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Coming of Age: A Selection of Short Stories

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“No,” Ren said.

“You think I’m crazy?”

“No way, man.”

“I told you, my name is Lou, from Louis, like St. Louis.” Lou’s voice was getting louder with each word, with the added bonus of frustration thrown in. He spoke like a kid about to have a temper tantrum. He was sweating a little above his upper lip and turned to look at his passenger as his foot pushed down on the gas pedal. The car accelerated and Ren knew at that moment that the original VW engine had been replaced with something that offered a lot more power. He was frightened by the intense glare cast his way, but wasn’t about to let Lou know he had the upper hand in this situation.

Ren tried to stay calm and think about long division. For some reason, he couldn’t remember how to do it, so he concentrated on it so hard that he forgot about Lou and where he was. His plan was for Lou to recognize Ren’s calm demeanor as a comfort and realize that there was no reason to get excited. Ren hoped his calm would assure Lou that everything was fine.

But Ren’s calm didn’t last. He panicked when he saw a pill bottle roll out from under Lou’s seat. His heart was pounding as fast as the car was flying down the highway.

“So, you on some kind of medication?”

“Why are you asking me that question?” Lou’s voice was raised to just below a screaming level. “I don’t need it anymore. I told the doctors I don’t, but they don’t believe me. Do you believe me?”

Ren said he believed him, and apologized for asking such a silly question. "I only meant that the heat bothers me and affects my own medication--for asthma," he lied. Then Ren smiled at himself for being able to take control of the situation so swiftly.

"Let me see your medicine," Lou said.

Ren didn't say anything while he tried to think what to say next.

Let me see your medicine," Lou said again.

"I ran out, and that's why I need to find out where to get it refilled," Ren replied, speaking slowly so that he made sure the words were clear and deliberate and that Lou would understand.

"Oh," Lou said, in a quiet voice. Ren felt better about his ability to bring Lou back to reality and thought he probably had the situation under control.

After a few moments of silence Lou looked at Ren and screamed out "OH MY GOD, YOU'RE A DOCTOR, AREN'T YOU?"

Sheer panic spread from the driver to the passenger in the same way Lou told Ren he could transport himself--through thin air. Lou looked like he might break into tears at any minute. His whole body was gripped with fear and his driving showed it. He swerved back and forth across the yellow line, and ran off the road a few times. He screamed at Ren to "STAY AWAY FROM ME" every few minutes, and sometimes changed it to "DON'T COME NEAR ME, YOU HEAR?"

Ren grabbed the door handle but knew they were traveling too fast to try and open the door and roll out. He also knew the next car may

not come along for a while and if he was injured, could die before anyone found him. He figured he was plucked from the dessert once this trip already, and he shouldn't count on being saved twice.

Again he tried to think of long division problems. His mind wouldn't focus. He could see numbers and lines in his head, but he couldn't subtract numbers and come up with answers. He couldn't even remember the numbers once he put them in place so he could work on them. Everything was jumbled, just like he knew his body would be if he tried to get out of the speeding car. He couldn't take that chance, not yet, because he still had hope that Lou was only crazy, and not violent.

Ren was trying to find any clues in the car without looking like that was what he was trying to do. There was nothing to learn about Lou except what he already knew from an empty pill bottle and the fact that he didn't wear shoes. That wasn't enough to draw any conclusions except for those he already had.

The car was in perfect shape. Maybe that was the key. Maybe they were being tele-transported at this very moment. That would explain the unusual attributes on the old VW Bug. Where was Lou going, and how far did he plan to take me, Ren wondered to himself. Both men were quiet. Lou hadn't yelled out anything for a several minutes, and Ren was beginning to calm down a bit.

The sun was setting and Ren wondered where he would be when he came out of the dark night. He hoped the morning would find him near Los Angeles. After about 40 minutes of peace, he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. He let himself fall asleep in the quiet, dark car.

His body jerked him awake. He first noticed that the sun was rising and his shoes were missing. Ren recognized his grogginess as drug induced and knew he was in trouble, but whatever drug he had been given was doing its job of keeping him from taking any action. He blinked twice and looked over to the driver's seat. Lou was not driving. Lou was not in the car at all. The car was the same but the driver was not. A man wearing dark glasses and a thick beard was now driving the car. He was heavy and sweaty and had the aroma of someone who had not bathed in the recent past.

The car jerked again and Ren's knees hit the dashboard. He looked at the driver. The man kept his eyes on the road. Ren glanced at the gas gauge and saw the needle was past the empty mark. That would explain the jerking of the car in the past few minutes. The driver's eyes didn't leave the road in front of the car. He said nothing.

The car was slowing down, coming to a stop. Ren thought about leaving the backpack, but then remembered the cash. Of course, all of his possessions could be sitting in the middle of the endless desert, thrown out while he slept.

He remembered the first time he saw the desert was when he and Lily drove there from Illinois twelve years ago. They were both 20, and transferring to UCLA. He first saw the desert on a Sunday. The sheer size of it scared him. Maybe overwhelmed was a better word. On that day he almost believed in God, he was that impressed.

He stopped being afraid just a short time after they began driving through the flat, brown land with the overbearing sun. They teased each

other about getting married in Vegas on the way, but the conversation had been a test they used to see if the other was serious about getting married. Both were in love and had been so since they met in a history class on the first day of school two years earlier.

He loved her the first moment he saw her. He was too young to realize at the time that love never goes away. She was delicate and her skin was pale. The only sign of the passion of which she was capable rested within her dark eyes and black hair. Both seemed to contain all her life. She carried herself with refinement and elegance, but her hair and eyes gave her away.

She let a stranger sitting next to her borrow a pen for class. He noticed that the guy left class with the pen. Ren wanted to find him and force him to return it, and then apologize to her for taking it. Ren wished he had forgotten his pen that day so he could have used one of hers.

“We could get married in one of those little wedding chapels they have in Vegas,” Ren said. That way your mother won’t be mad when she finds out we’re living together in LA.”

“Then she would be mad that I got married without inviting her to the wedding,” Lily said, looking to him for a reaction.

“Well, we could do it up right at Christmas when we go back. You know, a preacher and a party and all that for everyone in Chicago. That way, both families could be there.”

“Yeah, I guess we could.”

“I love you, Lily.”

“I love you, too, Cameron.”

At that moment the desert became a different place. He found comfort in the desolate land and painted sky. The emptiness was the perfect contrast to his fulfillment. He felt safe.

They found a not-too-tacky chapel and rented a white bouquet of flowers for Lily to carry down the short aisle. Ren had purchased a solid gold band for her before they left, and he and Lily bought a cheap ring for the ceremonial placement on the third finger of his left hand, to be replaced at a later date. It never was.

They were married in September. Lily was homesick most of the fall, and wasn't eating enough, according to Ren. She told him she would be better after the Christmas trip home. She grew painfully thin and weak. Ren took her to the emergency room over the Thanksgiving weekend when she couldn't eat anything and began swelling. End stage renal failure. They put her on the transplant list that day, but she wasn't strong enough.

Both families came out and they joked at first about a hospital-room wedding for the benefit of their parents. Then there were no jokes. She made him promise to have a happy life. He said they would have a happy life together, and they both let those words stay on his lips like it could be possible. But they knew it wasn't. After she died he made a grave-side promise the he would do as she told him, but 10 years, at least, would have to pass before the pain would subside. He knew she would be upset if he wasted the rest of his life and discarded the plans

for the future they worked on together, but his future was buried in her grave.

He hadn't been back to L.A. since. Now he was going back to place a lily at the site they had first made love after they were married. Both liked the idea of getting married in the desert and making love by the sea, so they drove non-stop for hours to be able to make love as husband and wife for the first time in view of an ocean neither had ever seen before. The quiet area high above the beach was perfect, except for the fact that a couple of people applauded when they finished.

Ren suddenly snapped out of his memory and into the present. He wasn't sure if anything remained of his possessions, but he saw his backpack out of the corner of his eye. He decided to take a chance that the money was there. That money would get him on his feet after he took care of his business in L.A.

In one motion, Ren reached into the back seat and grabbed what he hoped was his backpack. He knew it would hit the driver on the way back over the seat, but he didn't care. He actually hoped it would knock him out so he could get a head start running. His shoes were gone, but he didn't care. While he was bringing the backpack over the seat, his right hand was on the door handle. He was ready to roll out the door and into the sandy shoulder.

The car stopped. The gas tank was empty. Ren had the door open and was trying to move away from the car any way he could. He tripped over his sluggish feet and fell forward, then used his hand to push off the ground and project himself away from the vehicle. The

driver didn't chase him. Ren knew he hit him with the backpack, but didn't hurt him. The driver saw what was happening and raised his arm to deflect it off his face.

Ren got into L.A. later that day. Ten years to the day. A charter bus picked him up before the sun got too hot. The big silver box just stopped in front of him like it was a regular stop. Neither he nor the driver said a word as Ren climbed the steps and found a seat four rows back. He was able to sleep off whatever drug was in his body, and felt almost refreshed as he stepped off the bus in an unfamiliar section of downtown. A man on the bus gave him a pair of sneakers that almost fit, so he headed down the street like a man with a mission in extra large shoes. He bought a white lily from a street vendor, and carried it carefully to his destination. He thought he might break down when he found the spot he was looking for, but the feeling was more like watching a sad old movie. This was the place their lives began. A thousand years couldn't heal his soul, but if the hopelessness of 40 years alone was the price he had to pay for this uncommon love, then he would gladly pay it. He placed the lily in the sand and sat down next to it. The ocean was the same, but larger buildings surrounded the spot on three sides. People were even closer, but this time he didn't care. He told Lily his plans, then headed down the hill for a swim to wash away the hitch.

The masterpiece

“Grandpa, who’s that man in the statue holding the pig?”

“Why, that’s old mayor “Squealin’ Sam Gordon. He was tall and straight and the leanest man you could ever know. He had sandy brown hair and a voice so high that when he got excited and started talkin’ real fast, it sounded like the pigs squealing on his farm. The nickname was all in fun, and ol’ Sam was the first to admit it, about his voice, I mean.”

“Why is there a statue of him?”

“That’s a good question, Jonah. He wasn’t supposed to be there. I guess you could say he was the second choice. And the only reason he was second choice was that he was the only one in town who had enough money to commission a statue of himself. At the time, we had a base and no statue, which looked pretty funny in the middle of town square. He gave us an answer to a problem that wouldn’t cost the city a cent.”

“How did the base get there if there was no statue, grandpa?”

“Sit down on the bench here, Jonah, and I’ll tell you the whole story.”

The town of Mayville had a sister city in Italy. Milino was a quaint little town, nestled among the hills outside Florence.

“Isn’t that where the famous artist Angelo Micheletti is from?”

“Exactly, my child. How do you know of this famous artist?”

“From a book in the library,” Grandpa.”

Did your teacher tell you to study this artist?”

“No sir, he was never mentioned in school.”

“I’m not surprised. His name hasn’t crossed the lips of anyone in this town for a long, long time.”

During the 1940s Squealin’ Sam went to Italy during the war.

