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Auto Biography: A Daughter's Story Told in Cars

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AUTO BIOGRAPHY
A DAUGHTER'S STORY TOLD IN CARS

A Thesis

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by

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To my sisters,

who have their own tales to tell

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ABSTRACT

Auto Biography is a creative nonfiction memoir: A daughter, forced to move her unlovable, ever-combustible, wheelchair-bound mother cross-country in an RV, attempts to come to terms with her via the automobiles of their lives.

The story explores: 1) the universal dilemma of caring for aged parents—its stress, its pain, its sacrifice, and its dark humor; 2) memory—the "peeling back" narrative dynamic working in the same layer upon layer way of memory, its non-linearity creating not so much a one-piece narrative but essay snapshots forming a family photo album view of this thing we call memory and this thing we call meaning; and, of course, 3) cars—their subtle yet surprisingly essential role in all our modern and post-modern lives.

Women make up 70 percent of the population age 85 and older.

—Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics, 2000

If Mama Ain't Happy, Ain't Nobody Happy.

—Bumper sticker

PROLOGUE

2004 FunMover

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28', handicap-friendly, Ford V-10
chassis engine rental motor home with
garage section, wheelchair-accessible
hydraulic lift gate, rear compartment
bed, bathroom assist handles, standard
upfront motor home living quarters
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With the help of a trucklift, we have loaded our frail, feisty and sporadically senile mother, wheelchair and all, into the rented "FunMover"—half RV-half moving van—our vehicle of last resort. It is the crack of September dawn. My Texas sister Deanne, my Colorado brother-in-law Bob, and I are about to move a woman, who has never lived anywhere but Texas, cross-country before it's too late.

We've laid down rugs and secured every box, chair, mattress and bedframe in the back-end moving van section where she will ride the entire bathroom-on-board road trip in the comfort of her own bed, surrounded by her remaining earthly possessions. We've strapped open the door between the van and RV sections, and left a pathway all the way to the front seats.

Outside, Bob and I shut and secure the FunMover's "handicap accessible" trucklift tailgate, then we climb into the RV where Deanne and Mother are ready and waiting.

"Did you bring my Hershey's Kisses?" Mother demands to know.

That was how she had greeted me, 24 hours ago, when I first walked into her room at Carriage House Assisted Living Center: "Did you bring my Hershey's Kisses and Tums and my Wrigley's Spearmint and Kleenex?"

When I told her I hadn't been able to go shopping yet, having traveled 1000 miles to get there, she'd given me her pursed lip fume and said:

"I'm so disappointed in you, Lynda."

And hello to Agnes Rutledge at 85.

"Here they are, Mom." I grab the just-purchased Hershey's Kisses bag from the galley and pitch it to Deanne who hands it to Mother then takes a seat by her bed. We've packed her Tums and her gum and her Kleenex. We've stocked the RV's fridge and an ice chest. Bob, an M.D., has stashed an emergency medical kit and a mammoth thermos of coffee. The plan: Drive straight through, all the way to Colorado; no stopping for anything but gas.

With visions of being stranded in the middle of nowhere or in some small-town emergency clinic, we are ready to go.

"Who's in charge of prayers? Now's the time," Bob murmurs as he heads toward the driver's seat.

"I'll drive," I say, beating him there. "At least across Texas. You may be needed to help with Mother." But that's more than a reason. It's an excuse. I look into the rearview mirror. *Coward*, I say, gripping the steering wheel. This vehicle's a strange one, but this feeling isn't. Truth is I have always felt best when I am driving away from her, my mother in my rearview—even if only a few safe feet.

"Lynda!" I hear her warble from the back.

"I'm driving, Mom," I call toward her. But I can hear that my sister has already taken over. *So far, so good,* I think. *At least she didn't call the cops this trip.*

As I ease the FunMover into gear and head slowly for the Interstate, the early fall leaves crackling under our tires, I take a deep breath. We are finally doing this. Six months in the planning; seven years in the making.

It's been one wild ride. And, God help us, it isn't over yet.

CHAPTER 1

2004 Police Cruiser

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Ford Police Interceptor, 4.6L overhead
cam fuel-injected V8 engine, tinted
glass, driver's-side spot lamp, 3.27
ratio-axle/ traction-lock, heavy-duty
steel wheels, dual exhaust, cupholder
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The last chapter in our mother's life—and our lives with Mother—began the first day of March. It was my turn to broach the subject of moving and, after arriving early in the morning, I'd already put in a full day with her at Carriage House working up the courage. I had gone to the store for her. I'd rearranged her Kleenex stacks and her knick-knacks, at her direction. I rolled her to lunch and dinner at the dining hall. I watched TV re-runs with her until after dark. I did not, however, talk about moving.

Later, much later, deep into exhausted sleep, I pop straight up in bed to the sound you never want to hear in the middle of a motel night—the sound of someone pounding on the door.

"Who is it?" I manage.

"Grapevine Police," a male voice answers.

I find my jeans and my way to the peephole. And there stands a policeman. A big-eared, earnest, irritated-looking Texan in blue.

"Are you Lynda Rutledge?"

"Yes. What's wrong?"

"I've been looking all over this part of the county for you. Your mother has reported you missing."

As the sentence sinks in, I gape. *"Missing*?" I finally sputter.

"Yes, ma'm."

"My mother...in the assisted living home down the street?"

"Yes, ma'm."

He waits; I am gaping again.

"Ma'm?"

"Did you meet her?" I ask.

"Yes, ma'm."

"Officer, she's not in her right mind!" I say a little too forcefully.

He all but comes to attention. "We have to take these things seriously, ma'm. For all we knew you were missing."

He gives me that studied stare they must teach in police academy and says: "Call your mother, ma'm." Then he pivots and is gone.

And all I can think is: A policeman has just told me to call my mother.

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A few seconds later, I call her.

"Mother, what....?"

"Hold on," she interrupts. "There's crazy woman in my room."

Then she hangs up on me.

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The next morning, I drive up to Carriage House Assisted Living Center just as a small, wizened man passes me, shuffling double-time off the property. I inform the woman at the assistance desk.

"Oh, dear. Mr. Jeffries. One time he got all the way to the freeway." She sighs and bolts out the door.

My mother is sitting in her wheelchair by the window adjusting her thermostat as I enter the sauna that is her Carriage House room: 97 degrees, no more, no less. It is springtime in Texas, but in my mother's world it is always a blistering Texas July.

"Mother," I say even before hello, "do you remember last night?"

"Did you bring bird seed? I'm out of bird seed again."

"I just bought you a ten pound bag yesterday," I say.

"The girls poured it on the ground out there. All out."

"Ten pounds? Can't the sparrows eat it from the ground?"

"No, of course not," she snaps, looking at me as if I'd lost my mind. "They eat from the feeder."

Out the window, I can see entire flocks fighting and feeding on the spill.

"And I need more milk."

"You drank the whole quart I bought you yesterday?"

"It tasted sour. I poured it out. I need more." She picks up a stack of tissues on the windowsill and rolls her chair away from me.

Milk. My once lactose-intolerant mother is now obsessed with milk. Her fixation with the most maternal, elemental of foods would be baffling if we had time to ponder it. But she is keeping all four of her daughters scrambling just to keep up. Even though she is now fading fast mentally and physically, with sheer force of will, my mother has been creating chaos in her corner of Texas. She has called each of our houses so many times during the last year, day after day, her memory confused, we have all begun to dread answering our phones. Then she discovered 911 and its visits from paramedics and ambulance rides to the local E.R. She's called 911 for headaches and for stomach aches. She's called them to deliver milk. She "ordered" milk so often that, one night, the county paramedics brought her a gallon of it. She drank it all. By morning, she was in the hospital. So now even milk has become dangerous.

Just then, a tall, wild-haired woman wanders into the room then out. In a moment, one of the young Hispanic attendants passes by. I look into the hall in time to see her lead the woman into the room two doors down, close the door behind her, and walk away.

And from the other side, I now hear: "Hello! Hello!"

“Who was that?” I ask Mother.

My mother gives me her trademark dismissal gesture—a couple of brush-away flicks of the wrist—then says: "She's crazy."

I sink into a chair, exhausted already. Any visit with my mother is exhausting in itself. But I have to find a way to slowly broach the unbroachable subjects. She is now out of money, she has no family member living near her anymore, and she is past "assisted living." No one's used the word "nursing home" in her presence; the question, though, is no longer "if" she should move but "where." Her four daughters, scattered chronologically across sixteen years, are now also scattered geographically as if flung by the force of nature away from this whirling dervish of a mother—one sister to the other side of Texas, me to other side of the country, and two all the way to the mountains. My Texas sister Deanne now lives a day's drive away. I live in Michigan after years in Chicago and San Diego. My other sisters Kay and Ann, and Ann's husband Bob, live in Colorado. We could leave her alone here in this part of Texas for this last chapter of her life; we could…but we can't. It's not who we are, not who she raised, even if none of us can remember the woman she once must have been for us to be the kind of daughters who cannot even geographically abandon her. So I have to talk to her about what we think is best for her, but, most of all, about her having to trust us, an all-but-impossible thing for her to do. It's a futile gesture, but we are all taking turns trying as we begin making plans to do something and do it soon.

The situation with our mother's care might be coming to a head but the stress isn't new. We've been living this particular drama for seven years now, and, except for my mother's special, vivid flair, we know the situation isn't even that unusual. A quick comparing of notes with friends our age had told us that. But it feels unusual, it feels personal, it feels like the whole world is revolving around what to do with Mother. And for this moment in our family's history, it is.

"Mother," I say, "don't call the cops on me ever again. Next time I'll write down my motel number in case you forget. You hear?"

"I'm not deaf. Hand me those tissues."

"Which ones?"

She gives me her exasperated look. "Just do what I say, will you?"

So I do.

As Mother stares absently at the tissue, having forgotten why she asked for it, my eyes land on one of her framed photos scattered on her dresser—a B&W snapshot of my parents as young marrieds, holding my eldest sister as a baby. They are both grinning lost grins. I recognize my father behind his. I can see him in those jaw-dropping good looks before cigarettes, steak, and work bloated him into the basic average 50s dad, and before their own marital civil war had begun. But my mother I did not recognize at all. The mother smile I knew best, the one I'd seen throughout my life, was all lips and teeth, never much more than a controlled curve of her mouth. But that smile was not this snapshot smile, this one photograph of "before." This one is of a high-cheeked, long-jawed beauty whose laugh went all the way up to her eyes. I have spent my entire life staring at this photo and I still don't know this laughing snapshot Agnes. Standing there in her Carriage House room, I try to conjure up just one time I'd heard her belly laugh and fail. Even as a kid, I must have been worried about it, because I have spent my life handling her with humor, working for a chuckle, no more; just a good teeth-flashing gag of air. Even now, she will call me and invariably say two things: "What are you working on?" or "Why don't you send me another funny card?" But nothing seemed very funny anymore.

I once asked her: "Why don't you ever talk about your childhood?"

"The past is the past. Why talk about it?" was her only answer: It was a hard, rock-scrabble life; better to let it be. So I had. Now, though, I look at my mother, and I get very, very scared. Family stories about childhoods and grandmothers and strange cousins-once-removed are really the only hints, cautions, to what we all might become. And I have no stories. I only have what I see. And here's the scariest part: If I don't ever know her, or at least make peace with what I can know, then am I fooling myself into thinking I won't become her? And as I stand sweating like a field hand in her 97 degree room, I admit to myself: Isn't *that* really the crux of the whole fuzzy matter?

"Where are all my pictures?" I suddenly hear from behind me. It is the same question she asks each time I visit.

"Here they are, Mom," I answer, as always.

"Where are the others?" she answers, as always.

I don't answer as I set down the photo, knowing she will forget the question if I let it go. And, in a few seconds, she does.

It's only 10 a.m. She has finished her tissue stacking and is now struggling to put on the same J.C. Penney satin polyester blouse she had on yesterday, the one with two buttons missing and the food stain on the front.

"Mom, let's put on another blouse," I try. "This one's got a big old stain on it. And it's a little too revealing with those buttons missing."

"No," she hisses. "I've only worn this one three days."

I foolishly reach out to help her with the remaining button which is hanging on by a thread itself. She slaps my hand away. I cannot stand being in the room a moment longer.

"Let's go for a ride, Mom."

The truth is we have to go for a ride. It is the only time I truly feel comfortable with this mother of mine; in fact, it is, in some essential way, the only time I feel comfortable at all. I am the child with wanderlust, the one who has lived six places in 20 years and traveled many, many more, the one who feels solace in movement and knows the purest peace in wide open spaces. During visits home to see my mother over the years—a woman who lived at the same address for four decades—I'd feel the tension build to busting with us alone in the old, rambling house I grew up in. So I'd talk her into hitting the back roads, under some pretense—bluebonnets to see, new mall out on the Interstate to check out, or no pretense at all. She'd always say no, at first. And then finally, yes. Scarf around her beauty-shop hairdo, she'd sit harmless and calm beside me. And off we'd go. Moving along, free and easy.

"C'mon, let's go for a ride," I say again, watching her struggle with the dangling button on her stained blouse. "C'mon. I'll drive. Unless you want to." That gets a chuckle from her and her wrist-flick dismissal wave.

"We'll go see the llama and the camel out on that farm," I try again. "I'll buy you a corny dog and a root beer. Sound good?"

No, she says, then yes.

Fifteen minutes later, tissues finally in their proper places and my mother finally as dressed as she will ever be, I roll her out the door.

"Where are all my pictures?" she asks again, as we drove away.

They are in a landfill somewhere. Or an auction barn. Or someone’s garage sale. Except for the handful on her dresser and the few things in this room, every trace of her earthly possessions are gone as good as if she'd set fire to the old house.

For seven years, no one has had the heart to tell her what she did.

CHAPTER 2

1997 Chevy Astro MiniVan

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Blue-green, 3-door, 4.3 liter engine,
automatic transmission, four-wheel
drive, sliding side door, ABS brakes,
air conditioning, power windows,
third row seats
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On a summer day in 1997, in the tenth year of living on her own after my father's death, my mother gave the accumulated possessions of 41 years of living in the same big house to two hired women because they were going to have a garage sale.

Or so the story goes.

The hundred-year-old frame house in the small Texas town where I grew up, its stairways, huge sycamore trees and rumbling attic fan, had slowly become an old lady's home, with overgrown bushes, a dozen wild cats, one fat dog, and chainlink fence in all the wrong places. Inside, here and there, ceilings were water stained with plumbing leaks. And every upstairs bedroom was full-to-busting with band uniforms and old records and entire sets of Nancy Drew and all the used-up stuff four daughters left behind.

For several years, she'd had the kind of problems that defied diagnosis, finally forcing doctor after doctor to mention anxiety and depression and the wonders of Prozac. And all

she'd say was, "I'll handle my own depression, thank you," not believing a word. Of course, when she called to tell us about the gall of these doctors who were suggesting her health problems were "all in her head," we couldn't help but hear a glimmer of truth, knowing our tightly-wound mother well. There was no discussing the topic, though. And after going through the short list of physicians in the small town, becoming angrier and angrier about the insinuation that psychological problems could be causing her chronic physiological aches and pains, she began to medicate herself from the health food store she owned, and often to strange effect. She became a burper, and not a social burper, either, no hand-over-the-mouth, excuse-me belches for Mrs. Agnes Rutledge. She'd let loose with one, anytime, anyplace, sometimes in rapid fire. If I made a joke of it, offering up a "bless you," or some ice-breaking silliness, she'd give me her "smart-mouth" look, and say: "My stomach's upset." At the time, especially since my visits home were few and far between, it seemed like a small if rather weird thing. But soon she couldn't swallow hard food, living for months on nothing but liquid protein shakes. Even though doctors could find nothing physically wrong with her, she was wasting away.

During that time, I lived in Chicago. One day, she called me to ask if I would drive her to Houston. Her sister Belle had seen a news story about a specialist who, in layman's terms, was literally stretching throats for swallowing problems. Within a week, I had flown down to my hometown near Dallas and driven her the six hours straight south to the Houston clinic. After her procedure, the nurse motioned me inside where my mother would sleep until the anesthesia wore off. "You can come in and hold her hand if you'd like," the nurse said. Standing by her bed, I found to my horror that I, a hugger of semi-strangers, could not do it, my soul quivering ever so silently. I should be able to do this, I

thought. Why couldn't I? The nurse certainly thought I could, being the very picture of the dutiful daughter. Something sat there between us, though, something all entangled with self-defense, my mother's boundaries, and an entire adult life lived without holding, or even touching, her hand. It seemed like a failure of some kind, as if I'd chosen my mother poorly or should have been able to turn her into a mother who invited warm and fuzzy expressions of love. When she finally stirred, all I could muster was a few motherly pats of the kind she knew how to give us. And the soul-quivering feeling followed me as I drove her all the way back home.

The procedure didn't help her swallowing problem and within weeks of her return, things became seriously life-threatening. Finally, she allowed a doctor to surgically insert a plug straight into her stomach, and for over a year she lived liked that, until slowly going back on soft food.

Then one spring day, she broke her hip. For hours, she lay helpless on the floor, unable to drag herself to the phone in that old house with all its landings and stairways. Her cleaning lady had found her. And with that, as is so often the case with elderly women, she finally gave us her permission to move. My Texas sister, Deanne, found her a nice, assisted living home in the nearby Dallas area. Mother went through the tests and applications needed, and we all held our collective breath. When the moment arrived, she decided she was feeling just fine, thankyouverymuch, and refused to go. Instead, she built a handicap-accessible bathroom downstairs, and converted the den into her bedroom, believing that would fix everything. We all tried to talk her out of it, pointing out, once again, the subject of her safety all alone in that big, drafty house.

"This is home," she'd answer, and refuse to discuss it a moment more. We all began to feel a new sense of dread.

Next, she began having trouble with her finances. During her hip convalescence, she had been paying two caregivers, her long-time cleaning lady named Pansy, a whooping crane of a small town woman with bad teeth and an ingratiating way, and a plump, white-haired vocational nurse named Sharon. We had begun to suspect that these caregivers had also been talking Mother out of money beyond payment for their services. Whenever we'd broach the subject, though, she'd say, "It's my money. I can do what I want with it."

She was right, of course—right to a fault. And we always backed away. We'd left our mother to her independence so long, it seemed unthinkable to stomp in and wrestle it away, unthinkable and almost un-do-able if you knew Agnes Rutledge. At this stage in her life, finally on her own, our mother seemed to have one unequivocally hard and fast rule: No one was going tell her what to do.

That June, though, the line between feisty and senility became all too clear. The paid caretakers called Deanne to say that they could not get Mother to leave the bathroom for hours and, finally, she had fallen off the toilet and broken her clavicle. So they had taken her to the hospital.

While the rest of us were trying hard to get our minds around this new mother emergency, Deanne, who had a paralegal degree, realized that before medical, health, or financial decisions could be made for whatever was happening to her, we had to have "durable power of attorney" signed over to one of us. And it had to be done immediately. So she called our hometown attorney and asked what to do. Since it had to be signed in

front of witnesses and notarized, the lawyer suggested that they go to the hospital together, taking his two summer law interns along. They had all arrived to find Mother, her shoulder in a sling, in the bathroom, on the toilet. Again, she wouldn't get off. They waited. My sister coaxed her to come out; she refused. Finally, our lawyer simply eased the door open, handed the form to her and asked her to sign it while sitting on the hospital commode. The interns, two young women, witnessed it, and our lawyer notarized it, all there in the hospital room with Mother's pants down around her ankles. The interns didn't giggle and our lawyer "didn't bat an eye," my sister explained over the phone. "I was the only one humiliated."

In a few days, my mother, seemingly back to her senses, had gone home, and my sister had hired the caregivers to stay with her round-the-clock. Mother once again agreed to move to the assisted living home, and my sister, once again, began the arrangements. And, once again, we all held our breaths.

Then, on July 4th weekend, just two days before she was set to move to the assisted living home, Deanne left a message on my machine telling me that Mother had emptied the house.

The caregivers had found her scooting with her walker, from room to room, sling off her shoulder, throwing things into the trash. That morning, she had decided that it was her responsibility to do something with the entire contents of the two-story house, without a word to any of us. And she had set to work. Furniture, bric-a-brac, tacky knick-knacks, photos, china, my high school record collection—all—out with the trash in big, black trash bags. She also told the caregivers she had called the city garbage collectors to come take the largest pieces to the dump, and that a truck was on its way.

By the time the two women had called, though, almost an entire day had passed. The caregivers told my sister that they hadn't had a chance to call quicker because they were trying to stop her. Supposedly, they told Mother that they would take everything themselves—for a garage sale. Mother, being a garage sale veteran herself, must have found that a logical solution. She'd agreed. So, the two enlisted some of their bulked-up hometown relatives to carry everything possible to other places—to save it for us, they explained.

Of Mother's four daughters, only one, Deanne, the youngest, still lived nearby. Kay, Daughter #3 who lived in Colorado, was temporarily within driving distance. The rest of us—Ann and I, Daughters #1 and #2, respectively—lived too far away to be of any quick help. To make matters worse, I was in the middle of planning my own move. Everything stopped, though, after Deanne's call. For that entire day, I was on the phone or waiting by the phone.

Deanne had jumped into her Chevy minivan and headed straight for our hometown and by day's end, somehow was able to get Mother admitted to the small-town hospital overnight in hopes she would come back to her senses away from the house.

My sister Kay, a psychologist, arrived the next morning in time to hear that the hospital would be releasing Mother that afternoon unless my mother got a doctor's authorization to stay. Quickly, my sisters began to leave messages for Mother's doctor hoping he'd authorize the hospital to hold Mother for another day. It was Sunday, July 4th. On Monday, the assisted living home could take her, as planned, and then they could consult her new doctor about what to do. Surely, they thought, he would not mind authorizing her for one more day to help the situation.

Mother's last small town doctor, the one who had described Mother as a “very difficult” patient, returned my sisters' call. The hospital had refused to keep her any longer, he explained, because she'd been "red-flagged," i.e. too many visits in too short a time. Her Medicare wouldn't cover it. And, about my sisters' request that he issue orders to hold her over anyway, he did not feel comfortable doing so against the hospital's judgment.

I recall that moment vividly, as my poor sisters explained the situation over the phone. I remember wondering what would have happened if they had not been there. What does "the system" do with addled old ladies who lose their mind over holiday weekends? Release them to wander down the small town streets, for godssake? Even difficult old ladies don't deserve that.

But as fortunate as my mother was to have two capable daughters there in time, what now? They couldn't let her go back to her house. Besides the fact that it was empty, for all they knew the next thing on Mother’s list was to set fire to the house, getting rid of that, too. Taking her back to their homes was not an option. Neither house was close enough, and it was painfully obvious that she now not only needed medical attention, but psychiatric attention as well.

So, my sisters waited until the hospital forced Mother's check-out. Then they placed her into the back seat of Deanne's Chevy Astro minivan, and they kidnapped her. As they rolled slowly past the turn toward our old house on First Street, they calmly told Mother that they were not taking her back to her house. “She responded almost as if she didn't hear us,” Deanne later had told me on the phone. And the entire time, my sisters eyed the

back seat's rattling sliding door, wishing for a child lock on it, worrying that Mother would decide to eject herself at any moment.

They circled around the small town a few minutes, deciding what to do. Finally, they settled on the Dallas-area hospital clinic where Mother had undergone the assisted living home's prerequisite tests by its attending physician, and headed toward it. An hour later, they arrived there, only to be told that the clinic could not admit Mother without her consulting doctor's authorization. They would have to wait to hear from him. So, there they sat, in the mini-van, in front of another hospital, on July 4th, waiting for another doctor's answering service to contact him, watching Mother, ready for godknowswhat. It began to grow dark outside. Then somebody suggested ice cream. So my sisters, the kidnappers, and my mother, the "kidnappee," went across the street to a restaurant, and sat calmly, eerily, eating apples and ice cream, as if they were on a nice normal family outing.

While they ate their ice cream, the doctor, on a lake outing with his family, answered his beeper and okayed Mother's admission. They left her at the clinic and drove away, in the dark.

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"That's not exactly the way it happened," said my Texas sister. "I mean, yes, it is, but there was so much more." She stopped herself. "God, it was awful. We'll drive each other crazy trying to keep it all straight now. Much better to repress it, if you ask me."

Deanne was right, of course. It was so much more, more than enough to repress. Sometimes it seems that memory isn't a force of intellect but a tool of survival. We remember things a certain way for seminal reasons, we edit and we refine and we analyze. Or we do the very opposite and immediately delete it from our memory banks. But that was how I remembered the entire drama, from a thousand miles away, coming to me over the phone. That Day of the Great Giveaway I see through a phone line, riding my guilt due south listening, picturing, imagining, powerless to do anything to help with the surreal drama, however familiar and familial it was. It came to me in the kind of jigsaw puzzle pieces that a crisis seems to be while one is living it. And these were the things my mind allowed me to keep. But above all, this was my most bewildering feeling: We were four daughters who didn't know quite what to do about their mother. And we still don't.

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By my first visit after Mother's Great Giveaway, she was in a nursing facility, beginning tests and treatment. I found her in a common room, where a television is on, where other nursing home patients are scattered here and there, playing cards, talking to family. My mother picked that day to remember that she couldn't remember, saying, over and over, "I can't stand it. I just can't stand it." And she sobbed, something she didn't do at my father's funeral, something I've only seen her do one other time in my life. I desperately tried to think of something funny to say; I failed. Instead, once again I forced

myself to reach out and pat her arm. Out of pity, duty, guilt, human damn kindness. But not out of love. And I hated myself for the hole aching inside me.

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The treatment for an elderly woman exhibiting strange behavior turned out to be an in-patient/outpatient program focused on slowly nudging the person back to some acceptable grasp of reality. Back and forth, she went from nursing home to clinic, to rehab, back to nursing home, back to rehab. And soon, she began to pass such tests, to our continued confusion, somehow satisfying experts' studied requirements for acceptable senility, until she was deemed "here" enough to be moved into an assisted living situation. Finally, with seals of approval all around, except, of course, from her daughters who knew her best, we chose a place called Carriage House, and again held our collective breaths, as we moved her in. This Mother, though, we slowly realized, would never quite again be the Mother we knew, for better or for worse.

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And what about the entire contents of her big, old house? The caregivers' responses were always the same: They had been doing us a favor, the garage sale just a ploy to get Mother’s permission. Perhaps that was true, and then one of them began to think a garage sale was rather a nice idea. Because we soon had the bizarre impression that Pansy and Sharon were holding Mother's things hostage. After several strangely fruitless attempts to

recover any of the stashed contents of the house—including pre-arranged trips back and the renting of U-Hauls—we had to discuss the possibility of giving up ever seeing any of it again. We considered calling the police about the women's mysterious reluctance, but after all, we knew what any policeman or lawyer would hear first: Mother had given it away. The legal gymnastics just wouldn't be worth it. To be blunt, we were all so exhausted by the whole odd ordeal that we were willing to let the rest go. There were no heirlooms involved, no 19th century armoires or granny hope chests. Just the type furniture that a young mother buys when she is raising a brood of children, and the kind of furniture that a Depression-era child would consider good enough to keep after they were all gone. Even the living room's baby grand piano was in awful shape, and the pianists among us already had their own. All our energy, every last ounce of it, we needed for Mother.

And then, like magic, just when, by majority rule, we had finally let it all go, our hometown realtor called Deanne with the news that most of Mother's things had appeared at the house, no questions asked.

"What if I want to ask questions?" I had said.

"Don't," my sister said in her most world-weary voice. "Let it go." The returns were enough that the realtor thought it best to place them back in the home, to help sell it, and she even offered to handle an estate sale afterwards. "We need to go through the things to take anything of value," Deanne informed me. "And I'm not going by myself."

So after leaving Mother thankfully forgetful again, we headed down the highway toward our hometown, 60 miles away. We were riding in her minivan, her blue/green Chevrolet Astro, the kidnapping vehicle. Recognizing the rattle I'd heard through the

phone, I glanced in the back. My sister noticed. We looked at each other. Then we rode the rest of the way in blessed silence.

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Interesting how your mind responds to dreaded expectations. You either will remember every detail, however traumatic, or you will forget it as quickly as you see it, no lasting memory filed away anywhere you might recover it. When we arrived at my childhood home at 501 First Street, I recall walking up the front steps of the old house, looking as it had for a decade of Mother's decline, landscaping a bit overgrown, whole sections in gentle disrepair. But after walking inside the front door, I have no memory of what the entire downstairs must have looked like, where the piece of recovered furniture must have been placed. What I see are the walls—empty walls—with photos no longer covering every square inch of them.

Some people hang art in their homes, or at least cheap prints of Monet or Van Gogh over the sofa. Not my parents. We were, it seemed, Mr. and Mrs. Harold K. Rutledge's art—Offspring Series, 1942-1982—year to year, spring, summer, winter, fall. We were everywhere, gap-teeth, no teeth, chubby cheeks, a festival of babyfat and big, glorious ornate-framed bridal portraits. No tacked-up snapshots or 8x10 harsh-lit school pictures here. Every framed B&W photo was portrait quality. To visit Mother as grown daughters was always a little like visiting a museum, or worse, a mausoleum to ourselves. At my father's funeral, our hometown photographer made a point to tell me how my parents saved his business more than once. "I'd be wondering how we were going to make ends

meet that year, and here would come Harold and Agnes Rutledge wanting new portraits of their kids."

Not until I went off to college did I begin to realize that this abundance of portrait photography was a little unusual. And not until I began bringing boyfriends home did some of them begin to mortify me. My boyfriends always did the same thing: They'd come to a dead stop in front of my chubbiest baby-fat portraits that hung along the front stairway's wall. I had begged Mother to take them down—the pudgiest ones, at the very least. But Mother refused and continued to refuse through every once-chubby daughter's pleas.

Soon, as the weddings began, the den's walls were covered with bridal photos big enough to act as wallpaper. After one of my sisters' marriages ended and she remarried, the new son-in-law found himself directly under his new bride's first bridal photo still proudly displayed over the couch, my sister had pleaded, begged for my mother to take down the first one.

"No," Mother had told her. "I like it."

So my sister had even gone to the lengths of having a new bridal portrait made big enough to replace the first one. For a while, Mother hung the new one. Then one day, she decided she liked the first one better, and up it went again. And nothing my sister could say could get it down.

