

## Abstract

Title of Thesis: Collected Stories

David Lemmond, Master of Fine Arts, 2007

Thesis directed by: Professor Merle Collins  
Department of English

This collection includes five short stories and the opening chapter of a novella and while the topics and narrative techniques vary widely, certain themes emerge throughout the collection. In each story, the protagonist is faced with an unexpected event that forces some kind of action – an abusive husband whose behavior is passed on to his son, a latent pedophile, a man learning of his ancestors' sins, a successful attorney dealing with his parents' infirmities, a man confronting his sister's mental illness, and a man facing his mother's death. All of these characters face these realities in different ways, but cannot avoid dealing with what twists and turns the world has waiting for them. In this collection, the various characters respond to the environment that they find themselves in and do their best to remain intact in environments that are sometimes hostile and occasionally toxic.

# Collected Short Stories

By

David Lemmond

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## Advisory Committee

Professor Merle Collins  
Professor Maude Casey  
Professor Brian Richardson

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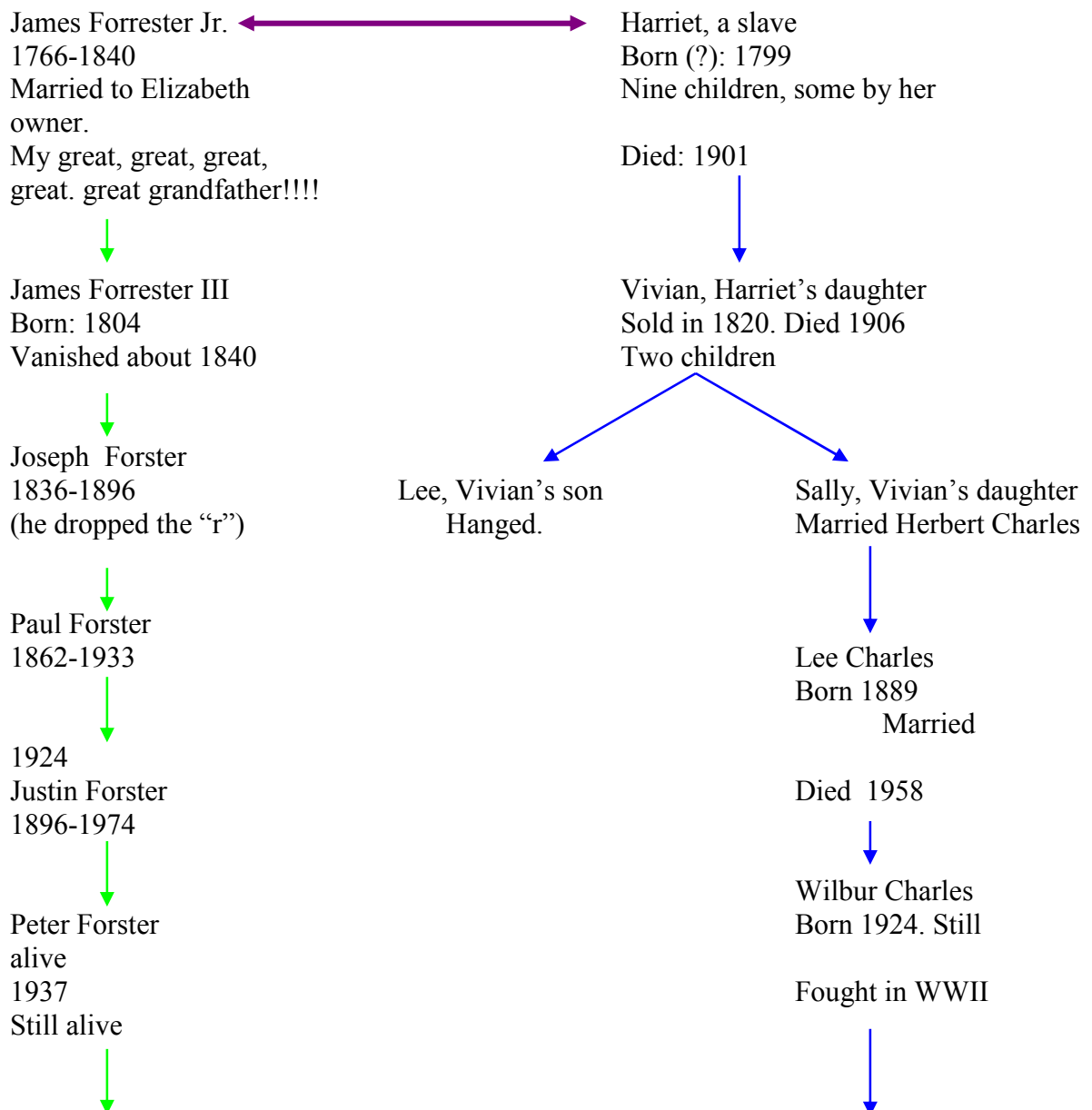
# **The Life and Times of Harriet X**

## **Prologue**

What started this small project of mine was a rather simple question from my middle daughter, Jennifer, as we sat in my car outside her mother's home just after Christmas two years ago. Her mother – my former wife, Leslie – was waiting impatiently in the doorway, so it was not an opportunity for much conversation. Jennifer asked the question as she was putting her hat on and searching for her mittens in her green parka. Did we like own slaves? she asked. I mean, like, real slaves, back in the day? I said probably, then her mother yelled Jennifer's name. The door opened, a blast of cold air came into the car. I think we did, Jennifer said as she left, and then she was gone.

About three weeks later, after I had taken Jennifer and both of her sisters to the movies, Jennifer handed me a lavender manila folder. I didn't look at until I got back to my apartment. All that was in the folder was this chart.

*Black & White Connections*  
*Black History Month Project*  
*Oral Presentation Notes*  
*By Jennifer Forster*



Michael James Forster  
Born: 1960  
Married Leslie Brumm  
Divorced  
My Dad

Wilbur Charles Jr.  
Principal  
Schenectady High School  
Three children  
My cousins!!!!



I called Jennifer that same evening and asked where she had found out all of this information. She said there were many places on the Internet to find family history and that she had mainly used a site run by the Mormon Church. She had used Google to find a few diaries and letters as well, from the University of Virginia and “some library” in New York. I asked her she had found any more information. It was just a three-minute oral report, Daddy, no big.

Some of what was on Jennifer’s chart was new to me, but I had heard most of it from my parents and grandparents. Over the next year or so, I spent some time on the Internet and at my local library, where one of the librarians was very helpful. My job took me to Washington DC, and I drove down to Richmond for a bit more research; more of a pleasant drive than real research, but I did learn more on that trip. All in all, I probably spent 20 hours on this project, including the drive that weekend, and I don’t intend to spend any more time. What is here therefore comes from Jennifer’s chart, a few diaries I have found, a few letters, my memories of conversations with my grandparents, and much speculation – logical speculation – on my part. I am no historian.

I am not related to Harriet X.. I am a 44-year-old white male of mainly Irish descent, with a new wife named Elizabeth, an ex wife named Leslie, and three lovely daughters. That my great great great great grandfather almost certainly fathered at

least two of Harriet's nine children connects her to me; that I believe now that she murdered him, his wife, and his son makes the connection feel stronger, for some reason. I have found no record of what became of the children produced by the sad union of James Forrster Jr. and Harriet; they were sold, that much is known, but then the records end. The same is true of all but one of her other children. Her last child, a daughter, was sold to doctor and his wife in 1820 as a nanny for their five children. The girl – the doctor named her Vivian – remained with the family through the Civil War. Someone taught her to read and write. The doctor's wife had a cousin who married a Mormon man, which is probably why Jennifer and I were able to find much of this information. After the war, Vivian married a man named Lee Johnson, who was a rather well known carpenter in the area, and they had two children, a boy and a girl. Vivian taught in a school for colored children, which was on the property of the same AME Church where Vivian and Lee had been married, where both children were baptized, and where Lee was buried in 1889. Vivian died in 1906 and is now buried beside her husband. I visited the gravesite last June and had the stones cleaned.

Vivian's son became a preacher in that same church. As far as I can tell, he never married, but I also suspect he inherited some of his grandmother's nature. He left Richmond at some point and was listed as a guest preacher at a church in Frederick, Maryland on May 5 and May 12, 1899. On May 15, he was found hanging by his neck on an elm tree just outside of Frederick; he was naked and his genitals had been cut off and stuffed into his mouth. If he was later buried, I could not find the grave, but I only spent an hour looking for it.

Vivian named her daughter Sally. Sally married in 1894 and lived with her husband, Herbert Charles, in Washington, DC, where he worked as a blacksmith. Sally taught school as her mother had done, and she bore one child, a boy she named Lee, perhaps because the boy was born the day after his grandfather died in 1903. Lee Charles married in 1924 and one of his seven sons was a sergeant in the Red Ball Express, a black regiment of truck drivers in WWII that became famous for its skill and valor. That man's son, Wilbur Charles Jr. , became the principal of a high school in Schenectady, New York, where I live. With my daughter's chart in hand, I visited the high school a well before school opened last August, thinking that Mr. Charles would be interested in my daughter's work and hoping that he might be able to add some information to it.

"So?" was the first thing he said after he inspected the chart.

"I just thought you might find this interesting, Mr. Charles. Quite a family."

"It is Doctor Charles," he said as he sat behind his desk and took off his glasses. "I have a doctoral degree from Syracuse University. It is Dr. Charles. I thought you had a student here in my school."

"Well, we are related, Dr. Charles." I held out my hand across his desk. He leaned back in his chair.

"Let me see if I get this straight. Someone from your family raped someone from my family. Three times. Probably more than that, and you want to shake my hand?"

"A long time ago." I said, quite surprised by the animosity in his voice.



“Yeah...yes, a long time ago.” He picked up my daughter’s chart and handed it back to me across the desk. “Is there anything else?”

“I thought you might be able to add some more to this chart? She – Jennifer, my daughter – is doing a report.”

“No, nothing to add.”

“Nothing? Perhaps some of your brothers or sisters might be-“

“No.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Is there anything else? I have a school to manage here.” He stood then and looked at me. He was taller and darker than he had first seemed to me. There was anger and hatred in his eyes, but he didn’t hate me. He held Jennifer’s chart in one hand and his other hand pointed to the door of his office.

“You can keep the chart; she wanted you to have it. I am sorry to have bothered you with it.” He crumbled the paper, squeezed it tightly into a small ball, and tossed it cleanly into a wastebasket. He said nothing more, just stood there and watched me leave.

I told Jennifer that Dr. Charles didn’t have anything to add to her chart and that he thanked her for her time and effort. By then, Jennifer had lost her interest in family history. But I wanted to know a bit more, and what I learned is as follows. We all want to know how our past pushed, shoved, cajoled, kicked, and moved us to where we find ourselves now, I suppose.

*From the diary of Doctor James McKwain: Taking care of Negroes is something I was not trained for. The colored races require different foods and have different ailments than the whit races. For this reason, I will not attend the birthing of a colored child. When J. Forrster called on me for his slave Harriet I refused, but he told me he knew for sure he was the father and said he would pay the fee for a white birthing, I agreed.*

### **The Death of James Forrster Jr.**

*Diary of Harriet X: I hatted that man with everything I got. Hated every day of my life. Forgive me, Jesus.*

The three men stepped out on to the rickety old white porch and said nothing for a good long while. Each was holding a handkerchief over their mouths and once outside and after the old wooden door had shut behind them each man took the cloth from their mouths and used it to wipe the sweat and the stench from their faces. Two of the men stood still at the top of the steps, while the third man, a young man just shy of his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, paced heavily up and down the porch, his footfalls shaking the loose boards. He stopped at the far end and put his hands on the railing, which fell away at his touch, tumbling down on to the ground into what was once a fine bed of roses but now was but a jumble of yellow leaves, withered rose buds, and weeds.

“Caleb,” said one of the older men. “Caleb, calm down, you have seen dead before.”

“Not like that, Sheriff,” Caleb said as he walked carefully back up the porch. “Damn all mighty, I never seen nothing like that, nothing. Never seen a white man, god almighty, no white man, and that’s the truth.”

You gonna get sick? Go over there, walk it off, son,” Sheriff Summers said. Caleb walked down the steps and moved around the corner of the house. “I swear, that Caleb. He and his people. I swear they all sound just like niggers themselves. Nobody hates niggers more than them; nobody sounds more like niggers than them either.”

The doctor laughed and nodded his head in agreement.

“How long you figure he’s been dead?” the Sheriff asked.

“In this heat? Hard to say. A day for sure, probably two, maybe three.” Both of the men wore white shirts, stained with sweat and the handkerchiefs they used to wipe their faces did little to stop the glistening sheen on their faces. Sheriff Summers was a short portly man with full head of black hair and almost shocking blue eyes. Doctor McKwain was tall and thin, bald with some white hair still cut short over his ears. These were men though used to summer in southern Virginia, used to hot humid air that barely moved even when the wind blew, air that remained when darkness arrived and temperature lowered. The two men had known each other since birth; indeed, they had been born a week apart from each other, in a hot and humid last week of July in 1780 within five miles of where they stood now. Virginia air, these men would have said, as would most of their white neighbors, is surely the sweetest on God’s earth. Even the sound of Caleb’s retching behind that old oak tree didn’t make them move.

“How did he die?” the Sheriff asked.

“Oh, Lord, could be a hundred things. I figure the old man was 85, maybe 90. I saw him spring before last; surprised he lasted this long, but, Oh Lord he was a stubborn old fool.”

“Yes, yes, he was that. You get word to his boy? Where is he?”

“In Philadelphia, I hear. I will send my boy down later to get word to him.” The Sheriff just nodded, then took off his hat to fan himself a bit and smiled as Caleb slowly climbed back up the stairs. “You all right, son?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Ain’t never seen no white man like that before, that’s all. Ain’t right; something ain’t right.”” Caleb got to the top of the steps, turned and looked out towards the road, which could just barely be seen through the high grass and weeds. “Think they know what did it? Want me to talk to them?” Caleb pointed towards three slaves, who were standing in front of a small white cabin that stood between the old house and the wheat field.

“Those old niggers? No, leave them be. I’ve known those three all my life, no harm there. They are good niggers. Let the Forrster boy deal with them,” the Sheriff said. “You head back to town, tell them to send out a box for the old man. I am not going back in there without a box to put him in.”

Caleb walked down the steps and straight at the three slaves. As he did, one of the men stepped aside. The woman was named Harriet, and she had lived on the Forster farm since she was five years old, fifty-five years ago. The man was called Gabriel, and he had been born on the farm sometime before Harriet had arrived. As Caleb approached, Gabriel stepped aside quickly. “Mister Forster ...is he gone, sir?”

“That’s right, boy,” Caleb said. “you know anything about that?”

“No, no, sir. Not me, oh Jesus, not me.”

“How about you?” Caleb asked Harriet.

“I saw him five days back,” she said, and Caleb paused then, for unlike Gabriel, there was no fear in Harriet’s voice. When he looked at her, she didn’t cower or avert her eyes. Caleb turned to the second man, who had only moved a step closer to Harriet as Caleb approached. This man was large and very dark skinned, some short gray hair left still just above each of his ears. He carried a shovel with a worn oak handle; the shovel looked as old as the man, and he held it as if it were some part of himself. Though he was an inch or two shorter than Caleb, he seemed much bigger: bigger in his shoulders, his chest, and his thighs.

“What about you, boy? You know something about this?” The slave turned towards Caleb, but said nothing.

“Speak up, boy. They call you Caesar, that right?”

“Caesar don’t talk,” Harriet said, and now she moved some so she stood almost between Caleb and Caesar.

“Sure he does, Caleb said. “I heard him talk, didn’t I, boy?” Caleb stepped back a half step, but Caesar didn’t move: his chest did not rise and fall with the breath of fifty years of insult and hate; his lips didn’t curse Caleb; his eyes remained on Caleb’s face, without a blink of movement, without any acknowledgement that he had seen Caleb before, that he remembered that time, late at night when he was chasing down a stray mule, that Caleb and two others from the slave patrol found him and tossed a rope around him. If Caesar felt the ache in his right knee, he didn’t show it,

even though that was the leg Caleb's rope had seized, the same leg that Caleb dragged him by for almost five hundred yards. Caesar had talked back then, and he had started to explain about the runaway mule, but the three white men didn't listen or didn't care. They laughed as they chased him down, laughed when the rope tightened on his leg, and they were laughing when they had finished with him, after dragging him down the road, through some brush, after kicking him in the ribs and face, and leaving him on the edge of the Forster farm.

"He don't talk no more," Harriet said, and her gaze was on Caesar now. She seemed nervous, a bit scared, but not about the white man.

"Want me to fetch your horse now, Mr. Caleb," Gabriel said, placing himself between Caleb and Harriet. "We gave it water and brushed him down real good for you, Mr. Caleb. Me and Caesar did, yes sir we did."

"I think you know something, nigger," Caleb said to Caesar.

"No no no, sir," Gabriel said. "I don't know anything. No sir, I don't know what day it is, sure don't. Don't know if the sun's going up or coming down. Let me go fetch that fine horse of yours, sir, let old Gabriel do that."

Caleb came no closer to Caesar, but his dark eyes stayed on him, just as Caesar's eyes remained on Caleb; unlike Caesar though, Caleb was moving. His lips quivered, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other as if he didn't know whether to run towards Caesar or away from him.

"I'll be back for you, boy," Caleb said. "You'll talk to me."

"Oh yes," Gabriel said. "Old Caesar will talk, he'll talk up a blue storm. Sing for you too, Sir. Sing and dance."

“Hush,” Harriet said. For an instant, Caleb thought Harriet was telling him to hush, but then saw that Gabriel had only stopped talking, he stepped back and was moving towards that white cabin where the slaves lived.

“Something happened, I just know it,” Caleb said. “That old man in that house, all alone. I know what he done to you. Next time, that rope won’t round your leg, boy.” Caleb worked some spit around in his mouth and spat it out towards Caesar; toward him, but also making sure it landed at Caesar’s feet. When he began walking towards his horse, Caesar walked away, never once even glancing back at Caleb, the heavy shovel resting easily over his broad shoulder. Only Harriet stayed where she was. From the porch, the two older white men watched Caleb walk off.

“That Caleb is a fool, but he might know something,” the Sheriff said. “You think those old niggers might have done something?”

“I doubt it. That one doing all the talking is a fool, even for a nigger. I have known that old gal Harriet for 20 years. She’s all right. That big dark one, the one who don’t say anything. He might be trouble, but I don’t think so. Hey Harriet. Come up here.”

Harriet heard the doctor call her. She glanced towards Caesar and waited until he was out of sight before walking towards the two white men. She stopped at the base of the stair and looked up at them calmly.

“I got things to do,” she said.

“What you got to do,” the Sheriff said sternly, “is answer what the doctor asks. You got that, Harriet?”

“I got to do some weeding,” Harriet said, in the same calm tone. “Got some peppers. They will go bad if I don’t pick them soon.”

“Won’t take long, Harriet, you know me,” the doctor said. “Your Master is dead, did you know that, Harriet?”

“I know that? Oh yes sir, I know that for sure.”

*From the diary of Doctor James McKwain: Nobody liked James Forrster. I surely did not; the Sheriff did not either. No one mourned him. He was an ignorant man who was cruel to his wife, his son, and to his niggers. God help me, but I didn’t care how he died; I was just glad he was dead.*

*Diary of Mrs. Grace Abbot Forrster: That my husband’s people kept slaves almost stopped me from marrying him. But he is a good man and promised me that horrible practice would not be a part of our lives together. Negroes should be treated well. The best ones know their limitations and abide by them. When taught and trained well, they make fine servants and can perform other important jobs, so they should be fed and treated with care.*

### **III James Forrster Jr.**

Hot in Philadelphia three days later, though the people there got sick in the heat, complained about it, left town if they could. No one spoke of the fine Philadelphia air. Six and a half miles due east from the center of the city, about half



way between where Washington kept his troops one cold winter at Valley Forge and Independence Hall where the country's important documents were crafted, negotiated and approved, William Forrster III, the son of the dead man in Virginia, was sitting at a polished oak table, finishing what he hoped was the final draft of a will for a merchant who had announced that very morning that his mistress was to be included in the will.

"A fine woman," the merchant had said after William had closed the office doors. "I will just not leave her destitute. I will not."

"Of course not. I understand completely," William replied. "And, of course, what you say here now is confidential. You can trust me." Trust him the merchant did, for he told William the whole history of his affair, how he had met her, how he went to her home every Monday. He told William her name and address. The kind of love only God can create, the merchant said. They discussed money, both for the women and for William's additional fees. William nodded, smiled, agreed, asked only relevant and polite questions, always the fine attorney, and never once did he mention that this would be the fourth will this active woman was now named in. The merchant had visited her on Monday evenings; William knew the men who visited on Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday.