He fell in love with the town of Milino, as well as a young woman there, named Maria Micheletti. Now, Maria had the shiniest black hair anyone had ever seen. Little wisps of her hair formed ringlets of curls around her face. Her eyes were as dark as her hair, and were set off by her milky white skin. She was lovely. Ol’ Sam sure thought so, too, and he wanted to marry her.

Problem was, Maria was afraid to leave her country and the only friends and family she had ever know, to go off with a man she loved, but hardly knew. She had heard stories about Italian women who had gone to America and were miserable. She knew in her heart that Milino wouldn’t be like her own town, filled with beautiful fountains and gardens and statues that made her feel at home.

At the time, Sam’s dad, Sam Sr., was mayor of the town. So Sam sent his dad a letter asking how to go about connecting Mayville and Milino as sister cities. Well, to be honest, there wasn’t much paperwork, and as long as the two towns agreed, there really wasn’t

much to stand in the way. There was a plaque for each town and a key and an official certificate to hang in city hall, and that was about all there was to it.

The Micheletti's had a cousin in America whom they contacted and told the story of their beautiful daughter's dilemma. Tears were shed by all who heard of her plight. Friends and relatives were divided over whether she should leave everything behind for the man she loved, or stay in the place where she felt alive, only to live there with a broken heart. Maria was not much more than a child at the time, but her parents told her she would have to decide for herself. They could not make a decision that would break either the hearts that beat inside them, or the one of their only daughter. A sadness swept through the town when the residents learned that Samuel couldn't stay in Italy after the war, where everyone was happy.

Maria's family loved Sam. He had worked hard at sounding like a man of the world, and also did a pretty good job of keeping his voice low, like his father's. He spoke slowly and confidently and explained that if only his family didn't have a farm to run, he would consider the idea of staying in Italy. But alas, his family needed him on the farm. It's a lot of work raising pigs, he told Maria time and again. He showed her a picture of the farm he left behind, but the old barn and pasture with its single large shade tree couldn't compare with the peaceful rolling hills of Italy.

When he left, he and Maria made a promise to have the situation resolved within a year. He said he wouldn't force her into a decision.

He assured her that she could make up her mind without pressure. He said he loved her and wanted her to be Mrs. Sam Gordon, Jr., and he would move his farm to Italy if he could, one shovel full of dirt at a time. This made Maria smile and she didn't feel quite as lonely as she thought she would when his train left the station. Every time she began to feel sad, she would think of him making a trip back with one shovel full of dirt.

About one month after he left, a letter arrived from Maria's relative in America. They discovered that she wasn't too far from Sam's area and the decision was made and everyone agreed that Maria would visit for the summer. She wrote Sam of her plan, and believed it would be easier to marry him if she had a relative close by. Both of their hearts were full of joy.

When her train arrived at the station, she was surprised to see so many people on the platform. Mayville must be bigger than it looks, she thought to herself, for so many people to be here. But then she saw her future husband and his parents all dressed up in the middle of the day to greet her. She felt like a queen but was embarrassed by her modest dress and flat shoes. She fixed her hair in a bun and applied a light pink lipstick to her already rosy lips. Her youthful glow had attracted the stares of the young men on the journey, but she ignored them. She saw her face in her compact and decided that she looked presentable, but her lip began to quiver at the thought of meeting Sam's family.

There was only one other couple who got off the train with her, and they were old and poor and she couldn't imagine why so many

people would come out to greet them. When she got to the bottom step of the train, she heard Sam shout “There she is.”

The crowd moved toward her. Maria’s first instinct was to turn around and run back up the steps to her seat of the train. She was frightened by the strange people who seemed to get closer and closer. She was afraid she couldn’t get off the train for lack of space on the platform, and she would end up staying on until the next stop. She was also afraid they would follow her up the steps and smother her in her seat.

After an eternity of looking for familiarity in smiling faces, Sam stepped forward and lifted her off the step, twirled her around and set her down on the other side of him. A space for her opened up, and she felt herself breathe again for the first time in what seemed like several minutes.

“How do you like your little welcoming committee?” he said.

“Is this all for me?” she asked, quite loudly, afraid he wouldn’t hear her over the hum of people and the train that was beginning to move again. They gathered her luggage and stepped to the other side of the platform. Sam set down her bags and said there was a surprise.

“You didn’t have to go to all this trouble,” she said. “First all these people here to greet me, and now something else?”

“Don’t you worry about me going to too much trouble,” he said.

“I did want to have people here to meet you and make you feel as welcome as I did when I was in Italy. But this is something your

brother Angelo did. He sent a gift for us, and you've been traveling with it all the way across the ocean.

“Why didn't he tell me?”

“Then it wouldn't be a surprise, silly,” he said, looking into her eyes again for the first time in months, and feeling like they both had come home.

After the train pulled away, they could see a large wooden crate with a red ribbon around it sitting on the other side of the tracks. Written on the wooden slats was the address of Mayville, and the words “Town Council of Mayville.”

“Your brother wrote us of his gift to our city, and we contacted the local stone mason here to see what we should do about putting it up on a nice pedestal, just like the one I'm going to put you on,” he said, smiling.

Sam explained to Maria that since his father was the mayor and had some pull in the county, he was able to dip into some emergency funds to pay for the base and even got a big-city architect to come in and design a space for it in the town square.

“The whole thing came together in less than three weeks, which is record time for anything new to happen in this town,” he said. “It's all for you, my darling, and in about five minutes there will be a dedication ceremony for the masterpiece called ‘Joy,’ in honor of you and me. Are you ready for all this,” he asked. I know it's all happening so fast. Don't worry, you don't have to do anything except stand here and look lovely, which is what you are already doing.”

Maria looked around for the first time since she stepped off the train. From out of nowhere a bandstand appeared, and red, white, and blue streamers were blowing in the breeze all around her. Several men in coveralls and heavy boots were surrounding the crate and moving it slowly across the tracks on a dolly.

Joy wouldn't be put on its base today, but it would be unveiled and tie together two cities and two lives forever. Sam's father, who looked just like Sam, only heavier, had a deep, rich, voice that rose out of nowhere and seemed to surround everyone. Sam Jr. Had unfortunately inherited Cissy's voice, which put a bit of a damper on his own political aspirations.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said slowly into the microphone, "I can't tell you how pleased I am today to be in the presence of two beautiful works of art from our sister city, Milino, Italy. He looked directly at Maria and said how happy he was that she was finally here, and the celebration would continue during the next four days throughout the weekend.

"I know your visit here this time is temporary, to visit your relatives in the next state, but I hope you will love everyone here as much as we love you and come back soon to be part of our family and our community."

Maria had never received this much attention before and felt her cheeks grow warm. Sam whispered to her to look happy and proud and his father would be pleased.

“I’ve been doing these kinds of things for years, and it’s best to just smile and wave,” he said softly in her ear.

So she did, and everyone cheered.

Election time was just around the corner, and Sam Sr. Wished with all his heart that that day was today, when he had the crowd eating out of his hand and wishing him and his family well. All he had to do now was think of a way to keep up the good will. He was spending a small fortune on the four-day festival, but realized at that moment that it was worth every penny.

“And now, dear friends and family, it is time to experience ‘Joy,’ a masterpiece in stone that celebrates the joy of young love, like that shared by my son Sam, and his bride-to-be, Maria. With the attention turned back to the couple, both smiled and waved, and then Sam Jr. took Maria in his arms and kissed her hard on the lips.

The crowd went crazy and the cheering went on for at least a minute after they pulled their lips away from each other. Sam Sr. wished he could bottle this popularity, and reminded himself to make a note to be seen around town with his son and his girlfriend every chance he could during the festival. They’ll have time together soon enough, he thought, but this weekend, they’re mine.

Sam’s mother, Cissy Gordon, was to be the one who unveiled the piece of stone. It was only fitting, she thought, since she was a charter member of the fine arts committee in Mayville, as well as president since its inception several weeks earlier.

“I’m just so excited,” she said. “And thrilled to be part of this historic moment that joins together two groups of people from foreign lands.”

Sam Sr. had told her what to say so it wouldn’t come out sounding small town. He figured by using the words “foreign lands” and “historic moment” the ceremony would have a certain international feel to it. He smiled at her, then she smiled at him, and then they both turned and smiled at the crate, which hadn’t been clued in to what to do, so it didn’t know it was supposed to smile back.

The men had loosened the crate enough so that with a slight tug, the whole thing would fall away and reveal the work of art. Cissy gave it her all, as usual, and the boards fell, careful not to land on her new pink high-heeled shoes that matched perfectly the pink flowers in her white dress. As the boards were falling away, the crowd grew quiet with anticipation. No one moved.

The statue was covered in a white cloth that allowed it to remain hidden from the onlookers after the crate was removed. Everyone chuckled and an odd sense of relief filled the air.

“Well, let’s try this again,” Cissy said into the microphone. She hadn’t been coached for the second round of unveiling, and looked to Sam Sr. to make sure her ad libs gained his approval. He smiled at her and nodded, which gave her the courage to call over Maria to give her a hand with this historic event.

For the first time in his life, Sam Sr. thought Cissy was a genius. He was so glad he had listened to his mother’s advice about the way

well-bred, Southern ladies were raised correctly and would always know what to do in social situations. She hit the jackpot on this one. Cissy was a true Southern Belle, and no matter what else people said about her, she was a lady through and through.

“Come right over here, Maria, and help me bring together the two sister cities,” Cissy said, but instead of pronouncing her name Marie-ah, it came out more like Mary-a. The name came out that way because she wasn’t used to pronouncing those foreign names, she told Sam Sr. later, in their bedroom while getting undressed. “It’s not like I’m the wife of the ambassador to Italy,” she said, in her own defense.

So Maria pretended she didn’t notice, and went over the help Cissy remove the cover. They took opposite sides and faced the crowd so any photographers could get a good shot, as instructed by Cissy quietly in Maria’s left ear while to innocent onlookers it appeared the two were just hugging each other in a greeting. When they each took a handful of material, Maria noticed Cissy’s short red nails looked like drops of blood against the solid white cover. The younger woman got a sudden chill and wanted to drop the cloth. She maintained her composure, however, and they raised the cover to reveal two young naked lovers embracing each other right there in the middle of the day.

The crowd shifted to make sure they were seeing the statue correctly. Mothers covered the eyes of their children and let them away by their arms. Husbands/fathers followed their families away from the scene. Arrogant young men laughed and whistled and shouted out suggested nicknames for the piece.



“Looks more lie it should be called ‘Makin’ babies’ to me, one fellow said.

Another shouted “It must be their birthdays ‘cuz they’re both wearing their birthday suits.”

People in the crowd laughed, and Sam Sr. knew he had just lost his edge.

He stepped up to the microphone and didn’t say a word. He just stood there for a moment, staring down at his shiny black shoes, wishing he could go back about four weeks and never tell anyone about the plan to bring art to Mayville.

He finally mumbled something about Europeans and their forward way of thinking when it comes to statues, but no one was listening. Most of the crowd was disbursed. He took Cissy by the arm and led her to the car. They pulled out of the parking lot and headed for their farm. Maria and Sam Jr. soon found themselves alone on the platform.

“What is wrong?” Maria asked.

“The darned statues don’t have any clothes on,” Sam answered, knowing he would never be able to follow in his father’s footsteps if he was associated too closely with the stone “disasterpiece.”

