

MINICK, JAMES D., M.F.A. *Beautiful, Broken*. (2015)  
Directed by Holly Goddard Jones. 104 pp.

*Beautiful, Broken* is a short story cycle set in south-central Pennsylvania between 1950 and 1982. This novel-in-stories focuses on Rosemarie Roberts, a nursing student who suffers a stroke at the age of twenty-five. She lives the next twenty years in an isolated home, where she's afraid light will trigger another stroke. Then in 1976, when her mother can no longer care for her, Rosemarie and her mother move to a nursing home, where for the first time, Rosemarie learns light won't hurt her. She gains mobility through an electric wheelchair, and gains friends, including a boyfriend, who takes her to Baltimore for a baseball game. Ultimately, this is a story about a woman finding freedom and a new life in a nursing home.

BEAUTIFUL, BROKEN

by

James D. Minick

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2015

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

© 2015 James D. Minick

For Alma Robertson, 1930-1982.

And for my family.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by James D. Minick has been approved by the following committees of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

February 27, 2015  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. WHO COOKS FOR YOU? .....	1
II. TRADE .....	15
III. CIRCUMSTANCE .....	44
IV. O'S .....	67
V. BEAUTIFUL, BROKEN .....	88

CHAPTER I  
WHO COOKS FOR YOU?

From the kitchen came the sudden crash of dishes hitting the floor. Then the thump of Mother's body. Then silence.

Rosemarie waited in her room. From her bed, she called, "Ma-der? Ma-der?" She imagined her mother laying on the linoleum from another dizzy spell, maybe something worse.

She called again. The house trailer swallowed Rosemarie's words—no sound but the metronome of her heart ticking loud and quick. Mother, get up. Mother, get up. And then, What if she didn't? How long before Alice called or their neighbor stopped in?

Mother, get up. Forget the coffee and toast, just let me see you in that doorway.

Rosemarie knew the longer her mother lay, the more damage done—she had been a nurse. She wandered if there was blood. She wanted to check her mother's vitals, elevate her feet, cover her with a blanket. Instead Rosemarie checked the clock, two minutes, three.

Then, finally, the sound of movement—a spoon clinked, the toaster popped. The broom *ssshed* the clatter of glass across the linoleum.

The dizziness had passed. They would be all right, for now.

Mother brought the toast and coffee.

"I hur oo fall," Rosemarie said.

Mother's face looked paler, and she had a red welt on her forehead. "Here's your breakfast. I just opened some raspberry jelly, like you like." She set the food on the side table and brushed down her bangs.

"I hur oo fall," Rosemarie repeated.

"You heard me drop a pot, that's what you heard."

Don't lie to me, Rosemarie wanted to say. "Wha's at on oo head?"

Mother fluffed her bangs, but they didn't stay down. "I forgot to close the cupboard door, so I walked right into it, that's all."

Rosemarie let out a *humph*. Then she pointed to the welt and said, "Ice," and Mother understood. She could decipher Rosemarie's speech better than anyone. And even though she'd just turned eighty-one, Mother's hearing was still school-teacher sharp. Unless she passed out.

Mother's breaths were shallow and close. She leaned over Rosemarie, pulled on her shoulder, and stuffed a pillow behind her. Her hand trembled, and she didn't prop Rosemarie up as far as usual.

"We'll be all right," Mother said, as if she could read her daughter's mind.

She spread a towel across Rosemarie's chest and set the plate of toast in her lap, the bent straw in her coffee on the table, like she had done for twenty years. "I heard that owl again last night. Did you?"

Rosemarie nodded. This wasn't the soft whinny of the screech owl she sometimes heard behind their trailer. And it wasn't the five-note song of the great horned owl, deep

like a stone dropped into a well, a call she hadn't heard since they left the farm. This owl had a different call, deep and with an odd rhythm.

"We'll have to ask Joseph if he knows what kind it is." Mother brushed crumbs from the bedspread and adjusted the blinds. Light hurt Rosemarie's eyes. One of the doctors said brightness might cause another stroke, so they kept the blinds drawn and the curtains closed.

Rosemarie reached with her good arm to turn on the radio. The weatherman predicted another hot day, with possible showers in the Philadelphia area. Rosemarie's sister and brother-in-law, Alice and Gary, were going camping somewhere down there, to celebrate the Bicentennial with Kate and Joseph, their kids. They lived close by, and they were leaving tomorrow.

"I hope the weather's good for their trip," her mother said.

Rosemarie ate her breakfast. She didn't like the idea of Alice traveling so far away. She wondered if she should tell her about Mother's fall.

\* \* \*

That evening, Alice's family came to visit. Kate and Joseph still hugged Rosemarie, but the quickness of sixteen-year-old Kate's hug made Rosemarie aware that this was forced, that Alice demanded it of her. Joseph didn't seem to mind, but Rosemarie wondered how much longer that would last.

"Grandma says you heard an owl," Joseph said as he held onto her bedrail. In the last months he had grown tall enough so Rosemarie didn't have to roll on her side to see

his face. She wanted to hold his hand, but didn't want to embarrass him, so she just asked about the bird.