Now, here they were stacked in the front hallway, back to back—all the smiling headshots, all the chubby children group shots, all the poster-sized bridal portraits, looking even bigger off the walls than they had on them.

I walked away from the pile; I knew that I didn't want even one of them. That was also the moment I realized I didn't want anything else, either. And I'd gone immediately upstairs.

I found my sister in our father's old bedroom, going through black garbage bags full of papers and cards and books and snapshots by the pound. So I headed toward another room with more stashed bags. Just as I had opened the first bag, I heard a shriek. I ran into the other room to find her in tears, holding a photo at arms' length, away from view.

"You don't want to see this," she said, continuing to hold the photo, rigidly, away.

I knew I didn't. I knew I would. I reached out and took the photo from her hand. It was a snapshot of my father. In his casket.

For a second, I didn't remember to breath. And then, just as my sister had done, I held the photo down, away, from view.

"Who would take this?" she said.

"Who would keep it?" I said.

...Mother?

A century ago, I am told, this was some sort of custom. But my father did not die centuries ago. I hoped upon hope that one of my weird great-aunts or second cousins-once-removed, still observing the old ways with Kodak Instamatics, had taken the thing and felt obligated to share. I could not picture my mother, whom I never saw use a camera, doing such a thing. But I would not have been able to picture it even if she'd been Ansel Adams himself.

The next few moments were images that my memory has chosen to delete. I remember my tough Texas sister's shock of tears. I remember the view from the bedroom

window where we stood. I do not remember my father's casket picture. I do remember, after she put it away, after we hesitantly finished going through the other packets of snapshots in the trashbag, that we finally began making jokes. Soon, we were talking, naturally, like sisters again, about the memories sprouting whole from the stuff around us, old letters, old rivalries, old enemies, old friends, groaning at the naïve silly girls we'd been. And while we hadn't forgotten that photo, we weren't talking about it. And we would never talk about it again. Did my sister keep that casket photo? I don't know; I don't want to know. There were other things to think about—like knowing that you are standing the last time in the house you grew up in, knowing you are looking at the flotsam, jetsam of that life for the last time, unless, that is, you want to carry chunks of it into your own future. And I didn't.

Except, that is, for one thing.

I don't remember how we ever finished, or how we ever walked out that front door, but I do recall the feeling—it wasn't melancholy as much as an odd relief, a heart-squeezing, nostalgic exhaustion of some kind. I suppose, even without the intrigue of mental illness, great giveaways, and caregiver caprice, it was a moment certain to happen. But the truth was, I'd left the house a long time ago.

When the moment came, my sister slid the rattling minivan door shut as I crawled in the passenger seat. She had packed several boxes full of stuff to keep and shoved them into the back. She noticed I hadn't, looking down at what I was holding in my hands.

"That is all you're keeping?" she asked. "An old license plate?"

Not just a license plate—my personalized license plate of my very first car, a 1963 Corvair convertible. Deep in a box full of garage junk, there it was. Seeing it had made me suddenly damn happy, the happiest I'd been in weeks.

"This is it," I said, closing my hand around it.

"Don't you even want your bridal portrait?"

"I have one," I said, "and it's not the size of a mural."

"Where is it?"

I told her I left it along with our big baby-fat group portrait, in the stash of stuff headed for the trash bin, and that I felt good about it. It was just pasteboard, I said; that's all, pasteboard now headed for the landfill.

"But your bridal portrait!"

"It's not *mine*—it was Mother's," I said. "Besides, I can't get on the plane with that thing."

She still didn't quite believe me. "All of my closets are full at home or I'd take it for you."

"Really. It's okay."

She didn't understand. I'm not that girl. Never was. That was Mother's ideal. Better it go the way of the rest of it.

She backed the minivan out of the driveway, and we both went quiet with the feeling of all turning points. I looked down at my license plate and when I looked up again, we were on the highway, heading out of town. Always before, I knew I could come back, at least I always had that choice. Now, I knew I wouldn't. I should have felt sad, but even

with finality in the air, I felt, as I always have, a tiny euphoria in the simple act of driving away.

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A few weeks later, after I was back home in Chicago, my phone rang. On the other end was a high-school classmate, a girl who had grown up in a house not too far from ours, a friend but no bosom buddy by any means. She had gotten my number somewhere and couldn't wait to tell me what she'd done. She and her sister had been back in our hometown to visit their father the week before. When they noticed an estate sale sign pointing toward Mother's house, they'd investigated. Shocked to hear that Mrs. Rutledge wasn't living there anymore ("We just couldn't imagine anyone but a Rutledge living in that house!"), they had gone in to look at the items before the estate sale the next day. "And when I saw your photos, you know, the one of ya'll so cute and chubby, oh, and your *bridal* portrait, too!—well, I couldn't stand the idea of them being sold. So I talked Dotty—you remember Dotty Kay Watson? She was doing your sale— I talked her into just giving them to me. And I brought them home and put them in my 'memory room.' If you want me to send them to you, I will. They'll be here!"

There it was. You can try and try, but you can't leave it behind. If you don't carry it with you, then you wish you had. If you do, then you wish you hadn't. And it all doesn't matter for all your trying, because somewhere there is a room with your fat photo in it. Best to make peace with it—somehow, someway—because someone is going to keep it all for you. In their memory room.

At Carriage House

Back near Carriage House, Mother and I are an hour into our morning drive. After riding on half the country roads surrounding Grapevine, Texas, past the little farm where the llama and the camel live, out toward DFW airport and back, we pulled into a broken-down, Frosty Mug Root Beer Drive-In that I'd discovered near her assisted living home, complete with abandoned car hop stations and faded root beer sign. The building itself looks deserted, as if waiting for a developer to bulldoze it for another 7-11 or Speedway gas station—except for the customers that keep pulling in and out of its pock-marked gravel lot.

After each drive, we visit this place and each year I brace for its walls to have caved in or see a big "Finally Closed" sign on the creaky glass door.

"I wish," says the plump owner, the only one I've ever seen behind the counter, besides a spry, wrinkled old woman in the back. "The customers won't let me." We had come so often, he'd even begun to remember our "usual": Corny dogs and frosty mug root beers. Mom always wants to go inside, so I manhandle her wheelchair up the non-handicap accessible entrance, push her past the yellowed glass door, and up to the little wobbly table by the rusting pinball machine.

For a moment, as we chow down, the space between us is soft, pleasant, good. As good as it gets. And I am enjoying my root beer more than any root beer I'd ever had, the

relief of the moment and the long country drive so palpable, so nice. My mother is calmly nibbling at her corny dog, mustard dabs on her blouse and her cheek, and I am not disturbing the peace with any mopping up activities. Some visits, my mother is thin, some visits she's fifty pound overweight, her appetite coming and going as strangely as her senility. This time, she is plump and eating everything in sight. She'd ordered two corny dogs and is already on the second one. We sit quietly nibbling, sipping, and listening to the sounds of the pinball machine. I still haven't broached the unbroachable subjects of money and moving. I really should start, I tell myself. But the peace of our drive had been so nice, I still haven't the heart to break the moment.

Instead, I say: “Mom, you remember the root beer stand near our house?”

She nods, holding tight to her corny dog stick. “Down at the end of First Street.”

“That’s the one.”

She stares suddenly at our rental car. “Is that yours?”

“No, ma’m," I answer. "It’s a rental. Remember?”

This thing we have—taking a drive together—has stretched back through half a dozen cars over the decades she lived in the old house and more than a dozen rentals since she's lived at Carriage House. And I realize I have never asked her about cars, ones she might have had before me, probably because she always refused to reminisce about anything before Mother Rutledge days. So, expecting nothing, I decide to see if I can shake a story from her past: “Mom, what kind of car did you have way back when?”

And she surprises me with an answer:

“A Studebaker.”

“A Studebaker? You and Dad?”

“No. My father.”

I set down my frosty mug and wait. This is the first mention I’ve had of her ne’er-do-well Irish father since I found a snapshot of him decades ago. His face is suddenly before me, his devil-grin, snow-white hair, and wild, black eyebrows. I proceed with caution. “Your father had a Studebaker?”

“For his job. Traveling salesman.” She takes another nibble of corny dog.

"I thought he was a Baptist preacher," I say.

She nods. "And sold ties. He taught me to drive in it. When I was in high school." With that, she finishes her corny dog with a big chomp and begins eyeing mine, which is getting cold.

I press, quickly, knowing she’ll shut down in seconds: "What was it like?"

But too late. She gives me her wrist-flick dismissal wave: *Enough of that.* And then she informs me that it is lunchtime at Carriage House.

"Mom, we just had a corny dog."

She presses her lips together, suddenly exasperated with me. "I *want* to go to lunch."

She does not want to miss a meal. With her come-and-go dementia, she is now swallowing just fine, unable to remember when she couldn’t. And the food she hated when she first moved to Carriage House is now the highlight of her day. So we finish our root beers and head toward lunch.

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In the years Mother has lived at Carriage House Assisted Living Center, my sisters and I have slipped with her into what I've come to call the "twilight years zone." Each

time we visit, we never know which Agnes we will meet. At the best of times, our mother is a terse, self-contained, controlling, feisty woman. At her worst, she is pretty much the same.

But for a while, after her move into the assisted living home, her medications turned her so sweet, one of my sisters quipped, "She's the mother I always wanted." It had seemed like a maternal invasion of the body snatchers. When this once-stolid Baptist lady was suddenly spitting expletives befitting Nixon, the body snatching had been welcomed, if eerie. But shades of our old Mom began to emerge from under the medications as she settled down, and we soon found ourselves in a sort of hide-and-seek with her. To underestimate Agnes Rutledge, we learned, was to find yourself on a helluva ride. And this year, Year 85 for Our Mother, she may not be making sprints for the freeway, but even with her all bent over in her wheel chair, no one puts it past her anymore.

We four daughters are all she has now. And her demands, once tinted with at least a touch of maternal concern, no longer even have the balance of rational thought. We are fighting to stay civil and sisterly as we deal with our own personal issues with this mystery of a mother who raised us. They, however, seem to have done a better job of the latter than I have. They seem to have learned where to put their heart out of harm's way.

I'm now at the age that I catch corner-of-my-eye glimpses of my mother in my bathroom reflection and wilt with despair. With every glimpse, I make vows not to be my mother. It's happening enough to sound like a mantra. And yet just as I think I have a Zen-like handle on it, I'll pick up the phone and find Mom on the other end. I instantly brace myself in case it's the "other" mother, because that mother has begun saying words that rattle me to the core. Since moving to Carriage House, my mother has hung up on

me, argued with me, told me I wasn't doing her right, that my sisters weren't doing her right and loudly reminded me that she had rights: All that, I can handle. But now and then, as I'm hanging up the phone, as I am already moving away from the sound of her, she'll say, "I love you" or “I'm proud of you," or "That's my kid!" or a dozen other phrases I longed, lusted, to hear as a child and learned to not expect. Yet here they are, coming at me, 30 years too late. And the world will tilt ever so slightly and I stand shocked into silence, waiting until it rights itself, wondering: *Who is this person? And what has she done with my cold, bitter mother?* But the wait is never long, sometimes only a matter of seconds.

“Maybe God will decide to take her before we have to move her,” one of my sisters recently said. I had burst out laughing at the sweetly macabre sound of it : It's the kind of natural thing someone with a belief in an afterlife and a merciful God thinks; it's also the kind of thing one thinks but never says out loud. Several times in the last seven years, however, we’ve thought God was going to do just that. We were certain "her time” had come. The first time we all braced ourselves, made emergency travel plans, talked about funeral arrangements, sat by her bedside as she tiptoed near the abyss. We were appropriately solemn, sad, reverent and dutiful. The second time, the feeling turned to amazement, and the third time, into exhaustion. Each time, in less than a month, she was calling us all again, wondering when we would visit her, who would be sending her treats, and griping about the help stealing her money.

One day soon there will be no re-resurrection of Agnes, and the easy thing would be to sigh with relief and the peace to come from all these life-long conflicted feelings. Lord knows I admit I've been running the other way from those feelings for more years than I

care to count, my life now full with its own intrigues and personal dramas. But as I drive her back from the Frosty Mug Root Beer Drive-In to Carriage House for lunch, I admit something to myself: I do not love her. My sisters have told me they do. Maybe they are able to reach for levels of blood love I cannot reach; maybe they are mature in ways I'm not through their own motherhoods, a rite of passage that fate didn't give me. Or perhaps their definition of the word is just broader than mine. It would be so much easier to sacrifice for her, to expect midnight calls and cops at the door, to handle the strain on savings accounts and future plans of our own, if our love for her overflowed, if she were one of the sweet old ladies that I know for an absolute fact *do* exist. But she isn't. I should at least love her in some bonded way past any feel-good, Hallmark card meaning. Surely I once did, didn't I? But pity is all that consumes me when I am with her, pity and guilt, and some crusty connection of biology. My feelings are all out of whack, and I want them to be back in whack before she dies. And I know that the longer we deal with this mother, the more she will become this mother, and this mother alone, in all our memories.

So I've begun to ask questions, to stir memory. Suddenly, I want to understand a few things, even though it's too late to hear them from her. To my knowledge, my mother wasn't ever happy, nor, for that matter, even pleasant. It has to be more than just a personality quirk; she couldn't have always been this way.

"Why is she like this?" I asked my sisters. One by one, they have all given me either a deer in the headlights look or a dead-on "don't go there" glare: Better to accept things as they are and let the past go. Life is short; move on. But I can't get a recent article out of my head, the findings of a "happy expert" that 50 per cent of happiness is in our genes, and I have 50 per cent of this woman's genes. Money, marital status, religion, and

education account for only 8 per cent of well-being; the rest, as the researcher put it, is up to "life's slings and arrows." It's hard not to believe a scientist who quotes Shakespeare. But while our family may have had more than our share of slings and arrows, other mothers have experienced more and still found peace by this age.

My sisters are right, of course. When I look at us, I see nothing but good: We have turned out relatively happy and well-adjusted, considering all—that is, considering her. It seems we have all found our way, away from her, with only these forays back into the twilight years zone to jangle us. I should let it go, not disturb our hard-won peace rustling around in anything-but-peaceful memories; all my wiser angels and sisters tell me so. And perhaps I will have no choice but to do so.

But not yet.

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Back at Carriage House, I roll Mom into the dining room, up to her usual table, and I sit down beside her along with the same women who have been at her table for years.

The tiny lady on Mother's left is a spry, rosy-cheeked woman who always says the same thing as part of her greeting: "My son brought me here and just left me. I lived in Abilene."

The woman across the table is silver-haired and big-boned, has most of her wits about her and seems physically fit as well, which has always made me wonder why she is here. Mother informs me, as always, that she was a dancer, a rather odd piece of information since the woman is 5' 10" and 190 lbs., if she's an ounce. She mostly talks about the food,

as if in warning: "It’s bland," she will say. "It’s good for us. I’m sure that’s the idea. But it isn’t three stars, that’s for sure."

The third lady is an African-American woman whom I imagine as a former schoolteacher, ruler-straight posture, dignified demeanor. She always wears the same gray-black wig, sometimes slightly askew. She greets me with: "Have you seen one of those gadgets that opens things? I need one of those. "

And, as always, my mother introduces me. We go through this scene every time I visit, the flurry of different Rutledge daughters no doubt a source of continued confusion to her tablemates.

"What do you do, dear?" one of them will always ask.

On my first few visits, I made the mistake of the truth. "I'm a writer," I answered. To which they always responded with "What have you written?" and "Are you rich and famous?" and, almost always, "Ooooh, like Danielle Steel? I love Danielle Steel. Do you know her?"

No, no, I had answered the first time. "I'm not that kind of writer."

"Well, what kind are you?" said one of them.

"Poor and obscure," I had joked.

And when this had drawn a three-way blank, I said: "But that Danielle Steel, isn't she something?"

"Oh, yes!" The Danielle-lover beamed: "Do you know her?"

This time, though, before Mother could begin my introduction, I am saved by the food. And as everyone is quietly digging into their little green peas and mashed potatoes, my mother suddenly declares: "Somebody stole my purse. I think it was the nigger girl."

I gulp, glancing at the dignified black woman. She hasn't seemed to have heard her.

But I sure have.

As I roll Mother back to her room, she brings up the missing purse again. And the "n-word." And again, I cringe. All the attendants at Carriage House, from what I'd seen, are Hispanic. Plus, to my knowledge, she hasn't had a real purse since moving here, just pocketbooks with a little bit of vending machine money.

"And my opal necklace. It's gone, too," she suddenly adds. I look around her room for the necklace, even though I haven't seen it for years. Is she remembering the things lost in the Great Giveaway or were things really being stolen? When I turn around to her, empty-handed, she once again tells me her opinion of who was the culprit. And yet again, I cringe.

Most people, especially those of us who lived through it, want desperately to forget what it was like before the civil rights movement. We want to believe it was never as bad as portrayed in books, films, stories, and documentaries. But to be alive during that time was to see the biggest change of the century; it happened before our eyes, in our lives, schools, churches, hearts. And lest I forget what a seismic sea change it was—lest I try to rewrite our own memories of it—I only have to listen to my mother, who long ago learned not to use the "n"-word, who taught us not to do so, and who now, upon losing some part of her mind, has begun to use it again.

"Mom," I say, by way of diversion, "do you remember my Corvair convertible?"

"Sure do," she nods. "You still have it?"

"No, I have a little Miata convertible now. Remember?"

She slowly nods, working on the memory, then says again: “Somebody stole my purse."

And before she can tell me again her opinion of who the thief might be, I say, "Mother, do you remember Dorothy?"

My mother hates to admit not knowing anything, so she doesn't answer. Maybe she doesn’t remember. I think she does.

CHAPTER 3

1963 Chevy Corvair

Black w/white convertible top, 4-wheel independent suspension, 6-cylinder rear-engine, in-dash automatic transmission, 100,000 mileage, like new

The car was so ugly, it was cute, so full of flaws it created a consumer-advocate career for Ralph Nader. But God help me, I loved it. I begged big for it, would walk all the way to Main Street from our house on First Street to stand and stare at it on Buddy Allen's Chevrolet Used Car Lot. My dad was about to perform his used-car finagle and bring home some "hoopie" car for me to drive since I'd recently gotten my license and my big sister's hand-me-down hoopie had burned its last quart of oil. I knew whatever he bought, it would be sensible and safe and clunky, something to get me and my sisters back and forth to school, but I could dream. And this dream was right down the street. With its dashboard gear levers and its push-button ragtop, I was in love from the get-go. Who cared about its 100,000 miles or dents and scratches all around? I must have made so many car lot visits, that Buddy Allen must have made Dad some ridiculously good deal. Because soon I was driving it.

And in the way and timing of such things, that black and white Corvair, along with the town's railroad track, my father's corner drugstore, and my mother's parade of housekeepers are all now my tiny, personal memories of the 1960s' civil rights era.

Someone once said there is no explaining the sixties, that "you had to be there." While that pertained more to the other end of the decade, it's true of its beginning, too, when the U.S. black civil rights movement found its momentum. To have grown up during that time is to feel a heavy "before and after" feeling. In hindsight, we always side with the angels because the angels' side is clear. The townful of otherwise good and God-fearing people who helped raise me, though, were not on the side of the angels. I want to believe that I never was prejudiced, that I moved through my Texas childhood never once using the "n" word, naturally having a good soul's consciousness that never needed raising. That's what I want; that's what I remember. But like most otherwise good people caught on the easy side of a bad situation, I know I had been brought up to think the status quo was just fine, that everybody was equal in God's eyes even if some were more equal than others.

In most Texas small towns, the railroad tracks were the easy dividing line. That was the status quo. And I lived in a small town that came into existence because of the railroad, Terrell being a planned stop along a new line between Dallas and Texarkana, 19th century city-planning courtesy of Southern Pacific Railways. So, if ever there were a town divided down the middle by a railroad track, my town was it. No one lived on the "wrong" side of Terrell's tracks but Negroes—that being the polite term our mothers and various church ladies and schoolteachers, watchdogs of our unruly mouths, taught us to use for the other half of the town's population. Negroes lived on that side, and everybody

else including the town's tiny "Mexican" population, lived on the other side. All was peaceful enough, no one really questioning this dividing line inherited from another era, that is, until Martin Luther King, Jr. began his nonviolent freedom marches a thousand miles away. And our small-town televisions began to bring them into our homes. And the word “Negro” along with politeness began to fade. And the "n-word" became common parlance on the streets and the playgrounds, at the gas stations and the soda fountains. And the worst thing a kid could be called at school was a “nigger-lover." And the good people of the town began to cringe and to squirm.

Now and then, my northern, big-city friends ask me questions about those times as if my childhood were some sort of museum piece. So I tell my Corvair story and let it go. I don't tell them about my father's soda fountain. I don't tell them about Dorothy. And I don't tell them about hearing my mother’s first use of the n-word, her first breaking of her own polite society rules, and my first eye-opening look at both her and my entire town. Because no matter what I might say, nothing will make us sound good. Good takes longer than a few years; good takes longer than forty years. And memory has a way of righting the wrongs you realize you may have lived through.

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I have partial memories of a dozen women hired as housekeeper/babysitters during my childhood. With my big sister Ann gone off to college, Mother had her hands full with my little sisters and me. So she gave in and hired help. Except for the occasional white church nursery worker, they were all black, and none of them lasted too long. My

mother was, as they'd say back then, hard on the help. And I'm sure my sisters and I were far from little saints. I remember only one by name: Dorothy. How old was I? Maybe 9, no older than 10, which means that the decade had just turned into the "sixties," and the civil rights movement's sit-ins across the Deep South had begun. But I wasn't aware of such things. I was, however, aware of Dorothy. She was a sight to my young eyes, a slue-footed woman who—as my 10 year old eyes saw it—moved so slow she'd have been beaten by a slug in a foot race. She had the biggest head, biggest feet, and biggest pair of sleepy doe-eyes on the skinniest body I'd ever seen. When she walked, she ambled, her heels hanging out the back of her old shoes, and nothing could rush her. But somehow she'd lasted the longest, until, that is, the day my mother was late returning from somewhere. I even recall the time: 4 p.m. Dorothy waited 30 minutes, then calmly walked out the front door, down to the sidewalk, past the corner hedgerow, putting one of those big feet in front of the other, until she disappeared in the direction of the railroad tracks, no more than a mile down First Street from our house.

Mother, of course, hit the roof when she came home and found us alone. I heard her yelling into the phone. To whom? My father, I suppose, or perhaps Dorothy if she had a phone. Yelling was just yelling to my young ears: Mother was mad.

The next morning, the doorbell rang and I ran to see who it was. And there was Dorothy.

"I need my pay," she said, looking down at me through the screen door. I can still see those big eyes. They seemed to hold no anger, just a recognition of things as they were—her right to a day's wages, no matter what sort of day it had been, or perhaps, more likely, it was a week's wages she came for, no matter what sort of day had ended it.

Mother came into the hall, calling "Who is it?" until she saw quite clearly through the screen who it was. I remember thinking "danger" in the way of all kids. But I just stood there, still young enough to need babysitting, not old enough to understand the dynamics in front of me, and a little too curious for my own good, even then.

I listened as Mother let her have it and then fired her (or fired her again). That's when I saw a flicker of something in Dorothy's eyes. Today, I think it could have been the desperation of larger perils waiting without her pay or maybe just plain anger of her own. But it was definitely a flicker. And I noticed Mother noticed as well. Mother was, of course, in the right, which was exactly where she liked to be. Dorothy had left us alone; she had been irresponsible. Perhaps she had a good reason; Mother didn't ask. Excuses wouldn't have mattered. Nothing would have overridden keeping us safely corralled, to my mother's way of thinking.

This, though, is the forever image I have of the next long moment: A standoff—two women, a screen door between them, and nothing moving.

Finally, Mother turned and, muttering under her breath, disappeared into the den. She returned with her big purse, pulled out her wallet, opened the screen door and handed Dorothy a handful of bills, the screen door slapping quickly shut again. Dorothy did not mumble thanks; did not say a word, did not rush down the steps and away. She just turned and put one size 12 in front of the other, to a cadence all her own, a sort of neutral in motion, and made her slow, even way to the sidewalk and out of sight once again.

Fuming, Mother pivoted, and as she passed me, still muttering, I heard: "Stupid nigger woman."

My righteous-as-hell, churchgoing mother, who had switched me but good for lesser things, had said the "n-word."

Do as I say and not as I do wasn't a concept I ever quite grasped, not even at 10. So now all bets seemed off and the first layer of parental scales had fallen from my little eyes.

I never saw Dorothy again.

But I would see Agnes again. And again.

The next day, a new black woman arrived to help Mother with us, and after that, a new one appeared every few months. I began to wonder where they all came from, Dorothy still disappearing in my mind's eye down the block toward the direction of the train tracks. I became very aware of those tracks and the forbidden world beyond it. Each day, when it was time to take our latest housekeeper/babysitter home, she always sat in the backseat of our car. We always drove her back to the drugstore where she would exit the backseat, enter the store and wait until Dad ordered his delivery truck driver to take her home over those mysterious tracks running right behind the store's building. Rare were the topics my parents agreed on, but the issue of race was one of them, and so, I knew, was the dividing line of that railroad track.

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My father's drugstore, which could have been packaged as The Corner Drugstore, America, circa 1950s, was right in the middle of our downtown main street that hugged the railroad track for a half-mile or so. The drugstore had been in the same location since

1875, the year the town was founded and railroad tracks laid. My father, a local farm boy making good, had bought it on its 75th anniversary. To stand inside its great glass walls facing the rest of downtown was to feel like you were standing in "city" central.

Having a drugstore daddy was like having your own weird wonderland of *Superman* and *Wonder Woman* comics, candy counters, band-aids, liniments, and strange bottles galore. Near the massive front glass windows, down from the display case of King Edward cigars, Lucky Strike cigarettes, and knives for all occasions, was the county's fanciest cosmetic counter. It was loaded with racks and drawers of face powder, mascara, lipsticks and perfumes—Revlon to Faberge—complete with padded, powder-puff pink chair where the town's beautiful women, or women beautiful-to-be, could park their derrieres and test the testers to their faces' contents. Several aisles over, nowhere near the padded chair, was the lone shelf of black beauty products—hair straighteners, Afro-sheen and such. Along the side street's glass wall was the comic, magazine and paperback racks. And across the back wall was the store's main counter, which fronted a raised employees-only area with its floor-to-ceiling shelves of prescription pill bottles and a place for Dad to stand and see everything while typing Rx labels two-fingered on his manual Underwood typewriter. And that included everything and everyone in the soda fountain, an area half as big as the store itself, an entire other room, stuffed into the far corner, where I knew the joys of creating banana splits, malted milkshakes, fountain Dr. Peppers, and grilled cheese on the griddle. I thought it heaven itself and begged to work back there. But there would be no sodajerking for Mr. Rutledge's daughter. I had to stand and sell from the front of the store, and from the front of the store, I saw the world of my little town go by. And the world was changing fast.

I began working part-time at the store during the summer I turned 14, moving from my mother's world into my father's. My dad was a man with a big laugh and a big heart, but he also had a certain way, his way, of looking at things. And to work for him, much less be his offspring, was to all but pledge allegiance to that worldview. I loved my daddy, but I was a little nervous about being his employee. I never knew which to do in his presence, shower him with affection or come to attention; any day might demand both. But any day at the store, I knew, would demand only the latter.

It was the summer that civil rights sit-ins were becoming freedom marches across the Deep South. The tension was in the Texas air as well, especially in nearby Dallas, still reeling from John F. Kennedy's assassination only the year before. Everyone in the store, though, was polite and friendly and happy enough, and that went double for me, as I soaked in everything I saw from my new, grown-up vantage point.

And from that vantage point, I couldn't help but notice Dr. Jackson, the town's only black doctor. He seemed to be dropping by almost every day that summer, much more than the white doctors ever did. Dr. Jackson was a big, roly-poly, wavy-haired man with expensive suits and shiny shoes, who laughed loud and long about this and that with my father, coming and going freely in the raised prescription area. He and my father were interacting as equals, a dynamic so strange I could hardly keep from staring. I watched my father for signs of his true feelings about this successful black man, waiting to hear some muttered racist remark after Dr. Jackson left. Perhaps it was just business, I reasoned, working to understand this intriguing sight; Dr. Jackson was a doctor, after all, and my father was a drugstore owner. But whatever his true feelings were, he kept them to himself. I never saw anything between them but the hometown respect that black

customers went out of their way to pay the pudgy doctor as he exited. It was the same respect they paid my father, down to calling them both "Doc."

At the very same time, though, sometimes even the same day, I'd hear Dad tell some scruffy young black man to button up his shirt before he came inside, that he had a family, that he should be a man. Did he lecture all the scruffy young white men in the store the same way? Probably. Undoubtedly. But only the scruffy-young-black-men scoldings have stayed in my memory, perhaps because of what I was seeing on TV each night—the angry young black men who were through with scoldings. So I'd brace for a reaction to my father's commands and, instead, I'd always hear: "Yes, sir, 'Doc.'" I recall wanting to ask my father about it all; I also recall knowing, instinctively, not to.

So I watched. And I listened. And I waited on his customers. And from behind that front counter, I was the one who delivered ice cream cones to black kids from the fountain area where they couldn't go, where a sign hung that said, *We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to Anyone*. And as the summer Texas days heated up, and the ice cream sales soared, and my trips to the soda fountain to fetch cones began to fill most of my drugstore day, I recall thinking it odd and rather stupid that black kids, or anyone black of any age, couldn't sit at the counter and get their own stupid cones. One summer day in July, though, a few students from the town's tiny black Christian junior college did, taking the few brave steps into the fountain and up to the counter stools. My father, a believer in the status quo at the very heart of the civil rights movement, the Jim Crow segregation in public areas, had vowed to close the fountain room if that day ever came. When it came, though, he didn't. My father dodged his own headline by letting it happen when it happened…and nothing happened. And that was that. Why didn't he close it? I've

wondered for years. Perhaps, again, it was just about business, the fountain being a big money maker. Perhaps, standing inside his glass-sided drugstore, he grasped that such an action might create a reaction he couldn't control. Perhaps. I'll never know. What I do know is this: My father was an authoritative, close-minded, benevolent bigot, the most munificent of small town kings —in short, a Southern man of his times as much as a Texas one. But he was not dumb.