“Of course it doesn’t have clothes on,” she replied. “Why should it?”

She thought about that question later in the day when she sat on the train on the way to her mother’s cousin’s house in the next state.

“Grandpa, naked statues are OK now, aren’ t they”?

“Jonah, naked statues have always been OK. Some people just didn’ t know it.”

Black as night

Part I

For six years the sign for the Randy Bauer Real Estate agency has boasted the fact that the agency has been located at its present address for 31 years. I drive past it on my way to work every day and notice the small sign with the black and brown scripted handwriting against the white background. It sits at second story level in what used to be the front lawn of the house-turned-office. If the owners can wait another four years, then they will just have to change the “3” to a “4” and probably save a little money by only having to adjust one number. But how much they care about that kind of thing is already obvious.

Neither cars nor people are found in great numbers there, and I’ve yet to see the front door open. Maybe clients come and go through a back door. I hope so. I like to think they do well because I know the owners. Actually, I knew their son, Randy Bauer Jr.

His height and looks were somewhat nondescript, but his white-blond hair was distinctive. Most kids lose that hair color when they start school, but Randy kept his like his father before him, as well as some of his other relatives of Norwegian descent. Clairol spends a lot of money every year to try to capture that color in a bottle, but it’s never been done well.

In my memory he is usually wearing a baseball uniform and cap because he spent a lot of time in that outfit. He loved to play baseball

and joined three leagues the summer we spent together. I don't recall his job at the store, exactly, but he was 22 years old and a job just wasn't important to him at the time. Baseball, his friends and his car maintained the top spots on his list of priorities. That same list was shared by many young men in the Midwest in 1979. The only difference between his list and those of a lot of others was that my name appeared on Randy's list.

Summer is my least favorite season, although perfect summer nights, the later the better because the air cools, have always been special. Something in the dark clear air has always reminded me of hopelessness, but then a couple hours later a new day takes over. Chirping crickets reassure me while the blackness conceals everything we don't want to see. A perfect combination for young men and women trying to find themselves and each other. The baseball fields at night were the perfect metaphor for my theory. Glaring white lights on the field made everything look bright and perfect. But the blackness that rested just beyond the edge of the outfield could hide any kind of secret. That tension made a lot of us crazy and drove us to distraction. That was the summer that Julie left town suddenly for a few weeks to visit a distant relative no one had ever heard her speak of. It was also the summer Randy died.

Part II

I woke up around 2 a.m. following one of Randy's games. I had only been asleep a short time because we had stayed out too late and drank beer in the cool summer air. The night was still and quiet, so a

disruption was noticeable, even in my sleep. I heard the noise again that woke me. Voices. I sat up in my bed with a start.. A car horn. I got out of bed and put on my long pink safe robe. Attired in my robe and slippers, I left my room and met my mother in the hall. She was wearing a much-less-safe green robe. We didn't speak as we walked, she in front and me behind, our robes swishing around our legs in the otherwise silent journey.

We went to the living room and stood in the dark behind the sheer curtains, looking for answers as we stared out the large picture window. With only eight houses on the dead-end street, traffic was rare. The street was empty, of course, so we just stared, hoping to discover something and nothing at the same time. Then we saw the boys driving drunk-crazy up and down the street. I heard my name. I saw beer cans raised in a toast to me out the car windows by the six occupants of the big white jalopy. I smiled. My mother didn't. Still no words were spoken in the living room. She turned and walked away. I followed, but hesitated two seconds until she was headed back down the hall to her room. Her husband had recently died after a long illness, and now she had to put up with crazy boys chasing her daughter. Their headlights cast a shadow of the empty rocking chair on her wall every time they turned around at the end of the street. Eight times she saw the chair.

I went to the front door and flashed the front light on and off two times. A cheer rose up from the car, the horn sounded and my "friends" drove off. I didn't know Randy and his friends were in that car. I thought the boy from school we called Ruben was the one behind

the wheel. Ruben had had a thing for me since I was a junior in high school. Jumping to the wrong conclusion was easy.

Part III

Many similarities existed between Connie and myself. I never noticed those similarities until several boys dated both of us. If I dated someone, chances are he dated Connie at one time or another. If someone was attracted to one of us, then he was usually attracted to both of us, but not necessarily at the same time. Worse comparisons could be made, although I never understood how one person could be attracted to her dark hair and mysterious eyes, then find equal appeal in my light-colored eyes and skin.

There wasn't a competition between us, or at least I never felt it, until Randy came along. Randy and Connie worked at the same department store and I knew they were friends and had gone out together. I didn't want him to date her again.

Even with my realization of the Connie comparison and the boyfriend competition, I was surprised at my ability to be small and petty. Connie was straightening men's shoes in the large shoe department when I saw her at work one evening. I sauntered up and began talking about going to Randy's baseball game that night, knowing she was stuck at work. I made a point of letting her know that Randy wanted me to be there. He had asked me to go and I was sure we would do something after. She was very gracious. I didn't deserve that. She should have looked me in the eye and told me what to do with my "date." But instead she was polite and she listened to my stupid talk

about Randy like we really were friends even though we weren't. That episode opened up a whole new avenue into a dark place inside me. Something inside me that night had stepped beyond the lighted outfield into the dark place.

Part IV

Since I didn't want any light shed on the truth at the time, I waited several years until I asked Vicky what really happened. She was a good friend and the only one I felt comfortable with asking such a question. She was there the night Randy was killed in the accident after the ball game I attended. He was the only one who died. No one else was hurt. I knew the official story. The one told to the police and the surgeon at the hospital.

The right front tire hit a large hole and Randy wasn't holding on to anything or anyone. He sat on the right side of the truck bed and was starting to stand up at just the moment the truck jolted from the large missing piece of asphalt. He fell over the side in an instant. The other passengers in the truck started screaming and yelling for Dan to stop. He screeched to a halt, not knowing why. He thought someone was sick and didn't look forward to cleaning up that mess in the back of his most prized possession. His annoyance soon turned to horror. When Randy fell out of the truck he hit his head on a rock. He died instantly. The season was over.

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Not much had come of our date that I bragged about to Connie because he was not well. His flu was contagious and everyone wanted to stay away from him. He sat on the bench for part of the game, an

unheard-of place for him, and then took his glove and went home to bed after the seventh inning. We thought of him when five or six friends and I piled in the back of Dan's truck to hit a couple of bars to celebrate the team's victory. Vicky was one of the friends. She was a little afraid of Dan's driving, and was worried that he had had a couple of beers, and would have more as the night wore on. She was right to be concerned.

That same situation occurred a week later, only I was the one with the flu. I gladly went home early to my pink robe and bed. On this night, news of a telephone call broke my slumber. Mom came back down the hall in the middle of the night to tell me. She said it was important. Good news can wait until the morning. Bad news never can.

Vicky was on the line, calling from the hospital. "Randy is dead. Randy is dead," she told me. She said it twice like she didn't believe it, or maybe she was afraid that I wouldn't believe it. She said it quickly so I couldn't interrupt. She was probably in shock. Now I was.

I stayed away from the funeral home and the funeral. We were OK about our relationship, and I didn't want to go to the funeral home. I drove by after getting dressed, but couldn't go in. I saw the lights on the expensive landscaping and didn't want to go there. Connie went and may have even appeared as the grieving girlfriend. That was fine with me. The darkness was where I needed to stay.

The next day I went instead to the place where they told me he fell out of the truck, located a few miles north of town, out past an area that had been neglected for many years. Left at the stop sign, then up and down the curvy road that didn't go anywhere. I parked my car at the

side of the road and walked a few yards to the spot where his life ended. I had to see the horrible place where he died.

The sun was bright but the dense patches of dark green trees on either side of the road provided a cool shade over the asphalt. A gentle breeze lightly brushed my bare arms and legs. The silence of the day was broken only once by a car passing. A quiet place where I wanted loud. Beauty where I wanted ugly. I sat down and waited for reality to return. Night fell.

Vicky told me the truth. She would never tell anyone else but me, and know it wouldn't go any further. Everyone was supposed to take the events of that night to the grave. But we've known each other since we shared our dolls when we were too young for elementary school. I know the real reason she left the university, and she knows why I did. Telling me what really happened wasn't something she was uncomfortable with.

It was true they had gone for a ride after the game. Yes, a few beers had been consumed, and Donna Jenkins was feeling bold when she climbed into the back of the truck with the other three; Randy, Vicky, and Vicky's boyfriend, Dill. Dan was again driving. Vicky found out that evening that Donna had a crush on Randy, but no one else knew it.

Randy didn't think anything of it when the group ended up at Donna's family farm. Everyone was too drunk to ride horses except Dan, who hadn't had a drop but wouldn't go near the "wild beasts," as he called them. Donna insisted Randy ride. He took her challenge

although everyone else tried to talk him out of it. A more dangerous combination was not available, so this had to do.

Donna was the only one in the group experienced in horsemanship. She was showing off with her ability to stay on no matter how much she drank. Alcohol couldn't wipe out years of experience. The large black horse responded properly to its master. The others sat on the fence and watched her ride in and out of the light that spread outside the stable from the big light bulb stationed at the corner of the building. Every time she came back into the light, she posed in a different position on top of the horse. She was good and she knew it. Randy didn't realize the show was for him.

When challenged, he struggled to get on the horse and stay on. Vicky and the others on the fence screamed at Donna to stop the horse. She couldn't stop laughing at Randy's inability to control either the horse or the situation. She didn't realize he was in grave danger. Dill got off the fence and headed for the horse not knowing what he would do when he got there. Vicky jumped off after that, heading for Donna.

Neither made it to their destinations. Both stopped in their tracks when Randy was thrown. His head hit a rock and Donna stopped laughing. They put him in the back of the truck quickly and sped off to the hospital. No one said a word, even when they hit a large hole in the road about a half mile past Donna's farm. That's where they all got the idea about falling out of the truck, but no one ever said it out loud until they got to the emergency room. Those words wiped out the truth once and for all. It lay lifeless in the dark just beyond the edge of the light.

Donna's family didn't have the kind of money or insurance coverage they needed for a dude ranch, and having all of Donna's friends over to ride horses had been out of the question, according to her parents. Donna knew they would be devastated to know one of her friends had died there, and since there was no way to bring back Randy, there was no reason anyone had to know.

"Of course, they questioned all of us, and wanted to know what we were drinking, Vicky said. "We were scared. I remember being cold in a room without enough light. The detective's face was hard to see clearly in that room, and I guess he probably liked it that way. I haven't thought about that night in a long time."

The sun was setting, so Vicky turned on the lamp. "That's better," she said.

The permit

In Cheryl's high school, the talk of a party would usually begin quietly on Monday or Tuesday, and by Friday afternoon would explode into an all-encompassing passion so that no one thought of anything else. Phone calls were exchanged, giggles could be heard behind closed bedroom doors, and secrets shared about who likes who and why. By the time the party began on Saturday night, new clothing had been purchased, hair styles updated, and bizarre make up and perfume rituals performed. Some of these disasters were self inflicted, some performed as a group in a rite-of-passage ceremony that involved lots of mirrors and towels.