After the merchant left, William sent his colored clerk off to fetch some water and his best paper. He moved into a lower room where there was at least a tiny breeze. Only then did he take off his jacket. He set out his pens and inks, and he walked slowly around the room until the boy returned. The boy knew where the paper was to be placed and where the water pitcher should stand, and he also knew to shut

the door quietly as he left because William insisted on when he wrote. Before he sat down to write out the new will, William smiled, for though the task was tedious it was also lucrative. He could double his usual fee. The merchant will pay to insure his affair remains secret until he was buried deep. He had finished copying the preamble and had made all the necessary financial calculations when there was knock on the door. He paused, took a sip of water, and resumed his work, for there were strict orders that he was not to be disturbed. At the second knock, he rose abruptly and muttered a low curse.

“Come in.” It was his wife, his beautiful Grace, standing there in a fine yellow dress and a white lace bonnet. His anger vanished, but he said nothing at first, silenced as usual by her beauty but also because she never came to his office.

“Grace? What is it? One of the children?” But he immediately knew his children were fine, because she did not look upset, she had not been crying. She seemed calm, a few strands of her black hair hung down playfully over her forehead, almost to her blue eyes. There was not a sign of sweat or tears on her snow-white face.

“It’s your father, Bill. I am so sorry,” Grace said as she handed a paper to him. William took the paper and read it slowly and carefully, weighing the meaning and significance of each and every word, as he had been trained to do. He read it twice before folding it carefully in half. “I am sorry,” Grace said again. William sat down again before he spoke.

“I haven’t seen him in ten years. We went down there, remember? You got sick. It was before Rebecca was born, remember? He wouldn’t come up here for her

christening, the stubborn old fool.” He poured himself some more water. Grace remained standing in the doorway.

“I remember,” she said softly. “Oh, Bill.”

“I will have to go down there to settle things, sell what’s left of the farm, get his papers in order, if there are any. Says he still has 60 acres, some with wheat standing. A horse, two plows, a wagon, three slaves, and some of Mother’s silver, though I would be surprised if he didn’t sell that. It doesn’t say how he died.”

“Is the farm worth much?” Grace asked.

“Don’t know, won’t know until I go there. I don’t know what debts he has. Cost of the funeral, of course, but I don’t know what else. I might come back with five hundred, perhaps a thousand, or might come back with nothing. I don’t even know if he had a will.”

“When will you be leaving?” she asked.

“Soon,” he said, then he glanced at the papers on his worktable. “No, tomorrow. I will leave in the morning. Would you get my things together, please? And have Thomas Jefferson come back in here. ”

“Oh, that’s not his name. You don’t even remember the boy’s real name, do you?” Grace said with an affectionate smile.

“He is Thomas Jefferson to me, and to everyone who comes to these offices.”

“Oh, James.” As she turned and left, she was laughing softly.

James turned his attention to the merchant’s will, but found he looking out the window. Thomas Jefferson was helping Grace into a carriage. Thomas was a good boy, thought James. He had worked for James for over ten years now, running

errands, keeping the place clean, greeting customers. He lived on the third floor of the building, in what was once an attic. James put in a floor and bought some furniture, so Thomas could stay there all the time to deter an unlikely burglar. It got very hot up there in the summer, but James knew that Negroes preferred that kind of heat. Room and board, a dollar a week, and Thomas Jefferson had worked out very well. He seemed content and James was even sometimes glad for the company. Mary had been right; James truly didn't remember the man's real name. Perhaps, James thought with a smile, he should have the name officially changed to Thomas Jefferson, but knew that would be a frivolous waste of time and money and, besides, James didn't even know how one went about changing the name of a Negro.

Three slaves left down on the old farm. That old man named Gabrielle might still be there. Daddy said that old nigger would live forever. Harriet might still be alive, and James hoped she was. She had raised him as her own; he had no memory of his childhood that did not involve her. She bathed him when he was very young, scolded him when he was late for school. James recalled the time when Harriet had stood between him and an angry mother one evening after James had pushed the woman's son into the river. Stood strong and wouldn't back down to that white woman. When James' own mother passed, Harriet was where he went for solace. She told him what to wear at the funeral; she even chose the Bible reading he gave at the service, and everyone, even the minister, complimented him on his selection. Yes, James hoped Harriet was still alive. James didn't know who the third slave could be. Perhaps that fat woman who worked in the kitchen, but her health was never good so James's doubted she was still alive. A young boy had cared for the horses and some

livestock, but James knew his father had sold off most of his animals so he probably sold that boy too. That big, dark one who worked the fields, the one Harriet liked so well might still be there. He was the darkest Negro James had ever seen, and he might be that third slave. Oh well, James thought. I will find out when I get there. If Harriet is alive, he will bring her back with him and sell the others, he thought. James knew of a lawyer in Philadelphia who would know about putting some freedom papers together. James heard Thomas Jefferson come in the front door.

“Got Mrs. Forrster home just fine, Sir,” Thomas said.

“Good. Thomas, I will be away for a few weeks, so be sure to keep an eye on the place. Go by the house on Sunday evening to get your pay, it as usual. If a customer comes in, make sure he writes down his name and address and tell him I will work with him when I return.”

“Yes, Sir”

“If it is something urgent, send him to Littlejohn, but be sure to walk down to his office when you do, so I get my share of the fee. I don’t want to lose any business.”

“Yes, Sir. And Sir? Mrs. Forrster told me about your Daddy, sir. I am real sorry for you, Sir. I will pray hard for him and for you. Your father is with Jesus now.”

“Oh, I doubt my father will even see Jesus, but you go and pray all you want, but wait till after you do as I said.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You are a good boy, a fine Christian, Thomas. Now leave me be so I can finish this will and make some money.”

“Yes, Sir.” Jefferson said, and he shut door quickly so James wouldn’t see the smile on his face.

*From the diary of Doctor James McKwain: Visited Forrster place to check on broken leg of male Negro. Mrs. Forrster complained of stomach pain. Some potions missing from my bag. Probably dropped and lost. Remember to order more.*

*From the diary of Doctor James McKwain: Mrs. Forrester dead. Mr. Forrster called me to the farm, but the missus was dead when I got there, been dead a few days. Forrster didn’t want to spend the money on two visits. Said Mrs. Forrester was scared of a slave woman. I know this slave and, yes, she frightens me some too. Don’t know why, just does.*

## **A Speculation**

Perhaps Harriet didn’t know where the idea came from, perhaps it was one day on a road, with her neck tethered to another 10-year-old girl with a piece of rope, when she was in a coffle being walked by a white man with a pistol, along with 12 others, seven men, two women, three children. White people passed the coffle on the

road, and the dirt from their wagon wheels and horses would sting Harriet's eyes; brown, hard Virginia dirt that hung in the stifling and wretched Virginia air and fill her lungs. The men chained with irons, the women and children with ropes. Perhaps the idea began that day she stood on a tree stump, naked first to the waist then naked as the day she was born, while white men in black coats and white women in long dresses walked around her on a beautiful spring day, inspecting her, while the white children played and laughed behind her; the day Master Forrster brought her to his farm. Perhaps the notion began there, or perhaps it was years later, four years later, as she walked back down the short path from the Master's house late one night, back down to one of those white cabins kept for the slaves, and beside the path was one of Master's dogs, laying still and dead in the dirt, a few leaves still in the dog's jaws. Poison. There was poison in this world, but perhaps she didn't find it just then, or perhaps she did and didn't understand it, for the pain between her legs where Master Forrster has thrust himself into her still throbbed. Perhaps the idea came even later. Perhaps Harriet began to look for poisons, experiment with different bushes, leaves, and berries. Perhaps she tried her potion on a few chickens, then another dog. Perhaps the dog took a long time to die, so she thought long and hard and changed the recipe. Perhaps it took years. She might not have even known the names of the ingredients, and she would not have told anyone, not even any of the other slaves. Perhaps she sometimes would catch a mouse or a rat or even one of the barn cats and remember in her mind how long it took the poison to work. One day, that bald white doctor came by, and left his bag near the kitchen door, the vials just there for the taking. Maybe around her seventeenth year, her seventh year on the Forrster farm, a mule died one

day, for no apparent reason. Just ate a bit of something from a wooden bucket, lifted its head, turned when its reins were pulled, walked towards the lower field and just fell down dead for no good reason. The mule had not made a sound, the old slave who had been leading him told the Master, just fell down dead, not a sound. The slave had been whipped, but he survived that and the mule stayed dead. Perhaps then Harriet stopped her experiments. Perhaps she found an old brown bottle and filled it with her potion and buried that bottle in the corner of the third white cabin, right in the spot where Harriet herself slept. It may be that that bottle stayed buried for a few more years, and it may have stayed there when Harriet gave birth the first time and the second time; stayed there when the children grew and were sold. When the men came to take her babies from her, she stood silently at the door of her white cabin, telling the child that all will be well, Jesus will save us, don't be afraid, and she watched the wagon move towards the road, then kick up red dust when it found the road and then vanish on the other side of a hill. She would turn then and go to her corner of the cabin and stay there for three days and four nights, not moving, not even sleeping. Her eyes would stay open as she lay on that straw in the corner, and perhaps she could feel that bottle buried in the ground under her. It must have remained there when Harriet gave birth the third time, for that was a hard birth and Harriet spent a year after working up in the house, helping in the kitchen, helping Mrs. Forrster with her little boy. Harriet might have waited until Mistress felt sick; a cold, a flu, perhaps some serious allergy. Harriet had to wait for a time when she was alone in the kitchen, when she could walk back down to her cabin and come back with that brown bottle under her skirt. Harriet would have had to pour just enough into that vegetable



soup Mistress liked when the evening air chilled and she wasn't feeling herself. Most likely, Harriet would have been the one to serve the soup and she might have been nervous that Mistress wouldn't think that soup tasted right, so Harriet would have been sure to add some strong pepper, the kind Mistress liked, to mask the slight taste of the poison. She may have smiled as Mistress sipped the soup in bed that night, flattered that Mistress approved of her cooking. Thank you, Mistress, that makes me feel so good, deep down good. I can fetch ore, Mistress, if you like. I don't mind. When Mistress fell asleep, Harriet could have made sure to wipe her lips clean before taking the soup bowl downstairs and washing it thoroughly. Other people saw Harriet run up the path the next morning; others saw her cry and wail when she found Mistress dead in her bed. Never seen no nigger so worked up, some said. Harriet took good care of Mrs. Forrster's son, at the funeral and later. The boy grew quite attached to her, everyone said so. Harriet got pregnant again, and again, and again, and again, and each time that boy fretted and worried on her. When the babies grew and got stronger they were sold: some to a big plantation down in North Carolina and some to Franklin and Armfield, the biggest slave trader around, with offices down in New Orleans and Mississippi, up in Richmond, and over in Maryland, in Baltimore, Easton, and Frederick.

Harriet's last child was a girl, and Master waited longer before selling the girl than he had with the others. The girl was pretty and dark skinned, and when she was sold to a family in Richmond, Harriet went back to her space in that white cabin, and perhaps there was still something left in that bottle buried beneath her. No one noticed her, for what made everyone talk was what old Caesar did. He took his shovel

and walked down to some old poplar trees and dug a hole, just kept digging for two days and one night, all night long. He could stand in the hole and not be seen. He dug until the hole was so deep he could not throw out any more dirt, and then he climbed out and sat by Harriet until she was able to get up and walk about.

## **Epilogue**

No one ever went looking for Harriet, Caesar, and Gabriel after the old man died. They had freedom papers, but that would do them little good in Virginia, so Harriet would have led them as far away as she could as quickly as she could. No one looked for James Forrster III either. It took Grace Forrster three weeks to inquire, for her youngest child had contracted the influenza that was in the area at the time and she was too worried about that. She may have thought that her husband was simply remaining out of town until the influenza passed, but there is no record of her making any inquiry until August 21, 1840. Three days later, on August 24, a telegram arrived in Virginia requesting that the sheriff contact James Forrster, but there is no record of any kind of action. His people in Philadelphia seemed to believe something happened in Virginia; the people in Virginia seemed convinced he had left and never make it back to Philadelphia. Grace never remarried, but she died a wealthy woman. Two of her four children died in the Civil War; her two remaining daughters most likely inherited her looks and, according to a will that is still available for perusal, they both inherited almost twenty thousand dollars. One daughter moved to Boston and the

other to Richmond. Their descendents must have been happy there, for today they are still near those two cities.

Harriet, Gabriel, and Caesar most likely wandered for a while, and, of course, for them the record is less clear. Harriet knew that they had to get out of Virginia, for even a slave with freedom papers wasn't safe. Freed slaves had to leave Virginia. Since all three slaves had spent their adult lives confined to the Forrster farm, walking across the state would have been difficult, even with the money Harriet carried.

Gabriel appeared in Washington DC in the spring of 1842, where he took a job in a livery, not far from the home of Walt Whitman. Perhaps Harriet and Caesar were with him there, for there is no record of them until 1847, when a woman named Harriet took a job with an elderly couple named Keller in New York City. She did some light cooking and cleaning, and she fit the description. There is even a photograph of her with the couple taken in 1851 at Christmastime. Mr. Keller kept a journal, and in it he describes Harriet as "a hard working old girl, with a deep southern accent that makes it hard to understand, but she does fine in the house and Margaret likes her." Keller also alludes to a husband, a "very dark Negro who sometimes came by the house" and this does sound like Old Caesar. In 1857, Keller refers to another servant, an Irish woman named Mary, and there is no mention of Harriet after that. Somehow though, the freedom papers for both of them are now in a small display case in the public library of White Hall, New York, which is 35 miles up the Hudson from New York City. The head librarian there said recently that she didn't know how the library got the papers, but "thank you for asking and, no, these papers will stay here."

The Forrster farm itself seems to have simply been abandoned, for there is no record of its sale or of any auction of property. The house burned down in 1864, so anything else that James Forrster may have left there was destroyed. Ironically, in 1867 county records show a man named Justice owned the land and paid taxes on it, but there is no record as to how Mr. Justice acquired the property. Justice left the farm to his son in 1904, who in turn left it to his on December 7, 1941; another irony, perhaps, though a meaning is hard to discern. In 1965, the Justice farm went bankrupt and the farm was divided to satisfy various creditors, with 30 acres, including where the old home and the slaves' cabins once stood, purchased by Kenneth Calhoun, who was a descendant by marriage to Caleb McCloud so, in a way, Caleb finally did get the property. In 1998, Calhoun sold the land to the CASS corporation, which planned to build a large apartment complex there for senior citizens. Construction did not begin until 2004, and it was only then, when bulldozers were clearing out a patch of poplar trees just down the hill from where the old Forster house once stood, that a skeleton was found, buried two feet in the ground. Forensic analysis – done by students at a college in Richmond – showed that the skeleton was that of a Caucasian male about 45 years of age. The students enjoyed determining the cause of death and spent hours studying the body, even though it was clear that the man had been hit on the very top of his head with something curved and very hard, like a smooth stone or a shovel.

## ***Broken Birds***

I know what to say, how to say it, when to speak. People ask me to tell them what to do. I notice things most people miss.

Martin always sits with his back to the door. Always. I asked him about it.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“You always sit with your back to the door. I’ve been watching, keeping track.”

“You’ve been watching where I sit? Keeping track of where I sit?”

There is a woman in my office who does not know how to wear her clothes. Some people say she dresses provocatively; lots of the men in the office watch her as she walks down a corridor or bends to retrieve a file, and I enjoy watching them sneak looks. I’ve heard some women talk about her: “I am sorry, but that kind of outfit is just not appropriate for a law office.” But it is not that her skirts are too short

or too tight or the wrong color, it is just that she does not know how to sit and she bends from her waist instead of her knees. I know all her underwear; the colors, I mean, not the cut or the material. Usually she wears white, except on Friday. Yesterday it was green. Her bra and panties always match.

Both of my parents are in a nursing home near my home. I do not know what is wrong with them, although I have spent thousands of dollars for extra nurses and special doctors, for third, fourth, and fifth medical opinions. My father may have Alzheimer's disease; some doctors say he does and others say he does not. My mother says she is tired all the time, too tired, she says, to talk on the phone when I call, too tired to eat, too tired to do anything. She is usually sleeping when I visit. No one knows why she is so tired.

It is not really a nursing home; it is called "assisted living." My parents share a large room and have their own furniture. I do not like that they are there, but at least I know they are safe, that they are eating properly, that they are clean. These are the sad standards I use to take care of my parents.

If you prune roses too early in the spring you risk losing the shortened limbs if it gets cold again. If you prune roses too late, you will not get as many flowers in the spring. I usually wait until the forsythia is blooming, but forsythia can fool you. Forsythia can make mistakes too.

Last year I pruned in early April, which is a few weeks late. I did not get as

many flowers as I usually do, so I didn't even get a ribbon in the June and July rose shows. This year I intend to prune my roses in the middle of March, no matter what the forsythia is doing.

My colleague Michael Littlejohn is retiring from the firm. My secretary is organizing the party, where I will speak. I met Michael in college which was - can it be? - thirty years ago. He is five or six years older than I, and his uncle was a founding partner of the firm. What will be strange is not seeing him every day at the office, because I know that after he leaves I will never see him again; other than work, I know of nothing else we have in common; other than work, I know almost nothing about him. I do not know where he lives, for example. He has a wife. I have seen her picture on his desk. I have seen her age as the years go by, as Michael replaced the picture. No pictures of children, so I suppose he has none. I now wonder why. Did he choose not to or was there a problem? I do not know. I once walked into his office and he was crying, sobbing quietly by himself behind his desk; his face was wet and red, he looked like he had been crying hard for a long time. His glasses were off, so he may not have known it was I. I left quickly and never said anything. Neither did he.

There are some things I do now that scare me: caring for my roses, taking care of the lawn and some other plants, a little carpentry, going to work. They scare me because I do not know what I would do if I stopped doing these things. If I didn't prune my roses in March, what else would I do?

“You were right,” Martin said at lunch last Tuesday while we were waiting for the check.

“About what?” I replied.

“I do always sit with my back to the door. I told my wife what you said, and she said she had noticed it too.”

“I knew it. Don’t worry about it, it is not a big deal.”

“I wonder why I do that,” he said.

“I don’t know. I only mentioned it because I noticed it, and I thought there might be an interesting story; maybe you are a spy, or something like that.”

“I don’t know.”

My father called me at work today, which he had never done before because, I suppose, I had once told him not to. The call startled me because I assumed there was an emergency. It reminded me of when my children were young, and how frightened I would be when a routine changed: I would come home from work, for example, and my wife’s car would be gone. As I walked through the garage, I imagined terrible things: playground accidents, death, dismemberment. I could not prevent thinking that way, the horrible images just appeared. When my father called, I was taking a deposition, a very important and very expensive meeting, but I took the call. In my mind, I imagined my mother’s death.

“Hello. What’s the matter?” I said.

“David? David?”



“Yeah, this is David, Dad. What’s wrong?”

“David, I can’t get the bird to work,” he said very calmly.

“What?”

“I can’t get the bird to work. It won’t work.”

“The bird won’t work” I repeated, for some reason. John Arnick, the attorney representing the man I was questioning, whispered something to his client and they laughed.

“Dad, what are you talking about? What bird?”

“It is right here.”

“Dad, is Mom there?”

“The bird won’t work.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. I’ll come over and fix it.”

“You don’t know how.”

“Yeah, yeah, I do. I’ve done it lots of times. Now hang up the phone and-”

He hung up. I went out to my secretary’s desk and told her to call the nursing home and find out what was going on. When I went back to the deposition, Arnick smiled and said: “Get that bird fixed?” His client actually laughed out loud.

I suddenly felt very tired, I am not sure why, and sank back into my chair. I did not say anything. Arnick’s client was still grinning like an idiot, but Arnick himself was smart enough to become visibly nervous. Watching Arnick squirm a little did improve my mood, but not by much. “No more questions,” I said. “Get out.” My secretary came back and said everything was fine at the nursing home. Arnick and his client left the conference room, and then Arnick returned.

“David, can I assume our deal is still in place?”

“No, it is not.”

“What should I advise my client?”

“Advise him to get another attorney, or I’ll drag this out until his grandchildren are dead.”

“Come on, David, be reasonable here.”

“And I told you to get out.”

All day long I thought about what my father had said. What was he thinking? Was he trying to tell me something but just could not find the words? Was some long ago memory bubbling into his head? He did not call back. I left work a little early and drove out to the nursing home, arriving there just after dinner. Dad was watching a television show, and we chatted about it. He did not remember calling me.

These modern roses attract Japanese beetles by the millions, it seems. It is impressive. Every summer they seem to drop out of the sky on to my rose garden. I have tried everything. I put milky spore disease on the lawn. I used sprays and traps. The traps attracted more beetles, who ate my roses on their way to the traps. The milky spore disease may have worked, perhaps it did reduce the beetle population, but many hundreds survived to feed on my roses. If I sprayed every day, the sprays worked fine, but using so much insecticide killed too many beneficial insects. Now when I come home from work, if it is still light, I head straight for my rose garden. I keep a coffee can filled with soapy water and I hunt Japanese beetles. I pick them off

the plants - I know where they like to hide, right inside the flowers - and I drop them in the can. This system works as well as any other.

Arnick called me, spoke to my secretary who told him, as I had instructed her, that I would not speak with him. He left a long message: said he wanted to make that deal or discuss a new agreement. He even suggested, my secretary said, that he would be willing to settle for less money. I called in an associate, the woman who cannot wear her clothes right, and assigned her the case. When I told her John Arnick was the attorney, she grimaced.

