored in a wooden crate. Jack grabbed a hammer from a nearby box and began coaxing the nails out of the wood. Hazel noted how excited he was as he lifted the lid off of the crate and eased the window out.

"Hazel, this is fabulous! It's a small rose window, and I do believe that the inner sections will match perfectly! With some luck, I think I'll have enough. Will you sell this?" he asked.

"Absolutely not!" Hazel replied. "Please take it as my gift to the church. That window was very special, and I can't stand to think that it's gone. I'll tell Pastor Davies that I'm donating the glass for the repairs."

"Thank you so much," Jack said. "How would you like to drop in on me tomorrow over at the church? I can show you how I replace the tracery. The lead is a little tricky to pry off, but once it's clean and ready to go, it's amazing how the new solder and patina really complement the old glass."

"I'd love to," Hazel gushed. "How about ten or so?"

"Perfect! It's a date," he joked. "In the meantime, I'll go get my gloves and load the window onto my truck."

The next morning Hazel woke with a strange feeling in her stomach. She stretched and rolled over to examine the clock on the nightstand. Her internal

alarm had stayed on track, and she was up at six as usual. "What is it?" she asked herself. Rubbing her hand across her wrinkled forehead, she rose with a start. "Good heavens! I'm meeting Jack at the church today! I've got to get myself ready!" she yelled to her reflection in the mirror above the dresser. Slipping out of bed, she prodded her stiff body to the bathroom and began removing the pink curlers from her coarse gray hair.

Jack was working in the building adjacent to the church. The place had been the minister's house at one time, but when the repairs became too much to keep up with, the church had purchased a new home. Hazel entered and found Jack working at a large wooden table near the back door.

"Hello Jack," she shouted, over the noise of the handheld grinder he was using.

"Hazel, you're just in time to help me with something," he called. "Would you mind cutting that piece of glass on the end of the table? I need it to go right beside Jesus' robe there."

"What makes you think that I'm qualified to help you?" she teased.

"I saw your work in your shop. You'll do," he shock back.

Hazel donned a pair of safety glasses and set to work measuring the area next to the robe. After marking the piece that Jack had already removed from the rose window, she picked up her cutter and began to score the glass along her chalk marks. When she was certain that she had achieved her cut, she took a pair of running pliers and gently squeezed until the piece broke neatly along the score line. She grabbed a pair of nippers from the toolbox next to the table and removed a small edge along the curved piece before taking it over to Jack for an inspection.

“Well done,” he judged. “I’d say that you passed the cutting test with flying colors. If you would like to help me for an hour or two, I’d appreciate it. But, please don’t feel like you have to say yes. Sometimes I’m too forward for my own good.”

Laughing, Hazel grabbed a pair of gloves from the toolbox and said, “Just show me what areas that I’ll be working on, and I’ll start cutting and grinding. I wouldn’t turn down the opportunity to work on this window for anything.”

With that, the two set to work on the project. Hazel fell into a quiet rhythm of measuring and scoring, while Jack worked at gently grinding the old solder from between the existing glass. He had managed to save the lower third of the angel, the area from the knees down, and he was attempting to loosen the old copper foil from around the feet with a delicate circular bit. Saving the flesh colored glass was extremely important, as O’Brian had used limited amounts of it in the rose window. Hazel stole several glances at Jack when he wasn’t looking, and she was surprised at how content she felt as they worked together.

At lunchtime, Jack put his tools down and motioned for Hazel to do the same. “How about going to get a bite to eat?” he asked. “I promise not to take you to the new chicken joint that the bird man mentioned.”

“Agreed,” Hazel laughed. “There is a nice sandwich shop just about a block away. It’s within walking distance. Does that sound okay?”

“Lead the way my dear lady,” Jack replied.

Lunch went by quickly as the two laughed and told stories. Hazel was mesmerized by Jack’s tales of working on the windows of Notre Dame Cathedral. The more he spoke, the more she realized that he was a true pioneer in his field.

The techniques that he had developed far exceeded anything she had attempted or even considered. Working with antique glass was such an exacting process, Hazel was awed at the scope of Jack's expertise.

As they approached the church on the walk back, Hazel felt that it was safe to confide in Jack. Taking a deep breath she said, "The angel was especially dear to me. I found comfort in that sweet face, and I felt I was never altogether alone just as long as that shining being was there to guard me. That angel was my angel, it made me feel safe. I know that sounds silly, so thank you for humoring an old woman."

Jack looked up toward the sky before he answered, "I don't think that's silly at all. I've had wonderful experiences working in churches and cathedrals. Call it spiritual if you'd like, but all I know is that there is a certain comforting feeling that comes with the job. That's why I love my work so much. I get to bring joy to others through the beauty of the windows."

Hazel arranged for Dottie's granddaughter to watch over the glass shop for the following two weeks. The young woman was dependable and always jumped at the chance to get out of the ice cream parlor. Jack had accepted Hazel's offer to help with the glass cutting, and she was confident that her shop would be in good hands while she was away. On the first day she arrived at the worksite early and began preparing for her work. After filling her cutter with oil, she paused for a moment over the pattern which Jack had rolled out onto the table.