And I missed it all, gone to church camp for a week of Baptist bible study and sneaking out to meet boys. Back at work, I heard about the incident sideways, in whispers and furtive looks of other employees who would hush as I drew near. I guessed it in the strained way my father watched the soda fountain, moving his typewriter to the corner closer to its entrance. But never did I hear of it from my father nor my mother, nor directly from anyone else, as if that were the point. In the way of such things, what might have been big news somewhere else was hushed, played down, allowed to play out at a small-town pace. For the rest of that summer, I still fetched cones for little black kids who'd stare nervously at the fountain entrance then hold out their quarters to me, just wanting a little ice cream. By the time school started, although Dad still nervously watched the fountain from his prescription area perch—as if, each day, weighing its drama against its value on whether to keep it open or closed—no one had to ask me to fetch ice cream at all. Everything was hesitantly, slowly, shifting, everyone minding their manners and actions. And Dr. Jackson, whose frequent visits I now realize might have had a calming purpose, was dropping by much less often.

Time passed; the threatening summer storm quieted. School integration was still a year or so away, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s Freedom March in far-away Alabama

wouldn't filter into our television rooms until the next spring. But something had changed; something had changed in me. I hadn't quite named it yet, but my curiosity was taking another shape, the shape of the times.

Finally, I got my driver's license and began my Corvair dreaming. Soon, my friends and I were riding around, in that new, very-used convertible Corvair feeling that first rush of high octane, top-down freedom. As we rode around and around the same smalltown streets, I began eyeing the railroad tracks. One evening, under cover of darkness, I stopped eyeing them: I drove the Corvair packed with my friends, up to and across the tracks. My friends squealed and squelched it, hands over their mouths. We felt the hot rush of the forbidden as we bounced over the rails, sailing into the dark, and then we hushed, straining to see through the shadows, and praying not to be seen. We drove past a few blocks of storefronts and houses, like ours, if shabbier; we drove past their high school, like ours if shabbier, and then drove quickly back over the tracks again. And that was that.

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At home, Mother's parade of housekeepers had slowed, since I was now the one doing any needed babysitting, and cleaning lady visits were only weekly events. I'd smile at them, try not to get in the way, and made sure not to be in the room when Mother talked to them. I already had my own authority issues; I didn't need to feel bad about the way she treated people she hadn't given birth to. But slobby teenager that I was, I did notice that, as if on some cue, I began straightening up my room the day before Cleaning

Lady Day. On one of those days, as I was running out the door, Corvair key in hand, my Mother called after me.

"Take Mavis (Maisy? Myrene?) home, please," she said. "Take my car."

I knew what she meant: Drive her to the drugstore so the delivery truck driver could take her home across the tracks.

I smiled at the cleaning lady who was coming out the front door and down the steps toward me, sizing me up. Why don't I remember her name? In all the years since, I have not been able to conjure it. But I see her, the way my 15-year-old eyes saw her: She was a big woman, bulging in all the wrong places, and grunting with every step. She wore pink houseshoes, the slip-on kind. Her hair was black beauty-shop perfect, but a hint of rolled up hose, stopped below her knees, peeked below her hemline.

We both made a move towards Mother's car. My Corvair, though, was behind it. So I said, suddenly: "Want to ride in my convertible?"

The woman looked me up and down, one eyebrow cocked for any white child nonsense.

"Really," I said. "It's cool." I went over to the car, put the top down and waited. "See?"

She wasn't looking at the downed top, though. She was looking at my Corvair's tiny back seat, and we both knew what she was thinking.

So I said: "Sit up here. C'mon." And I pointed to the front passenger side, which would place her knee to knee with me. She paused, thinking about this odd thing for a moment, then just stepped stiffly over, and eased her big self into the little car's seat.

As I popped the lever into reverse and rolled out of the driveway, she put one hand over her hair as if it would blow away. We drove down First Street to the town's main drag, crossed it, and sailed right across the railroad tracks. And with her directing me, pointing the way with her free hand—left, right, and left again—I proudly drove up to a little house fronted by a cyclone fence overgrown with vines and weeds to the sound of a yap-yap dog somewhere behind it all. She patted her hair down, got out as dignified as possible, tugging at those hose rolled under her kneecaps. Then, looking back at me and smiling strangely, holding her gaze on me for a beat longer than she ever had before, she shook her head, and without a word, went inside. So I turned the Corvair around, thinking already about the hell I would catch once I got home.

Nothing, though, was ever said about it. Maybe my parents never knew, but how could they not? I have no memory of their reaction, and, to this day, I have no idea why. Did it really happen? Yes, I'm sure it did, yet I think about that ride now and feel a sort of a bemusement. The line between fantasy and reality is pretty gray when you're 15; the crises you see on television can feel very real indeed, seeping out and into you. There I was, my formative years sandwiched between Kennedy idealism and the Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinations, so it's possible, I suppose, that I could have wanted to feel good about my young self in that little black and white town even if it meant imagining a token gesture to pin those good feelings on.

All I know is this: I can see every moment of that little ride in Living Technicolor.

I never drove back across the tracks again. The next year, my high school took its first steps toward being integrated, and my sister Kay and I both made black friends our parents forbid us to have. So by the time I was living through the Vietnam War years of

my college education, my little Corvair story was part of my life, my way of understanding my own budding awareness. It became a part of my personal mythology, truth above all, which helped shape me when I most needed to be shaped.

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There's another defining moment that also catches a ride with any memory of those years, and now it seems to be about another kind of freedom. It happened years later, long after the Corvair had been handed down through two more sisters' adolescent driving, and long after my father noticed smoke coming from its rear engine and gave it a long-overdue burial.

I was riding in the back seat of my parents' big, black god-awful boat of another black and white car—this time, a Cadillac. Where we were going or why, I have no memory. My father was driving, my mother riding "shotgun," an appropriate enough analogy for the uneasy peace I always felt between them when riding anywhere with them both, cross words like gunpowder waiting for any spark to explode. I was an adult by the standards of the world, a young married, already finished with college and living on my own, with opinions of my own, already having seen enough of the world to know I wanted to see more. But I was still their daughter on my rare visits back into their world, and in truth, I was still their daughter in the ways of all twenty-something daughters everywhere, especially in Texas. And on that day, I was Daughter #2 going along for the ride.

Driving down a stretch of four-lane highway near Terrell, we passed a pickup truck with two little boys in the back, arm-in-arm buddy-style, nestled in some old tires in the wide-open breeze. One was white, the other black. I barely noticed them, the scene not

being that unusual, thank God, by then. My father, however, turned his head toward the sight and said, "That just makes me sick." My mother gave a little snort, and that was that. We pulled past them and away.

I was stunned. My stomach flipped, flopped and turned flat over. I felt heat rising up my neck until the sweat drops popped. I was angry, embarrassed, disappointed, ashamed, and what I wanted most in the world was to open the car door, halt that pickup driver and kids and hug them all, in front of my parents.

Why was I so surprised? This wasn't new. It's not as if I didn't know my parents' prejudices past the good, God-fearing people they saw themselves to be. Why was this moment different from my town's wrong-side-of-the-track mentality, my father's soda-fountain fears, and my mother's cleaning lady parade?

And then I understood. It was my first sparkling moment of grown-up clarity. This was about me. And them. I realized that one of two things about the moment had to be true: Either they did not know what I thought or they did not care.

If they didn't know, whose fault was that?

And if they didn't care—?

If they didn't care, it didn’t matter. Because, at that moment, finally, fully, I saw them not as parents but as people: A man and a woman, stuck forever in their own time. And with that, my bit of righteous anger faded as quickly as it came, turning instead into a sort of leaving, an epiphany on wheels. They were who they were and who they would always be.

And I was not them.

As I glanced back at that pickup, I saw something new. I saw the road clearly going the opposite way. And when I see it now, it's the Corvair I see driving on it, top down, free and easy.

At Carriage House

"It's cold in here," my mother announces and rolls over to ratchet that thermostat dial up even higher. I have no more layers to shed. I have already stripped down to a camisole and am not prepared to go any further, so I open her room's door, stick my head into the hallway for a big gulp of normal air, and I get an earful of the Hello woman two doors down:

"Hello? Hellooooooooo?"

My chore this afternoon is to take Mother to the doctor, so I decide we can just get going a bit early. Considering her frailty, before committing to moving her two states away, my sisters and I thought it best to consult with her doctor. She believes the appointment is for her usual array of problems, and is happy to go and talk about them. I, though, am less than thrilled.

"Ready?" I say. "You've got a date to see the doctor, you know."

"What time?"

"Now."

After the Great Giveaway, we had consulted with a small army of medical experts. She did not have Alzheimer's, they finally, progressively, agreed. Good, we'd all responded: What, then, was wrong with her? No one, though, would commit to a

definitive answer for what was creating her come-and-go senility. Every response was hedged, qualified, years passing without any real medical diagnosis. Perhaps a series of small strokes, one speculated. Another mentioned some cerebral atrophy in a CAT scan. Another, after studying her past medical files, underscored the havoc that years of unaddressed stress, anxiety and depression can wreak on the elderly. Yet another finally came right out and said my mother's condition was just senility, what was once called "old age," her decline a natural thing—"natural," I can only suppose, in the same sense that dying is natural. During one visit that first year, I noticed one side of her face seemed to be drooping ever so slightly without hampering her ability to stack tissues and turn up thermostats, so I had called my brother-in-law Bob, the M.D., and asked him if these were the tiny strokes one doctor had suggested.

"Maybe. Although they aren't the fatal kind," he said, dumbing it down for me. "They're called 'transient ischemic attacks,' mini-strokes, blockages of tiny blood vessels that keeps oxygen from parts of the brain. They don't last long, partially recovering but leaving damage. Kind of like unplugging circuits, say, in a Christmas tree. One or two, you don't notice. Too many in one location, you do." Then he added: "The whole common denominator is arteriosclerosis, of course, the gradual deterioration of blood supply to an organ, in this case, the brain. Although we haven't seen much of that in the tests done on your mother."

Oh, I said, then how might this be connected to her erratic behavior?

There was a genial pause, and then his answer: "Well, we don't know."

And so it goes.

One thing, however, we knew without doubt. Whatever was happening to parts of her mind, other parts were still sharp enough to cut yourself on. Somehow she always seemed of sound mind when it counted—with doctors, with nurses, with psychologists, with cops. And she was good at it, scary good, multiple-personality good, a skill that continued to keep her legally sane. She had even conned a doctor into giving her an operation, against her own written orders against it, and without contacting any of her daughters. It was as if we were the only ones she revealed her true off-kilter self to. Now you see her, now you don't.

Or maybe it was us.

After years of lunches with the nice ladies at Mother's table, I'd begun to suspect Mom is not that unusual. They all seem a little off yet still in touch, so how would you know what they were before? It would take a family member to judge a difference. And in the ones with an authoritative air like our mother, their slight looniness might not be noticed in occasional interaction by overworked personnel, experts accepting the reality they see, the reality that family members resist. The truth is, I think, old people scare everyone a little. I have an image of the entire medical industry quaking at the number of little old ladies like Mother coming their way. All of them—doctors, nurses, attendants, even cops and paramedics—just seemed flat tired. Just like us.

By this time, seven years down the road, then, she is much more excited to go see the doctor than I am. What I will see is a man whose hands are full of old ladies with buckets of troubles. What she will see is an expert with a prescription pad to tell her troubles to.

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Fifteen minutes later, we finally are on our way. As I steer her out of her room and down the hall, I notice she is in a decidedly upbeat mood. And I see my chance:

"Mom, we have to talk."

I know that my eldest sister Ann has already talked to her about the state of her finances and declining health, about the need to move her nearer family members and into a skilled care nursing home, about applying for Medicaid, and all the rest of the details we are facing for her. I also knew that she had become upset about everything, but mostly about her money, vividly refusing to believe this point above all. So I brace myself and say the rest:

"Mom, remember what Ann talked to you about when she was here?"

"No," she says a little too curtly.

She remembers.

"Wouldn't you rather be closer to some of us, Mom? You know you need the help."

She fumes, pursing her lips impatiently. "I don't have the energy to move. You'll have to drag me. This is my home now."

"But you say you hate it. Hate everyone here," I point out. "That they won't let you have milk or ice cream when you want it, that they are stealing your things."

"No, I don't," she snaps. "This is fine."

"We have to face it, Mom. Your money's gone, and we've got to make some changes."

She will now maneuver; she will say something else, anything else, to get me off the subject—or she'll say nothing at all. So I wait for it. Will it be birdseed? Milk?

She chooses nothing.

Her nest egg had gone faster than any of us ever expected. After going through all her finances and ledgers once we moved her here, we saw that our guess about the situation was right—she had given a not-insignificant chunk of the nest egg away for months, years, before the Great Giveaway. She had been supporting older, penniless sisters and brothers. She had been giving money to one or two of Dad's longtime employees whenever they'd call. She'd paid $20,000 alone for the back taxes on the house of a handicapped black man who'd work for my father and grandfather for almost 50 years, a fact that momentarily shocked me until I realized she felt it was her duty, the right and Christian thing to do, even long after she'd turned her back on the church. Even Pansy, of Great Giveaway Caretaker fame, had tracked Mother to Carriage House and called to ask for a loan as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Was it all part of her slow-motion senility? I knew it wasn't, at least until the Pansy Era, because there had been us as well: "Do you have enough money?" she'd asked us through the years as we headed out her door, back to our cars and our lives, far past the point we would ever take money from her. As we have begun to sacrifice to pay her bills, filling in the gap between her own money, Medicare, and the Medicaid coverage to come, we keep reminding ourselves of the Mother who followed us out her front door, smiling as she offered us cash. Sometimes it's all that keeps us steady. I can look back now and see her stiff offerings as perhaps her most natural expression of kindness. I also look back and see myself expecting them, not liking myself in the expectation, but knowing somehow that, by taking them, I was also accepting a piece of Mother's love I couldn't get any other way, that she could not give any other way. So I took them long after I should. My dad's generosity was a joyful thing, obvious to everyone, if still firmly

attached with the strings of an authoritative father. My mother's joy in giving, though, was always an invisible thing, something with layers of unspoken history trailing behind it. My husband once remarked that my parents had set out to have the American Dream and they'd done it. The comment had taken me by surprise considering the combustible state of their marriage, but in this one essential sense it was true. We were children of Depression-era parents who'd made it to the middle class and were going to revel in it, with lots of kids and lots of things, and lots of hard-won security all around. Money, for them, was love, control, power, the wellspring of all goodness. What, then, must it be like, at my mother's age, to be told the one thing she had always counted on, beyond marriage, beyond children, beyond religion, has now abandoned her?

"Mom? Did you hear me?" I press, as we turn the Carriage House hall's corner.

"Hello?" I hear from down the corridor. "Hellooooo?"

Several miles down the road toward the doctor's office, as she sits harmlessly in the passenger seat watching the passing scenery, my mother suddenly says:

"I'll say one thing for Harold. He was a good provider."

Good provider—it *was* the one thing she said about Harold, the one nice thing she ever said about Dad. And he was. And now it's gone.

And we ride the rest of the way in silence.

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At the doctor's office, I roll her into the examination room, hand her a magazine, then fib about a full bladder in order to talk to the doctor about things I do not want her to

hear. But before I can say a word to him, both of us standing a few feet outside the examining room, I feel a presence behind me. When I look, there she is, creeping toward us, pushing that wheelchair with her feet.

So I roll her back in and, once again, hand her the magazine. On the cover is a talk show host who is promising to enlighten the reader about her love-at-first-sight marriage with her latest husband.

“That's what I said,” says my mother, pointing at the title of the article: *That's the Man I'm Going to Marry.*

"What?" I ask. "What do you mean?"

"When I saw Harold, I said, 'That's the man I'm going to marry.'"

As she goes back to page turning, I go back to breathing, the words having knocked the wind right out of me. It was the first mention I’d ever heard of my parents as lovers. In fact, it is the first loving thing I've heard her say about him.

Ever.

And this one hits me in a spot I have hidden so far down I don't even know it's there, a spot that can make me suddenly bust out crying unless I throw everything I have at it. The adult who is tired of the buffeting, all the hide-and-seek and who-the-hell are-you of these Mother visits wants to hear nothing more. But the daughter in me won't let it go, and I hear myself repeating: "What do you mean?”

And she obliges: “I saw Harold get in the elevator at UT, the one I operated when I was a student. He smiled at me and I said to myself, 'That's the man I am going to marry.'"

CHAPTER 4

1984 Dodge Ram 50

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Navy blue with silver trim, short-bed
pickup, 3.7 liter 6 cylinder engine,
3 speed automatic transmission, off-
road tires, a/c, grille guard, towing
package, headache bar, ball hitch,
gun rack
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I heard the news that my father was dying over a restaurant's pay phone after returning from an anniversary trip to the Caymans in 1986. He barely 60; I was barely 30. My dad had been slowly dying for 10 years from his beloved cigarettes, having problems as far back as my college days. My first notice of it was his gasping for breath lugging my stuff up six flights of stairs to my freshman dorm room. Now, he was on a ventilator at the closest hospital to my hometown that had one. I got off the phone, walked back to our table in the nonsmoking section where I noticed a couple, puffing away. I walked straight over, in front of God and everybody and told them to take their cancer sticks out of my breathing space or I'd tell the management. And when they took exception, I told them to move or else I'd take their burning sticks of slow death and shove them where they'd do some good.

No I didn't. What I did was politely ask them to move. When they didn't, I politely asked the waiter to move them. When he didn't, I stormed outside, where a college-age boy stood smoking and began giving him an earful about Dad and ventilators and dying too young from those goddam smelly things until my husband came out and corralled me.

"C'mon, Agnes," he said. And seeing the fire in my eyes at those fighting words, my former college football player husband just pulled me into a bear hug until I returned to my senses.

Although the years fade memory's sharpest edges, my anger, I think, was mostly about my being young, clueless, at the beginning of adult life, and unable to consider death on any terms. Like most people who hear the word "emphysema," my father knew what he'd done to himself and what would slowly begin to happen to him over the next decade after diagnosis. He'd lived with the reality of his coming death for longer than I care now to imagine. Death used to be as much a part of a family's life as a family member; it was always waiting to come in and stay awhile. We hide it now. No ice in the coffin and viewing in the parlor. But it's still messy, and the younger you are, the more you fight it, angered by it, refuse to accept it. Now, of course, we all look at our mother and wonder if our healthy living is worth it. Give us all, dear God, quality over quantity. Or bring us all a steak and extra dessert, please.

And, as I look at Mother now, I also realize I'm no longer angry with my father for smoking himself into an early death.

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My father was a pickup-driving man, complete with gunrack and gooseneck trailer hitch, Texan to the core, the first in his family to get a college education. He wore a white shirt, tie, and dress shoes everyday to work. But outside his drugstore, he had hat, boots, truck, and the attitude to go with them. He also had a strange sense of humor. Ask him how he felt, he'd say, "Oh, I got a bad pain in my ovaries," and belly laugh for a full five seconds. Not the bumper sticker type, he once briefly put two on his precious pick-up: *I'm Not a Cowboy, I Just Found the Hat* and *Drugstore Cowboy.* One truck had an air horn like an 18-wheeler that he could reach up and pull just for fun. His trucks always smelled like a combination of cigarettes, horse sweat, and Texas dirt. And his idea of heaven was a Sunday spent at his 400 scraggly acres of pasture land near town—the kind of place Texans call a "farm"—riding horses and herding, dehorning, deworming and castrating cattle. It was a Sunday ritual I quickly tired of, but one my younger sisters loved so much, at least the horsy part, that they still have horses today.

My earliest memory of my father is watching from our upstairs bedroom window for his truck to roar into the back driveway at the end of his normal 16-hour drugstore day. My little sisters and I would squeal down to him through the window screen, as only pre-schoolers can, watching the truck's headlights go off and the engine stop and the back porch door screech open then whop shut. And we'd start bouncing on our beds waiting for him to come up the stairs and hug us. Even to this day, I smile at the sound of a truck pulling into a driveway at night. It is a good sound, a masculine, safe and happy sound.

Dad's last pickup was a blue '84 Dodge. He knew it would be his last truck and told one of my sisters so. It was the last in a long line beginning with the first drugstore delivery truck, a 1957 Chevy painted with the slogan: "Service to the Sick," and

including a truck that had a wrought-iron bar bent into the shape of an Rx behind the back window directly over the tool box. He was a man who loved being "Daddy," and all that went with that in those baby boomer days—and he did it so well that my Texas sister will still not allow a cross word to be said about him. But he also loved running the show. Go with him anywhere, and you were along for his ride. Be bold enough to ask him the time, and he'd cock an eyebrow and growl: "What's the matter? You taking medicine?" Do something less than up to his standards or his timing, be his daughter or his employee, and you'd know the wrath of Mr. Rutledge. Now that I think about it, take away the humor, and the same could be said for Mrs. Rutledge.

In fact, in the end, this was their battlefield—the same potload of pride and stubbornness. (Case in point: My father owned a drugstore; my mother opened a health food store—a fitting metaphor for their marriage if there ever was one.) And not a joke between them to lighten the load. I would soon learn from my own newlywed experience that a sense of humor shared was sometimes all that stood in the way of bloodletting.

Someone once summed them up by saying they loved us in the autocratic way of all Eisenhower-era parents. Fine, I thought, but didn't Eisenhower parents hug and smooch? Touch and tease and laugh, now and then, to make their offspring feel joy to the core? Theirs was the kind of relationship, though, that made a kid glad to have been born in a big family; all the better to get lost in the shuffle and the sound and occasional fury. My eldest sister, eight years my senior, the one who should have the fond memories of young parents laughing and flirting and kissing, has no such memories, in fact, has no childhood memories at all. But they must have once. My mother's "before" photograph attests to it, as do my own extroverted genes, not to mention the bumper crop of babies spread across

sixteen years. Whatever was between them, they protectively hid the specifics from us, if not the emotion. Or maybe they didn't know what it was themselves. It was always there, though, at least in my memory. My modern self wonders why they didn't divorce, or at least separate once or twice when the tension got so thick none of us could breathe. But I know why. Past the fact that divorce, back then, was considered a disgrace, and the fact that they had a houseful of children to consider, my mother had nowhere to go. For that matter, neither did my father. Our world worked, such as it did, because they found a way to occupy their own worlds inside ours. Other photographs, the framed and oversized "Offspring Series" portraits that slowly enveloped our house's walls, testify to that. We must have kept them spinning proudly around us all on our bikes and horses and big back yards and baseball and piano recitals and school awards and the whole of our Texas childhoods…and maybe their own middle-class dreams.

Being married then and being married now are two entirely different things, of course; I'm not fool enough to say it isn't so. After all, what do I really know about my parents? Not much, since they'd shared no more than snippets of their life before us: A dirt-poor 19-year-old woman, first in her family to go to college, dropping out of school to support her new husband. A dirt-poor 21-year-old man, putting himself through college dreaming of being a doctor but forced to settle for pharmacy school because he didn't have time to keep up his grades. Two people who met in an elevator on campus in 1941 and eloped three months later. This was all we were ever told. Maybe this was all they told themselves, as they created their new, improved All-American small-town life.

Maybe.

***

The only time I paid for psychological counseling was, years later, to deal with the rejection side of the writing life—or so I thought. There was one little problem. That topic didn't come up. I spent the first few sessions making jokes, and the next few talking about my father, my dictatorial, mercurial, generous, short-tempered, selfless, selfish, chauvinistic, charming mess of a dad, who I decided had made a mess of me. And that resulted in my spending the next few sessions realizing that I was full of slow piss—just like my father. Lord knows I couldn't have talked to him about it before he died, the confusing mix of arms-wide affection and arms-crossed authority that he so loudly was.

But as I ranted and raved and let out all that slow piss of my own, I also realized I had barely mentioned my mother, and always in the context of him. Perhaps it was all about another seismic cultural shift, the one going on for women at that time, an era when the word "equality" was in the air for gender as well as race. My father's patronizing, if loving, treatment of his daughters ("All my girls should get their college degree, just in case.") included his wife, a dynamic I could not fail to notice. So, perhaps, for that moment, I was forgiving my mother everything, blaming all her "sins" on the autocratic, male chauvinistic, cultural patriarchy of the time, or some such thing I might have said back then.

Whatever the case, after a dozen sessions, I decided I was okay except for a problem with perfectionism and a toxic case of my own stubbornness, and rejection was okay if it didn't become a lifestyle, a career dead-end, or part of my own marriage. And that ended the $90 an hour chats.

Rejection, however, isn't just for budding writers. For some, it's part of love and war and sometimes even death. That, now, seems very clear. The fact that he died almost 20 years ago mutes most of my memories of him, as it should. It gives them all the mellow sheen of old photographs—all, that is, except the way he exited and the way he designed that exit.

***

It took my father about two months to die, and he wanted it to happen at home. He made it known loud and clear that he did not want to go back on that ventilator, because he knew the next time we would be the ones making the decision to take him off, and that seemed like his idea of a double hell. No, he wanted to die in his own bed, in his own room, with the Louis L'Amour paperbacks and the cigarette-stained Lazy Boy and the old roll top desk from the 19th century drugstore that had been his for a large portion of the 20th century.

My mother was there in that house with him every minute of his slow dying. All the daughters but one still lived in Texas at that time, as we took turns coming to help. She had him 24 hours a day, though, so even when we were there, she began to pay for sitters to give us all a chance to sleep through the night. I watched the way she tended to him, perhaps because it was easier to watch than the slow, gasping demise of my father. I found myself studying her actions, looking for last clues to her or to him or to them, looking for some feeling here at their relationship's end. There truly is no ending with such a relationship, of course, but that was a truth I had yet to grasp. I was a young

married, still confused about these parents who loved us in an orbital way, who had circled each other as we circled them, while never straying into each other's atmosphere. My mother, though, was all business. She had obviously locked away any feeling with her own private pain long ago.

My last night there, I woke in the middle of the night to his gaspings. My room was next to his, and so there was no escaping, even through my closed door, the sound of him. By the early morning hours, he had become delirious. For over an hour, I heard his groanings as he worked for breath: oh-my, oh-Harold, oh, oh. Oh. When I could stand it no longer, I walked into his room to see the sitter dozing, God knows how, in a chair near his bed. I walked past them to my mother's room down the hall. I watched her sleeping, dead to the world, head propped up on a stack of pillows, sleeping all but sitting up in her odd way, hair net on, mouth open. I knew if I made a sound, she would hear it, even over the sounds of my father, and she would rouse herself, get up, check on both me and my father, all in one motion, and I knew I would continue watching for the signs I still hoped to see between them beyond duty and obligation. But I didn't make that sound, because I had no energy for the watching. And there was nothing she could do for Dad that wasn't already being done. And what she could do for me, I had begun to accept, was beyond her.

So I moved silently back into Dad's room to the sound of his oh-mys and told the sitter she could go home, that I'd start my spell early.

For the next four hours, until the sun came up, I sat with my father, and soon my breath was in sync with his. As the minutes went by and by and by, I felt my heart pound, I felt my chest all but burst, and I began to beg the God of my youth for some mercy,

some grace, to let it end now, with me here. Let me be the one. And when I got no response to my childish prayer, no slowing of my father's torturous breathy delirium, I began to silently beg my father.

Die now, Dad. While I'm here. Die now. It's all right. Let go.

I wonder now about why I wanted this so much. I wasn't that close to him. I had chosen not to be when I left my younger sisters to ride the horses and mess with his cattle out on his mesquite spit of a farm, growing away, driving away, moving steadily farther and farther away from this room, this house, these parents. But that moment in the dark with him, none of that mattered. I was his daughter. I cared at that moment more than I had in years. I wanted it over. The end was horrid. And it shouldn't be attended by hired sitters.

I sat there listening to each labored breath, visualized each one as his last, imagined the silence—until the next raspy, desperate inhale began. And instead of a peaceful end, he came back to consciousness just long enough to realize how bad it was.

Despite pledges demanded about dying on your own terms and in your own bed, when you cannot breathe you ask for ambulances, you ask for doctor friends, you ask for ventilators. You ask for the stash of morphine you put in your filing cabinet from your drugstore years before, fearing this day, having forgotten its lost potency. You say it will be easier on us, insist 911 be called, and be called right now.

I weakened; Mother did not. And as he slipped back into delirium, I went back to sitting, and my mother slipped back into her room.

Finally, the sun came up. His breathing had become less labored, shallow, thin. The next daughter would arrive in a few hours, and I had to go. I had no grasp of this thing, its

own pace, its connection to the rest of life. I wanted it to end well, a woman with too many literature degrees, expecting the crispness, the moral clarity of a novel's end, still believing life could be, should be, tidy. I left finally knowing better.

In less than a week, my doctor brother-in-law would be the one to hear his last breath. I would be called to come back for the funeral. And that would be that. Most such stories would end there, let everyone grieve, let the memories simmer and healing begin, allowing us all to get on with our own lives. For my mother, though, something else happened, and we were pulled along in the wake of it for months and years to come.

***

At my father's funeral, my mother sat quietly, calmly, in the first row of the funeral home chapel with us at her side; I recall this now because it was perhaps the only moment of the day I recall as normal.

After the funeral, during the awkward moments between the service and the burial, one of her college-age grandchildren, Ann's daughter, had leaned over to me and said, "She didn't cry." I didn't have the heart to tell her I wasn't surprised. Whatever Mother was feeling, it was not exactly grief, at least not the kind that comes with tears. That evening, the immediate family's adults assembled back at the house. My mother, all four daughters and our husbands were spread over sofas, wingback chairs and folding chairs, in the big living room, facing the executor of my father's will. He was the one who delivered the news: Dad had not done what we all expected--what Mother certainly

expected—which was leaving everything to Mother. Instead, he was splitting his estate down the middle; half to her, half to “the girls.”

Mother—stoic throughout her husband's long dying, throughout the funeral, and burial, throughout the comings and goings of preachers and church ladies with covered dishes and condolence—lost all composure.

"It isn’t fair!" she screamed. "He was supposed to have left it all to me! This isn’t fair; it isn’t right! He didn't trust me! He never trusted me!"