“Problem with Arnick?” I asked her.

“No, not really,” she said, sort of smiling at me. “He always makes a pass at me, that’s all.”

“I can give the case to Ludwig. Arnick may not make a pass at him.”

“No, I am used to it. That’s OK.”

“What do you mean you are used to it?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, most of the men here have done the same thing. I can handle it.”

“Is that a problem for you?”

“It used to be, but most of them are harmless, I guess. You get used to it.”

I looked her straight in the eye.

“I can’t do much about Arnick, he doesn’t work here, but if you have a problem with anyone here, you tell me. All right?”

“OK. Thanks, Mr. Wilkins.”

“Please call me David.”

“OK. And thanks for trusting me with this case. I appreciate it, David.”

It would be so easy, I thought. She was wearing red underwear.

“And keep me informed on the case.” I said, and she left.

When I got home from work, my wife said there was a message on the answering machine I should hear. I did not want to listen, but my wife insisted. It was my father. “David? David? You said you would fix the bird. You said you would.” My father kept talking for a while, but I could not understand anything else he said, though I listened to the tape five times. After the third time, I realized that my father did not understand he was talking to a machine. I also think he was crying.

Instead of going to work the next morning, I drove straight to the nursing home. My father was asleep, and the nurses said he was fine. I waited by his bed, reading some things from work and talking quietly on the telephone, until he woke up. He looked at me; he may have been looking at me for a while. I asked him if he were all right, if there was anything I could do for him, anything at all. Would he like to come live in my house? Is there any way I could help him?

“Who the fuck are you?” he said. I had never heard him use that word before and all I could think of, as I stared back at him hoping he would remember me, was how angry he had been and how he had punished me when I had used that word once in his presence when I was young.

When I drive around now, to work and home, all my errands, I find myself looking for birds. I do not know one bird from another: I know robins and cardinals and humming birds and blue jays and a few others, but all the rest look the same to me. Now that I am looking for them, I see them everywhere: in the treetops, of course, and also in bushes, on lawns, in gardens, in the city on the ledges of the buildings. There is a nest on a ledge on the building across the street from my office. I spent a very pleasant hour yesterday watching the birds tend their nest. I am going to buy some good binoculars and keep them in my desk. I also think I'll put a bird bath in my rose garden. Perhaps the birds will eat some Japanese beetles.

I noticed my father's Alzheimer's disease for the first time in early April of 1989. It was a Sunday. My mother called and invited my wife and me to come over for lunch. Mother sounded nervous, and to issue such an invitation on such short notice was unlike her. My wife even laughed when I told her, but I knew something was wrong.

"Mother, what is wrong?"

"Can you come to lunch today?"

"No, we have other plans. Mom, is Dad there?"

"He is sleeping."

"So early? Mom, what is wrong?" My mother and father never talked about their problems, nothing was ever wrong. I realized that Mother's invitation was as close as she could come to asking for my help. How could I refuse? I told my mother that I would come over.

The house looked different. I couldn't see the difference at first, but as I parked my car I could see that many of the shrubs, all of the rose bushes, and a few of the small trees had been cut down: the limbs were scattered over the yard. I noticed similar damage on a neighbor's yard, where people were standing around inspecting the damaged plants.

"What happened, Mom?" I said as I came in. "Who did all this?"

"Your father," she said, and then she started crying. The door bell rang and I let in some neighbors, one of whom, an old friend I recognized, went to console my mother. After talking to the neighbors and later with Mother, I learned that my father had gone outside very early to do his annual rose pruning. Somehow, he just kept cutting, and when my mother finally came outside she found him on a neighbor's yard, patiently cutting down a thirty-year old English boxwood with his lopping shears. He did not resist when she took his arm and led him home.

One of the neighbors was quite angry, even after I told him I would pay for all the damage. When he said he was considering a lawsuit, Mother got more upset and asked me to be nice and to be careful; her warning was misunderstood by her young neighbor, who thought Mother was warning him. I gave him my card, told him to have his attorney call me, and then, when I was sure Mother could not hear me, I told him to go to hell.

While Dad slept, I took all of his cutting tools and put them in my car. I went into his workshop and disconnected the power tools. I waited for an hour, until my father woke up. Dad remembered pruning his roses, he insisted on showing how good a job he had done, and he had done well, but he vehemently denied cutting

anything else. He also remembered that it had been a long time since I had visited; he could recall the date of my previous visit, and he was glad to see me. I didn't know what else to do, so I stayed and drank coffee and talked for two hours, mainly about roses. He was interested in a new fungicide that showed some promise preventing blackspot. He has never said anything about the tools I took away.

For five years, I led the firm: I brought in more money to Bartlett, Littlejohn, and Bilmore than anyone else for five straight years: 1986 to 1991. No one has ever done that before. There are five plaques hanging in the waiting area of my office that cite my achievement; the plaque for 1990 also notes that no one ever billed as much as I did that year. When I retire, I am told, I will get replicas of all five plaques. I am also told, by my parents' doctors and by my own, that whatever is afflicting my father will most likely afflict me, that some day I will lay in a bed and not know what day it is, who I am, my wife's name, my daughter's face; some day I will forget how to put on my pants, how to shave, how to swallow, and eventually I will forget how to live. I will not remember my mother and father; those five plaques won't even remind me of anything, and when I die I will be surrounded by people I do not know.

My father now calls me four or five times a day; he calls me at home and at work. I don't know why he calls so often. People in the office are talking about it, I know, but I also know that no one has the nerve to complain to me. My secretary knows to call him if four hours go by without a call from him. When he calls, I listen to him, answer his questions when I can and try to talk with him. Sometimes he does

not know who I am, but he knows my phone number. Perhaps he forgets me between the time he dials the phone and the time I answer. I see him three or four times a week, but sometimes he does not recognize me and he seems mad at me; at these meetings, he is vulgar and swears constantly. I don't know why. If I swear also, it seems to calm him down, so sometimes the nurses come into the room to find my father and me cursing crudely and happily at each other, while my mother sleeps on the bed. When he does recognize me, he is pleasant, but still concerned sometimes about the broken bird. When I tell him I will fix it, he smiles and says firmly that I do not know how. He is right, I do not know how to fix a broken bird, but I do not know what else to say. The doctors tell me this kind of fluctuation is normal and that he is otherwise healthy, that he should live quite a while longer. Recently, he has started to urinate in the shower stall and into a chair, which the doctors say is a sign he is getting worse, that he may have to start wearing diapers. I have not spoken to my mother in six months. I think she is comfortable and I think she is happy, but I don't know for sure.



## *Jackie and David*

I park my father's blue Honda Civic in a spot not very close to the front door, so I can walk slowly to the entrance. I check twice to be sure the doors are locked and smoke a slow cigarette before the automatic doors whisper open for me. I glance into the small convenience store and say hello to the volunteer at the reception desk, who asks me to sign the visitor's register. I linger at the register book after signing it, looking to see if my mother has had any visitors I know in the six weeks since I had last been to see her. Mary McClain, Sally something, Joan Silber, and someone else has signed in to visit my mother, but I don't know, or don't remember, any of them. A local elementary school has decorated a wall near the elevators with a collage of animals: a large green tiger, two pink bears, three yellow deer, a group of purple and gray penguins, a tiny navy blue wolf, a white snake, a brown squirrel with red eyes,

and three huge, orange and red gerbils. I spend a few minutes trying to see if there is a logic to the colors, but find none. When the elevator door opens for me the second time, I step inside and the elevator takes me to the second floor.

The elevator door opens, and all I have to do is step across the hallway to an open doorway to find her. I stop in the doorway and look for her, though I know where she is. She sits in her big, blue wheelchair in the middle of the room, at a table with two others. Her hair is still dark, with just a few strands of gray by her temples; she is the only patient with black hair. I walk to her slowly, weaving among the wheelchairs until I am in front of her and she sees me.

Oxygen tubes keep her alive – clear tubes that snake up her back, around her head to push oxygen up her nostrils - while she stares at her pureed food. She lifts her head and laughs when she sees me, a fast high giggle, but she doesn't say anything. Her hands flail in the air and her lips quiver as she giggles her greeting. When she sees my youngest brother or me, she laughs a greeting. When my father is there, she smiles, and her eyes follow every move he makes, no matter who else is there or what else is happening. She does the same thing when my wife visits, but she smiles more at Shelley and she tries harder to talk. Hello, Mom. I hold and steady her hands before I touch her hair and stroke it; something I never did before she came here. It is a warm Sunday in the middle of August of 2004. I am visiting my mother at the Baptist Nursing Home in Scotia, New York. My mother has emphysema and she is going to die in this nursing home. Most of each day, she sits in her large wheel chair in a big room on the second floor of the nursing home along with 20 other residents. Twelve tables fill the middle of the room. Patients are sitting at the tables; some are

sitting along the wall to my left. A woman named Heidi always sits at the large window, looking out at the parking lot. In the back of the room, a huge television set is on, and three men are huddled in front of it. Their heads are pointing at the screen, as if they are really watching the pretty blonde woman announce that Michael Jackson just might get arrested for molesting a child.

The aides are chatting among themselves as they feed the twenty or so people in the room. I tell my mother my name, and she says, "I know."

A young aide named Shirley rolls her chair past me. She asks where I am from and I tell her, though I have answered that same question many times, for my mother has been here for almost two years now. I try to be nice to her and to all the other aides, so that they know me and perhaps will take better care of my mother. "Oh, I went to DC three years ago. It was fun," she says. Shirley is nice, patient with the residents, but I swear she doesn't look more than 15 to me: dirty blonde hair that almost covers her eyes, very fair skin with two small freckles on her forehead. Like two other aides in the room, she sits on a chair with wheels and rolls easily from one old person to another. All three women roll around the room, feeding some residents, talking with others, wiping chins. Shirley rolls away from me and begins a conversation with another young aide who is rolling on the other side of the room. A fourth aide is older than the other three, about my age. I have only seen her here four or five times before. She sits at a table near me, feeding two men who moan lowly as they eat. She is wearing an orange blouse, and she glances at my mother and me often.

"Good to see you again, Dave," she says.

“Hello,” I say, and wonder for a moment when I had told her my name. No one calls me Dave.

“I haven’t told Steve yet,” Shirley says, as she rolls to another table.

“You’re kidding!” the other aide says as she spoons some carrots into an old man’s mouth. “You better tell him soon, girl. You’ll be showing soon.” The carrots dribble slowly down the man’s chin and on to his bib.

“I know, I know. Just can’t find the right time. I almost never see him, you know. He’s been up north, working. He bought a new truck, did I tell you?”

“When did he do that?”

“End of last week. He loves that truck. It’s his baby. Have some carrots, Charlotte.”

“Wait till he hears about your baby. With him gone so much, I can’t believe you had the time to make that baby. You sure it’s his?”

“Pretty sure.”

The two young aides laugh and laugh, and so does the old woman sitting next to my mother. So do I, but just a little. My mother doesn’t laugh, but her eyes look around the room, following the conversation. I touch her lips with the spoon so she knows it is time for more.

“Has anyone seen Ruth?” Shirley asks, throwing the question out to all the other aides.

“No, I don’t know where she is. She wasn’t in her room this morning.”

After a while, she just stops opening her mouth for me, so I know she is finished. She looks up from her chair at me for a while, and I don’t know what to do

other than look back at her. I want to do something to help her; something anything.  
Oh, Mom.

“She eats better when you feed her, Dave,” the aide behind me says. Do you, Mom? Slowly her eyes close. She has gained weight since she came here, so her face has changed; she is a plump woman now, but before she got sick, she was not, so she wears clothes now that don’t seem familiar to me. Not the kind of clothing she would choose for herself. There are dark red blotches on her arms and legs. She sleeps 16-18 hours a day, which is a good thing because staying awake is hard work for her. I watch her sleep and stroke her hair. I try again, but no more pureed beets today. I reach for the cake. She opens her eyes and smiles; not at me, but at the cake. Her dark blue eyes carefully follow the spoon as I move it to her mouth.

I know how to do this and I enjoy it, for my mother smiles as she eats. It is chocolate cake, very soft, and I feed it to her and then give her a sip of milk: back and forth, milk and cake. I wonder what she is thinking. I wonder if she is thinking. Around the room, people are busier now. Many of the residents have finished eating. The aides are busy with forms where they write down everything each resident ate at the meal.

Shirly rolls to the television and turns up the volume. She sets the volume up high, so the men can hear Oprah Winfrey. None of the men has their heads pointed in the direction of the television. One of the men is trying futilely to get out of his wheelchair. Today, our topic is crime in our schools, Oprah announces. Her audience murmurs loudly when Oprah adds in a louder, more dramatic tone: crime in our elementary schools. One of the men – I can’t recall which one, though my father had

told me – was an acquaintance of my parents, a neighbor. He fought in World War II. He was one of those men who volunteered for the Canadian Air Force, so he was fighting the Germans before Pearl Harbor. When my parents knew him, he was a judge in one of the state appellate courts.

“Did Sheila finish her juice?” Shirley yells across the room, after she finished wiping the mess off the two men’s faces.

“She eats more when you feed her, Dave. Good to see you again,” the older aide says, as my mother slowly closes her eyes and falls asleep in her chair. I don’t answer her. One of the men near her, the only other man left in the room, begins coughing; loud, persistent hacks of deep coughing, causing his pureed cake to fly out of his mouth. My mother doesn’t stir. Oprah announces that Sylvester Stallone will on the show next week.

“Oh, George,” that same aide says, with just a little laugh. “Oh George. Are we making a mess?”



I live now in Maryland, just outside of Washington, DC. My mother and father live in upstate New York, in the General Electric town of Schenectady. They have lived there for 40 years. We moved from Pennsylvania when I was in the sixth grade. They were married near Boston, in a pretty

church by the ocean. Since I left home for college, almost 35 years ago, I have not spent much time with my mother. Not alone, anyway. The last photograph I can find of just the two of us was taken at my wedding. I got married right after college, took a teaching job, had two children. My daughter was my mother's first grandchild, and the first girl in the family. That daughter is now in graduate school studying history, and my son is in California, working for the Navy. What I do now as often as I can is fly to Albany on Friday evening and fly back to Washington late Sunday afternoon. Sometimes my wife comes with me, sometimes she comes by herself, and so my mother and father get more visits. All of us decided when my mother first became ill that it was best for us to visit one at a time, that too many people just confused her, so I almost always traveled alone. My three brothers visit separately also. When I do visit, I go without my father, so my mother gets more visits. When I visit, I see my mother twice: at lunchtime on Saturday and again on Sunday. My father prefers to visit in the morning, so that way my mother gets two visits when I am there. I spend more time with my father, thinking that he is the one now who needs me. He handles us better one at a time also, so our individual visits are as much for him as for my mother. I try to visit every six weeks.

Two months later, I am back. My wife visited in October. November now; much colder in upstate New York than in Maryland. Just above zero when I wake up

at my father's house; I think of it now as my father's house, not the house where I lived for eight years, not where my mother lived for thirty-two years. The inside of the house has barely changed and my mother seems to still be present everywhere: she chose the brown carpet, all the furniture, even the two dachshunds. Her umbrella is still in the black stand by the front door, and most of her clothes are still in her closet. Her hairbrush sits on her dresser, on top of glass. Under the glass are a few of her favorite prayers and family photographs. A small jewelry box, a wedding gift, remains open, as if she just stepped out and will be back soon.

Sunday lunch again, but my mother doesn't laugh when I arrive; she just stares at me, her eyes following my every move. My wife visited recently, and she said Mom was talking less and less. I tell her things about my life: Sara is in school. Do you remember Sara? The way she would jump off the stairs? Jonathan has moved to California, Mom, and he says hello. Shelley is busy, as always. It is cold outside today, about 20 degrees. No snow yet, but soon, I bet. Do you want some potatoes? Peter is coming to visit next weekend, and Bob's wife is having a baby.

"Are you married?" my mother asks suddenly. That aide who calls me Dave laughs at this.

"Yes. You remember. Shelley. She couldn't come this time."

"Oh," she says. "Bob? Is he married?" Bob is my youngest brother. She asks often if Bob is married now, so she may be confusing me with Bob.

"Yes, He married Karen last year. Karen is pregnant."



“Really?” She begins to cry then. When Bob and Karen did get married, she cried hard and long. I think what saddened her was that her illness prevented her from going to the wedding, but she didn’t or couldn’t say.

When she stops crying, I feed her potatoes slowly. The room is quieter this time, so when I talk the whole room can hear me. The two aides roll about quietly from table to table. Gathered around the television are two men in the huge wheelchairs. I don’t want to think about why there are now two men, not three. I can’t see the television, just the backs of the two large wheelchairs, but I can hear someone talking about that priest from Boston who molested over a hundred children. My mother was born in Boston and was and is a devout Catholic. Both men are looking out the window.

“Did you deliver papers on Sunday?” my mother asks, and as she does, some potato dribbles down her chin. I clean it off carefully.

“Yes, every Sunday, Mom. Before church. You remember. You drove me sometimes when it was very cold outside, remember?” The aide sitting behind me laughs softly and pokes me lightly in the back. I turn and look at her, then turn back to my mother.

“No.” my mother says, and then she leans back and closes her eyes. When I bring the spoon to her mouth, she doesn’t open it, even when I try the pudding. There is a fifth aide in the room that morning, for some reason; the only male aide I have ever seen there. He watches me as I put a bit more chocolate pudding on my mother’s lips.

“Don’t feed her that yet,” he says, in the kind of tone that a first-grade teacher might use with a difficult child, as if he had told me this ten times already. He has a tattoo of a girl and a red rose on his forearm. My mother’s lips part and she smiles when the chocolate touches her lips.

“I said,” the man says, as he walks a bit closer to me. “I said we give her the dessert last. Get some of vegetables into her first. Didn’t you hear me?”

I give my mother another spoonful of pudding, but she is back asleep and she won’t open her mouth. She looks at the man, then at me, then again at the man, and she smiles. The man stands next to me for a few moments, and then turns away. “Some people,” he mutters, loudly enough for the whole room to hear. I stroke her hair. Someone touches my back, but I don’t turn around. She opens her eyes for a few moments, and then closes them again. I put down the spoon, turn to the tattooed aide, then turn away and leave the room. My shoes making squishy sounds on the black and white linoleum floor.

When she sleeps like that I have learned to stop feeding her, wait ten minutes or so, then try again. Sometimes she wakes up and finishes her meal, sometimes she doesn’t. I push the button for the elevator and wait. A few months ago, when that same aide had been chastising another aide for something, my mother looked up at me and said: “What an asshole.” My mother would not say the word “asshole.” If I were to say it, even now, even at my age, she would have been angry with me. It just didn’t sound like my mother.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” It was the aide who had been sitting behind me. I turn, but don’t want to talk because I know I am about to cry.

“Jackie.... Jacquelyn Hobart...I mean Jackie Londford, when you knew me.”

All I can do is look at her: a short, slender woman about my age, with dark brown and gray hair tied neatly behind her in a braided ponytail that almost reaches her waist. She is smiling up at me; her brown eyes are big and wet and for an instant I think that she too is going to cry.

“Do you still smoke?” she asks softly, as if she is sharing a secret. I nod and step back into the elevator and though I don’t answer, she steps into the elevator with me.

“You really don’t remember?” For some reason, I suddenly very much want to get away from this woman who is asking me to remember. I do not wish to remember, for it seems that every memory I have now is painful. I miss my mother. When I am in that room, feeding my mother who is no longer my mother, I cannot, cannot, cannot think of anything else. What I want to do was to walk out to my car, drive to the airport, and leave.

I sit on a bench outside, light my cigarette.

“I didn’t recognize you the first time you visited,” Jackie says. “You must remember me, you have to.” I do not remember, but I am not even trying to remember her.

“Of course,” I say. “Of course I remember you.”

“You have changed some, Dave.” She laughs quietly. “I am surprised you didn’t say anything to Andrew up there. The guy is a prick.”

“What guy?” I say. She reaches over and takes my hand, and only then do I look at her closely. Her face, around her eyes, looks more familiar now; her voice, the way she said “the guy is a prick” sounds like a voice I remember.

“Can I have a light?” she says. I hand her the lighter.

“You know, you gave me my first cigarette. I remember it like it was yesterday. We were at a party, my girl friend Laura’s house. You were with some black girl; she was the only Black at the party, I remember and you came outside with her. Me and Laura were sitting there. Laura asked for one, and you offered me one too, just like that, and I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t cool or something so I took it. Anyway I did and you lit it for me and I thanked you and then you and that black girl walked away. I almost puked; Laura laughed at me.”

“Jackie?” I say. “Jackie Longford?”

“Londford. Yes.” I remember a small girl, with long brown hair parted in the middle of her head and a funny laugh. She had been a grade behind me in high school. “You remember, don’t you?” she asked again.

I laugh a little, and she looks hurt, so I say, “Sure, of course. Jackie. How could I forget? It has been a long time, Jackie. Sure, of course. Jackie Longford, sure.”

She blows out a long, even stream of smoke as she looks at me. I can’t read her eyes then; she might hate me, she might be happy, she might believe me when I say I remember her, but I don’t think she does. I took her to a high school dance.