"You've portrayed the good Lord beautifully," Hazel announced. "I'm jealous of your drawing skills. The folds in the robes are quite stunning and I'm very impressed with the way you've achieved the sense of movement."

“That’s a trick I learned from one of the best. When I was a young man, I apprenticed myself to an artist in Vancouver. He really took me under his wing and taught me the fundamentals. Of course I didn’t appreciate it at the time but, he made me draw for two long years before he let me near a piece of glass. I have him to thank for my success,” Jack answered humbly.

“Well, you deserve the credit here. The parishioners are going to be so happy when they see the window. I wish you could’ve seen how funny the choir members looked every time the wind rattled that plastic behind them on Sunday. The organist hit a few more sour notes than usual, I’ll tell you that!” Hazel replied.

Chuckling, Jack put his safety glasses on and started sorting through the glass that had been gathered from the church lawn, while Hazel turned her attention to the pattern and began inspecting the pieces that he had placed beside each section.

The work went well in the following weeks, and Hazel was sorry when her last day arrived and the time had come for her to return to the shop. She was unusually quiet as she worked beside Jack, and she had to assure him that she was feeling well several times throughout the day. She tried as hard as she could to pretend that everything was fine, but she suspected that Jack knew something was wrong.

“I really appreciate everything that you’ve done for me over the last few weeks,” Jack offered. “The window has come along quite nicely. Another week or so, and I should be ready to install it. Thankfully, those crooks didn’t have time to do more damage to it.”

"I had a wonderful time," Hazel replied. "I can't wait to see the finished piece. Really, all that remains to be finished are the angel's head and wings, I suppose. I'm just sorry that our work together has come to an end. Thank you so much for allowing me to help."

Jack stepped forward and gave Hazel a hug. She was surprised by the sudden closeness, and her body tensed at the unexpected touch. After a few awkward seconds, she melted into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I must be a shameful task master," Jack said suddenly. "Let me take you to dinner tomorrow night. I'll pick you up and we'll make a real night of it, okay? Dinner, dancing, the works."

"Okay," she said. "That's a lovely idea."

Hazel waltzed to her bedroom when she arrived home. She pulled her new silk dress from the department store bag and held it up to herself in the mirror. Shifting her weight from left foot to right foot in perfectly timed steps, she hummed a soft melody and danced with an invisible partner around the room.

"Why yes, I would love to join you in this dance," she told her silent companion. "Why, thank you. You dance quite well yourself," she whispered. Although she knew that she was alone, she felt silly carrying on like a young girl, so she reluctantly put the dress on a hanger and placed it on the back of her bathroom door so she could admire it for the rest of the evening.

The next day Hazel went to the salon to get her fingernails manicured and her hair set, a treat she seldom indulged in. She wanted everything to be just right when Jack picked her up for their date. She caught herself fidgeting several times, and she had to make a conscience decision to stop looking at her wristwatch every

few minutes. *I need to calm down and just enjoy myself this evening*, she thought to herself. She closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths while she sat waiting for her polish to dry. As she relaxed, an old Doris Day tune began to play on the salon radio, "*Que Sera, Sera, Whatever will be, will be...*" She chuckled softly to herself and said, "Yes, I'll take one step at a time."

Hazel had just finished applying rouge to her cheeks when the doorbell rang three times in succession. Disappointed that she had not been able to cover the many brown spots on her temples and forehead, she quickly pulled some of her hair down to frame her face. "That's the best I can do," she assured herself, before heading to the front door.

Jack was waiting patiently on the porch when she opened the door to greet him. She invited him in for a moment while she went to get a light wrap from her closet. When she returned, she found him studying a black and white photograph on the mantelpiece.

"You were stunning," he told her. "I mean, you still are," he quickly added.

Hazel picked up the small frame and held it up to the light. "That was a lifetime ago," she commented.

"Are you ready to burn up the dance floor?" Jack asked.

"Yes indeed," she replied.

"All right then, let's go."

Hazel was impressed with the restaurant that Jack had chosen. She couldn't take her eyes off of him as he ordered from the wine list and spoke with the waiter. She noted how his lips favored the left side of his cheek when he smiled, and how young he looked for his age. *I can't picture him wearing a moth-eaten*

brown fedora, she thought to herself. When he recommended the escargot, she readily agreed.

The evening proved to be everything that Hazel had hoped it would be. Jack asked her to dance during dessert when one of his favorite songs was played, and they remained on the floor through several others. Hazel was impressed with how Jack conducted himself. Gentlemen were few and far between in her opinion, and it was refreshing to be around someone with impeccable manners. When it was time to leave, he helped her with her wrap, and asked her to wait inside while the attendant brought his car around.

When they arrived at her home, Hazel invited Jack in for a drink. She went to the kitchen and dusted off a bottle of sherry that she had bought a few years back. He rose from the sofa when she entered the room, and she laughed and told him to sit and rest. After she had handed him his drink, she sat down on the sofa next to him. Leaning over, she kissed him gently on his cheek.