"I bet it's a barred owl," Joseph said. He had been studying bird calls with his paternal grandfather, working for a merit badge in Boy Scouts. "Grandpa said that if we practiced, we might be able to call one in." Then Joseph lowered his chin and tried to lower his voice to make a guttural call that almost didn't sound like any bird at all. But that was their owl.

"That's definitely the one," Mother said.

Joseph repeated the odd sound that came from the back of his throat, like a cough formed into words. "Hear it?" he asked. "The owl's hungry. He keeps asking, 'Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?'"

After a while, Alice ushered them out. They still had packing to do before they left in the morning. They'd be back in a week.

Somehow, Alice didn't notice the bruise on Mother's forehead, and Rosemarie didn't mention the fall. She didn't want to ruin the family vacation. She hoped it was the right decision.

\*

\*

\*

Alice was Rosemarie's baby sister, Beatrice her oldest. Most of the time if Rosemarie needed something, Bea sent money from Boston—she had no kids, seldom visited—and because they lived nearby, Alice and Gary would go buy it. That's how she got the little black-and-white TV that Gary hung in the corner. Usually, though,

Rosemarie didn't need anything. Or didn't allow herself to need anything. Why travel that dead-end road?

But when all you had was time and the only places you could go were in your mind, she did travel that road. She would love to ride a horse again, to feel those muscles under her. She had only ridden Mac, the gentlest of Daddy's work horses. She used to carry a jug of water out the lane to where he cultivated corn. After he drank, Daddy hoisted her up onto Mac's sweaty back—heavy breaths swelling and releasing beneath her, leather squeaking, coarse hair hot against her legs. She held onto the knobby hames, and Daddy clicked his tongue and walked along beside. He never let her ride alone, even when she got older.

Now she wanted to go back and ride alone, out the lane, up into the mountain to the lookout, the farm becoming a white speck below.

Instead, she rode this narrow bed in a dark room in a house trailer, with her radio beside her. In the corner, a shaded lamp and rocking chair for Mother. On her right, a wall of windows, all the shades drawn. Above, a white tile ceiling full of tiny dots. Sometimes she saw new constellations in their patterns. Sometimes she imagined looking right through them to the real stars.

On warm nights, Mother cracked the windows, drew the blinds, and let her listen. They lived at the end of a cul-de-sac, and the neighborhood children rode their bikes up the little hill and then raced back down. Rosemarie could never see them—her window was too high—but she listened to their screams and their talk. When darkness filled the trailer park, she listened for the owl. Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?

Rosemarie had the stroke when she and Mother were cooking together in the summer of 1955. She was home from nursing school helping can tomatoes, the kitchen full of heat and the smell of sauce, windows all steamed. They had spent the morning picking and peeling and had just started the hot water when Rosemarie felt a sudden headache, like the steam had entered her nose and seared her brain. Her lips buzzed, and she tried to shake her head clear, but that just made her dizzier. She wanted to sit at the kitchen table. “Mother,” she thought she heard her voice say, but she wasn’t sure, the sound coming from so far away.

And then, halfway to the chair, her legs gave out, and she felt the thud of her head on the floor. Her vision blurred, a circle of storm clouds closing in. Quiet, no thunder. And then the world went black.

Mother dragged her to the parlor where Rosemarie woke on the sofa. She tried to get up, but couldn’t move her legs. She tried to lift her right arm, but nothing happened. “Mother,” she wanted to say. “What’s wrong?” But no sound came from her mouth. And she couldn’t swallow—saliva seeped from the side of her mouth. The headache had turned to a dull, blank numbness. Move, she willed her thumb. Move, she told her toes. She remembered the illustration from her anatomy book. If she could push one little message across all those synapses. But nothing moved—no toe, no finger.

Mother ran to the neighbors to call the ambulance, and all that time Rosemarie lay there, alone, rubbing the sofa cushion with her left thumb. She couldn’t even pray.

At the hospital, the nurses knew her. Mrs. McGunigal, the head nurse, was one of her teachers. Her voice stayed steady, but her eyes reflected Rosemarie’s fear.

The IC nurses swiped her saliva every few minutes because Rosemarie still couldn't swallow. One time, when Mother and Father stepped out of the room, Mrs. McGunigal placed her finger at Rosemarie's mouth. "It's time," she said. "Rosemarie, let me help you."

Rosemarie shook her head and refused to open her mouth. Let me die, she wanted to say. Please. Let me drown and be done with this.

"Rosemarie, let me help you." Mrs. McGunigal held her hand close.

Rosemarie turned her head away.

"I'm sorry, but I have to do this." She gently took Rosemarie's chin.

Rosemarie tried to shift her head, to shake it side to side. She yelled, "No," but there was no strength behind it. Mrs. McGunigal forced her thumbs between Rosemarie's teeth to pry open her jaw. Rosemarie bit down, but even that had no effect. Mrs. McGunigal's finger searched. The finger swiped. The finger daubed what it found onto a gauze pad. The finger repeated until the saliva was cleared.

Rosemarie didn't know what Mrs. McGunigal told her mother: That Rosemarie had bit her? That she refused her help? That she wanted to die? Whatever the nurse said made Mother so mad that she marched in, Father trailing behind. "What do you think you're doing, Rosemarie Emma Roberts?" Mother's voice quavered. "Don't you die on me. On us. We need you." She started crying, and then, so did Rosemarie. "We'll get through this." Her mother held her hand. "Together. So don't you ever try that again."