“My break is over. I have to get back upstairs. Maybe.....maybe we can talk or something next time you come back. I take good care of your mother. She remembers me.”

For some reason, I feel as if I have hurt this woman somehow; there is pain in her eyes now, though the source of her pain is not clear to me, but as we talk my memory of her improves. It was a formal dance; I wore a tuxedo and the shoes were too tight. It had been more than 30 years, after all; perhaps her life had not gone as she had hoped. She was an aide in a nursing home now.

“Sure, Jackie, that would be nice. I will be back next month, I think.”

She stands up and looks down at me. “You are going bald, Dave.” She stands there for a few extra moments before she leans down and kisses my bald spot, her lips lingering for an extra second, her hand moving in my hair a little before she turns and walks back into the front door of the nursing home. She is wearing white jeans that fit her well, and there is a small tear on the right rear pocket.

I don’t see her the next time I visit. Christmas is approaching, and I know I will be there for that, so I postpone my next trip until the holiday, this time with my wife and children, just as we have done for 30 years. I look for Jackie when we all visit the nursing home on Christmas Eve, but I don’t see her. My three brothers, one sister in law, my wife, my two kids, and my father fill up my mother’s room, but she doesn’t wake up. We stand around and talk quietly to each other. My mother shares a room with a woman named Pauline, and her family is there also. Pauline lectures her family in a loud, high voice. “I want to go home!” she says, over and over and over, while my family stands in uncomfortable silence watching my mother sleep. Each

breath she takes is labored and slow; her chest rises unsteadily, and then she seems to hold her breath for a while before she exhales. "I want to go home! I want to go home!" We all line up and kiss Mother and wished her a Merry Christmas as we leave. When I kiss her, she exhales.

We come back again on Christmas Day, but still Jackie isn't there. I think about asking for her at the desk, but I don't. We decide it is best not to visit Mom in such a large group, so others visit her the day after Christmas. Two days after Christmas, I drive out alone to the nursing home at lunchtime. My mother is back in the large room, in her wheelchair at her regular table.

On the walls are Christmas decorations: green trees made from green construction paper with silver glitter glued on the branches; red and white drawings of candy canes, made with the broad strokes of fat crayons. Two aides on wheels wear Santa Claus hats; Jackie, sitting at my Mother's table, wears a sweater adorned with Santa and all his reindeer.

My mother smiles, but does not laugh when she sees me. The room is quiet, only the sound of a radio playing Christmas music from a weak signal and the wheels from the rolling aides. The television is on, but the sound is off. The same two men are staring at the screen intently.

"Merry Christmas, Dave," Jackie says

"And the same to you. Merry Christmas." I begin feeding my Mother. "I can't remember the last time anyone called me Dave." Jackie is feeding three women, rolling slowly among them so I cannot see her well as we talk.

"Just David now?" she asks.

“Yes, I prefer it.” She laughs softly. My mother is watching us both.

“Well, you are Dave to me. You know, I have still that dress from the senior ball,” she says with a happier laugh. “I don’t know why I have kept it. I haven’t been able to fit in it for years.” I give my mother half a spoonful of something green, and she seems to like it. The senior ball. As Jackie talks, my memory improves. Yes, it was in the gym at our high school, and Jackie had been some kind of princess or queen of the ball, which meant she had to ladle out paper cups of punch and do some other things. Jackie and I went to the senior ball together; yes, yes, yes, now I remember. Her dress was a deep red, with a bow at the small of her back that came loose somehow, so I held it there for her most of the evening. Everyone thought we were in love, because everyone saw my hand on the small of her back all night long. Maybe the dress was blue. On a picnic table at a party after the ball, I kissed her for a long time.

“I remember that dress.”

“Did she ever tell you?” I turn and look back at Jackie, who is trying to pour milk into a woman’s mouth.

“Tell me what?”

“She never told you? Oh, that is just like her, isn’t it? Your mother... Ann, bought that dress for me.” I stop feeding my mother, and Jackie laughs again; her laugh jogging something else in my memory; my mother forcing me to bring Jackie to our house, so my father could take photographs. “Yes, she did, really. At Macy’s. I had called your house, to tell you I couldn’t go to the ball, but you weren’t home and I was crying. I was so upset! Your mother – Ann – answered the phone, and she heard

me crying and she made me tell her why I was crying, and I did. Tell her, I mean, I told her my father couldn't afford a dress for me. Poor guy. He didn't know. First he said sure, but when he saw how much a dress like that costs, he just couldn't. It wasn't long after my mother had left us, so, well, money was tight." I turn my back on Jackie and begin feeding my mother something that seems like mashed potatoes. Her eyes are wide open, looking up at me with a look that did not seem familiar to me at all; an intent stare, but a stare that did not remind me of my mother. I stare back and feed her some more pureed chicken.



"So your mother, " Jackie says, pausing to clean someone's chin, "and this was just like her, don't you know? Your mother called my father and asked him first, then took me to Macy's and bought me that dress. You never knew?" Some of the pureed chicken dribbles out of my mother's mouth, and she smiles and as her smile grows more chicken and then some of the green stuff comes sliding over her lower lip. The bigger mess she makes, the more she smiles.

Luckily, she is wearing a bib; a white one, with orange ducks.



“No, she never told me.” But perhaps she did. The story feels familiar, as Jackie tells it. I remember standing with Jackie in the living room while my mother suggested how we pose. I had to pin a corsage on her dress three or four times while my father took pictures. My mother had bought the corsage.

“Isn’t that just like her?” Just then, one of the women Jackie is feeding begins gasping and wheezing. Her face almost instantly turns a deep, frightening red. “Millie? Millie? Look at me, Millie,” Jackie says loudly, and one of the other aides rolls over to her. The old woman is not moving at all; her hands, arms, shoulders are still, her mouth is wide open, and her eyes are wide, like a fish’s eyes and mouth after it is pulled from the water with a hook in its mouth. “Millie?” Someone turns on the television, and game show host announces that someone just won a new Ford Escort. The television is not loud enough cover Millie’s wheezing and moans. My mother stares at Millie.

“Stay here,” Jackie says to one of the aides on wheels, and then she runs out of the room. I try to feed my mother some more food, but she wouldn’t take any; she just stares at Millie, her look steady, curious, and sympathetic. The television blares news about Nicole Kidman, and how upset she is about her recent divorce. Jackie returns with a nurse and the two of them push Millie out of the room.

“You bought her prom dress, Mom?”

“Yes. I remember,” my mother says, without opening her eyes.

I lean down and kiss her forehead. She closes her eyes. I stay for another five minutes, listening to the television rate the ten worst-dressed women in Hollywood, or perhaps it is the best dressed. My mother slides into sleep. I leave the room

slowly, as I always do. As I leave, a woman reaches up from a wheelchair and grabs my arm. “Help me,” she says. I just stand there, looking down at her. She has the loveliest blue eyes I have ever seen. Her hair is thin and white, her right leg is quivering, there is something wrong with her teeth, and her lower lip is twisted on one side, but her eyes are big and a clear shade of light blue, the beautiful blue of a springtime sky.

“Tell me...please,” I say. “Tell me how to help you. Please.” She just stares at me, and then releases her grip.

“Thank you,” she says calmly. As I leave the room, I hear Nicole Kidman crying.

Before I get into my car, I walk around the building. It is very cold, below zero, and it looks like it is going to snow soon. The sky is gray and the air feels damp. My mother always liked the snow or the cold weather. Or perhaps she didn’t. She never complained about it. She reacted to the weather though, I do remember that. The long gray winters of upstate New York depressed her, just as the lovely springs and summers and autumns made her feel better. She has not been in the weather for two years now. I can’t remember my mother and I talking about that dance with Jackie: I barely even remember the dance itself, or how involved Jackie and I were together. What kind of relationship did we have back then? That was thirty years ago; no, thirty-five years ago. The cold begins to get to me, so I pick up my pace. When I get back to the parking lot in front of the building, Jackie is waiting for me, shivering in the cold and smoking a cigarette.

“You ok?” she asks when she sees me. “I knew you would be out here; you always liked being alone.”

“How is that woman?”

“We called the doctor,” Jackie says. “She will be here soon.”

“It is cold. Aren’t you cold?”

“Not so bad. You just aren’t used to it any more.”

“I guess you’re right.” I am freezing, shivering, but I light a cigarette anyway and move a bit closer to her. We don’t say anything for a while.

“You know what?” she says, her voice a bit softer. She glances back towards the door. “There was a time, at your house. It was in the summertime and you invited me over. I didn’t think I would ever tell you this, but now I want to. Your parents weren’t home, and I was surprised at that. You kind of tricked me, I guess, but I remember I was glad they weren’t there. I was still 16, I think, or maybe I was 17. I think you were in college then or about to go. But you know all of this.” She takes long pull from her cigarette, turns to put it out, then turns back to me and slides her hand inside my arm. “I said no. You were angry, but just a little bit. I didn’t see you much after that though.” She leans into me a little, and her head rests on my shoulder. I am freezing cold now, shivering hard, but I don’t say anything. I put my arm around her and pull her a bit closer. A few snowflakes begin to fall.

“I have to get back inside now, “ she says. “You need to come back here more often.”

“Yes, it would be nice to see you again.” She pulls away from me slowly and smiles as she looks up at me.

“Yes, it would, but that’s not why you should. Not to see me. That’s old history, another life, Dave. Ann. Your mother. She doesn’t have much more time, Dave. A month, maybe two, and she loves it when you come here, I can tell. Say hey to your Dad for me too. It is wonderful to see them together.”

“I will”

“Good. Maybe I will be here to see you again.” She leans up as if she might kiss me, but she pulls away quickly and walks back inside the nursing home. I don’t watch her; I just hear the automatic doors open for her and close behind her. I hurry to the car and drive back to my father’s house, where my wife and kids are all packed up and ready to go to the airport. We almost miss the plane.

I make a one-day visit at the end of January, but my mother is sleeping in her bed when I go to the Baptist. I fly up again for a weekend in February. My mother seems content, but she only stays awake long enough to eat, and even then not long enough to eat any cake. I look for Jackie, but don’t see her until I leave. She is coming in the door as I am going out. I am in a hurry to get to the airport on time, so I don’t stop. She is with a man; a short and sadly obese man with an unkempt black moustache. She stays behind him, her head bowed as she walks past me without saying a word.

The phone call comes on March 18, a Friday evening. She is not doing well. One of the aides, my brother says, thinks she may not make through the night. The aide says she knows you. An hour later, another phone call, this time my father says that she has improved and not to fly up. I don’t, forgetting how my father always sees

hope, even when no one else does. I change my mind the next morning and manage to get a flight from Baltimore at 10:30. My brother meets me at the airport and tells me that she died while I was in the air.

I drive straight to the nursing home with my brother, who had come up the night before. We barely speak on the ride. I call my wife from the car. The sky is amazing: perfectly white clouds against a beautiful blue sky. My mother's favorite color was blue. I am fine; my brother and I make all the expected sounds about how it is a blessing after such a cruel and long illness, about how we expected it to happen. I even mention that Jackie had warned me. I am fine, until I walk into her room. She is there on the bed still, her mouth open slightly. Jackie is sitting in the room, for some reason, in the old blue chair I had carried to the room when I had moved my mother there. Her favorite blue chair from her home, where she sat with her smaller dachshund for two years before she went into the nursing home. I lean down to kiss my mother's forehead, as I had done so many times before, and her forehead is as cold as piece of wood that had been left outside in the snow. I inhale sharply and make some sort of sound. Jackie reaches out to steady me, her grip firm on my elbow. I just turn and leave, to walk by myself, around the home three times beneath that beautiful blue sky.

## Ann Bartlett Lemmond

**Niskayuna** — Ann Bartlett Lemmond of Valencia Road, Niskayuna, died Saturday morning, March 19, 2005, at the Baptist Health Nursing Rehabilitation Center. Members of her family were with her when she peacefully passed away.



Ann was born in Swampscott, Massachusetts in 1927. Along with her two sisters, Virginia and Sally, she was raised in that area by her parents, Mary and Frederick Bartlett. In some ways, Ann always felt a strong connection to Boston and to New England. She graduated from Westbrook College in 1947 and she remained close to her classmates.

Ann moved with her family to Niskayuna in 1963, where she devoted herself to raising her four sons. From Boy Scouts to the PTA, Little League to the

YMCA, school events, basketball teams, homework, from hockey carpools to caring for her children when they fell ill, she was a busy and caring mother. She prepared a dinner every night at six o'clock. When her boys grew older, she became a teacher's aide at Niskayuna High School, where she worked for 12 years. She enjoyed her time at the high school and she was an enthusiastic and loyal member of the school's community and a loyal friend to many at the school.

In 1963, she also began attending St. Helen's Church in Niskayuna. For the next 40 years, she rarely missed Mass on Sundays.

After leaving her job at the high school, Ann tirelessly devoted herself to assisting those afflicted with mental illness and those who had relatives with mental illness. Her commitment to bettering the lives of families whose loved ones suffered from mental illness was strong and effective. She initiated direct support to family members by being a founding member of the Schenectady Relative's Group. Her initial efforts developed a foundation for the group, which eventually evolved into the currently active Schenectady Chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. Family members who found themselves in crisis knew that they could call her, day or night and they often did.

Ann always found time to talk to distraught family members who were coping with the news of a mental health diagnosis. She helped to shepherd them through the maze of service providers. She encouraged family members to think beyond their personal circumstance to improve the care of the mentally ill and to become advocates for the ill.

Ann's cause who the

In her lifetime, Ann raised six dachshunds, she understood and enjoyed the stubborn independence of her dogs. She loved spring flower the "Boston-Celtics," "Lara's Theme" from Dr. Zhivago (which was her favorite movie), New England foliage, her family, her dogs, God, good seafood, and family gathering. Her favorite color was blue.

Throughout her life, Ann Lemmond always put the interests and needs of others above her own needs and wants. Whether it was raising her sons, supporting her husband, working for the high school, or her tireless devotion to the cause of mental illness, Ann truly lived the Christian ideal. She lived a wonderful life.

Ann is survived by her husband of 53 years, Joseph V. Lemmond, Sr. of Niskayuna; her sons, David Lemmond and his wife Shelley of Silver Spring, MD, Joseph V. Lemmond, Jr. of Albany, NY, Peter C. Lemmond of Falmouth, MA, Robert M. Lemmond and his wife Karen of Boston, MA; her older sister, Virginia who died in 1998, her sister, Sally who lives with her husband, William in Bridgton, ME. Ann has two grandchildren, Sara F. Lemmond of Williamsburg, VA, and Jonathan R. Lemmond of

spoke eloquently on the of mental illness to all would listen. She offered family perspective to the staffs of local mental programs, a service that staff members have said had a profound and lasting effect on their practice. She lobbied elected officials politely and relentlessly, educating them about mental health programs and quietly demanding stronger support for the mentally ill and their families.

Ann devoted a tremendous amount of her time and her considerable talents to the Schenectady County Community Services Board. She served as board president and held several offices, including board secretary and chair of the Mental Health Subcommittee. In 1999, she received the Senior Citizen with an Outstanding Contribution Award from the Schenectady County Office for the Aging and her work was acknowledged and lauded by the state Legislature. She also received a special community service award from the Alliance of the Mentally Ill of New York State.

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San Diego, CA. Her son Robert and his wife are expecting Ann's third grandchild in early May.

A Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated at 9 a.m. at St. Helen's Church in Niskayuna on Tuesday, March 22.

Calling hours will be Monday evening, March 21 from 5 to 8 p.m. at Jones Funeral Home at 1503 Union Street.

Burial will be in Most Holy Redeemer Cemetery, Niskayuna.

Contributions may be made to The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill of New York State, 260 Washington Ave Albany, NY 12210 in the name of Ann C. Lemmond.

*Jones*

Family gathers that afternoon. Telephone calls are made. The next day I write her obituary, and the wake is the day after that, on a Monday night. Jackie comes to the wake; along with that fat man I had seen her with before. He stands in the back

while Jackie approaches my mother's coffin. She looks directly at me when she turns away from the coffin, and I look back.

"Who is that," my wife asks.

"A friend of my mother's, I think, " I say.

The funeral is the next morning. At the Mass, the priest doesn't want a eulogy, but doesn't stop my brother and me when we stand to give one. My brother tells a story about a hockey game. I talk about how she loved this church. As I speak, I look around the church. I don't know many people there. Jackie isn't there.

I stumble somehow walking towards her grave and twist my ankle. A nun says something. My brother reads a prayer. I am supposed to read another prayer, but I can't. And then it is over. Two Hispanic men with shovels in their hands wait for us to leave. My ankle is throbbing and I am sweating, so I am the last to leave. I don't feel well, and I cough. As I limp behind the others, my daughter sees me and comes back to me. She takes my arm and puts it over her shoulders and lets me lean on her. "Take your time, Daddy," she says.

## *System Error*

“Missy?”

“Missy? Missy? Are you listening? You seem out of it, sugar, are your hands shaking?” Though she did not answer, she listened closely, of course, to his words, his tone, to what he said, how he said it, what he did not say; watched him carefully while she listened, watched where his pretty blue eyes rested, carefully noted the way his narrow lips slowly formed a smile or a scowl, watched very carefully for that tiny twitch in his lower lip, the twitch he always denied. She had to watch, had to listen, had to remember, for her safety depended on it, so she listened and watched constantly and steadily, avoiding conversation. She sat up straight on the sofa. Her hands were shaking slightly, so she slid them under her thighs. Paying attention to him was no longer a second nature of hers; it was always first, before all else. Her shoulder and her hip still throbbed some, but she didn’t mention that to her husband. She waited for him to speak. She knew to listen and watch him constantly, but he didn’t always call her Missy. Missy, honey, dear, baby, sugar, sugar pie, Jules, Jule, Julers, all meant he was content, if not quite happy, but the names alone were not always clear signals, she had learned in eighteen years of marriage. Baby and sugar were terms of affection, along with babe, sweetie, sweet thing, sexy thing, pretty mama, silly, cutie, and hot thing. For a while, she was his sweet slut, but that stopped years ago. In public, she was the wife, my better half, my ball and chain, the little



woman, but these names were always used as part of a joke that only he still seemed to find funny, though she was careful to laugh every time he did. Watching him carefully even as she laughed. Her name was Julia. His name was Jonathan. A pair of J's. J & J Enterprises, he used to say. He even had had tee shirts made and had given them to everyone on their first anniversary.

“Missy? Are the kids asleep?”

She merely nodded, sitting across from him on a long, beige sofa in their family room. The only light in the room came from the large television set. A soft blur of greens, blues, and yellows illuminated the walls and moved slowly over her husband's large body as he lay in his black leather reclining chair. His black hair was beginning to thin, but there was not a single strand of gray. The lower buttons of his white shirt bulged a little, so Julia knew she would soon have to begin buying him a bigger size. The windows were open, and the slight sounds of suburbia slid easily into the room, along with a warm breeze; doors closing and cars in the distance, the muffled voices of teenagers waiting to be called inside, a dog named Becky being summoned in for the night. The twins, twelve-year old girls with her blonde hair and their father's eyes, were probably talking in the dark still, but she didn't mention that. She had talked to them for a while, picked up some dirty clothes, set out clean outfits for the morning.

“Did they have any homework, Missy?” His voice was low, and he turned to her as he spoke.

“The girls did, Junior did not, not tonight.”

“Did you check?”

She tried to smile. “Yes, he and I had a little talk.”

Fifteen minutes earlier, yes, she had checked on her son in his bedroom. Her son’s room, her lovely baby boy, fifteen now, and sprawled across his bed in his black boxer shorts. He was beautiful, taller than his father now by an inch, broad shoulders, a hint of stubble on his face. Some nights, she would quietly go into that room just to watch him sleep. Julia had entered the room quietly that night, checking the floor for clothes. She asked in a whisper if he was asleep, and his answer was sharp, but his voice made her smile, for she was still not accustomed to the deepening tone of his voice and when he tried to make it lower, as he did that night, it sounded a bit funny to her.

“If I were sleeping, Mother dear, I would not hear your question, now would I?”

“No, Junior, no, please, you wouldn’t.”

She moved slowly to the bed and sat on the edge, her hand drifting to his shoulder.

“How was school today?”

She heard him sigh and felt him roll over to face her as he answered. He pushed her hand from his shoulder.

“School was fine, school is always fine, but I am trying to go to sleep now, so please leave.”

As he spoke that sentence, she saw it: in his blue eyes, in the cruel smirk of his lips, the tilt of his head; the same tilt, the same arrogance on his mouth: for the first time, she saw *that* part of her husband in her son's face. He rolled into the moonlight coming through the window so she saw his face even more vividly.

"Are you all right?" she whispered, knowing the answer, not wanting to know.

"Until you came in, I was fine."

"Jonathan, please, no."

"Are you deaf?" he said, and he smiled: that thin smile she had seen so many times before.