Jack placed his glass on the coffee table and moved away from the sofa. Embarrassed, Hazel said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"No Hazel, it's not that," he replied.

"I thought that we'd gotten along wonderfully, and that we were developing a relationship. I guess I'm not very good at such things," she admitted.

"Hazel, I was married," Jack began. "That is, my wife died four years ago. I'm sorry, I should have mentioned it. I'm still having a hard time getting over the fact that I've lost her. I really don't think that I ever will. All I can offer you is friendship."

"I understand Jack, and I'm sorry," Hazel replied, turning to hide her disappointment.

"No Hazel, you have no need to apologize. I...I guess I should go now."

Hazel watched from her window as Jack backed out of her driveway and drove slowly down the street. Later, when she was resting in her bed, she thought back over the last few weeks. *He pretended that he was taking me to dinner to get rid of Oliver, he invited me to help him with the window, he hugged me, he took me out for an evening of dinner and dancing to thank me. I think he cares for me but he's afraid of being disloyal to his wife's memory. I shouldn't have moved so fast. No, I shouldn't have allowed myself to get involved. It's been just me and the shop all these years, and I've been just fine. I'm the old fool.*

Over the next two weeks, Hazel stayed away from the church, to allow herself some time to forget. She arrived at her shop early one morning, and when she unlocked the door she found a note on the floor just beyond the welcome mat. "What in the world is this?" she asked, stooping to pick up the neatly folded paper. Closing the door behind her, she took her things over to the workbench before she opened the note. She took a breath and read aloud, "Hazel, I'm sorry about what happened. You were a great help to me, and I've missed your company over the last few weeks. The window is finished, so I'll be leaving today. Once again, I beg you to please forgive me. Sincerely, Jack."

Tucking the note into her sweater pocket, Hazel walked to the storage room and began to sort through the shipments. She worked quickly, thankful that she had fallen behind in her merchandise stocking. By late afternoon, she found herself exhausted, both physically and emotionally. She had never been one to

hold a grudge, and she was feeling guilty about her behavior toward Jack. *I shouldn't have left him alone to finish the job. I think it's time for me to pray on this matter so I'll stop by the church before going home tonight*, she promised herself.

When she entered the sanctuary, Hazel was careful not to look up at the window. She wasn't sure that she was ready to see it just yet. Finding her usual pew, she entered sideways and lowered herself onto the velvet cushion. Staring at the hymnal on the shelf attached to the bench in front of her, she began to quietly pray. Although she tried to concentrate on her words, she couldn't focus. Finally, she gave in and lifted her eyes to the window. She was happy that it looked just as it had before the damage, with the exception of the new solder and frame. Just as she usually did, she traced the glass with her eyes, only this time pausing to inspect the pieces that she had worked on. She was relieved to see that Jesus was wrapped in his new robe and standing in fine form. Hazel's eyes grew wide when she realized that her favorite angel now bore her own likeness, her youthful likeness from the photograph. A slow smile spread across her face as she whispered her prayer for forgiveness.

When she left the pew, she found Jack waiting for her just inside the door. Smiling, he handed her a small bouquet of roses.

"I went to your shop a few minutes ago, but you had already left for the day. Something told me that you might be here."

"Yes, I was anxious to see how the window looked," Hazel answered softly.

“Hazel, I’m so sorry, and if you’ll give me another chance, I’d like to take you out again,” Jack ventured. “I’ve been afraid of letting go, and until now I never thought I wanted to.”

“Jack, I know something about being afraid of letting go. I’ve lived my life alone because I’ve been too afraid of being left alone. I know that doesn’t make sense, but it’s true,” she replied. Turning to the window she said, “You know, that old window has been transformed. Look at how the old pieces and the new pieces work together. It’s like life, I guess.”

The couple stood quietly staring at the window until Jack offered his arm and Hazel accepted.

THE ART OF HOSPITALITY

Cora put the books away and smoothed her skirt. The other members of the Mayflower Ladies Auxiliary were expected to arrive within the hour, and she wanted to be ready. Entering the dining room, she paused by the table to take a final count of the place settings. *Let's see now...I think I have enough lace napkins and yes, there are two gravy boats. Everything is perfect.* She stood admiring her floral centerpiece, and allowed herself to rest for a moment, her mind wafting back to the work of the previous weeks.

The perfectly laid table was a testament to Cora's studious attention to detail. For several weeks she had immersed herself in the art of proper etiquette. When the city council announced that a delegation from their sister city in Marbachin, Germany, would arrive in May, and that the Ladies Auxiliary would be hosting the ladies for a day, Cora had set to work. Although she wouldn't go as far to say that her fellow members were unrefined, she was convinced that they could use some brushing up on table manners and appropriate conversation topics.