Rosemarie nodded once, then turned her head away in shame.

Two days later, whatever had seized her throat loosened its grip. Rosemarie could swallow on her own. The doctors said she'd had a stroke, but they never could identify the cause. After a week of tests, they said they could do nothing more. She was stable, so she went home to her mother's care.

Over twenty years had passed since that day in the kitchen with all of those tomatoes waiting to be canned and her fallen on the floor. Twenty years on her back in a dark room. Every one of those days Mother bathed her, dressed her, and cooked for her.

\*

\*

\*

In the middle of the week, with Alice and her family three hours away near the Liberty Bell, Rosemarie listened to her mother singing in the kitchen. She used to have a soprano that anchored the church choir. And some evenings, when Mother grew tired, she'd slip into a blues song she learned when she went to the teacher's college, like Rosemarie's favorite, "Black Snake Blues." Her mother sang that now, and Rosemarie hummed along. "I ain't got no mama now / She told me late last night / 'You don't need no mama, no how' / Mmm, black snake crawlin' in my room." They used to play Victoria Spivey records when they still lived on the farm, records Mother bought before she married. But the Victrola and albums got sold in the auction five years ago, so now they just had memory and Mother's voice. And lately, Mother couldn't keep the melody going for long.

The song stopped, and a kitchen chair scraped.

"Ma-der," Rosemarie called.

"I'm all right. Just need to sit a spell."

Rosemarie pictured Mother at the kitchen table, head in her soapy hands. What if she blacked out and didn't wake up? Rosemarie had a phone beside her bed—Alice had made sure of that—but she had dialed it only once, and that had taken so long that the tone kept coming on and she had to start over. And besides, no one would understand her. If her sisters didn't call, and Mother fell and couldn't get up, it could be day or two before the neighbors checked on them.

Rosemarie pounded her head against the pillow. In that moment, she hated her mother. She hated her “Oh, I'm all right,” when she wasn't. Her expectation that Rosemarie not tell her sisters. Her refusal to consider a Home (“We're fine here, just you and me.”). And most of all, Rosemarie hated that she couldn't go against her mother, couldn't for once speak the truth and say we need help, you've done enough, it's time for someone else to cook for both of us.

\*

\*

\*

Five years ago, they moved to this place after they sold the farm—that white clapboard house with scrollwork in the eaves, Father's house where they all had been born, everyone but Mother. She and Rosemarie only needed a few rooms—the house was too big, especially all the years after Father died. So Alice and Gary found this trailer, and the Path Valley Ambulance moved Rosemarie over the mountain in the dark of night, like she requested. She and her mother were both glad to leave that hard-to-heat house, but Rosemarie had wondered if this was the best choice.

Back in nursing school, Rosemarie spent one rotation in a nursing home. She expected to hate it, but she didn't. People cared—the nurses and doctors and even most of

the patients. Some were difficult, but the nurses taught her how to calm them with song or food. Rosemarie spent Thanksgiving there sitting between a retired music teacher and a Navy man, both of them embarrassing her with raunchy jokes.

That place held nothing like the loneliness of the farm or the loneliness of her room now.

The next morning, the day after Mother had faltered in the kitchen, and after Rosemarie had slept little worrying about all the what-ifs, she said to her mother, "It's ime."

"Already? You're early this morning," her mother said. She reached into the closet for the bedpan.

"No." How to say this? How to make her understand? "It's ime we ove."

Mother put the bedpan back. From the closet, she asked, "And where do you expect us to move to?"

"Oo know air."

She stood beside her, those eyebrows close together, those blue eyes sharp. All the years of reprimanding children in her one-room schoolhouse, all the years of keeping her daughters out of trouble, all that focused now. "Rosemarie, I am not going to a nursing home. I've told you that a thousand times."

"Why?"

"I'm just not."

Rosemarie asked again.

"You really want to know?"

Rosemarie nodded.

“All right. The one time I went, I was a girl and we were visiting my great uncle Wallace. It was the most depressing place I have ever visited. Uncle Wallace hadn’t been washed in who knows how long. We had to leave his room while Mother washed him. The place smelled like urine. Some of the patients moaned all the time, and some screamed. And no one came to visit. We were the only family there, no one else. Those people went into that home and got forgotten. All of them. Forgotten. You want to live in a place like that?”

Rosemarie told her it wasn’t always like that, there were much nicer places.

“And you think they can take better care of you than I can?”

Rosemarie said yes. When you’re lying on the floor and I can’t help you get up and no one else is around, yes, they can take better care of both of us.

Mother crossed her arms. For a long time, neither of them spoke.

Rosemarie held out her hand. She wanted to hold those blue-veiny fingers, feel those knobby knuckles that scraped her skin every time Mother buttoned her shirt. You’ll still be able to help feed me, she wanted to tell her. You’ll still be my mother.

But Mother turned and walked out the door.

\*

\*

\*

That night, Mother sat in her chair doing her crossword. Under the small circle of lamplight, her white hair shimmered. She always kept it in a tight bun, but now a few strands hung loose. “What’s a seven-letter word that ends with *o*?” she asked. “We’re supposed to be ‘Starting Fires’ with this one.”