So the party at Danny's had been set all week. He went to the Catholic grade school and still had friends at the Catholic high school, so there would be new boys there. Everyone in Cheryl's group imagined these boys would be more mature and handsome than the boys at the public high school. Cheryl planned on staying out late with Gerry, her new boyfriend. She knew she could stay out late and no one would know when she sneaked into the unlocked house and crept into her basement bedroom.

There was drinking at the party that night. Danny's parents weren't home, and, well, when you reach a certain age and there is no adult supervision, beer just materializes. Cheryl didn't drink anything that night, and while no one really ever offered her any, she knew it was

there. Cheryl wasn't really interested in alcohol. Unfortunately, Willy Foote never met a beer he didn't like.

Willy was the rich Catholic kid with the flashy red Firebird. He dated Annie, the Protestant-girl version of the rich kid, although she drove something much less fancy. Her money was in wardrobe. Annie had to work the night of the party, which was also her birthday. Willy wanted to drive out to her house after she got home around midnight to give her a cake and a present. She lived out of town on a two-lane, winding road that seemed to swallow up a drunk driver just about every full moon.

At the time, Gerry Smog was Billy's best friend. They did everything together, including having a few too many that night. Gerry liked Cheryl, and had promised he would give Cheryl a ride home from the party, which now included a detour out to Jan's house in the magic Firebird. No one wanted to go with Willy, but promises were made that everything was fine, no problem. Gerry held the big cake on his lap on the drive out. Everyone talked about the party and the silly things that happened there. Willy took a few turns too fast. Everyone stopped talking and began helping Willy concentrate on driving.

At Annie's, Willy got tired, Annie got mad, and Cheryl and Gerry got worried. Nonetheless, they all ate cake like it was the normal thing to do sitting around a white French Provincial dining room table after midnight. Willy had a beer to wake himself up.

All of their parents were asleep, probably thinking that their children were in their beds sound asleep as well. Cheryl was thinking

about the drive home, and Gerry felt guilty that he dragged Cheryl out there. Willy just wanted to drive.

Everyone but Annie got back in the car and backed down the driveway slowly. Fortunately there was no traffic and the swift-moving car had the run of the road. Willy drove pretty carefully all the way back to town, but not carefully enough. On Main Street everyone noticed the exact moment the bright flashing lights lit the interior of the car from behind.

“What are you and your friends up to tonight, Willy?” the officer said.

“Oh, you know, the usual, Willy answered.”

“Yeah, I know,” the officer replied.

The officer knew Willy by name and told him to dump out any beer, of which there wasn't any. The officer was probably relieved that the situation was under control. Then the officer asked everyone's names and wanted to know if anyone had a license to drive. Gerry just about jumped out of his seat while yelling “Cheryl has her learner's permit.”

She was able to produce the permit from her purse to show them that she wasn't just kidding around. This was serious business. The State of Missouri believed she was ready to operate a motor vehicle on a public road as long as a licensed driver was in the car. The fine print didn't specify whether or not the licensed driver had to be conscious at the time.

That piece of white paper was good enough for the police, and good enough for Gerry. Unfortunately, she wasn't as sure. She'd just taken the written part of the driving test that afternoon. The paper license was still crisp. She'd only driven her mom's Monte Carlo on some of the back roads by her house, but this was a power machine and she'd never driven after dark.

She was hoping the headlights were still on as they maneuvered themselves around in the car so that Cheryl now sat at the controls. If the headlights weren't on, then she'd have to look for them. If she took too long, she was afraid the police might not believe the permit was official. She thanked God the lights remained on during the 10-minute visit by the men in blue.

She hadn't stopped shaking when she pulled away from the curb, but had calmed herself enough to put the gear shift in "D" and give it some gas. She was probably the most cautious driver out on the streets that night, and could have passed any driving test thrown at her. Gerry piped up and asked where should they go now that they had a good driver? She and Gerry relaxed enough to laugh a little and at about that time she pulled in her driveway. She threw the lever into "P" and raced into the house, careful not to make much noise. Any questions presented by her parents would give her away. She tiptoed down the steps with her heart pounding. At least 15 minutes passed before she could speak, and then she sighed out loud thinking about how her parents would react had they known the situation she had allowed herself to get into.

The next morning she half expected to see the Firebird sitting in the driveway with two sleeping occupants. The driveway was empty.

Cheryl's mom asked if she wanted any coffee. No one had ever asked her that before, and so not to make a big deal of it, she asked her daughter about the party.

"It was fine," Cheryl answered, looking into her cup and smiling. Then she reached for the sugar to sweeten the warm, brown brew.

A few weeks later Cheryl passed her driver's test, but never drove again. She never saw the need, and had lots of friends who had access to cars. When she was stuck at home as a teenager she just went in her room and read or talked on the telephone. Her grades were good so her parents thought not driving was a little odd, but they understood and did not question her motives, which were clear to them. When she left home, cars were not necessary in her small college town, and then an apartment in a city with decent public transportation took care of her mobility needs as a young adult.

Now that she had settled in a small house in an area with some stay-at-home moms, she felt like she belonged although she had neither a husband nor children. And transportation was never a problem. She caught a city bus to her office every day, and stores and restaurants were within walking distance. She loved the neighborhood as much for its convenience as for the friends she made.

She didn't think about driving much, except for those days when she used to sit in her car and contemplate freeing herself of the phobia once and for all by starting the darned car and driving to the grocery store for ice cream. Those thoughts were always fighting for space in her brain against some recollections of negative experiences with the automobile.

She thought she was over the problem when she shopped for and purchased a car from a man she worked with, but when he delivered the car to her garage, there it stayed. She waxed it one weekend in hopes that she would drive it, but never got beyond the planning stage. She even signed up for driving lessons, but couldn't go in the building to meet her instructor. She called from a pay phone outside his office and claimed that she was ill.

The one thing she did manage to do was keep her driver's license current. She had taken the driving test the day after she turned 16 and couldn't remember how she got through it. On the way home she made a right turn on red without noticing the sign warning her not to do that very thing. She, in turn, caused a minor accident and cried for two hours, worried that she could have killed someone. She hadn't responded drastically at first, but became immobile when she saw a small child in one of the cars. No one could console her. Her mother drove her home, then to pay her traffic ticket and anywhere else she needed to go after that.

Neither said a word about Richard, Cheryl's baby brother, who had died from complications of injuries sustained in what had appeared

to be a minor car accident 12 years earlier. His picture remained in her parents' living room, but nothing else.

Cheryl couldn't live with the fear that she might do to a family what someone else had done to hers—afflict irreparable damage to its heart and soul. Her head was filled with those thoughts as she heard Judy yelling as she ran to her house from next door.

“Cheryl, Cheryl, help me,” she cried. “Michael fell and hurt his head.” Cheryl saw the 4-year-old boy lying limp in Judy's arms as she came through the gate to the back yard. His straight black hair bounced with every step, catching and reflecting the sunlight. The black silk turned the color of steel blue at the crown as it swayed back and forth by the movement. His smooth, brown legs were lifeless. His sandal had fallen off his left foot, which was now scraped and bleeding.

This was the same boy who usually came through the house and yard like a hurricane, his shrieks and laughter swallowing up the silence. Now he was quiet, and Judy's screams couldn't erase the eerie silence that surrounded him.

Through her tears she said something about cutting down the big elm tree in front of their house, so Cheryl knew her child had fallen out of the tree. That was the tree she had seen him play around a hundred times. The big, beautiful elm tree that provided cool to both their houses in the summer, and whose leaves turned beautiful shades of gold in the fall, now seemed dark and solid against the blue sky. It's branches hung low when Cheryl saw it as she came around from the back of the house.

“Hospital,” is what Judy said, and they both knew what she meant was “Please drive us to the hospital.”

Cheryl’s terror spread. Both women felt it. Judy knew the reason Cheryl didn’t drive because they had discussed it over coffee during long winter evenings. Judy didn’t drive either, but didn’t have a license and had never even tried. She grew up in New York City and driving a car was as foreign to her as flying an airplane. Phone service had been out all morning, so both knew calling an ambulance or a taxi was impossible. Driving the 15 blocks to the hospital was the only available option.

Judy knew where Cheryl kept the car keys that never started the car. She also knew that Cheryl always renewed her driver’s license, and that she used to sit in the car by herself in the garage, trying to work up the courage to take it out and drive into town. She also knew Cheryl couldn’t drive them, but asked her to do it anyway. Judy knew that Cheryl couldn’t, but knew that she had to, knew that she would.

Judy ran to the garage while Cheryl raced inside and took the keys from their hook in the kitchen. She ran as fast as she could, hoping, somehow, that she would never reach the car, or wake up from this terrible dream. Her heart pounded in her chest like it had more than 10 years ago when she was afraid that she would end up in jail. She made herself move, and wanted to throw up. Everything was closing in around her. In the same moment she wanted everything to turn white so she could pass out, but to also be driving the car so she could help her little friend.

Fear wasn't what she felt. She sped right past fear to terror and beyond. Speaking was possible, but she would have to concentrate on getting sounds out of her mouth in order for words to materialize. She tried counting backwards by threes from one hundred. Nothing helped. Her insides felt like they were on the outside and her outside was nowhere to be found. Her thoughts and fears could not be contained by the boundaries of her body, so her arms and legs seemed to dissolve as the fear grew larger than herself. She moved toward the garage, keys in her hand.

"Michael is hurt and needs help," Cheryl tried to tell herself.

"Michael is a child, not unlike the little boy climbing out of the car in the accident many years ago." Cheryl imagined that boy as a man now, and Cheryl's wish for Michael's well-being and the desire for him to grow up to be a young man overwhelmed her. This feeling was the closest Cheryl had ever come to thinking like a parent, and because of it she was able to turn the key in the ignition, back out of the garage and drive her dear friend and her child to get the help he needed.

She drove through a blur for several blocks, and suddenly became aware at a stoplight. An airplane cutting a path through the sky caught her attention. She looked up through the windshield and suddenly felt like she was driving along a high ridge at the top of the world, the sides of the Earth falling away beneath her. Her mind took her away as she sat sideways in the car and hung onto the steering wheel to keep from tumbling off the planet into the sky. She feared that the car

would roll and not be able to stop as it did a free fall through the atmosphere.

The road ahead of her was too clear. She needed clouds and trees to break her fall. Nothing was holding her down, the ground couldn't be trusted to hold her. Cheryl believed that living on only one plane was too risky. If that plane disappears then there is nothing else. She knew that whatever was holding her in place couldn't be seen or felt, so losing that safety could happen at any time for reasons she would never know.

Her terror mounted. She was afraid she couldn't see Judy or Michael anymore sitting in the seat next to her, so she didn't look at them, and didn't speak to them because she was afraid they wouldn't hear her. If she disappeared inside her panic, then Michael wouldn't get to the hospital.

She gathered her strength and spoke. Judy turned on the radio so Cheryl knew she had heard her request. Her level of terror dropped one degree. She was still in the car. That was a good sign. She released some tension through her mouth, in a sigh. The voice on the radio caught her attention. Cheryl could hear, that was good. The voice was familiar, but she couldn't place it. After a few seconds, Cheryl heard the voice telling her to "Come on down to Foote Chevrolet and ask for Willy. That's me," he added. In that same moment Cheryl both felt grateful to Willy and hated him. She looked at the radio and saw it as it really was. She wondered if Willy was still drinking and driving as the

light turned green and she turned left with the other cars in line. Within the next block the hospital came into view.