When the etiquette books arrived by post, Cora immediately began planning her lessons. After reading the chapter titled *The Perfect Dinner Party*, the first thing she did was to pull her embroidered tablecloth from the corner chest to inspect the gauzy material for loose threads and yellow spots. Propping one of the books up on the kitchen counter, she followed the directions for making a crisp, tight crease with her iron. With her next order of business resting in the china cabinet, the ambitious woman went into her dining room and began removing the patterned pieces from the shelves. Only after she was certain that she had a complete service for twelve, did she sit down to polish her mother's silver.

The next three weeks held much of the same cleaning preparations, as she had insisted that the Auxiliary invite the ladies to an intimate dinner at her home, instead to subjecting them to Mahoney's, Mayflower's finest two star restaurant. Cora had suggested a practice luncheon, so it was with great excitement that she waited for her fellow members to arrive. The sound of tires on gravel brought her back to the moment, and she checked her makeup and adjusted her hairpins in the mirror before going to the door to receive her guests.

"Welcome, welcome to my home. I hope that you had a pleasant trip here," Cora crooned as she opened her door. Before allowing the head of the group, Aida Fitzgerald admittance, she grabbed the unsuspecting woman by the shoulders and planted a kiss on each cheek. She subjected each member in turn to the greeting before allowing them to gain entrance. When Cora closed the door behind the last, she turned to find her friends wide-eyed and for once, quite speechless.

"Now why in the world are you all looking at me like that?" she asked. "Haven't you ever seen how Europeans greet each other?"

Lisbeth Murray piped up and answered, "Yes, but we're not in Europe. We're in your living room." The others snickered.

Cora narrowed her eyes and replied, "This is how we will greet the German delegation. You don't want to appear uncultured do you?"

She waited for a smart reply, but none was offered as the ladies began removing their coats and tossing their hats onto the table in the entryway.

"We'll discuss the proper way of handing your overcoat to the hostess later," Cora warned. "Please wait for me in the sitting room while I place your things in the closet."

The ladies obediently turned and headed for the sitting room without complaint. When Cora was well out of earshot, Aida pulled the others aside and said, "She's certainly taking this delegation visit seriously. Maybe it's too much for her."

Cora returned with notebooks and pencils for everyone. "I suggest that you write down the tips and suggestions that I have for you today. It will help you to remember the rules of etiquette. Now, I've spent the last few weeks reading about the right way and the wrong way of receiving guests. We will strive for the right way, and with my guidance, each and every one of you will learn how to be a gracious hostess. Before we commence are there any questions?"

Lisbeth glanced at Aida before she ventured, "Why are you talkin' with that accent?"

Cora raised her eyebrows and asked, "What do you mean? What accent?"

"That accent," Lisbeth answered. "That snob accent."

The ladies couldn't hold back their laughter, and Cora stood with pursed lips as they guffawed and snorted at her expense.

"Yes, well this is a good place to start," she replied. "You are laughing like a bunch of hyenas. Proper ladies keep control of themselves and when they laugh, they keep it to a minimum and cover their mouths with a delicate hand motion."

At this, the women howled even louder. Finally, with tears streaming down her cheeks, Aida reigned the unruly group in. "Now let's settle down and behave ourselves. Cora was nice enough to invite us over for an afternoon of learning how not to fart in front of strangers. The least we can do is pay attention."

Cora ignored the remark and began again. "As I was saying, with proper training even the most hopeless of miscreants can learn manners. I have typed instructions for everyone to take, so don't feel like you have to learn everything at once. I think that we should start with the art of conversation. The main thing to remember when conversing with a guest is to take a genuine interest in what they are saying, and the way to achieve this is by asking questions and commenting on the information they give you. Remember, always direct the conversation toward the guest and don't sing your own praises. Let's give it a try, shall we?"

"Oh yes, let's," Lisbeth chimed in. Before Cora could continue, the feisty sixty-something turned to her left and addressed Violet.

"Violet, I noticed that the bob wire fence by your pasture is down. You should call that Stevens boy and have him fix it."

Before Violet could reply, Cora raised her hand to call for a pause. "Violet, I'll take it from here. Now Lisbeth, it is not a bob wire fence, it is a barbed wire fence. Do you see the difference? The wire has barbs on it, hence the term barbed wire. And another thing to remember is to keep the conversation free of confrontation. By pointing out that the fence is down and telling her who to call, you have created an atmosphere ripe for argument. Now, try again."

Lisbeth folded her hands on her lap and once again turned to face Violet. "Violet, you were absolutely right about Aida's cookies. They were too salty and undercooked. You really are the better cook. Oh, and you were right on the money about that dress that Mary wore on Sunday. She did wear it to services the previous week. You are quite clever, Violet."

Cora shook her head while the others joined in on another round of laughter. Crossing her arms, she suggested, "Let's work on this later. Will everyone follow me to the dining room? There are place cards at each service, so please take notice of where you will be seated. I've arranged the seating so that the delegation members will be seated in every other chair. That way, both groups will be forced to engage each other in the spirit of friendship and respect. Now mind you, we will be using my polished silver and my bone china on Wednesday. For our purposes today, we are using my Sunday china. Nevertheless, we will have the same amount of pieces, so this is what the table will look like."

"What dishes are you serving the German ladies?" asked Violet.