Rosemarie waited to make sure Mother wasn't teasing. Usually she solved the puzzle with little help, and this word seemed so easy.

"In-erno," Rosemarie said.

"Yep, that fits. Inferno." She scribbled in the letters and then asked, "How about...?"

The rest of the sentence never came. Mother slumped in her chair, her chin on her chest, her pencil on the floor. Again, no response to Rosemarie's calls. Again, that body-sweating panic, that physical strain to witness something other than this. Did Mother faint? Or is this more serious, like a heart attack? She had never fainted while just sitting, at least not that Rosemarie knew of. Through the bedrail, she watched her mother's small body. Her chest moved with each slow exhale. Rosemarie would count to sixty breaths, and if Mother hadn't come to by then, Rosemarie would try to dial the neighbor.

Mother woke on the forty-ninth breath. She looked around a moment, blankly, before it registered on her face—surprise, then anger. "Don't stare. It's not polite." She picked up the folded newspaper and found the pencil on the floor. She wobbled to her feet, and then she held onto the doorframe as she stepped into the living room. "I just need a little nap," she said as lay on the sofa.

And we both just need someone else to look after us, Rosemarie thought.

\* \* \*

At the end of the week, Alice and Gary and the kids returned from camping and filled Rosemarie's room. All four of them wore red-white-and-blue shirts that Alice made, even Kate, who tied hers at the navel to reveal her smooth belly.

After they said hello, Alice sent the kids outside and Gary to watch them. That left Alice and Mother and Rosemarie.

“How have you been?” Alice asked.

“O-ay,” Rosemarie said and looked at Mother. She fiddled with the buttons on her sweater, kept her head down. Rosemarie could tell she had no plans of leaving the sisters alone.

“And you, Mother, how have you been? Any more dizzy spells?”

“No, no spells.” She tidied up Rosemarie’s table. “Did you get to see the Liberty Bell?”

Alice nodded and said they took the kids into the city one day. “Mother, how’s your breathing been?”

“It hasn’t changed, the lungs still work.” Mother took a deep breath to demonstrate. She reached out to adjust Rosemarie’s pillow, and her bangs shifted so that Alice saw her bruise.

“What happened to your forehead?”

“Oh, I forgot to close the cabinet door the other morning and walked right into it. It’s nothing, just a little bruise.” She patted her hair and glanced at Rosemarie. That fear again, that silent plea. Alice looked at Rosemarie, too.

Rosemarie pointed to Mother and then to the door.

“Mother, I think Rosemarie wants you to leave.”

Rosemarie nodded.

Mother turned to Alice. She placed her hand on Alice's arm and began talking. "We heard that owl again, and we saw the Liberty Bell on the news. We looked for you in the crowd, but didn't see you. And I'm all right, don't you believe a word she says. I'm all right."

Rosemarie pointed to the door once more.

Alice interrupted. "I think Rosemarie wants to talk with me in private, Mother."

Mother stopped talking. Her blue eyes pierced Rosemarie and then Alice. "Don't you believe a word she says," she repeated. Then she turned and walked out and shut the door and began clattering dishes in the kitchen.

## CHAPTER II

### TRADE

He wore a Yankee's cap. That was the first thing Rosemarie noticed as she rolled her chair into the day lounge to find a stranger sitting at a new card table beside hers. She had wanted some time alone in *her* corner, away from her roommate, Elsie, and all the other residents. Yet here was this man in an ugly blue cap, a red flannel shirt, and faded jeans. He swiveled his whole body to greet her, like he couldn't turn his neck. She considered leaving, but she didn't want to be rude, so she wheeled on into the room.

The man chewed a mustache so dense and heavy it looked like it might weigh his mouth closed. He'd rolled up his shirt sleeves so the dark stain of a tattoo showed—the top half of a naked mermaid, she guessed. His collar was faded, but his sneakers glowed white in their newness.

Rosemarie pulled close to her table and did a quick check of the puzzle. She had started it yesterday—a castle in the Alps.

The stranger squinted through thick glasses with thumbprints on the lenses. His sea green eyes startled her with their intensity.

“Good afternoon,” he said.

Like all the other residents, he was older than Rosemarie, who was forty-eight.

“I put a couple of those stray bastards in your puzzle there. Hope you don’t mind.” His voice was all gravelly, a bass in the choir (if he sang in a choir). “Couldn’t help my sorry self.”

Did he really just say bastard? No one swore here, except Norman Ring, who ended every sentence with “damn nurse.” Rosemarie heard her mother’s voice in her head: Young lady, it’s time to leave.

Instead, she stared at her puzzle. *Her* puzzle. On *her* table. It looked different. She hated when others messed with it. Especially if they were trying to be helpful. She wanted her space. She wanted her work left alone.

Just turn around now and move away from this man. Again, her mother’s voice. And again, she was probably right, but Rosemarie had too many questions. Who was he and what was he doing here and why did he just keep looking at her?

