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## Growing into Womanhood

Charlene Engleking

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Growing into Womanhood

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An Culminating Project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing

2006

**COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY**

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## Table of Contents

### Poetry Collection

Innocent .....	1
Burned .....	1
Echoes .....	1
Conformity .....	2
Peony Dance .....	2
Carolyn at the Garden .....	2
Higher Learning .....	3
Goddess Thoughts .....	4
Orpheus .....	5
It's Hera, Stupid .....	5
Eve's Declaration I .....	6
Eve's Declaration II .....	6

### Short Story Collection

Sisterhood .....	8
Living with a Samba Beat .....	24
A Matter of Choice .....	37
Love and Entomology .....	61
June Anne's Good-Bye .....	72
My Grandmother had One of These .....	80
Birth Stories .....	90

## INTRODUCTION

I have been a reader since I was four. My mother realized that the best way to keep me occupied was to open up the rest of the world. Even if initially that world was Dick and Jane and *Are You My Mother?*, it was still a bigger world than Bloomington, Illinois offered. I've continued to find the world through stories, poetry, and essays. I skipped many of the classics that most children are supposed to read and progressed to more contemporary, soon to be classics. They ranged from familiar worlds created by Beverly Cleary to the fantastic worlds of Madeleine L'engle. I've continued to look for those other worlds but not necessarily as fantastic or distant as Middle Earth or Avalon. Instead, I find myself best transported by the language used by writers. Listed among my favorite authors are Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Chitra Divakaruni who create magical worlds found in unfamiliar but everyday settings, or T.C. Boyle and Flannery O'Connor who take ordinary worlds and make them extraordinary, but it is the language that they use to create those worlds that most inspires me and that I most hope to emulate.

The writers whom I most admire, and consider influences, are storytellers who create worlds through prosaic and evocative language. The stories vary, the themes may be deep or disposable, but these writers don't just create and describe the characters, or the settings, or the emotions, they sculpt them and expand upon them. The house one of them might describe will be a reflection of the characters or the theme described in such distinct detail that

the point is ornate yet clear. The perfect words and phrases, while seeming to expand sentence upon sentence, instead narrow the point until the reader recognizes the precise, the only, truth that the author intends.

As more than one writing instructor has noted, the successful writer creates settings and characters that transcend the context, leading the reader to a universal truth that creates the connection between text and reader. As an aspiring writer, my goal is to create those characters people want to know, who exist in places that readers may recognize and want to visit. I turn to writers like Ann Patchett, Louise Erdrich, Marge Piercy, and others precisely because of their ability to create such characters and describe such settings.

Louise Erdrich is well known for her sense of place and her strong characters. In *Tales of Burning Love*, Erdrich describes the heat of North Dakota:

Outside, the water has been sucked from everything. The veins in the leaves are hollow, the ditch grass is crackling. The sky has absorbed every drop. It's a thin whitish blue veil stretched from end to end over us, a flat gauze tarp. (17)

She continues to describe the protagonist as she and her mother “rise and unstick our shirts from our stomachs, our skirts from the back of our legs” (21). The reader can feel the heat rising, can remember the stickiness of a humid summer. The characters are defined and shaped by their environment, and the reader makes the connections naturally, entering the world that Erdrich has created.

I tried to emulate Erdrich's evocative prose in the story I wrote about Sara, the lesbian pastor and her partner Lauren. My hope is that I have created a setting warm and familiar enough to the reader that even if he or she can't understand the conflict, he or she will still feel empathy for women who love each other and want only to lead the lives they believe they are destined to lead. If readers fail to connect with the characters, they will consider the story a disappointment at best, or quit reading at worst. I believe that if the reader can connect with the humanity of the characters, then he or she will want to finish the story to learn the outcome. Ideally in this story, I have successfully created a conventional, rural, Midwestern setting, populated with familiar but not stereotypical people.

The opening setting of the story, the church sanctuary, represents one of the dominant forces in Sara's life. My goal is to describe the sanctuary in terms that will draw the reader in as he or she remembers a similar experience. The filtered light and the calm feeling inherent in the setting belie the conflict that Sara feels. Lauren's entrance brings the conflict into the sanctuary, setting the theme for the story.

In "Love and Entomology," I again try to create a setting that defines the character. Ginny's office, her "insect inner sanctum," includes objects that one would expect to find in an office, normal everyday items. I hope to make the connection to the familiar and then bring in the specific, that which defines Ginny. Thus, "[e]ven the leather chair in the corner gleamed like a beetle's carapace, crackling deliciously when she sat down in it."

Marge Piercy's style ranges from contemporary stories, to mysteries, science fiction, and poetry. Her variety of genres attests to her ability to develop a variety of characters and place them in a variety of settings. Piercy's characters are never flat or stereotypical, even when the situation might call for a stock character; the divorced academic and her wild-child sister; the aging hippies; the emotionally lost professional; they are all very human with both likeable and unlikable characteristics. The connection between reader and characters remains consistent. Even an unsympathetic character, like the woman known to steal lovers, is still compelling. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy creates a protagonist who is either a time traveler or psychotic. The character is believable and sympathetic with either interpretation.

Most of the stories in this collection are plot driven but as I have challenged myself to expand my focus from plot to character, I find more weaknesses in my prose. It is the ability of good writers to create characters that are real, compelling, and even quirky that I truly hope to emulate. I realize that I have many pages to write before I can create characters as well-defined as Piercy's, but I do believe that the characters that I have created for this project do represent a variety of voices. Whether plot or character driven, the stories share similar themes of empowerment and what it means to be a woman in various incarnations.

Many middle-aged women can relate to Ginny in "Love and Entomology." She struggles to achieve success through her secondary, almost



secret, career as a writer while she lives an ordinary life teaching. She would like to be involved with a man but has been unable to find one who understands her inner self. I hope that she has enough depth that she is not a caricature. June Anne, in "June Anne's Good-Bye," is a woman coping with the death of her husband. I tried to convey her actions as motivated by love rather than revenge. By delivering him back to his primary home, the bar, the reader will ideally sense the affection that June Anne felt for Dominic. Again, I can only hope that the reader will feel some affection if not a connection for her and the friends of her husband.

Clara in "Birth Stories" is probably the least sympathetic character included in this group yet one whom any woman who's ever been pregnant will recognize. As with the other stories, I have tried to surround her with familiar but not simple characters (ala Piercy) and placed her in a strong setting (ala Erdrich). The small town intentionally includes a café, church, and the house still identified with its former owners. The women could belong to any ladies group in any small town, women who have known each other for so long that there can't be any secrets left.

These stories are about more than just creating interesting and compelling characters and placing them in settings that transport the reader to a different reality, even if that reality is a small town in the Midwest. The writers who repeatedly bring me back to their writing are those who also sneak in a message. As I review this collection, I think I may have focused too much on the message instead of the characters carrying the message.

However, I do believe that the characters in these stories are still real enough that the message doesn't scream in flat tones from characters that have no depth. As a reader, I'm not looking for allegory or ultimate truth, but for simple truths retold in new ways.

Ann Patchett writes towards her truths from the first sentence through the last sentence of her novel or memoir. She is best known for *Bel Canto*, the novel that made her one of National Public Radio's favorite interviewees. The opening sentence of *Bel Canto* is "When the lights went off, the accompanist kissed her" (1). Perhaps an innocuous beginning but, since the reader probably knows that these characters will soon be hostages in a political struggle, this is an opening that leaves the reader questioning the significance of the action. In one sentence, Patchett has introduced two characters and created a need to hear the next step in the story.

Patchett's most recent book, *Love and Beauty*, is a memoir about her friendship with Lucy Grealy. Patchett retells the story of a good friend who was compelling, outrageous, and difficult. The reader may wonder how Patchett could maintain a relationship with a woman so self-involved and high maintenance but at the same time can't help but regret not having been part of Lucy's life. It is Patchett's descriptions of the settings, the events, and most important, of Lucy herself, that leave the reader mourning the loss of a woman she never met and might not have liked if she had. The truth of the connection between friends is conveyed with emotion but without pathos. Patchett admits her love for Lucy and the loss that she feels, but her

admissions are unnecessary. Her writing is clear, entertaining, gentle, occasionally exuberant, but always honest. Her feelings would have been apparent even without any actual statements of love and loss.

I don't have the expertise that Patchett has to lead the reader directly down my path, but I have tried to create a truth in each of the stories in this collection. Following Patchett's lead, I hope that my affection for my characters is apparent enough to compel the reader to keep reading but doesn't keep the character from becoming more than just a new incarnation of my own persona. For example, it is essential that the reader connects with Aunt Phyllis and Rhonda, from "My Grandmother had One of These." Without that connection, Rhonda could seem diabolical and Aunt Phyllis pathetic. Instead, assuming that the story works, the outcome is inevitable. An old woman who is no longer useful to the family is put at the Antique Mall hoping that a young family will find some use for her. The reader is not slammed with the truth about our society's attitude towards aging women, but rather led to it as Aunt Phyllis claims her temporary home in Booth 127.

The point of "Birth Stories" is the eternal question of karma. Do we really reap what we sow? Does Clara conjure up the dead because she has frightened too many mothers-to-be with her stories? Why are otherwise compassionate women compelled to share these horrifying stories at a time when the pregnant woman most needs sisterhood? The key to this story's success is that those women who have been on the receiving end will still feel a little compassion when Clara gets her comeuppance.

I have included a few poems in this collection. The influences vary, and the change in voice can be traced in this particular group. Marge Piercy has influenced my poetry as well as my prose. She has a straightforward, conversational style which I find appealing. Anna Ahkmatova, William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Rexroth, and more traditional poets like Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson all follow the spare style that creates the image in precise terms. My love of Chinese poets also colors my work, again because of the precise use of language and the seemingly simple topics that they choose.

“Carolyn at the Garden” is a good example of this style. I try to convey the loss that I feel for a friend and mentor through the act of looking for her memorial at the Botanical Garden. Like many poets still working to find the right voice, my haiku is still hit and miss. Thus, even though it isn’t exactly in haiku form, I’ve only included one haiku-like poem in this group. It does reflect what I want to achieve in that form. It is simple, yet conveys the emotion that I want the reader to experience.

*Echoes*

My heart extends  
To find the echo  
Of your last presence.

Anyone who has ever been left behind has felt the emptiness that has replaced the former warmth.

The change in voice in my poetry is a direct result of my exposure to the Beat Poets and my immersion in the works of Diane di Prima. “Kansas Higher Learning” is an attempt to emulate the rhythm of the Beats, the

cadence that is so different from what I usually employ. The lines are longer and the voice more strident. The words are chosen for their harsh alliteration, rather than the gentle melding of sounds that I use in “Peony Dance.”

The di Prima influenced poems move beyond strident to shrieking in a few instances. The more gentle feminist voice of my prose becomes louder and more insistent in my poetry. An Eve in my prose, perhaps reminiscent of feminist Marge Piercy, might offer an apple pie and be shocked at the results. In my poetry, I am channeling di Prima and the Loba saunters in demanding to be heard.

Finally, I haven’t included nonfiction or memoir in this collection, but I credit the influence of several nonfiction writers in my poetry and prose. Although my nonfiction choices, such as Anna Quindlen and Molly Ivins, appeal because of the opinions they express, which mirror and reinforce my own, each writer has a straightforward style that colors those opinions, drawing pictures to reinforce the truths that they define. Annie Dillard, a master at blurring the lines between fiction and nonfiction, memoir and short story, recreates the Pittsburgh of her childhood seemingly so effortlessly and so clearly, that even though I have never visited the city, I feel like I grew up in the same neighborhood.

As much as I would like to emulate Dillard, I’m afraid that the pace of my prose will never be as immediate or as detailed as hers. Still, I can’t help but want to recreate the immersion that the reader feels when reading her descriptions, crouching at the edge of the pond or even sitting at the family

dinner table. When I describe the quilt show at Paducah, I get closer to that immersion but the sensory experience still falls short. The sounds of hundreds of women talking and laughing at once, the smells of the carnival style food, and the sense of enclosure created by the concrete levy walls combine for a compelling setting but, in this story, I still haven't nailed the moment as I would like.

Ultimately, I do believe that I have presented a good collection of views of the female spirit. Although it is only the later stories that focus more on character rather than point, I think it is the self-confidence of most of the characters that I most like about them. These are women as we should all be; self-assured even with the doubts inherent in living. Ginny, Sara, and Lauren all struggle with how they can achieve what they want under difficult circumstances. June Ann has few doubts and is controlling her world. Clara has considered herself in control of her world and is learning to cope with her new ghostly visitors. The weakest voice is the adolescent on the cusp of womanhood. I'll continue to work on that story to find a truer voice, whiny and childish, yet astute and more adult.

Working with the theme of being a woman and the stages of womanhood leaves an infinite variety of themes, characters, and settings. What better juxtaposition is there than to find the feminine in a patriarchal world? I will continue to mine this topic for poetry, prose, and nonfiction and look forward to more fully developing the characters I create as I gain a better understanding of who they are.

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## Poetry Collection



***Innocent***

I didn't mean  
To invite trust  
    So guilelessly.  
To inflict love  
    So heartlessly.  
To fling pain  
    So carelessly.  
But there we were  
    And here we are.

***Burned***

My love curls back within  
A lotus  
Retracting from the cold  
Front  
I face.  
Pulling back  
Frostbitten petals  
Blackened  
By knowledge.

***Echoes***

My heart extends  
To find the echo  
Of your last presence.

### ***Conformity***

Bearded iris  
 Ironic appellation on a plant  
 So feminine and frilly  
 Bowing to the breeze  
 Skirted with green  
 An island crowd surrounded by grass.  
 A small colony of anarchy in an ordered lawn.

### ***Peony Dance***

Peonies plop against the green lawn  
 Shedding petals in a profusion of pink.  
 Small commas of color dance across the grass with the prompting of the breeze.  
 It's the beginning of Summer – Spring's end  
 Feathery flowers fit for the heat replace  
 The delicate dogwood and fragrant lilacs.

### ***Carolyn at the Garden***

I looked for your tree.  
 A maple, she said when I asked at the Help Desk  
 Southwest corner, Chinese Garden.  
 Silver leaves in the breeze  
 Strongly rooted in fertile soil.  
 I found coral bells in bloom  
 And columbine bouncing and waving  
 And a Japanese cousin swaying and weeping.  
 I didn't find your tree  
 But I know you are here  
 Silver in the breeze  
 Solid in your roots.

### ***Higher Learning***

Midwestern daughters  
 Seeking voices in wheat colored realities  
 Are challenged and protected by church-related  
 Liberal arts  
 Bastions  
 Of truth and question.

Safely, we study Shakespeare and Shelley  
 Titter to the bawdy tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer  
 Rise to the readings of Simone and Jean Paul  
 But hear no Howl still rumbling in the West.

The sixties are silent.  
 Protesters now march, if they march at all,  
 In support of Iranian students  
 Alarmed at the Orwellian reach of Savak.  
 For most students - A safe danger  
 They only know the three camel jocks on campus soon to be stateless.

Disco dreams and engagement rings  
 Still choreograph the days of these dreamers.  
 But the dreams stay small, safe.  
 Like 3.2 beer - watered down and all you can drink in a dry county in Kansas at  
 eighteen.

Dr. Dan and Dr. Jane struggle to mold minds beyond their still adolescent  
 Diminutive Dreams  
 Sometimes successful but mostly satisfied to see their protégés march across the  
 dais in May.  
 Perhaps hoping that this one or that will transcend marital ambitions  
 And matriculate to grad school or write the novel that answers the eternal  
 questions.  
 But most will live satisfied lives of productivity on small farms in small towns  
 On the sprawling plains of Kansas.

***Goddess Thoughts***

Where is the Goddess?

The eternal spiral that claims the womb sacred

Not a vessel for political polemics.

Lilith survives, sister to Eve

Both united in their supposed desire to trump Man's place of honor.

Wasted insecurity – disruptive egoism that betrays the balance.

The perfect equipoise of yin and yang replaced

By monotheists unhappy with any universe that doesn't tip to the penis.

Silly

Size doesn't matter.

The womb is boundless.

***Orpheus***

Impatient love  
You had only to wait, to trust, to look forward.  
Instead  
You stumbled  
And left me  
Abandoned to Hell.

***It's Hera, Stupid!***

Poor Paris  
He had no choice.  
Power? Beauty? Wisdom?  
A youngster with a youngster's drive  
Procreation over preservation  
Short-term gain with long-term cost.

Funny  
That Power trumps Wisdom  
But Beauty always wins.

***Eve's Declaration I***

Drink your apple juice  
Little Man. Your  
Paradise is intact.  
That snake in the grass  
Was no friend of mine!

***Eve's Declaration II***

I am not your Eve!  
Destined to tempt -  
A stolen rib doomed to remain at your side.