The poet

There was nothing extraordinary about Yale. He walked down the street like a million other young men of his generation—confident and scared to death. When the weather turned cold, he would hunch up his shoulders, put his head down and jam his hands in his pockets so hard that he tore the polyester lining. It was hard to see his face when he walked like that, trying to keep out the cold in his old faded blue jacket, the only one he had. Most people didn't see him at all.

He would smile to himself when he remembered the day Suzannah opened his closet door and couldn't believe what it didn't contain, namely, many clothes. He lied and said some of his clothes were in the laundry. He didn't have much, didn't need much, and had never thought about it until he met Suzannah.

Very few people had influenced Yale's life, and he surprised himself by how much he cared what she thought. He couldn't remember ever caring what anyone thought about him enough to actually lie, and he felt a little uncomfortable about the situation.

He had been labeled "The quiet kid" long before he was aware of the tags and labels put on children like him growing up in foster homes, and how those labels are just one more way to conveniently categorize them long before anything is done to care for them, and long after anyone wants to do anything else. He was always grateful for a hot meal and clothes and didn't ask for anything else. He knew not to ask for fear of attracting attention. He was quite aware from a young age

that he was just one phone call away from a change for the worse. Kids on the street lived in fear from day to day. He knew he was lucky to have what he did, and had seen other children he lived with for months suddenly disappear one night, never to be heard from again. He learned not to ask or get attached.

When he was very small he remembered asking the nuns at the orphanage about his mother and father. The women in black told him only that he was from another country and that was that. When he insisted on more information, he was scolded for questioning God's plan. The following week he was moved from his quarters into a foster home in a run-down section of town where trash lay in the gutters. He understood the fragile relationship between him and the state.

He wanted to find his family or his people, and would look for photographs in magazines of people who resembled him. Most of his classmates had white faces and white parents so the young boy who tried to fade into the background had to work very hard to do so. Physically he stood out from any of the children he played with, so he learned to make his soul as invisible as possible. He couldn't take the chance of becoming a part of something that he didn't belong to.

As a child and even as a teen, school had been easy for Yale, and he hoped he could some day go to the university that shared his name. That was the only dream he dared to hold onto, the only one he clutched to his heart as he drifted off to sleep in the dark. In spite of good grades, school officials didn't bother to talk to him about his future, because

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most kids like Yale didn't have the prospects for the kinds of careers that educators find worthy of discussing.

He kept a journal almost from the time he could write, not because anything memorable happened, but because he wanted to remember how he felt as a child, so he could compare it to how he would feel as an adult. The hope that his life as an adult would be more satisfying was a thought he couldn't afford the luxury of thinking. But he knew he wanted a record, wanted to remember. He wrote very quietly at night with a fine-tipped pen so he could write small and include a lot of information on each page. He didn't want to have a lot of baggage to carry if he had to leave a place quickly, so he covered every inch of every page with writing that was barely readable.

Suzannah lived in the same building, although she was a few years older and far enough along in her career that she could afford much better living arrangements. She, like Yale, loved the location close to her newspaper office in the "artsy" section of the city filled with the best galleries and clubs and restaurants hidden in the alleys and behind the doors of some run-down building exteriors. Both liked the contrast of old and new, art and industry.

Dozens of writers, artists and dancers lived there, creating their own artists' colony within a few city blocks. Yale felt right at home there, and spent many late nights with groups of writers reading his new works or listening to the works of his friends. Encouragement and constructive criticism were served right along with strong hot coffee and left-over sweet rolls from the bakery next door, which sold for \$1.00 a

bag if customers showed up as they were closing for the day around 3 p.m.

Yale's construction jobs freed his mind to work on poems and stories in his head, and he would memorize line by line large portions of work as he created it during the day. For this he was again labeled "quiet," but a hard worker who never complained and always showed up on time. Work was sporadic during the winter months, and Yale struggled. Stretching a buck came naturally, although paying the rent in February and March meant regularly washing dishes in a local restaurant. He didn't mind the work itself, but dirty dishes were a never-ending proposition in a restaurant. He was glad for the opportunity to shut off the heat in his studio apartment for an evening and work in a place that was warm and safe.

He could almost always count on a cook or a manager to put a plate of food back in the dish area during his shift. Yale would eat in silence until every bite was taken. Breaks were spent sitting on boxes of potatoes with his journal and a fine-point pen. His entries written in restaurants were recognizable at a glance. They all lacked the edge brought on by working outdoors in a job that could end at any time. Kitchen stories were softer. Yale told Suzannah that it's hard to maintain an edge when he is warm and there is an abundance of food in the same room.

A few of his stories were beginning to sell, but checks for \$25 or \$50 didn't go too far. He knew that a long stretch of time would pass

before he could make his living as a writer, and he certainly understood the possibility of never accomplishing his goal. It was on a day when one of those small but encouraging checks came in for \$30 that he met her. He had just spent hours in a warm kitchen, and his belly was full of meat and potatoes and hot coffee. Maybe his guard was down and he was vulnerable. When he returned to his building from his dishes and found a check in his mailbox, he walked down the hallway to share the news with his friend. Before he knocked he heard laughter and music behind the door that belonged to Paul, a young man who also had writing aspirations and would appreciate the significance of the small amount of money.

As Yale knocked he noticed the door was open, and he leaned in. Normally he would have shied away from all those people, but he was in a good mood and wanted to drink some wine and share the news with his friend. He entered the apartment and found Paul alone in his kitchen, away from his noisy guests who were talking and laughing loudly in the small living room.

“The Frenchtown Gazette bought my story about the homeless man I saw when I was restoring that old Victorian house on Second Street,” he told Paul.

“Congratulations, old man,” Paul said, through lips that held a cigarette while his left hand slapped him on the back and his right hand tried in vain not to spill the contents of his drink. “That was a great story,” he said, sincerely. I knew it wouldn’t hang around for long

without someone snatching it up. Now we really have an excuse to celebrate. Come on, let's join the others."

"Oh, I don't think so," Yale said. "I don't know all your friends here and they won't care about my story."

"Well, you're probably right for the most part, but Suzannah will be interested. Remember, I told you I met her in my writer's workshop a couple of months ago. She lives on my floor, and writes for a living. Works right down the street at the Tribune. She'll be thrilled for you.

Yale took the glass of cheap red wine Paul offered and headed for the living room through the swinging doors. His life changed as he pushed through to the other side. The two young men--Paul, blonde and light and happy, and Yale, dark and serious--entered the room. Yale saw her and no one else. A shiver went up his spine. He used his glass to point to the woman sitting in the corner.

"Who's that?"

"That's Suzannah, my friend."

Yale stopped and stared. Suzannah was not beautiful, but something about her held his gaze. Her manner of dress was fussy, her blonde hair coifed, and her bracelets clanked together every time she moved either one of her arms. This kind of woman he normally didn't look at twice. Each of these things alone would drive him crazy by themselves, but add them together and his tolerance for annoyance would be put to the test. He realized he would be insane to spend any time with her. Nothing about her appealed to him. He knew had to meet her.

When she was introduced to him, she said “Hi Ya-ya!” with an accent that stretched his name to two syllables. He cringed at the sound of his name as he sat down on the floor next to her chair. He noticed her small shiny black shoes with numerous straps and wondered how long it took her to get them off and on and why anyone would bother. His big brown boots next to her little feet made him feel awkward.

She continued to talk to her friends and the longer Yale sat there pretending to be interested, the more out-of-place he felt. After about 45 minutes, when the conversation broke up with her friends, she looked at him, rather, through him, and asked him what he did for a living. He wanted to explain that he was celebrating and tell her all about what he wanted to do with his life and where he came from and what he liked best about writing.

“I work in construction and write a little.”

“Oh, really,” she said. “I write for the Tribune. Been there since my internship. Where did you go to school?”

He didn’t know how to respond without looking foolish. He wasn’t familiar with trying to mislead anyone, so he mumbled something under his breath as he got up to refill his glass. She didn’t seem to care what he said and the conversation with her friends was quickly underway again, as if it had never been interrupted. He spent most of the rest of the evening in the kitchen, and said “hello” when she came in to refill her drink.

She responded with “Hi again,” and raised her glass.

She left with her drink and returned to her familiar circle of friends in the living room. By the time he went back into the living room, Suzannah and her friends were gone, as were most of the guests. His insides were unsettled and relieved and sad at the same time. He said good-bye to Paul and left the party. Out in the hall he saw a large young man outside a door waiting for someone to let him in. Yale started down the steps when he heard the man yell to the person behind the door. Yale stopped in his tracks and listened.

“Let me in,” he screamed as he pounded on the door.

Yale couldn't hear the response from behind the door, so he waited again to hear what the young man said.

“I drove a long way to see you, and I'm not standing out in some hallway waiting for you to stop playing games,” he said in a booming voice that matched his body. He softened his tone a bit and pleaded again. Yale came back up the steps and stood behind a corner where he could not be seen.

“Come on honey, it's Joe Dick, your favorite snuggle bear.”

The door opened just a bit, and with that Joe Dick pushed it the rest of the way open and entered that room with all his might. He wouldn't let the door close on him again, and said so. Then he told the unseen party that she shouldn't ever pull a stunt like that again, and his voice got louder as each word left his mouth. By the time he got to the end of the sentence and said her name, he was screaming. When he said “Suzannah,” Yale headed for the door.

He stood there for about 10 seconds before either one saw him. Yale knew he wasn't as big as Joe Dick, but his construction jobs had made him strong and lean. He could take care of himself, and Joe Dick knew this as soon as he saw Yale. Joe Dick changed his whole body when he saw Yale.

“Can I help you, man?”

Yale said nothing for a couple of seconds, just stared at Joe Dick, and without taking his eyes off the man asked Suzannah if she was OK and would she like some help escorting this young man to his car. Suzannah ran to Yale like he was a long-lost brother.

“Are you ready for that midnight showing of Casablanca, like we planned at Paul's,” Yale said. “C'mon, the others are waiting for us downstairs.” The two clutched each other and left the apartment.

“You'll lock up, won't you, friend?” Yale said, as they walked out the door.

Joe Dick stood there, not knowing what to do. He wasn't used to feeling foolish, so it took him a few minutes before the full extent of the embarrassment reached every inch of his body.

Joe Dick Hopper was trouble. He was Suzannah's old boyfriend and wanted her to move back to Jackson and marry him and have his children. The plan was one not shared by his intended bride. He was accustomed to having his way and did not take well to the idea of not getting what he wanted. Usually his size alone would intimidate anyone to his way of thinking, or if that didn't work, then the local politicians would “influence” the guilty party. Suzannah had once seen two of the

Hopper men beat up a man with a cast on his arm for accidentally interrupting a meeting. She left everything she knew to continue her life someplace, any place, else.

There had been a Joe Dick Hopper in political office since the Jackson town charter was established more than 100 years earlier. Big fish in a small pond was all they knew, and each generation felt more comfortable than the last in that role. The youngest Joe Dick fulfilled his duty with exceptional mastery. He was already beginning to develop a plan to handle that “foreigner.”