“I just moved in.” He sat back, put some cards on his table, and crossed his arms. He had to turn his neck and shoulders sideways at a weird angle to talk to her. At least his shirt was clean. And she smelled aftershave of some sort, vaguely familiar, disturbing some memory she couldn’t register. “My room’s so damn small I can’t even scratch myself without smacking my head against the wall. So, I thought I’d organize my cards out here. Plus, I have a roommate. A goddamn roommate! I haven’t lived with another person since the wife died fifteen years ago.

“My son, he said he couldn’t handle me anymore, so he put me in here, the goddamn Church of God Nursing Home. Unbefuckinglievable.”

He held out his hand. “My name’s Gus. You must be Rosemarie.”

She shook with her left. She felt a jolt. His hand so hot, not sweaty, but charged. Like the time her sister tricked her into grabbing the neighbor's electric fence. And Gus didn't let go. "Man, I'm just an old wrinkly fart. Where'd you get such pretty skin?"

Rosemarie didn't know what to say. She'd always had pale, smooth skin—alabaster, her college roommate called it—and she remembered how that compliment made her proud, and then ashamed for such pride, her mother's voice *tsk-tsking* in her head. Even before the move to the nursing home, before Rosemarie spent twenty years in a dark room, afraid the light might trigger another stroke—before all of that, her skin had made her sisters jealous.

And here was this man noticing it.

Gus released her hand and turned to his work. He reached into a shoebox to pull out something. Rows and rows of cards lay before him, not playing cards with kings and queens—but small rectangles with faces and bodies in uniforms holding bats and gloves.

"This is a new one of Eddie Murray," Gus said. "You ever hear of him? He's first baseman for the O's, and he's hitting big time."

Yes, she'd heard of him. And she'd heard of baseball cards, too. Her nephew, Joseph, collected them.

Gus handed her the Eddie Murray card.

Her little black-and-white TV didn't show Murray's face so well, the intensity of those eyes. He looked so serious.

"You like baseball?"

Best game in the whole damn world, she thought. And then, her mother's voice:  
Rosemarie Emma Roberts, what are you doing swearing?

Rosemarie knew she should leave.

"Who's your team?"

Rosemarie held up the card. "O's," she said.

"Well. Excuse my Russian, but no shit. You poor fool. Now my team here," he tapped his hat, "they make the O's eat their own snot. But you already know that, don't you?"

He took his cap off, pretended to wipe away a stain. "Bought this in nineteen-and-sixty-four when I took my boy to a game. I always felt bad for those O's, always having better records than any damn team in the National League and still not making the playoffs. Poor bums."

"Ine-een itty-ix." She wanted to say 1970, too, but waited to see if he could understand.

"Come again?"

"Itty-ix an even-y."

He repeated her, looked at the ceiling, said her words again, then, "Oh, yeah. 1966 and 1970. Pathetic years. Your lousy O's took it all." He put his hat back on. "You wanna bet on this season, Ms. O?"

She shook her head. She felt the grin on her face, wanted to somehow stop it but couldn't.

“You just keep that offer in mind.” He pulled another card. “I’m afraid to show you this one. Might not get it back.” He handed her a Jim Palmer. “That one’s ten years old. Nineteen-sixty-eight, I think.”

She held it close and saw those blue eyes. He looked so young, with trimmed hair and dimples. On the radio, sometimes they interviewed him after a game, and he always sounded so well-mannered.

“Goddamn underwear boy wonder,” Gus said. “Makes those ads you girls slobber over. But the son of a bitch can pitch.”

She had never seen those ads, but she’d heard the commentators making jokes. And she could imagine his tall body, all lean muscle. Rosemarie wanted that card. She hadn’t wanted anything for a long time, not like she wanted that card now. To hold it before going to sleep. To wake and see it on her bedside table in the morning.

Don’t be so silly, her mother prattled.

Don’t be so judgmental, she prattled back.

She turned Palmer to the light and imagined those eyes smiling, and just as she held it up, Gus took him—took Palmer from out of her hand. He slipped it into a bundle, wrapped it with a rubber band, and placed it in the shoebox.

“Gotta go. Game starts in a few. And those jerks won’t let me watch it in here.”

“Where oo et em?”

He looked at her, trying to understand. “Man. You have the prettiest blue eyes I’ve ever seen.”

The heat rushed up her neck and into her cheeks, and then that embarrassment at being embarrassed she always hated, that made her blush even more. She fiddled with the control knob on her wheelchair and repeated her question.

“Where do I get these?” Gus tapped the box. “Sometimes I trade for them. You got anything to trade for that Palmer, Ms. O?”

She shook her head.

“Too bad.”

She didn’t know if he was being sarcastic or not.

“I used to get them at the corner store on the other side of town. Once a week I’d walk there and buy a humongous bag of gum, big squares of that pink shit. I had to stop chewing it when I got my teeth.” He smiled and pointed to his dentures. “So lately I just give the gum to any snot-nosed kid standing nearby, or throw it in the trash. The gum comes with the cards. It’s like scratching lotto tickets—you never know what the hell’s inside. Then last year they started putting cards on Twinkie boxes. Go figure. Get your sugar bomb and three cards for a buck and a quarter and be set for the rest of the day.

“Since they took my license and put me in this hellhole, I have to find some other coot to buy from. But I got me these new sneakers, and I can still walk, you better panooching believe it.” He paused to catch his breath. “Hey, you know anything about that store down on the corner?”