You  
However,  
Could be the embodiment of incomplete.  
A dusty bag of skin struggling to repair what you have lost.  
Wasting a life proving supremacy while muttering to a patriarchal god  
Who promises you dominion.

Better to embrace the missing piece  
To move from dominance to partner  
From High Priest of the Great Paternal  
To co-creator of the World as it should be  
Amen.

## Short Story Collection

## Sisterhood

Green, more green, and still more green, occasionally swathed in fog, or broken into sections by trees barely in bud, a few perhaps hit by lightning during the storms of the last few weeks. Gena rolled her head against the window glass and looked toward the sky. Then it was just gray and more gray, the source of the splatters, but the clouds so dense that the sky was solid slate. She sighed and plopped against the back seat.

“Awake back there, Sweetie?” Gena’s mother, Susan, looked in the rearview mirror. She missed the sweet child her daughter had been until recently.

“I could have stayed home,” Gena glanced at the mirror and then turned back to the window.

“You’ll have fun,” Gena’s grandmother, Bess, turned slightly to look into the backseat. “It’s time you joined us for this trip.” Although she concurred with her daughter in missing the younger and sweeter version of Gena, she was sincere about being glad that Gena had joined them. Expanding from a two generational outing to three warmed her soul.

Gena rolled her eyes, slumped down as far as the seatbelt allowed and pretended to try to sleep. She could feel her mother and grandmother trading smiles which just irritated her further. She would be thirteen in two months and she would have been fine at home alone today. She wasn’t a baby, but you couldn’t tell her mother that. Even her grandmother, who was usually pretty cool, had taken her mom’s side.



Every April, the women in the front seat joined the quilting pilgrims headed towards Paducah, Kentucky, and the American Quilt Society's annual show. They left before dawn, and dragged home long after dark, loaded with fabric, patterns, and more stories than anyone in the family wanted to hear. Every April, Gena and her dad would make this day, their day. They had gone fishing a few times, had enjoyed movie marathons, had even mowed the lawn, and planted a garden once. This year, because of his new job, Gena's dad was out of town on a business trip, expected home sometime in the afternoon. It was that "sometime in the afternoon" that had forced the crisis.

Gena had begged to be left at home. She had assured her parents that she would be fine. She would lock the door, do her homework, maybe watch a movie, not invite anyone over. Her parents were so lame, though, they wouldn't even think seriously about it. They just kept bringing up plane delays, and thunderstorms, power outages, and whatever nightmare scenario parents always brought up. How had they ever had the courage to even have a baby? Lots could go wrong and she had been fine. She hadn't even broken any bones or ever needed stitches.

Then, she had the brilliant idea that if they wouldn't let her stay home alone, she could spend the night with a friend and her dad could pick her up when he got back. They had actually thought about that idea, but that was when her grandmother, and this was when Gena almost totally lost it, suggested that it might be time for Gena to come along. Her mother got that look, the "Oh, why didn't I think of that brilliant idea?" look; and Gena knew that she was doomed.

And here she was, in the back seat of her mom's Camry, heading south, long before even God was out of bed, so that they could look at quilts, and fabric, and buttons, and the rest of the stupid stuff that Gena couldn't begin to list all of, more of the same stupid stuff that her mother had brought home from Paducah year after year, a lot of it stashed in a closet upstairs.

Gena knew what it would be like. They would make a big deal about her being grown-up, tagging along on a Girl's Day Out. Like this would be the ultimate womanly thing to do. It wasn't like she'd started getting her period or something. Now that would be a true womanly moment. But looking at fabric, no. She thought about how her mother had made shopping for her first bra a huge event. Her mother had been so embarrassing then. "Ooh my baby's growing up! Her first step into womanhood!" Gena had pushed for what, in her own mind, she called Step Two, buying that lacy top that would show off the bras that they had bought that day. Now that would make her feel like a woman!

"You know," Bess continued, "Paducah has painted all of the levee walls."

Gena looked toward the front seat, "Painted the levee walls?"

"You know, the giant concrete walls that keep the river from flooding the city," her mother said.

Gena looked out the window. "I know what levee walls are, Mom."

"Anyway, they have several artists who have painted murals so that visitors don't have to stare at those ugly barriers," Grandma finished.

"That's kind of cool, I guess," Gena conceded.

They outran the rain as they headed south through Illinois, although the sky remained a dull gray. The varied greens along the edge of the highway appeared even more verdant without the brightness of the sun to wash out the colors. Gena wished that she could paint so that she could capture the lushness of the colors. Green, spring green, ivy, olive green, pine green, jungle green, she mentally listed all of the greens from the crayon box that she could remember and still felt that she hadn't covered the panorama before her. She looked back at the sky. It was still slate. She thought about listing the grays just to pass the time but couldn't drop the image of blizzard blue and wild blue yonder, neither of which described today's sky.

In the front seat, the older women murmured back and forth about what colors they were hoping to match and which vendor they hoped to visit. For them, the trip rounded out the quilting season. It provided the last opportunity to finish projects that had been on hold for lack of something and offered up a new round of ideas that could become unfinished projects in the months to come.

Gena turned backed toward the windshield just as the car crested the hill exposing a view of a wide river.

"Wow! What river is that?"

Gena's mother looked in the mirror, "That's the Ohio. You've seen it before."

"I don't remember. That's really pretty."

For Bess, this was the moment in the trip to Paducah when she felt that she was coming home. She had grown up in Illinois, alongside the Ohio River. It

marked her life in a way that she imagined the Mississippi River would some day mark Gena's. Just north of Paducah, the Ohio River widened reminiscent of the Mississippi at St. Louis except it lacked the muddiness that belied that river's dangerous currents. This river boasted its current with a clear flow that carved out its sandbars rather than seeming to shove them into submission. Unaware of the concurrent thoughts, both Gena and her grandmother thought of the stories of escaping slaves trying to cross this monster and felt an even greater respect for those who had made the crossing.

Once across the river, Paducah opened up like every other city along every other interstate. Manufacturing plants flanked the first exit. Shipping warehouses, a cement plant, a tool and die shop, Paducah was definitely a river town relying on river trade. The next exit promised the usual fast food restaurants and chain hotels. Susan took the exit and suggested that they stop for a quick bite before heading to the quilt show. Gena stretched, glad that she was traveling with her grandmother who always needed to stop. Gena was definitely ready to get out of the car.

Filled with orange juice and a breakfast burrito, Gena almost felt ready to slog through a quilt show. How bad could it be? She could sense the excitement rising in her mother and grandmother. They were practically running over each other, chattering about the award winning quilts from past years.

The view away from the interstate morphed from the typical interstate views, into a true southern city. Magnolias and azaleas that grow to reasonable heights and breadths a few miles farther north, began to take on their southern

grandeur in Paducah, a truly southern city. As they approached the river bend where the Paducah Convention Center sat between river and levee, the houses became stunted clapboard squares that had obviously weathered more than one flood. Yet, even the most derelict yards overflowed with the promise of flowers as if they would not be put off in such lush soil.

Gena watched the houses and leaned forward to catch a view of the painted levees. Instead, the view was blocked by giant gray walls of unpainted concrete. She snorted in disgust.

“I thought you said they were painted.”

“I think that’s just downtown honey,” Susan answered distractedly. “If we’re lucky, we should be early enough to park up here on the street.”

She turned the car up a side street, and Gena swiveled around to watch the receding levee walls standing sentinel behind her. She caught a quick glimpse of color through an opening in the levee. Behind that blank and forbidding wall were hundreds, maybe thousands of people, mostly women. It reminded her of an anthill, a colorful, multi-aged, mostly female ant hill.

Obviously tickled by the close parking, Susan and Bess twittered for at least half a block as they walked back to the Convention Center. Gena was glad that she had worn her Nikes. Her mother had warned her that they would be walking, but Gena had ignored that warning before.

The levee walls were even more imposing up close than from the car. Gena ran her hand along the rough concrete as they approached an opening. She was surprised to see that the walls were actually on rails, ready to be moved into

place in case of flood. She thought of the pyramids and wondered how many Egyptians it took to move one of these upright slabs. She could hear voices on the other side, and occasionally a shriek from a woman recognizing someone else. The tantalizing smells of kettle corn, cotton candy, and barbecue drifted over the wall, making Gena wish she had held out for even junkier food than the breakfast burrito.

Susan and Bess walked quickly through the portal into the throng. They knew exactly what to expect and were still surprised by the throng of women and even a few men who jostled and joked between the levee walls and the Convention Center. Gena, however, was unprepared for and almost overwhelmed by the noise and movement. She felt like Dorothy and her first view of the Emerald City. She couldn't understand why a quilt show would make her think of Oz, and then she realized it was the odd quality of standing on the dry, safe side of the levee wall, hearing the sounds, and smelling the food, before coming around the corner and finding a completely new world.

Susan also noted the shift from the outside to the inside but as always, experienced a sense of safety rather than danger from being on the wrong side of the levee walls. Despite the prison-like quality of the walls, they actually contained rather than excluded the better world; they almost kept the cold world on the outside. She wouldn't have been surprised to find the sun shining on this side of the wall.

Susan turned to Gena and called to her to hurry up. For both of them, the crowd reverted to babbling women and the levee walls to concrete constructs built

only to hold back a rising river. Both returned to the quilt show and all of the crazed women who were drawn to it.

Gena trudged behind her mother up the stairs and into the Convention Center. It was even noisier inside than outside. She had never seen so many handmade tote bags, purses, vests, and skirts. These women were from another planet. Even her mother and grandmother were not this far gone.

“Let’s start with a few vendors before we look at the quilts,” her grandmother was suggesting to her mother when Gena caught up with them. They paid for the show and set off towards the first room of vendors.

Gena looked around the room. “Geez, this is like some kind of lame video game. All I have to do is get past the lady on the stool, spend all my coins, and return to the front with the most fabric; or would that be vest patterns?”

Bess looked quizzically at her granddaughter and Susan laughed. “I think she gets it Mom.”

Bess shook her head. “I don’t understand the video game part but the rest is right.”

The three of them moved to the left and up the far aisle of vendors. Gena shuffled behind the two older women, occasionally picking up fabric, flipping through books, or fingering samples. Susan and Bess seemed to look at everything but hadn’t found anything worth buying yet. At this rate, Gena thought, this was going to be a long day. They finally arrived at a quilting machine vendor who was allowing potential buyers to test drive the machine. Gena took a turn sewing swirls onto a piece of fabric.

"Gee Mom, you need one of these," she teased her mother.

"Sure, you tell your dad that we agreed that buying this makes more sense than a new roof."

"It's still pretty cool."

"Yes, I suppose if I actually quilted my tops rather than tied them off, it would be worth the investment." Susan looked at Bess and imagined that her own face mirrored her mother's wistful look of desire. She would rather have bought the machine than a new roof, but there never seemed to be enough extra cash at the end of any month to consider such extravagance. One year, she and Bess had actually discussed buying a machine together but had finally decided that neither would use it enough to justify the purchase.

Impervious to her mother's true longing, Gena laughed at the thought of telling her dad too bad about the roof, and the three of them moved to the next vendor. They turned down the next aisle and found three computers set up, one with the program projected onto a large screen.

"You see how you click on the fabric swatch, and it will fill all of the designated pieces," the saleswoman was telling the gathered women. As she spoke, she slid the mouse to a side panel, clicked on a green square, and turned a handful of rectangles on the screen from white to green. She then moved to an orange square and turned another handful of rectangles orange.

Bess and Susan stopped to watch the demonstration as Gena wandered over to one of the open computers and began playing with the mouse. Finally, thought Gena, this was cool. It reminded her of the paint program at school. She



could design the quilt blocks, arrange them into a quilt, and then import actual fabric reproductions to determine how the final quilt would look. Yes, this was truly awesome. She wasn't even interested in sewing and she wanted this program. Her grandmother watched over her shoulder as she manipulated the design.

"That's very pretty dear, and certainly beats graph paper and colored pencils."

"With gadgets like this, we might make a quilter of her yet," her mother added.

Gena scowled and abruptly slid the mouse across the pad. It annoyed her that her mother didn't understand the difference between computer design and playing with a sewing machine. Actually, it annoyed her that she was wasting an entire Saturday looking at fabric and quilting supplies.

Bess ignored the adolescent attitude, linked her arm through Gena's, and answered, "Maybe it's time that we took a look at those award winning quilts."

They moved quickly through the remaining vendors and finally entered the display room. It was only midmorning and the room was not as packed as the vendor space. Gena again thought of Oz. These were not her grandmother's or even her mother's quilts. She stopped in front of a traditional design. She recognized The Log Cabin pattern. It was one of her grandmother's favorites. Strips of cloth were sewn together like stacked logs, creating squares of shifting colors. Her grandmother pieced all of her quilts by hand, preferring traditional calico prints and historic patterns that she had been using forever. This quilt used

nontraditional fabric but the effect was the same as the greens bled into blues, which evolved into purples as the log cabin strips stacked one upon the other square by square.

“My goodness,” murmured Bess. “I know the pattern, but I would never have considered using neon green and teal.”

Susan brushed Bess’ side as she leaned towards the quilt. “Actually, I used that teal print in the throw I made for Pat. But I certainly wouldn’t have been creative enough for that combination. That’s amazing.”

Susan’s palette was broader than her mother’s, including more modern prints, appliquéd into festive designs, or machine quilted with variegated threads that highlighted both fabric and design. Still, she had never sewn anything that looked like these quilts. An appliquéd quilt hung next to the Log Cabin. The quilter had pieced together black and white diamonds to form the background and then had hand sewn bright red birds in flight that seemed to soar above the quilt beneath them. The diamonds released the birds from the cage of fabric to which they’d been attached.

Gena stood before a quilt that matched a Monet poster that she had in her bedroom. She understood now why these quilts belonged in a museum. This piece was a painting sewn in cloth. The accompanying card noted that the quilter had used over two thousand two inch squares to create this Watercolor Quilt. The pastel flowers of the fabric were only discernable when Gena stood within inches of the quilt. When she stepped back, the squares melted together again into a lovely reproduction of Monet’s “Water Lilies.” Gena realized belatedly that she

needed to close her mouth. A middle-aged woman wearing white gloves stepped behind the velvet rope and lifted the edge of the hanging quilt.

“Look at the back of this one. She’s created an evening version of the morning painting.” Gena’s mouth dropped back open.

Her grandmother leaned over her shoulder, “Look at the next one, dear.”

The next quilt was even more breathtaking than the first. It was pieced, appliquéd, and then embellished with small crystals so that as the air conditioner caught the borders, it moved slightly, sparkling and emphasizing the tiny stars that had been sewn on top of what was otherwise a traditionally pieced quilt. A small card identified the quilter as a Canadian and noted that there were over forty-two hundred small crystals adorning the stars.

Bess turned to Susan. “Maybe it’s time that we bought one of those little attachment things to put the crystals on our quilts.”

“The day you start making useless quilts that can’t be put on the bed, is the day that I have you checked for senility!” Susan teased her mother.

Bess pretended offense, “Hey, I’m a twenty-first century quilter!”

Both women laughed and moved to the next quilt. Gena moved from quilt to quilt, sometimes directing her mother or grandmother, sometimes allowing herself to be directed. She admired hand sewn quilts pieced with traditional techniques, whose cards proclaimed eight or ten stitches per inch. She laughed at joyful quilts, so silly, yet so intricate, that she wondered how the quilter had kept the design straight. She marveled at quilts made by experts, by young girls, and by men. She wondered how the quilters from Japan, Sweden, Guatemala, and

Australia had ever heard of Paducah, Kentucky. And, she talked to people; women who remarked about the workmanship, women who compared the quilts to those from past years, and women who shared her sense of awe.

Gena walked out of the display room, again clamping her mouth shut, relieved when her mother suggested lunch. Rather than head back outside, they waded through vendors, and found the hotel restaurant, surprisingly not packed with quilters. While they waited for their food, Susan and Bess pulled out patterns that they had bought and began discussing whether they should look for fabric here rather than risk being unable to find it at home. Gena quietly ate her lunch, barely joining the conversation. She thought about cults. Strange people who would talk you into believing what they believe, manipulate you into dressing like they dress, and finally, convince you to turn over everything you own to them. She had seen a bumper sticker that said "She who dies with the most fabric wins!" and knew that her mother and grandmother were gone but not too far gone, yet. If she ever came home and found the sticker on the car, it was time to pack up Dad and head out.

She picked up one of the patterns that Susan had laid beside her plate.

"You know Mom, that would look really cool in that Funky Monkey material."

Bess leaned over and turned the pattern towards herself.

"That would be cute; but then, I like those monkeys."

Susan agreed and they decided that they would return to the vendor with the sock monkey fabric collection. Gena was pleased that her mother and grandmother had approved her suggestion.

Susan pulled a packet of fat quarters out of her tote bag. Tied with a satin ribbon, the quarter yard cuts of eight different cat prints made a pretty bundle by themselves.