“Thank you for helping me,” Suzannah told Yale as they headed out the door and into the street. Neither knew where they were going, and ended up at an all-night coffee shop several blocks away.

“Joe Dick is a part of my life I don’t want to think about, and I have run into him when I visit my parents,” she said. “But this is the first time he’s come here.”

She told Yale she was frightened because Joseph Richard Hopper knew something about her that no one else did. She told Yale that she has kept a journal all of her life, and when they dated he found it and read some personal things that young girls in Jackson did not think about, much less do, with a teacher. Her uncle was chief of police and this kind of thing could ruin his career. She knew if Uncle Marty was ousted, then the Hoppers would have power in almost every political office in town.

“I told him I would marry him if he gave me my journal,” she said, looking into her cup of black coffee. “Joe Dick is a politician

through and through, just like his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather. They use people to get what they want and then toss them aside. It's only a matter of time before I would 'get in the way'." I don't want to spend my life worrying about doing something that classifies me as a 'problem wife'."

During the next few weeks Yale knew his job was to keep Joe Dick away from Suzannah. He didn't want Suzannah to think he was watching her, so he started hanging around the lobby in an effort to cut Joe Dick off at the pass. He tried to make his presence in the lobby look natural, and he passed the time there holding pretend conversations with her in his mind that made him look bright and charming. Three days later he saw her come down the stairs. He didn't move or speak.

"You're never home, are you?" Suzannah asked.

His cheeks got warm and he smiled, then looked at the floor.

"Thanks again for the other night," she said. "I've been trying to call you and invite you to dinner. Are you free Wednesday?"

He stood there smiling.

"Can you make it Wednesday at 8?"

He smiled harder. Finally he managed to nod his head, indicating that he was in agreement.

"I'm a vegetarian most of the time" she said. "So if that's a problem, let me know."

"Me too," he answered, thinking about the hamburger he had eaten for lunch.

Yale didn't care why Suzannah was paying attention to him. He only cared that she was. He did think about a time when Joe Dick was no longer a threat and Suzannah didn't need him anymore, but he hoped by that time Suzannah would be used to having him in her life, and want to keep him there.

The two shared dinners and drinks a couple times a week and began to critique each other's work. They stayed up late and drank coffee and watched old movies together and walked through the park when it wasn't too cold and discovered that they had absolutely nothing in common but the fact that they liked each other.

In early summer, Suzannah began to withdraw. She was quiet in the same way she was the night he helped her walk away from Joe Dick. Since Yale was usually quiet, the silence between words became longer and more uncomfortable. She was somewhere else, and Yale wanted to go there with her. She denied it, but they both knew it was a lie.

One night he knocked on her door and knew something was wrong the minute he saw her. She wasn't wearing any make up and her hair was a mess, as were her clothes. He noticed boxes when he entered the apartment.

"Were you just going to leave in the middle of the night without telling me?"

"No," she said. "I was going to leave you a note."

"Well, don't bother," he said as he turned to leave.

"Please don't leave like this," she said, through her tears.

He had never seen her cry, and he wanted to comfort her and make everything better and start unpacking boxes so she would stay.

“Joe Dick knows my secret,” Suzannah said. “He’s a good politician, I can say that about him. He knows how to use information and influence to get what he wants. I can’t let him tell everyone what I did. My family wouldn’t be able to live there anymore. I can’t do that to them. Joe Dick knows that. He never came out and said it, but he knows I know what he is talking about when he ‘teases’ me about my past.

Yale and Suzannah spent their last night together like their first—talking about their lives until the sun came up. He helped her finish packing her things and loaded them into the car. He was numb when he watched her drive away around noon. He turned around to walk into the building, but he couldn’t remember why.

After she left he filled his days with work and writing. Neither was fulfilling, and he stopped sending out stories altogether. Suzannah had made copies of some of his poems and short stories and sent them to some friends of the family in an effort to get him a scholarship to Yale. It was her gift to him, and he didn’t find out until she was married. He couldn’t call her to share the news, knowing how Joe Dick would react. He knew his health and unbroken bones were probably part of the deal she cut when she married him. Calling her might backfire, and he couldn’t bear the thought of hurting her.

Everything at Yale would be paid. He would be able to study with some of the best writers in the country at no cost. A job at the

library was included in an effort to give him some spending money. He decided to take a chance and call her family, but realized during the conversation that no one would pass along a message.

After the desperation almost burned itself out, he wrote her a letter two weeks before he was to leave, sending it to her parents' address with another friend's name on the return address spot, with the hope that it would somehow be passed along. In his letter he proclaimed his love for her, not in a way to make her feel guilty, but happy in knowing someone in the world cared for her in ways she will never know. He told her he understands how they can never be together and he wishes her true happiness. Although he was heartbroken, he looked forward to the new chapter in his life, one he believed would be the most exciting thing he would ever experience.

"The chance to go to Yale has kept me going for years," he wrote. "Once it is finished I will have to find a new dream. And darling, I am looking forward to the mysterious journey that will point me in the direction of dreams I can't even fathom at this time." He chose his words carefully, as he always did, and spent the better part of two weekends composing his thoughts.

After he dropped it in the mailbox outside his building, a heaviness filled his chest. It didn't prevent him from breathing, but filled him with an uncomfortable presence that spread down his arms and up his throat until it was released through his mouth in a simple, silent, gasp.

The next week he busied himself with preparations and packing what little he had and promised his old dilapidated car to one of the other struggling writers in his building who had actually coveted the sad piece of junk metal. Yale had never been in a position to give anyone something of value, so he was just as thrilled as the recipient. He turned over the keys and registration, and unconsciously touched the bus ticket in his pocket that would take him to a new place in his life the next day.

After work that night, Yale and a few friends toasted each other in his apartment. He drank and fought back tears as he tried hard to ignore the missing portion of his heart Suzannah took with her. When his friends left, Paul offered to stay with him as long as he wanted, but Yale needed to be alone. Sleep didn't come, so he stared out the window down the street that took Suzannah from him.

He dozed off around 11 p.m., and was sleeping soundly when the phone rang at 11:20. Suzannah's voice came through the receiver and spilled into the dark room like honey. She spoke slowly and softly, glad to find him there but afraid of his reaction after her hasty departure. Yale thought he was dreaming.

"Yale, honey," she said. "I love you, and wouldn't ask anything of you that would cause you harm. But I need you. I ache from missing you. My marriage to Joe Dick is a sham, and I am so embarrassed by the whole thing that I feel stupid to have let myself be talked into something that is ruining my life. I'm stayin' at my mamma and daddy's house for awhile to sort things out."

“I’m leaving now,” he said, knowing it would take several hours to drive to the small town in Louisiana. He ran down the steps to the lobby and out into the cold night before he realized he had given his car to his buddy. It was parked nearby, however, and he knew where to find the spare key. He jumped in and started it and took off into the blackness.

Yale bought a couple of cups of coffee along the way and managed to stay awake by sheer will. The thought of Suzannah kept him going when nothing else would. She told him how to get to her parent’s house, and when he was close he recognized a few landmarks from some memories she had shared with him.

He found the house easily, and turned off his headlight as he crept down the tree-lined driveway that led to the expansive house on the hill. He parked a long way from the house and quietly made his way to a back door where she told him she would be waiting for him in the library. The French doors were unlocked. He entered the room with his heart pounding. She was asleep on the couch. He walked to her and bent down to hold her. He watched her sleep for several minutes before she opened her eyes and said “Hi Ya-yal,” just like the first time they met.

He picked her up and carried her outside to the guest house. He found the bedroom and pulled back the cover on the queen-sized bed. They slipped in and warmed themselves against the cool night air under the thick comforter. As they held each other, she told him she wanted to go to Yale with him. He said they would never be apart again. Yale

stroked Suzannah's hair gently and spoke to her like he had spoken to the younger children in the foster homes when they had nightmares in the middle of the night.

"Everything will be OK. We have nothing to worry about. Everything will work out," he told her, quietly, almost whispering as he drifted close to sleep.

Suzannah's Uncle Marty was making his rounds when he happened to see the beat-up junker with an out-of-state license sitting on the lane that led up to his brother's house. He pulled up close to the vehicle and called in the plate number. The car had just been reported stolen. The chief of police was beginning to worry, and he called for back up but insisted on no sirens or lights. He was concerned that a commotion might endanger the lives of his relatives inside the house.

Within minutes a dozen officers were listening to the hushed orders given by the chief. The group split into several teams in an effort to surround the house. Within minutes two officers found Yale. Marty's brother, Suzannah's father, found them at about the same time Marty did, and when he saw his daughter underneath the man, shouted, "I'm gonna kill that son-of-a-bitch."

Officer Lang hadn't been on the job very long and didn't realize until too late that the statement came not from his boss, but from his boss's brother. He fired his weapon.

The police report filed later that day noted that it took just one bullet to stop the rapist.

Out of her league

Lucille Sayer had a good head on her shoulders, so her daughter, Rita, grew up as the neighborhood women drank coffee, smoked cigarettes, and discussed life and its problems around her kitchen table. Lucille always had a practical answer to the most difficult problems the neighbors could throw at her. Unplanned pregnancies, infidelity, and uncooperative children/parents were common topics. Lucille provided a safe haven for these women and their problems.

So when Rita decided to go to college and major in psychology, everyone knew she made the right choice. She understood the concept of confidentiality, and that you could never, ever judge a book by its cover. One of her earliest realizations was that some of the most respected people in her neighborhood were some of the craziest.

In her sophomore year she was fortunate to be able to study with a somewhat famous visiting professor/psychologist. She was thrilled to get into his senior seminar on case study management, and was admitted because she had lobbied him through a letter-writing campaign of a magnitude previously unknown by Dr. Bass.

At the beginning of the term he told each of the eight students that they had to select one person to study, and that person should be someone with whom the students have some contact, but are not very close. No "best friends, family members or lovers"--past, present or future," he said.

Rita began her case study with what she knew from casual contact with Sharon, a young woman from her office. She thought long and hard before she entered information in her notebook about the woman with whom she would come to know more thoroughly than she thought possible.

...Although Sharon had a choice of living arrangements, she lived out of her car most of the time. Her trunk was her closet, and the floor of her back seat was her pantry where she kept a grocery bag of canned goods and bakery items. Vienna sausages, unheated green beans, and cookies kept her alive most of the time. She alternated them with a few other items, but these were her staples, just as other women kept flour and sugar on hand in glass or metal canisters on their kitchen countertops.

She paid attention to everything Sharon told her, and tried to remember every detail so she could categorize and organize the information. After the semester ended she hoped she would be able to share her insights with Sharon and solve her problems. Rita knew that life was like a desk, and all it took was a little organization to clear up any mess.

It was hard for Rita to just listen and write, but she did as she was told by Dr. Bass. She kept her opinions to herself and just used her pen to record the ideas. By mid semester, however, she had a book full of notes that painted a picture of a woman with whom Rita could not relate. The work progressed slowly at first, but quickly progressed beyond a level with which Rita felt comfortable.

... When Sharon felt vulnerable, she liked to tell her father she was staying with her grandfather, and her grandfather she was staying with her father, and then park her big Ford at the end of the deserted dead-end street where they both lived. She would sleep there and feel very safe and warm.