Rosemarie shook her head. Others residents, the independent ones, like Gladys, talked about getting good coffee a block or two away, but Rosemarie had never been.

She followed Gus's gaze to the other side of the room where three white-haired women watched a soap opera. "Maybe sometime you and me, we can outmuscle these old biddies and watch us a game in here, how about it?"

Again, Rosemarie couldn't hold back her smile. Her, outmuscle someone? You're silly, old man with that stoop and those eyes. Watching a game with someone else could be fun, though. And this TV was big and in color, not like her little one back in her room, where she had to keep the volume low so as not to bother Elsie.

Only if you put tape over his mouth—Mother's voice again.

Rosemarie shook her head in agreement.

"See you 'round," Gus said and stashed his box under his arm. He walked bent over, as if he'd broken his back a long time ago. After he left, Rosemarie thought about Palmer and gum and blue eyes. About what Gus said about her. Wait till she told Mother about him, though she'd be sure not to mention the compliments or Palmer.

And then she remembered Mother was dead. Had been dead for almost two months. And still Rosemarie was surprised to realize it. She sunk a little deeper into her seat.

\*

\*

\*

Rosemarie steered past the nurse's station, toward the dining hall. She kept coming back to that word. Trade. Hadn't she given up on that a long time ago? She used to pursue that word for days until she realized it just made it all worse. But here it was again: What would she trade to live in a different body? To ride a horse. To write letters. To just use the bathroom. To push herself out of bed and walk down the hall and out the

door and down the street to that restaurant that Gladys always talked about. What would she trade for that? What *could* she trade for that? She had nothing, had had nothing since the stroke took it all in 1955. And here it was, twenty-some years later, and she had come to terms with that long ago—hadn't she?—when she said, God, I don't understand your ways but if this is what you have in mind, then I guess I'll accept. Like she could do anything else.

Hadn't she put that all to rest?

Her wheels bumped over the dining hall threshold, and she caught herself looking for two empty places. Rosemarie couldn't trade away this emptiness either. She and her mother had moved here together, and though they lived in separate rooms, they'd sat together at every meal. Mother would talk for the two of them, chat with the other residents about the weather, or invite the visiting preacher to join them. And at every meal, Mother would cut Rosemarie's food, tuck a napkin under her chin, and make sure she got enough. Now, Rosemarie had to ask an aide for help, or usually, she made do, which meant making a mess.

Rosemarie found her spot at a table. The server brought her plate, a hamburger steak. What a fine meal, Mother-in-her-head spoke. Mother had come to like the Home, but never its food. At least this wasn't a pork chop, Rosemarie replied. She could cut this and not have to ask for help, not have to remember her mother's blue-veiny hands holding the knife and fork so properly. Oh, Mother had manners and made sure each of her daughters did too.

Across the table, Gladys and Elsie commanded a view of the dining hall. Gladys had manners too, and her face was always perfect—the eye shadow today a cool blue to match her blouse which, as always, outlined her figure. She kept her hair in tight curls, never frizzy like Rosemarie’s, and she knew all the names of all the men in the building—the male residents, both married and not, the repairmen and janitors, and even the boy who cleaned the tables.

Elsie was the exact opposite, and yet the two were best friends. Where Gladys had the high cheekbones of an actress, Elsie had a man’s square face with the bottom lip always stuck out, a chin that stuck out even farther, and jowls like a bulldog. Her rouge always seemed so fake, too pink against her olive skin, and every night, she snored loud enough to keep the nurses awake. Except for the occasional complaint about the TV, Elsie and Rosemarie got along well enough, but Rosemarie had no idea why they were put in the same room. She could’ve lived a much quieter life with some other roommate, but not Gladys. No, she always had company, and always had gossip to share.

“His name is Gus,” Gladys said. They were pretending to eat as they stared across the hall. “He’s from the other side of town. I heard he has a mouth.”

You heard right, Rosemarie wanted to say.

Elsie pushed up her glasses and stared across the room.

“I also heard he has a drinking problem,” Gladys continued, “including several arrests for driving when he shouldn’t’ve been.”

Satan’s Punch, Mother used to call it when their neighbor, Jedidiah Holbrook, stumbled by the house. Rosemarie believed it, too, the way Jedidiah acted, throwing his

empty bottles at fence posts, or worse, pulling out his pistol and shooting at some ghosts out in the meadow. Rosemarie and her sisters used to watch from the upstairs bedroom, though Mother shouted for them to get away from the window.

“Doesn’t look like he’s weaving too much right now,” Elsie said.

Rosemarie had her back to the room, so she couldn’t see.

“Never can tell with alcoholics. Never can tell when they might explode, too. Know what I mean?” Gladys took a sip of her tea.

She’s right, Mother said. But he seemed sober just a while ago, Rosemarie replied.

“He got that stoop from falling off a roof and breaking his back. He can’t hardly see where he’s going, can he?”

“Where *is* he going?” Elsie asked.

“Looks like right here—so hush up.”

Gus stopped beside Rosemarie. “Good evening, ladies. Mind if this sorry sot joins you?”

That gravelly voice again.

Such manners, Mother hummed.

Despite his chin almost touching his chest, he looked around the table. No one spoke for a long while. Finally Gladys said, please, have a seat. “But we won’t tolerate any swearing.”