“I bought this thinking you might like to make a pillow or throw,” she told her daughter.

Gena took the packet and rifled through the fabrics like a flip book. “As long as I don’t have to make a vest, I guess I might like them,” she smiled sideways at her mother.

Susan playfully snatched the packet back. “You know that’s what I really bought it for!”

Bess looked puzzled. “They would make a cute vest. What’s wrong with a vest?”

Gena looked at her mother. “Nothing, it’s just that nobody wears them anymore.”

“Well, I do,” snorted Bess, unaware of her daughter and granddaughter’s conspiratorial smiles.

After lunch, Gena walked through the remaining vendors, still something of a reluctant tourist, but also now as a potential artist. Now as she touched the sample work, dug through the button bins, and sorted the pieces of fabric, she considered how she would use each piece. Could that piece of lace really

embellish a T-shirt? How hard would it be to sew those buttons on her jacket, trick it out a little? She looked at the kits. Staying interested long enough to complete a Block a Month Quilt, the pieces of which would be sent to her one block at a time was a laugh. That wasn't happening.

Yet, despite making fun of the cult-like atmosphere of the whole event, for the first time, she was beginning to understand. It had started with that Monet watercolor quilt and the quilts with the sparkles. These weren't designed for warmth but for beauty. Those quilters were artists who had chosen a fabric palette. Ultimately, though, it had been the special projects quilt which had shifted Gena's attitude. The quilt had been designed and pieced by school girls in Africa. According to the attached card, it was one of several quilts that were currently touring the United States to raise money so that young girls could go to school. These girls would have more than a blanket when they finished their quilts. They were actually sewing towards their future.

Gena looked at her mother, an arm around her grandmother as they looked at a stack of fabric matching and discarding the different pieces. It wasn't about sewing, it wasn't about getting out of town for the day, it wasn't even about gathering and storing as many supplies as possible. It was about spending time with other women who understood beauty, who understood the dedication required to create these quilts, and who knew that beyond creating quilts, they were creating community.

Bess, Susan, and Gena emerged from the second set of vendors into the sunshine. While they had been inside the Convention Center, the rain had lifted

completely and the sun returned. The plaza guarded by the levees was still crowded with women, but Gena could pick out the different conversations. Most were buzzing about classes they had taken, projects they were working on, or the prize-winning quilts they liked best. Susan put her arm around her daughter.

“Ready to head home?”

“Duh, I thought you’d never ask.”

Susan hugged her as she and her own mother smiled at each other over Gena’s head. They walked back through the opening in the levee toward the car, as the chattering behind them grew more distant, they reentered the real world that had been kept at bay for a few hours.

## Living with a Samba Beat

I balanced the salad on my lap as Nate took the corner a little faster than I would have had I been driving. I hoped I wasn't advertising my small town upbringing with this pea and ramen noodles salad. Definitely Midwestern, but still delicious, so who cared? It's not like I'm competing, right? Gabby had said a salad would be great when I had made the offer. I had considered checking a few recipe websites for something more exotic and had decided that it would be better to bring an old faithful than to experiment with something that might have fallen flat. Now I wondered. I glanced at Nate. He really was too good looking to be unattached.

I had known Nate for four years. We had even taken salsa classes together one semester. He, of course, was a natural dancer, while I never learned how to keep time. In the four years that I had known him, he had dated sixteen women that I knew about. I didn't bother to count those "Ohmigod, who did I bring home" stories that he told in the early days of our friendship. I suppose it would be patronizing to comment that he was growing up in his dealings with women, but in some ways, he really was.

"I'm glad you came along."

Nate turned briefly and grinned. "I wouldn't miss this!"

"What does that mean?" I wondered for a moment whether I should be glad that he was coming along.

"C'mon, I just mean, Gabby, Jimmy, Gabby's new live-in; James, Gabby's Ex; and you, Gabby's Ex's new squeeze."



I squinted, "Don't call me a squeeze."

Nate just grinned and turned back to the windshield. Of course Gabby would find this neighborhood. On the edge of gentrification it was safe but not yet out-priced. The brick homes were well cared for and differentiated by awnings, flower beds, and a few statues, some religious, some just silly, or small picket fences here and there, all of the houses proclaiming owners who cared about the neighborhood. Last year, I got lost a few blocks farther down and the neighborhood really changes character.

Nate pulled into the driveway of 1264, a small brick house like its neighbors but adorned by a trellis of clematis that shielded the porch from the driveway. I noticed that a few bees still hovered over the flowers despite the evening hour. They must have been compensating for the early rain, returning to finish collection after hours.

"Are you sure this is it?" I asked Nate, leaning down to look towards the porch.

Nate turned his left hand palm up, "Yes, 1264." He turned the palm with the penned address toward me, of course he'd written it on his hand, and flashed that ever present grin.

I shifted the salad bowl, yanked the car door open, and then wished that I had thought to pull the car visor down for a quick mirror check. Never mind, that move would have earned a smirk from Nate and I had to admit that I wouldn't have done more than comb my fingers through my hair anyway. Instead, I closed the car door with my hip and joined Nate for the walk up the drive.

"Cute house," Nate noted as the front door swung open and Gabby stepped onto the porch to greet them. Even a June Cleaver apron looked appropriate on that woman. How did she do it? Brazilian and more secure in her femininity than I'll ever be, Gabriela Maria Santos Gilberto elicited admiration and desire without expecting or asking for it. A blonde, she would have been as exotic and sought after in Rio as she was in Kansas City.

"Bem-vindo mios amigos!" She trilled, stopping to kiss Nate on each cheek and then repeating the ritual with me. "Ooh, I love ramen salad! It is so Midwestern American!"

She waved us into the living room which opened directly from the front door. I recognized the curtains hanging at the windows. Each window was adorned with a swag made from different vintage fabric, different colors and patterns but somehow they matched. The furniture was eclectic, an old brocade couch the centerpiece. A velvet throw probably hid a threadbare spot but still looked as if it had been casually thrown over the back of the sofa a few moments ago. I also recognized the floor rug from the apartment that Gabby had shared with James. Funny, I hadn't noticed its absence in his apartment. In the apartment the rug had only covered the floor. In this room, it tied the parts together. The rich burgundies connected the couch, the corner desk, the leather chair, and the more contemporary side chair to each other creating a room that invited visitors to stay.

James walked into the living room leaving a door swinging behind him that gave tantalizing views of the kitchen with each swing. It seemed to tease

with an invitation to enter, only to rescind the invitation with a backswing. I guess I wasn't surprised to find my boyfriend cooking in his ex's kitchen. I disliked that word "boyfriend" but "lover" seemed so intimate and it was too early for partner. Had I known he would be cooking (something which I should have known when he said he would meet us here) I could have asked for salad suggestions. As he stepped through that magic door, grinning widely, and wiping his hands on a kitchen towel, I wondered what label he would choose, friend, lover, significant other. He patted Gabby on the shoulder before leaning over to peck my cheek and take the salad from my hands.

"Hi, sweetheart, did you have trouble finding us?"

I would have liked more than a peck at that moment, although public displays of affection weren't our normal pattern. Nate reached out to shake James' hand, causing him to juggle the salad a bit before throwing the towel on top of it to free up his hand.

"Your directions were perfect," Nate answered. "You were right about turning at the gas station that's not a gas station. It did make sense when we saw it."

I wiped my now empty hands against my skirt feeling overdressed yet again. I had spent three hours at the mall, two more hours mixing and matching, and I still didn't feel like I had achieved that thrown together look that Gabby wears everyday. Once, I had rushed to the hospital at 2:00 am because a friend had been in a car wreck and there was Gabby in the waiting room looking like she

had already slept eight hours and stopped at the salon before arriving at the emergency room.

“You look pretty tonight. Is that skirt new?” I hadn’t noticed that James was still standing beside me.

“Yes, I wasn’t sure I was going to keep it.”

“Keep it. It’s pretty. I’ll bet it matches that dark pink turtleneck that you wear in the Fall. I better get back to the kitchen.” James turned around and stepped back through the swinging door allowing a whiff of something spicy to sneak back through to the living room. I watched the door still imagining James filling it and thinking about that invitation – come in, stay out, come in, no... Tall and slight, he had ducked his head as if he might not have fit through the door. I could imagine such a bow made to the oven in thanks for its perfect functioning. It was the same gesture that he gives me when he’s amused, leaning his head closer, almost resting his forehead against the top of my curls.

Gabby twirled to follow him waving toward the couch. “Have a seat; Jimmy will be back in a minute. We decided that we needed some Galliano for dessert. Do you like anise?” She smiled, “of course you do! Who doesn’t?”

Actually, I don’t. But then Gabby never remembered that. I would drink a toast, that’s what well-brought-up Midwestern girls do. “Are you sure you don’t need some help?” I asked.

“No, James has it under control. That man sure knows how to woo a woman with good food.” She winked and was gone through the swinging door. I just hoped that he wasn’t wooing Gabby this evening. I knew I was being

ridiculous. James and Gabby knew enough about each other to choreograph their conversations, and both claimed to have moved comfortably back into friendship mode.

Nate stepped to the mantel and picked up a small sculpture. "Is this some of James' work?"

I moved closer. "Hmm, I wondered where that had gotten to. I hadn't realized he had given it to Gabby." James would always be a starving artist. His work rarely moved beyond his studio because of his attachment to it. I tried not to be hurt that this piece was here. I really loved this particular sculpture, an abstract of Sisyphus that conveyed the tension of the story in a small bronze form. Had I ever told him how much I admire this sculpture? Would it have made a difference? Most people misunderstood the myth of Sisyphus, remembering only the curse that forced him to eternally roll the rock up the hill. Somehow they forgot that it was his own treachery that placed him on that hill. I started to stroke the soft curves of the muscled back when the front door opened.

"Galliano Man! And with bag in hand, we can assume that you were successful." Nate placed Sisyphus back on the mantel and stepped toward Jimmy.

Jimmy grinned and pulled the tall bottle from the bag. It caught the light and twinkled as he passed it to Nate who lifted it higher to catch a final ray before the sun sank behind the house across the street. The men clasped each other as if they had been estranged and suddenly come to an understanding. As they pulled apart, Jimmy looked toward me, and pulled me into their circle.

"Shawny, glad you could make it. I hope Gabby's been sharing James."

“Actually, he’s been engaged in the kitchen since we arrived. I figure that once again I’ll just enjoy the meal he’s fixed as compensation for his absence. Dinner smells good.” I smiled my reflexive Midwestern smile. I wondered if Jimmy ever called Nate “Natey.”

“Well, then we must join them in the kitchen,” Jimmy steered both of us through the swinging door.

My relief at finally being invited into the inner sanctum was short-lived. We moved through the door just as James held the spoon to Gabby’s lips. The intimacy of the moment struck me, but when the other two men seemed unaware that they had interrupted anything, I decided that I was just being silly.

Jimmy flipped the light switch, expanding the light beyond the stove hood that had backlit the scenario of a few seconds before, opening the room to include the rest of us. James and Gabby giggled and stepped away from each other prompting me to wonder again if I was letting my imagination and knee-jerk jealousy get the better of me. Nate leaned over the pot that they had just sampled and inhaled deeply.

“Mmm, smells fabulous. How much longer?”

“So impatient! Ah, Jimmy, you found the Galliano? Nate, why don’t you set the table?” Gabby turned to the drawer and started pulling silverware out to hand to Nate. I took the silverware from Gabby and moved to the table in the corner.

“I’ll do this. I’d rather be useful.” Nothing makes me feel more like a fifth wheel than standing around watching everybody else work. I laid the

silverware and returned to the cupboard for plates. They were to the right of the sink, logical or set up by James? Logical, of course, yet the house seemed to mirror James' style more than Jimmy's. After setting the table, I looked around the kitchen for Jimmy's presence. The table that held the phone was stacked with magazines, the top issue a Sierra Club Magazine. Not much by themselves, but at least the magazines offered some proof that Jimmy lived here.

Jimmy wore his Minnesota heritage proudly. His idea of the perfect weekend involved The Boundary Waters between the United States and Canada, a sleeping bag light enough to backpack and warm enough to handle a temperature drop, good fishing, and a bear encounter close enough for photos but distant enough for safety. Conversely, Gabby professed that any town without a good hairdresser, an authentic Thai restaurant, and a third thing that she would identify as it came to mind (sometime it was a Neiman Marcus, another time a grocery store that sold pate) was as close to the wild as she ever hoped to experience. They seemed to have found common ground in enough places to make living together not only work, but work well.

I sat down and couldn't help but watch the men hover around Gabby. It reminded me of the bees circling the clematis on the porch. These drones were certainly no less graceful or purposeful. James remained at the stove, moving back and forth to add spices and ladle from pot and pan to serving dishes. Nate leaned against the counter, drinking occasionally from his wine glass and shifting from time to time to peer into a pot or accept a light touch across the shoulder or back from Gabby. Jimmy moved from stove to table with the serving dishes,

dancing around Gabby, each time brushing a kiss or offering a caress as he maintained the waltz between stove and table. The laughter rose and fell as if with a breeze as they bantered back and forth, offering advice or poking fun at one another. Occasionally, I interjected comments, but the ballet being performed by the others was more compelling than the conversation.

I don't mean to imply that the conversation was flat. It rolled from laughter at this or that silliness to reflections on someone or someplace that was no longer part of our world. We covered several topics of The Big Three – Best Restaurant, Most Useless Professor, Worst Shopping Experience. As always, the speaker would choose the first two and leave the third to be chosen when it arose. Eventually, the food flowed to the table, carried on the waves of chatter, rising and falling as the dishes were passed and the spoons clicked against the china and pottery. I considered the quiet intimacy that all five of us shared and almost forgot my earlier discomfort at James' solicitous concern of his former lover. How many men could continue a friendship with a woman who had packed up one night after having announced that she no longer felt passion for him? I glanced toward Jimmy. On the converse side, how many men could invite the ex over for dinner and so obviously enjoy his company and feel no smug sense of conquest at his victory?

Actually, Gabby had brought much of James with her when she moved to this house. The room arrangements and décor reflected James' artistic sensibilities. The earthy base colors of the walls and sofa supported and complemented the bright Brazilian colors that Gabby brought to any environment,



furniture was set at odd angles, and small odds and ends were arranged to create tableaux that Martha Stewart would never have dreamed of but probably would have approved and claimed her own. Where was Jimmy in this house? I imagined the porch in the back of the kitchen cluttered with outdoor gear and Jimmy's two bicycles. Perhaps one of the bedrooms upstairs was furnished in sturdy maple with plaid throws over an old oversized rocking chair, something out of LL Bean or Eddie Bauer. Jimmy was a small town boy raised in a cosmopolitan house. He had attended public school but had all of the polish of a prep school grad. He was at home in the field during pheasant season, and could clean up to attend the symphony. I had to admit, that despite the lack of material proof of his presence, Jimmy seemed to own this space. No one could accuse James of keeping a presence through his designs; and certainly Gabby would fill whatever space she occupied.

I watched Jimmy and James lean toward each other, almost conspirators as Gabby waved ineffectually at both of them.

"You are both incorrigible! How was I to know that there were no buses after 1:00 in the morning?"

I laughed, as I always did at this story, "thank goodness you didn't know or I might never have met you!" It was easy to forget that I had met Gabby first, and only later met James. I had been working late that night and stopped to pick up the young woman trudging back to campus from the other side of town. Gabby might have known that walking alone at 2:00 in the morning was dangerous, but with no buses, she had no choice. Typical of Gabby, she had been

at a party, decided that it was no longer amusing, and left with a dramatic flourish. It was only after standing at the bus stop for twenty minutes that she realized her mistake. Returning to the party to arrange a ride home would have been logical and certainly understood by the partiers, but unthinkable for Gabby. She had gratefully accepted a ride from a stranger, deciding that accepting a ride from me would certainly be less humiliating than returning to the party and less dangerous than waiting for an offer from whoever came along next.

Although I don't always operate at Gabby's speed, I've never regretted joining her circle. An introduction to Gabby is an introduction to an established community. Gabby collects people like my grandmother collected aluminum pie pans, old magazines, and plastic margarine bowls. After all, one never knows when one might come up short-handed. Yet Gabby's collection produces a choir, not a cacophony, a folk dance, not a riot. When I first met James, I wondered if he existed outside of Gabby's shadow. So much of who he was and what he did seemed to be determined by what Gabby wanted and needed. As I spent more time with them, I realized that he managed to express himself perfectly well, in more subtle colors. I wouldn't have considered the rightness of my own match with James had Gabby not suggested that the two of us should try dating instead of just hanging around as friends.