She saw it happen before it happened. Her mind, her memory, filled the gaps that were too quick for her eye. It had happened to her before, many times. Her mind slowed the world to a speed she could comprehend: the muscles on his arm flexing, his arm moving slowly up and then towards her; slow and almost easy, until the heel of his hand struck her shoulder. She watched it happen, saw that hand hit her. Then she felt it also, her body accustomed to blows, yet not wanting to accept this blow from her baby boy. He struck, and then pushed her hard. She started to fall off the bed, and he struck her again; she didn't see the second blow coming, but she felt it hit hard lower on her shoulder, and she fell off the bed on to the wooden floor. Pain in her shoulder, in her hip where she landed, at the small of her back.

"No, no. Please, baby, no no."

He didn't answer her for a moment. She began to cry, and he rolled back out of the moonlight, his arm under his pillow, and his back to her, letting her cry softly.

"Just go."

She climbed off the floor, using the bed rails, and turned to leave, doing her best not to cry hard.

“Don’t ever hit me, Jonathan. Never.” she said from the doorway.

“What are you going to do about it?” he said calmly, his back still towards her. “Tell Dad?”

“ I asked if you looked in on Junior, Jules. Did I not speak loud enough for you?”

“Of course I did.”

“Of course? Just last week he left all his books on the kitchen table, or have you forgotten that, Missy?”

She returned his stare and watched him carefully, for his tone had changed with that question. He spoke more slowly, and he lowered the pitch of his voice. She knew it was only because he was very tired, but she didn’t want him to see her tears. She hated him, loathed him, but her hatred had moved inside her; it was an organ in her body now, always there, connected to her heart and lungs. She felt it throb now, just below her right breast. She was used to it though, had kept it inside of her, secret from her own mother first, then her sister, then her friends, and most of all her children. She hated him, but all the throbbing did was make her watch him more carefully. He was smiling, as if he found her amusing, and he had not moved in his leather chair.

“I checked. No homework tonight,” she said.

He stared at her for another few moments, then his smile vanished. He leaned back in his recliner, and turned his attention to the commercial on the television. He rolled his head back and forth on the black leather of the chair to find a comfortable spot.

“Good girl, “ he said, as his eyes closed halfway. A blonde woman in a red dress announced the beginning of the eleven o’clock news.

As quietly as she could, Julia walked up the stairs to the kitchen, just as she always did when the news came on. She collected the stray dishes and glasses and put them in the dishwasher. She prepared a lunch for her husband for the next day: peanut butter and jelly sandwich, one red delicious apple, a small bag of raw carrots, and a brownie. As she placed the brown paper bag into the refrigerator, she folded it a few extra times, for Jonathan did not care for peanut butter; he expected ham and cheese, thinly-sliced ham from the delicatessen, good Swiss cheese, and a hint of mayonnaise on whole-wheat bread. Perhaps he would not look in the bag when he left in the morning or perhaps he would. Sometimes he looked, sometimes he didn’t, but if he did she would certainly be rebuked.

Remembering easily how his words could sting and still feeling the pain in her hip, she looked in the refrigerator, knowing that peanut butter was her only choice. Her hip hurt more when she bent over. The twins had missed their ride to soccer practice that afternoon, so she had to drive them there and hadn’t had time to get to the grocery store. She wiped down the top of the stove, the kitchen table, and all the countertops. She stumbled, catching herself on the counter. Tears returned, and she

missed her mother and father almost painfully in that instant. What can I do about it?  
Who can help me?

From the family room downstairs, she heard the sound of martial music from the television, announcing either progress in a war or the beginning of the sports segment. She sat down carefully in a kitchen chair and glanced at the clock on the refrigerator. Eleven twenty five, so it was sports on TV. In five minutes she would walk downstairs and kiss her husband's forehead lightly. He would not be pleased and would grouse that he was going to watch the news; when he was half-asleep his anger had once been almost endearing to her; it reminded her of a part of him that she had known years and years ago, before he hit her the first time. He would grumble like a big bear, tell her he was awake, complain about something, usually about her, and then fall back asleep in his reclining chair. She would shower, undress for bed, and be sound asleep before he arrived. That was the schedule the night before, about the same as the night before that and before that, for almost as long as she could remember. It was a safe schedule, one that she did her best to create and maintain, in spite of that throbbing organ in her chest. Jonathan is 15, she thought; a boy that age has strong mood swings, bursts of temper. She could shift her plans, adjust her schedule, until he moved out.

No alarm clock buzzed for Julia the next morning, nothing woke her, but then again she had not slept well, tossing and rolling all night long. finding it hard to find a

position that did not make her hip ache. Her eyes slowly opened to a bright bedroom filled with yellow light from a bright sun. So bright, that the white walls gleamed. The room was quiet, the air cool and light, the windows open, so still that she saw the light breeze lift tiny particles of dust, hold them suspended in the air. Lying in bed, she heard nothing at all: no children scurrying about or yelling, no husband searching for a clean shirt or slamming doors. Nothing at all. The window shades were up, and she could see patches of a clear blue sky, and that was when, fully awake, she gasped a bit when she realized she had overslept. She reached across the bed for her husband, but he wasn't there. His space on the bed was not only vacant, but the bed on his side was made, the pillows tucked neatly under the blue bedspread. She got out of bed quickly and walked across the bedroom, covering herself with her arms as best she could before the open windows, for her husband insisted that she sleep nude, in case he wanted sex during the night.

With her bathrobe on, she walked quickly to the children's rooms. Both bedrooms were empty, the beds made neatly, no clothes on the floor. With a slight edge of panic in her walk, she moved quickly from room to room, checking the bathrooms, the family room downstairs, even the closets. Opening and closing doors sounded very loud. She stopped when she thought she heard a short beep, something electronic; stopped and listened carefully with a slight tilt of her head, but couldn't remain still. Jonathan's car was gone. No brown bag in the refrigerator. The coffeepot was clean and dry. She yelled her husband's name, then yelled it louder. She called the twins. Called for Junior. Nothing, though it was strange that her

shouting now had a slight echo in the house she had never heard before. She yelled again, to hear that echo.

She sat down on the living room sofa, leaning back as far as she could, taking a brown pillow and hugging it tightly to her chest. She simply did not know what to do. She had not cried since the time her husband pushed her down the steps to the garage seven years ago, and when she tried to cry now she simply could not. She found herself breathing fast and deep, so she took a slow deep breath and exhaled slowly five times. It was almost nine o'clock. Why had she slept so late? Why didn't Jonathan wake her? Why did she still feel exhausted? Do the girls have money for lunch? Who made the beds? Picked up the clothes? Did he make himself coffee? Did he even know how?

There was really only one thing she could do, and she dreaded it. She took two more deep breaths, and exhaled even more slowly. The throbbing in her chest became more painful. She would have to call Jonathan at his office, which he loathed and had often warned her never to do. She would apologize for oversleeping, thank him profusely for taking care of the children, apologize for the peanut butter, and offer to bring him a better lunch. He would be angry, she knew that for sure, but if she wore her tight green dress, put on some make up, wore those white heels he liked, he might, just might, be less angry, and she might, just might, get nothing but a good scolding. He had not struck her in almost two years, for she had been very careful; she knew how to avoid that kind of anger by watching, listening, following her own plan. She felt a bit safer with a plan in her head. Being alone was not unfamiliar.



Her fingers were quivering, so was difficult at first to push the buttons on the telephone. At first, she dialed the wrong number. She took another long breath and redialed. No one answered the phone at her husband's office. A real-estate sales office, someone always answered the telephone, even on the weekends. She let it ring for a long time, then sat down on a kitchen chair listening to it ring a while longer. Of course, she could call her neighbor, the woman across the street. She couldn't recall a name, but her twins were friends with the child there. No one answered there either. Another neighbor: no answer. She called her sister in California, using the automatic dialer now. No answer. The ringing of the telephone sounded very loud, so she held the phone away from her ear a little bit. She hit another button on the speed dial, without knowing whom she was calling now. No answer, so she hit another button, then another, then another. No answer. She slammed the phone down, felt herself begin to cry, picked the phone again and dialed for the operator. No answer, but she didn't hang up. She put the phone on the table and let it ring and ring.

She could feel her heart; she could feel more tears, so she stood up and hurried back to her bedroom. She got dressed, which made her feel better. Jeans and an old black tee shirt, not the green dress. OK, she thought, I made a big mistake, but there is nothing I can do about that now. I will make it up to them, she thought. She would clean the house thoroughly, make a fine dinner. Perhaps we will eat in the dining room tonight. Yes, Jonathan liked that every now and then. I will make roast beef, which was Jonathan Junior's favorite. That was her plan, and she believed that all would be well.

After a bowl of cereal for breakfast, she got out the vacuum cleaner and all her cleaning tools and began. She was a good and efficient house cleaner; indeed, the first time that her husband had hit her, fifteen years ago, was because he was not satisfied with the way she had cleaned a bathroom. Jonathan sometimes joked that he could rent her out to friends and neighbors, she was now that good. The first time he had said that, she cried, and he twisted her by arm later that night; the last time he said, she smiled, and put her hand under her right breast. It took me a while to train her, he liked to say, but now she is the best. The house, of course, was already clean, so she could spend her time now cleaning things she rarely had the time to clean. She carefully pulled the refrigerator away from the wall and cleaned its coils and the walls behind it. With some steel wool, she cleaned and polished the stainless steel kitchen sink. She used a good, stiff brush on the tiles in the shower stall; she cleaned all the windows, inside and out; she polished her husband's shoes and lined them in the shoe rack just the way he liked them to be. She found herself breathing hard, and she was sweating from exertion, but it felt good. She thought about getting out the steam cleaner and cleaning some carpeting, but decided it wouldn't be dry by dinner time, and she still needed to get to the grocery store.

She changed her tee shirt for a blue blouse, ate a yogurt, grabbed her purse, and headed out. The car clock told her it was almost one o'clock; she had just enough time to get to the store and back before her children got home. After such a disturbing morning, she was glad her day was going by so quickly. She took two deep breaths before putting the car into gear.

The radio in the car didn't work. All she got was static, no matter what button she pushed, and she pushed them all. And there were no cars on the road, not a single one. She came to a red light and stopped, and she had a few minutes to look around. There was not a car moving anywhere. The gas station on her right looked open, but she could not see anyone there. The door was open, and she could see the vending machines inside blinking. One of the garage doors was raised, and a blue Toyota, the same model as her car, was up on a lift. On her left, the firehouse had its garage door open so she could see the two big fire engines, one red and one yellow, but no firemen. The fire chief's truck was in the driveway next to a bright green hose and a bucket for soap, but no one was washing it. She rolled down the window of her car and heard nothing, no sound at all, She heard a loud click in front of her, so she turned her head and glanced up. The light had turned green. She had never heard a stop light change colors before. She drove to the grocery store, slowly and very carefully.

By the time she got to the shopping center, she did not expect to see anyone. The parking lot looked huge, with just a few cars parked here and there. She used a parking spot close to the door. The store was open, the automatic doors worked, the lights were on, but all she heard when she entered was the hum of machines. Getting home before the children would be no problem, she thought. Since she knew the layout of the store so well, she picked up all she needed quickly. The milk was cold, and the meat section was full and chilled properly; all the machines humming steadily, all the florescent lights bright and a few were flickering as usual, The green and white tile floor was clean and shiny. No one was behind the deli counter though,

no butchers working behind glass walls, no people in the aisles putting more goods on the shelves. She took her time picking out just the right roast beef, feeling a slight and surprising surge of contentment now for her solitude. No other shoppers to bother her, no store attendants looking over her shoulder. She rarely talked to anyone at the grocery store anyway, so while she could not deny that the eeriness frightened her, she also could not deny that the solitude made her shopping easier and faster. Jonathan had often complained that she took far too much time doing simple things like shopping for groceries.

She added up her purchases with the calculator in her checkbook and left a check on the manager's counter. There were no cashiers on duty, although the green light for the "quick check, ten items or less" was blinking high on its black pedestal. Writing the check was difficult, for her hands were still shaking some and it felt like her eyes were wet, blurring her vision. Writing the check felt odd also, for Jonathan rarely allowed her to write checks. He gave her five twenty-dollar bills each week for groceries and her other expenses, and he never allowed a penny more. Checks required his approval in advance, but now, well, he was not available. She could make her excuses later.

The radio still was not working; the roads were still empty. Her car sounded so loud to her that she wondered if something was wrong with it. At the stoplight, she had an idea. She glanced around, checked all her mirrors, and felt a slight blush of excitement on her cheeks as she drove right under the red light, hoping that she would hear a police siren, but smiling when she did not. All the way home she drove five miles an hour over the speed limit; no blinkers when she turned, no stopping at stop

signs. Wanting some music, she turned on the radio again, but she heard nothing but static, so she found herself humming some old song from her teenaged years as she pulled into her driveway. *It takes two, baby, it takes two. Me and you.* I can do this, she thought, I have a plan. With the roast beef cooking, and the potatoes and vegetables washed and ready for the stove, she began to set the table in the dining room. It was getting late and the children should be home by now. No, the girls have basketball practice and Junior rarely was home before five. She never wore a wristwatch and was not in the habit of looking at clocks, for there was never a need. She had a schedule, weekdays and weekends, holidays and vacations. Events happened, people made requests, clothes needed to be washed, her family needed to be fed, sick children needed attention, these things and more told her what to do and when to do it. But she looked at the clock now, and it three thirty. She could make a joke to Junior about last night, not acknowledge what happened and perhaps he would forget about it. No, best just not to stay anything and not go into his room so late any more. Where did every body go?

Using all the buttons on the speed dial, she called everyone again; just pushing the buttons, one after the other. She called her husband's office, her children's schools, her neighbors, the phone company, the water company, the police; she dialed 911 for the first time in her life. Every call got the same response: a click, then ringing. No one answered. When she called the phone company, the line went dead and the recording said, over and over: "if you wish to make a call, please hang up and dial again. If you wish to make a call, please hang up and dial again." She hung up, but did not dial again.

“Everyone’s gone, “ she said out loud. They were gone and they were not coming back. Her children, their father, her sisters, the old couple across the street, the man at the dry cleaners who asked her to let him buy her lunch with a smile on his face that she enjoyed, the check-out girls at the grocery, the police, the firemen, all the people driving cars, flying in planes, just everyone gone. And they weren’t coming back. It made no sense, she knew, but she knew she was completely alone. Yet she knew that this was no so different, that she had been alone for years now.

She sat in the kitchen and looked out the window. There was a breeze, and she could hear leaves rustling. A lovely autumn afternoon. When she was younger, this was her favorite time of year. She would take the children outside every day in the fall. They went for walks and she taught them all to ride bicycles in the fall. She felt surprised that she wasn’t scared, surprised that she wasn’t crying. She missed her children, but still she didn’t cry. They were gone: not hurt, not dead, not frightened or angry, just gone. There was nothing she could do for them; they didn’t need her. She sat there for a moment, and that is when she heard the electronic beep again. It was not loud enough to frighten her or startle her. She listened carefully. She heard it again. She stood up and she heard it again: a soft, persistent beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. She walked down the hallway to the bedrooms. The sound got louder. She went into her son’s room, thinking it was one of his many electronic games, but when she entered his room she heard the beep again, softer this time. She went back into the hallway.

The sound was coming from the fourth bedroom, a small room where her husband kept an office. Neither she nor her children were allowed in his office,

though of course she came in once a week to clean it, always carefully and always when Jonathan was at work. Out of habit more than anything else, she pushed the door open slowly, She peeked inside, saw that everything was in its place: white walls, a sleek black computer desk from Ikea, one extra chair, two posters of a half-naked woman advertising spark plugs on each side of the window, two framed certificates from the realty company over the desk: Outstanding Salesman in 1995, Best Effort in 1998. The computer was on. She could hear it. The screen was bright. Careful to leave the door open, she walked slowly into the room, She sat down in her husband's black leather chair and looked at the screen. There was not the usual confusing collection of icons and computer symbols, just a white square that filled the screen; the word "hello" printed in the top left-hand corner six or seven times. The computer beeped again, and another "hello"" appeared, in pretty red letters. She pushed the chair a bit back from the computer.

It beeped again, and yet another "hello" appeared. She didn't know what to do. She moved the chair closer, and the computer beeped, but this time no words appeared. It beeped again. She stared, waiting for another "hello" but nothing happened. She moved closer, then closer still. She got close enough to put her hands on the keyboard. She watched, hoping for another red "hello." The print on the screen was large and easy to read.

"Answer me," appeared silently on the screen. She smiled at the assertiveness, smiled at being told what to do for the first time on this perplexing day.

"Answer me," appeared again, and then the computer beeped three times. Beep. Beep. Beep. It seemed louder to her now. She put her hands on the keyboard,

but didn't type anything. "Answer me," appeared for the fourth time, and she typed, but nothing happened. The computer beeped, but this time it didn't stop, and now louder and faster: beebbeepbeepbeepbeep, on and on. Wanting to obey but afraid of doing something wrong, she hesitated. She looked at the keyboard and pushed the "return" key.

"Hi" was what she had typed, and it appeared on the screen in dark blue, in the same pretty font.

"Hi" popped on in red immediately after her "Hi" appeared.

"How are you today?" the red print asked.

"I don't know," she typed. "How are you?"

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I mean that I am alone here."

"Ah, well so am I. Being alone can be fine."

"No," she typed, typing quickly now. "Everyone is gone, they all left."

"Who left?"

"Everyone." The red letters had been appearing instantly after she typed her responses, but now nothing appeared. She looked around the room and listened for sounds in the hallway.

"Are you still there?" Julia typed.

"What is your name?"

"Julia."

"Are you safe, Julia?"

"I think so. No one is here."



“Are your doors locked?”

She didn't know, she had not thought of danger that way, danger coming from outside her home; a slight tingle moved slowly down her spine. She got up from the chair and went downstairs, locked the front door and the garage door, went to check the back doors and locked them both. She found herself looking out the windows, but saw nothing. She went back to the kitchen to check on the roast. The computer was beeping insistently and more loudly, so she went back to it.

“Where did you go?”

“I locked the doors, just like you said.”

“Oh, OK. But don't leave without telling me.”

“Sorry.”

“Just don't let it happen again. I am going to go now, off to get something to eat. It is dinnertime where you are, have you eaten yet?”

“No, not yet”

“Well, perhaps we will talk after dinner.”

“OK”

“Now go and eat. Do you drink wine with your roast beef, Julia?”

“Oh no,” Julia typed, and she actually laughed out loud.

“No, no wine during the week. Just on special occasions. Jonathan, my husband, says it makes me sleepy, so no wine for me.”

“But he is not here now, is he?”

“No, he is not.”

“So now it is up to you, isn't it? It is all up to you now.”

“Yes,” she typed. “It is up to me.”

“A little merlot would go well with that roast beef.”

“Just a little, yes.”

“Or the whole bottle. It is up to you now. Enjoy your meal, Julia.”

The white rectangle on the computer screen began to shrink, getting smaller and smaller until there was just a tiny square of light in the middle of the screen. When it disappeared, Julia heard the computer shut down. She stared at the screen for a minute and, for the first time that day, she spoke to herself out loud.

“I must be going crazy. Completely crazy,” she said. “Oh my....the roast beef!”

The roast may have been a bit overdone, but she preferred it that way so, she thought, for once I can have beef the way I like it. She found a bottle of Merlot and opened it to breathe, though it took her a while to find the corkscrew. The table was set; the house was clean. Yes, the children were a bit late, but what could she do? There was no one she could call. It was just after five, a time usually filled with dinner preparations and teen crises, but today the house was calm, so Julia poured herself a glass of the Merlot and took it with her out on to the deck behind her house.

As she sat down in a green plastic Adirondack chair, she told herself this would all be over soon. Her family would be home, and they might laugh when she told of her day. Jonathan would laugh about what the computer had said but, no, best not to tell him about that. Who was talking to her on that computer?

A flock of birds swarmed around an elm tree, and she watched them. She had loved birds when she was young, even thought of studying them in college. She and

her father had made birdhouses, ten or twenty of them, each designed for a specific type of bird. Now she didn't even know what kind of bird she was watching. On another tree, she saw the male cardinal she had watched since spring. He and his mate had a nest nearby, for she saw them both often. Perhaps, she thought, when the children have left, Jonathan would let her go back to college. As this thought passed, the throbbing in her chest grew again. She finished her wine and leaned lower into the chair, just watching the birds. Her hip felt fine now, no pain and she knew that if there was a bruise it would fade by tomorrow. Tonight perhaps she could wear the pajamas she kept hidden; Jonathan had not reached for her in bed in months, so perhaps he wouldn't mind. She could make more of an effort to keep her son away from his father, and, as her eyes closed, she was thinking about summer camps and colleges for her children.

She didn't fall asleep, but she did dream some. She remembered when Jonathan built this deck just after they moved here. Junior was so cute trying to help his Dad. The girls watched from the window in the dining room. Jonathan was five or six then, the girls just two. She had to admit that her husband had been a good father then. He did well with children, especially very young children. As they got older though, he pulled away, as if he didn't know what to do. The children seemed frightened of him now, but not because they were concerned he would hurt them. Julia watched that carefully and had always made sure she put herself between Jonathan and the children when he was upset, when she saw any sign of violence. No, the children's fear was not that their father would hurt them; it was a fear of something unknown, the kind of fear one feels of a stranger on a street or of some

large animal. Julia was glad her children didn't know their father, but perhaps her son had learned more than she knew.