My sisters and I gaped at each other: *What the hell?!*

“You girls will put me in a rest home!”

We were all shocked out of speech. What was she talking about? Rest home? She was barely 60.

Then she said it again, with a twist: “You'll put me in a rest home! Take it all! Abandon me!"

My sisters and I, eyes wide, gazed back and forth at each other as the surreal scene unfolded in front of us. I recall us comforting, assuring her. Even now, though, I can feel the anger of the moment, my disbelief, my offense, unable to grasp what could blind this mother of ours from seeing what kind of women her daughters were. Who did she think she raised?

And how, *how,* did our lives sink into bad theater?

I think about that scene now after all that's happened, feeling the guilt waiting for us when we *were* forced, ultimately, to move her into Carriage House, and I wonder what it was really about. Such an estate dispersion is not that unusual. And the estate itself was not big enough to offer her vast wealth, by any means. So I push past the old hurt at the

memory of my mother's lack of trust in us and focus on the 45-year inexplicable, uneasy co-existence that was my parents' marriage. And when I do, I see that the scene wasn't really about the money, nor even about her fear of the future or her daughters' character. Rather, it must have been about control, as if he'd had the last say, after all. Perhaps everything had been left unsaid, as so many things were between them, and she'd assumed…assumed what? Every answer still has the sound of melodrama, like some opera's playbill: *After 30 years of peace at any price—staying in a bad marriage for the sake of the children, in the hope that all would be worth it one day when he dies and leaves everything to her—the mother becomes hysterical upon finding out the father had other plans*.

But you don't want to think of your family's life as the stuff of opera, soap or otherwise. You want it be normal, you want your mother to be normal, you want the tidying up of the end of your father's life to be a normal, sober event not a melodramatic one.

So we waited there, the air all but sucked out of the room, until the executor began again, in his best, calming voice, to explain the will as Mother's white hot boil finally lowered back to its long, eternal simmer. Then, without a word I can recall between us, we all got in our cars and scattered back to the peace of anywhere but there. Trailing along behind us, though, was the outright stupefaction of the scene, all of us no doubt wondering what was going on inside Agnes Rutledge and what was going to happen next.

But I knew what was going to happen next. And I would be the one doing it.

***

A week later, I drove back to my hometown to look inside a safety deposit box. Almost a year before he died, my father had called to inform me that I now had a safety deposit box at our hometown bank—co-signed with him.

"Yes, sir," I said, like the good Texas daughter I was, "but why?"

"You'll find out after I'm gone," was his cryptic reply. “Your mother doesn't have to know about it. You'll know what to do."

After the reading of the will, I knew the safety deposit box had to be opened, and I dreaded this last wish of my father’s. I had no talent for secrets. I’d also had enough surprises and drama for a while. But I needed to be finished with this chapter of my father's funeral saga.

So I walked into my small town's big bank, listened to condolences from every soul there, showed my key to the vault woman and was led to a silent, steel box-lined room. When we finally located the correct deposit box, and I was left alone, I slowly opened it to find it full of paper money: Thousands of dollars of it. I knew my father. This was not the dramatic, formulaic stash of films or television; no drugs, no gambling, no juggling of books. And while I truly had no clue what it was—maybe interest from small loans, or poker game winnings with his buddies, or a habit of stashing twenty dollar bills over decades—I knew it was legit, at least, that is, in my father's moral universe. So I let that question go.

However, I also had no note. But I knew what he intended; I could try to fool myself I didn’t, but I knew. It was one last goodbye gift to his daughters. And it was also one last slight of my mother.

I lost track of time there in the vault.

I remember the heat rising slowly up my neck. I was supposed to decide how to "take care of it" and I needed to decide right then. Because, suddenly, that money was like hot coals. I knew that such wishes, even those left unspoken, were sacrosanct. Yet, frankly and suddenly, I didn't care. This wasn't about the money; it was about my parents–and between my parents. Why did he choose me? Was I so predictably, malleably dependable? Leaning against the counter, alone in the tiny stainless steel room, I clenched and unclenched my jaw, stared at the money and pondered my options: 1) Keep it all. 2) Fulfill what I assumed was my father's wishes. 3) Or do the one thing he'd never think I'd do.

An hour later, when I handed her an equal share of the stash, my mother gasped: "I can't believe he remembered me."

It was all I could do not to yell: It was *me.* But I didn't. I would not be my mother. Or my father. And what about my sisters? They'd understand, I decided, and if they didn't, then they'd have to forgive me. I was still looking for that happy ending, I suppose, even if I had to write it.

And what alternate ending might I have written if I had to "take care of it" today? I try hard not to think about it, very hard.

That night, though, relieved that my part in my father's drama was finally over, my spouse and I were browsing the books in Dad's room, when I opened one and out floated a 20-dollar bill. I stared at my husband and then laughed out loud.

"What should I do?" I whispered. "I mean, damn! Haven't I done enough?"

He cocked an eye at me: Tell your mother.

So, after one last glance around this room that was still so full of my father, I did.

We spent the next few hours combing through every book and drawer and closet in his big room, finding bills here and there, small denomination and big. Finally, we were sitting around the kitchen table as she counted this latest stash of about a thousand more dollars. She counted it twice, smiled, and held up a 50-dollar bill. Then she made the closest thing to a joke I have ever heard her say: “Here you go. A finder’s fee.” She held it out.

And I took it.

I came home several times in the next few months, before my husband and I moved north to Chicago, leaving Texas as home for good. By the next trip back, I noticed she had moved Dad’s pickup from where it and its other incarnations had parked for 30 years. It was now in the alley. Soon, it was gone.

At Carriage House

"Time for dinner," she says, as we return to Carriage House from the doctor's visit. So I help her from the rental car into her wheelchair, then push her into the building, steering her toward the dinner hall.

The ladies are quiet as they eat their green beans and mashed potatoes. They do not like the roast beef. “Chewy,” says the dancer. “My dentures are loose.” She puts a finger up to them and pushes hard.

“We’ve got better beef in Abilene,” says the spry woman, pleasantly. “That's where I lived, Abilene. My son brought me here and left me.”

The dignified black woman, whose wig is a little off tonight, chews hers a moment and says, “You ever see one of those little gadgets that opens jars? I sure need one.”

And my mother is concentrating on the cherry pie and ice cream.

After she finishes, I roll her back down the hall, which is strangely silent. The Hello woman must still be in the dining room.

Then someone's call button begins to ring and ring and ring. I look toward the sound and see nothing. On the other end of the hall, though, I notice a flurry of activity. I watch

for a moment, as two women and a man with a striking family resemblance—the same fireplug build, the same red faces and hair—are moving furniture out of the room by the exit door. It takes only another moment to realize that they are family, that the room's resident has died, and that they are cleaning out her effects. I begin to ask Mother about it, but think better of it. It's hard not to think of death in a place like this. For that matter, it's hard not to ponder life in a place like this. I watch the red-headed family discreetly, their body language, their silence as they dispose of their loved one's things, all but reading their minds: How things last so long; how people don't…except for little old ladies who live on and on. I don't remember the woman who lived in the room. I wonder if she resembled her fireplug family. I wonder if hers was a good death; I wonder if hers was a good life. Was it long, full, rich in love to the end? I wonder if they will miss her or will they be burdened with both loss and relief? I wonder if this moment—the image of this last service done for their mother or aunt or grandmother—will be stored in their memories as a good day or a bad day?

As the fireplug redheaded man struggles with what looks like the last box, I remember Mother and look back around. She has rolled into her room on her own and turned on the television. The PBS station's re-runs of *The Lawrence Welk Show* will be on in five minutes. She does not miss it for anything or anyone; one of my brothers-in-law found this out when he stopped by unannounced during the show and she completely ignored him. I suddenly wonder if she still watches *Star Trek* re-runs, too.

I sit down in the wingback chair inches from the television and stare at the end of a PBS fund-raising moment, knowing those caught-in-time champagne bubbles are about

to churn. I look back at her. She is dozing in her wheelchair, oblivious to the TV's talking head and the sound of that call button still ringing, ringing, and ringing out in the hall.

And I am transported back to a moment, sitting in this same chair, in front of the same television, hearing that same sound, the first time Mother almost died.

CHAPTER 5

1987 Starship Enterprise

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1000' Constitution class space cruiser,
2 space warp engines/2 fusion impulse
engines, 190,000 metric tons, 23 decks;
seats 430
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The summer after we moved her into Carriage House, before she had turned 80, Mother had her first near-death experience.

She had been rushed to the hospital due to the effects of being unable to swallow solid food again, shriveling down to skin and bones, hardly able to walk even with her walker. After doing what could be done, the doctor had returned her to Carriage House, and within a day, she lapsed in a semi-coma-like state. Her body was shutting down, the doctor explained. What was happening to her was often the first stages of death. She would either pull through or not, but we should prepare ourselves for the worst. So we had all arrived in shifts, dropping everything to sit dutifully by her bed.

During those days, two of my sisters sat and read to her as she lay there in-and-out of strange consciousness. The other sister tried one-sided conversations to get her to respond to little more than mumbling effect. Nothing had made much difference. I couldn't bring

myself to talk to her and reading to her was too elegant an option for me. So, on my shift, I sat there listening to Mother's shallow breathing, in the silence. Until my cellphone rang.

I fumbled with my satchel to get to it, then missed the call, which was fine by me; I'd deal with it later. The phone was new, my first flip phone, and I was still getting used to the feel of it. Fiddling with the phone, I suddenly had the bright idea to try to get a rise out of my mother with a little cell music (Twenty new ring choices to choose from). I tried *Happy Birthday, Yankee Doodle Dandy, She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain*. I tried *America the Beautiful, Hallelujah Chorus, William Tell Overture,* even *Beethoven's 5th.*

No response.

So I gave up, flipped the phone off with a flick of a wrist and closed my fingers around it. All nerves, though, I couldn't sit still. Fingering the phone, I began flipping it open, closed, open, closed, suddenly thinking of *Star Trek*. It was the cellphone—if it had been gold, it would have been the spitting image of the old television series' communicator/phaser.

"Look, Mother," I said, flipping it open. "I'm Captain Kirk."

At that, I thought I saw her eyes flicker.

I sat up.

"Mom," I said, "I bet I can make your phone ring."

I dialed her number. The clunky tan phone by the bed rang. And, to my amazement, my mother sat up as if in a trance, leaned over, picked up the receiver, and said into it: "Hello?"

And so I said: "Hello, Mother, it's Lynda."

"Hello, Lynda."

There we were, holding phones to our ears, sitting three feet apart, and, incredibly, I could not think of one more thing to say. "Well. Okay, then," I finally said. "Goodbye, Mother."

"Goodbye, Lynda," my mother said, then closed her eyes and in slow molasses motion, lay back on her pillow.

I waited a beat.

"Mother?" I tried.

Nothing.

I dialed her phone again. I let it ring a dozen times. I waited and dialed it again. But Mother did not budge. So I flipped my cellphone/communicator closed.

***

After college, I'd discovered "Star Trek" re-runs, and, for a while, I couldn't get enough of them. Years later, to my utter surprise, so did my mother, who, after my father's death had begun to revel in having the big house to herself and who left the television on night and day, her favorite shows becoming comforting daily companions.

She seemed to enjoy inhabiting the whole universe of 501 First St., and that included its television airwaves, radio transmissions and phone line. "Talk Radio" was big during that time. She and her older sister Belle would listen to the Dallas am radio late-night talk-jocks and then call each other to jabber about what they'd heard, plotting to call in

themselves. She was in her mid-60s, I was almost 35. When I visited, though, she'd expect me to sit down with her and watch whatever *Star Trek* re-run was on, a noteworthy happening in itself since I had never seen her sit still long enough to watch an entire episode of anything. But like fathers and sons communicating through sports, my mother and I watched the voyages of the Starship Enterprise together long past my trekkie enthusiasm had died a natural death.

On one visit home, my mother suddenly suggested we see the latest *Star Trek* movie together. Considering our hometown "picture show" had shuttered its doors, that meant a trek to Dallas. And considering she had not passed my hometown city limits in recent memory, nor seen a movie in a theater since *The Sound of Music*, the suggestion was nothing short of a jawdropper. When I found my voice, I said: "Sure."

So we laid out *The Dallas Morning News* to find the nearest movie theater showing it, checked our watches, and soon we were part of a sold-out crowd, cheek to jowl with young, hyperactive strangers, my mother nervous as a tick and I nervous that she was nervous. It was the era of THX Dolby Sound systems, so each theater's performance began with a display of the system's prowess. The lights had gone down, the curtain went up, the THX Dolby announcement appeared ("The audience is listening...") and the baaaaooooooooooo ooooooooooommMMMMMM grew to earthquake decibels until it hit the audience at its famous eardrum-busting, chest-whomping blast. And when it did, my unsuspecting mother had levitated, her teased helmet hairdo all but taking a right turn off her head. Even now, I can still see that hair quaking against the silhouette of the trekkie in the seat beyond.

That was the moment I remembered most, told most, laughed about most, over the years. But it is the next moment I continue, after all this time, to keep to myself.

As we filed out of the theater, still under the feel-good movie spell, something happened that never happened before: As we walked out to the car, my mother took my arm. I remembered the gesture as I might remember an electric shock, stiffening so thoroughly at the touch of those fingers, the awkwardness of it, the openness of it, that I recall feeling sore the next day. She kept them there all the way to the car, with me barely breathing, wanting not to scare those fingers away. I'd been that surprised at my mother's show of affection…of happiness…of what? Whatever it was, she never did it again.

***

Sitting by her Carriage House bedside through that first near-death watch, my chest had tightened at the sudden stuffed movie memory. One of my sisters arrived. I started to tell her about Mother answering my cellphone call; instead I said: "Remember how much she liked Star Trek?"

"Mother watched *Star Trek*?" My sister laughed. "You're joking, right?"

We looked at each other then looked at our mother. And I recall thinking how she has always been as inscrutable as Mr. Spock.

At Carriage House

The *Lawrence Welk Show* is in full swing. My mother is still dozing, leaning sideways in her wheelchair, when there's a knock on the door and the night attendant strides in.

It's time for Mother's pills. I nudge her awake, and she rolls over to the tiny kitchen table where the attendant has laid out her nightly prescription cocktail. About a year before, when she had become so frail she was using the wheelchair all day long, we began paying for a higher level of care at Carriage House which offered this nightly help with her ever-expanding and confusing regimen. As the attendant lays them out, I am once again shocked to see how many pills the woman takes. On the kitchen table are 13 tiny paper cups, one pill inside each, placed neatly in a row. But one by one, Mom dutifully takes them all, as the attendant announces each one, like a pill roll call, the only one I recognize being a prescription-strength Tylenol. As soon as the attendant leaves, Mother picks up the water glass, rolls over to the cabinet, opens a big bottle of Advil and downs three of them before I can get to her.

"Mom!" I shout, "what are you *doing*?!"

"My head hurts," she says.

"But you just took a prescription Tylenol!"

She gives me her wrist-flick dismissal wave and rolls to her refrigerator.

As she upends the remainder of an entire quart of milk, I hear the sound of the same call button that has been steadily ringing and ringing for almost a half an hour. I hear the Hello woman calling from behind her door: "Hello!" Hell-o! Hellooooo!" I cannot stand any of it a second longer and I stride into the hallway to see if the night attendant—anybody—can do something for these people.

Then, just like that, the Hello woman hushed and the call button ringing ceased. And except for the ringing in my ears, all is suddenly silent. I take a deep breath, pivot, and return to Mother's room.

It's dark outside now. So I help Mother into her pajamas and she lies down on her bed, no longer complaining about her headache. She begins to doze again, so I sink into the wingback chair. I should leave, but I'm afraid she'll wake up and see me gone and call the police. Or wake up and still have her headache and call 911. Or wake up and—god knows what else. So I sit there, listening to her breathe, sweating in front of the heater fan. Until I hear ringing again.

But this time, it's my cellphone.

And, for the oddest moment, I think it might be Mother calling me.

CHAPTER 6

1999 Mazda Miata

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Roadster convertible, red w/black top,
1.8 liter 128 horsepower engine, alloy
wheels, Torsen limited-slip differential,
rack-and-pinion steering, 4 wheel disc
brakes, 5 speed manual transmission
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Mother's second brush with death happened almost immediately after the first, and again, she had bounced back like the trooper she had become. By the third time, in 2000, we all had the routine down, everyone making instant plans to rush to her bedside, everyone but me.

I had just packed my little Miata two-seater to the brim, had given away what was left to Goodwill, and at the crack of dawn the next morning, I was moving again, this time from San Diego, headed across the desert, back toward Chicago and beyond. Just before I had slipped into my sleeping bag on the floor of my rented house, my cellphone rang. It was my Texas sister Deanne calling to tell me that Mother had been taken to the hospital the night before, complaining of chest pains. They stabilized her, but were holding her for observation one more night, checking for abnormalities. The other sisters were already on their way.

“We can handle this,” she said. “Take care of yourself. I'll call you if something changes."

So the next morning at dawn, as planned, I hit the road. My spouse had bounced back north months earlier to begin his nice, new, stable job. My two-year long writing project was finished. So, now I was having to leave the west coast, a place I'd come to love as home, in order to rejoin the husband I still loved, who was my home. We'd survived a commuter marriage, a change of jobs, and all the compromises and strained moments that happen in a dual-career marriage. Taking the trip alone, though, was my idea. The drive was my way of coping with all the stress of the transition and of life in general after you've lived it awhile. I needed the therapy of wide-open spaces, the cosmic perspective they always gave me, but most of all, I needed silence. What was at the very heart of my life-long wanderlust was in that silence. Riding through honest-to-god natural landscapes, be they mountain or desert or surf, I feel the tug of the eternal. Right in the middle of feeling small, I feel big. It raises me, fills me, especially when I am empty. The word “sublime” was actually coined for this feeling and I needed sublime. It can do what the pulpit-pounding of my youth could never do. It makes me hear the music of the spheres, and I went to that church every chance I got. And I had never needed it more than I did that summer.

It was July, though. Beyond the fact that July is potentially the worst time to be driving solo across a desert, it's also possibly the worst time to be a Rutledge.

When we count our dead, we are counting Julys. For four generations back, every death in our extended family has been either in July or within days of it. I'd rationalize that it was the hot weather, the cycle having to do with the extremes of Texas seasons,

but more than half the deaths have been accidents or cancers or suicides that know no season. And many also have been connected to road trips, one way or another. We'd already been through several strange, strained summers in the last decade alone, my father's death being one of them. The fact that Mother's Great Giveaway had happened over July 4th weekend had put an added unspoken spin to that special chaos.

The most recent example, however, was my grandfather, a man we all called Daddy B. After my father's death, my Uncle Bill—stricken from childhood with the most brutal kind of juvenile diabetes—had sole responsibility for the spit-and-piss piece of work that was my paternal grandfather, who had diabetes issues of his own. My grandfather had senile diabetes, and because of it, the former sharecropper was in a wheelchair, without legs, spending his days wondering why he was still on earth, making demands on his remaining son, and swearing he'd die before going into a rest home. Decades earlier, after a short stint working for my father, Bill had moved to nearby Dallas. I've always believed he did so because he knew his health wasn't up to handling both his father and my father for the rest of his days. He had to live a laid-back life or he would not be living at all.

Now, though, our grandfather was all his. Bill, who existed on a strict program of diet and injections, had been forced to drive back and forth at all hours to handle my grandfather's demands. One night, he had driven off the road, his insulin out of whack, and was found wandering the highway by a state trooper. Finally, my uncle gave up and hired nurses to help him care for my grandfather, against my grandfather's loud wishes.

My uncle's health stabilized, though, and for over six months, all seemed well. So that summer, his family talked him into taking their first real vacation together to Yellowstone National Park, a long family drive beyond the tyranny of telephones—two full weeks on

their own. By the time they got to Yellowstone, however, a message was waiting: My grandfather had died. So they had turned right around and driven straight back. It was the end of July.

My mother, through the years, always seemed to have this sort of Rutledge July on the mind. Her constant insistence that I carry her number as emergency contact "just in case" didn't help the slight paranoia that hovered over every trip down the road or around the globe, from the moment I left home. No matter where I went in July, I couldn't quite escape it. Once, during her Carriage House years, I had been out of the country studying in Spain the entire month. In the middle of the night, a few days after arriving, I dreamed that the phone was ringing. When I answered it, I heard:

This is the operator. Your mother is calling.

"My mother?" I mumble. "But she doesn't have this number..."

To which the operator repeats: *Your mother is calling.*

"Wait a minute—" I say. "Let me wake up. It's the middle of the night."

Then the operator says, *Your mother is at peace*.

As one might imagine, that was when I woke up, popping straight up in bed, wide-awake. Slowly, I lay back down, waiting for the phone to actually ring; when it didn't, unable to shake the twilight zone feeling of the moment, I lay there wondering if I should call my sisters. Instead, I spent the next day in a sort of expectation, my logical self going on with the day, the rest of me waiting, without surprise, for someone to hand me a note to call home. No one did. It had been my psyche calling, after all.

So, as I drove into the California desert in my little Miata, hazarding a road trip in July, with my mother in the hospital once again, I couldn't help but have this odd Rutledge dynamic on my mind, along with everything else already crammed in there.

After an hour or so, though, I began to sense the magic of the open road. It’s an illusion, of course, this feeling of freedom as you travel. It didn't matter; it was wonderful.

But again, it was July. In the desert. And I was alone.

While I knew not to go too far from the Interstate, even though my wanderer of a soul wanted to take the nearest two lane and drive it due north, I made a compromise with my wiser self. Instead, I would just edge slightly past my good, common sense to try something I'd heard about long ago and always wanted to try. I took a side road on the edge of the Mojave, drove about five miles, and stopped near a desert dirt trail to a place where my radio was only a mute, crackling reminder of civilization just out of reach. I wanted to experience the phenomenon of desert silence—not a 21st century silence, a seventh day of genesis silence, the music of geology, the kind inside planets and stars, not the pallid kind missing inside me. To the ear, it is a high hissing sound, I was told, like some empty, earthy recording tape. Literary desert icon Edward Abbey described the sound as not so much silence as "a great stillness." What would it be like, I wondered, to hear the stillness of the earth? What would it be like to feel stillness at all? I wanted to hear the sound of the earth empty of all human movement. And for a moment, just a moment, I wanted to hear the sound of myself empty of me—and all that was trailing along behind me.

I made myself settle down, calm, quiet. I took a step away from the snap, crackle, pop of the heat on my car's hood. And then another. And another. Standing on the dirt road headed due south before me, I listened for a hiss of nothing. The wind whipped, then died, a moment passed, then another; I closed my eyes...

And I heard the sound of Vivaldi, the famous opening of *The Four Seasons*—which would have been a marvelous sound for that or any moment, except that it was my cellphone. Cellphone ring choice #4:

Da dum doodle doo da dum. Da dum doodle doo da dum. Da da doodle doo doo doooooooo

It was my Texas sister, Deanne.

Mom had made a sudden recovery and was already back in her room and already back to her demands for tissues, candy, milk, and Tums. So my sister had decided she wasn't needed, nor were the rest of the daughters. She was calling us all to tell us to stay put. She was also calling to warn us that Mother was being more forgetful than ever, and might begin calling us repeatedly again, which she had begun to do before she'd gone into the hospital. This was new for us, Mother's repeat calling. It was not yet a routine problem, so we were still hoping it would run its course as some of Mother's other unusual behaviors had done. She didn't have my cell phone number, though, so I thought nothing more of it.

I went back to my trip, settling into my moving meditation, momentarily free of guilt.

The next day, on Interstate 70 on the stretch between Utah and Colorado, I drove through a stretch of country that was as soul-satisfying as a cathedral. I had already resisted a half-dozen urges to take detours to see Arches National Park at Moab, to see

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, to see the Sego Canyo Petroglyphs and the Big Rock Candy Mountain, a sucker for all the tiny red site-seeing markers on my Rand McNally map. By 3 p.m., my day had been almost perfect, my Miata's top down in the morning and up in the midday sun.

I was on the verge of driving into the area on Interstate 70 which was absolute desolation as far as the eye could see, north, south, east, west, not a sign of humanity in sight, except for other drivers spotted sporadically on the road. In fact I had just passed a sign that said "No Service for the Next 70 Miles." So I had filled up with gas, food and water, put the Miata through its tiny paces and drove straight into the glory of it.

And just as I drove into the first canyon area, my phone rang. Not expecting to be able to use my cellphone way out there, I had put the phone in my backpack and thrown it into the floorboard for the day's trip. It was on its last ring before going to voice mail by the time I fished it out. And when I finally gasped a "Hello?" into it, there was my mother's weak voice calling to me across the badlands of Utah.

"Lynda? It's your mother," she said in her odd way of announcing herself. But before I was able to respond, the phone went dead. The signal was lost, my phone announcing: *No Service.*

And all I could think was: *My mother? But she doesn't have this cellphone number…*

Before I could feel guilty about that thought, my cellphone came to life again to tell me I had six messages waiting. All from her.

Suddenly the landscape looked different. It no longer held the thrilling serenity of a moment ago. Now it all looked like so much dust to get through. My phone rang again

then stopped in mid-ring. I answered it anyway. No one was there, and, once again, the phone announced *No Service.* So I pitched it into the passenger seat.

As I did, I felt the weight again, the old earth-bound mixture of guilt and obligation and reality, cathedrals turning into dirt. But I put the Miata into high gear and kept moving. In a few miles, I felt a sense of calm, order and control returning.

And then, needing one more chance for the dirt to turn back to cathedrals, I reached over and turned the cellphone off.

At Carriage House

Lawrence Welk has ended, as I finish updating the last sister via my cellphone to the sound of Mother's snores. So I finally find the courage to slip away to do some snoring of my own. And the motel night is a peaceful one, no 911 calls, no pounding on the door, no surprises at all, thank God.

***

The next morning, as I drive into the Carriage House parking lot, I am almost run over by a small church van that veers around me to a lurching stop right in front of the big doors. And out from it comes a big woman dressed in a fire-engine red jumper, followed by a half-dozen other Pentecostal-looking women in buns, clunky shoes, and ankle-length, home-made print dresses. One of them is holding a tambourine, the other a guitar, and they are all African-American, except for the bald van driver in a polyester grey suit jacket who has a very large black bible in his beefy hand.

And I remember that it’s Sunday.

My mother is not in her room. I find her around the corner in the lounge area, a place where the more able-bodied residents play cards, and, now and then, take a donated book from the surrounding shelves. Mother is half out of her wheelchair, trying to grab a book from a high shelf.

"Whoa!" I say and rush over there. "What are you doing?"

She looks around at me and grins eerily ear-to-ear. "Just the person I need! Come here." I study her face. This would be a day she seems fully "here." I brace myself. "Get that book up there for me, will you? I can't reach it."

As I reach, I say, “Mom, is that a church service about to start in the front area?"

"They’re from the Pentecostal Church down the street. It's a nice service."

That stops me. "You've gone to their service?" I ask. When I was growing up, if you happened to be a church-going Texan, odds were good you were walking into a Southern Baptist church on Sunday morning. Baptist we were, and to Baptists, Pentecostals were suspect. They spoke in "tongues"; they were "holy rollers" for their emotional and somewhat gymnastic services; they didn't believe in wearing deodorant; some of their backwoods brethren even performed snake-handling. In short, they were a downright embarrassment from a clean-living, solid Christian citizen point of view. The Rock-of-Ages-Baptist mother of my youth would have rather taken a drink of liquor than sit still for any Pentecostal-style "charismatic," tambourine silliness.

"That book, right there." She points to the top shelf.

I reach up, take it down, and hand it to her.

She exclaims, "You found it! That's my kid!"

I pause, all but looking behind me for a "kid." It's happening yet again, my heart lurching—never has she called me her kid. Who is this woman? And why now, when she is no longer herself, when I must discount everything and anything she utters, is she saying such things? I feel like a kid, all right, a silly, damn kid.

"Mother—" I say, a little too roughly, watching her set the book down and roll away, "aren't you planning to read it?"

"I keep putting these out and someone keeps putting them back up," she answers, exasperated.

She isn't reading the books; she is displaying them. My mother is being a church librarian again.

I pick up one of the books; she gets agitated. "Here. Put it right here with the others."

I do.

"No, turn it the other way. "

I take a close look at her selection: *The Life of Billy Graham. The Baptist Hymnal. King James Version Bible.*

Well, I think, it's Sunday where Mother is, too.

And since she has admitted to going to a Pentecostal church service run by black women, it would seem that hell has frozen over as well.

***

When I think of my days growing up Southern Baptist, I think of a joke and the lyrics to a long-forgotten country song.

The joke: "The only problem with Baptists is that they don't hold them under long enough."

The lyrics: "I was raised in church where I learned sex is dirty and should be saved for marriage/and that God loves us so much He'll send us to hell."

Mother would not have thought these funny, at least the mother of my Sunday memory.

Depending on what daughter you ask, you will get a different image of mother and church. The eldest daughter knew the true believer, who saw the church as the pinnacle of all our activity and all religious training and all our hope for a virtuous life. That mother had us there every time the doors were open, and gave my father grief for not being among the faithful. The two middle daughters saw the true believer slowly begin going through the motions, and the youngest daughter saw those motions whirl into a spiritual death spiral.

So many Sunday mothers to choose from…but there's only one I truly see in my memory. Seeing my elderly mother act like a librarian is like bumping into my Sunday Agnes Rutledge, and I can't help but look for signs of her in these librarian motions. It seems, sometimes, that we can get free of almost everything except the spaces where things and people have been. I recall a passage John Steinbeck wrote in his famous *Travels with Charley*, about encountering his long-dead mother while driving away from his Salinas, California hometown. When he'd physically left home, she had become part of his Salinas "pattern of remembrance." In his permanent, changeless memory, Steinbeck's mother, he wrote, is always "shooting a wildcat" in a wild area that no longer

exists. In mine, my mother is taking care of the books in the stuffed, stuffy second floor room in a church building that no longer exists.

And as I watch this Agnes Rutledge arrange the books suitable for her Carriage House church library, I can't help but also see Sunday and what it once meant.