Rosemarie thought Gus’s lips turned up, but she couldn’t be sure with his moustache.

“Thank you,” he said and sat beside Rosemarie, that flannel shirt so worn it looked soft. They introduced themselves and said where they came from, Rosemarie staying quiet as Gladys sized him up. No, he’s not your type, is he? But whose type is he, with such a mouth? After a while, Gus leaned to Rosemarie and said, “My bozo Yankees lost today. And your kanooching O’s won. You should’ve bet me.”

Rosemarie rolled her eyes, and she tried to ignore the hitch in her heart. Didn’t he understand that like proper women, she didn’t bet and didn’t swear?

“We need to find us our own TV. You know of any?”

There was hers, she thought, and immediately was glad she didn’t open her mouth. Instead she just shrugged. He chewed his mustache as he regarded her. Then he turned to his mashed potatoes, which he ate solemnly, and, she was surprised, with his mouth closed, unlike Elsie who spoke whenever she wanted, mouth full or not.

What would it be like to have this foul-mouthed man in her and Elsie’s room?

Don’t even think of it—Mother in another fit. With that tongue and who knows what he’ll be drinking? Don’t even think of it, young woman. You haven’t known him for twelve hours, have you? And he’s at least twenty years older than you, closer to *my* age than to yours.

But Mother, you married a man sixteen years older. You can’t say much.

And, Mother—Rosemarie sighed—you can’t say anything anymore.

\* \* \*

Several days later, as Rosemarie delivered the mail on the west wing, her wheelchair stopped in the middle of the hall. She pushed the control lever this way and

that, but nothing happened. *Bees' butts and beetles' bottoms*, her mother's "curse" coming to her so suddenly, making her laugh at the absurdity of those words and her situation—stuck in the middle of an empty hall.

Norman found her outside his door, and after he realized the chair wouldn't work, he bent behind her and wiggled some wires. Every so often, he yelled, "Try that." Then, "Try that." Finally, the chair moved. Rosemarie was afraid to stop it, but she wanted to thank Norman. He wiped his hands together and said it was nothing, just a loose wire on the battery. "But you better have one of the maintenance men look at it. I only could finger-tighten the nut, so who knows how long it'll stay good." Rosemarie thanked him again before moving down the hall to complete her mail run.

At lunch, she entered the dining hall to find Gladys and Elsie in their usual seats at the table, Gus too. Rosemarie pulled into the empty spot beside him. He nodded and said hello, but no one else greeted Rosemarie. Instead, Gladys kept leaning close to Elsie and whispering. Rosemarie could only make out a few words, like "fool," and "I know." She ate her tomato soup and wondered what Gus thought of them.

"You know, ladies," Gus said so sharply that even the residents at the next table looked. "I'm getting sick and tired of your goddamn gossiping. That's all you do. Tittle tattle in each other's little ears. Why don't...."

"You have no right to use that kind of language at this table," Gladys said.

She stood, so Gus rose too.

"Yeah, just like you have no fucking right to go around blabbing shit about other people."

“Well, Mr. Gifford, at least I don’t have a sewer coming out of my mouth.”

“Ha! Your mouth *is* a sewer, Ms. Smith. Here,” Gus threw his napkin at her, “have some toilet paper.” He picked up his dessert—a bowl of pudding—and walked out the door. He didn’t look back.

Gladys’s face turned red. She yelled about deserving more respect and “I don’t pay two arms and two legs to be treated like this.” She swore she had no more appetite. “I’m going right now to the director and get that filthy old man kicked out.” She marched to the front office, leaving Rosemarie and Elsie staring at each other.

“Well, that was something,” Elsie said, and then she started eating again.

Rosemarie put down her spoon and left her food on the table. She no longer had an appetite. For years, she’d been wanting to tell Gladys to stop talking about others, and here, Gus did just that. And he hadn’t been here much more than a week.

But why did he always have to swear? Sometimes it made Rosemarie laugh, but most of the time it made her cringe. And he did it so often. Like he didn’t know how to be any other way. Like he didn’t know how to be gentle...but he did, she’d seen that in how he treated her.

Rosemarie steered out to the empty courtyard. She sat by herself and soaked up the sunny silence and wondered whether or not she should tell Gus about her TV.

\*

\*

\*

The next day, Gus didn’t come to the dining hall. Gladys let it be known that the director had called Gus into his office and put him on suspension. He was to stay away from Gladys and improve his manners.

Both restrictions made Rosemarie relieved—at least that’s how she wanted to feel. Mother was right to warn her about drunkards. She should stay away. Even the nurse that morning had commented on Gus’s bad manners. Rosemarie just shrugged, not sure what to think.

No matter how she tried, though, she couldn’t forget Gus’s eyes. Or when he shook her hand. It was as if he had been the first person to really see her in years. Sure, her mother had looked at her every day, but that recognition had such familiarity to it. Like looking at your own face. Rosemarie wasn’t sure she could describe her mother’s face if she didn’t have that photo of her in her blue dress, the frame resting where she saw it every morning.