Where were those children of hers? She reached sleepily for her wine glass and knocked it over. It rolled off the deck and smashed on a rock. She stood up and walked down the stairs. Tiny shards of glass were scattered about one of the posts of the deck, only the stem of the glass remained intact. Julia held on tightly to the banister of the stairs; her heart raced, her breathing sped up again. She began to cry, and then, from her belly, she screamed. Her scream stopped her crying; her scream was loud and fierce, surging up from the right side of her chest; the kind of scream an animal makes when cornered by a predator, the kind of scream that is all the animal has to save its own life.

The scream sent the birds away, and that cardinal flew off quickly. It is getting late, she thought, as she caught her breath. She climbed back up the stairs to fetch a dust pan and gloves to pick up the glass, and she heard the computer beeping at her when she got into the house.

"Oh, hush," she said. She poured herself another glass of wine and went down to Jonathan's office. She pushed the door open wide and sat down on Jonathan's chair.

"What?" she typed, without waiting for a question. "Who are you?"

"Are you still alone?"

"Yes I am"

"All alone?"

"All alone in the whole world, except for you. Who are you?"

“How will you eat?”

“There is a whole grocery store up the road. Free food.”

“Is that enough?” She paused then for a moment, staring at the screen.

“Is that enough?” the computer asked again.

“Who are you?” Julie typed.

“Is that enough?”

Julia smiled, with her head now clear. She typed: “The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain,”

“Is that enough?” the computer wrote immediately. Julia laughed, for this was a type of communication she understood well: what she said or asked or thought did not matter. What did matter was her responding to questions, following directions, being told what to do, and doing as she was told.

“Yes, there is enough,” she typed, and sipped her coffee while waiting for the next question for she knew there would always be more questions or directions.

“Are you safe?”

“ Yes, I feel very safe now.”

“Where does Jonathan keep his gun?”

“No gun.”

“Where does Jonathan keep his gun?”

“In the closet, on the top shelf. He has a metal box for it.”

“And where is the key?”

“I don’t know”

“Where is the key?”

“In his night table, in a small jewelry box with his cuff links.”

“I think it is best that you take the gun out of the box, and keep it close to you.” Julia just looked at the screen for a few moments, and then smiled to herself. This is just a square of white on a computer screen, she thought. It cannot hurt me, cannot push me to the floor to bruise my hip, cannot break the wine glass my mother gave me when I got married, cannot do anything except give me orders.

“It is up to me, not you, “ she typed.

“Of course it is, Julia. Everything is up to you now.”

“Can I?”

“Yes you can. You can make everything right, but only if you do what I say. You best do what I say.”

“Or what?”

“Don’t, Julia.”

She picked up her wine and took a long sip, as she stared at the pretty red printing on the computer screen.

“Don’t you dare,” the screen said.

Her eyes left the screen and went to the big black box next to it, then followed the cord with her eyes to the outlet. She reached for the plug and pulled it out. The computer went silent.

A doorbell rang, her doorbell, then pounding on the door. She didn’t get off the chair for she knew the door was locked. A car honked in the distance and she could hear a siren wailing. Her neighbor’s garage door opened with its usual groan. Someone was yelling for Emily to get inside. Jonathan was at the front door, yelling

her name. He would have to come in through the garage, come up the stairs into the kitchen to get to her.

She went to her bedroom and took the key from Jonathan's jewelry box and then took the box with the gun off the shelf in the closet. Her breathing was steady now, almost calm. She heard the garage door open. Holding the gun with both hands, she walked to the kitchen. Standing in the kitchen, near the door from the garage, her husband's cursing as he walked up the wooden stairs, each step felt like a heavy punch on her face. Her legs spread, steadying herself. Goddam peanut butter. How many goddam times do I have to tell you? No ham and cheese, and someone is going to learn a lesson. She had heard it before; she knew what was about to happen. It was up to her to raise the gun. The door opened and she saw that angry red face, saw those pretty blue eyes filled with loathing, heard that scowling voice, his arm already raised for the first blow when she pulled the trigger over and over and over, heard the explosions, felt the heat and hard movement of the metal in her hands, smelled smoke, over and over and over and over until she heard him fall back down the stairs, until the throbbing in her chest lessened and then disappeared.

## An Easy and Durable Oil and Varnish Finish for Your Walnut Furniture and Other Hardwood Projects

(Drive home from work, slowly up Connecticut Avenue, thinking of the walnut jewelry box ready for the final coat of finish after two weeks of work. Got rags. Got sandpaper. Got 0000 steel wool. Got tack clothes. Got the oil/wax mix. Remember to clean everything first, to keep the dust down. Speed picks up a bit on the ramp to the Beltway, right behind a vanload of girls and a soccer mom, pigtails flying. Stay near the van until the right exit, then pick up speed and park in driveway. Upstairs first to get out of work clothes; no one else home, so no need for more than boxer shorts and tee shirt. Pick up top for box and rub , checking for dust nubs. Open wax/oil mix and stir slowly.)

Girl Scout cookies.

Open door slowly; open wide. Hello.

Two white girls. One black girl. Brown skirts. Brown sashes. Merit badges. Cute.

White mother behind.

Thin mints. Four boxes.

Giggles. More giggles.



Take money. Yes. Thin mints.

Just thin mints?

Five boxes. Love thin mints.

Girls stare low.

Giggle. Blush. Adorable.

Love thin mints. Six boxes.

Mother looks low.

Girls look low. Shortest girl with blue eyes.

Step behind door.

Sorry. Forgot.

It's ok, blue-eyed girl says, blushing still.

Creep, mother says.

Girls leave.

No thin mints? Oh well.

Still Wednesday evening, still not yet dark, still a good time to put that final finish on that walnut jewelry box. A small, pleasant task. Start over with new music. Rub first with 600-grit sandpaper, then with superfine (0000) steel wool for the final smoothing of the wood. Rub over and over and over, with a Scarlatti piano sonata playing quietly from the next room. Rub every plane, every cranny. Clean the wood carefully next, first with a cotton rag and then with a tack cloth. Rub slowly and with some pressure to catch every particle of dust. Rub off residue from tack cloth with clean white cotton. Set the jewelry box aside to clean the workbench and cover it with newspaper to keep dust away. Pause for a few minutes to let dust settle and to enjoy a Scarlatti crescendo. Set the box on the work bench: walnut top on the right, with a lovely stripe of cream-colored sapwood; walnut base on the left, with no sapwood and with dark, swirling grain. Open the can of finish with a small screwdriver: one third

pure tung oil, one third boiled linseed oil, one third caruba wax. Stir the finish slowly to avoid air bubbles. Dip a small piece of clean cotton into the oil/wax finish and cover the walnut. Dip. Repeat. Rub the finish into the wood. Too much is better than not enough. Pause to let the oil seep in, and to enjoy more Scarlatti. Use a paper towel to wipe off excess oil, then rub with a cotton cloth to remove more oil. Use another piece of cotton to rub more to harden the wax. Soak the rags in water. Hang rags to dry. Cloth soaked with oil can ignite.

Take shower. Get dressed.

Check walnut. Rub more, mainly to polish the wax.

Eat cheese.

Drink water.

Thursday. Work. 8:30 to 5:00.

Friday. Flex time day off. Need to clean workshop.

Answer telephone at 9:15.

Police. Come talk.

Talk on phone?

No, come talk now.

Later?

Come now, or I come to you.

Change clothes.

Drive to police.

Get lost. Call police on cell phone.

You are late.

Lost.

You are late.

Help me.

Go straight. Turn right. Park.

Open big glass door.

Wait. For Detective Sally Lopez.

Sex offenders. Detective First Class.

Lopez smiles. Come with me.

Long white table amidst blue cubicles. Black chairs.

Sit here. Not there.

White walls. No windows. Florescent lights.

Lopez in cubicle. Black slacks.

Four men. Blue shirts. Brown holsters.

Note on table: Baby shower for Leslie on Friday at two.

Lopez out of cubicle, with blue folder. Thick folder. Opens folder.

Your name is?

Yes.

You live at?

Yes.

Done this before?

What?

You heard.

No.

Yes, you have.

No.

Then why?

Why what?

Three Girl Scouts.

No. Two Girl Scouts, one Brownie.

Yes. Yesterday.

No.

Yes. Mother too.

No.

Yes.

Mother saw penis.

Mine?

Not hers.

No.

Yes. She saw. Described.

Accident.

Tell me.

Rubbing walnut.

Rubbing what?

Walnut.

I see.

Doorbell rings.

Rubbing walnut in underwear?

Yes. A jewelry box, solid walnut, with a plywood bottom. Plywood provides a fine bottom, strong and stable. The top is two pieces glued edge-to-edge, bookmarked wood so the grain on them is symmetrical, quite pretty. Finish is a mix of new and old: pure tung oil, boiled linseed oil, like the old days, but the polyurethane varnish is a modern film finish, very durable, very hard. The top coat, yesterday's, has no varnish, carnuba wax instead. Lots of elbow grease, lots of rubbing.

Hard?

Yes. Walnut is a fine, hard wood. Not as hard as maple, but hard enough and easy to work. Air-dried walnut, not kiln dried. Air dried has a nicer color, a rich brown. Kiln-dried walnut has more of a grey tone.

I see. Doorbell rings?

Yes. Open door. Two Girl Scouts. One Brownie and a mother.

Underwear?

Yes. Boxer shorts. Tee shirt.

Why?

Why what?

Why open for Girl Scouts?

Love Thin Mints.

Three girls?

Yes.

Mother?

Yes.

Stay here.

Lopez to cubicle. Zipper in back of black slacks.

Pictures on her desk. One boy and one girl. Girl about 12.

Talks on telephone.

Two men, one with holster, the other with none.

Talk with Lopez in her cubicle.

Men look. Point.

Turn back and talk more.

All three sit at white table.

Lopez: Last Saturday?

At home.

Alone?

Wife.

I see.

Man: Parking garage at Tyson's Corner Shopping Center? Three o'clock?

No.

Lopez: Wife's phone number?

621-3432. Don't tell her.

Stay here.

Back in cubicle. Another man. Red necktie.

All four back at table.

Red necktie: Tyson's Corner. Three o'clock. Penis. Video tape.

No.

Yes. Little girl. Nine years old. Tell us.

No.

Lopez: Tell us. Girl hurt. Still in hospital.

Call wife?

No answer.

Call cell phone. 240-445-7372.

Police leave. Lopez on telephone.

Wait and watch. Sweat on palms.

Can go. Stay available.

Wife?

Yes. Said you were at home.

Drive home.

Rub walnut to polish the wax. Consider one more coat of finish. Pants on.

Wife on telephone. Crying. You promised.

No.

Why? Why? Why?

No. No. No.

More crying by wife. Dial tone.

Walnut done. Time to cure. Check that the cans of finish are sealed, that all rags are disposed properly, that air can circulate over and under the jewelry box.

Do laundry.

Find boxers. Red white blue. Union Jack.

Hold up. Front and back.

No opening for penis.

No penis.

Smile.

Call Lopez.

What?

No penis.

Yes. Penis.

No. No opening.

No opening?

No opening.

Women's boxers?

No, just no opening.

Like women's underwear?

No.

You did.

No.

Will see you soon.

Good-bye, Sally.

Officer Lopez.

Good-bye.

Watch TV. Cable News Network. Karaoke Craze in Ohio.

iPod Pornography. Global Warming Debate.

Clinton Gives up French Fries. Turn off TV.

Wife home.



You OK?

Says nothing. Takes shower. Sleeps in guest room.

Walk around house. Guest room door locked. Sleep.

Saturday. Wife goes shopping.

Sunday. Wife out. Don't know where.

Rub walnut slowly, all cured now. Place box on oak bookshelf in den. Move box to coffee table in living room. Back to the bookshelf, back to coffee table. Looks best on coffee table.

Wife home.. Don't talk to me. Talked to Sally. Just don't say a thing.

Say nothing.

Monday.

Lopez on telephone.

Come see me.

Work.

Come see me or I come see you. At work.

Call work. Drive to Lopez. Raining hard.

No Lopez.

Michael Ivers. Detective First Class.

Hi. Call me Mike.

Hello, Officer.

Cool with me. Don't care.

What?

What you wear, what you do.

Sit in Mike's cubicle. Bare desk.

Want some coffee?

No.

Whatever you want. Tea? Soda?

No.

Cubicle two down from Lopez. Phone extension 451.

Lopez thinks you are a bad one.

No.

Gotta tell ya, I have thought about it.

What?

Panties, women's clothes. Stockings. Must feel good. Smooth satin. Lace.

Don't know.

Were the girls pretty?

Kids.

One was hot. Didn't look 14.

Yes, she did.

Not when I met her. Oh, man. The mother?

Don't know, Officer.

Not bad. I saw her. Great ass.

Good for you.

Four witnesses. Tough.

Accident.

No blame. Hot girls, fine mother.

No.

And the tape. At Tyson's. You are on it.

No tape.

I can keep it quiet.

No.

Your boss? Your neighbors? Your friends? Think.

Yes.

Don't leave town. Stay in touch. No coffee?

Good-bye.

Late for work.

Tuesday.

Wednesday.

Thursday.

Ruth. Chief Executive Officer. High heels. Long black hair. Colored to cover gray.

Yellow folder on Ruth's glass desk.

Open folder. [www.neighborhoodlookout.com](http://www.neighborhoodlookout.com)

Number 14. Not official, Ruth.

No? Ruth stares, Smiles.

Some neighborhood web page.

People talk. Police called.

Man or woman?

Woman. Go home. Stay home.

Fired?

Maybe.....stay home.

Didn't happen, Ruth.

Go home. I won't tell anyone.

Thanks, Ruth.

Take wife's photo off desk. Leave file keys in drawer.

Elevator to parking garage. Doors close silently, then open again.

Two women. Kate and Sheila. Internet Sales.

Doors close. Elevator descends. Doors open. Women leave.

Kate turns back. Sale soon at Victoria's Secret?

Laughter as doors slide closed.

Friday.

Saturday.

Wife silent, but angry eyes. No more crying.

Sunday.

Monday.

Clean workshop and listen to Bach's "Concerto in G Major." Yo Yo Ma. Clean tools thoroughly, to get ready for the next project. Always another project.

Tuesday.

Wife says good bye.

Where?

My sister's. Don't call.

Wednesday. Drive to Pennsylvania to buy more walnut, and some bird's-eye maple. Worth the drive for air-dried walnut and highly figured maple. 228 dollars for the

wood. Fourteen dollars for more oil/varnish finish. Nineteen dollars for carbide round-over router bit. Bring rough sketch of coffee table design. It is rough lumber, so plane lightly at home then set aside to acclimate to shop. Wood moves, grows, bends.

Thursday.

Friday.

Ruth calls. Resign or be fired.

Will sue.

Severance. Lots of money.

Quit.

Saturday. Inspect the maple carefully to choose best look for top of the table. Put on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; “Flute Concerto Number 2 in D Major.” Plane carefully, for figured wood will tear out easily. Use a high-angle plane, very sharp. Winding sticks and hand planes to make each board true and flat. Cut the four boards to length, then use a jointer on the edges for good glue joints. Turn up volume on Mozart. Rub on glue evenly on all edges, then clamp with six bar clamps. Wipe off excess glue with damp sponge. Check clamps, check wood for cupping. Wait fifteen minutes, then use sharp chisel to remove more excess glue. Leave top in clamps for two hours; set top aside for 36 hours.

Sunday.

Dog shit in mailbox. Note with shit: Move, you asshole.

Monday.

Doorbell rings.

Sally Lopez. Detective First Class.

You have the right.

Handcuffs.

Police car.

Neighbors watch. Clap hands.

Corporal Lance Everad drives.

Know what they do to turds like you in jail? Laughs.

Big jail cell. Two other men. Stainless steel toilet. Wooden benches.

Man on bench. My name is George. I killed a dog with scissors.

Nod at George.

Other man laughs.

Arraignment in courtroom.

Judge behind walnut bench. Mostly walnut veneer, but some solid walnut. Nice consistent coloring, but weak grain and no sapwood accents. Bench finished with lacquer. Hard to do without spray equipment, but prefer oil and varnish mixture, with wax as topcoat.

Not guilty.

Lawyer talks. Smiles. Takes money.

Pay bail. Leave jail.

One week.

Cut the pieces for the walnut base of the coffee table. Cut the legs to length from thick lumber, two inches thick. More Mozart: “Symphony Number 40 in G Minor.” Taper legs on table saw. Make five legs, in case one splits. Even with sharp blade, some marks left on wood, so rub with card scraper until marks vanish. Cut pieces for table skirt. Drill and chisel deep mortises into each leg, cut tenons on skirt. Use new shoulder plane to smooth tenons for tight fit.

Big check from Ruth. Note, too. Pink ink.

Dry fit base of coffee table. Always do dry fit before final assembly and glue. Cover tenons with glue, drip glue into mortises. More Mozart, louder. Use a brush to spread glue evenly. Slide skirt tenons in mortises on legs, clamp, and set aside.

Two weeks.

Letter from wife's lawyer. Certified mail.

Begin rubbing walnut and maple coffee table with many short concertos by Vivaldi. Smooth wood with power sander, then with hand sanding. Tung oil, linseed oil, and varnish. Four coats. Make Vivaldi louder. Rub more. Two coats oil and wax. Rub with old tee shirt. Walnut darkens to rich brown; tiny knots in maple darken.

Two weeks. Table finished.

Visit lawyer.

Good news.

No tape. Lopez bluffing.

Yes.

Mother says no penis.

Yes.

Charges dropped. More money.

Yes.

Two weeks. Table in family room.

Ruth calls.

I heard. Sorry.

Yes, Ruth.

Wife?

Gone.

Dinner?

Yes, Ruth.

Nice dinner. Thai. Ruth talks of business, new products. Short skirt. No gray in hair.

One week.

Google Lopez.

See movie with Ruth. Harry Potter.

Clean up workshop. Organize walnut scraps. Put on “Fanfare for the Common Man,” by Aaron Copeland, nice and loud. Sharpen all tools. Sharp tools very important. First, use noisy power grinder to set angle on chisels and plane irons. Put on sharp edge with Japanese water stones. Make the edges gleam like mirrors, then add micro bevel. Hone with a leather strop. Very sharp. Emergency-room sharp.

One week.

Divorce papers filed in court. Wife cries.

Weekend with Ruth in Virginia.

Do something for me?

What, Ruth?

Wear these. Panties. Red, satin and lace.

Yes, Ruth.

Ruth says oh baby.

One week.

Find Lopez in newspaper online. Bowling league.

Google bowling alley.



Wait in parking lot. Same Lopez. Toyota Corolla. Brown. Tag DH3245.

Google DH3245. Nothing.

Ruth calls. New panties. Stockings too.

Later, Ruth.

One week. Bowling alley.

Follow brown Toyota. 2463 Katskill Lane. Nice house.

One week.

Table finished.

Use Google Map. Find aerial pictures. Print pictures..

Find picture of Lopez on bowling web site. Lopez and two kids, Toby and Lisa.

Print Picture

Crop picture. Just Lopez. Print.

Crop picture of just Lisa. Print. Print bigger.

Print picture of Lopez again, just face.

Again, just eyes.

Again, just mouth.

Google Lisa. Adams Middle School. Soccer team. Left halfback.

Print picture of Lisa. Blue soccer shorts.

Ruth calls.

Yes, Ruth. No thongs.

Oh, baby.

Four days.

Drive by 2463 Katskill Lane at noon. Drive by at five. Drive by at eight.

Bitch grows roses.

Drive by early in morning.

Toby and Lisa, waiting for school bus. Lisa in pink jeans.

Two days.

Find three pieces of walnut. left over from table. No sapwood. Smooth some and glue pieces together. Yellow glue. Seven clamps.

Ruth calls. Come to party?

Sure.

Surprise me, baby.

Two days.

Trace out club on walnut blank, with Ludwig Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Volume up high, fill the house with sound. Leave some sapwood for pretty contrast. Cut rough shape on band saw. Shape slow curves with spokeshave. Stop. Sharpen knife on spokeshave with water stones. Make the music louder. Make nice handle. Thick and smooth at one end, easy grip at the other end. Heavy enough. Strong. Shape into club with 60 grit sandpaper. Club nice and balanced. Straight grained and strong. Rub walnut with 150 grit sandpaper. Louder music. Rub walnut with 180 grit sandpaper. 220 grit. 320 grit. 400 grit. 0000steel wool. Rub on oil and varnish. Rub and rub and rub and rub and rub and rub.

Ruth's party. Red panties under black slacks.

Walk in playground. Drive past 2463 Katskill Lane. Lisa in front yard. Cute.

Finish rubbing walnut with oil/wax topcoat.

Three days.

Drive to Katskill Lane. No one home.

Ruth calls. Dinner?

Yes.

Two days.

Ruth's car. Parking garage.

Flash me. Oh, baby.

Ruth wants vacation. Vermont with me?

Yes, Ruth.

Lisa Lopez. Pretty girl, stupid name.

Drive to Katskill Lane. Lisa in driveway. Club on lap. Pretty wood, perfect finish.

Feels smooth and hard, balanced just right in left hand. Rub slowly.

Sweet to touch.

Lisa looks. Bounces ball. Denim shorts. Cute.