Nate, on the other hand, had once told the group that Gabby was exactly the dangerous type of woman to whom he was attracted. This was after he had invited her to an expensive, once-in-a-lifetime concert. She had accepted the invitation but as a generous offer from someone who just happened to have an

extra ticket. I do give him credit for at least trying to exact an evening kiss from her. According to him, at the end of the evening, she had performed the typical Brazilian good-bye to a friend kiss trilling “Muitos obregados, Caro” – Thanks a lot sweetie – before she danced through the door still humming the band’s final encore song. On the night that he conceded her danger, he had added that he knew that she would never stay with him and, since he wouldn’t survive the exit, he would never risk the entrance. At the time, she had thought he was being melodramatic, courtesy of the wine. Gabby had leaned over him that night and promised her undying love, if he would only commit himself to her wholeheartedly, immediately before she shook him by his ears and called him a silly man.

Gabby had traded James for Jimmy, caution for spontaneity, emotional stability for minor unpredictability, unemployed artist for fully employed photographer. James was gentle and calm. Jimmy was ebullient and fun. One night when the car had blown a tire on the way to a party, Gabby had flounced out of the front seat and threatened to walk the rest of the way, James had immediately tried to placate her, telling her to wait, it would only be a few minutes. Jimmy, in the meantime, flagged down another car, arranged a ride, and as soon as Gabby and I were in the other car, started changing the tire. I wondered if any of the three of them appreciated the irony of the names. Nate had once made a joke about monogrammed towels, and Gabby had reminded him that such things were only gifted for weddings, which at this point was not part of any discussion.

And what had James traded for? I knew I shouldn't ask the question but it regularly nagged. Had he found the antithesis of Gabby? Midwestern boring? Had he consciously chosen me, a woman who was beige to Gabby's Brazilian flamboyance?

"I'm so glad that you picked up Gabby that night, or we might never have found each other," he whispered.

Gabby reclaimed the conversation, "Well, that is fine but now what are we going to do to find the perfect partner for Nate!"

James nuzzled my ear and I smiled, reassured. The ballet would continue into the next movement as Nate offered his contribution, again proclaiming that the woman was out there somewhere, but he was enjoying the search too much to settle for one woman. Besides, he would add, his heart already belonged to Gabby and her replacement would be difficult to find. Jimmy would then open the Galliano, and proclaim a toast to true love, good friends, and a third thing that would reflect the evening's conversation. I leaned into James' arms as Jimmy rose from the table to find the Galliano.

### A Matter of Choice

Sara liked being in the sanctuary in late afternoon. The setting sun flowed through the stained glass catching every mote of dust, emphasizing the last dance before dusk. Morning was lovely, especially with the choir singing, perhaps with a brass chorale, or even just the organ filling the church with music and glory. But morning was about promise. About sending the flock forward with a good word that would sustain them through the week. Propel them to be better, to do good. Afternoon meant that evening approached. Everything quiet, settling. Unless there was a committee meeting, a late night call, an emergency, a death, the evening was hers for wandering, reading, or even sitting in front of the television and having a cup of tea with Lauren.

She looked up toward the light fixtures. Even this modest small town church had been built with God's glory in mind. As always, the builder had dreamed of gothic greatness and the soft brass crowns were unnecessary in the afternoon light. They would have added a golden illumination to the polished wood of the pews if she bothered to raise the dimmer and artificially light the sanctuary. They would also have drowned out the beauty of the swirling motes flitting through the red, green, blue, and yellow rays of light. She thought of Abbot Suger, one of the fathers of gothic greatness. He was the first to equate the light filtering through the stained glass to the presence of God.

Sara heard the gentle click as someone came through the door behind the chancel. She considered scooting farther over on the top step of the altar hoping that whoever had walked in wouldn't see her in the dimming light, but she knew

that anyone coming in the backdoor was probably looking for her and knew her well enough to know where to find her.

“I knew you’d be here.” Lauren was standing by the pulpit. “This really is a pretty sanctuary. Sometimes I think you went to seminary just so that you wouldn’t be accused of loitering in stained glass filled rooms.”

Lauren was a case worker for a rural outreach program. When she had agreed to an itinerant life with Sara, she had worried that her career would be spent moving from useless job to useless job but instead she had found that as a licensed social worker, some agency was always shorthanded and thrilled to hire her. In college, she and Sara had both volunteered at the Women’s Center and although she had never envisioned herself as a pastor’s wife, she couldn’t imagine a life without Sara. Sara was the gentle rain to her thunderstorm, the placid pool to her bubbling spring, the graceful waltz to her frenetic polka.

While Sara had been one of the pillars of the Women’s Center, Lauren had survived her undergraduate years thanks to the support that she had found at the Women’s Center. It had been women from the Center who had encouraged her to stay in school when she was too homesick to go to class. It had been women from the Center who had cheered her decision to major in pre-law so that she could become a crusader for children. It had been women from the Center who had cheered her again when she had changed her major to women’s studies because she loved the immersion in all things female. And, the women from the Center had cheered her yet again, when she had changed to her final major, social work and stayed there completing her masters degree, so that she could try to affect the

world that women and children inhabit. More important than the never ending support from a variety of steadfast women, Lauren had met Sara at The Women's Center.

Lauren had floundered through her studies, changing direction as she tried to decide who she was and what she wanted her place to be in the world. Sara, on the other hand, had been sure of herself from the moment that she had started her bachelor's degree, perhaps from the moment that she had begun kindergarten. Sometimes it seemed to Lauren, that Sara had known herself from the womb. The only moments of doubt that Lauren had ever perceived in her lover revolved around her decision to pursue graduate studies. Sara knew what she was called to do, she was just unsure of her ability to achieve it.

Lauren had once questioned her own motives during those moments of Sara's hesitation. Did she love Sara for herself or for the potential for drama that surrounded her? It had reminded Lauren of the crusades she had studied during her women's studies days, Mrs. Pankhurst chaining herself to the gates of parliament, Marie Curie a groundbreaker in science when few women shared lab tables, and every other "first," lawyers, doctors, politicians. Ironically, it had been in her more cynical moments that Sara's complicated choices most appealed to Lauren's romantic nature. Fight the good fight! Break ground so that those in the future would not even know a battle had been fought! Now that she loved Sara more deeply than she would have thought possible, Lauren understood the deep pain that the conflict caused Sara, and remembered her own embrace of the drama with embarrassment.

It was a surprise to Lauren that she and Sara had survived the final two years of undergraduate studies together. Thinking about it now, Lauren wondered why Sara hadn't walked out in disgust at her histrionics. Sometimes she needed a little drama, and Sara wasn't capable of providing it. Lauren had stormed out more than once, and been tearfully welcomed back by Sara, who seemed willing to accept the explosions as part of life with Lauren. Perhaps it was true that opposites filled the voids in each other. If that were the case, Sara had certainly filled the voids in Lauren's life. Bouncing between majors had only been a symptom of Lauren's journey to find herself. She had even wondered if her sexual orientation was just another symptom of that search. Once she met Sara, she knew that it wasn't a lifestyle choice but the way that she was wired. She and Sara were soul mates.

For Sara, Lauren brought sparkle to her sober world. Sara's joy sang in a lower register. It lifted as a quiet undertone, melodious but easy to miss in the frenetic tempo to which life usually resonated. If asked, her friends would identify Sara as a happy, centered person, and they would be right. Little ruffled her, and her concern for the world around her was deep and genuine. For Sara there had been no blinding light on the road to Damascus or anywhere else. God hadn't appeared to her in a dream or in the clouds. Her parents, though church goers, had never expressed their desire for a child to pursue the ministry. Sara just knew. Only her orientation had raised insecurity. She was brought up in a main-line protestant denomination, one that emphasized works and social justice but hadn't embraced the concept of homosexuality as part of God's plan. She



decided to stay true to her upbringing and try to balance her personal life within the closeted parameters she was offered. Ironically, although Lauren hadn't planned it, she had become that perfect pastor's wife that rural churches adored. She was open with parishioners, sang in the choir, and made a blue ribbon pie for any occasion.

The additional years of graduate school, one hundred and eighty miles apart, had been harder than either had expected. By then, Lauren had thought that she was grown-up enough to be independent, and Sara was unprepared for the depth of her dependence on Lauren. There had been summer nights when Lauren had shivered from the cold of Sara's absence, winter nights when Sara had burned from the ache of loneliness. Each had even questioned whether she should dump the degree or dump her partner when the loneliness overwhelmed her. Yet, a phone call or better yet a visit, confirmed that both goals were worth pursuing. A few years apart were a small investment for a lifetime together. Each spring they had debated whether one or the other should take the summer off so that they could be together and each spring they had decided that it would be better to take summer classes and graduate more quickly. Lauren would travel to Kansas City, or Sara back to Iowa, to grab a few moments together between homework and internship obligations.

Now, they were in yet another small town, Sara serving yet another small congregation, and Lauren working at the job she loved, but in yet another agency. This one had the advantage of maternity leave. They had saved every extra penny for the last eight years. Usually, they pretended the money was for the big trip,

Alaska, Europe. They had dipped into it four years ago to replace Lauren's car and would probably be doing the same for Sara's next year. But each knew that they were saving for their child. They rarely said it out loud, it only provoked discord, timing was wrong, politics were unfriendly, but they both understood the shared goal.

Even the District Superintendent knew that Lauren wanted to be a mother and Sara a parent. He supported their cause but was hindered by church policy. When the Bishop had first raised the possibility of Sara's appointment in his district, he had expected Sara to be one of those radical "your horizons just need to be broadened" type of feminist pastor. The Bishop, a woman who had been appointed from Illinois, and thus was new to this church conference, had been clear that she would not force Sara and Lauren upon him. A good soldier, he had appointed her to a church in his district and, before the end of the year, was a regular at the parsonage dinner table.

Sara turned toward her partner and smiled. "Caught. You know me too well. I just needed some direct conversation and the office was getting smaller as I sat there."

Lauren smiled in return. "I'll bet. What did you decide?"

"I decided that maybe I don't have a choice but I still can't accept it."

Lauren sat down beside Sara and put her arm around her. "I'm sorry. You know I'll support you either way. I was just upset this morning."

"I know. Really, I do. I sit here soaking up color and believe that I am a child of God. How could I not be? And then I think why not play the game? The

Bishop knows that you're my roommate and just appoints me to congregations who will also pretend that we're only roommates."

"And the problem with that is"

"Remember the joke about numbering the jokes because you've heard them so often?"

Lauren hugged her. "This is argument 42?"

"I don't know. Yes, no, yes, no. It's not just my career; it's a calling from God."

"And I'm not just your roommate; I'm your soul mate, right?"

"You shouldn't even have to ask."

"Come on Sara, let's go home. I don't want to restart this argument. I fixed you dinner."

Sara hugged her. "I love you." She laid her head on Lauren's shoulder as Lauren pulled her closer. "She called today. The Bishop, I mean, she called today."

Lauren paused. "And what did the 'Pastor's Pastor' have to say?"

"I know it's hard to be nice to her, but she is the boss, you know."

"Okay," Lauren tried again, "What's the word from the Head of the Church in these parts?"

Sara snorted. "I'm glad that at least you get along with Harrison."

"That's because the District Superintendent, the Right Reverend Harrison Moncure, is a real pastor. a Christian who truly cares for his flock. The Bishop? I

think she forgets sometimes she can't hear God's voice over her own proud sermonizing."

"Hmm, anyway, the Bishop wants to attend the next Pastor-Parish Relations Committee."

Lauren frowned. "Taking a congregational poll to be sure that we're not offending anyone? Where's that DS who I was just complimenting?"

"Harrison isn't aware of the Bishop's planned visit. I asked if she had invited him, and she said no, but I was welcome to invite him."

"That's not a bad idea. At least he'll balance the attitude a bit. Did you call Vince or had she already alerted the Chair of the PPR Committee?"

"I haven't called him. He'll take it in stride, I'm sure."

"Vince still quotes from the sermon you gave at his father's funeral."

Sara smiled again. "Vince won't be a problem. That was a damn fine sermon though wasn't it?"

"One of your best," Lauren reached down for Sara's hand.

Still smiling, Sara held Lauren's hand for a moment before heaving herself up. They stood for a few more minutes enjoying the last rays of the sun before turning together and walking back through the door that Lauren had just entered.

Sara had served the small church for three years. Typical of the denomination, she would probably serve another three to five. When she considered this, Sara marveled that they had accepted her so lovingly. As they left the church and crossed the small parking lot they dropped hands and Sara turned to look back at the church.

“These people have been good to us.”

“They support you.”

“They like you.”

“Well, of course! What’s not to like? I even sing in the choir, despite the Fields Sisters.” Lauren leaned into Sara as they reached the backdoor of the parsonage. “Come on, I have dinner ready and you better eat something before choir practice.”

“Someday, I want to serve a large enough congregation that I don’t have to sing in the choir. You know, nobody’s making you sing in the choir.”

Lauren looked at Sara sideways. “Oh, of course not, you sing because you like it, and I sing because I have this lovely soprano that is my gift to God! Oh yeah, and without my voice the choir would still be stuck with some two part kinda’ harmony that half the congregation prepares for by turning off their hearing aids. And, it gives the Fields an opportunity to be truly righteous.”

Sara lifted her shoulders in a deep breath. “Lauren, what do you want me to do? At least those two small town bigots still show up for choir and still tithe. There are a few that we’ll never meet who are just waiting for the next pastor to be appointed here.”

Lauren yanked open the oven door and pulled the casserole out of the oven.

“Every time those bitchy sisters snub me, I want to grab you in a lip lock and confirm their worst fantasies.”

“Don’t you mean their best?” Sara teased.

“I’m serious. To avoid controversy, we pretend that nobody knows that we’re really a couple, and we still pay for their narrow mindedness. They win on both sides. We stay in the closet and still get slammed.” Lauren moved to the refrigerator and pulled out a salad.

Sara stepped behind her at the table and wrapped her arms around Lauren.

“I’ll talk to Harrison before the Bishop arrives. Somebody’s gotta’ take a stand. Maybe it is supposed to be me.”

Lauren turned around in Sara’s arms, trying to shift her mood for Sara’s sake. “Honey, it’s just choir practice. I’ll suck it up. If it’s not time, it’s not time; but one of these days, we’re going to have kids. Then the church’s going to have to deal with it whether they like it or not.”

Sara kissed her softly. “I know. We better eat or we’ll be late.”

Lauren released her, still not happy, despite her deliberate attempts to be upbeat. “Whatever.”

Sara washed her hands and set the table.

“Ella dropped by today,” Sara tried changing the subject.

“I wondered where the bulbs had come from; lilies?” Sara nodded and Lauren continued, “Did you ask her opinion?”

Sara sucked in her breath. “I was ready to, but then I just,” Sara put her fork down. “I couldn’t risk hearing a no from her.”

It was Lauren’s turn to catch her breath. “Why would she not support us, support you?”

Sara picked up her plate and turned to the sink. It was easier talking to the window. "I do think she'll support us, but her heart belongs to the church, to the community. She may not be willing to put that at risk for somebody who's been here three years and at most will be here another five. She has to face these people every day for the rest of her life. It's a lot to ask."

"Sara! Why are we even talking about making a stand if you don't have the cajones, excuse me, ovaries, to even ask for support from people who love you?"

"This is my entire life that we're talking about, Lauren."

"No, this is our entire life that we're talking about...Sara!"

Both women paused. They had teased each other earlier about numbered arguments, and each knew the responses as if scripted, yet seemed locked into a dialogue that both knew could at best end in a stand off, at worst could leave each woman wondering if the relationship was worth such anguish.

Lauren rose from the table, "We better get to choir practice." She placed her plate in the sink as Sara wrapped the leftovers and put them in the refrigerator. They left the kitchen and walked side by side yet measurably separate across the parking lot to the church.

The greens and blues in the window closest to the chancel sparkled announcing the presence of at least one choir member. The grey Ford Taurus and the red Ranger pick-up now in the parking lot identified the early arrivals as Diana, the choir director and June the alto, or at least June who came closest to singing the alto parts. As with most small congregations, the group had more

heart than talent. Diana felt like she had been coaxing music out of the same seven or eight voices for years. She had watched children grow old enough to join the choir only to leave for college or a job in the city. Occasionally, one of those children might marry locally and remain in the choir but that happened more rarely now.

Diana and June turned and greeted Sara and Lauren as they walked through the church's backdoor. Lauren hugged each woman in turn as Sara moved behind the chancel to gather the choir music. Sara marveled at how easily her partner converted the duo into a trio. She wondered again what it would be like to live an entire life with the same people. Lauren was so comfortable with these women that a newcomer might have mistaken Lauren for a local at that moment.

The door opened again and the chatter of the Fields Sisters could be heard before they entered the room. Julia had been Mrs. Walter (Skip) Mason for thirty-two years and her younger sister Janet had married Fred Sanders two years later but both would always be The Fields Sisters. Skip and Julia farmed the Fields homestead and Fred and Janet had bought the adjacent farm when the Penners had sold out and moved to Des Moines to live near their kids and grandkids. Following the sisters were Mr. and Mrs. O'Donnell. Although they were only a few years older than Diana, even she called them Mr. and Mrs.