Cora smiled and answered, "Wiener schnitzel, braised carrots, braided bread, and several other German dishes that I've practiced making over the last week, along with an apple strudel."

"Wiener schnitzel? That sounds positively ghastly," Violet replied.

"It is a German specialty, and only those with uneducated taste buds would find it ghastly," Cora said defensively. "If everyone would look over here a moment, I have a chart with the place settings mapped out. Here is the salad fork, here is the dessert fork, and so on."

"Good God Cora," Aida moaned. "You're acting like none of us has ever been out of Mayflower. Believe it or not, we also use dishes in our homes. Well, at least when we're not squatting in front of a fire and clubbing the hell out of a deer, or when we take a break from painting pictures of bison on our walls with ochre and charcoal."

This prompted a third round of laughter which Cora endured with quiet dignity. When she'd had enough she tapped a teaspoon against her wine glass and continued, "I'm not suggesting that you are a bunch of ninnies. I just thought we should go over a few things that you may have forgotten over the years. Most of us learned this from Miss Green way back in high school. Remember Lisbeth? We had home economics together. It's just that out here in the country we don't get to practice refinement very often, and I don't want the Europeans to see us as a bunch of barbarians and cretins. We don't want that do we? We want to show our visitors that although we may live in the country, we are well versed in social settings. Will everyone please make an honest attempt today?"

"Cora, you have reached the pinnacle of perfection with this chicken. The sauce is mild, yet it accentuates the dish nicely," Aida practiced.

"Thank you very much Aida, this is my mother's recipe. I'll give you a copy of it before you leave," Cora returned.

"That is kind of you Cora. You are always so generous with your recipes," Aida concluded.

Cora smiled at the group. "I knew all of you could do this. It's not so hard is it? In fact, it's quite satisfying to treat each other with respect isn't it?" she asked.

"Yeah, I could get used to this," Lisbeth answered. "Until about the time I get home and see Ben scratching his ass and drinking his iced tea out of a canning jar. That's when the reality will come crashin' back down." This time Cora joined in on the laughter.

The Mayflower Ladies Auxiliary was waiting near the bus stop when the delegation arrived. Cora inconspicuously reached down to pull up her hose before the door of the bus opened. She wanted everything to be perfect for the visitors, including herself. Her new paisley dress was starched and pleated, and she had spent a considerable amount of time plucking rogue hairs from her chin. When the glass doors swung open, Cora stepped forward and double-kissed the first woman to exit the bus. She looked back at the others and was happy to see that they were all standing in line, each waiting their turn for the kissing.

A robust German delegate beamed a broad smile at everyone and said, "Tank you so very much for dis welcome. My name is Gerta and I am leader of dis delegation. We tank you for da warm greeting."

When the other five delegates had exited the bus, the Ladies Auxiliary members gathered around them and introduced themselves. Cora handed everyone a name badge and after they had pinned them onto their lapels, they headed down Main Street to the first planned stop.

Ushering the ladies around a large bronze statue, Cora began the tour. "This is a tribute to the founder of Mayflower, Captain Filmore Wentworth," she explained.

One delegate smiled and said, "He got skinny legs. He needs meat on his bones."

"You're right, he could use some fattening up," Lisbeth joked. Cora caught her eye and winked an approval.

The next stop was the Mayflower Art Center. Cora allowed everyone to file in before she began speaking. "This is our new art facility. It's small but we have

some very interesting works on display. The painting on the wall to our left is by a German artist, and the quilt over in the glass case came from a German immigrant," she pointed out.

A thin lady with large protruding teeth asked, "Where are da American paintings? We come to see dat."

"Well yes," said Cora as she squinted to read the woman's nametag. "We will absolutely look at the American artwork, Inga. There is a nice Thomas Hart Benton piece hanging on the east wall."

"Danke," Inga replied.

The rest of the afternoon found the group visiting all the points of interest that Mayflower had to offer. Cora had prepared a precise schedule, and she continuously checked her watch to make sure that they kept to it. Even so, she couldn't resist spending a little extra time at the Mayflower Park, where she pointed out each and every flowerbed that the Ladies Auxiliary had lovingly planted. As she led the delegation around the begonia display, she noticed that some of the ladies appeared to be bored. Silently admonishing herself she quickly said, "Um, we have a bit of free time at this point in the afternoon, is there anything that you ladies would like to see or do right now?"

Cora looked to her right just in time to see one of the ladies deliver a sharp elbow to Inga's ribs. Instantly she was seized with the thought that the ladies were not enjoying the tour. She was preparing to press the question again when Inga stepped forward.

"Is dere a shop where we could buy da Levi's?" she ventured. "We would like to buy some American clothing."

“Levi’s?” Cora questioned. “Would you ladies prefer to go shopping?”

The delegation chimed in at once, “Ja, ja.”

Although disappointed that the visit to the Historical Society would be cancelled, Cora graciously escorted the ladies to the bus and asked the driver to take them to the department store. As she sank down into her seat, she chided herself for being insensitive to the desires of her guests.