Drive away slowly.

Vermont with Ruth. Lake side cabin. Loons in the morning.

Back on Labor Day.

Soccer season begins.

Another oil/wax coat on walnut club.

Clean shop for new project.

“

## ***Dancing with My Sister***

### ***Chapter 1***

#### ***Homecoming Queen***

“She will be here sometime on Thursday, so we will have dinner Thursday night. Be home by six.” My mother’s voice on the telephone arrives solidly in my ear; she speaks more loudly and slowly when she talks on the phone, as if she feels her normal voice needs an extra boost to travel those 200 miles from her home in Maryland to my apartment in Virginia. Mother doesn’t greet me on the phone; no hello, no small talk. She just jumps right into the conversation, loudly and clearly. I gave up trying to leave her to my voice mail. It makes no difference; she doesn’t talk to me on the telephone, she leaves messages on my voice mail or in my ear. She is different person on the telephone. If I don’t answer, she hangs up.

“If you are still with that girl, she should come too. Six o’clock, no later than six thirty. Will she be coming? Forgive me, Jimmy, but I don’t remember her name.”

“No, Mom, no, she – she won’t be coming.” She went back to her husband, Mom, I could have said, back to some fat old dentist in Richmond, and don’t tell me you have forgotten her name, Mom, you remember everyone. Two months with me, that pretty girl had said, made her love her husband again. She actually said that, Mom, and she thanked me as she left.

“Don’t bring a new fair maiden. Your sister liked that other one. She is very pretty.”

“No Mom, I won’t be bringing anyone. Just me.”

“As you wish, Jimmy.”

“Is Dad around?” My father would be watching the television in the living room, sitting up straight on the sofa, the remote control in his hand. My mother would pause, and then say he was busy.

She paused.

“Oh, he is downstairs doing something or other. Charlie? Charlie? Jimmy wants to talk with you.” My father would turn his head towards her when she called his name.

“He is busy now, dear. You can talk to him on Thursday. An easy trip, from Stratford to London.” My mother loved Shakespeare; loved to read him, watch his plays. She taught high school English for 27 years, and taught at least one Shakespeare every year. She used him when she talked to me, and only to me, for as long as I could remember.

“OK”

“Six o’clock. Don’t care, and don’t be late. Oh, and Jimmy? Kissing.”

I laughed. “Kissing? Shakespeare didn’t invent kissing.”

“Love’s Labor’s Lost, smart boy. As an adjective.” It was a game we had been playing for years now, her testing me on words or phrases Shakespeare created and that we now use. I suspect she found a book of such words somewhere, but I didn’t look for such a book for we both enjoyed the game.

Click.

“Bye, Mom.”

Amazing: my sister is coming home after three years. Wonderful: my amazing sister, my distraught sister, my errant sister, my beautiful sister, my disturbed sister is coming home, so there is no doubt I would do as my mother asked. My mother needs me there, to see my sister but to be there for my mother and father as well.

I taught a class on Thursday evenings. No one would complain if I cancelled it, but I would need to adjust my course syllabus. One hour for that, right before lunch tomorrow. I had set aside three hours after class on Thursday to grade a set of essays on *King Lear*, but I could find those three hours on Wednesday night by going to sleep thirty minutes later and by setting aside work on an a set of worksheets I had agreed to write for a junior high school edition of *The Tempest*. My sister is coming home after five years away from home. An appointment with the dentist and another for my car could easily be postponed All set. My sister is coming home, so of course I will make time to see her.

My sister, the lovely Angeleena. Angie. Ang. Angel. Angleeeeeeeena. Leena. The cheerleader, the homecoming queen, voted twice the most likely to succeed, the biggest flirt, the best personality; in those lovely high school days, she was Angie, my big sister, four years older than I. That same Tuesday night I pulled her file folder from my cabinet. Newspaper clippings, a few photographs of Angeleena Hawkins, my amazing sister; I spread the contents of the folder over my desk: clippings on the left, letters on the right, and photographs in the middle. I stood up and leaned over the

desk, looking first at the photographs. The big one in the middle of my desk had been taken by one of my uncles, one of my father's brothers. Angeleena, the cheerleader; a row of six pretty high school girls, girls cheering a football game on a cold, rainy Saturday afternoon. Some of the girls are crouched low to the ground; one is in the air, her legs bent, her hair moving like a whip; all have their backs to the camera, but Angeleena is looking over her shoulder, her hair wet and stringy, her white boots splattered with mud. Behind her, a pile of football players, out of focus and so covered with mud that the uniforms of both teams were indistinguishable. Yet even in a photograph, there is a shine to Angeleena's eyes, an energy in her smile. A smudge of dry mud just below her right eye,, her hip cocked to the left, her right leg just a bit off the ground, but she was not posing, she was moving, excited, and very happy. This same photograph was printed in our local newspaper and served as the inside cover of our high school yearbook two years in a row. My father made a frame and hung it in the living room for all to see. My smaller print, I noticed that Tuesday night, had started to look a bit tattered and old. Of course, my parents no longer have the picture on the wall; I assumed it is stored somewhere, along with the few other things of hers my parents have kept. The telephone rang, but I let the voice mail pick it up.

I had six more photographs of her and picked them up one at a time. Father and Angeleena, in the car heading off to college: the car is packed full, suitcases lashed to the roof, she is smiling and waving at the photographer, laughing; my father's face shows his mixed emotions: a happy smile, sad eyes. A wallet photo of her from the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, her mouth closed to hide her braces. An old picture of the two

us in a green canoe, our shoulders and heads smothered in orange life jackets. A poorly lit snapshot of her in her freshman dormitory room, pointing at the computer that had been her high school graduation gift from my parents. In her other hand was the Pearl Jam CD I had given to her. The last two pictures I had found when I had helped my mother clean out Angeleena's room two years ago; two small photos, inside a red envelope jammed in the back of her desk drawer. I glanced at them, then put them in my pocket, not looking at them closely until a few days later. The larger of the two was a black and white shot of Angeleena in her underwear, in fancy lingerie and flirting with the camera, posing, one bra strap off her shoulder while she held the other strap two fingers. I can't tell where or when that picture was taken, nor do I know the bar where the second picture was taken. The second picture was dark, taken with a cheap flash. My sister's long body was draped across the lap of an older man with gray hair and an expensive suit. Her right arm was over his shoulder and her left hand was holding a green bottle of Heineken beer, the same kind of beer that the man was drinking. His other hand was on her thigh, his fingertips just under the hem of her short brown skirt. The telephone rang again, and I glared at it until the voice mail picked up.

I put the photos in a pile, arranged, as best I knew, by chronology, and then turned to the newspaper clippings, which were really just another set of photographs. My sister was beautiful as a child, as a young teen, as a young adult. I am sure she is beautiful now. She has that rare kind of beauty that photographs well: long hair, a brown that contrasted but did not overwhelm her face; large, dark blue eyes; full lips; a smooth round face wrapped in that lovely hair. Five feet ten, always the tallest girl,



and her figure photographed as well as her face, front and back or from the side. She was more beautiful when she wasn't moving, when an image of her was captured on film she was stunning. Photographers were drawn to her and she enjoyed being photographed, so she had appeared in the local newspapers often: Angeleena on the soccer team in grades nine and ten, Angeleena on the softball team and captain of the swim team. When a group of students went to a local retirement home for a "Senior Ball," the photographer found her dancing, in her backless prom dress. She was looking over her shoulder with a perfect smile, as she danced with a short, old man who wore a red bow tie and was staring unashamedly and happily at her breasts. In the article, she said, "this was better than the real thing, and the men dance better than high school boys."

She is coming home.

I put the clippings back in order and set them on a pile next to the photographs. I picked a letter off the desk. The shiny pink ink still looked as bright and silly as it had been 12 years earlier, when Angeleena wrote to my on my birthday. The postmark on the silver envelope was three weeks past my birthday.

*It's your sis!!!!!! Remember me??????? So now you are 17, my my my, Sweet Baby James. Happy Birthday!!!! Do something wild on your birthday, Jimmy.....I can't tell you what I did on my 17<sup>th</sup> ( hee hee hee). Remember my gf Michelle? She is always asking about you, telling me how cute and smart you are and stuff. She likes big boys. Up for an older chick? Whaddaya thiink?????????*

*School is OK, I guess. I bought you something très cool for your birthday....well, I'm gonna, when I get some cash, but you won't get it till turkey day. Sowwwwwwwyyyyyyyyyyy.*

*Gotta go now*

*Luv to luv ya*

*A-*

Thanksgiving came and went that year in a blur, with Angeleena in the center of everything. The telephone rang four minutes after she walked into the house, and she took the call in her room, just as she had done before she had left. "I bet the phone won't stop ringing all weekend," one of my aunts said laughingly. Even after being out late each night, she still spent most of Thanksgiving Day in the kitchen, helping to prepare the meal. Angeleena came home then, with no gift for me, and my father took a day off of work the next week because he was exhausted from waiting up for her each night.

It was getting late, and I needed to clean up, do some reading, and get to bed. I put down the letter and picked up that cheerleader photograph. Ah, Sis, I am glad you are coming home. Where have you been?

Those next two days were busy days. Everyone on campus seemed tense and irritable, for the end of the semester was just three weeks away. Students wanted to talk; the other teachers were harried. I seemed to be among the few not feeling the pressure. My exams had been written a month ago, and I was all caught up with grading papers. Though it was only my second year at Adams College, I knew what

to expect. I added four hours of office hours to my schedule and offered tutorials by appointment, on campus or at my apartment, which turned out later to be fortunate.

I taught nothing but freshman English my first year at Adams; indeed my name was on every student's schedule and all 311 copies of the course syllabus. This course – Literature and Rhetoric – is a simple course to manage. Each Monday, an English professor gives a lecture on a major work of literature. The entire freshman class of the college should be there, so it is held in our largest lecture hall, Phillip Morris Hall. My job for this part of the course is to schedule the lecture series, meet with each speaker, and write a short summary of each lecture to be distributed at the first class meeting; a much simpler task than I first thought, because most of our faculty had been giving the same lecture for years and had no inclination to change, so I simply had to rewrite the summaries from the year before. A special guest lecturer is hired for the first class in December, for the Mamie-Stoddart Levine Memorial Lecture on Literature, and I was looking forward to hiring and meeting some of the more accomplished people in my field, but I was informed that the same three guest lecturers have been rotating for almost 20 years. (Next year, my third year on the job, I may disrupt the this rotation and bring down an old professor of mine from New Haven, but I haven't decided yet.) I gave two lectures last year, one on Hamlet ("Ophelia and Gertrude: What are We to Think?") and another on Elizabethan poetry ("Rhyme, Rhythm, and Metaphor.") along with the first lecture of the term, where I simply review class procedures and do my best to scare the students from stealing their essays from the internet. After the lecture, the students meet twice each week to discuss the lecture and review the literary work of the week, and to be

assigned their essays, four each term (6-10 pages) and the Major Freshman Essay (15-20 pages) at the end of the course. Last year, I taught four of these smaller classes, the three honors sections and one regular section. A few other instructors teach these classes, but graduate students teach most of these classes, and supervising these students is also my job.

“Just keep an eye on them, James,” Myron Able, my department chairman, had said as he concluded our first and only meeting. “Make sure they take attendance, make sure they don’t grade too hard or too easy, and make sure they show up for all their classes, for Christ’s sake. Oh, and James?”

“Yes, Dr. Able?” I had been taking notes and when I looked up, he was grinning like a schoolboy, which almost made me laugh, because he had to be seventy years old. Something was coming out of his nose, and his right hand was twitching.

“Call me Myron in the office.”

“OK, Myron.”

“Try not to sleep with too many of the grad students and don’t forget how young the undergrads are. It is easy to do.” I just nodded, laughed politely, gathered my things and left, but I followed his absurd advice: I stay away from the female students, especially the English undergraduates. I also try to avoid Dr. Able, but the old fool was right: they are very young.

This past school year was similar to my first year, though I only taught two sections of freshmen English, along my “Seminar on Shakespeare,” which is the class I had to cancel. My sister Angeleena is coming home. I also have advised two graduate students on their master’s thesis: Lisa Schneider, who I have slept with, is

writing about “Shakespeare’s Minor Women: Characters or Eye Candy?” and Valerie Dickinson, who I have not yet slept with, is writing about race, “Black and White at the Globe?” At Adams, all essay titles must be in question form. It was Myron Able’s idea in 1956.

That is my job; that is my life. I will stay at Adams for four or five more years, then move on to another school. I won’t get tenure, unless someone resigns, which they never do here, or unless someone dies, which could happen, since the average age of the English faculty is 63, not counting me, and I am 29. I like my job, all in all, and I knew tenure would be close to impossible when I signed my contract. No one gets tenure these days, especially not in the humanities. When I leave, I will probably be replaced by two part-time teachers, who will be paid a pittance and get no benefits.

Canceling my class was a simple matter, just a form to post on the classroom door. No one questioned it, my chairman signed off without a word, probably because this was the first time I had missed a class. I sent out e-mail to all of the students also, along with instructions for the following class and a revised syllabus. I spoke to Martha Osborne in her office about her upcoming lecture on Hemingway and Fitzgerald, “Time to Let Them Go.” I suggested that she did not have to be quite so negative.

“Oh, of course I will, dear, they expect that of me,” she said cheerfully. I didn’t know just which “they” she meant, but I let it pass.

“I want the kids to want to read Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Dr. Osborne.”

“Of course you do, dear. Just fail them if they don’t.” She invited me to lunch, but I politely declined.

“That’s nice that you are going to your parents,” she said in that same cheerful tone. “Mine are dead.”

I did not tell her that I was not going home to see my parents, though I do visit them every six weeks, that I was going home to be with my parents while my sister was there; to see Angeleena, of course, but also to help my mother and especially my father. I simply suggested another day for lunch and left.

I spent the rest of the afternoon on the telephone with my graduate students, dealing with issues and concerns of their classes, and with the long line of undergraduates outside my office; some needed some extra time for a paper, some needed a lot more time. Two of them, one boy and one girl, actually cried. Another student spoke of a grandmother’s funeral, another of a dying parent, and one told of a dying golden retriever. I listened to them all; they all received not less than five and no more than fifteen minutes of my time. I dispensed tissue as needed, offered appropriate and genuine condolences, and signed off for three incomplete grades. I finished fifteen minutes earlier than I had planned, so I had time for a swim before dinner.

My plans almost always work; making good plans is one of the things I do very well. My father told that when I was young, when I was just six or seven years old, and I am better now. I plan things in my head; just go off by myself and think things through. My father noticed the way I do that, even twenty years ago. As a child, I would just go into my room, shut the door, and emerge after a while with a

plan of some kind. What do you want for your birthday, Jimmy? What are you going to do about that mess in your room? Are you going to try out for the little league team? I would almost never be able to answer questions like that right away, but after an hour or so by myself, I would know the answer and my parents were always amused and impressed by my certainty (and, especially later in life, by my accuracy). These days it is something I do intentionally; something I enjoy. I plan to plan. I think of the first step, and for each first step the inevitable or likely succeeding steps. Step A leads to a Step B to a Step C. It is how I chose to teach at Adams College, for example, after three hours of that kind of planning. I know it doesn't work for everything, but it works for me often and I am good at it. Sometimes, part of my planning acknowledges uncertainties, what cannot be planned. I knew, for another example, that the pretty woman with the fat dentist for a husband would not stay with me very long; I just didn't know how long or why she would leave, but I knew she would; otherwise I would not have agreed to let her move in with me. Complex situations require complex plans; a simple thing like freeing up a Thursday night needs a simple plan, so I even had time to clean my apartment, take some clothes to the cleaners, and still get to my parents' home fifteen minutes early.

No extra car in the driveway, no extra lights on in the house.

“Ah, hello, you’re early, Jimmy, good,” my mother said at the door, looking over my shoulder for the girl I had told her wasn’t coming. When she looked up at me, her brown eyes seemed to move all over my face, checking to see if I was all right. As she did, I noticed there a few more strands of gray in her black hair, just a few above each ear. She was dressed up a bit more than she usually did, and she seemed nervous.

“I told you, Mom, just me. Hi, good to see you. It’ll be fine, don’t worry. ” I bent and kissed her forehead, but she stood in the doorway with a smile, and wouldn’t let me pass.

“Puke,” she said, and she began laughing before that short word was out of her mouth. “Yes, puke.”

“Oh no, Not puke,” I said laughing loudly myself. “You are bluffing this time. He didn’t.

“As You Like It,” she said, and naming the play made her laugh even harder. “As a verb, you know what he did with parts of speech. Puke.”

I was laughing still when I entered that house. It still amazed me, whenever I visited, how that house never changed, how my parents had so carefully kept it exactly the same way it had been all these years. When carpets needed to be replaced, they shopped, discussed it, and always ended up picking the same brown and the same texture as the old carpet. When Angeleena’s picture had come off the wall, my father had carefully filled the nail hole and then repainted the entire foyer with the same shade of white that



had been there on my eighth birthday Memories I had set aside or repressed came back every time I walked into that house: falling down the stairs when I was three, that Christmas morning that got me so excited that I threw up all over the coffee table, my first kiss on that sofa in the living room, that night when Angeleena was raped, the day I left for college. I heard the television and walked into the living room.

“James,” he said as he stood and extended his hand. His hair had turned from gray to white years ago, though he cut it so short it was hard to tell. He was a half-inch taller than I, but tonight his broad shoulders were lowered and he seemed shorter.

“Good to see you, Dad.”

“You look good.”

“”Thanks...so do you. Not much change in three months, Dad.”

“Just three weeks?”

“No even that.”

“If you say so,” he laughed. “My sense of time is off these days.” But already his eyes were shifting back to the television set. When my mother came into the room, he turned and sat down again, giving his full attention to the screen. Mother and I also turned and watched it; it seemed impolite not to. Three young women were in some sort of contest. A deep male voice, speaking over some amazingly bad music, was directing them. “Sit down now,” he said, and all three sat down like robots, and they looked nervous. “Now, Janelle, show them their meal!” the man said, and a tall blonde in a very short skirt and very high heels came on to the screen and whisked a

white cloth off of the table, revealing three plates. One of the girls screamed. “Oh my god,” my mother said; my father laughed. “That’s right, Ladies,” the deep voice said. “Insects! A plate full of bugs! Chock full of vitamins and expertly prepared just for you. When the buzzer sounds, begin eating. The last one finished is sent to the circle of shame. Pick up your spoons. Begin!” The man’s deep voice filled our living room; the light from the television bounced around the room like a small fire. The music shifted abruptly to bass, one long hard note, low in the register, synthetically produced. The woman in the middle held her nose rather theatrically with one hand and lifted a spoonful of bugs to her mouth with the other. People were laughing, or at least there was the sound of people laughing; my father’s laugh was almost constant. The woman at the left end of the table simply started eating as if her plate held a garden salad. “Not bad!” she said to even louder laughter. The girl at the other end of the table bowed her head, then pushed the plate away and stood up. The music stopped. Two shirtless muscular men appeared immediately at her sides. The tall blonde stepped forward and attached a collar and leash to the woman’s neck, which made me laugh a little myself. “And when we return,” that low male voice happily announced, “Greta enters the circle of shame!” My father pushed a button and silenced the television as the commercials came on.

“Are those girls just wearing underwear?” I said, resisting an urge to joke about the collar and leash.

“Oh, Jimmy,” my mother said. “I notice you didn’t mind. Fair maidens! I can’t remember the last time I saw you watch TV so carefully.” When she laughed, I

did also. Even my father laughed a bit, which was surprising and nice. I put my arm over my mother's shoulder.

"We will give her an hour, unless you are hungry, Jimmy," my mother said.

"No, I can wait. Has she called?"

"I am sure she will be here soon."

The commercials over, and the two winners of the bug-eating contest were now standing on a platform over a very large dark swimming pool, still in their underwear. Some thing, perhaps several things, was swimming in the pool and the girls looked frightened.

"Well," I said. "I am going upstairs. Maybe lie down, maybe just rest a bit."

"You must be tired, Jimmy," my mother said. "Remember, dear, the play's the thing."

"I remember, Mom. A king's conscience."

"I will wake you when she gets here."

My bedroom had not changed much since I moved away, though without the clutter of all my belongings, it felt and looked different. All the same furniture, same beige and blue rug, the same pictures on the light blue walls, the same oak floor, yet the cleanliness of the room along with just a hint of stale air made it feel like it was just an empty room that once had a purpose. I found a book, put it back, took another. My father and I had made the bookshelves. I ran my fingers over the top shelf; the finish was still smooth. I was 12 when we made them, using clear pine; the first time he allowed me use his table saw. I ripped the boards to width, with my father standing

close by with his hand on the switch, watching me carefully. Be very careful. Just as I finished the last board, I screamed, as if that blade had severed my fingers, though the board was through and my fingers were clear. My father swore loudly: Jesus Christ! And turned the machine off, but by then he saw I was joking and he glared at me. For a moment, I thought he was going to hit me, but at the same time he was holding back a smile. He looked funny, trying so hard not to smile, and I began to laugh and the instant I did, he joined me. He wrapped his large arm around my neck and rubbed my head with his fist. As our laughter faded, he said, "Don't ever do that again," which made us laugh even more.