As soon as the Fields sisters saw Sara and Lauren, they stopped chattering and put on their church faces. The O'Donnell's waved hello and then turned to Diana to talk about the weather as they removed their jackets.



Finally, Barbara the church organist and accompanist arrived carrying an empty casserole dish. "Here Lauren, thanks so much for the turkey tetrazini. I don't think Jim would have starved but it was thoughtful while I was out of town."

Lauren laughed, took the dish, and placed it on the front pew. "Don't let me forget that," she nodded to Sara who nodded back.

"I suppose we should get started," Diana tried. She knew it would take a few attempts before the choir would fall into line. Realistically, she could just run through the anthem ten minutes before each service began but she needed the pretense of practice to believe that they really had a choir.

"Lauren, why don't you run through that solo once before we try the refrain," Diana asked.

Diana enjoyed the years when a pastor and his wife brought musical skills with them and made do when they didn't. Lauren's clear soprano was a welcome gift that the congregation looked forward to each Sunday. Diana took advantage of Lauren's willingness to sing and chose music that highlighted her talents. The entire choir, all six of the locals and Sara, filled in beautifully behind and around her. The forty-five minute practice moved quickly once Diana had them under control. They ran through the three hymns for the upcoming Sunday before Sara collected the music and placed it back behind the chancel.

"That was wonderful folks," Diana praised the choir. "I think we're as ready as we'll ever be."

June closed the piano lid and rose from the bench. Julia and Janet Fields made a show of placing their music on the chancel and saying good-bye to each

member before moving down the aisle to the door. Lauren called a good-bye that neither woman acknowledged.

“I don’t know why you bother Lauren,” chided June. “They’ll never change. You should have seen them when the Summers were here. Mrs. Summers is Korean and that just chapped them to the end of the day.”

“Now that makes me feel better!” responded Lauren.

“What’s going on? You seem a little edgy tonight Lauren,” Diana asked.

“It’s just the same old same old,” said Sara.

“Are you still thinking of taking a stand with the church?” asked June.

“It really shouldn’t be our business,” Diana interjected, “but what you do will affect the church and we’ll be here long after you’re gone no matter how things turn out.”

“I know. That’s part of what’s kept me on my knees for so many hours,” frowned Sara. “I love this church but I’m tired of the pretense. Somebody’s got to take a stand.”

“This conversation again?” June sighed, “Don’t get us wrong, we’ll support you but there’s some in the church who won’t. They won’t be able to pretend ignorance if you take this step. I don’t know how many more we can afford to lose.”

“We’re not telling you anything you don’t already know,” picked up Diana. “but there’s lots of folks accepted your appointment as a sort of experiment. They were willing to try because they like the District Superintendent but now, if you do this,”

“I know,” Sara held up her hands. “You all treat me with so much care, and Lauren,”

“But why you? You and Lauren have a good life don’t you? Why risk that just to make a point?” asked Diana.

Lauren started to speak but Sara put her hand on Lauren’s arm.

“I haven’t made a final decision but I promise that if I do go through with it and it looks like it will damage this church I’ll resign first.”

“We don’t want you to resign, but we can’t afford a split,” Diana reminded her.

“I know. I wish life weren’t so complicated,” Sara answered.

“Forgive me Diana, but I think Sara’s going to misunderstand.” June turned to Sara. “We know that you’ll do what’s right but we love this church and worry about being sacrificed for a greater good. I feel wrong even saying this out loud.”

“No, there’s nothing wrong with protecting the community that you’ve built. All I can ask is that you trust me and thank you for the support that you can give,” said Sara.

June reached over and hugged Sara before picking up her music and walking to the door. Diana also hugged her.

“You’re very special to us. I’ll keep you in my prayers,” she assured Sara.

“Thanks, I appreciate it, really,” said Sara.

Lauren put her arm around Sara and the three of them moved down the aisle breaking apart to turn out the lights before passing through the doors. Sara

turned to lock up and looked upward at the small rose window over the door. These people had invested their lives, their souls into this congregation. What right did she have to turn it upside down?

She thought again of Ella. Every church relied on the support of the women. There were always men involved; accepting the positions of authority, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Chairman of the Pastor Parish Relations Committee, President of the Men's Group, but it was the women who kept the church together. They organized the funeral meals, taught the Sunday School classes, and kept the gears greased so that the men could make the Big Decisions, and keep the church going on the path that the women had designed.

Although Sara cringed whenever Lauren used the term "Holy Mother" she had to agree that every church had at least one matriarch who carried the wisdom of the community. Hollywood might make fun of rural America but rural America had retained a veneration of the community's elders, particularly the women. Ella would laugh at the designation which only strengthened her position as matriarch of this congregation. She rarely spoke, but when she did, her opinions carried weight. She had born children, raised children, and even buried a child. She and her husband had farmed his family's property for as long as anyone could remember. Both Sara and Lauren knew that without Ella's support, the church would crumble, and without her endorsement, they couldn't make a stand from this congregation.

Sara heard Lauren in the shower the next morning and realized that she had slept through the alarm. She got up and padded to the kitchen to start the

coffee. She decided to make a pot of malt-o-meal to surprise Lauren. She was just putting the lid on it to set when Lauren walked into the kitchen.

“Aren’t we domestic this morning? Trying to get back in my good graces?” Lauren laughed at her.

“I decided that comfort food would be a good choice this morning.”

Lauren kissed her partner. “An excellent choice. You’d better get in the shower, love,” she chided Sara.

Sara hugged her and headed up the stairs. By the time she returned to the kitchen, Lauren was gathering her purse and briefcase together.

“Busy day?” asked Sara.

“The usual, you?”

“I need to drop by the hospital and see Sam but otherwise, the usual,” answered Sara.

Sara followed Lauren to the door for a good-bye kiss and then sat down at the table with a bowl of malt-o-meal. She looked through the kitchen window to the church across the parking lot and could see the sagging gutters around the lower edge of the roof. She sighed. That would be an expensive repair. She hoped that she could raise the money. As she watched, a white pick-up with ladders mounted above the truck bed pulled into the lot. Sara gulped the last two bites of her malt-o-meal, placed the bowl in the sink, and pulled on her jacket as she walked toward the man making notes on a clipboard.

“May I help you?” she asked when she was behind him.

He stopped writing long enough to hand her a card and then moved toward the back of the church. "Gutters, Siding, and Windows" on the first line, followed by, "You need 'em, We got 'em," and then his name, William James, and his address and phone number.

"Mr. James, are you here for an estimate?"

"Yes, ma'am." He continued making notes on his clipboard and ignored Sara. She followed him around the building. As they rounded back to the parking lot, he tore off the top copy of his form and handed it to Sara. Without another word he walked to his truck.

"Excuse me," Sara started. "But,"

He turned. "Look ma'am, a job's a job and I ain't turnin' it down if you like the price, but I ain't workin' for you. I'm workin' for the church." He nodded his head, climbed into his truck, and drove out of the lot.

Sara stood dumfounded. She had experienced this attitude before but it always surprised her. Forget the hospital. She was the one needing a pastoral visit. It was 9:00 by the time Sara pulled the car out of the garage and drove towards Ella and Frank's place.

Sara felt better just pointed in the direction of the Hansen's 120 acres. Ella and her husband Frank farmed a small plot on an unpaved lane just north of the county road. The congregation was evenly divided between those with large spreads and acres of corn, cattle or hog confinements; or smaller holdings that the family used more as supplement than primary income. The Hansens had always

had a smaller spread but had portioned off part of it for their eldest son and his family.

Sara slowed as she turned off the county road. She could have been viewing a Grant Wood painting. The rolling hills looked artificial and the sun belied the chill that still freshened the air at this time of year. Soon the dust would be heavy with heat, oppressive. Now, the green hills celebrated the late Spring. The corn was barely identifiable with small green fluttering leaves, harbingers of the tall dusty stalks they would become later in the summer.

Sara pulled over and rolled down her window. The breeze lifted the papers on the seat beside her. She clapped her hand on them before they spread across the floor.

“If you’ve got a message for me, you’re going to have to be more direct!” Sara checked in the mirror at the road behind her. No movement other than the breeze. She placed her hands on the steering wheel and lowered her head.

“It’s not supposed to be this hard. Struggle yes, doubt yes, but I have faith! I do believe I’m your creature but then why? I did hear the right call, didn’t I? You didn’t get a wrong number did you? Ah, then you wouldn’t be infallible would you?”

Sara laughed at herself. She looked at the papers fluttering more gently at her side now. One was the quote from the gutter man, below that was the funeral bulletin from Del Ramey’s funeral, and underneath that were the notes from her sermon for that funeral. She laughed at herself yet again and put the car in gear.

The Hansen farm represented Ella and Frank's philosophy of life in the same way that Sara's ordination represented hers. Ella railed against young farmers who didn't understand the importance of "choring." She believed that without livestock, farmers forgot what they were about and focused on expensive combines, overextending themselves to buy more acreage to justify those big machines.

Sara wasn't surprised to see Ella standing in the barn door watching her car as it kicked up dust. A small woman, Ella had reached that ageless moment that left her someplace between sixty and eighty. Only the deep freezes of January seemed to slow her down. Her husband Frank matched her timeless quality. His overalls could have been bought in the thirties or the fifties or yesterday. Only his gimme cap was regularly updated depending on which salesman had one handy when Frank needed a new one.

Sara waved and parked the car between the house and the barn. The gravel had washed out a bit but the yard was neat, the bushes trimmed, and the picket fence around the house, though not recently painted, showed the care that had been taken when it had last been touched by a brush.

"Now, don't you go pretendin' that you come by to see me," Ella smiled at Sara.

"Well of course it's you I want to visit. How are the lambs by the way?"

Ella turned back to the barn and Sara followed. She buttoned her jacket as she entered the shadowed building.



In March, Ella's kitchen smelled of wood stove, baby lambs, and home cooking. Sara loved to visit during lambing season. Ella always said that "God's work is in the lambs" and Sara agreed.

"I was just gettin' ready to head them out to the back pasture." Ella led the way to the pens in the far corner. Sara could hear the bleating of the ewes and the answering calls of their lambs. Pansy was sitting patiently at the edge of the gate, tail thumping. Sara reached down and scratched her ear.

"Ready to get to work sweetie?"

"That dog was born to work," answered Ella.

Ella motioned to the dog as she opened the gate. Pansy raced in low around and behind the ewes. They responded and began moving through the gate and into the barn proper. Pansy came around on the other side and started them towards the back door of the barn. Sara didn't see Ella motion but the dog responded as if she had. Ella moved to the right of the small herd as Pansy worked them into the yard. Ella unlatched the second gate and Pansy directed them into the back pasture. They had been grazing in the side yard just off the barn. Their new pasture was greener and enjoyed more sun. They might never show their appreciation but even Sara liked the back pasture best.

"That's amazing. I never get tired of watching Pansy with the sheep."

Sara turned towards Ella. "It's what you always tell me."

Ella chuckled, "Yup, there's a reason that Jesus always talked about his sheep. Dumbest critters in creation. Gotta' tell 'em where to go and how to go, and more than once. Need a good shepherd to keep 'em in line." She turned to

Sara and shaded her eyes. "You're a good shepherd girl. Don't never believe otherwise."

Sara struggled to keep the tears from falling. She turned toward the sheep and leaned on the fence.

"Where's Frank today?"

"Stevensons got a new boar. He couldn't wait anymore, had to check it out for himself."

"I hear he's a bruiser."

"That's the word."

Sara hadn't realized until this moment how much she was relying on Ella's support for what might come. She watched the ewes nosing around the pasture, their lambs nuzzling along behind them. Pansy lay on her haunches just inside the gate.

"You okay Sara?"

"Ella, you were one of the first to sit in the parsonage kitchen and tell me that I was lucky to have a woman like Lauren to take care of me. I can't tell you how much that meant to me, still means to me. I'm really struggling. I want to do right by Lauren and by this congregation, but I can't keep pretending that the denomination really accepts us."

"What does Lauren say?"

"She'll support me either way."

Ella cocked her head and looked at Sara closely.

“Hon, you’re the only one can make that decision. You know that I was baptized in that church and you know how I feel about you and Lauren. What’s God say about it?”

“Oh, that depends on who you ask!”

Ella cocked her head. “I assumed you were going directly to the source!”

“I am. I’m just not getting a clear signal back.”

“Well, keep praying. You know I’ll be on my knees.”

“Thanks, let’s hope the other Christians are praying as sincerely as you do.”

Ella opened the gate and motioned to Pansy. “We’ll be up at the house brewing tea. Join us whenever you’re ready.”

Sara watched Ella reenter the barn and then turned back to the sheep. She tried to pick out the lambs that she had bottle fed, but she lacked Ella’s experience and they all looked alike to her. One of the lambs jumped erratically when another nosed it. That might be the one she had called Greedy. Then again, that little guy that wouldn’t leave his mother’s side could be Greedy. She hadn’t realized that several were already old enough to play. The ewes patiently nuzzled the little ones and returned to grazing. They were so easily lost and Ella and Pansy made it look so easy to keep them safe. She preached that God did the same for his flock, and she truly believed it. However, a little more direction, a divine version of one of Ella’s whacks with a fly swatter, would certainly be helpful at this moment.

Sara turned from the pasture and walked back into the barn. The sun had risen higher since she had come through these doors. The dust twinkled in the dappled rays that leaked through the gaps in the upper loft of the barn. Sara inhaled the fecund smell and thought of Spring.

### Love and Entomology

Ginny sighed and straightened the lab reports before placing them, along with the grade book, into the bottom drawer of her desk. She locked the drawer and rose from her chair. This wasn't the brightest group of ninth graders she'd ever taught, but they weren't the worst either. Six more weeks of school and she tried not to count how many more labs she would lead with this group. Her third hour group was livelier but more easily distracted.

Perhaps she was expecting too much. It just seemed like years since she'd had a group that was bright, engaged, mature, and eager to learn biology, as opposed to those who were either marking time until graduation or taking her class only because they couldn't take chemistry before passing biology. It had always been a challenge redirecting hormonally charged adolescents to the fine study of biology beyond their own bodies (or the bodies that were the current objects of their lust). Ah, Spring when a young man's fancy...Shoot, when a middle-aged teacher's fancy!

Ginny unlocked the closet door and pulled her coat from the hanger. She wouldn't need this much longer. The days were definitely getting warmer. As she reached to the floor of the closet to claim her purse, she heard her classroom door open. She turned just as Laura Espinoza leaned in through the open door.

"Are you going to the happy hour tonight? It's Nedra's last day before starting maternity leave," Laura asked.

Although Ginny liked Laura, a perky young French teacher whom the students adored, Laura also reinforced the Manual of Teacher Stereotypes that popped into Ginny's brain whenever they spent time together. If Laura was the cute, fun one, with the charming accent and flippy hair, that left Ginny as the dried up old maid trying to hide the gray in her hair without looking ridiculous. Ginny was at least twenty-five years older than Laura but the younger woman never seemed to notice or care.

"I don't know," Ginny answered. "I'm not a big one for bars."

"Oh, c'mon, I'll drive. I can only stay for one round anyway, and Nedra can't drink at all. You can tell me about your newest novel on the way over." Laura put her arm around Ginny and steered her from the classroom.

"Oh, my novel, I got another rejection yesterday," said Ginny, allowing Laura to escort her to the parking lot.

"Don't worry. I believe in your writing. I loved that one story about the desert. I could feel the heat rising. I had to refill my drink three times. Your prose is downright steamy and not just because of the desert setting!"

Ginny blushed lightly. "You're a sweetie. If I ever get published, I'll dedicate the book to you. You can compose something naughty in French and we'll leave people guessing."

Ginny followed Laura into The Pub squinting to find their colleagues. She shouldn't have let Laura talk her into this. She felt herself aging just by walking into this Den of Twenty-Somethings. How did women like Laura manage to glide

into whatever setting they placed themselves? Ginny found herself too young for half of the places she spent time in and too old for the other half. The only exception was in the safety of her study. Laura seemed not only to adapt but to blossom in any environment. She really was a chameleon. Ginny smiled slightly realizing that although she meant it as a compliment, Laura might not see it as such.

They could have been blind and found their colleagues. Just as their eyes began to adjust to the dimness, Nedra shrieked with laughter. Laura and Ginny threaded their way through the tables to the corner where their colleagues crowded around three tables jammed into a space for two. It was the usual crowd. Nedra taught English and was flanked by her husband Tim, the band director, on one side, and two fellow English teachers on the other. We do hang with our own species thought Ginny and shook her head. She had been teaching biology way too long when she started classifying her colleagues. But then, they were a family of sorts.

Nedra was reading from a book for new mothers that had been published in the fifties. Tim was blushing so sweetly, Ginny guessed the advice must have been related to sex or breastfeeding. Actually, she thought, most new fathers were probably embarrassed by the entire process.