Aida leaned over to her and whispered, “Thank the Lord. My bunions are killing me! An old lady like me can’t walk around for hours at a time, you know. At least I can sit in the dressing room while they try to squeeze into those blue jeans. I hope the store carries waist extenders.”

“Stop that!” Cora hissed. “They might hear you and your shameful complaining. You’re no older than I am, and I’m just fine. Above all, we want these women to have a pleasant visit.”

“Yes, yes, I agree. Still, that dressing room has a chair with my name on it,” Aida warned.

Inside the store, Cora led the women through the casual wear aisles and over to the racks of blue jeans. She watched as Inga ripped several pairs off of the hangers, and held them up to judge the width. When she glanced over at the fitting room, she saw Gerta waving to get her attention, so she quickly maneuvered around the growing pile of Levi’s and went to assist her.

“How dis look?” Gerta asked.

Cora walked around Gerta, studying her as if she were a sculpture in the round. “Well, they’re the right length. Let’s see the waist...yes, that looks about right. How do they feel?”

“Well, it feel tight in da boot,” Gerta replied.

“It does? I think you have plenty of room. These are bellbottoms so they flare out to give ample room at the ankle. See? Look at your feet. You can comfortably wear your boots in these Levi’s.”

“No, da boot is tight. Too tight,” Gerta insisted, shaking her head.

Puzzled, Cora got down on her knees and began inspecting the hem. “Look at this Gerta, there is quite a bit of denim between your ankle and the seam.”

“No, da boot,” Gerta repeated. Turning, she pointed to her behind.

When she realized where the true source of Gerta’s discomfort was, Cora got up from the floor and fought back the urge to laugh. “It’s called the *derrière*, Gerta. Some people refer to it as the butt,” she said in a hushed voice, “which is a crude take on the word buttocks, but a lady such as you would say *derrière* in polite conversation.”

“Boot is bad word? I’m so sorry,” Gerta said, sheepishly.

“Oh no, it’s just not a word that should be used to describe your rear end,” Cora answered, trying to be tactful. “In English, a boot is footwear.”

Gerta began laughing, and a few seconds later Cora gave in to her own urge. When the two finally emerged from the fitting room they were met with curious looks, but they offered no explanation. Cora winked at Gerta and the two women rejoined the group.

With their purchases in hand, the German delegates waved to Cora and the others as they boarded the bus and went to their hotel to rest before dinner. The bus was expected to drop the delegates off at Cora’s at six in the evening, so there was enough time for the Mayflower ladies to go home as well, and for Cora to

prepare the dinner courses. Waving off all offers of help, she got into her Studebaker and drove across town. She was satisfied with how the day had gone, and was proud of the members. Even Lisbeth had managed to keep her snide remarks to a bare minimum. Her thoughts shifted to the tasks waiting for her at home, and with that she stepped on the gas pedal.

Pleased that she had set the table the evening before, Cora concentrated on the food preparation. Following her recipes to the letter, her strudel came out of the oven picture perfect. *This looks fine enough to serve to the Chancellor himself*, she mused. As she completed her tasks she checked them off of her ever-present list. Finally, she pulled the marinating meat from her refrigerator and prepared the lemon juice and bread crumbs. With the concoction tucked into her skillet and everything else ready to serve, Cora went to her bedroom to dress for the evening.

Combing out her long silver strands always took some time, so Cora decided to pin her hair up into a braided crown. *This hairdo will go with my new outfit very nicely*, she thought to herself. Opening her closet she removed the garment bag and admired her new dirndl. She stepped into the dress and sucked in her stomach to maneuver it over her broad hips. The tight bodice proved to be the most difficult to manage as Cora pushed, pulled, and rearranged her large bosom to accommodate it. Green velvet slippers that laced up in the front completed the look and she smiled approvingly at herself in the mirror before heading back to the kitchen.

Standing in front of the kitchen sink while she filled a water pitcher, Cora noticed that the lawn just beyond the clothesline was wet. "I wonder if we had

spotty showers this afternoon,” she said to herself. “My geraniums could use a good soaking.” The thought of the flowers reminded her to put the centerpiece on the table, so Cora left the window and resumed her work.

At half past five, Aida and Lisbeth arrived together. After she had greeted them with the now familiar kiss treatment, Cora stepped back and turned in place several times to reveal her full gathered skirt. She stood waiting for them to lavish her with compliments, but it was several seconds before Lisbeth mustered, “What in the name of common sense are you wearing?”

“A dirndl of course. It’s a traditional German costume but this one has a modern cut,” Cora replied.

“Well you look like you should be shoved into some oven, Gretel. And where is Hansel hiding?” Lisbeth joked.

“Very funny. I thought our guests might enjoy a touch of home,” Cora sniffed.

“Just don’t lean over or bend down in front of anyone because those two chickens are about to fly the coop,” Aida added, pointing to Cora’s bodice.

Before she could reply, the other members had arrived and were knocking on the front door.

“Oh Cora,” Violet whispered, “Everything is absolutely stunning.”

“Yes, you have outdone yourself,” Aida added.