I picked up a third book and got on to the bed. As I began to read, the lamp on the nightstand flickered and went out, leaving me in my old room reading by the fading light from the windows. I put the book down, and looked at the same blue walls, those pine bookshelves, my old dresser and desk, My high school and college diplomas, all four of them, hung on the walls, carefully framed in walnut by my father (walnut for me, cherry for Angeleena), along with an awful landscape that had been there since I had proudly given it to my parents for Christmas when I was seven years old and a few framed black and white photographs of me; me as an infant, a formal pose with the whole family, another one with my grandparents, and four photographs of baseball teams I had played on.

My eyes adjusted to the dim light of the room. I could hear the television set downstairs as I felt myself getting sleepy. I played baseball for six years; in the local Little League, for my high school, and was offered two college scholarships. The picture right in front of me was the team I played for in my last year of Little League,

the year our team lost the state championship by one run. It had been the first time I played on a serious baseball field, with two wooden dugouts, a raked infield and pitcher's mound, mowed grass, and a public address system with an announcer who introduced the players and called the game. Now batting, James Hawkins! The other team had four coaches, all of whom wore white shirts and matching green neckties. Two of them carried clipboards. I remember standing on the field before the game began, looking around in the crowd, kicking the dirt. On the very first pitch of the game, the kid hit the ball hard in my direction. I barely even saw him swing the bat. I heard the sharp crack of his bat on the ball. I dove to my right, out of instinct I suppose more than anything, and felt the ball hit my glove as I landed on my belly and as dirt went into my mouth and nose. I rolled over, got to my knees, and threw the runner out at first base. It was the best play I ever made, before or since. It was perfect and I felt invincible, even as I cleaned the dirt from my mouth. For the first time, people applauded me; though the four coaches from the other team did not applaud, nor did my sister. Angeleena simply screamed my name, over and over, louder and louder, long after the applause stopped, until all eyes were on her. I waved to her finally, she waved back, and the game went on. It was a close game, five to five after six innings so we went into extra innings. I had hit a home run at my first at bat and a double the next time. In the bottom of the eleventh inning, I came to bat with Richard Wilbur, the winning run, on third base. I expected to be walked. Their catcher said something to me, called me an asshole I think. I said something back to him, probably called him an asshole too, and the umpire told us both to shut up. Their second baseman gave me the finger. The umpire called a time out, and told

everyone to calm down. Angeleena was screaming, mainly at the pitcher. Her screaming rose above all the other sounds; she yelled my name, called the pitcher fat, but mainly all I remember is her screaming. Even as I lay there in bed, I could remember the sounds of that moment. Two of the coaches from the other team walked to the pitcher's mound. One of them talked to the pitcher, while the other one just stared at me. Their pitcher seemed not to like what he was being told, for he was angry as another boy took his place. He stomped off the field and left the ballpark. This new pitcher was a huge kid and he didn't even want to warm up. I stepped back into the batter's box, expecting an intentional walk, but instead the big boy wound up dramatically and threw the ball right at me. I started to move away, but he caught me in the ribs and I went down, my face back in the dirt, a sharp pain on my left side. It was hard to breathe. Angeleena somehow got to me first, lifting me up and telling me to breathe, smacking me on the back, and screaming at the other team at the same time, I tried to get up, but the pain sharpened, and I stayed on my knees. The umpire said I had to leave the game, though my coach said I could still play.

"You can't be here, young lady," the umpire said kindly to Angeleena.

"Go fuck yourself," she said, and as my coach was helping me back to the bench, Angeleena turned towards the pitcher. "And fuck you too, big boy. Come on, hit me." I stopped.

"It's OK, Ang," I said, even though saying that almost made me cry it hurt so badly. She took another step towards the pitcher.

"Go ahead, if you have the balls for it. Hit me too" She didn't seem to notice that everyone was silent now. I think she was crying. The kid on the mound didn't

look at her, just bowed his head and moved his foot back and forth in the dirt. My mother came on to the field and took Angeleena by the hand, and she stomped off the field, still cursing.

As my coach and I turned back to leave the field, two of the coaches from the other team, the same two who had told the kid to hit me, approached us.

“Good game, kid,” the one on the right said.

“Yeah, good game,” said the other, a stupid grin on his face. “Welcome to the big leagues.” The crowd stared to applaud just as he said that, so I didn’t think anyone besides the coach and me heard him. It still hurt very badly every time I inhaled. My coach just shook his head and led me to the dugout.

How the game ended, I don’t remember, except that we lost and that pain in my ribs subsided some by the time the players and coaches of the other team lined up in the infield for the trophies. I could breathe without much pain. By now, it was getting dark, and the crowd was dispersing. We were supposed to go out and get our second-place awards and congratulate the new champions. I didn’t want to go, but my coach insisted. I was crying. My coach patted my shoulder, and told me it was all right, but, of course, it was far from all right. I refused, but as my teammates went out on to the field, I saw my father standing there, looking at me. He looked so big and strong to me then. He motioned for me to come out, so I did. The players on my team were walking down the line formed by the other team, shaking hands one player at a time; my father and I were the last two to join the team. “Good game, son,” my father said to every player, in the exact same tone. I remember that sound clearly: “Good game, son. Good game, son. Good game, son.” I didn’t say a word, but did shake

hands with most of them. Sorry man, one of them said, and only two looked me in the eye. As we got closer to the end of the line, I could see the four coaches, their neckties finally loosened. I saw one of the clipboard coaches look in my direction. “Good game, son,” my father said to the last boy on their team. I didn’t want to shake hands with those men, but my father quickly shook hands with the first coach, then moved to the second one. That first coach held out his hand to me, but I wouldn’t take it, and he started to say something to me, but by then everyone was watching my father and that second coach; he was the one who told the pitcher to hit me. They were shaking hands.

“Let go of my hand,” the man said loudly enough for most everyone to hear. My father was staring at him and he didn’t let go. “What the hell are you doing?” People stopped and watched. The muscles in my father’s forearm and shoulders began to bulge, and the coach closed his eyes and his mouth opened a bit. No one moved; no one said a word. “Jesus Christ,” the man said quietly as my father tightened his grip. The man dropped his clipboard and tried to push my father away. He grabbed my father’s wrist, and I saw my father’s shoulder flex suddenly. The man’s cry was feeble, weak, a high-pitched cry of pain. My father moved somehow, and the man’s cry got louder; made louder still by the silence of everyone else. When my father released the man’s hand abruptly, the man cried out even louder, this time with a touch of anger in his voice, but before he could say anything, my father leaned closer to him and said, in a surprisingly and frighteningly calm voice, without a trace of anger or malice, but slowly and loudly enough for all to hear: “Welcome to the big leagues.”



The details of that memory swirled around my brain that night as I lay in that bed waiting for Angeleena to come home. My father never said anything about it, not even as he and I walked off the field together that night, with that silly man still howling in pain and cursing us at the same time. By now, the room was quite dark; someone was squeezing my hand.

“Your sister is here,” my father said, and he left the door open when he left. I could hear lots of voices from downstairs, just a babble of sound. My sister was home. I went into the bathroom, washed my face, and went downstairs. Angeleena hugged me on the bottom step.

“Jimmy, oh Jimmy.” Kisses on my neck, her hands up and down my back. “Oh, god, Jimmy, it is so so good to see you. Jimmy. How are you? Have you gained some weight? I want you to meet my Mortimer; he is a professor too. And Erin and Becky, two friends of mine, oh, Jimmy, you will love them.” I touched her hair, a coppery red now and cut short. She had gained some weight. Several large suitcases and a pile of knapsacks filled the foyer behind her. “I can’t wait to talk with you. Do you like teaching? Mortimer hated it. You have gained weight; you look good. How are Mom and Dad?” She was whispering into my ear. “They look so old now. Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy.” She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me closer to her.

“Good to see you, Ang.”

“Nobody but you calls me Ang.”

“Nobody but you calls me Jimmy.” She laughed; a slow, melodic laugh, muffled against my shoulder. I looked past her hair – a new color, yes, and different

length, but a familiar smell, Angeleena's hair – and saw a man sitting in mother's rocking chair in the living room: lots of gray hair, unkempt and too long, thinning on top, a bald spot, a large forehead; thick gray glasses; big lips. I could see blue jeans and shiny brown boots, with pointed toes and two-inch heels. Standing next to the rocking chair, her arm draped across the back of it, was either Becky or Erin, and she reminded me a bit of Angeleena, though a few years younger. She had long black hair, shiny and dark, darker than Angeleena's hair, but it was her height, at least five nine, and the way she stood there with confidence that reminded me of my sister. I could hear my mother talking to someone in the kitchen.

“You OK, Ang?” She pulled away from me a little bit, her face right in front of mine.

“Yes, Jimmy. Yes.” She paused, to give some more thought to her answer. “Yes, I am good, finally. Yes. Yes.” She paused again and touched my face. “And how are you, Professor Jimmy Hawkins?”

“I am not a professor, Ang.” She kissed my cheek. “And I am fine. Hungry, but fine.” She laughed, and stepped away from me, almost tripping over one of the suitcases behind her.

“I know. We were late getting started.” She took my hand and led me into the living room, in front of the rocking chair.

“Jimmy – sorry, James. This is my friend Erin. She is also a friend of Becky, who is around here somewhere.” I said hello to Erin, but she didn't answer me. She was almost as tall as Angeleena, and she had pretty, dark green eyes that moved over me curiously. “I told Erin all about you, Jimmy, so watch out. And this is my

Mortimer. Mortimer Scully. Dr. Scully.” Mortimer stood up slowly and hugged me; his head bumping into my shoulder, just below the spot Angeleena’s had rested moments before.

“I feel like I already know you, Jimmy,” he said, his hands still on my sides. “Not a hugger, are you?”

“It’s James,” I said. “And I prefer to hug people I know and like.” Angeleena laughed merrily.

“See?” she said to Mortimer. “See? I told you.”

“OK,” he said. “James. Well, Angie described you well.”

“Dinner,” my mother announced from the dining room, while a shorter girl in red flared pants scurried about the table behind her. Her hair was also long and dark: a lot of hair flying around the house that evening. Becky, I assumed, and I was glad I was hungry. “Come, please, while everything is hot.”

Sometime later in her life, after I had left home for college, my mother developed an interest and found a talent in cooking. Her comment about hot food caused a few small laughs as we took our seats, for the first course was a cold gazpacho soup. My father sat at one end of the table, my mother at the other end, Mortimer and Angeleena on one side, Erin, Becky and I on the other side, at Angeleena’s insistence.

“I didn’t know there was going to be so many of you,” my mother said cheerfully, “but we will make do.”

“The soup is delicious, Mrs. Hawkins,” Mortimer said. My mother’s smile tightened a bit.

“Oh, call me Helen, please. Mrs. Hawkins makes me feel so old.”

Mortimer, who could not have been much younger than my mother, raised his wineglass. “To Chef Helen! And to knowing that you are as young as you feel.”

Amidst the happy sound of clinking crystal, I muttered under my breath, “or as young as the one you are feeling.” From my right, Erin’s knee hit my leg and I heard her giggle. Mother’s food dominated the time and the conversation; she had prepared an excellent meal. Angeleena told family stories and a long joke that ended with “nine inches,” which caused Mortimer to laugh so hard he spit out a piece of spinach and made my Mother blush as she giggled politely; only Erin, my father, and I didn’t laugh.

“So just what do you do, Mortimer?” My mother’s polite question caused louder laughter than my sister’s joke had. Angeleena answered for him: “Morty doesn’t really do anything now; well, other than me.” She and Mortimer found this very funny also. Erin kicked me again, and my mother left to check on dessert.

I told everyone where I taught, after Angeleena got the name of the college wrong. Mortimer, I learned, had taught at Stanford for a while, but if anyone said when he did or for how long, I missed it. He and Angeleena had met at O’Hare Airport in Chicago while the airport had been shut down in a snowstorm; that she had been in Chicago at all was news to my parents and me. My father, when prompted by his daughter finally joined the conversation and confirmed that he had wrestled and boxed in college, that he had worked as a civil engineer for thirty-four years, and that he had a master’s degree.

“From M.I.T, Daddy, right?”

“M.I.T., yes, right.”

Angeleena also got him to tell about building our backyard porch and about the time he had won and lost five thousand dollars in one night in Las Vegas, but he wouldn't talk about the Korean War, other than to agree with Angeleena: yes, he had been there; yes, he had been in the fighting. I watched my father as he responded to his daughter; each of her questions seemed to hurt him, even the innocent, flattering ones. His voice got softer, weaker, till he was barely audible. To me, he seemed to shrink, as he pushed himself back and down into his chair as he spoke. Erin kicked me again, and Becky was licking her plate clean.

“Becky doesn't believe in utensils, “ Angeleena explained, and no one asked anything else about her. When I looked directly at Becky, she was licking her soup bowl and she winked at me.

Mainly Angeleena posed more questions; answers were given and the conversation went on politely, controlled, as I expected, as it used to be, by my sister. Erin once won an amateur striptease contest and had had a small part in a movie. It was science fiction, set in the future, and she had played a police officer. “No lines,” she said, and she kicked me again. Mortimer stopped the conversation when he asked my father if there was a hot tub available, because “I love a good soak after a good meal, Marshall, don't you?”

“Isn't he adorable?” Angeleena said, after it was clear my father simply was not going to answer. She kissed Mortimer then, whispered something into his ear, which made him blush, and smile, then she kissed him again. We then heard the story

of how Angeleena had met Erin and Becky. Angeleena had been tending bar in Atlanta, and the two girls had been waitresses there.

“When were you in Atlanta, dear?” my mother asked, but by then Angeleena had moved on.

“Dessert?” my mother asked.

“Yes, Helen, dessert. I'll help. " my father said, getting up out of his chair.

When they left the dining room, Angeleena whispered loudly to me across the table.

“How are they? Is Daddy OK?”

“They miss you.”

Dessert was a fine tiramisu, served with fresh cantaloupe and strawberries. Mortimer just ate the fruit. “Watching my weight,” he said. “He is so cute, ” my sister said. My father offered coffee, but Mortimer explained that coffee would upset his stomach and keep him up all night. Angeleena beamed and began to play with Mortimer’s hair. Dessert was quieter, and when I poured myself a second cup of coffee, Erin kicked me again.

“Stop that,” I said, allowing a touch of authority in my tone.

“Stop what?” Erin replied a touch of exaggerated flirtation in her tone. I turned and looked directly at her.

“It is simply childish. Stop it.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said with a smirk, but I kept staring at her and the smirk faded.

“Oh, Jimmy,” Angeleena said. “Stop what?” I continued staring at Erin till she looked quite helpless. I turned back and sipped my coffee, and decided that the lull I had caused in the conversation was a good time for me to ask some questions.

“So, where is the wife tonight, Mortimer?”

“At home, I would imagine.”

“You imagine?”

“James, don’t,” my mother said.

“We are separated,” Mortimer said, speaking to and looking only at me.

“Yet the ring stays on. Any children?”

“Two” Angeleena began to rub his neck and she looked at me as if she was to either about to cry or about to hit me.

“Boys? Girls? One of each? Details, Any grandchildren?”

“Jimmy-“ Angeleena said softly.

“No, it is ok, baby. You warned me.” Mortimer said to her, though he was still looking only at me. My mother got up and began to clear the dishes, but she did not leave the room. Erin, I knew, wanted to kick me, and Becky was quietly licking her dessert plate. My father was watching his wife.

“My son, Andrew, is in the army, Special Forces in fact. He is overseas at the moment.” When he said that, he took his gaze from me for a moment and glanced at my father, who was sitting at the end of the table like a round stone, his mouth a hard, straight line, his gray eyes still fixed on my mother. “Ah, well, uh, yes, “Mortimer said, turning back quickly to look at me. “He isn’t married, no kids – none that I know of anyway,” and he suddenly grinned and looked around the table at everyone

for some help, everyone but my father, but no one said anything. Becky kept licking, though her plate now was clean and shiny. Mortimer took a deep breath and filled the silence. “My daughter turns 30 next month. She’s expecting, got married two years ago, so no grandchildren yet, but will have one in about five months.”

“Oh, that’s nice. You and your wife must be so proud.”

“We are separated.”

“Oh, that’s right. You mentioned that.”

“Yes, I did,” he replied, a slight flush of anger in his voice now.

“And your daughter is soon to be 30, which would make her – yes? –Just three years younger than Angeleena.”

“Shut up, Jimmy, just shut up,” Angeleena said quietly, no anger at all in her voice. Mortimer simply stopped speaking; his anger all over his face, his cheeks flushed, glaring at me. I smiled. For a moment, I thought he was going to get up and hit me; for a moment, I hoped he would, but I decided to let the silence do my boxing for a while longer. Becky put her plate down on the table.

“Mrs. Hawkins?” she said. Becky had said nothing during the meal, not a sound from her at all, other than the sounds of her tongue on my mother’s good china. Her voice was startling beautiful; firm and intelligent, a lovely tone and pitch with a touch of music to those three syllables. A voice that lifted the tension off the table:

“May I help with the dishes?”

“Of course you may, dear,” my mother said. “But we have a dishwasher, so you won’t have to lick them all clean.” Becky and my mother headed off to the kitchen, Becky’s pretty laughter calming us all; Angeleena whispered something into



Mortimer's ear, he smiled, and they also got up and left, leaving me, Erin, and my father still at the table. Without a word, my father got up and left the table.

"You don't like getting hit, I take it," Erin said. I turned and looked at her, really for the first time. She was a very attractive woman, and she was smiling at me.

"Not at all," I said.

"Mortimer is an asshole," she said, her smile opening a bit more. Her hair was jet black; her eyes a lovely green. "Too bad."

"Yes it is. My sister. Well, she seems to attract them."

"No, I mean too bad you don't like me hitting you." She then got up and stood behind me. "I bet smoking is not allowed in this house anywhere."

"That's right."

"Then I am going out front. I will see you there." Her hand brushed my shoulder as she left, leaving me alone.

I set off to find my father. Since the television was not on, I knew he was not in the living room. In the kitchen, my mother was happily interrogating Becky, and Becky was happily responding and asking questions of her own. Mortimer and Angeleena had taken some luggage upstairs, and I didn't want to go there, even if my father had gone there also. Erin was in the front yard, so I went to the back yard. I found him sitting in a green Adirondack chair near the back of his backyard.

"Dad?" I said from the steps off the back porch. His head moved a little, but he didn't answer me. As I began to walk towards him, I heard him crying: soft sobs that made his whole body shake. He was leaning forward in his chair. The rhythm of his sobs had no relation to the way his body was moving. I had seen my father cry

before, but never like this. It was as if this was not my father; more like a ghost of my father. I stopped and listened, doing my best to stay completely still and silent, and he waved his arm towards me. I could not tell if he was waving me to him or away from him, but I moved away slowly, walking backwards across wet grass, my eyes only on him. I tripped on something and tumbled backwards, losing my balance and landing on my ass, but as I fell my eyes never left him and he never turned to see me fall or to see if I was all right. I got up off the ground and went back in the house.

In the kitchen once again, I poured myself another cup of coffee and listened to my mother and Becky. They saw me come in, but my presence didn't stop their conversation at all.

"You have a master's degree?" my mother was asking when I leaned back against the kitchen counter.

"Yup," Becky answered. "Two of them."

"In what?"

"One in anthropology, at NYU. One in nothing. I went to St. John's, in Annapolis and Sante Fe." My mother began to laugh at this, but not in an insulting way. Becky also began to laugh. I wondered if they had been drinking but then, yes, I did smell some marijuana in the air. My own mother!

"In nothing?"

"Nothing." And they laughed even harder, and I even began to smile when we heard a sound from above us, from upstairs. A low, single tone, steady, like a bass violin; the kind of low note that makes it hard to find its source. It wasn't loud at first, but it stopped our laughing.

“What in the world?” my mother asked, but we didn’t answer. As the sound got louder, the pitch moved higher, steadily and smoothly up the scale. Louder and louder, higher and higher, then it held that high note for an instant before changing tone, but not pitch, and moving easily to a scream: a harsh, grating kind of scream that went on and on till we heard Mortimer screaming: “Yes, oh my god, yessssss please oh god!” followed by a thud on the floor above us, and we then heard Mortimer moaning and purring like a child.

Becky had a huge grin on her face. My mother looked at her, and then began laughing herself, which made Becky laugh so hard she fell to her knees on the kitchen floor. “I am going to pee!” she said, gasping for air, which made my mother laugh even more. They moved towards each other and hugged, still laughing. I don’t think they heard me when I said I was leaving.

I walked as fast as I could to the front door, down the steps past Erin, who was smoking.

“Did you hear that?” she said, but all I could think of then was getting in my car and leaving, going back to Virginia, back to school, so I didn’t even bother to answer her. She got up and followed me; I could hear her steps behind me. “Wait,” she said, but I didn’t. She banged on the window of my car, and I rolled it down. “Take this,” she said, “you may need it.” It was an index card, and I tossed on the dashboard, put the car in reverse and pulled away from her and from what was once my family home.

Even before I got on the highway, I knew that Erin was right and I also knew I didn’t have a plan.