Laura pulled a chair from an adjacent table for Ginny, pushing her toward it as she moved into a second chair, effectively placing Ginny between herself and the middle school math teacher, Pete Gaston. Ginny smiled weakly at the man on

her left. He returned an identical smile as they simultaneously realized that they had been manipulated. Ginny leaned to the other side of Laura and yes, as she suspected, there sat Laura's handsome husband Alberto, the middle school Spanish teacher. Despite having heard the story of Pete, Ginny, and the Junior High Dance, the Espinozas had tried again at their annual Christmas party to transform Pete and Ginny into a couple. Even then, months after the dance, Pete had been unable to look Ginny in the eye, and Ginny was unwilling to do the work it would have taken to draw him out.

"Would you like a drink?"

Ginny turned back to her left surprised that Pete was speaking to her. "I'll take a cosmopolitan if you see a server."

She was halfway through her drink before the mathematician found the courage to try conversation.

"Excuse me, I heard that praying mantis females don't eat their mates."

Startled, Ginny turned to her left, "I'm sorry?"

"I said; I heard a report that scientists were wrong. The praying mantis doesn't eat her mate once they've mated."

"Hmm. That's interesting. Who completed the study?" As soon as she asked, Ginny knew she had made a mistake. The poor man looked lost.

"Uh, I just heard it on the radio. He said that when left in more natural settings, the female is less aggressive. The scientist thought that perhaps it was the stress of the situation that caused her to eat the male."



"I wonder if that extends to human interaction," Ginny tried.

Once again the man fumbled trying to determine if Ginny was making a joke. Ginny decided to save him from the quicksand.

"I mean, perhaps if the woman feels safe, she won't attack the poor male who can't be anything other than what his genetics dictate." Ginny could tell by the look on Pete's face that he was trying to determine what genetics dictated to men about their behavior. She switched direction.

"How's your algebra class doing this semester?" She remembered that at Laura's Christmas party Pete had gushed about three students who might be contenders for the state contests.

The math teacher blinked his eyes quickly at her and unfolded himself from the protective hunch into which he'd collapsed.

"Oh, thank you for asking," he smiled. "All three qualified for State and we'll be going to the university next week for the competition. We actually stand a chance this year."

"That's exciting," answered Ginny. "I'll have to watch the news for the results. I hope you have something to celebrate."

"Perhaps we could go out and celebrate together," he stammered.

It was Ginny's turn to be surprised. She and Pete had attempted a date once last spring when he had been stuck chaperoning a dance. The plan was to monitor the young gropers and then adjourn for an adult meal afterward. Instead, two of the little gropers had abandoned their attempts to learn more about female

anatomy and instead had opted for experimentation with combustibles. The evening had ended with lights and sirens, two thrilled and only somewhat repentant eighth graders, and one angry math teacher completely covered in soot. Pete had been so befuddled that he had forgotten Ginny's presence. Later, he seemed too embarrassed to call her when he found out that she had caught a ride home with a colleague while he was dealing with the principal, parents, students, and police.

“Well, of course. I'd enjoy that.” What was she thinking? It had been almost a year since she had been on a real date and she hadn't felt any void that needed to be filled. At least she hadn't thought that she had felt a void. Her lack of regret for her quick reply astonished her more than the quick reply had. She supposed that she didn't want him to think that she had ever held the events of that night against him. Even more amazing to Ginny, in response, Pete actually seemed to have stretched to a greater height. She noted the change and wondered how tall he actually was. Her last attempt at dating had been with a man who seemed to shrink.

The previous August a former colleague had been in town for a conference and invited her out to dinner. She had remembered him as a kind and gentle soul with a dedication to his students. What she hadn't remembered was that he was so small and furry, almost a drone-like bumbling bee. He had even seemed to rub his hands continuously together as if cleaning pollen from them. At the end of the

evening when he made his embarrassing offer of "a romp in my hotel room," she had found it difficult to be polite when she told him no.

"Call me when you get home from the competition," Ginny further committed herself. She was going to have to give up cosmopolitans. She couldn't think of any other reason for her eager acceptance of Pete's invitation. Pete looked quite pleased with himself but obviously had no idea what the proper response was to a woman not only accepting an invitation but almost demanding that he keep his word and take her out for a celebration.

Ginny turned back to Laura who was finishing her margarita and gathering her purse. She was planning to keep her promise to leave after one drink. Ginny had enjoyed herself more than she had expected, but she was ready to be at home. She was more comfortable in front of her computer than sitting in any bar making small talk. She wasn't anti-social, just reserved. She thought of Brian's contemptuous departure three years ago, accusing her of channeling all of her energies into "those rotten little adolescents" and when she just stood by passively and watched him pack, he added his scorn for the scenes she created for her unpublished books. She liked to remember herself retorting that if he were half the lover he thought he was, she'd be using him as inspiration rather than using writing as a replacement for what he couldn't seem to give her. In reality, she was pretty sure that she had just stood there as he threw his few belongings into a duffel bag and stalked out the door. Although they had been sharing space for two years, it hadn't taken her long to return to her old patterns.

The kettle whistled just as she slipped her wool “writing” socks on her feet. She poured herself a cup of tea and shuffled into her office. Why was Brian on her mind? One cosmopolitan and she had not only accepted but demanded a date and now she was thinking about Brian. Jeez. He had been so derisive of this room. He called it her Insect Inner Sanctum. The inner wall was covered by built-in bookshelves. Interspersed between the books were gilded easels displaying various insect specimens in small framed boxes. The walls were decorated with naturalist drawings of insects that she had collected at estate sales over the years. Even the leather chair in the corner gleamed like a beetle’s carapace, crackling deliciously when she sat down in it.

The monitor was off but the computer had a low hum that confirmed that it was still running. She turned on the monitor, called up Documents, and retrieved, “A Sexton’s Victory.” She reread the last paragraph that she’d written.

*She stood claiming victory. She had slain her competitors. They had not had the hearts of worms. She knew it was her time to mate. But where was he who had vanquished the males? The pustulatus of her nicrophorus dreams? There he stood, his large antennae waving. He flagged her as his as he scuttled across the field of fallen Sexton Beetles. Only the mighty would live to procreate. Together they would bury the carcass, the progenitor of the skirmish. The victors could now lay there eggs within. She could sense the pheromones rising from his thorax. He wanted it as much as she did.*

Yes, this might be her best prose yet. She knew that the market existed. She just needed to find the right publisher. She happily edited the last three pages that she had written and inserted a scene earlier in the story so that readers would feel more sympathetic for the dung beetles which might otherwise be repulsive to them. She would never understand why people were so squeamish about the removal of corpses and offal. She sat back in her chair and realized that it was almost 2:00 a.m. Thank goodness that this was Friday night, and she didn't have to be anywhere in the morning. She saved her text one final time, turned off the monitor, and headed for bed.

The weekend was uneventful and she was ready to return to school on Monday. The students seemed to have settled in for the last push before their brains preceded their bodies out the door for summer vacation. She had a collection of videos for this time of year that provoked derisive responses from students thus guaranteeing that they would pay attention, if only to out do each other with inappropriate comments. She regularly expressed prayers of thank you to National Geographic and Nova before holiday breaks and towards the end of the school year.

When the phone rang at the end of the week, she was startled by Pete's voice. She had spent the intervening time grading papers and working on her novel (she'd added six pages) and completely forgotten the commitment. Pete chattered on cricket-like about the competition until she finally deduced that the students had placed first and would be moving to the national competition. Ginny

shared his excitement. She had spent too many class periods waiting for the light bulbs to turn on, not to appreciate when it happened for a colleague. They agreed on dinner the next night. Saturday would be fine, although Ginny preferred Friday night dates to Saturday because she would have to be careful not to descend too deeply into her writing, or Pete would arrive with her still sitting in front of the monitor tapping out insect love.

The next morning, Ginny flashed out four pages of her novel without hesitation. At this rate, she would be ready to proof this version by the end of the month and perhaps start the submission – rejection cycle soon after school adjourned for the year.

After lunch she picked up the house, flicked a dust rag at a few smooth surfaces, but couldn't resist the siren call of her story. She set her alarm for 4:00 p.m. and sat down in the front of the monitor.

*The Mantis swayed forward seductively, her movements barely visible to the cricket moving closer, closer. The Mantis sprung forward crunching the unsuspecting cricket quickly, seemingly consuming half of it while the cricket still lived. It was almost October, egg laying season. She would soon have to find a mate worthy of her. She had sensed a mighty male earlier in the day almost flying through the branches above her. Rising in height, seemingly stretching to a greater length, growing to better meet his duty. Yes, she must move higher in the tree and entice him to perform.*

The chime of the alarm penetrated Ginny's insect focused brain. No, that wasn't the alarm, that was the doorbell. Beneath the fading bells of the front door, she could hear the insistent buzz of the alarm in her bedroom. Damn! She should have moved the clock into her study. Ginny patted her hair and ran for the door.

"I'm so sorry Pete. I got caught up at the computer and lost track of time."

Ginny noted that Pete filled the doorframe as he entered the front hall. They should have danced at the Junior High extravaganza. She might have noticed how tall he was then.

"No problem. Is that a smoke detector sounding?"

"Oh, shoot. No, I set the alarm so that I wouldn't get too caught up in my writing and then I didn't hear it. Make yourself at home. I just need to change into something more presentable." Ginny ran for the bedroom to pull on a pair of dress slacks and soft blouse.

After ducking in and out of the bathroom, Ginny stepped into the living room surprised that Pete wasn't on the couch. He hadn't left had he? She turned to the study and realized that she had left the door open and the monitor on. Pete stood in front of her computer slightly hunched over, reading intently, holding his hands almost prayer-like to his face.

Ginny caught her breath, her heart pounding from deep within her. What a surprise. Unaware, she moved her own hands, palms together, to her lips.

### June Anne's Good-Bye

June Anne pulled on the windbreaker and checked her reflection in the front mirror. She looked okay. The last time that she had worn the windbreaker had been to last season's final softball game. After months spent sweltering, the Finals had been played in the evening just as autumn asserted itself. It was the first time that the team from Sammy's Pool Hall had made it into the finals. Tonight the windbreaker pockets were bulging a little but even if they noticed, the guys would expect her to be carrying Kleenex. She could even sniffle at some point and pat her pockets like she was about to pull one out and then just pull one from her sleeve instead. Patting her pockets would be a good idea anyway.

She leaned toward the mirror. Her eyes were still puffy but at least they weren't bloodshot. She'd even lost a little weight. She'd made a joke of it with her sister. If divorce means losing 210 ugly pounds with the help of a lawyer, why did a car wreck only lead to 8 or 10 lost pounds and a chilled void in that cold lumpy bed where those 210 pounds belonged? Maybe in a week or so she could get her roots touched up by a professional so that it didn't look so harsh. She might feel better and she deserved that, an hour or so with someone fussing over her, someone who wasn't fussing with sympathy and overblown concern.

June Anne flicked off the hall light, grabbed her old shoulder bag which was heavy with the extra weight. She checked the zipper that ran along the bottom seam and enlarged the bag for extra storage. It was safely closed. With that last



check, she flicked off the kitchen light, punched the garage door open, and climbed into the car as the door lumbered upward.

Dominic's death hadn't flattened her as much as she would have expected; the late night call, the totaled car, or even the DOA pronouncement. Then again, it had only been three weeks. She hadn't had time to miss the occasional soft touch on her shoulder or the face behind her in the mirror in the morning. On the other hand, she wondered if she could ever long for that bellow from the den "Hey, baby, get me another cold one!" Or that late night smell of beer and cigarettes and too much time spent in the bar because he didn't have to be at work in the morning even if she did. Maybe.

Had Cinderella's prince come home smelling of beer? How many times had Tammy Wynette been wronged before she quit standing by her man? Then again, who would remember that she liked a twist of lemon in her diet soda or surprise her by planting almost one hundred daffodil bulbs one Saturday while she was at work?

She pulled into the parking lot and was relieved to see that Mitch, Steve, and Danny were already inside throwing back a few. Normally she wouldn't be looking for them, let alone looking forward to seeing them, but they would welcome her and help her justify her presence at Sammy's Pool Hall. Yes, she'd gone a few times every year so that Dom couldn't complain that she was a killjoy. No one would think she was out of place but she knew she didn't belong in Sammy's. This would be her last visit.

She climbed from the car, slung her bag over her shoulder, clicked the alarm, and stuffed the keys in her jeans pocket. The air was fresh. It might be raining by the time she was through with this mission. She opened the door to Sammy's and even the memory of freshness vanished. The jukebox warred against the sounds of the game on the TV. The crowd cheered as the door closed behind her. The beer signs rotated eternal and the smoke eddied toward the ceiling curling around the rectangles of light over the pool tables off to one side. She stood for a minute inhaling the smoke that swirled around her and was about to turn toward the back of the room when Danny yelled at her as he slid from his barstool.

"June Anne, I'll be damned! Come 'ere girl and let me buy you somethin' cold."

Danny wasn't a bad guy. He was just born to warm a barstool. His father bragged that he'd soaked Danny's pacifiers in scotch to keep him quiet. His mother didn't have the energy to protest when they became drinking buddies when Danny was fourteen. Danny pulled June Anne into his smoke and beer scent.

"I'm real sorry about Dom. This place just ain't the same without him."

Mitch leaned out from the other side of Steve and waved. "Hey, darlin' you doin' okay?"

She smiled weakly at him and raised her hands in a shrug.

“We know. What can we get ya’?” Danny asked as he gently shepherded June Ann onto the barstool that still held his warmth.

“Oh, a gin and tonic, light on the gin,” she feigned indecision. “I just didn’t want to be home tonight.”

“Honey we’re here for you,” Steve told her and patted her arm.

“Thanks guys. I knew you’d be cool.” She wasn’t lying. These guys had replaced her car battery, helped her move a fridge, cornered a raccoon that had no intention of leaving the attic, and held her hand through the funeral. June Anne shifted her bag onto her lap. She checked the zipper again. She almost shook from the need to unzip that zipper. Instead she twisted toward the TV.

“Who’s playing?”

Mitch laughed. “You never were the sports fan. It’s March Madness, NCAA Tournament. That’s GW and UCLA.”

“GW?” June Anne knew that he meant George Washington University but they would expect her to be clueless, and she wanted to meet that expectation. After all these years, why didn’t they know that she knew about college basketball? What didn’t she know about them? She had never considered that. They were so transparent, just like her.

Danny hugged her. “George Washington, Sweetheart. They beat Gonzaga and if they win tonight, they’ll play either Duke or Indiana next.”

“I get it. Who do you have for the Final Four?” she asked as if she cared.

"Listen to you, talking like you follow college basketball," Mitch leaned around Steve again. "It's Duke all the way Darlin'."

"Man, I don't know what you're drinking, but Duke is never gonna' get past North Carolina and you know it," countered Steve.

Just as she had hoped, the three men returned to the conversation they had every March. Steve always pulled for North Carolina, Mitch loved Kentucky, and Danny generally lost all of his money on whoever the underdog was. Apparently this year it was some small school from Iowa or Michigan. She thought of all the repeated conversations. Sports, high school, old girl friends. She hadn't expected Dominic to become an old story so soon.

June Anne slid from the stool and motioned towards the bathroom. Danny smiled gently at her before returning to the conversation. The bathroom hadn't changed in the fourteen years that she'd been dragging Dominic out of here. She was glad that she didn't need to use the toilet. The rust stains were rust stained. She checked her reflection and was surprised to see that her cheeks were flushed. Her puffy eyes had even softened leaving her almost vulnerable looking. She smiled again. She started to read the phone numbers scribbled on the wall. Danny's was usually there but she'd never seen Dom's. He was just a drunk, not a cheater. At least not a cheater who ever got caught.

She pulled the small pocket knife from the outer compartment of her bag and tried to slice the corner of her windbreaker pocket. The first glitch. She hadn't expected the material to be so strong. She sawed at the seam and finally

started a small tear. She repeated the process on the other side, this time looking for the thread of the seam first. A small puff of dust dropped from the incision in the windbreaker as she placed the knife in the pocket of her jeans.

She opened the door slowly looking out into the small hallway that led to the bathrooms. Good, nobody was back here. She checked around the corner and decided that the game must have gone into overtime because the juke box had been silenced and the sound on the TV boosted. She moved to the men's room and leaned in trying to hear sounds from the other side. Silence. These guys did everything loudly, peeing, farting, spitting into the sink. The coast was clear. She opened the door slowly and confirmed that no one was there. She moved quickly into the bathroom and began forcefully shaking her pockets. The silt from her pockets sifted onto the urinal and into the corners. It wouldn't be cleaned up anytime soon.

She turned back to the door and opened it stealthily, again relieved that no one stood in the hall. Her exit from the men's room would have been hard to explain. She moved over to the phone as if looking up a number in the battered phone book and shook the remainder of the dust and dirt from her pockets. She patted them gently and giggled wishing weight loss was this easy. Maybe she should ask one of the guys to dance.