“Thank you,” Cora beamed. “Please relax in the sitting room while we wait for our guests.”

Just as they were about to sit, Lisbeth looked out the window and saw the bus pulling into the circle drive. "They're here," she announced, "Should I go out and welcome them?"

"Heavens no," Cora whispered. A proper hostess allows the guests to knock on the door in a civilized manner."

Lisbeth stuck her tongue out at Cora and stepped away from the window.

After an appropriate number of knocks, Cora calmly opened her door and greeted Gerta and the other delegates. When everyone had been welcomed and was seated, Cora excused herself and returned momentarily with drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Up to this point, none of the delegates had commented on Cora's attire. Finally, Inga broke the ice on the subject.

"Dat is a very interesting dress, Cora. I remember my mudder wearing one like dat."

"Oh," Cora replied, "This is a new contemporary design. The shop I ordered it from specializes in foreign fashion."

"No, no. My mudder wore a frock like dat when I was little girl," Inga insisted.

Gerta shot Inga a look from across the room and said something in German that the Mayflower ladies couldn't understand, although the tone of it was easily translated.

"Please allow me to accompany you to the dining room," Cora insisted in an attempt to change the subject.

Grateful to leave the awkward moment to the confine of the sitting room, Cora escorted the ladies into the dining room and asked them to take their seats

according to the place cards. As she made her way around the table pouring water into the glasses, she noticed a peculiar smell.

I wonder if someone isn't feeling well, she thought as she gazed around the roomed and observed the faces.

"Please forgive me," she begged. "I forgot to mention that the powder room is just to the right in the hallway. Make yourselves comfortable, as my home is your home," she added graciously.

When the glasses were full, Cora excused herself to bring the salad course in from the kitchen. The odor became stronger as she approached the kitchen door. As she swung the door inward and stepped onto the tile, her slipper was immediately soaked. It took several moments before it registered in her mind just exactly what was taking place. Her eyes were drawn to the sink, where brown water was bubbling up and over the side and onto the floor.

"Oh my Lord!" she screamed. "The drain is clogged. That's why the yard was wet this afternoon! Oh dear Lord, what I am going to do?"

Cora called for Aida to come to the kitchen, but by the time she got to the door, the water was seeping out of the kitchen and into the dining room.

"Cora, that is raw sewerage," Aida coughed.

"I know," Cora cried.

"If the tank is backing up, it will come out of all the drains," Aida yelled.

Cora ran through the dining room, leaving a trail of filthy water and puzzled faces behind her. She didn't have to enter the powder room to know that the water was already gushing from the toilet, the smell hit her as she reached the hallway. By the time she had covered the hardwood floor with towels and made it back to

the dining room, Violet and Lisbeth were ushering the guests out the front door, coats in hand, and Aida was on the telephone.

Gerta paused in the doorway and called to Cora, "Danke for your hospitality."

With this, Cora burst into tears and fell onto the couch. She remained there several minutes before Aida appeared and said, "Cora, I've placed towels on the kitchen floor and the septic man is on his way. Go change your shoes because there is nothing more you can do here. The girls took the ladies to Mahoney's, and we're gonna meet them there."

"I can't face those women," Cora sobbed. "This is a disaster."

"You are going to face them because, 'A good hostess keeps her composure no matter what transpires during the course of the evening,' right? Isn't that what you said the other day during our lesson? Now get those slippers off while I get your things."

Cora was fighting to control her tears as they entered Mahoney's. As she approached the group, she saw Lisbeth raising her glass to make a toast. "We are much honored that you chose to spend some time with us. Please consider us as your new friends." Everyone smiled and nodded their heads in agreement.

Aida took Cora by the hand and led her to the table. There were several seconds of awkward silence before Gerta rose to her feet and began clapping. The rest of the women followed her lead and left their seats to gather around Cora.

Inga held out her hand and said, "Your lovely friends have told us about all da troubles dat you went to. Danke for your work. Our day is now perfect. Ja, perfect. We eat dat food all da time. What we really want is da cheeseburger and

milkshake. We want to have da American experiences. Please, sit down and enjoy a meal wit us.”

Cora looked over at Gerta, and her gaze was met with a wink. Humbled, she accepted the invitation and sat down to enjoy a meal with her old and new friends at Mayflower’s finest two star restaurant.

THE NIGHTINGALE

The 7:30 bus to Cedar Street was on time. Helen patiently waited for it to come to a stop, just as she had done every evening for the past twenty years. The steps weren't as easy to climb now, and Helen accepted the hand of the driver as she boarded. The young man waited as she arranged her cane and bags and settled into a seat near the front. She thought about her first trip to Cedar Street, back when her hair was just beginning to gray, and when she walked freely, without a limp. "Ah well, such is life," she whispered.

When the bus reached her destination, Helen carefully climbed down onto the pavement and began making the one block walk to the large white house on the corner. The evening was unusually warm for November, and she noticed two fireflies defying winter to dance one last Tango, near the fountain.