CHAPTER 7

1959 Chevrolet Station Wagon

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Red Impala, 4 door, rear entry, 9
passenger, 90 cu.ft cargo space, V-8
engine, Body by Fisher, plate glass
windows, rear-facing third seat
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It's Sunday morning. All the Sundays of my childhood.

I see us dressing up in our Sunday best and piling in to our long red Chevy station wagon, my mother at the wheel. Soon, we are running down the old halls of musty-smelling buildings to the sound of the pounding of hundreds of feet, hurrying to get to Sunday School on time. I see myself sitting in those mysterious old rooms, meeting the comfortable God of little old ladies with big bibles and bigger, lacquered hairdos, using cutouts of robed figures on great, green flannel boards. I see myself making a junior choir joyful noise during the music time, choosing the triangle for my instrument. Stubborn little joyful heathen child that I was, I loved baseball, dogs, bicycles, and horses. Jesus wasn't really on my top ten list during those Chevy station wagon years, but with the help of that triangle and those flannel boards, he was moving up quick.

My mother would disappear after steering us to our Sunday School classes and reappear to retrieve us in time for the morning worship service. In the tenth pew from the front, my little sisters and I sat by her and her big purse, until we began inevitably to fight with each other. Then she'd separate us by moving between the worst offenders, which usually put me on the good side of her purse—mysterious in itself—from which she'd pull her emery board when the sermon got boring, and Chiclets breath gum which turned our mouths green, and quarters for us to place in the collection plate. And at the end of each service, we'd sing all seven verses of *Just As I Am* or *Amazing Grace* until somebody, please, somebody, would finally come down the aisle and accept Jesus as their Savior or rededicate their lives to Christ and let us all go home to the roast in the oven.

***

I see Sunday nights, after evening worship service, as the red station wagon pulls up to the Terrell Root Beer Stand at the end of our street. Stopping there on the way home, ordering frosty mugs, corny dogs, and Frito chili pies for the car hop to bring right to the car, was a ritual as religious as any Sunday service. Bring up the root beer stand in front my brother-in-law and he will tell about one of his first dates with my big sister. He had taken her there, thinking they'd finally be alone after sitting with the family at church, only to glance over and see a red station wagon with three little girls hanging out the windows waving at him.

***

I see a Sunday afternoon driving to a nursing home in the neighboring small town, to visit my mother's mother—Grandma—whom I didn't meet until I was eight. When and where I met her lives on in my memory as vividly as if I'd stepped into a history book. She was already a mighty old woman, fat, bent, mumbling, with a big German honker of a nose that, under normal circumstances, might have impressed me the most. But where I first saw her and her nose was what took my attention and kept it, riveted. She was still living in a drafty, weathered farmhouse in the backwoods of East Texas with no running water or electricity, without paint or heating beyond bundles of quilts and a soot-black fireplace. Out back was a water pump and an outhouse where spiders and scorpions lived and where I would not go, no matter what anybody said. It was a house that could have been built over a century before, a homestead, something I'd seen only on television westerns. I visited that house only twice. The next time we came, not much more than a year later, we came to help move her into a nursing home near us.

On those Sunday afternoons when my mother would make us go with her to see Grandma, the scary house in the woods had become the scary concrete nursing home down the road. I recall visits where Mother made us watch quietly as she cut her mother's snow-white hair or did a dozen other personal things for this old, mumbling lady in her foul-smelling room, sitting, sitting, sitting, her thumbs cupped inside her fists. For the rest of my life, when I caught my thumbs edging into my fists, I have stopped them, refusing the pull of genes.

And for the rest of my life, whenever I drove that stretch of road, I'd recall the drive home from those childhood visits—riding in the Chevy station wagon's "back-back," the

third seat turned backwards, watching the yellow stripe blipping under us and away. And I'd recall my mother's silence, a mixture of relief and sadness and irritation that only now do I understand.

***

I see a Sunday morning that began like all Sunday mornings, the whole family going to church as usual—except, as usual, my father, who could not abide anyone telling him what to do, especially anyone purporting to be God's chosen messenger. Never one for rules and regulations beyond his own, he seemed to have come up with his own unspoken deal with God on the subject. And he certainly wasn't going to put up with the round, flat-minded First Baptist pastor, Bro. Fine, preaching at him about do's and don'ts.

My true believer mother, on the other hand, lived by a sturdy list of them, especially the "clean-living" kind. She and my father fought about beer in the house, about country club parties she refused to attend, about the drugstore's embarrassments of girly magazines and Sunday hours. The girly magazines were soon behind the counter, and beer was never seen at home, but never did Mother go to the parties and never did Dad go to church.

Until the one Sunday morning he did. Why he went that one day, I don't know. Perhaps my older sister was playing the organ or getting an award, both of which happened frequently. Or perhaps he was just trying to appease his wife, a peace offering of a whole other kind, one that good-girl Agnes, young mother, Baptist preacher's child, desperately longed for, beyond all else. She had thought he was a churchgoer during their

head-spinning college courtship; he could not have failed to know going to church would please her. Maybe that morning was about both of them trying, and trying hard. Whatever it was, her happy hope filling the car, I see that Sunday morning more vividly than my own baptism.

"Is that Harold?" asked his mother, my paternal granny, from her second row pew as we marched toward her. Indeed it was. And after a mighty good worship service with mighty good singing and mighty good preaching and mighty good everything all around that offered mighty good hope for more full family attendance in the Rutledge future, Mr. Giddens decided to listen to the spirit.

Mr. Giddens was a porkfaced, bespectacled earnest man of God who must have done something awful to be so stridently upright all the years I knew him. We were into the third verse of the "invitation hymn," the altar call ending of our Baptist worship service, when Mr. Giddens felt led by the spirit—which seemed a pretty malleable ghost back then—to slip up the aisle and "witness" to Daddy right then and there.

The singing was so loud, no one could hear what he was saying, but we knew. He was saying what we were all taught was the essential question of church: "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?" He might also have thrown in a mention of divine leading in his query, but whatever the case, every eye in the place was on them. My father went redfaced; Mr. Giddens, permanently redfaced but never from embarrassment, persisted. I can still see my father frozen to the spot as Mr. Giddens leaned ever nearer, talking down heaven non-stop, my father leaning back, away from the man, saying absolutely nothing. Mother and the rest of us were dumbstruck and continued to be dumbstruck until the spirit told Mr. Giddens to sit back down, and we finally finished the

verse which finished the service and all our mighty good hopes. Dad would never go back to church, not even for his funeral. And no one would ever mention that Sunday service again.

***

I see a Sunday evening as a teenager, in the church library with my mother and the minister of education, a man named Richard we had been told to call "Dick." As my mother moved into another room, I felt Dick, with this sculptured silver hair and his year-round tan, move a little too close, then kiss me on the cheek. I stepped back. He smiled, said nothing, and left. I stood there a moment, taking it in, pausing to sort through what I was feeling. When Mother returned, I began to tell her. But I didn't, imagining what would happen:

Oh, Lynda, she would say, cutting me off. *Don't be silly.*

Decades later, I would find out that Dick had come on to my sisters as well, including their friends. But they never told Mother either, understanding the same thing about her, whatever it was.

My mother kept putting those books on the proper shelves, kept cataloguing and buying and displaying. As the years went by, though, she'd begin to keep her library hours on Sundays then go back home, skipping church altogether. Until one day she didn't go back at all.

***

And I see one last Sunday morning at the old house, a year before my father died. My husband and I were sitting at the kitchen table and looked up to see my father come down the stairs. Dressed in a jacket and white shirt, he had some kind of book in his hand and the oddest, slightly chagrined smile on his face. He said nothing, grabbed his hat, and went out the side door.

"Where is *he* going?" I asked.

"To Sunday School," my mother answered with just a hint of sarcasm in her delivery. My husband and I gaped, then guffawed. This was incredible. Bro. Fine, it seemed, had finally gotten wise, offering a Bible class off the church premises. He had lost Mom but gained Dad. Even in this, they were operating on entirely different hemispheres.

Why did she stop? If you asked Mother why she quit going to church, she always had an answer. Hypocrites, she'd say, or boredom. Or some slight committed by one of the staff or a longtime church friend/enemy.

But I know what turned her away.

At Carriage House

It has begun to rain outside, a Sunday springtime thunderstorm. I go outside Carriage House's side doors to watch it for a moment. The storm is coming this way but not dangerously. I step back into Mom's 97-degree room and am dry in seconds.

"Raining out there, Mom. You should have seen the lightning. Let's go driving. It's gorgeous."

As I move over to the window, she gives me the look and the wave. "You're crazy," she says. "It's not safe."

She, of course, is entirely right, making mother sounds of long ago. And then, out of nowhere, she says:

"Did you know Rick died?"

I turn slowly around to look at her face, my heart in my throat. How did she know I was thinking of him?

CHAPTER 8

1965 Buick LeSabre

Midnight blue, 4 dr. sedan, V-8 300 cu.
engine, power windows, power seats,
power brakes, power steering

My big brother loved electrical storms. He'd see one brewing, and he'd jump in the car and be gone, driving around in the rain, doing godknowswhat. I have this image of seeing a dark, brooding storm out my bedroom window, and my brother sprinting to his old yellow hoopie of a '56 Chevy roaring away. Just to roar. Like he was trying to bring down the lightning.

Rick, the only boy in a gaggle of Rutledge girls, was 19 when he died. Home from his freshman year at Vanderbilt, big college man, he'd grown into my father's looks, and that summer, I'd also done some growing. It was the summer after my freshman year, too, in high school. My oldest sister Ann was already married and gone. I was the oldest at home, and I'd just gotten my learner's driving permit. So I'd ridden all the way from Texas to Nashville with my mother in our brand-new Buick LeSabre, to bring him home for the summer, driving some stretches of highway myself. When you're 15, and your

mother has let you drive on actual highways, all you can think about is cars, cars, and more cars. I watched my brother's every move as he drove us back home. So, the first summer storm in June, when he went running for his car, I did, too, and he let me ride along, slip-sliding away. This is my memory of him, hands on the wheel, smart-ass grin, riding in the rain. With me. He had a date for a July 4th party in nearby Dallas, so he washed and waxed that midnight-blue Buick to a high sheen. It would have been much more appropriate if it had been a bolt of lightning that killed him. Instead, he died that night on the way home, fell asleep at the wheel and drove into an overpass embankment.

At midnight, when my Uncle Bill woke me to tell me the news, I said: "Was it my fault?" I picture my uncle, nonplussed at the response. I like to remember him saying, "What the hell are they teaching you at church?" But I know that's not what he said. What he did say, with a surprised, strained look, was "No, no, of course not, honey!" or comforting words to that effect. Forty years later, I will find out that my father, standing with my young brother-in-law on the bridge where Rick died, had asked the same question.

That night, in the wee-hour dark, as the phone began to ring and the cars began to pull into the drive, their headlights flashing through the house's dark rooms like white sirens, I learned how long it can be until dawn. My aunt and uncle were there to be us while our parents endured all the minutiae that must be handled when someone dies, no matter how young or world shattering. But my little sisters needed more "with" time than I did. I was caught somewhere in between, and I recall the feeling as a sense of floating. I won't see my parents for hours, and when I do, I notice that they cannot look at me. I see myself

standing, sitting, waiting, in the dark, being shuffled here, there, long gaps of time with no sound. I hear whispering. I feel out of place, in any place, wrong, in just being alive.

Somehow the dark turned into day, and the images blur with the view from the top of the staircase where I would stay all morning:

Our old house full of church ladies carrying casserole dishes for a mourning feast only they eat.

Bro. Fine straining a stomach muscle to say something profound and failing.

All the coming and going through the front hallway, screen door slapping.

The sensation of feeling every slap as if it were across my face.

The awareness of an “alone” beyond my experience.

And the rough epiphany of the whispers floating up to me, that adults know next to nothing, and the people who don’t know they don’t know are the ones who’ll teach you comfort theology. In that place at the top of the stairs, I stayed and stayed and stayed, so I didn't have to be considerate to church ladies discussing "God's will" or hear myself praying to bring down the lightning on every soul uttering the phrase. Even then, I knew God was bigger than that, harder than that, and miles more mysterious than that, knew it suddenly and irrevocably and young.

Sometime that day, my friends will visit, caught up in the drama. One will tell me that her tough railroad mechanic father, after returning from volunteer firemen duty helping with the wreck, had stood in her bedroom's doorframe and said quietly, “It was the Rutledge boy." Another will tell me that she heard it on the radio, as if that was exciting, as if he had gained celebrity the hard way. And I will be relieved when they go, watching them from my upstairs window.

After visions of firemen and radio bulletins, I recall picking up a joke book and reading it, to be anywhere but there, even for a moment. And now I am strangely embarrassed by the memory, as if it were somehow wrong not to be mature enough to weep and wail—to be old enough to know what was happening but too young to know exactly what to do with it.

Later that day, the "viewing time" was set. For the funeral, the casket would be closed. But for the family viewing, now, it would be open. The adults began to move toward the door, and then remembered us.

“Shall we let the girls go?” my father mumbled.

“No. Not the way he looks," my mother answered.

Hearing that, I recall freezing up, imagining the way my brother looked, then not being able to stop imagining.

“Lynda….”

Mother was staring at me, about to give me the grown-up choice. I didn’t want it. I knew, if I went, it would be my memory of him. I also knew I’d do anything they asked me to.

Then, suddenly, they made the decision for me and were gone.

I can see them in that freeze-frame moment, poised at the door, dressed in black, looking back at me. How old were they? If I count up the years, the parents looking back at me were in the forties, but whatever their age, they were much older than they were the day before.

Beyond that moment, I don't remember my parents during that entire time. In fact, I have no memory of my sisters, either, nor they of me. I know my big sister and her

new husband had driven in. I know my little sisters were in the house. I can't picture any of them. It was as if we were all on our own, revolving somehow around the center of something that had been knocked out of orbit, and taking us all with it, careening wildly, silently into the darkness.

I once read that scientists cannot prove that each of us is not the center of the universe. While we know logically that such a thing can't be true, science cannot prove it in any systematic or cosmological way, since there is nowhere you can go that you aren't there. So even someone else's death can seem to be all about you, almost as if the center of another universe, even a collapsing one, still has you in its gravitational pull.

Over the years since Rick's death, my imagination has never quite escaped the haunting wonder of what might have been, my mind roaming, now and then, the infinite possibilities of a life with my brother in it:

We became close; I followed him east to college, instead of my sister south. We fought over something big, and hadn’t spoken in years. He introduced me to a man who broke my heart; I introduced him to his first and third wives. He made a killing in the stock market; I let him bankroll my Peace Corps phase. He teased me mercilessly about my love life; I disrespected his serial monogamy. He named his firstborn after me; I returned the favor. The daydreams reel here, there, everywhere, because they can, because the specific universe that included us both no longer has a center.

***

I learned that day, then, about grown-up death. I thought I knew about it; this wasn't, after all, my first funeral. At age 11, I had gone to my grandmother's small service after she'd died in her rest home. At age 12, I had been part of a packed church service for a school friend's father, as round as he was tall, who'd died of a heart attack.

And at age 13, I had watched my other uncle—the 35-year-old father of my favorite cousins—die a slow death from pancreatic cancer, wasting away in the front room of my grandparent's ramshackle little house, where my father had created a make-do hospice, with a hospital bed and other such things to soften his younger brother's imminent death. I have a memory of spending time in the back part of that house with my cousins, waiting on the adults in the front. One of those days, my father asked if I wanted to say hello to my Uncle Robert. It wasn't a question, really, so I followed him down the dark hall and into the warmly-lit room. "Hello, Lynda!" the skeleton sitting up in the bed had said to me, and my father pushed me ever closer until I had taken his kind, bony hand for the last time.

But, of course, my brother's death was different. I learned about tragedy in my own front room, in all the rooms of my big, rambling house.

I also learned about mercy. As the odds and fate would have it, a state inspector came by my father's drugstore on the day of Rick's funeral. My father owned two drugstores in town, a tiny one in which Uncle Bill, Dad's baby brother, was the only licensed pharmacist, and the larger one where Dad, at that time, was the only licensed pharmacist. My father closed the tiny store for the day, since my uncle, of course, was also needed to help with the family tragedy. He left the large drugstore open, though. His longtime employee, a bald beanpole of an older man named Mr. White, whose family had owned

the tiny drugstore before my father bought it, and who helped Dad with everything this side of the actual filling of the prescriptions, was left in charge. His instructions were to manage the "front" of the store, to take prescriptions if the customer wanted to leave them, explaining the situation, but to hold them until my uncle could arrive to fill them later that day. One regular customer could not or would not wait and Mr. White, a kind and sweet soul, decided to oblige. Of the handful of customers in the store at that moment, one of them was the state inspector, who, as Mr. White was counting pills, stepped behind the counter and announced himself. The inspector could have jerked my father's pharmacist license, ruining his career and perhaps our entire family's future. But he didn't. When I reach back for a glimmer of grace during that summer's nightmare, I think about that government employee I never met.

***

Throughout my entire adult life, I have had a recurring dream about my brother—that we find him miraculously, but that he's not quite "right," that he doesn't recognize us, that he acts bizarre. The dream has tapered off with the years, but not its impact. A few weeks ago, with Rick on my mind, I decided to tell my psychologist sister Kay about it, after all this time.

“So. What do you think?” I asked.

She answered in the roundabout way to the truth of all psychologists: “Well, all I can say is that the dream is not about Rick but about you.”

Perhaps that was it. The Rick we found was never quite right because my family was never again quite right, and nothing, not even a re-appearance of my brother, could change it back.

There was once a custom in Southern and pioneer homes. With a death in the family, drapes were placed over each clock face throughout the house. I understand that gesture now. Time stopped, even as it continued on.

Before leaving my perch on the upstairs landing that morning after Rick's accident, I had heard one last vivid pair of voices, floating up from downstairs.

"How can you go on?" I heard a church friend say to my mother.

"I have to," came my mother's brusque reply. "I have to be strong for the children." The "have to" lingered in my ears; we were her salvation—and her burden. I remember fearing, even then, which one we'd most be.

Then I heard the church friend finally murmur, "Yes. Life goes on."

***

I got my driver's license the next month. A month after that, I saw a used car on Buddy Allen Chevrolet Lot, a used convertible Corvair, with only 100,000 miles. Within another month, it was mine and it became a sort of rolling sanctuary. Therapy is anything that works. Their therapy was silence and space, and maybe, momentarily, buying something that made a daughter smile again. My therapy was driving, top-down, movement as solace even then, the wind more soothing than a mother's hand and a thousand sermons, the roads connecting somewhere which connected to somewhere else,

highways, slipping through nature, strangely lifting my spirits, making some crooked sense when nothing else did.

And then there were the thunderstorms. Another sister whose lightning-loving brother had died might have made a point to avoid stormy weather at all costs. But I wanted to hear something, anything, but silence. Because I was still here; because we were all still here.

So when the first thunderstorm appeared after Rick was gone, I recall watching it form in the west, slowly moving toward me, where I stood by my beat-up convertible in our driveway. I could hear the clean, deadly, charged sound of lightning in the distance like clear, clean voices. It sounded like my soul felt. I think, now, my lifelong wanderlust may have begun there, for whatever reasons such things begin. For the rest of my life thunder and lightning will take me back to this memory, this storm, as if it were the last intimate moment, somehow, with my big brother. And as the storm came roaring toward me through the treetops, I roared my little car, top up, toward it.

***

Thirty years later, after Mother's Great Giveaway, my older sister Ann shoved two big boxes into her Colorado basement. That was all she had been able to recover during her attempt to regain Mother's things back in Terrell. She'd taken them home and plopped them unopened there, too frustrated and upset to go through the mostly worthless effects retrieved from the trash by the caregivers. During a visit to her house, several years later, I decided to go through them. The contents were stuff from the desks and

drawers in our upstairs bedrooms, nothing special, but just as I was about to close the box, I noticed a beat-up diary. It was mine. The inside cover said so—along with an Alfred E. Newman for President stamp—yet I had no memory of it. What was it doing still in existence? I seemed to recall making sure all such things had been discarded before I'd even left home. What about this diary would have inspired me to put it in a safe place, so safe I'd forgotten its existence?

I sat back and opened it:

Diary, baby!

Sorry I haven't written. Your lock is broken and my little sisters have been reading this, so I've had to hide you…and, listen, brats, if you are reading this, may the curse of Ali Babba [sic], be upon you!

After months of entries of who liked who and who was being mean to who and who sat next to who at the picture show, the girl who had words enough to fill volumes, finally left a day blank: July 4th, the summer after my freshman year.

After that entry, the diary stopped, the pages for the rest of the year blank, except for one short entry on September 4:

Dear Diary,

It's been a long summer, Diary. Sorry I haven't written. I just didn't feel up to it. And I guess I'll always remember why.

But I didn't write down why. Not a word.

Instead, I wrote this:

Since I last wrote, I got a Corvair convertible, and you can bet I love my Daddy….

Life goes on. At least it does when you're 15.

At Carriage House

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…"Did you know Rick died?"

“Yes, Mom," I answer her, turning back toward the window to watch the thunderstorm. "I know.”

CHAPTER 9

1966 Cadillac DeVille

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4 dr. hardtop sedan, 429 cu. V-8 engine,
leather upholstery, am/fm stereo, power
windows, power seats, power door locks,
tilt steering wheel, automatic climate
control, white sidewall tires, remote
control trunk lock, padded roof
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Silence descended after that. The moment came when the church people left, when the extended family left, when even my big sister and her new husband left, and we were alone–three daughters, ages 15, 13, and 9, with two inconsolable parents. We watched them, waiting for things to go back to normal, fearing what might happen if they did not. There was no group therapy, no family counseling back then, and only crazy people went to see the lone "shrink" in town. Besides that, he went to our church and was thought to be a little crazy himself. Being strong, surviving, was what my parents were expected to do and what we needed them to do. There's a slow tearing of the fabric of life, though, that happens after any family tragedy, in which strength can become a weakness, and survival can become not a means to an end but an end all to itself.

So, the entire next year, we went through the motions, letting life push us along, trusting the flow to keep us afloat. Dad's sorrow seemed summed up in a quote he asked

me to decoupage on a plaque for his office a few years later: *No problem is so big that a friend and bottle of whiskey can't cure.* My father must have found friends to talk to and whiskey to drink somewhere we wouldn't see. My mother, who I think now would have benefited more from a shot of whiskey than my father, seemed to have made a deal with herself—to keep living and moving and meeting her obligations by holding her deepest feelings in a stranglehold so tight she could never let go. As the days passed, and all of our grief began to go underground, hers seemed to go so far underground even she had no control over where it went. It was that kind of silence that settled in at our big, old house to stay for a while. And yet silence in itself is a kind of peace.

When I see life begin to go on again, it is in the shape of our new cars. The crushed Buick had been totaled, even if our parents would ever have driven it again. In my small Texas town, one's choice of automobiles was limited to either Ford or General Motors automobiles. After my brother's death, of course, Buicks were forever off-limits. Horribly enough, I have an image of the wrecked car, which can only mean that, in the benign way of small towns, the local wrecking company had been paid by the police to haul what remained of the blue crushed Buick from the scene of the accident to the local junk yard that backed up to the Dallas highway. I must have seen it while innocently driving by, which means my parents probably saw it there as well. For a while, until they could handle the thought of buying a replacement, we had a loaner from Buddy Allen Chevrolet, a bulbous white Chevy sedan. Then, for a few months, Mom drove an ugly yellow Pontiac my sisters hated, in which she carted them places and monitored their deeds and misdeeds. Or so they tell me. I have no memory of it, self-contained in my new Corvair convertible freedom.

Then Dad had brought home the Cadillac.

He had always wanted a Cadillac; that is, he had always wanted his wife to drive a Cadillac, no doubt for all the reasons that American husbands wanted wives to drive Cadillacs back then. She had said no for years. She would not show off. It wasn't Christian, the same reason she gave for not going to the country club and to parties at which people were drinking. She, after all, was not a "Whiskeypalian," and she would not drive a Cadillac like an Episcopalian, either.

But Dad so wanted a Cadillac. He must have made some sort of incredible deal with the hometown GM dealer, because without warning or obvious forethought, he drove a sleek, long Cadillac Seville into the driveway, and told my mother it was a steal.

There was only one problem—it was black.

"It looks like a hearse, Harold!" she had screamed. *"How could you?!"*

In a huff, he had quickly taken the car away.

And that seemed to signal an end to the silence, to our fragile peace. Was the fight that night? I don't know; I only recall it being a loud one, and being the first one since my brother's death. Compared to tales of other parental fights involving all sorts of taboos unthinkable in our small-town experience, this one wasn't earth-shattering. In fact, it might not have even compared to some of their own earlier fights. But in my memory, this was *the* fight, the one I'd remember the rest of my life. My mother was serving him a late dinner as she did every night when he came home from work at 10, moving from kitchen to dinette table where he sat. He said something; she spat something back. My sisters and I had come to the top of the stairs to eavesdrop as we always did, as all

children do, with a sense of fear and dread and fascination. But this time, it was too much, the words, the rage, the hysterics.

What were they saying? I only hear the tone, the voices rising, erupting, her slamming down of his tea glass in front of him at the table. The steak slapped on his plate, his growl, her pivot and waving of her arms. The screech of his chair on the lineoleum as he shoved it back, erupting to his feet. The view of their faces inches apart, yelling now at the top of their voices, fight at full-tilt.

My little sisters hurried back to their room and shut the door; I put my hands over my ears, but did not move. Never had I shown my face during all those childhood years of listening from the upstairs landing. This time, though, this one time, I dropped my hands from my ears and yelled down at my parents:

"*Stop it*—PLEASE *STOP* IT!"

At the sound of me, they paused, then cleared out of the room. Dad went outside; I followed.

"The woman's a *bitch*!" he yelled. Instantly he knew he'd crossed the line with his daughter; I could see it in his eyes that he was sorry. But he wasn't a man who could say he was sorry, and he wasn't over his anger because his anger was not all about her.

I ran to find my mother, who was sitting on her bed with her back to me, weeping, seething.

"I *hate* that man!" she sputtered, as I stood holding onto the bedpost, waiting for her to stop. But she wasn't over her hate because her hate was not all about him.

With that, I left them both alone, went to my own bedpost, my own tears, my own anger, wishing I'd been as smart as my little sisters. The space between my parents was

never a healthy place to be, but stupidly I'd marched straight into the middle of it and stood there. What did I think I was doing? Something was breaking I still wanted fixed, and I wasn't over trying. But what I wanted fixed was not all about them. They were just the only ones I had to turn to, the only ones I could learn from. The memory of that fight would not change my little sisters. They'd heard yelling before; this was no different. But it was. And now I was different. Now I comprehended the concept and value of peace at any price.

***

Within days, the Cadillac was back. This time, though, it had a white vinyl top on it. Then the silence descended again. Silence, though, was better than yelling. Silence let us all finish growing up, allowed us to navigate around our mother, however we could. We were now 16, 14, and 10, and we got busy again being as naturally self-involved as other kids our age. And soon, once again, we were not worrying so much about our mother and father.

That's why, months later, I was surprised to hear Mother, who was washing her face in the bathroom, suddenly burst into tears. I craned my neck around to see her staring at the washcloth and sobbing in deep, full, shocked sobs. Then I watched her replace it on the rack, stiffly regain her composure, and stride straight-backed out the other door. I inched over to see what she'd seen; the washcloth had Rick's name written on it, probably from some long-ago summer camp trip. I don't recall ever seeing one of those

again. And I don’t recall ever seeing Mom sob in that same way again. But I saw something else.

***

The summer of my senior year, two years later, we were on our way to Galveston for a quick beach trip before I left for college, my two younger sisters, Kay and Deanne, riding in the back seat, me in the front, Mother behind the wheel. Thirty miles down the road, one of my sisters realized she had left her clothes bag at home. Mother began to yell at her; my sister began to yell back, and my mother pulled to the side of the road, put the Cadillac into park, turned all the way around and slapped her. We all froze; it was the first time she slapped any of us. Mother turned back around and began to whimper, hunched over the steering wheel, saying over and over, "I can't stand it! I just can't stand it."

I recall the trauma of watching her meltdown a foot away from me. I realized something awful was happening, but it was not something that I, even as an 18-year-old, could fathom. Somehow, it seemed worse than anything I'd seen before, including Rick's death, as if his death's unresolved load we were all carrying around had just hit its tipping point. I was once again at the top of those stairs on the day Rick died, hearing her tell the church friend that she "had to go on for the children." Watching her now in that car, I knew I had relied on that, even as I feared she couldn't do it, that she shouldn't do it. But she had done it, for over three years. And there on the side of the road, the world seemed to be suddenly stuttering once again. We listened to her whimper for the longest time,

waiting for her to stop and move on, as she always had. She didn't. Instead, she continued to say, over and over, “I can't stand it! I just can’t stand it.”

As it went on, I looked back at my sisters, frozen to their spots in the backseat. No one knew what to do much less say. I had never confronted my mother. Ever. I had learned how to navigate around both my parents through my teenage years after Rick's death, with jokes and smiles and sweet talk, avoiding harsh words at all costs. The next moment, then, I recall as the kind between childhood and adulthood. I got out of the car, walked around to the driver's side, opened the door and said, "Mom, I'll drive us back to get it."

She didn't respond.

"Mother—" I yelled, "*move over—"* Still, she didn't move. So I bodily pushed her toward the passenger side, and slowly she slipped to the other side of the Cadillac's bench seat and huddled there.

I drove us back to the house, my sister grabbed her hang-up bag, and without a word between any of us, I turned right around and drove us to Houston. By the time we got there, she was back to what would become her pattern—her normal, tightly wound, handling-it-myself, survival mode, as if it had never happened.

And to this day, both of my sisters believe they were the one she slapped. She didn’t slap us all, but we all felt it.

At the Frosty Mug Root Beer Drive-In

Why is it that I am not thinking about piano lessons, guitar lessons, voice, drum, tennis lessons? About horses, bicycles, and Easter dresses? About dogs, cats, ducks, Thanksgiving feasts, Gulf coast beach trips, All-American Christmases? Or any of the thousands of other parental expressions of love? Why is it that such memories aren't enough to take away the tint of cautious, confused joy, the something lurking behind every memory of growing up with my mother, even before she lost her son? A kid knows this stuff, but doesn't know it enough to put a name on it before stashing it away. So, somehow, the past forever becomes something neither to run from nor something to glory in.