She looked back into the bar and sidled around the corner towards the pool tables. Mitch, Steve, and Danny were still engrossed in the game. They hadn't even missed her yet. Big surprise. She unzipped the bottom of her bag and was

pleased to feel a small trickle wafting from it. She had sliced just enough for her purposes. She would miss this bag but all good things must pass. At that thought, she snorted and quickly covered her mouth with her hand.

She hugged the wall moving towards the pool table where Tina and her husband were racking up a new game. Tina turned to June Anne and brightened.

“June Anne! What a great surprise. How ya’ doin’?” She hugged her tightly with the arm that wasn’t holding a pool cue.

“I’m okay. I just needed to be around some noise. The house was too quiet.”

“I’ll bet that’s true. If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

June Anne patted Tina’s arm in thanks, slapping her purse against her hip at the same time. “I’ll let you get back to your game. Keep him honest.”

Tina’s husband raised his bottle in toast to June Anne as she moved on around the edge of the bar, her purse lightening with every step. She stopped at several tables to accept condolences and exchange hugs, each time dropping a small dust storm from the opening in her bag. Gotta’ love a dark bar she thought. How many times had she sat at these sticky tables wondering when they’d last been wiped down?

As she neared the bar, Danny spotted her and waved her back onto his barstool. “We thought you got lost Sugar.”

June Anne smiled at him. “I had a lot of people to say hello to.” She reached for her watered down drink and turned to watch the final moments of the

game. Just as she swallowed the dregs, the star forward for GW sunk the winning three pointer. Danny jumped up and down wildly, alternately hugging her and high fiving anyone within range. Each hug squeezed a little more from her pockets and purse and she laughed uproariously at the justice of it all.

“I knew you were a basketball fan. Dom never did listen to me,” Danny laughed back at her.

“Dom never listened to anybody.” She replied. “He was more at home here with you guys than he ever was in our house on Elm Street and you still couldn’t tell him anything.”

“That’s no lie,” shouted Mitch over the roar of the bar crowd.

“Well boys, I’ve done all the damage I can here. Thanks for helping me out tonight.” June Anne hugged each of the men in turn, emptying the remaining bit of dust and ash from her pockets and purse. She waved good-bye to friends across the bar and walked out the door into the fresh air. She inhaled deeply and walked quickly around the side of the building to the barrel planters that nobody cultivated. June Anne slung the now empty purse from her shoulder and pulled off the jacket. Just as she remembered, the staves on the right hand barrel were not attached and she was able to stuff her jacket and bag into the opening. She dusted the residual ash from her hands and walked back to her car. This was one night that she was glad not to be hauling Dom home from Sammy’s and knew that he’d be thrilled to be left here without a wife’s nagging.

### My Grandmother had One of These

Rhonda pulled into the driveway and admired the gingerbread that decorated the corners of the porch. She had been visiting this house all of her life. She knew which stair boards would creak and which windows needed a prop to stay open. As she crossed the porch she could see Aunt Phyllis sitting in the Queen Anne chair, ankles crossed. She had repeatedly told the old woman not to sit with the curtains open. The wrong sort of person might see her alone in the living room. Her irritation rose as she turned the key in the lock and realized that the front door was not bolted. Oh well, it wouldn't be a concern much longer.

As she opened the door, the scent of the house enveloped her. Musty, dusty, medicinal, it pushed her back in time. She was eight, twelve, sixteen coming over to help her Aunt Phyll clear the cupboards or wax the floor. She smiled as the older woman pushed off from the arm of the chair rising as her great niece entered the front room. She could have been any age categorized as old. She might even have been very old. Someone who didn't know her might wonder if she suffered from arthritis. Perhaps she had only been in the chair too long for knees that had climbed too many stairs and bent to scrub too many floors.

"Hello dear. Is it 3:00 already? Oh, I suppose it must be since my story is over."

Rhonda smiled. Despite her impatience, she loved her aunt and she loved being in this house. The living room hadn't changed much over the years. Aunt Phyll was probably one of the few people left who still watched a console TV flanked by a turntable in one end and a



stereophonic radio receiver in the other. When Rhonda thought of her aunt's home the console and the Queen Anne chair were the pieces of furniture she imagined. The chair was upholstered in yellow with large peacocks gracing the back and seat cushions. The sides were a soft blue velvet that emphasized the peacock image. Rhonda had watched American Bandstand on that TV and listened to Elvis on the record player when her parents refused to buy her one of her own. In those days, they had lived one block over in a newer ranch home.

"Would you like a cup of tea dear?" Aunt Phyllis asked.

"No, I'm fine. Jimmy should be right behind me and we'll need to be ready when he gets here."

"I'm ready. I just need to get my pocketbook. Oh and did you want to take the teapot today?"

"No. Weren't you going to wrap up Uncle Henry's picture?"

Phyllis shuffled to the TV and picked up a framed sepia print of a handsome young man in a pin-striped suit. "You're going to think I'm a foolish old woman, but I couldn't bear to wrap newspaper around that smile. Even after all of those years married to that man, he could still get whatever he wanted from me when he flashed that smile." She smiled back at the young man in the photo.

Rhonda moved over and put her arm around her aunt. "I don't blame you. He was a handsome devil!"

"Yes, he certainly was," whispered Phyllis. She noticed the clean circles on the otherwise dusty console top where the white hobnail vase and its matching pitcher had sat for years.

"I need to dust this before the boys get here."

"Don't worry about it Aunt Phyll. They have an open truck so it will just get dirty again."

Phyllis replaced the frame on the TV, moved slowly into the kitchen, and returned with a dust rag. "I just won't bother to use the Pledge."

As Phyllis wiped away the dust, Rhonda glanced around the living room. It was still in pretty good shape. The shadows where the gilt frame and matching sconces had hung for so many years were the only hint that the paint needed freshening and except for the corner stain made by Frumpie the dachshund the carpet was not too worn.

Rhonda was startled from her reverie by a demanding knock at the front door.

"That must be Jimmy." She opened the door to a man in his mid-twenties holding a clipboard.

"Hi Mrs. Denton. Are you ready for us?"

"Of course. The TV is right here. We just need to secure the arm on the record player and unplug it. That's the chair." She pointed to the Queen Anne opposite the TV.

Jimmy stepped through the door followed by another young man pulling on gloves.

"Okay Steve, catch that storm door and I'll get the console ready."

Steve turned back to the door and propped it open while Jimmy unplugged the TV and checked the turntable. Rhonda picked up the photo and handed it to Aunt Phyllis who cradled it reverently. The console would barely fit through the door but they could make it work. The chair wouldn't be any problem. Each man picked up one end of the console, crabwalked it out the door, and hefted it onto the bed of an older pick-up.

Phyllis watched them through the window. "Do they know what they're doing?"

"They're fine."

Phyllis picked up her purse and juggled first the purse and then the photo as Rhonda helped her into her coat. "This has always been my favorite pocketbook. I'll never think of it as a purse. You carry purses. Look at that bag! You could put my entire china cupboard into it!"

Steve returned and picked up the chair by himself. Jimmy confirmed directions with Rhonda and they all moved to the door.

"This has been a lovely home."

Rhonda turned to her aunt. "You don't have to come right now if you don't want to."

"No. I better come now before I change my mind. I just need to put a hankie in my pocketbook. Did you know that's why Queen Elizabeth always carries a purse? So that she'll never have to ask for a handkerchief? Of course, I don't believe that she ever has to blow her nose. Do you think she ever has to blow her nose?"

"I wouldn't know," answered Rhonda.

Both women walked through the door stopping long enough for Phyllis to unlatch one door and lock the other. She hesitated for a moment and then seeing Jimmy drive away from the curb, put her hand under Aunt Phyllis' elbow. They walked down the steps, crossed the small patch of grass, and Rhonda helped her aunt into the car.

"I always worried about forgetting my keys but I won't have that worry anymore. I imagine that Queen Elizabeth never worries about keys. She has so many people around her, she probably never has to worry about any of the everyday things the rest of us tussle with."

"I'm sure that's true Aunt Phyllis." Rhonda was only listening with one ear. She was trying to catch up with Jimmy. He was driving pretty fast for a man with furniture in an open truck bed. She finally caught him at the light and noted that he slowed once he realized that she was directly behind him.

It was a short drive across town to the warehouse turned Antique Mall. Rhonda always smiled to think that people expected to find real antiques in such a place. Anything twenty years old qualified these days. Sentimental value added monetary value. She had avoided the beanie baby nonsense but had amassed a respectable collection of Santas. Her largest Santa was almost three feet tall and held a bag that could be refilled each season. She had three or four that were a little scary. They were gifts from friends who she suspected didn't share her appreciation of the jolly old elf.

Rhonda believed that collecting Santas probably confirmed a flaw in her character. Not only was she cluttering her house with various sizes of goofy little guys, but she really should only display them for two months out of every year instead of giving them places of honor throughout the house. Thank goodness that Stan was a patient man even if he had banished the entire tribe of festive figures from his bathroom.

Jimmy parked at the curb in front of the main door and Rhonda pulled in behind him.

“Aunt Phyllis, why don’t you get out here and I’ll go park the car.”

Rhonda opened the door and ran around to help Aunt Phyllis out. Phyllis stood dutifully beside the Mall door clutching the photo to her chest, her pocketbook looped over her wrist. Somehow she looked both lost and confident. The pocketbook and photo provided a shield better than any metal smith could have devised. Rhonda instructed Jimmy and Steve where to take the furniture and then returned to her car to park it. As Phyllis watched, Jimmy and Steve unloaded the chair and placed it on the sidewalk in front of the glass windows.

“Here you go ma’am. You might as well be comfortable while we haul this stuff in.” Jimmy helped Phyllis sit down in her Queen Anne Chair. She placed her handbag and photo in her lap and crossed her legs at her ankles. Steve hopped into the truck bed and unlashed the console before sliding it towards Jimmy waiting at the tailgate. Together the men moved towards the door

reaching it at the same time as Rhonda who opened it for them. Rhonda turned back to her aunt, helped her rise, and held the door as her aunt walked through.

“Hey there Miss Rhonda. Bringing in more stuff?” A large redhead wearing an appliquéd bear sweatshirt waved from behind the counter.

“Hi, Junie! That’s some color you’ve got goin’!”

“Why thanks. Miss Clairol ya’ know.”

“It looks good.”

Rhonda placed her hand beneath Phyllis’ elbow and steered her toward the second row of stalls. The smell of dust mingled with mothballs and mildew reminded Phyllis of her grandmother’s attic. Jimmy and Steve passed them on their way back to the front to pick up the chair that waited outside the door.

Phyllis turned to watch them.

“Don’t worry Aunt Phyllis. They’ll be gentle.”

“I’m not worried.”

They moved slowly down the aisle turning right when they reached a cross path. In the corner booth an old woman sat quietly knitting in a small maple rocking chair.

“Hello Ada!” Phyllis stopped in front of the booth surprised to find a friend sitting at the crossroads.

“Phyllis! What a surprise. How are you?”

“I’m fine. I recognize that rocker.”

“Oh yes. My mother rocked me in this chair and I rocked all three of my girls.”

"I thought so. You sure have it polished to a fine shine."

"It wouldn't be right to do anything less." Ada dropped her knitting in her lap and stroked the arm. "I'd stand up and show you how worn the seat is but I don't think I could get up."

Phyllis smiled and patted Ada's hand. "That's fine. It's a marvelous thing the way these chairs fit us when nothing else does."

"You just missed Sula. A nice young family just left with her."

"Really? I had no idea these things happened so quickly," replied Phyllis.

"Oh, it's all in the deal," replied Ada.

Rhonda gently nudged Phyllis' elbow.

"I guess I better get moving. Nice seeing you."

Ada resumed knitting. "You too dear. Good luck and take care."

Rhonda and Phyllis continued down the aisle and were soon passed by Steve carrying the chair. Phyllis perked up and followed her chair down the aisle to Booth 127. Steve arranged the chair in front of the TV console, waved at Rhonda, and headed back down the aisle.

"Oh, my console! And my gilt mirror. How lovely! It almost looks like home."

"Do you like it Aunt Phyllis?"

"It's fine dear." Phyllis moved to the shelves against the wall of the booth. "Your grandmother tatted these doilies. Look how delicate they are. I never could match her handwork."

"Would you like me to hang up your coat?"

Phyllis shrugged out of her coat, again juggling her photo and handbag. Rhonda put the coat on a hanger and hung it from a hall tree in the back corner of the booth. She dropped her purse on the console and dug until she found a Ziploc bag with small white tags. She extracted a pen, wrote a price on the tag, and then attached the tag to the coat, looping it around the top button.

Phyllis sat down in the Queen Anne chair, placed her purse and photo on her lap, and again crossed her ankles. Rhonda returned to her Ziploc bag and removed five additional tags writing a price on each and noting that each was part of a larger set. She rummaged in her purse until she found tape and another Ziploc bag holding safety pins. She carefully taped the first tag to the console, the second to the handbag, and the third to the photo. She then used the safety pins to attach one tag to the chair and the final tag to Aunt Phyllis' sweater. Phyllis turned the tag over.

“My goodness. That’s high! Can a young family afford that?”

“Don’t worry Aunt Phyllis this way if I have to bargain, I’ve left a little room.”

“Oh, that’s such a good idea dear. You always have had a head for business.”

As Phyllis repacked her purse a young couple came down the aisle disagreeing about their need for a stuffed moose head.

“Sweetheart, where would we put it?” The husband asked impatiently.

“Wait.” The wife stopped in front of Booth 127. She ran her hand lightly over the TV console. “My grandmother had one of these!”



“Don’t fall in love,” her husband replied. “I think it’s part of a five piece set.” He moved closer to Phyllis for emphasis. “Is it worth buying the other four pieces just to get the console?”

Rhonda put her arm around Aunt Phyllis. “I’m sorry but there’s no way that my Aunt Phyllis could bear to break up this set.”

## Birth Stories

Clara placed the strawberry preserves into her shopping tote. They joined the red peppers she had purchased from Mrs. Meyer's stand and the tomatoes and zucchini from the Mennonite girls. She looked like a woman used to planning her own garden rather than buying zucchini from someone else. But her arthritic gait always gave her away, no matter how much her hands ached for the feel of loamy soil, her knees would not bend to allow them to weed and till.

"I always look forward to May when the Farmer's Market opens," she said to Mrs. Hooper as she paid for the preserves. "Now that I don't can anymore, I have to rely on your delicious preserves."

"I'm glad you enjoy them," replied Mrs. Hooper. "Give it another month and I'll have some peach jam."

Clara looked toward the edge of the market booths as an unfamiliar woman caught her eye. Strange, she couldn't place her. So few women wore hats these days, and the silk violets on this woman's hat were particularly striking. She turned to ask Mrs. Hooper if she recognized the woman, but when she turned back, the woman was gone. Clara sighed and rejoined Donna who had already moved to the next booth and was fingering some homemade lace. She turned to Clara.

"Girls just don't do this kind of handwork anymore. Such a shame."

"I know. My sister Mary tatted, crocheted, knitted." They moved away from the booths toward the parking lot.

Clara put her hand on Donna's arm. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. I had the strangest thing happen yesterday. I had just walked into the kitchen and I am sure that I saw my sister Mary going out the back door. I even heard the door close. I move so slowly these days, by the time that I got the door opened, there wasn't anyone there." She paused. "Not that she could have been, mind you."

Donna looked at her sympathetically. "When did Mary pass away?"

Clara stopped and looked towards the trees. "Three years last month."

Donna put her arm through Clara's.

"I guess we've just reached that age when we lose so many friends and family, we can't help but want some of them back."

"I suppose that must be it. Don't tell Mary, but I'd much rather hear from Frank. Sisters are important, but I really miss my husband" Clara smiled and leaned into Donna. "C'mon, I'll make you a lovely salad for lunch."

They were almost to the car when they ran into Mrs. Hooper's daughter-in-law.

"Hello ladies, I hope you found Brenda's stand."

Clara patted her bag. "Strawberry preserves, right here. How're you feeling dear?"

Young Mrs. Hooper patted her distended belly and smiled. "Just fine, three weeks and counting."

"Exactly what I would have guessed. I'm pretty good at figuring out how far along an expectant mother is. You do look radiant," said Clara. "No way out now!"

Mrs. Hooper laughed. "I suppose not."

"Well, there's nothing to worry about I'm sure," continued Clara. "You know I was in labor for over thirty-eight hours with Steven and of course I've probably told you about Lindy's delivery. The doctor thought he'd lose us both! I ended up with two lovely children even if I couldn't have anymore."

"Now Clara, you shouldn't worry the poor thing. I had three perfect pregnancies and all three of them popped out like babies are supposed to," added Donna. She turned to Clara, "I need that salad you promised."