She bought a freestanding light at a garage sale that was perfect for reading or doing her nails at night in the car. It wasn't so bright as to attract attention, but provided enough light to handle the tasks at hand. Her father's "camping" can opener found its way to her car, as did a few other household items like an inflatable pillow. She kept these things in her glove compartment, and she found that what wouldn't fit there wasn't really necessary. Everything she needed she had, as well as security and peace of mind. She felt safer in her car than anyone's house.

Using a variety of sizes of cardboard boxes, she had organized a system for her clothes in the trunk, but never found a system to organize her life. She was sick about a third of the time, and calling in to tell her boss was something she was very good at. Eventually Sharon lost most of her jobs because of her propensity to watch daytime television while her grandfather brought her soup or ice cream or grilled cheese sandwiches as she traveled down that long road to recovery. It was an endless journey.

She never worked in any office for long, but everyone seemed to know her circumstances within a short period of time. Her shocking revelation usually bought her some time, and since her bosses felt a little

sorry for her they kept her on the payroll longer than she deserved. Part of the sympathy may have been given because none of these people could believe they had been taken in.

...Sharon was a skinny 20-year-old with a face that fell somewhere between not terribly good looking, but not unattractive, either. She was average. This kind of look on a man doesn't matter much, but on a woman, well, her options might be limited if she didn't have anything else going for her. And Sharon truly didn't have anything else going for her. Nonetheless, she flirted with men unashamedly, and to her credit, she probably got most of her jobs because of this ability.

...Sharon's mother hadn't been in the picture for years, so she was raised equally by her father and grandfather. She told her women office friends about the time she came home from school early and found her father and his male lover together in the living room. From that time forward she spent more time with her grandfather and her Ford. Neither failed her for many years.

It was her grandfather, in fact, who bought her the Ford. Big and solid, like himself, he believed she would be "safe" in the car. Sharon took that advice to heart. A couple of fender benders (for the other cars involved) proved his point. Her Ford never received a dent or a noticeable scratch. And if it did, the gray paint didn't show it. But some damage can't be seen. That kind of damage Sharon was familiar with.

No one was ever surprised when Sharon didn't show up for work, so on any Monday morning no one would even bother to ask why

her chair was empty. Her boss figured he would get a call from her sooner or later, and he was usually correct.

“I won’t be in for a couple of days,” she said, at five minutes after 9 on a cold winter morning. A long pause filled the line while Alfred tried to hide his disappointment and anger. He had work to do and counted on his secretary to be in the office to do her share. He also hated answering his own phone.

“My grandfather died last night,” she continued. “I can’t believe it. He’s dead.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Alfred said. “Well, call me later in the week to let me know when you’ll return to work.”

He knew he sounded cold, but couldn’t help it. His sympathy for her and her circumstances fell short after the first month she worked there. He would make it up to her with a nice card his wife would pick out and sign and mail. He then told Amy, his boss’ secretary, who told the rest of the group, including Rita, about the situation.

After everyone had exchanged the proper amount of sorrow between them, Rita and Amy admitted that they wanted to go to the funeral home to get a glimpse of Sharon’s gay father, of whom they had heard so much about. Amy was very young and not familiar with homosexuals, and Rita had been friends with a gay couple in college, but was still curious enough to go with her. Rita thought she could get some insight into Sharon’s situation by seeing her people. On Tuesday Amy and Rita wore their good dresses and polished shoes so they could go straight to the funeral home from work.

The funeral home was located in a building that used to be a movie theater. Rita noticed that the front of the chapel was located at the bottom of a slight incline, and the seats had been replaced with pews so everyone had a really good view of the casket and the preacher. She joked to Amy that she hoped all the gum had been scraped off the floor.

The irony of a movie-theater-turned-funeral home was not lost on Rita. Many tears had indeed already been shed there, but tears of a different nature, of a fantasy world. Those shed at a funeral home are real and close to the heart. They come from a deeper place. At a movie theater, tears and laughter find a happy mix. Happiness at a funeral home is hard to find.

When they walked in the door Rita swore she could smell a slight popcorn scent. Amy said she didn't smell anything except the appropriate funeral home smells, which includes perfume, after-shave lotion, leather from expensive furniture and expensive furniture polish. (Cigarette smoke used to be included in this list, but with the current anti-smoking sentiment, you now must go outside to find this one.)

Rita knew popcorn when she smelled it. Everyone else was trying hard to pretend that the funeral home had always been a funeral home. This building that now housed a dead grandfather was also the building where some of the attendees had been kissed for the first time in the back row while the images of romance were projected on the screen.

No one who worked there would talk about it or admit anything. Of course she didn't discuss it with members of the immediate family

of the deceased because she was brought up better than that. But it's just the kind of conversation that could make funeral homes less intimidating, she thought to herself. No one shared this opinion with her, but she made a note to record these thoughts in her case report notebook.

Even the staff members she spoke with wouldn't admit that they knew anything about the building's past. She was pretty sure they had been told what to say to nosy funeral home visitors like her. She would have bet there was even a condescending memo floating around somewhere that had words to the effect of "...in order to maintain our reputation, as well as the dignity and respect we have built during our 50 years of business, please refrain from referring to the building in its former life. If a visitor wants to talk about it, let him or her, but staff members should only reply that they are unfamiliar with the former occupants of the building..."

Rita don't know where funeral people come from, and didn't know anyone who knew any funeral home people socially. She did know funeral homes tend to be family businesses and there is probably a reason for that. Once someone in a family begins to work there, then others follow because when they start to tell people they have a brother or sister in the funeral home business, people begin staying away because they know your siblings work with dead people. Soon the only thing left to do is go into the same business because no one will have anything to do with anyone in the family anyway. She wondered what people say to someone who works in a funeral home after "What's it

like working with all those dead bodies?" And the only reason they ask this question is so they will have something to tell other people at parties. No one really wants to know what it is like working with dead people. Everyone can pretty much guess. It's no wonder these people have to socialize with each other. But the big question remains--what do these people do on "Take your Daughter to Work Day?"

Amy and Rita accomplished their original mission, to get a good look at the two male lovers. There were a lot of other men there that night, and she wasn't making any guesses about sexual preferences, although she took enough mental notes to start a new notebook. She thought the others may have thought she and Amy were lesbian lovers, so she made a point not to stand too close.

Sharon was genuinely glad to see them, as they were the only representatives from the workplace, and Sharon wasn't used to having many close girlfriends. They followed her to the basement lounge where the three had a choice of soft drinks and candy from a machine. She showed them where the rest rooms were located, as well as the quiet lounge. Rita wondered that since there was a quiet lounge, was there also a loud lounge, but didn't ask.

Sharon sat down on one of the soft basement couches and immediately proceeded to tell them the story of her mother and father's breakup, and the pregnancy that resulted from one final fling. "Daddy didn't know anything about it until much later, and since Mother was married to another man, she didn't want him to kick her out of the house."

Sharon didn't cry or show much emotion with the story of her very early life. "But then my stepfather figured out what happened, or Mother may have told him in anger, when she was seven months pregnant with me and my twin sister."

Amy and Rita stared at each other for a moment. "You have a twin sister?" Amy asked. "You never told us you had a sister."

"I don't. She died in the womb after a tragic accident."

Amy and Rita stared at each other again as soon as they finished staring at Sharon. The group might as well have been sitting in the "quiet" lounge, because no one said a word for a long time.

Sharon never came back to work after that. Rita hoped her grandfather left her some money so she didn't have to work, because Sharon never dealt well with the stress of the working world. Roseanne, the office receptionist, and Rita were discussing that very topic one day about a month after they last saw Sharon.

"Did she ever tell you she was a twin?" Rita asked.

"Twin?" Roseanne replied. "She told me she was a triplet. One sister died when she was a baby. Her other sister lives in California. They write to each other all the time."

Rita knew then and there what she had to do. She threw away her notebook and called her advisor to change her major. Art history suddenly sounded very good to her, since most of that information had already been categorized and classified in a way Rita could understand.

The ride of her life

Sally and Rob tried to love each other, and now they had a baby.

The ride to the hospital must have been uneventful because Sally couldn't remember it. She wanted to remember that trip for later, but since they put her in right from her doctor's office that day, she didn't really pay attention. She tried to remember if the trees had their leaves, and whether or not the tulips had bloomed.

Most parents have funny anecdotes about rushing around before leaving for the hospital on the big day. Or funny stories about promises made during painful contractions. Or even stories of speeding and getting pulled over and then receiving a police escort to the hospital. Sally had been born in a blizzard and it took her parents a long time to get to the hospital. She and Rob missed all that. She couldn't remember the ride to the hospital at all.

Once she was admitted to the maternity ward, the requisite blood was drawn, forms filled out and hospital gown and bracelet issued. There she sat on the side of her bed feeling fine and not knowing how soon anything would happen. The results from the amniocentesis would be available later in the day, as would the results from the blood test. Until then, Sally would wait with Oprah and Phil and the local TV newscasters whom she invited into her room.

“Your levels are up, we take her in the morning,” her doctor said that evening when he made his rounds with two other people in white

coats. "About 10:30." One of the other doctors smiled at her as they left the room, and Sally couldn't tell if she was trying to be happy for her and reassure her that everything would be OK, or if it was just a nervous smile. She was left with the memory of that smile as she waited for her most important tomorrow. Fortunately, a sedative that night relaxed her enough to help her sleep. When she woke up the next morning, the relaxed state remained.

Nurses wheeled her into a birthing suite and her doctor came in just after 10:30 a.m. After hooking her up to a fetal heartbeat monitor, he tried to "turn" the baby from its breech position in preparation for delivery. After several minutes of painful pushing and pulling on her stomach, the baby's heart rate dropped dramatically. However, the doctors and nurses didn't bother to tell her that that was the problem. They just began shouting orders over Sally and ran to the operating room, holding onto the bed with Sally in it.

"What is it? What is it?" Sally asked. Then tried "Is it her heart? "Is it her heart?" She couldn't stand the fact that the tiny heart beating inside that tiny little body might be damaged before it even had a chance to beat on its own. Most people earned their broken hearts as rites of passage. Starting out that way wouldn't be fair, she thought. Her own heart broke for a second time.

The first time had been just a few months earlier, before she knew she was pregnant and when she thought Rob didn't love her anymore. For the better part of the previous year every conversation they had had turned into something uncomfortable and tense. Neither

really knew why, except that some strained family situations grew larger than life and invaded their relationship. Suspicions complicated by poorly chosen words clouded what each was trying to say. Every time they spoke in an effort to come together only took them farther apart.

Before Christmas they decided on counseling to save a marriage that had lost its meaning. The decision to try changed something, maybe even stopped the bleeding, and they never got to the first session. Rob started coming home on time because they wanted to love each other. Now they wanted to love this baby.

She tried to sit up on the speeding table and catch someone's eye. No one answered. She knew of a woman who recently lost her baby two days before her delivery date. Her heart now broke for that family, and for herself. She was unfamiliar with the protective device that comes with bringing a new life into the world, and a combination of emotions swirled around in her body, which was already stretched to the limit. Fear rose from her chest, up through her throat and into her head, where it invaded every thought. She wanted to see Rob, but he was lost to her as she rode to the operating room with these strangers.