***

After the thunderstorm passed over Carriage House, I talk Mother into a trip to the Frosty Mug Root Beer Drive-In. It is Sunday, after all. So we are sitting once again inside the dilapidated place, by the pinball machine, Mother chewing her corny dog and, as usual, eyeing mine.

A pink Cadillac, circa 1960, drives up—the kind with fins long enough for take-off.

"That should be yours," I say to the owner of the place, standing at the counter.

"Naaah," he answers, "I got a Lexus."

Mother doesn't notice it, though, focusing on the remains of the corny dog still on her stick.

The Cadillac's driver, an old geezer, rich enough to have car toys and $1000 ostrich boots, steps onto the crumbled curb and through the broken hinged door. Loudly ordering up a greasy burger and frosty mug, he takes out a handful of coins and slaps it down on the counter.

And I jump.

CHAPTER 10

1977 Chevy Vega

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Silver hatchback, 4-cylinder aluminum
block engine, catalytic converter,
black wall tires, tinted glass, swing-
out rear side window, am/fm radio,16
gal. gas tank, 22mpg city, 26mpg, hwy
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I got married the day after college graduation in the First Baptist Church of Terrell, held the reception in our house's big back yard, and soon Mother had a new bridal portrait to hang in the den beside my big sister's. After that, it was as if my new husband Don and I made a pact to live all over the state of Texas, a marriage on wheels. God help us, we even did a stint in a mobile home during graduate school. And whether he knew it or not, by marrying me, he had also made a pact to do some traveling. During those first years together, with nothing more than a beat-up car and a tent, I dragged that longsuffering guy from one end of the country to the other, from ocean to ocean, up mountains and down rivers, only beginning to understand how much I loved the very act of moving down the road.

Texas was a mighty big place and we were doing our best, it seemed, to make it even bigger. But in the way of all families, home is still home, and I continued to feel its call, even if its pull was becoming fainter with the passing years. My parents' world still held the same confusing mixture of pictorial adoration and marital tension, yet also the same sycamore trees and hallways and nook and crannies. The truth is you can go home again and you always do; it just gets easier not to go back with each passing mile.

As for Mother, one day, she seemed to realize that soon her last child would be gone. Beyond waiting to hang her remaining daughters' bridal portraits in that wedding gallery of a den, she began to have ideas of her own. I recall her trying community college classes for a while, joining a service club, and a bowling league, all the while asking Dad to let her manage the cosmetic section of the store to which he always said no. Next, I remember she tried being a secretary for a church office, making a point to show me her first paycheck, with which she bought the ugliest, most uncomfortable naugahyde couch we'd ever seen. But nobody said a thing; it was bought with her own money, so we sat. And then I recall Dad hating the idea of his wife being anyone's secretary so much that he finally let her have that cosmetic counter.

The next time I looked, she had started her own store—the health food store. It was supposed to lose money, my father once told me, to help his yearly Internal Revenue headache. That was the plan; it didn't. Suddenly Agnes Rutledge was dispensing a whole other kind of over-the-counter medical advice from a whole other kind of stockpile of pills and remedies, a nod to Dad she never grasped. I can see Mother in her tiny storefront crammed ceiling to floor with things my father would have dismissed as quackery, having no boss but herself. "Try garlic capsules to help your high blood

pressure," I can hear her tell a customer, her best authoritative mother voice wafting over the aisles to me. "And this capsule is guaranteed not to make you smell, which is nice."

I recall each of these episodes in the half-remembered way of twenty-something daughters eager not to be thinking of parents at all. I was concerned with my own independence, not my mother's. Beyond the multiplying number of funky vitamin and herb containers in her cabinets—I was aware of nothing more than my parents' usual routine, the steak she cooked for him each night at 10 p.m. and the silence in which he always ate it by himself at the kitchen table before he went to his room to smoke his cigarettes and read his Louis L'Amour westerns.

During those years, still within a day's drive of home, I can see myself moving down Highway 80 in a succession of used cars. Then, even clearer, I see myself driving away again. When I count up that decade of automobiles, it's a sad, silly list of used cars, a litany of the automobile industry, our financial status, and our young, spotty common sense. My new husband and I had a 1975 Chevrolet Vega (built to last 50,000 miles and not a mile more), a 1975 Ford Fairlane (bought off our brother-in-law after he crushed in the front grille; we never fixed it), a 1978 Fiat Spyder (another 100,000 mile troubled convertible that I adored), a reconditioned 1979 Audi (a bored West Texas boy had used the front end for target practice; we got it cheap); a 1980 Volkswagen Rabbit Diesel (we called it the "hummer"; 53 miles to the gallon, despite air and ear pollution), and then a new 1983 Subaru and a new 1984 Volvo when our bank account caught up with our hard-knock vehicle-wisdom.

But it is the Vega I think of now. Our first road trip was to the Rocky Mountains right after we were married. Young, poor, and totally clueless, without credit cards and only a

set amount of cash, we headed toward Colorado in that tiny Vega. We even somehow stashed my college sister Kay in the back seat of that hatchback, smushed in with our tent and bags after she had begged for a break from Mother that summer. She planned to go see friends and would get them to bring her home somehow. So we all headed up the same road we'd be driving our mother 30 years later, stopping at places such as a Shakey's Pizza Parlor along the way, to buy an extra-large pizza and take half of it with us to live on for another day.

After dropping off Kay, we followed the Continental Divide up and back again, for two solid weeks, before heading back to Texas. About five hours from our home, we entered some small town on the Texas/New Mexico border. We had a tank full of gas and $5.25 between us to get back to our mobile home in Ft. Worth. For the likes of us, it was enough, if nothing went wrong. We were so hungry, though, totally out of snacks and day-old pizza.

So we parked the Vega near a small-town diner, counted our money again, and headed inside. On the front door, however, was a sign that said, "No halter tops." I was wearing a halter-top. Two good ol' boys passed us, one with a beer belly hanging out over his belt buckle, the other wearing his Levis so low, his butt-crack could have used a halter-top. But I went back to the Vega and found a t-shirt, while Don went on inside. By the time I got back, the waitress was waiting and Don was staring at a buffet table that spread down the entire interior wall. I gave him a look; he looked back at the buffet. So I gave him a second look, not wanting to argue in front of the waitress.

That's when she said: "We got us a nice buffet here, $3.75. You two interested?"

I sighed, opened the stained menu, and ordered a grilled cheese, $1, and some water. And then I heard my new husband say, "I'll have the buffet." Before I could find my voice, he was up and making his way down the buffet wall.

While I stewed over my pitiful grilled cheese, he filled his plate once, then twice. On the third time, I stomped out the door. When he came out to the Vega, he was grinning, sheepishly satisfied. And we now had 50 cents to our names. We got into the car without a word and drove off, and for a mile, we didn't speak. Then I let him have it.

"What were you *thinking*!" I yelled, this side of popping him upside his big Texas boy's head. "What if something happens—what are we going to do!!?"

His answer: "I had to have that buffet."

We went another three rounds, getting louder and louder, me telling him that he was irresponsible and him telling me that I couldn't boss him around and that I worried too much, and other such colorful things newlyweds say.

Until finally, he said the worst thing he could think of: "You sound like your mother!"

To which I retorted: "You sound like my father!"

And we both paused on that one: I had meant to say "your" father, not mine.

Not too long ago, decades after that moment, I was surprised to hear my spouse telling some friends about this fight, in the spirit of "one-day-we'll-all-laugh-about-it." He called it one of our first "rip-snorters." As he told it, I realized I was still mad about it. We had just let it go, just like Agnes and Harold, acting as if it never happened. For me, that long-ago fear of driving home with only pennies in our pocket had been bad enough. Worse was that we'd had a fight just like my parents, and just like my parents, we'd never resolved it.

But worst of all?

I *had* sounded like my mother.

We made it home to Ft. Worth. And soon we had more than 50 cents in our pockets. In the years ahead, we tried to make Texas even bigger, but it was never quite big enough for me.

One day, Don asked me what I thought of Chicago. He'd been offered a job there. I thought about it for ten seconds and I said: "Let's go."

At the Frosty Mug Root Beer Drive-In

At the Drive-In, we have just finished our root beers and corny dogs for the afternoon. We still have time for a Sunday drive, and the sky is now brilliant blue, so I load Mother and her wheelchair back into the rental car and we crunch across the gravel parking lot, headed toward the countryside. The thunderstorm and the rain had left the air clean and charged, and the idea of driving through nothing but green fields after a spring rainstorm sounded mighty good. Mother thought so, too. So, about a mile down the Interstate, I turn off on a road we haven't ever driven down, knowing it will hook up with one of our much-traveled roads one way or the other.

"Okay, Mom," I say, "fasten your seatbelt. We're going into unknown territory."

She touches the seatbelt already fastened across her, decides it's just fine, and looks back out the window, anticipating something new.

Instead, we see something old. About a mile down the road, we spy a red brick Methodist church, and from its parking lot comes a line of cars with their lights on, led by long black limos and one long black hearse, all coming toward us.

Waiting for the funeral procession to meet us, I slow the rental car as respectfully as I can while still moving, when Mother says, "Aren't you going to pull over?"

When I was growing up, that was what you did, whether you knew the newly deceased or not. If you were walking along the street, you stopped. If you had a hat on, you took it off. If you were in your car, you pulled over, no matter which side of the road you were on. You were giving the funeral procession room to pass, but you were also showing respect for the dead, deference to the mourners and, I'd always thought, reverence to the eternal stillness of death itself. By the time I left home, though, the land of two-lane highways had already begun to turn into a four-lane one and safety became more the issue than respect, no one wanting to create any undue need for new funerals. So, except for the safest, small pockets of civilization, the custom had long since died a natural death.

Now, though, with my mother's question in my ears, I have two flashbacks:

Through the window of the funeral car, on our way to bury my brother, I see a fleeting sight of a leather-skinned old man standing on the edge of the country road. He stops, turns and pulls the straw cowboy hat from his head, as we pass.

Fast forward, twenty years. Through the window of another funeral car, on the day we buried my father, I see a beat-up pickup truck, hazarding the ditch of the same country road, as it bumps to a halt along the road's narrow shoulder.

So, as the Methodist church's funeral procession edges closer, I look behind me. No one was coming for the moment and the procession isn't that long. The road's shoulder, though, leaves much to be desired, especially since I'm driving a rental.

"Aren't you going to pull over?" Mother repeats.

And I decide that I am.