Mrs. Hooper watched as Donna marched Clara to the car before turning towards her mother-in-law's stand.

Clara regularly praised two ingredients of small town life. The first was the Farmer's Market and the second was her ability to walk to church on Sundays. She missed her husband Frank most on Sundays. He had been a quiet man. She filled the house with chatter and he would reply with yeses, hmmms, and you don't says. It didn't matter if he wasn't listening with both ears. She knew he heard her. Actually, when she thought about it, his silence in life made his absence a little easier to bear. She knew he listened to her when she talked to the walls of the house now, and only felt part of the emptiness she might have felt if she had to wait for a response. But why had Mary been in the kitchen last week, but Frank hadn't bothered to turn up? She really was getting balmy if she started looking for visits from the dear departed.

Clara slathered her toast with the newly purchased strawberry preserves, it was one of her few indulgences, and sat at the table with her fancy home

decorating magazine. She really missed McCalls Magazine. The recipes were always wonderful, and she had felt fashionable in those days. Even her daughter Lindy had looked forward to the McCalls delivery, waiting impatiently to cut the Betsy McCall paper doll out of the back. That seemed a century ago. Last she had heard, some celebrity had bought McCalls and changed the name. Now why would someone do that?

She finished her toast and rinsed her juice glass and plate. Only on Sunday did she leave dirty dishes on the drainboard. She figured that God understood that she had more important places to be. She picked up her purse and walked out the backdoor. As always, she reached the front sidewalk before she realized that she should have checked her hair one last time before leaving the house. She turned toward the driveway as if to go back in and check her hair when she saw a quick movement by the garage. She blinked twice and adjusted her glasses. Yes, there was someone back there. Deciding that no trouble maker would be up at this hour on a Sunday morning, she lumbered back up the driveway following the figure into the yard.

She was shocked to see her sister Mary bending over the flower bed pulling at some weeds that the neighbor boy had missed.

"I'm ashamed of you sister, letting your garden get so scraggly!" Mary chided before abruptly disappearing.

Clara clutched her chest and took a step backward, barely keeping her balance. She reached her hand to the edge of the house and considered going inside to sit down. After catching her breath, she decided that it would be better

to go to church. She'd drop a word in her prayer and let God know that one of his lambs had stepped out of the fold. She smiled at herself, this time she didn't think she'd tell her friend about Mary's visit. She would call her doctor though to make sure that her blood pressure medicine didn't cause hallucinations.

The bells were ringing when she dropped into her regular pew. Donna looked at her sideways before asking if she felt alright that morning.

"I'm fine," Clara whispered. "Just a little out of breath."

Both women stood as the organist launched into the processional hymn. Donna moved the hymnal closer to Clara so that they could share the weight. After the opening prayer, Clara sat down gratefully and considered the oddity of her sister's visit. Of course, she would show up in the backyard. Mary had always been a better gardener than Clara, but Clara was the better cook. Mary's son Tim still lived in town and visited Clara at least once a month, bringing his own son along if he wasn't dropping by to help with some small chore or other. Again she wished that her children didn't live so far away. She did appreciate Mary's Tim though. Perhaps she should call Tim and see if Mary had visited him. Now that would guarantee a one-way trip to the Old Folks Home! He'd be on the phone so fast to Clara's daughter Lindy that the wire would vibrate in cut time. She looked up to find Donna watching her and realized that she must have chuckled out loud. She put her hand on Donna's.

"Sorry," she whispered, "my mind was wandering."

Donna smiled back but looked quizzically at Clara. Clara squeezed Donna's hand.

"I'll tell you later."

Both women turned back to the scripture lesson. Clara couldn't follow the sermon. Her mind still skittered around Mary's visit. She scanned the congregation to be sure that Mary wasn't sitting in a pew somewhere. Sitting near the front on the right was that woman that Clara had seen at the Framer's Market. She wore a striking purple hat adorned with violets. Clara smiled. Once upon a time she wouldn't have been caught dead in church without a hat on. Now, nobody wore hats. Such a shame.

By the end of the service, Clara had convinced herself that a visit to the doctor or pharmacist would clear up the visits from Mary. Modern medicine, bah! Sometimes the side-effects were worse than the affliction. As she and Donna shuffled down the aisle, nodding to and shaking hands with fellow parishioners, she caught up with Katy Penner, Jewel's granddaughter.

"Katy! How are you doing? Your grandmother tells me that you're expecting."

The young woman turned. "Hi Mrs. Hansen, yes, we're pretty excited. I'm just waiting for next month when the doctor says the morning sickness will end."

Katy's husband leaned around her. "Morning sickness? Try afternoon sickness, evening sickness, just got out of bed sickness. The poor thing is living on soda crackers."

Clara patted Katy's arm. "I'm sure that you'll pass through this fine. Now, you know I almost didn't want to get pregnant again after my first. Not only

was I sick all day every day but it lasted almost the entire pregnancy. Poor Frank had to do all of the cooking. I couldn't go near the kitchen."

Katy paled slightly as her husband moved her quickly away from Clara. "I'm sure Katy'll be fine. Good to see you both."

Donna turned to her friend. "Clara, why do you tell such awful stories to these poor little things."

"I was only telling Katy about my experience. I'm sure hers will be much easier."

After church, Clara and Donna joined "the girls" down at the Dogwood Inn for Sunday dinner. The town called them The Widows Club (not to their faces) and the widows themselves enjoyed the weekly two hours of gossip and camaraderie. They called themselves the True Ecumenical Council arriving at various times as the different congregations adjourned for the week.

The conversation rolled around the usual topics, the peonies were large this year, this or that grandchild was doing something or other, and finally, as they enjoyed the pie that they always finished the meal with (after appropriate protestations of course) and despite her decision not to tell anyone, Clara found herself telling the story of Mary's visit.

"Good heavens Clara, call your doctor and get your prescriptions checked," chided Lorene.

"Oh Lorene, there is more in heaven and earth. Clara you need to find out what she wants and take care of it. I hadn't noticed that your garden looked scraggly, but Mary did have high standards," said Ruth Anne. She was generally



considered a little wacky, having gone to that girl's college, but the group always enjoyed her programs at the Auxiliary even if they didn't always understand them.

"For crying out loud, we all get visited now and then," interjected Louise. "We're just getting to that age that there are more to miss. As a matter of fact, that's probably it; we get visited because we miss them so much. I wouldn't worry about it."

The ladies finished their pie and headed off in their separate directions to spend their solitary Sundays gardening, reading, or perhaps visiting children and grandchildren. Clara felt better about Mary's visit. The girls were right, she'd check with the doctor, and if all was fine there, she'd chalk it all up to missing her sister. Clara did feel guilty about how little gardening she'd been able to do in the last few years, it made sense that she'd bring Mary back to chide her about it. Hers had always been a sensitive nature.

Clara paid her bill and turned towards the rest of the Council to say good-bye. She looked toward the Ladies Room just in time to see the woman in the violet hat disappear inside. She started to ask Ruth Anne or Lorene if they knew who she was and then decided it didn't matter.

The walk home was lovely. The lilacs were out in front of the Caulfield's house on Hawthorn Street, and the surprise lilies were just this side of bursting. She couldn't remember who had bought the Caulfield's after Sophie passed, the house had been in Sophie's family for three generations, but they sure had kept up the yard. Sophie would be happy. Clara put her hand out to pull a lilac branch

closer for a better sniff and jumped back as if bitten. Sophie was hiding beneath the blossoms!

When she came back around, a young couple was standing over her. "Don't move ma'am, we've called an ambulance."

Clara tried to sit up. "I'm fine, really, fine."

She recognized the face of the young woman she had seen weeding the Caulfield's yard. "I think the lilacs just overpowered me. I'll be fine."

By then, Clara could hear the ambulance and knew that she would be bundled off to the hospital no matter how much fuss she made, so she listened to the young woman and put her head back onto the grass. At least she hadn't collapsed onto the sidewalk, although the grass stains would probably never come out of her dress. It was embarrassing, but there was nothing she could do about it now. Well, now the girls would know that it was her prescriptions that had caused Mary's appearance, and she wasn't losing her mind. Good lord, now that her medical problems would be identified, she could tell them about Sophie, and they'd all have a good laugh.

Clara's relief lasted only as long as it took to run a series of tests. Two days, four bouquets (one store bought from her grandkids), and lots of cards later, and the doctors still didn't have a clue why she had collapsed. She wasn't about to tell them that it was because she had seen her second ghost in the same day. She was still waiting to hear about the strange side effects of her prescriptions or worse, the brain tumor that was waiting to overtake her.

The nurse had just brought her fresh ice water and her favorite TV judge was about to start when she realized that Barbara Jeanne Summers was sitting in the visitor's chair. Barbara had been gone for at least twelve years. Clara started to push the Help Button when she thought about what the nurse would say and turned to her unexpected visitor instead.

"Barbara, what in the world are you doing in that chair?"

"Visiting you of course dear," the ghost replied.

"But you've been gone twelve years!"

"Actually, I've been gone twelve years, two months, and sixteen days."

"So, you're really here. Your funeral was so beautiful! The middle of hydrangea season, such beautiful flowers."

"I never liked hydrangeas. Flowers aren't meant to be blue. You always were a silly woman Clara. And of course I'm here. I was glad to see you visiting the hospital. Well, not glad that you're here, of course, but still glad to see you. Funerals, you have no idea what it's like to die. That heart attack left me thinking that not only did I want to die but that I wished that I had died before the heart attack. The pain! Unbelievable! I kept taking breaths but it just hurt more. I praised Jesus when he finally came for me."

"Good heavens. Who knew?" Clara was bewildered; Barbara Jeanne seemed so real. Clara was pretty sure that even Emily Post didn't have good advice about how to entertain a ghost. Barbara Jeanne had to be there but it didn't make sense. Then again, there was Mary and Sophie, and the doctors were

clueless. Suddenly, Barbara Jeanne disappeared as quickly as she had appeared. Clara was still staring at the empty chair when Dr. Mehta walked into the room.

“Hello Mrs. Hansen, how are you this morning?”

Clara hesitated a moment before deciding that Dr. Mehta didn't need to hear about Barbara Jeanne Summers.

“I'm fine. About ready to be done with this place though.”

“Well, your tests all turn up negative which is good news. I'm thinking that your fainting spell may have just been overexertion on Sunday. That's a long walk from the Dogwood Inn and the spring heat sometimes catches us off guard. I'm going to release you this morning. Do you have someone who can drive you home and keep an eye on you for a few days?”

“Of course, I have several friends I can call, and my nephew lives in town.”

“Very good, I expect you to call if you feel even the slightest bit dizzy.”

The doctor scribbled on his clipboard and left the room.

Clara called her nephew Tim who promised to be at the hospital within the hour. He was such a good boy. She wished that her own children or grandchildren had settled closer, but Tim was a blessing in her life. Mary had done a fine job of raising him. Clara was dressed and seated in her wheelchair (such a silly hospital regulation) waiting for him when a very pretty pregnant woman waddled by.

“Good heavens dear, are you here for delivery? I would have guessed you're two weeks away.”

The young woman smiled. "Good guess. I do have two weeks to go. I wish I were here for delivery, but I'm dropping by to visit a friend from birthing class who delivered yesterday."

"How wonderful. Babies are such a miracle. Now don't let her scare you with her delivery stories."

"Shouldn't be a problem, she ended up delivering by caesarean. It was a pip."

"Oh dear, major surgery. You young girls have no idea how long it takes to recuperate from real surgery."

The woman looked poised to respond when Tim walked through the door.

"Aunt Clara, I hope you haven't been waiting long."

The pregnant woman took advantage of Tim's entrance and picked up speed as she moved toward the elevator. Clara turned to say good luck to her but the elevator doors were already opening. Clara shook her head in surprise to see the woman in the violet adorned hat standing at the back of the elevator.

Clara was happy to be home. She had assured Tim that she would be fine and once he confirmed that while Clara had been in the hospital, someone (probably Donna) had bought fresh milk, put a casserole in the fridge, and fed the cat, he left her to settle back in. Clara puttered around her living room straightening the lampshade, adjusting the pictures on the mantle, and flicking cat fur off of the sofa. She turned to the piano and was shocked to see Marilee, the former organist at the Presbyterian Church, lifting the cover preparing to play.

"It's about time you got home Clara. You keep all this music here but this piano doesn't look like anybody's played it for ages."

"Marilee! What are you doing here? You, I mean, it's been,"

"Just say it: I'm dead. Been dead for six years, ten months, and two days. And let me tell you, I heard them at that eulogy, 'What a blessing that she passed in her sleep.' Hah! In my sleep indeed! The first stroke left me lyin' there for almost four hours. I couldn't move and that damn cat – Don't look at me that way. I can say whatever I damn well please. That damn cat wouldn't move off of my chest, flicking that furry tail under my nose. Finally, the second stroke took me just before dawn."

With that, the piano lid banged down over the keys and Clara was left staring at the sheet music as it gently fluttered to the empty piano bench and finally to the floor. She lowered herself into her husband's recliner which rocked slightly as she sat.

"Strange isn't it?" Mary stood in the doorway, leaning as she used to before she broke her hip. "Feels good to lean, I didn't realize how much I missed it till just now."

"Mary! What are you doing here? You just missed Marilee." It seemed so natural to have Mary in her living room that Clara didn't even consider the absurdity of it.

"Pfft, I see too much of her as it is. It feels good to see the sunshine. Pneumonia leaves you so cold. They thought that straight oxygen eased the pain.

Doctors don't know anything. I still swear that I coughed up three lungs. What a miserable way to go."

"That's all you have to say to me after all this time?"

"I already told you to clean up that garden." Mary seemed to take a deep breath. "Yes, that sure feels good. I hope you appreciate every breath you take here on out." And she was gone.

By the next morning, Clara had convinced herself that she was just overtired from the stress of coming home from the hospital. The sun shone into the kitchen and it was hard to imagine any ghost being about on such a beautiful day. After breakfast, she picked up her bible and her purse and started down the street to bible study at the church.

As she reached the Caulfield's, Clara slowed watching the lilacs to be sure that Sophie wasn't hiding beneath them again. She had no plan to end up back in the hospital, but the scent of lilacs rekindled her certainty that Sophie had been hiding beneath those lovely flowers. As she reached the edge of the fence, sure enough, there leaned Sophie, balancing a basket of cut lilacs on her arm.

"You knew I'd be waiting for you, Clara. Don't look so shocked."

"How can I not look shocked?" retorted Clara. "The last time I saw you I spent two days in the hospital, and the time before that you were laid out at Shetler's Funeral Parlor."

"Don't be crass. It wasn't my fault the brakes on that car failed! I told John to get those checked, but he never listened. Cost him a lot of nights of Campbell's soup. Hah, bet he missed me then!"

“Be fair, John missed you. Not a day went by that he didn’t tell someone how much he regretted letting you drive that car.”

“Be that as it may, he can’t make up for all of the pain. It took them two hours to pull me out of that wreck. The ribs were the worst. I think at least one of my legs was broke, and my arm was pinned real funny between the door and the steering wheel, but it was the ribs that hurt. Made it hard to breathe.”

“Clara? Are you alright,” Donna was standing next to her, her car parked at the curb.

“Goodness, how long have you been there?” Clara was doubly discomfited. How long had she been standing there? Had Donna seen Sophie?

“Long enough to call your name, park the car, and walk over here. Are you alright?”

“Donna, you’re going to think I’ve lost my mind. I was so caught up in the smell of the lilacs, I guess I forgot where I was.”

“I should say. Do you feel well enough for bible study?”

“Of course. We’d better get going or we’ll be late.”

Clara would never admit how nice it was to sit in the car and be ferried to the church. Maybe she should give up walking. The doctor was probably right, Spring heat did sneak up on a body.

After the bible study, the ladies always adjourned to the Fellowship Hall for coffee cake. Today was Lorene’s turn which meant a crumble cake. Clara’s specialty was a lemon bundt cake with a lemonade based glaze. Lorene’s crumble cake was good but not quite up to Clara’s bundt cake. Clara always graciously



accepted the crumble cake anyway. She excused herself to wash her hands in the kitchen before rejoining the group.

Standing beside the sink was an elderly woman whom Clara didn't recognize. She nodded her head and proceeded to soap her hands.

"You don't recognize me do you Clara?" the woman asked.

Clara turned toward the stranger and strained to find something familiar.

"I'm so sorry but,"

The other woman cackled. "Ah, don't worry, we'll meet eventually. I just wanted to drop in and see if I could see how far along you are."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well honey, we all have to go sometime. I was just trying to guess how far along you are."

"How far along?"

"Why yes dear, let's see you're eighty-two years, four months, and five days from birth. That would make you...oh I can't tell you your exit date!" The woman stepped to the coat rack in the corner, placed the lovely purple hat with the violets on her head, and once again, Clara found herself standing in a room alone.