As she entered the home, the child's parents were preparing to leave for the night, their coats in hand, standing near the door. The mother looked tired, her face long and drawn. Helen knew what to say to ease their worries, she had done so on countless nights, for many others. The first night was always the hardest.

"I'll take care of him, don't worry about anything. You go ahead and get something to eat and some rest. I'll bathe him, and put him down," she assured them.

The mother studied Helen for a few moments before agreeing to trust her, the kind grandmotherly figure who stood before her.

"He's afraid of the dark," she said weakly, her eyes revealing a hidden plea.

Helen placed her hand on the woman's thin shoulder. "I promise to leave the lights on in his room, and to check on him often throughout the night. Go home now and let me care for him," she gently coaxed.

The father gave a grateful smile as he took his wife by the arm and guided her out onto the porch. The mother looked back, and Helen gave her a reassuring nod, and then closed the door.

When the evening staff had left for the night, Helen began making her rounds. There were three to care for this night, but she looked in on the child first. How young and delicate he was! He was much smaller than most boys of six, but then most boys were free to run and play, free to be children. This child, Thomas, or Tommy as he was called by his parents, had only known pain and sickness. He was resting peacefully, so Helen closed the door to the room and went into the parlor to check on Mr. Murphey.

"I see that you have had visitors today, Mr. Murphey," she said, glancing around the room. "Now, what is this I hear about you having lipstick on your jacket? Here, let me take it from you so I can scrub it with a little soda. That should take it right out." With that, Helen removed his jacket, accidentally brushing his hand with her breast. "Why, Mr. Murphey! You are such a flirt!" she teased, playfully patting him.

The smell of roses was thick in the air this evening. Jennifer Gordon's lover had been sending large bouquets for the past two days. The attached cards all expressed the same thing, he was sorry for what he had said to her. He wanted desperately to make it up to her, but she would not answer him. She had taken two bottles of pills and fallen into a perpetual slumber. She was beautiful, a

contemporary Aurora. Helen shook her head sadly as she stood in the doorway watching her. "Poor thing," she sighed.

The evening was growing late, and there was the child to attend to. Helen ran the water and began to gather the things she would need for the bath. Towels, sponge, soap, everything she would use was placed carefully on the shelf above the porcelain tub. When all was prepared, she brought the child to the room and began to undress him.

"You poor dear. Don't worry, the water isn't too hot. There now, just lay back and let me hold your head. See? I have you, nothing to be afraid of," Helen gently told him.

As she washed his small body and shampooed his lovely blonde hair, she was surprised to find herself suddenly overwhelmed with a deep feeling of sadness. She had cared for many children, but Tommy's frailness touched her on an emotional level, she hadn't visited for quite some time. When she accepted the position years ago, she promised herself she would not get involved with those in her charge. She would care for them and make sure that their needs were met, but nothing more. But now, she couldn't help but cry as she bathed the small boy in her arms. "Now don't pay any attention to me," she sobbed. "Some soap got into my eye, that's all."

Helen rested Tommy's head on the back of the tub for support, and walked across the room to wipe her eyes. She turned her back to the child and muffled her sobs with a towel, several minutes passing before she could gain control. When she turned back around she saw that Tommy had slipped completely under the water. "Oh my God!" she screamed, racing back to his side. She grabbed him and

pulled him up into a sitting position, all the while repeating over and over, "I'm so sorry, please forgive me." Helen cradled the child against her breast, and held him there until she had calmed herself enough to continue. The young boy made no sound, and once again rested in her arms.

When the bath was finished, Helen carried Tommy to his room, where she gently dried and dressed him. "There, there, you look very handsome. Your parents will be pleased," she said as she tucked him into his clean white bedding. She laid his head on the soft white pillow and kissed him on the forehead before she left his room, leaving the light on as promised.

After she had cleaned the rooms, removed the lipstick from Mr. Murphey's jacket, and checked once again on the others, Helen went into the sitting room where she could relax. The lonely hours settled in, the silent time when her charges rested freely.

Helen looked in on Tommy several times through the night, faithfully keeping her word. When the sun rose, she opened the curtains in the foyer. The visitors always arrived early, and she wanted to make sure the coffee was prepared. The bell rang a few minutes before she was to unlock the front door, and as she approached, she recognized the silhouettes of a tall man and a small woman, just beyond the etched glass window. The child's parents were waiting. They had not slept and were anxious to see him.

Helen opened the door and the couple gratefully stepped inside, thanking her for allowing them to visit early.

"You are very welcome. I hope you were able to get some rest last night," she said, all the while knowing that they had not. "Tommy is waiting for you in

his room, go ahead and go in. I'll be in the office waiting for the morning staff, if you need anything."

The sounds of the mother's sobs made their way throughout the home, reaching deep into the parlor where Mr. Murphey was waiting for his wife and children, and into Jennifer Gordon's room where she rested among the roses. With a heavy heart, Helen said goodbye to her morning replacement and made her way out the door and down to the sidewalk.

As she slowly walked by the fountain, Helen noticed the fireflies floating in the water. She turned and looked back to see the sun just breaking through the clouds and shining down on the funeral home.