CHAPTER 11

1989 Lincoln Continental Hearse

```
Grey model Landau w/ 3/4 black roof,
amber beacon, flag staffs, white
walls tires, aluminum wheels, leather
interior, burl-wood casket floor,
black chauffeur's compartment, grey
casket compartment with wood bier
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Soon after moving to Chicago, we had to return for yet another funeral—my grandfather's. That was the summer my Uncle Bill, saddled with his pistol of an invalid father while coping with his own diabetes, had tried his Yellowstone family getaway only to have to turn right back around due to Daddy B.'s sudden death.

We all dropped everything, too, all the grandchildren, all the surviving daughters-in-law, all the cousins, almost as if we were rallying around Bill—the Rutledge clan's last living patriarch—as much as burying a grandfather. Don and I had packed up the dog, some funeral clothes, and drove straight through.

Before the funeral, I looked around for my uncle's familiar bald dome. When I finally located him, I did a double take: He was wearing the worst toupee I had ever seen in my life. It was all over his head.

"Uncle Bill!" I whispered. "What happened to your Kojak look? I loved you bald!"

He laughed heartily, if a little self-conscious. "Well…the ladies in my family like it, so…"

So I hugged him big.

After the small service, we congregated outside the funeral home chapel. Since Uncle Bill was the oldest surviving Rutledge male, all four of our young husbands along with our lone male cousin joined Bill as my grandfather's pallbearers. As we watched, they carried his casket to the same grey Lincoln Continental hearse used for my father's funeral.

And the route to the country cemetery was also the same. It had been the same for every family funeral of my life. The short procession of vehicles, three black Cadillac funeral limos and half a dozen personal cars, lights on, followed the grey hearse to a two-lane winding country road on the outskirts of town. It stretched through several miles of farmland from Terrell's Highway 80 to a long-gone farm settlement called College Mound, now no more than a white clapboard community church and cemetery amidst a grove of pin oak trees.

Gravel crackling under the funeral cars' tires, our processional pulled through the wrought iron entryway toward the older part of the cemetery. And, in a moment, following the casket and pallbearers, we were all gathered around the edge of the older Rutledge plot, burying my grandfather beside my grandmother and other kin longgone enough to contain weathered tombstones from another century.

Afterwards, we headed back to my mother's house where all the relatives came by to see everybody they hadn't seen since the last funeral. Before dropping by, Bill and several cousins had gone over to close up my grandfather's house. One of the cousins

walked in with a photo of a dark, high-ceiling room. Directly in the middle of the image, sitting near a rolltop desk, was a man with a handlebar mustache, in a western duster, boots, and Stetson, shotgun across his lap.

"Who is that?" I said.

"I think it's our great-granddaddy," said the cousin. "Says on the back, 'Virgil Rutledge, Sheriff of Kaufman County for 20 years.'"

While everyone was chatting about the photo, I took this in, incredulous. For lack of any evidence, I had always thought we came from a long line of farmers who had done nothing more exciting than tame some North Texas land for the last 150 years. How could a Texas family have a turn-of-the-century sheriff for an ancestor and not know it?

"Is this true?" I asked my uncle.

He nodded.

"Did you know him?"

He shook his head, explaining that he'd been the baby of the family. The sheriff had died when he was small.

"But didn't Daddy B. ever mention his own father?" I asked.

Bill, laconic as ever, just shrugged.

So I went to ask Mother. I found her in the kitchen; she instantly put me to work piling food onto platters. "Did you know Dad's grandfather was a sheriff?" I asked her.

"Vaguely," she said. "He was already dead by the time I moved here with Harold."

"Nobody ever mentioned him?"

"I don't think he and your grandfather got along," was Mother's reply.

"How can we have a sheriff in the family and not have one story about him?" I griped.

She answered by handing me a tray and pointing toward the crowd waiting in the other room.

By the time I delivered that platter, everybody had gone back to chatting about football and the weather and all our personal tomorrows. I seemed to be the only one nonplussed by this sheriff great-grandfather who had just entered the room.

And soon it will be as if the photo had never existed; its image is fresh in my mind to this day, but I will probably never see it again. The cousin who claimed it promised to make copies and send one to us all, which went the way of most such promises. And by the time I followed up, the cousin's life was in chaos and the photo was nowhere to be found.

As interested as I was about the Texas sheriff in my family tree, though, I think I was more bothered by what my not knowing of him meant. Already a writer with a built-in need-to-know, I couldn't help wondering what else I didn't know—and what else it was already too late to know. More importantly, it was also the moment I realized how very little my own parents had shared about their childhoods. That fact suddenly seemed odd in a way it never did before. Growing up, I had no lack of stories, courtesy of my own imagination and all the library books in the world. Add the fact that the more removed my cousins got, the weirder they were, and the less I cared to know. Inevitably, though, I came to the question of me—if my parents and grandparents weren't storytellers, then how to explain a girl who never shuts up?

And now my grandfather, son of Virgil Rutledge the sheriff of our whole damn Texas county for 20 years, had died not leaving one anecdote from that entire generation, of sheriffs or anybody else.

I recall thinking that this is how it works—the meaning of the term "taking it to your grave."

***

Several years later, I was offered a writing assignment about genealogy. I hesitated. After all, I wasn't that interested in the topic. How could I be, having no family stories beyond my own? But the photo of that sheriff had never let me go, so I accepted the assignment, spreading the word throughout the extended family to see who knew what about who.

When I called Mom, I expected her usual: "The past is past. Why dwell on it?" Instead, she passed the buck. "I'll ask Belle."

This was news of the good news/bad news variety. Her sister, my Aunt Belle, was a Mormon and genealogy for a Mormon is rather like evangelism after death. That was the good news.

This was the bad news: Belle was, as they say, a brick short of a load; her stairs didn't go all the way to the top. The woman was eccentric. Eccentrics in one's family tree are always more interesting a generation or two removed; Belle was only a hundred miles away. When I was nine, she was my favorite aunt; by the time I was thirteen, she either got crazier or I grew out of crazy, because suddenly she embarrassed me beyond words.

My mother, though, always seemed tickled by her. Mother was the baby of her family, her mother having had her after a lifetime of bearing and burying children. Of seven surviving siblings, half of which Mom herself seemed barely acquainted with, Belle was the one she seemed to truly love, always sending her money and asking her along on our little trips here and there.

Married three times, back when that was scandalous this side of Hollywood, Belle became a Mormon to please her second husband. She stayed a Mormon after the reprobate left her, even after she married her third and final husband, Glenn, the silent, mustached, chain-smoking, weak-hearted, air traffic controller, a story in himself. Belle stored specially-labeled canned goods under beds, in closets, in every nook and cranny of her little house in Waco. They were Mormon preparation for the "end times," as she described it. And as if that wasn't enough, she soon gained fame as the "Bird Woman of Waco" for her uncanny ability to nurse wounded sparrows and blue jays and all sorts of wild birds brought to her doorstep. She became a minor celebrity for a time, making television news and newspapers deep in the heart of Texas. If you were brave or foolhardy enough to visit her, she would grab her scrapbooks off the electric organ and make you sit on her musty old divan and go through them all, page by page. Those scrapbooks were what came to mind when my Mother evoked Belle's name. No assignment was worth sitting through those scrapbooks again.

Beyond Belle's wealth of story material, I had only one other Mother-sibling story. One of her much older brothers was a legally-blind sweet soul named Cecil, who wore the thickest glasses I'd seen; coke-bottle thick only begins to describe them. As an adult, he never strayed from that East Texas backwoods house, living with his mother in the old

homestead handed down from another generation's elderly relatives. Then, after Grandma's move to the nursing home near us, he somehow continued to live there himself—with a little help via the U.S. Mail. According to my Aunt Belle, he ordered up a mail-order bride named Stella, a tale that was immediately pooh-poohed by my mother.

"It was a pen-pal ad or something in the back of one of his magazines for the blind," she said, with her already famous flick-of-a-wrist dismissal wave. Whatever the truth, one fact remains: A mildly buck-toothed woman named Stella, with thin, waist-length, mousey brown hair, held back with clips, wearing a long, homemade dress and thick glasses of her own, showed up at the little farm one day to stay. There was just one small problem. She was "touched," as they said back then, her goofiness of the ethereal, farm-stock Blanche DuBois kind.

"Her family just wanted to get rid of her, that's what," Belle had sniffed, hinting of uncovered mental institutions in her background. But Stella, sweet-souled herself, never left. And Cecil, after that, was always "Cecil and Stella."

The few times I saw Stella after hearing the story, I ached to ask her about it, but I'd already been spoiled by too big a dose of Southern manners. That left me with two versions of the Cecil and Stella Story—my aunt's and my mother's. The truth I figured was somewhere in between, at least until I began to see Aunt Belle, the Bird Woman of Waco, through adult eyes. By that time, though, my mother was on her way to being the Cat Woman of Terrell. So I knew the truth was a slippery business, in either direction.

As for my father's side, surprisingly, my brother-in-law Bob, the doctor and amateur genealogist, was the one to send me a packet of records. Inside, was a cheaply-bound, badly-edited fifty-year old county history publication full of errors of both the

typographical and biographical kind. But whatever its factual worth, it was the only oral history recorded of that era and area, so I did not scoff. Because from its pages, I met Virgil Rutledge. In fact, I was trotted all the way back to one of my original Americans, an indentured servant that got off a ship in 1615. I watched the Rutledge surname travel via this tiny written oral history all the way to the moment young Virgil Rutledge got on a train toward Texas. Some anonymous offspring of the sheriff, one of my great-aunts or great-uncles who did get along with him, wrote of watching his/her parents race horses up the lane, my great-grandmother riding side-saddle at a dead run. Of the sheriff finding orphans in their barn and babies on doorsteps. Of a money order that appeared every year thanking the sheriff for a secret favor. Of the sheriff's famous way with horses and keeping the peace. The paragraph had a power that made my blood pump, loud and oddly proud. Most living souls pass on genes that tell their own tales, but the lucky ones are the ones who do that for somebody, I think, if only through a vivid recounted moment or two. If such books are the judge—and who knows they're not?—we truly are the sum of a few such moments, in the end. In reading that county history, I also couldn't escape an existential moment of my own. According to that old account, I exist because of a flu—a rather nasty 1889 one called "Le Grippe"—that killed Virgil's young wife who'd come all the way to Texas with him. Virgil's second wife, the Texas-bred sidesaddle racer, was our line.

No flu, no me.

If I ever need a reality adjustment, that would be a good place to start.

And mother's side? Belle sent a genealogy of questionable branches and scratched-in names. There was my grandfather of the Irish eyebrows and devil grin, selling ties,

moving his brood, and preaching along the way. There was Grandma of the German honker who had kids and more kids and made do. Among the usual mix of pioneer preachers and farmers, there was a hint of a Cherokee squaw. Before they all came by wagon to Texas, though, running from or taking leave of their own families, there was nothing.

But as I kept reading, I began to sense that "nothing" might be the point. After all, wasn't that the pioneer mindset? Fresh starts. Clean slates. Better times ahead. Leaving the past behind. Perhaps that's the answer to my own parents' silence—simply a lingering pioneer mentality. Perhaps their young lives really were so hard, unhappy and poor, they were embarrassed by them and wanted to leave them behind. And while that does ring true on some level, there's just one thing—lots of families had nothing but stories to hand down and did so with relish.

So I'm back to where I began. I am left only to imagine, so I imagine.

I place my father and my mother into this context. I send them to college from their respective hardscrabble Texas farms, the first of their families to go. I place them in the same elevator, and I watch my mother's eyes soften at my dad's smile. They are 19 and 21, and within 3 months they are married, and producing kids to fuel the nation's new baby boom. Everything is about the future; the only stories worth telling are the ones they were now creating. And for years, they go about living the American Dream, a bucketload of kids, corner drugstore, hometown church, and small-town, if not marital, tranquility. There are weddings and grandchildren but also funerals and tragedy, a loss of religious faith and a finding of it, the best of times and the worst of times in the time-honored Dickensian way.

And then I fast forward to my mother on her own. And for the first time in her life, she has a universe of her own making, one not about childrearing, not about an unhappy marriage, not about moral obligation or personal pain. And if everyone would just leave her alone, if her daughters would come to visit now and then, and if she had cats and dogs to fatten and *Lawrence Welk* and *Star Trek* to watch in the evening, and Talk Radio to disagree with at night, and a nice little health store business to run, then perhaps this two-story frame world of Only Agnes would finally allow her to feel a peace about her choice made in that elevator so quick, so long ago.

Or so I imagine. After all, what else could it be?

Hundreds of things. Thousands.

But I'll never know.

CHAPTER 12

1953 Ford

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Light blue 4 door sedan, 3 speed
manual transmission on column, slight
oil leak, upholstery rips/tears, mild
rust, spray paint graffiti smudge on
front fender, good hoopie car
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For several years after my grandfather's funeral, things were relatively peaceful. My mother turned 70; the Great Giveaway was still years away. I kept up with her by monthly calls and the occasional visit home from Chicago.

Then one day, I picked up the phone to hear her voice. What she said after hello, however, made me lose all sense of syntax and exact memory:

Uncle Bill was missing.

"He's been missing for several days," she said.

The rest I recall in sound bites, like a story on the 6 o'clock news. All points bulletin. Abandoned car at Lake Tawakoni. Gun. Chains. The dragging of the lake. Possible suicide. No note found. Police investigating.

My mother was still talking, but I heard nothing more. Until she said: "I can't believe he'd put everyone through this. We've never had a suicide in the family."

And I quit listening again.

In a moment, I heard, through the fog: "Lynda?"

"Yes, Mother."

"I said, I hadn't called you sooner because I knew it would be hard for you to come. But I thought you'd want to know. The funeral is tomorrow."

My mother, though, hadn't noticed something important: Bill and I had been friends.

I went.

***

In a small town, things not only change slowly, sometimes they don't change at all. There's a junkyard at the edge of my hometown, on the road to Dallas. It was the junkyard in which I must have seen the Buick after my brother's death. If so, the crashed carcass wasn't there long. But in the junkyard's corner, up on blocks forever and a day, was a 1953 Ford. It had been there so long that weeds the size of small trees had grown up from inside the open hood.

After college, through all the years I had come home along that old highway before moving due north, I drove past the junkyard and its corner Ford. Whizzing by at 60 mph, I'd glance toward it, marking time by it, watching its rusting baby blue paint sun-bleach into white, weeds growing ever higher—and I'd always think of my uncle. He'd had one just like it, in fact, so much like it, I was always tempted to stop and ask someone if I could check its fender for a big, black spray paint smudge that would mark it as Bill's beyond doubt. But I was always too busy, too distracted, moving down the road. On the

day of his funeral, I passed it again, the rusting hulk sitting in that weedy corner, no longer recognizable at all.

When I think of Bill, I think of that car. In the summer of my junior year, Dad had moved his second drugstore, the tiny one, to my town's equivalent of a suburban strip mall, put Bill in charge and sent me out there to help for my summer job.

After an agriculture degree and a failed attempt at dairy farming, Bill had gone to pharmacy school with my father's help. Although he was as stubborn, willful and private as my father, he was also as laidback as Dad was driven. And his sense of humor fit mine just fine. One day, my father had wrong-headedly taken me from behind the sales counter and made me a bookkeeper to help Mother with the chore, having not yet noticed Daughter #2 was not only math-challenged but way too dreamy for something as exact as money-counting. Three days in a row, I couldn't make the books balance, far too interested in sorting through the change for Mercury Head dimes and Buffalo nickels. Bill teased me mercilessly about it. On the fourth day, when I had to sit there and wait for my mother to arrive and bail me out—again—my uncle had sauntered over from the prescription counter and flipped a coin onto a pile of change I was recounting. I cringed. I was sure Bill was about to hand me yet another cash register bag and I'd have to start counting all over again, something he knew very well I'd think. Then I looked closer. It was a Mercury Head dime.

Every day, he drove to work in that ugly old hoopie car. That's what he called it: His "hoopie." It was one of those ugly old Ford models that seemed to be all sharp points on a balloon body. And everyday he parked it in the same place, out by the street, in my direct line of vision behind the front counter.

One day before work, I saw him pointing a can of black spray paint at the car's front fender. He was putting one last coat over some graffiti. The Ford hadn't started the night before, so he'd left it in the parking lot over night. Some town knucklehead had creatively expressed himself on the fender under cover of summer darkness. Of course, I tried to make out what dirty word was under Bill's handiwork, but he'd used a whole can on it. Something in the fact that I couldn't, made it every bad word rolled into one, even more dangerous and titillating as a smudge than it ever would have been as the word itself. Since it was a hoopie, of course, he never bothered to have it repainted, just continued to drive the smudge back and forth to work. So, for the rest of the summer, every day, I looked at that smudge out the storefront's glass windows from my place behind the counter.

That is the car I see sitting by Lake Tawakoni; the '53 Ford with the obscene word on its fender. And in my mind's eye, it's not blacked out.

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The only flight home available on such short notice forced me to drive straight to the cemetery for the gravesite service, having already missed the chapel funeral itself. The cemetery was, of course, the same well-kept old country churchyard at College Mound.

As I zigzagged through the burial plots to join my relatives encircling the Rutledge plot, I noticed the headstones, this time, of the older Rutledge gravesites. There was Virgil, inches from where I stood. Beside him I saw my great-granny Lula, the side-saddle-racing second wife. Over in the corner, my uncle Robert, my brother Rick, my

father Harold, and, in a matter of minutes, my uncle Bill. I thought I'd experienced every kind of funeral there was to experience: grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, fathers, brothers. I was wrong. The air was thick with what was not being said, the mourning lopsided. And so I learned about another kind of death.

I joined my mother where she stood with the rest of the extended family behind the seats filled by Bill's immediate family—my aunt Ellen and their two grown children. My mother and I exchanged glances, then both turned our gazes back to them. "How could he do this to his family?" Mother muttered, under her breath. I marveled at her, the way she prized strength and responsibility above everything, always returning to it, like some faulty lifeline, and expecting the same from the rest of us. "Why would he do such a thing?" she added. I reached for the logical answers: His health must have deteriorated. He must have seen what was coming. He was battling depression over the possibility of ending up like my grandfather, whittled away, handicapped and going slowly blind. He left a note and it was lost. He had been planning this for years. He'd decided that being strong and responsible wasn't enough, anymore. What else could it be?

What else? Hundreds of things. Thousands.

But we'll never know.

In fact, Mother's whispered comments were the only ones I heard about Bill the entire day. No one mentioned him beyond the most basic condolences; no one asked why, no one said anything at all, at least not in his wife's presence, and not here so near to where we were laying him with the rest of our dead. It was October, I recall thinking; he'd cheated July, for whatever that was worth. But I told myself that this would not be how I

remembered my uncle. Bill was the guy who sprayed over a hoopie fender's dirty word, who knew the magic of a Mercury Head dime.

***

After the service, we all walked up the hill to the "fellowship hall" of the little College Mound community church where the nice church ladies had prepared some plates of food to give us something to hold onto while we didn't talk about Bill. For about an hour, we make small talk with other relatives about anything but why we were there. And the smallest talk of all would be with Bill's widow Ellen along with their two children, now young adults. I watched Ellen closely, as taut as Bill was laidback, looking for some clues to Bill, but she stayed only a moment and then was gone. What I didn't know was that this would be the last time I'd ever see her, or them, that they'd be gone from the family as if they'd left with Bill.

But the rest of us lingered, the peculiar grief holding us in place in a way other family deaths had never done, as if we were in shock, as if in some reverse way, we wanted to acknowledge, even celebrate, life, the going-on of it, the carpe diem of it. That's how it felt as we talked of families and new jobs and future plans. Judith, the widow of my late Uncle Robert who had died of cancer so very young, came up to give me a hug. She was, even at 70, elegant.

"Tell Agnes we need to have some fun!" she said. "Get her to go traveling with me!" I glanced toward Mother standing within hearing distance, and then back at Judith, trying

to picture my aunt and my mother together on a cruise ship somewhere. Two merry widows, on their own, kicking up their heels? This I'd have to see.

"I'll try, but don't hold your breath." I motioned Mother over to us. "Mom, did you hear that? You should go."

She gave us the smile she reserved for silly ideas, punctuated with a tiny version of her dismissal wave. And no more was said about it.

As my aunt kept chattering, my mother drifted away, not wanting to keep talking about things she didn't want to do. Finally, someone called to Judith and after giving me another little hug, she drifted away as well. I looked around for Mother and found her, sitting now at a table, eating from her food plate. She would sit there until it was time to go. And then she would go straight home.

It was as if Mother's world was beginning to shrink even as mine was spiraling ever bigger. By that time, my husband and I had been in Chicago for five years. Every significant family member, and a few not so significant, had visited, coming for the Windy City tour and the free room and board, everyone, that is, but my mother. She kept asking about it; I kept inviting her. She never came.

During those years, I began to accept travel assignments, often out of the country. Before each one, she'd ask if I were carrying her phone number or my husband's, in case of emergency. *Yes, yes, of course, Mom*, I'd assure her, knowing it was my brother Rick who was on her mind. On my return, she'd want to hear all about it, the five-minute version, that is, which was as long as she ever talked about anything. She seemed to like that I "went"; she just didn't want to go herself. And she just couldn't find the time to visit

me. Still, I didn't think that too unusual. She wasn't ever much of a traveler, and, frankly, I was more than a little relieved.

Then, twice in as many years, I found myself in the hospital.

"Do you need me to come?" she said the first time, then quickly answered her own question: "I worried whether you had enough help, but I decided that Don could probably handle it." That was exactly what I was preparing to say to her: She needn't come, that Don could handle it. But never would I have expected her to say it first. Our mother in "mission" mode was a woman not to be denied. Her idea of "helping" a daughter in need was a sort of swooping take-over, a sudden smothering, hovering attention. She didn't hold our hands; she forced pills and remedies on us until we gave in and tried them, then she cooked us supper and made sure we ate every bit of it, driving us all a little crazy.

Then, my second hospital stay turned out to be emergency major surgery, the life-threatening kind. When she responded exactly the same way, I realized her first response was no fluke. And I finally understood two things I hadn't grasped before:

I had driven far, far away in my mother's mind, as if I'd taken a train or wagon to the frontier.

And in the years since, my mother had shut some sort of fence behind her.

After my uncle's funeral, as I was saying my goodbyes and take-cares to everyone I probably wouldn't see until the next funeral, I looked back at my Aunt Judith, ready to live as long as she lived, the world expanding outward for her. And I looked back at my mother, holding her days cautiously within the confines of her tiny town's limits, the world folding ever smaller around her. In the years ahead, Judith would visit Europe on an "If-this-is-Tuesday-it-must-be-Belgium" whirlwind tour, then do the same thing in

Australia and New Zealand. Within the same few years, Mother would begin to have her medical problems, they would worsen, and that would be that.

When I thought about my aunt in the years to come, oddly enough, I'd see her in that church hall at the end of Bill's life, opening up to new things at the end of hers, seeing the world and letting the world see her. But inside that memory, like a shadow in the background, I also see my mother, and she is shutting that fence forever behind her.

CHAPTER 13

2004 Rental Car

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Ford Focus or similar car. Features:
air bags, am/fm stereo radio, 4-
cylinder engine, air conditioning,
automatic transmission, power steering,
tinted windows, dual mirrors, unlimited
mileage, usually white
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The country church cemetery is now only about 100 yards off the new stretch of Interstate 20, its winding two-lane road even having its own official sign: *College Mound, Next Exit.*

The afternoon I spied the sign, I was speeding down the Interstate in a rental car, going toward East Texas to work on a book project.

I knew I should stop, but I was hesitating, the ghosts still a little too near. I had already passed my hometown's exit a few miles back, even though the house where I grew up was only a couple of miles up the road, a basic easy off/easy on. But I hadn't visited it since the day my Texas sister and I had gone through Mother's recovered goods right after the Great Giveaway. I was tempted, my curiosity piqued by my sister's description of the new owners, a couple not much older than we were. The wife, well-

known for her renovations of old houses, purportedly had done such a great job on my childhood home that she and the house had been profiled in the leading Dallas newspaper's home section.

No time, I had told myself. *Best to leave ghosts be*.

When the cemetery's exit appeared, however, I found myself steering the rental car up the ramp, through the stand of woods, around the little country church, and through the cemetery's wrought iron archway. A burial service was going on, as chance would have it, on the other side of the cemetery. So I rolled respectfully and quietly to the older part of the graveyard where all my Rutledges are buried.

The trees planted by my mother around my brother's grave were blooming. I got out of the car and paused a moment at Rick's headstone. Then I stepped over to my parents' double headstone. For a quiet moment, I paid my respects to Dad, and then glancing at my mother's side of the headstone, I was also paying my respects to her.

There was just one problem: My mother wasn't dead.

The next moment was, to say the least, bizarre.

I sank onto the bench behind me to take it in. Agnes Rutledge was definitely still among the living, even though, obviously, a part of my psyche didn't seem to quite think so.

I gazed at Mother's side of the double-duty headstone, which seemed suddenly bizarre in itself, the very idea that she'd actually bought it that way. But there it sat, carved and ready:

Agnes Ryan Rutledge

Born 12/7/20

Died space space space

Trying to get a handle on the moment, I shook my head to clear my mind of whatever psychological cobwebs had caused it. Granted, in the years since moving her from the big house in Terrell, with all its giveaway drama, I'd begun to feel that the mother I'd known no longer existed. But the truth was, the feeling had begun long before that. Had the part of me keeping score of all the small deaths I'd witnessed through the years, mourning them subconsciously, quietly, just needed desperately to "say" it out loud?

But it was still too much, so I just got in the car and rushed off to my appointment, leaving the moment thankfully behind.

For several days, I worked on my project, gratefully stashing thoughts of cemeteries and psyches for another time. Then, finishing a little early, I had made a beeline back to the airport to catch the last flight of the night.

A month later, though, just before my March Carriage House visit to take my turn broaching the unbroachables subjects with Mother, I was called back for follow-up work on the same book project. That I hadn't expected. So I was about to find myself once again in a DFW Airport rental car, headed once more past my hometown and my country cemetery. And on this trip, I not only had time for a ride down memory lane, I had time to kill, my crack-of-dawn flight landing me in Texas hours ahead of schedule.

The cemetery, as one might imagine, held no more temptation for me. But the old house? I was wavering. I was still curious about its renovation, but part of me wanted to let memory hold my childhood home just as it was decades ago. The best of those times was already long stored safely in memory, anyway, so, whatever I might revisit in a quick drive-by really would be about its Mother years. And that would not exactly be a

sentimental journey. Besides, I was not the kind of person to walk up to the front door and ask for a tour. No, I'd have more than enough Mother to handle in a few days, I told myself. So I got into the rental car, put my mind in neutral, let go of the idea once again, and stepped on the gas.

For 30 minutes, I maneuvered the car out of the Dallas metroplex, dodging morning rush hour and two-ton trucks, until I finally connected to Interstate 20 again on an eight-lane stretch of freeway, headed toward East Texas.

That's where I saw the Corvair, in front of me, chugging along in the slow lane. I blinked. I squelched an urge to rub my eyes, considering I was in heavy traffic. An 18 wheeler was already behind me, and another had just pulled between my rental car and my flash from the past. So I slowed down to let the truck pass to make sure I wasn't seeing things. And there it was: A rear-engine chunky little Corvair. I hadn't seen a Corvair on the road in two decades. Yet, not only was I seeing one now, I was seeing one *exactly* like my very first car:

Black.

With a white convertible top.

Nobody will believe this, I thought; *I* don't believe it. But there it was. And there it continued to be. So I just laughed, slowed, and decided to enjoy the view, be it huge coincidence or cosmic order placed just for me.

For several miles, as the rest of the traffic whizzed by on the other lanes, the Corvair and my rental car plodded along in the right lane. Not wanting to seem unduly weird myself, I remained a sane distance behind, soaking in the only type of nostalgia I'd ever had a weakness for. I found myself in a sort of warm, emotional neutral so pleasant that I

lost track of how far we really drove. It went on long enough, though, that I didn't quite want to let it go, at least without a closer look. So when the Corvair finally turned off, I turned off as well. At the first red light, the spell was broken: A 50-year old man was driving it, not a 15-year-old me. The light turned green, and I let the car disappear down the street.

Back on the highway, I savored the serendipity for a few miles, despite my skeptical self. And when I saw the Terrell exit, I thought: *What the hell.* Out of a sense of flow, more than any belief in divine leading, I decided I'd just drive by the house, not slowing long enough for any ghosts to hitch a ride.

In a few minutes, I was at the old root beer stand, now a funky used car lot. I turned left onto First Street, and, eyeing the run-down condition of the houses lining the old street, I topped the hill. But when I rolled into the 500 block, my breath, as they say, was taken away. The house at 501 First Street brought tears to my eyes; I even think I said an audible *Wow*. I stopped the rental car in the middle of my old street and just stared. The new owner, this renovating whiz of a woman, had worked a little miracle. The house I'd said goodbye to seven years ago was old-lady shabby, with hedges overgrown, chain link fences in all the wrong places, and cats galore. Now, though, the house's faded grey brick was a pleasant mauve, the cracked windows had been replaced and shuttered, the driveway was matching, interlocking brick, the chain link fencing was gone as if it had never existed, and the lawn and trees were immaculately pruned and groomed. She and her husband had sunk a small fortune into my childhood home.

But as I was taking in this apparition, something kept bothering me, something seemed…wrong. People were coming and going. Cars were parked everywhere. On a

Thursday morning. I was still on sensory overload, however, unable to pull myself together enough to analyze anything, so I parked and walked around the entire block, letting it all settle in. Finally, as my eyes slowly let go of the past and allowed me to see clearly the present strangers going in and out of my old house in their Sunday best, I felt a familiar sinking feeling.

This was a funeral. And I was an intruder.

I decided, for once, it would be okay not to know the rest of the story. So I returned to the rental car and started the engine, planning to drive away, respecting the privacy of other ghosts, even if the scene still seemed part of my own past.

Just then, a thirty-something woman walked by, slightly smiling, eyeing me curiously, a stranger in *their* midst.

"Excuse me," I heard myself say. I introduced myself, explaining that I grew up here, and would she mind telling me what was happening?

"My aunt just died," she said quietly. "Breast cancer. This was her house."

And again, my breath was taken away; I collected myself and mumbled condolences.

"Would you like to come in?" she was saying. "I know my uncle would be so pleased to meet you."

No, no, I quickly assured her, putting the car into gear. "But would you tell him thank you from all the Rutledge girls who grew up here?"

"Why?"

"For what she did—loving this house back to life." Or so I meant to say. Instead, my voice broke halfway through my nice speech. And worse, I realized I was not going to finish it. Then, worst of all, I felt a pat on my arm: I was being consoled by the poor

woman's niece. Quickly, absurdly, I mumbled more condolences and somehow steered around her, down the street, and away.

By the time I hit the Interstate, eyes dry and wide, all I could think was: *What just happened?!*

So I drove, just drove, in the direction of my mother, who was still—despite whatever was going on inside me and all around me—very much among the living.

At Carriage House

I have now been visiting Mother at Carriage House for three days.

We have had root beers and corny dogs and country drives and doctor's visits, we have moved tissue stacks and knick-knacks to the other side of the room and back again, and we have watched *Lawrence Welk* every night at 7. Only once, though, have I broached the unbroachable subjects, the reason I was there in the first place, and I have to leave tomorrow afternoon. She is puttering around her room now, as I watch, stacking more tissues, moving her goodies from kitchen table to cabinet counter back to kitchen table, still working so hard to create orderliness and control in the world she inhabits. I really should try again right now, I tell myself.

But she has just informed me it's time for dinner.

So I push her and her wheelchair down the hall to dinner, taking her the long way as per her directions, beginning to suspect that she rather likes my chauffeuring her around the place.

Finally, in the dining room, I steer Mom up to her usual table, and again, we sit down with the same women. After three days, they still don't seem to remember me exactly. My mother introduces me again.

"This is my daughter, Lynda."

And again, they all greet me. The dancer seems to have an "Ah, yes, we've met" shine in her eyes, but when she opens her mouth it is the menu she is commenting upon. "At least it's not roast beef tonight," she says. "Don't ever get the roast beef."

The tiny Abilene woman tells me yet again about how she was dumped here by her son, a man I am beginning to dislike immensely. And the dignified, wigged, African-American woman still wants a can opener, but then she switches gears and is the one to ask the question today:

"And what do you do, dear?"

Not wanting to discuss the merits of Danielle Steel yet again, I say, with a big grin, "Me? Oh, I'm a long-haul trucker. Got my rig outside."

My mother snorts. "No, you're not." She announces to the group: "She's a writer."

I turn all the way around to look at her.

This is new.

"That's right!" one of the ladies says. "You know Danielle Steel! I love Danielle Steel!"

But I'm still looking at my mother, trying to interpret the something new.

CHAPTER 14

1939 Studebaker

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4 door/4 seat sedan, saloon doors,
115 horsepower, 4 speed manual
transmission, Coker wide white wall
tires
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Back in her room after dinner, Mother has given me her tiny re-ordering tasks, moving around old newspapers, storing her snacks, and rearranging photo frames an inch this way and that.

As I deposit her new purchases of Wrigley's Spearmint Gum packages in the lower right hand corner of her nightstand drawer on top of the fifteen other packages already stored there, I find a copy of a *Dallas Morning News* editorial column, dated 1975. It seems familiar. I recall seeing it years ago in the Terrell house, stashed with other clippings in an organizer above the old phone. And here it is again. What's it about? Nothing special, just a human-interest story of the columnist's Christmas memories. Yet it survived when almost everything else vanished during the Great Giveaway.

"Mother, why did you save this?" I ask, showing it to her.

"Because it is good writing. It's lively and entertaining," she answers in an instructive voice that would have made a writing teacher proud. Suddenly, I have a vision of my mother who read the *Dallas Morning News* every day for sixty years sizing up the quality of the journalists' writing with each turn of a page.

And then, up from behind that image bobs a memory I'd stashed away so well that I'd almost forgotten it—the one revealing story Mother ever told me about the young Agnes, and my only glimpse of who she might have been.

***

After my grandfather's funeral in 1989, my husband and I stayed the weekend before heading back to Chicago. He was gone that night, visiting his father who only lived a couple of hours away. I was leaning over the dining table, where I'd spread out research for some writing project, when I heard Mother behind me: "Do you think you could you help me find someone?"

I turned all the way around to see her standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the den, kitchen towel in hand, as if the idea had just occurred to her.

"I could try," I answered. "Who?"

"Liz Carpenter. I went to school with her and Leslie, her husband."

"You went to school with Liz Carpenter?"

She nodded.

"Where?"

"Austin High."

Liz Carpenter was a name most Texans knew during my childhood. She was an early female journalist of the colorful Texas kind, covering Washington D.C. for the leading Austin newspaper, later becoming a speechwriter for LBJ. She was most famous for being Lady Bird Johnson's press secretary, but perhaps her most poignant footnote in history was writing Lyndon Johnson's response the day after John F. Kennedy's assassination. So I was more than a little surprised to be hearing this school chum fact for the first time.

Mother, then, matter-of-factly told me the rest of the story, which must have happened about the time her father acquired the Studebaker and the new tie salesman job. After years of moving around from one hardscrabble sharecropping farm to another while her father held odd jobs and preached whenever he could, her parents settled in Austin. All the children were grown and gone, except for 17-year-old Agnes. There, she began attending Austin High School, and soon she was working on the high school newspaper. The student editors her senior year were a couple of 18 year olds who would soon marry each other named Liz Sutherland and Leslie Carpenter, already famous in Mother's teenage world from the way she described them. They took young Agnes under their wing that year. Seeing that she had zero prospects for college yet impressed with her abilities, they offered to loan my mother $50, the price of tuition at the University of Texas, if she'd major in journalism.

My mother had agreed, taking them up on the deal. She enrolled in the University of Texas. Within a year, she had taken the fateful campus elevator operator job, met my

father, married him, and, like most such women of her generation, dropped out to put him through school, setting her hopes on his hopes.

Five children and a lifetime later, she was sharing this story with me only because she was considering the idea of contacting her now-famous classmate. "I'm thinking about paying her back," she announced.

She seemed to already know that Liz's husband Leslie was deceased. What else she knew, she didn't say. She ended it there.

"Good grief, Mother," I said, "what a story—"

"So, you think you could find her?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm sure I can. Just tell me when to start."

With that, she turned around and went back into the kitchen, as if that was it, conversation ended. Of course I followed her, a dozen questions on the tip of my tongue. It was one thing for my mother to tell me she went to school with someone famous. It was a whole other thing to be hearing that she was once interested in writing, and had been good enough to be encouraged by a future world-class writer. That tidbit was on the level of mind-boggling.

Because, try as I might, I could not recall ever seeing her write a single word.

All my fine questions, though, went nowhere. I got little more from her than a shrug and an "Oh, it's so long ago, I can't really remember." Whether that was true or not, it didn't matter; I wasn't going to get another word out of her. So I stopped. I was busy with my own work, but more than that, Mother was Mother, not likely to tell me anymore no matter how much I bugged her. I just stored the anecdote away, thinking little more about

it, except that my boring, taciturn mother was suddenly full of surprises. I figured she'd call me when she was ready to follow through, and then I'd ask my questions again.

She never called.

Why not? Did she decide it was too much trouble? Did she give it more thought and realize she had nothing to show for the money?

Or what?

***

While I am reliving that 1989 moment, there in Mother's Carriage House room, she rolls past me and into the bathroom and ever so slowly closes the door behind her. Knowing she'd be in there for 20 minutes, minimum, I decide to get some corroboration. I pick up my cellphone, plop into Mother's rocker, and call my sisters, one by one.

"Quick question," I say, with a promise of full disclosure later. "Have you ever heard Mom's Liz Carpenter $50 Loan story?"

Sister #3 Deanne hadn't heard it: "Wonder why she'd want to pay it back after all this time? Didn't most girls have catching a husband on her mind more than school back then? That'd make anybody feel guilty."

Sister #2 Kay hadn't heard it: "The only story Mother ever told me is the one about her mother crying when she told her she got married. Have you heard that one?"

No, I hadn't.

"When she'd told her mother she'd eloped and was quitting school to support Dad, Grandma had cried, and not in a good way. Like she wanted something better for her."

Sister #1 Ann hadn't heard it, but she still had no memories at all, sorry: "You're letting her get to you. Don't do that, sweetie."

I flip my cellphone shut, sit back in Mother's rocker, and try to focus on what is really bugging me about the story, now, here, after all these years. It isn't so much the irritation of yet another tiny mother mystery. It's more about what we might have had in common––a love of words—something I even may have inherited from her. How is it possible I didn't know? It feels as if she had kept a secret from me. It feels personal. For a second, I contemplate contacting Liz Carpenter myself. If she were still alive, I could find her easily enough, through her agent or editor, the Austin phone book or certainly by "googling" her. But even as I begin scheming to do so, I hesitate. After all, what would happen if I did bother the woman? I could think of only two things:

1) She'd remember Mother and the $50. She'd ask about Mother's life and we'd chat until we ran out of things to say, hitting the inevitable gap in conversation. Then that would be that.

2) Or she wouldn't remember Mother or the $50. Then the gap would be all mine, full of chagrin trying to find a way to hang up. And I'd be left wondering which of these octogenarian's memories had failed them. Or whether the whole thing had ever happened in the first place. Because—and I repeat—beyond shopping lists and greeting cards, I never saw my mother write a single, solitary word.

At that point, Mother swings her Carriage House bathroom door wide and rolls back into the room. "Who were you talking to out here?" she asks.

"Just myself, Mom," I answer, having tired myself out.

She notices I was still holding the yellowed newspaper clipping.

"Hand me that."