As they raced down the corridor, other members of the medical staff began accumulating around the bed. Each foot traveled seemed to attract more racing doctors. They appeared from nowhere but fell into step with the others. All wore blue scrubs and masks. None had a face, only eyes that peered down at her with concern. The movement of all that blue material reminded Sally of laundry drying on the line in the breeze.

The doors to the operating room seemed to open magically and more of the blue people appeared. Twenty people were going to be present for the birth.

“I’m George Daniels,” a man behind her head said as they asked her to “hop” onto the operating table. “I’ll be your anesthesiologist.”

While he spoke a blue sheet went up between her head and the rest of her body. She could see nothing in front of her face, and turning left or right only offered limited views of blue doctors or silver equipment.

“Heart rate is back to normal,” a woman standing next to her right hand said. The adrenaline level in the room dropped. She could almost hear the disappointment in the woman’s voice, and in the tone of the other 19. A collective “aww,” is the sound she thought she heard. Like the “awww” an audience makes during a play when the star is chastised by the woman he loves, but who doesn’t love him back. Or like an “aww shucks, we can’t go to Disneyland this year.”

“Roll over on your right side,” the same woman said. “My name is Debbie.”

Sally struggled to get on her side. Her body had not been her own for some time now, and the fluid trapped under he skin that sent her blood pressure up also prohibited her from moving with ease in any direction.

“I feel like I’m going to fall off the table,” Sally said as her body wobbled on the edge.

“Would you like to hold my hand?” Debbie said. “Just hold my hand. I won’t let you fall.”

Sally reached for the hand. She didn’t know the woman but her hand was strong. As long as she held the hand she thought everything would be OK. The small smooth hand in her hand reminded Sally of clasping her own two hands together, like she did in church when the minister said “Let us pray.” There wasn’t much substance in either the fingers or the palm, but Sally knew that this person wouldn’t let her fall while another stranger inserted a sharp needle into her back.

When she rolled onto her back, she let go of Debbie’s hand, only to have her right hand taped to some sort of board that limited her movement. No one prepared her for any of these actions. She was just along for the ride.

Sally couldn’t move her arm, and a tingling feeling that came up from her stomach took only a few moments to reach the tips of her fingers. She wiggled them to see if they still worked. Sally believed if the tingle reached her head, she might die. Mistakes happen in operating rooms all the time. She had recently read the story of the doctors who cut off the wrong foot of a man who had a diseased foot, so the man was ultimately left with no feet at all.

“What could these 20 people behind masks do to her body as she lay motionless,” she thought. Debbie had made her feel safe, but anything could happen. Someone could’ve held that footless man’s hand, too.

Her thoughts turned to work and the disasters created when any decisions were made by committee. And those committees were usually made up of four or five people. “Imagine what kind of havoc 20 people could wreak on a helpless body,” she thought. Sally tried to concentrate on anything else.

When Rob showed up she didn’t know him at first because he was disguised as the others. He spoke her name and Sally knew. He held her left hand and Sally forgot about the rest of her body. He was smiling behind his mask. A genuine smile that crinkled up the skin around his eyes as it crept up his face.

What did he say during all this? What did the doctors say?

None of this stayed with Sally and she wanted to remember. One of the nurses asked Sally later if she heard her doctor begin speaking in Vietnamese, his native language, while operating. Sally didn’t remember. The only thing she remembered was the baby’s first cry. She also didn’t remember Rob leaving his seat and going over to the table where some of the mystery people in room cleaned the baby. She thought Rob told her this story after the big event, but she would have to ask him again to help her remember. She decided she would hold onto every word when he did.

Sally kept wondering where she was during the whole procedure because these events were not part of her memory. Now she wanted to talk to everyone there and ask them what happened on that Wednesday morning. But she didn’t know any of them. Debbie never told Sally her last name. Sally was afraid she rode the rolling bed to the

operating room and left her memory behind. Now too much time had passed.

How did she get from the operating room back to her room?

Her brother came by right after the baby was born, but he didn't plan to be the baby's first visitor. It was just coincidence.

Sally saw him, and he and Rob disappeared for a while. Sally thought Rob took him down to the nursery to see the baby. Sally couldn't remember where she saw him and for how long. She thinks he came by when she was in the birth suite, but why did they put her back there? That room was for women waiting to deliver. In her mind she can see him standing by one of those beige hospital curtains that rides a circular track along the ceiling in that room. Was that an image left over from an earlier visit?

He didn't mean to be there at that time. He left quickly, although Sally didn't mind the company because she didn't quite know what to do. The baby must've been in the nursery since Sally wasn't allowed to see her until later. Her memory failed her again in recalling the details of that afternoon or evening.

The morning after came at its usual hospital time of 5:30 a.m. with the sound of nurse Jill opening the door. Sally remembered her from earlier in the week as a kind woman with a little bit of an edge. She had looked through all the magazines on the table while a student nurse took Sally's blood pressure. "You sure have a lot of magazines," she would say every time she came in the room.

Patty was Sally's roommate. Patty had been introduced to Sally two days earlier by another patient, who told Sally the sad story of Patty delivering a baby who had already died.

"She asked me if Medicaid would pay for the baby's funeral," the woman said. "I don't know what she's gonna do. I know she couldn't afford to have it, and she can't afford to bury it."

Sally wondered why the hospital staff would be so cruel as to put this woman in her room. One with a baby, one without. It must have been a mistake.

Rob said he couldn't wait to take Sally to the nursery to see the baby. He was impatient as she slowly moved her swollen body from the bed to the wheelchair, but reassured her to take her time. He was anxious to reunite his family. Sally and Rob each wanted to hold the new baby that linked them.

No one could enter the special care nursery without an invitation. The door was opened by an unknown entity from the other side after the intercom button was pressed, and identification obtained. Sally couldn't get out of the chair, so Rob had to roll it up to the big silver sink where she could wash her hands before putting on a hospital gown. They took turns holding the baby while they planned the future.

That night, Sally looked over at the sleeping Patty and thought about asking the nurses to help her remember. She thought about trying to love Rob and the baby and the ride home.

Carlos the too-big car

Carlos was a very big car. “Too big,” some people said.

“A gas guzzler,” others said.

But Mrs. Hanson never said any of those things about Carlos.

Carlos was her very own very big car and she loved him.

She purchased Carlos many years ago when he was shiny and new. He helped Mrs. Hanson run her errands in town.

Every Thursday he and Mrs. Hanson went to the grocery store and the drug store.

Sometimes he took her to the doctor’s office, the Post Office, the bank and the dry cleaners. He also took her to visit her friends in the community.

Carlos was the perfect car for Mrs. Hanson.

So when someone said Carlos was a gas guzzler, or that he was just too big, she always said “He gets me where I need to go.”

And that was that. Mrs. Hanson would have none of the negative talk about Carlos. They took care of each other. She bought premium gas for Carlos’ gas tank, and had his oil changed regularly. She also listened to the mechanic who worked on Carlos and did whatever he recommended to keep Carlos’ engine running smoothly.

Carlos was glad that Mrs. Hanson took good care of him. And Mrs. Hanson was happy to have Carlos take her where she needed to go. He ran for years and years and years without any problems.

Carlos lived under the covered parking space behind Mrs. Hanson's little house at the end of the lane. The roof kept him dry in the rain and clean of snow in the winter.

He liked playing hide and seek with the children in the neighborhood. He could hide six or seven children at once. Some would open his door and sneak inside, and others would crouch behind his wheels.

Carlos loved the children and loved to hear them whisper and laugh as they played. The children also loved Carlos, and Carlos let them honk his horn. "Beep, beeeep!"

He would also beep his horn at the children when they gathered near him to take the little yellow school bus to the preschool. Carlos and the school bus were friends. They would honk to each other every day when the little bus came by.

One day a new car moved in next door to Carlos. Sporty was a shiny red little sports car who could go faster with less gas than Carlos, but Carlos didn't care. Carlos knew he helped Mrs. Hanson.

When Sporty called Carlos a gas guzzler, Carlos didn't listen. When Sporty called Carlos an old dinosaur, Carlos didn't care. He knew Mrs. Hanson depended on him.

Carlos noticed that Sporty's owners could open his doors by a remote control button. He also saw that Sporty had automatic locks, windows and outside mirrors that were adjustable by a switch inside.

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He also had an antenna that went up when his owners turned on the radio, and went down when they turned it off.

When his doors were open, Carlos saw that Sporty's dashboard was black and shiny and everything operated by pressing buttons. Carlos had an old-fashioned dashboard without very many buttons or knobs at all.

Sporty asked Carlos how he fit into parking spaces because he was so big. "Don't you need two spaces? I just zip in and out without even thinking about it."

Carlos had never thought about parking spaces before. He would have to remember to be careful to park between the lines when he went into town.

Carlos saw how much Sporty took his family places, and thought that maybe the others were right. Maybe he was too big. He saw that the other cars on the road are a lot smaller than he was, and didn't feel big and special anymore. He felt old and tired.

One day, Mrs. Hanson got behind the wheel, turned the key to start Carlos' engine, and waited. The engine wouldn't start.

Carlos was very sad. Mrs. Hanson told Carlos not to worry, that she would have him fixed up in a jiffy and he would be just fine. Carlos knew she was right, but was unhappy when he saw her neighbors help Mrs. Hanson climb into Sporty so she could run her errands.

She had Carlos towed into the shop for repairs, and he had to stay overnight with some other cars in the garage. He heard some of them whisper to each other about his size, but ignored them and went to

sleep. Mrs. Hanson picked him up the next day. He noticed that Sporty brought her to the garage, and then honked as he sped away.

Carlos felt better after he was repaired, but was still feeling old and out of date.

But one day, everything changed. He heard the neighbors talk about the little school bus that broke down and couldn't take them to the fire station for a field trip that day. He had heard about the trip for many weeks and knew the children would be disappointed. He heard them talk in the yard and wanted to help, but he didn't know what to do. He also heard the children's mother say that Sporty was too small to hold five children, and fire station was too far away to make two trips.

Carlos wanted to help, and he knew he was big enough to take all five children on their field trip. He hoped harder than he had ever hoped before that someone would notice him. Then he saw five children and one mother walk over to Mrs. Hanson's yard. Mrs. Hanson was pleased to see them all and invited them in for lemonade.

Carlos wished he could go inside and hear what they were saying. They stayed in for a long time. He was very anxious to know what was going on in there.

Finally, they came outside and walked right over to Carlos and opened his door and climbed in. Five children and one driver. Three in the front and three in the back. They all buckled their seat belts and backed out of the covered parking space.

On the way to the fire station, the littlest girl in the back seat said
“I’m sure glad you’re big enough to hold us all, Carlos. “We love you
very much.”

When Carlos returned the children to their home, Sporty said he
was sorry for calling him a gas guzzler. He thanked Carlos for taking
care of the children and getting them to the fire station safe and sound.

Carlos was very happy that he was a very big car.

The end.

Mary Elizabeth Horner was born in St. Charles, Missouri, in 1959. She graduated from the University of Missouri-St. Louis with a bachelor's of art degree in English, and has worked for several publications in the St. Louis area as a writer/editor. While completing this degree, she was managing editor of the *Journal of the American Optometric Association*. She currently lives in St. Charles with her husband, Randy, and her daughter, Nila.