I give it to her. She holds it in her hands, studying it for long enough that I think she is reading it. But then she rolls back over to her nightstand and places it back in the top drawer where I had found it. My mother, the librarian, pushes the nightstand drawer closed, the article once again in its safe place. Then she wheels backwards far enough to see me again, and says, seemingly out of the blue: "What are you working on now?"

And something clicks.

The thing I'd sensed all through my childhood from Mother, the confusing thing that wasn't quite disappointment since she did seem sporadically proud of us, that wasn't quite full-out sorrow even with our family tragedy—could this be it?

Behind the guarded thoughts, the short temper, the driven perfectionism, could there just be a lifelong case of wondering "what-if?" After all, not only had a woman who became famous for her writing tell my mother she had talent, she had put money behind it. That isn't something anyone could ever forget.

My Texas sister Deanne, the one geographically in the eye of most of this mother-storm before and after the Carriage House move, once remarked how my Mother's eyes would light up when she'd talk about me. I had been stupified and uncomfortable hearing such a thing, even irritated in an odd way, hoping Mother wasn't trying to hurt Deanne, considering everything that my sister was doing for her, day in and day out. And there was a wistful tone in my strong sister's voice that clutched at my heart almost as much as the statement itself. "She just likes my funny cards," I recall saying to lighten the moment for us both. At the time, I had chalked it up to the Mom grapevine still at work. That was what my sisters and I called it. Mother was the kind of parent who'd wax enthusiastic

about your accomplishments to others yet never say a word to you. And I'd heard my share of maternal pride in the sister news she delivered to me, everybody getting their fair share of headlines. Long ago, we'd grown past worrying who was her favorite, understanding on an unspoken level, that her truest favorite was the one who had died and that something essential about her capacity to love had died along with him. And we settled into a healthy skepticism of her once-removed grapevine compliments, especially after her move to Carriage House had turned them increasingly into grapevine gripes.

Now, though, Deanne's comment is ringing differently in my ears. Like the something different I had just heard in my mother's voice in the Carriage House dining room, it seems suddenly to hold another meaning, another dimension, the light in Mother's eyes about something beyond me—something not about *me* at all.

Could it be that simple? And simply profound?

Or am I just projecting like crazy?

God knows lesser things have consumed stronger people's lives.

Looking at my mother, there in this room that's now her whole world, I know I can't ask. What good would it do? Even if I'm right, it would be only part of what made her who she became—this final, stiff, etched-in-stone version of that young Agnes.

The year after we'd moved Mother to Carriage House, Deanne had told me of bumping into Mrs. Chitty, one of Mother's old church friends/enemies, a woman with whom she'd had "a falling out," as they say, not just once but over and over. Mrs. Chitty had asked about Mother. Deanne, aware of their history, told her only a little of what Mother had done before moving from Terrell. As if she were making some sort of peace with their prior nonsense, as well as offering a strange understanding of Mother's actions,

Mrs. Chitty sighed and said: "Your mother and I have been who we are so long, we can't be anything else."

Are we powerless to change after some mysterious moment? The thought had stayed with me, because it had the unmistakable sound of truth: It's as if we all have a built-in timer, a last chance to decide whether we can ever find it in ourselves to make peace with everything that's happened, with what we've done, with what we have never done, and with what others have done to us. To call it a "midlife crisis" is to trivialize its impact. It seems something far more permanent and far later in life.

Suddenly, I feel an odd bonding with my grandmother who cried, wanting "something more" for her Agnes, even though the "something less" created me. But that's not exactly it…no, what I want is for her to have found a way to embrace both more and less, somehow. I want my mother to have been able to rise above all her pain and disappointment, her lost potential, her life's slings and arrows, to show me how to do the same.

I stop myself. I am making way too much of all this. I take a breath, and I let it out. Whether my "what-if" hunch is right or wrong, I know it's too little too late. But it is something, where there was nothing.

If life only makes sense backwards, then the real stuff of life, the stuff that does tell us who we are, *is* just a series of such moments, though, isn't it? Somewhere along the line we choose whether we will pass them on or hold them in until they disappear along with us, until that last moment of choice comes and then quietly goes. And it all seems to have to do with joy, or the sad, lost hope of it.

My mother spent her whole life guarding her moments. In essence, she had offered me only two—the Studebaker Learning-to-Drive Story about the thrill of the open road and the Famous Schoolmate $50 Loan Story about the chill of that one damn road never taken. They are hardly more than half-told anecdotes; glimpses; all I will ever have. What am I supposed to do with them?

I watch her here, after 85 years of life, focusing so hard on controlling every last inch of this room, the position of each tissue, the stockpiling of gum, the counting of Hershey's kisses, the comfort of birdseed and milk, and the preserving of old newsclippings. Her world is now about inches instead of miles, and even words are something to keep safe instead of something to set her free.

She has rolled her wheelchair to the opposite part of the room straightening knick-knacks, having forgotten her question about my work. We are back to normal, as normal as we will ever be. But I feel an intense need to do or say something. I glance outside. The sun is going down, too dark, I suppose, for a joy ride.

So I choose the safe thing, too, here so late in the day, so late in our lives. *Well*, *I have never seen her write a single word,* I think, *but I have seen her drive.*

"Mother," I say, walking toward her. "Tell me about that Studebaker."

"Hmmm?" She looks around.

"The Studebaker your father taught you to drive. Was it fun?"

"Sure." And for a moment, her eyes light up. "It was silver."

CHAPTER 15

2004 Trauma Ambulance

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AEV Trauma Hawk, white w/ orange stripe,
7.3L power stroke diesel, 145" l90"w 65"
headroom, Whelen KKKHF 4000 lightbar,
battery charger, 1000 watt inverter,
thermostat controlled with digital readout,
15 amp straight blade shore power with
toggle GFI, medical oxygen quick disconnect
outlets, 700 series red flashing grill
lights/intersection lights/rear center amber
lights/dual 100 watt siren speakers
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The next morning, the last morning of my visit, I decide to let Mother sleep in a little longer, so I arrive about 10 a.m.

As soon as I step inside the door, the receptionist calls to me, waving me over to her desk.

Mother had called 911 last night again, she informs me, for a headache. The paramedics had taken her to the E.R., and once again brought her back home with nothing more than a new prescription for Darvon to add to all the others.

"I left my number—" I sputter. "Why wasn't I called?"

The receptionist shrugs.

I pivot and stride into the director's office. The director, a stout, middle-aged female in a bad hairdo and a pantsuit two sizes too small, doesn't get up from her desk.

"Ah, yes, Ms. Rutledge, did you get the word then? Your mother is okay. She just had a headache." She motions me to one of her chairs.

"I *know* she's okay—she's always okay," I say, continuing to stand. "I left word to be called if Mother dialed 911 while I was here, so I could talk her out of it. I was staying right down the road."

"Ah, yes. It seems the night attendant didn't know," she calmly responds.

"The night attendant was the person I talked to—as well as the on-call nurse. I *thought* I covered everyone."

"Ah, yes. Well, they changed shifts and the late shift didn't see the message."

I am trying hard not to blow my top. The last time one of my sisters had visited, the director had patted her hand and said, "Don't you worry about your mother. We'll take good care of her." I'd like to see the woman try patting my hand.

"She's calling 911 every other week," I finally say. "Isn't that a problem for you, too?"

The director leans back in her chair. "Unless our residents push their call buttons for our help before they dial 911, we don't know until the paramedics arrive. And your mother won't push the call button. Besides, it's within her rights to call—we can't keep her from using her phone. We have no control after that, you know."

She is getting terse with me, which should be my prerogative. The least she could have done is waited for me to pitch a hissy fit. So I'm a little surprised and more than a

little put-off. She notices and backs away. "I'm sure you know your mother can be…difficult."

Hey, this is your job, I begin to say. *Try having her as your mother.* Instead, I grasp something essential I haven't wanted to accept: My mother is beyond "assisted" living, but as long as we keep paying for her to stay here, short of a real emergency, no one is going to help us with this decision.

The director, if she remembers her position, will now say something soothing. Here it comes: "My apologies for our staff not calling you, but we are doing the best we can, especially in your absence. We are taking good care of her, just as we have all these years."

A minute later, I stride into my mother's room to see Mother fiddling with the thermostat, as if she hasn't spent half the night with her new 911 paramedic friends. "Mother," I say, heading straight toward her, "We have to talk. And we have to do it now."

CHAPTER 16

2004 FunMover

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28', handicap-friendly, Ford V-10
chassis engine rental motor home with
garage section, wheelchair-accessible
hydraulic lift gate, rear compartment
bed, bathroom assist handles, standard
upfront motor home living quarters
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"Park it around back!" calls the Carriage House receptionist over the rumble of the FunMover's truck engine. I put the thing back in gear and pull it through the parking lot to the door closest to my mother's room, right in front of the garbage bins. Bob, my brother-in-law, jumps out and waves me back, back, back—stop! In a minute, we are walking down the hall toward my mother's room on this September D-day of Operation Mom Move.

My Texas sister Deanne suddenly appears out of nowhere.

"I've been circling the block," she says. "I wasn't going to go in there before you two got here."

So, with deep breaths all around, we three march into Mother's room, en masse.

"Here we are, Mom. Let's get this show on the road," I announce.

"Did you get my messages?" she asks me. "Did you bring my Hershey's kisses? And the Tums and Wrigley's Spearmint and Kleenex?"

"I haven't had time to go shopping yet, Mom," I say. "We just got here."

She purses her lips, fuming. "I'm so disappointed in you, Lynda."

"Hey, Mom—look!" By way of diversion, Deanne has yanked open Mother's underwear drawer and is holding up a handful of panties. "Let's get you dressed, so we can get you packed."

Mother rolls over to make her selections while Bob and I go back to the FunMover for the packing materials. When we return, tape and cartons and trash bags in hand, she still hasn't decided on her traveling underwear. It is going to be a long day.

***

By June, all of us had visited, broaching the unbroachable subjects of money and moving. Our efforts had slowly begun to work. We had made it into first gear: She agreed to move. So my Colorado sisters Kay and Ann began scouting nursing homes. Choosing two for their high-rated care, Kay began the application processes by putting Mother's name on their waiting lists, and we put our plans into second gear:

How do we get her to Colorado with both our sanity and her frail body in one piece?

Fly her, we all agreed. A couple of hours on the plane and—voila!—she'd be in Colorado. Yes, that would be the smartest way, and we could worry about moving her stuff later. One daughter would fly with her, one would drop off at the airport, and

another would pick up at the other airport, while the other one would meet us at the nursing home. The airlines were set up to help in such matters, we were sure.

There was just one hitch.

With the heightened post-9/11 security measures, neither terrorists nor grannies could get on a plane without a picture I.D.

And Mother had no picture I.D.

We were told she could get one by showing up at the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles with an old driver's license or a birth certificate. Easy enough, we thought. But then we couldn't find her old driver's license. Either it did not survive the Great Giveaway or was stolen along with her purse at Carriage House sometime over the years, as she claimed.

That left a birth certificate.

After looking everywhere for it, and, once again, finding nothing, we asked her.

"Never had one," she answered.

"Mom," I said, "how could you not have one?"

"I was born at home."

"But you had to have one to get a driver's license, didn't you?"

She nodded. Over sixty years ago, she had applied for a duplicate of some sort in order to get her driver's license. Supposedly, it was still on file.

So we called. It wasn't. According to the State of Texas, it seems, my mother was never born.

For the rest of the summer, we worked to get her credentials to fly her. After we did all we could by phone, we enlisted a grandson who lived within driving distance to take a

day off from work and escort her to the nearest DMV. With all the documentation we had in hand—social security cards, Medicare cards, insurance policies, Carriage House verification et al—he rolled her up and into the nearest Department of Motor Vehicles, waited in line, and explained our situation, in hopes a real-live governmental official either could find a record of her driver's license or would have mercy on us all and give her an I.D. The DMV clerk took one look at our shrunken little mother in her wheelchair, another look at the documentation her grandson was holding, another look into his database and said, "Sorry. No can do without an old driver's license or a birth certificate. We have no record of her license and you have no birth certificate."

So, according to official Texas state records, my mother now had not only never been born but also had never driven a car, either.

As the summer ticked by, a granddaughter with a fresh law school degree tried again to track down Mother's equivalent birth certificate that the state records department had to have created 60 years ago. When she came up with nothing, too, she inquired about the process of creating a new one. It could be done, she was told, but it would take months of red tape, even possibly some legal fees to do so.

And all of this effort was just to get one old woman on a two-hour plane flight.

Finally, just to make sure the airlines really had no way to rescue us, I picked up the phone and dialed American Airlines' customer assistance.

"We don't have control of those things anymore," their special assistance coordinator told me. "It's federal regulations. I have old relatives without birth certificates or drivers' license, too. And I've told them, 'Get one or the other or never fly anywhere anymore.'" Then she added, as an afterthought: "Have you thought about renting an airplane?"

"Well, no," I responded. "Wouldn't that cost thousands of dollars?"

There was a pause on her end: "There are some charities that will fly you for free. If you qualify…"

Not poor enough; not rich enough, I thought. Stuck in the middle again.

As it became clearer and clearer that our running joke through this whole long-distance ordeal—moving Mother cross-country in an RV—was fast becoming our only option, we had all gone silent with dread.

For several weeks, we didn't communicate at all, hoping, I think, that everything would all just go away. I had nightmares about being stranded in some emergency clinic in Podunk, Texas, along a stranded New Mexico highway, or in an early Colorado snowstorm. One dream had all of us stuffed into a rental car with Mother in the backseat, making a "rest" stop at a Shakey's Pizza Parlor, arguing about who was going to drive, and accidentally leaving Mom back in the restroom.

By the end of August, though, we had to face the inevitable. Time was short. Mother's health was failing, so was our money, and winter was not far away. If we didn't do this before the first Rocky Mountain snowstorm, we wouldn't be able to do it at all. Considering everything that my sisters either had done or were about to do for Mother, the least I could do was to handle the road show, if it had to be. So after making one last call to everyone to make sure a birth certificate was not going to appear a week after we left (it wasn't), and to agree on a starting date for Operation Mom Move (September 18), I sat down and forced myself to cope.

Mother had been accepted by the better of the two nursing homes and a room had just become available. So we had a nursing home waiting, and we had a date to fit

everyone's calendar. Now we needed an RV, we needed something to haul her small amount of furniture, and, most importantly, we needed some sort of hedge against roadside medical emergencies. I could only think of one solution. I called my sister Ann's husband, Bob, an M.D., and asked him for a huge familial favor. The only way I could see moving Mother a thousand miles without making new E.R. and paramedic friends along the way, was to have an on-board doctor. I knew Mother had been calling him constantly about her aches and pains for over a year, placing him in a perpetual ethical dilemma between her and her Texas doctors, especially as her 911 calls had begun to complicate everything. So I knew what I was asking. But, bless his Hippocratic oath-swearing soul, he agreed. When Deanne offered to fly up to Dallas, help us pack and drive north with us, the "who" of our road trip was nailed down.

Now came the "how." Online, I located a nationwide RV rental company to begin researching a one-way Dallas-Denver rental. But, there, on its webpage was an advertisement for a "handicap accessible" RV. I clicked on it and up popped the FunMover: half RV/half moving van, complete with a "handicap accessible" trucklift back-end, which indeed it was. I was looking at the perfect vehicle for Operation Mom Move, despite my spouse's jokes about packing mama in the back. The good news was that, although the company only rented the FunMover from one location in mid-America, the one place happened to be Denver. The bad news was a one-way trip was out. We'd have to drive it down to Dallas empty and back again full. Once Bob and I worked that out, I forwarded a picture of the FunMover to the sisters, everybody voted yea, I made a reservation, and we all synchronized watches, calendars, travel arrangements, and lives.

Meanwhile, there was Mother. We had to explain this new turn of events, cajoling, sweet-talking, working through another round of "I'm not up to it; you'll have to drag me; we can't do that." Slowly, though, she agreed to this new twist, if precariously, and we held our collective breaths.

Then, just when we thought everything was settled, when we thought we could finally begin to wrap our minds slowly and calmly around this moving-mama road show, my niece—Bob and Ann's daughter—made a surprise announcement. The weekend that we had chosen was the weekend of her wedding celebration. She and her significant other had eloped and had been planning this big blowout for over a year. It couldn't be changed.

By this point, none of us were surprised.

Frankly, we all needed a party. Free champagne? Glorious. And in an odd way, the timing made perfect sense. It would be a sort of bubbly, life-affirming balance to a once-in-a-long-lifetime bumpy family week.

One more time, then, we reworked our schedules. We'd pick up the rented RV, go to the wedding party, have a good time, not drink as much as we'd like, then my brother-in-law and I would leave the next morning at 4:30 a.m. to drive straight through to Texas, where we'd meet Deanne at Carriage House, pack Mother up and bring her back to the mountains.

That was the plan.

So on Saturday, September 18, everyone flew to Denver for the wedding party. For a few hours, we forgot about the months of chaos, about the anxiety of Operation Mom

Move, and we celebrated life by toasting the next generation with the sparkling help of their open bar.

Then, at almost straight-up midnight, one of my sisters made the mistake of checking her cellphone voice mail.

The Carriage House Director had left a message: Mother had called 911 again, and, this time, she had been kept at the hospital overnight.

And, just like that, we were all instantly sober.

"What does this mean?" I asked Bob.

"It means that unless she is checked out and sent back to Carriage House today, we can't move her on Monday, as planned. It can't be done." With that, he shook his head, smiling despite himself. "How does she do it? She has us focusing on her even here."

For a moment, we went back to the din of the party, the live band playing a happy tune. Then we all headed for the elevator and the quiet of our rooms. "I'll try to get a hold of the attending doctor," Bob told me. "I'll call you at 4, either way, and tell you what I've found out. Then we can decide what to do."

At 4 a.m., my cell phone rang.

"She's back at Carriage House," announced my brother-in-law. "Let's go."

That September Sunday drive was a blur. Bouncing along in the strange box of a vehicle, we rattled and rolled due south; it was a 14 hour drive of mountains, panhandle prairie, feedlots, oil wells, dusty little towns and generic Interstates. And every few hours, we called Mother, reminding her we were coming, waylaying any new 911 obstacles between here, there, and back again.

By dark, we hit town. By dark-thirty, we were standing in her room. By the next morning, we were ready to pack her small roomful of remaining earthly possessions, into the back of the backed-in FunMover.

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Mother's room at Carriage House smells like Lysol and lemon and a certain, smothering ripeness; in fact, so does the entire assisted living home. I notice my sister Deanne sniffing and rubbing her nose.

"I guess we should pack everything but her bed," Bob suggests, as the three of us stand in Mother's room planning our packing day. "We'll dismantle it in the morning and put it in right before your mother and her wheelchair."

Just then, the blonde activities coordinator walks in, offering to take Mother along on their scheduled outing to Wal-Mart to have her out of the way while we worked. With a promise to check with us right before they left, she rushes away to begin corralling the other interested residents.

"Mother," I try, "wouldn't you like to go?"

"No," she says. "I hate her."

We try two more times: No and no. And she really, really hates her.

So we begin packing in spite of our mother who refuses to leave the room and refuses to let us help her choose her clothes. We try to help her dress in something beyond the same stained polyester blouse with the missing buttons and the pants held together with

the huge safety pin. My sister Deanne had even brought a new pair of pajamas for the trip. She would have none of it; she'd dress herself, thankyouverymuch.

So, as we wait for her to choose her clothes from her chest of drawers, we move on to other things. Deanne begins packing her knick-knacks, Bob her TV, and I check her closet, knowing that only a few things are still hanging there. Over the years, as she'd gone up and down in her weight, she'd routinely given her clothes away to various Carriage House attendants; she'd done it so much that I picture the attendants regularly checking her weight and her closet. The first Christmas after she moved here, we all pitched in to buy her a beautiful suit. By the next visit, when she had fattened up to a butterball, it was gone. We tried again the next Christmas, all buying her another beautiful outfit, and again, by the next year, a skin and bones year, it was gone. As the cycle continued, we'd stuck to Wal-Mart fashion.

Her closet, however, is full—just not with clothes. It was bursting with decorations: Halloween decorations, Thanksgiving decorations, Christmas decorations, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Independence Day decorations, the entire year ready to be decorated by my mother's closet. While she was arguing with my sister over something, I try to sneak the worst of it—plastic flowers, ribbon from long-gone arrangements—into the trash. She sees me. She commands me to stop and to pack all of it.

So I do.

For the first hour or so, she tries to direct traffic from her wheelchair, boxes over here, what gets packed where. As we up the pace, though, she quickly runs out of steam, then becomes upset, and begins repeating the phrase we all know by heart.

"I can't stand it," she cries. "I just can't stand it!"

Deanne soothes her in a practiced tone of voice, the kind used to calm large animals, small children, and elderly ladies. I, though, have to go outside for a breath of fresh air, the Hello woman's "hellooooos" following me down the hall and out the door.

A few minutes later, fresh air restoring my fortitude, I enter the building again, and I notice the Hello woman's door is now wide open. Wearing a yellow oversized sweater, she is sitting in her easy chair, leaning slightly forward, watching the doorway as if it were her TV.

As I pass, she follows me with her eyes. When I pass by again with a new load for the FunMover, she is still watching. And on my way back in, just as I pass by her door once more, she yells: "Help me!"

I hesitate, but then I hear that she's pushed the attendant call button, so I shake it off and keep moving: *You are not responsible for her, Lynda. Move along.*

For another half-hour, we work in my mother's room without leaving. Then, in need of a screwdriver, I head back down the hall. Nearing the Hello woman's room, I slow, hoping for silence, her problem solved. But, as I pass, another "Help me!' wafts out.

I take two steps, roll my eyes, pivot, and enter the woman's room.

She lights up. "Take off my sweater!"

So I do.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"I'm an angel," I mumble. "And I'm returning to heaven now."

Returning from the FunMover, screwdriver in hand, I try flying by.

But she's been waiting:

"Help!"

God help me, I think, *if she wants that sweater back on…*

"Help! My sweater's caught!" she calls.

It's lodged behind her. So I rush in, release the sweater, lay it in her lap, and before she has time to respond, I quickly say,"Heaven again," and turn and rush out.

Fifteen minutes later, as I pass with another load for the FunMover, someone has closed the door. And the Hello woman is hellooooing once again.

***

The day moves on, and we move with it. As we pack up Mother's small bits of furniture, I suddenly notice the chewing gum stains on Mother's carpet. They are everywhere. Carriage House offered to replace the carpet, but first Mother had to promise to quit her Wrigley's Spearmint Gum habit. She wouldn't. So the carpet, threadbare and gummy under our feet is now so noticeable that I can barely stand to walk on it. It's more than just the carpet, though. As we slowly empty it of its contents, Mother's room seems somehow heartwrenching in a way it never did full. The carpet looked far too much like how we felt and how these years had been: worn-out, sticky, and sad. So much of the woman we moved here, physically and mentally, wasn't going to be leaving with us.

"Want to hear something scary?" asks Bob, after retrieving her boxful of medical files from Carriage House's on-call nurse, whom Mother hated and would not call. "She just told me she couldn't remember any time Mom wasn't in her right mind."

Word begins to spread that Mother is moving, the Hispanic attendants begin to drop by to give her big hugs goodbye with loud love all around, the same attendants she has

griped about all these years. She offers them the controlled, cardboard smile I know so well. When the party grows, more and more attendants appearing to say adios, noisily proclaiming their deep sorrow at mamacita's departure, she stiffens in the face of all that Latin emotion, but the smile stays glued in solid place.

By dusk, though, when the blonde activities coordinator returns one last time to give her a wooden hug, I watch her eyes. She would give anything to pull away; she doesn't have the strength. She really, really does hate the woman. But it's not just her that she hates. She hates it all, everything spinning around her and out of the room, out of her grasp, into the unknown. And by the time we all slip away for some sleep before packing her into the FunMover as well, she has no choice but to spin along with it.

***

At the crack of the next morning's Texas dawn, we hit the road to Colorado, the FunMover's back-back compartment carrying Mother, her bed, and all her possessions. I take another big gulp of my 7-11 extra-large coffee-to-go, and maneuver the FunMover toward the state highway we've chosen to criss-cross West Texas.

Thirty minutes down the road, I smell something burning…something rubbery, acrid. I call my sister up to smell. We both take a big sniff. She smells it, too. So we call my brother-in-law up to smell.

"Smells like brake pads," he says. We all pause on that. Then I notice a tiny light on the truck's gauge panel: The damn emergency brake. Quickly, I yank on the brake release

lever and hear something let go. Back at Carriage House, Bob had set the brake—an obviously useless car part considering we are in motion—and I hadn't noticed.

"Well," I say, "I guess we can all relax. We've had our first near-miss."

For another hour, I inhale that smell, though, until finally the air clears.

For several hours after that, we travel quietly, sanely, due largely to the blessing of sedatives and such, except for the driver, of course. I, though, am in a safety zone, behind the wheel. All is well.

Along the four-lane state highway that we've been driving on since dawn, winding across Texas between Interstates, we are forced to pass through one dried-up little town after another, stopping at the one red light in the middle of each downtown, scouting for the speed trap, and then revving up to speed through wide open pasture-land again. Just on the other side of the umpteenth one, I notice a man standing in the median. He is wearing a black cowboy hat, black glasses, black jeans, black boots, and a cape. Black. As we whiz past, he salutes us, cape flapping in our wake. And no one sees him but me.

An hour this side of Amarillo, my brother-in-law eases into the passenger seat from the RV section behind me. "Want me to drive?"

"No, no, I'll keep driving."

"You sure?"

I was sure.

And we go back to the blessed silence, the sound of the miles ticking by. I glance into the rearview mirror. Deanne is sitting in the chair bungee-corded beside Mother's bed. She has just brought Mother some cookies and milk and Tums. All is settled back down and we roll along.

Past Amarillo, driving across the breadth of the Texas panhandle, the only radio station I am able to pick up is a country and western one. I have listened to Waylon, Willie and the boys for two hours. And then, a few miles this side of the city limits of Texline, the station plays a Mary Chapin Carpenter song:

Sometimes you're the windshield/Sometimes you're the bug…

My brother-in-law leans in from the RV part of the FunMover and offers again to drive. "It's been 6 hours. We're almost in New Mexico."

"No, no, I'll keep driving." I say, and he goes back to check on Mother.

You gotta know happy/and gotta know glad

'Cause you're gonna know lonely/ and you're gonna know sad…

Finally, my sister comes up to the front and says, "Let him drive, Lynda. Really."

So we pull over for gas at Texline, and I let him drive.

As he eases into the driver's seat and we head into New Mexico, I slip into the passenger seat for a moment.

"Go back and see the look on her face," he says.

"What do you mean?" I ask warily.

"I think she's happy."

I go back to see my mother lying on her bed, rumbling along at 65 mph, her eyes almost closed. I study her face for happy. I want to see it. I don't. I ease into the bungee-corded chair, and I keep looking.

***

Somewhere on the other side of New Mexico, Deanne begins to make us all sandwiches for the second time that long day, while we keep moving. We've begun to get the hang of eating and drinking as we rattle along. I hand Bob his food, balancing it on the console so he can nibble on it as he steers. Then I take Mother her meal. She all but inhales the sandwich then asks for Tums and Advil along with her afternoon pills. But when I ask her if she's car sick or has a headache, she adamantly says no, then asks for milk to wash it all down. After I give her all her requests, she turns her head toward her little window and drifts back to what seems to be her own bit of bumpy bliss, despite the stomach and pain pills she's just taken.

"Mom."

But she's already asleep again. Since it seems safe to leave her a moment, I move up to the booth-table by the galley, to finish my sandwich with Deanne.

"What's your best Mother memory?" I suddenly ask my sister.

Deanne stops in mid-chew, cutting her eyes up at me. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Something nice. Or funny. Something you remember as good."

"Why?" she says, hesitant.

I shrug. "It seems important."

Deanne thinks a moment, staring strangely at the last bite of sandwich in her hand. Then she says: "Two bologna sandwiches."

"Bologna sandwiches…" I repeat.

"That's right. I had a new tricycle," Deanne goes on. "She told me not to ride it past our block, and I did it anyway. When she caught me, I began crying, knowing I was

going to get a whipping, I mean big sobs, all the way back home. But instead she took me in the kitchen and made me two bologna sandwiches."

"That's your story?" I ask.

"That's my story," she says, pushing her paper plate away. "Your turn."

"I asked her where babies came from."

"You asked her about *sex*?"

"I was just 10," I answer. "It was Kay's fault. She asked me and I said it was probably from necking too much. But then I thought I'd better make sure. Mother was cooking something on the stove, and when she heard my big question, she turned all the way around, led me into the den, sat me down, pulled out the Encyclopedia Brittanica and showed me everything."

"Good god!" Deanne groans.

"Yeah." I laugh. "When I said I'd never, ever do that, Mother actually chuckled. Then, in this really nice voice I'd never heard before or since, she said to me: 'Oh, yes, you will.'"

For a moment, we sit quietly, the rumbling of the tires under us feeling oddly bouyant. Noticing Bob's finished his sandwich, I ease into the passenger seat to ask if he needs anything else. Instead, I say: "Bob, do you have a nice memory of Mother?"

"Sure," he says, smiling, never taking his eyes off the road. "She sent me cookies at A&M, when I was engaged to Ann."

I gawk at the man. "Cookies—she never even sent *me* cookies. Deanne, did Mother ever send you cookies?"

"Never," Deanne answers.

"And she bought me a beautiful suede jacket my first year in medical school, right after we were married," Bob goes on. "I thought she was great."

I'm unable to say anything for a moment, taking this in. Then: "That was before Rick's accident, wasn't it?"

He nods slowly. "Yeah."

We watch the scenery, the flat New Mexico shrubland turning into hills. Deanne comes up and leans between us a moment as we eye the New Mexico mountain pass looming large ahead. The FunMover begins to strain a little as we slowly gain elevation for the first time. And a light drizzle of rain begins to hit the windshield.

"Every time you took a trip," I ask them, as Bob flips on the windshield wipers, "did Mother ask if you had her phone number on you somewhere, in case of emergencies?"

Yes, they both answer. Always.

"I better go check on her," Deanne finally says, and moves toward the back.

***

By dark, we arrive at Bob and Ann's house, where we have planned to spend the night before taking Mother to her new nursing home, a place called, solidly enough, Denver Manor. Bob, Deanne and I get out of the FunMover and look at each other in shock. We're early. By some small miracle, there have been no incidents, no snowstorms, only a little mountain rain, a couple of juggling moments of sedatives and prescriptions, and just a handful of difficult stops to maneuver Mother to our on-board bathroom for some unsteady pit stops of her own. For whatever reasons, in her own fashion, she seems to

have enjoyed most of the ride. It was the longest road trip she has taken in 20 years, and it will be the last one she ever takes. I wonder how much she grasps of all this? I know it doesn't really matter. It's just that the traveler in me cannot help but feel a sense of profundity. The driver in me, though, is just glad that we've gotten her here in one piece. And I mumble thanks for crazy traveling mercies, even though I know the worst could be yet to come.

The next morning, we trucklift Mother back into the FunMover, as Deanne rushes to the airport to handle family obligations back home. Then, with Ann following in her car, we drive to the nursing home. At Denver Manor, Kay meets us at the door to help Mother with admissions, while the rest of us unload her belongings, double-time, into her corner room.

When they rejoin us in her new room, Mother takes one look around and says, "Where's the kitchen?"

"Remember, Mom? You don't have one here," I say. "You use the call button when you want something. For Tums. For ice cream. Anything. Anytime at all."

She rolls over to the bathroom. "Where's the shower?"

"It's down the hall, Mom. The people here help you," Kay explains. "Just push the call button when you're ready."

"Where's the phone?"

"You don't need a phone, Mom. You have two daughters nearby," Ann says. "And if you need anything here, you just push the call button, remember?"

"Who's that?" She points to the other side of the room, beyond a divider. A woman was lying on the bed in the far corner, with an IV drip by her side, asleep, seemingly

unfazed by our noise. We had been told that another resident would be in the room temporarily while her own room was being renovated.

"You have to share the room, Mom, at least for now, while they renovate," Kay says, "but it's a big corner room and the window side is yours."

Ten minutes later, as we finish unloading, Mother is once again trying to find the shower in the bathroom. We explain to her again that all she has to do is push the call button to get assistance for a bath, just like she did at Carriage House except that it's down the hall.

"No," she responds.

My sisters and I look at each other, contemplating the meaning of that.

"What have I gotten myself into?" she is now moaning, tears coming to her eyes.

"How about some ice cream?" I say quickly. "I'll go get some for you. And did I mention that you can push that call button and get it any time you want?"

She slumps over in her chair in obvious despair. "You girls are not doing right by me! I hate this!"

I rush out to find the ice cream vendor we were told was always available at the call of that damn button.

A confused little lady in a wheelchair rolls right into my path, unable to get over a little bump in the hallway. "Help!" she says. "Help!" I push her over the bump. As I maneuver around her, I hear: "When-is-*LUNCH*!" Another woman, in the room to my right, is yelling in almost a cadence: When-is-*LUNCH?"*

When I finally find the ice cream counter, complete with counter stools and old-timey soda fountain table and chairs, I order Mom's bowl of vanilla ice cream. Then, sinking onto a stool and picking up another spoon, I add: "Make it two."

A minute later, as I return with my mother's ice cream, a Bassett hound saunters by me and down the hall.

"Look, Mom, a dog!" I say, as I enter the room.

"Where?"

She wants to see, rolling to the door.

***

For the rest of the morning, we work on the room. We set up her bed, we hook up her TV, and we hang her photos. We keep reminding her about the magic of the call button, and she continues to look for the shower and the kitchen, stopping every few minutes to despair of what she has gotten herself into—what we have gotten her into. We all look at each other, silently reminding each other not to let her get to us, not to despair ourselves. There is no going back.

As my sisters keep unpacking, I leave to help my brother-in-law return the FunMover to the RV rental company. He has gone ahead to settle up. Just outside the nursing home's parking lot, I steer the FunMover to the stoplight at the main thoroughfare ahead. My light is green, so I speed up to make it. As I turn right, a flash of pink in the far left crosswalk catches my eye. It is a woman in a pink afghan-like shawl scooting a little wheel-attached walker across the busy six-lane intersection. She is obviously a resident at the nursing home; it's as if she is "on the lam" in slow motion. And she is going far too

slow to make it to the curb before the light changes. She is taking tiny, shuffling steps, hunched over the walker, as if that will make it go faster. It doesn't. The stoplight changes; the busy street now has a green light, and she is only halfway across. None of the cars move. I slow the FunMover, anxiously watching the scene in my side-view mirror. *Not your problem*, *Lynda*, I tell myself, as I force my eyes back to the road. *All the old ladies in the world are not your problem.* Yet I continue to look back in the mirror at the flash of pink crossing the street, stopping traffic as she goes. Until finally, the woman makes it to the curb and hurries as fast as her stroller will allow to godknowswhere.

Thirty minutes later, Bob drops me off at the nursing home before going back to work, and I enter through the back door near my mother's new room. Mother, however, is nowhere in sight.

"They've gone to get more ice cream," my sister Kay explains. She is arranging Mother's small, framed photos on her dresser. There, on the front row, I see the "before" photo of my mother, the one of her as a high-cheeked beauty whose laugh went all the way up to her eyes. And I can't help myself; I'm happy to see it. A photograph can only say with certainty "what is no longer," a philosopher named Roland Barthes once wrote about an entirely different topic. As I stare at the photo, though, I think of that quote. I had always heard something sad behind the thought; now I hear something else. While I still don't recognize my mother in the photograph, this young Agnes "who is no longer," I realize I'm still glad it's here to say who she once was—even if that is all it can ever say.

"You're not going to believe what happened," Kay says, her voice lowered, glancing back at the elderly lady asleep on the other side of the big room's divider.

I brace myself as she points toward the sleeping woman: "Right after you left, she opened the divider, headed for the bathroom. But she got so tangled in her IV stand that she just went back to the bed and curled up in a fetal position. While Ann and I were deciding if we should help, Mother rolled over to her, introduced herself, and asked if she could push the call button for her."

"You're kidding," I say.

Then Kay adds: "Of course, she went right back to being upset about the kitchen and shower. So they went for more ice cream."

And the mystery continues. Still, it seems a good sign; yes, a good sign.

I gaze at my sister a moment, worrying about her and Ann, knowing that as good as this place might be, our pistol of a mother-in-decline will still be a handful. They continue to assure me, though, they're ready and all will be well. And when I look at Kay's face, I see it might be true. But it doesn't lessen my worry.

"Should I stay longer?" I ask her, as I help unpack the last box.

"Everything's almost under control," Kay says. "She'll be fine. This place really is one of the best in the state."

I check my watch. It's almost time for my airport taxi to arrive. So I hug my sister, grab my bag and go in search of Mother.

And, as I did, I felt the same tiny moving-on euphoria I've always felt upon taking that first step toward my car, putting Mother in my rearview, driving away, away. It's a feeling I have never admitted to anyone, sounding as it does like a confession of sorts—not even to my sisters, especially since they seem to have made their separate peace without hitting the road. But now, each escape, each happy goodbye, comes with the

emotional baggage of knowing that it could be the last one. Even after all we've just gone through, even after doing the right thing with a thousand-mile, thousand-dollar, mother-moving ride, I have no sense of satisfaction or peaceful wisdom. I'd hoped for more, at least from myself. Whatever I feel for my mother is still a crusty thing.

And yet I keep coming back. Therein lies my own mystery.

I find my sister Ann and my mother playing dominoes and eating ice cream with a few other ladies near the ice cream counter. Mother is keeping score and Ann looks amused. Since I've never seen my mother play dominoes, any other day I'd have thought it odd. "Mom, did you play a lot of dominoes when you were a kid?" I ask. She doesn't answer, all her concentration on those black tiles and their tally. So my sister and I just exchange glances, no longer surprised at anything coming from our Mother at 85.

I tell Ann about the nursing home "escapee," the pink-afghan woman rolling that walker-on-wheels across the intersection. "It was amazing she didn't get hit. It was like she owned the road. It was crazy." I pause. "I wonder if I should tell someone here?"

"Maybe she isn't from here," Ann offers.

But we both know she was.

I get to my feet, grabbing up my bag. I tell my mother goodbye and that I'd see her soon, the same thing I tell her every time I leave. She gives me a slight smile and a little wave, still concentrating on her ice cream and her dominoes. So I turn and head toward the front doors to catch my taxi to the airport. My sister walks me out.

"Do you think she heard me?" I ask.

Ann nods. "Sure, she had a tear in her eye."

I knew she didn't; I also knew it was okay.

Ann pats me on the arm. "You can go back to your life now, sweetie. You did it. You got her here. Kay and I'll handle it now. Everything will work out." I give my sister a long-practiced, knowing look; she gives it back to me with another pat.

We step outside the front doors. The taxi is waiting in the parking lot.

"I don't know when I can get back…" I am saying when a flash of pink catches my eye. Headed straight toward us, scooting up the sidewalk, is the pink afghan woman pushing her walker-on-wheels.

The woman rolls by, bent forward making that walker go. Ann gasps, recognizing her, laughing big and silent.

I can only stare.

The Goodbye woman has come back, popping the home's automatic door button and shuffling herself and that wheelie-walker inside—as if her coming and going, her leaving and returning, is the most natural thing in the world.

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VITA

Lynda Rutledge Stephenson is the author and/or collaborator of over a dozen books. Her author credits include *Brave New Wanda*, a novel, (under Lynda Rutledge), *Give Us a Child,* a medical/ethical nonfiction memoir, and a two-volume *History of the San Diego Zoo.* Her collaborative credits include stories from people of many walks of life, including legendary zoologists, Ground Zero crisis chaplains, and world charity founders. Her writing has been published in national and international publications including *Chicago Tribune, Houston Post, San Diego Union-Tribune, Poets & Writers Magazine, BREVITY,* and, internationally, the German news weekly, *Die Woche*. And her work has been reviewed in the *Washington Post, U.S. News & World Report, Publishers Weekly,* and *Library Journal.* She has won fellowships, grants, and residencies for her creative writing, including an Illinois Arts Council Prose Fellowship Finalist Award, an associate artist-in-residence at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, a Squaw Valley Community of Writers' Screenwriters scholarship and a Ragdale Foundation fellowship. She's taught at Baylor University, Texas Tech University, and Columbia College, Chicago. And she holds a B.A. in English/Art from Baylor University and a M.A. in American Literature/Mass Communications from Texas Tech University.