In the mailroom, she paused from sorting the stacks of letters—flyers for cemeteries and insurance companies and the new doctor in town—when she noticed a folded piece of paper off to the side. No stamp, no address, just her name in blocky letters. She had to maneuver her chair in order to reach it. Inside, Gus had written:

*Rosemarie,*

*That no account woman got me riled.*

*I’m sorry I ruined your supper.*

*Your friend, Gus*

Rosemarie read it several times. He didn’t ruin supper. He just told Gladys what she needed to hear.

Don’t you think of it, young woman. You saw how upset he made Gladys, and don’t forget that he’s a drunk.

You're right, Mother. You're right.

At supper that evening, Gus ate by himself in the corner of the dining hall, and Rosemarie felt like she was the only one who had any sympathy for him. He did not look up from his food, just ate in a hurry and left.

Good riddance, Mother whispered in her head. But Rosemarie wasn't so sure.

\* \* \*

A week later, Rosemarie found another envelope addressed to her in the heap of mail. This one she had expected. Right after Gus had shown her Eddie Murray and Jim Palmer, Rosemarie's nephew had visited. Joseph too was an O's fan, and he also collected cards. Rosemarie had given him two dollars, told him to keep the gum or Twinkies, and just send her the cards. She wanted to start collecting. She wanted to trade.

But that was before the big blow-up. And here they were, stiff pieces of cardboard inside the envelope. Rosemarie considered just throwing them away, but then she knew Joseph would ask. So she pinned the envelope under a book and sliced it open with the knife. Joseph's note read:

*Here they are, Aunt Rosemarie. Our first trade.*

*I'm enjoying the Twinkies.*

*Mom thinks we're silly. Oh well.*

*Love, Joseph*

The cards were of Doug DeCinces, Willie Stargell, and Ed Halicki. Rosemarie pinched the DeCinces—a good sign that her first set included an Oriole, if she really was collecting. She slipped the cards back into the envelope and the envelope into the little

pouch on the side of her wheelchair. She would read the backs later, but first, she had to deliver this mail.

\*

\*

\*

Baseball cards? It made no sense for a forty-eight-year-old woman who couldn't get herself in and out of bed to want to collect little pieces of cardboard. No sense at all, just like her love of the team that made her mother leave the room whenever a game came on. Yet the more Rosemarie thought about it, the more she realized that's what she wanted—all the cards for all of the Orioles, from the 1950s, when they first moved to Baltimore, to now, April 1978, the beginning of a new season, when your team is by far the best and you know they'll take you all the way to the World Series.

Rosemarie wanted the cards for Brooks and Frank, Ellie and even Billy Gardner from 1957, the year she started to listen to every game on the radio. The year she finally just accepted her plight—that she'd always live with her mother. The year she knew she'd never speak normally. Never live to look out a window in the daytime—oh that silly fear of light. Never leave that house or room or bed. Never be with a man again. Yet here she was, out of *that* bed in that cold farmhouse forever and out of *this* bed every day. And she had a window, lots of windows, and the sunlight didn't trigger another stroke like that first doctor had said. And she had a wheelchair, battery-powered so she could just push that little lever and move—*move*—she never imagined any of that in 1957.

And what about this man, Gus? How much did he drink?

The man is no good, her mother's voice. Definitely a dangerous bomb ready to go off.

Maybe, Mother, but maybe not. He spoke the truth to Gladys. Plus he knew baseball, and he had O's, including several Jim Palmers.

\*

\*

\*

The next morning, Gus entered the lounge. "Mind if this sorry fool joins you?"

Rosemarie's heart thudded. It was the first they had spoken since the blow-up.

Rosemarie motioned toward the chair. He didn't smell like alcohol, just that aftershave. And he didn't seem that different, maybe a little more stooped, a little quieter.

The box top for the jigsaw puzzle stood on the far side of the table showing another photograph of a New England bridge. Every puzzle the Home owned, it seemed, showed some castle or covered bridge taken in a different season, this one surrounded by the golds and reds of autumn.

Rosemarie didn't say anything when Gus snapped a few border pieces into place, but she didn't like it. Now she couldn't have that feeling of completing the puzzle by herself.

He kept popping in pieces, and she couldn't figure out how to tell him to stop.

"There you are, you sneaky little bastard," he mumbled to the last edge piece.

"Do you ink?" She searched for a particular piece of red, from the bridge.

He chewed his mustache. "Drink, right?"

She nodded.

"Not anymore."

"Why?"

“Don’t want to die just yet. Got a grandson I’d like to see grow up. Already ruined too much as is.”

Rosemarie found the right piece, fitted into place. They worked in silence.

When Gus stood to reach for a far piece, she pulled out the Halicki and set it on the table before him.

“What the hell. Where’d you get that bastard?” He sat down and picked up the card, those green eyes taking in the card and then her.

“A secre,” she said.

“I see.” He lifted the card to the light. “Has a grease stain here on the corner. One of those bloated cupcakes must’ve touched it.”

Rosemarie shifted her shoulder. “Trade,” she said as loudly as she could.

“Rain?” He looked out the window. “I don’t think so—just clouding up some.”

“Trade,” she tried even louder.

“Raid? What—you steal this slimy thing off of some poor sniffing kid? His two-bit daddy coming to beat your head in, so now you want to pawn it off on me? Or maybe he called the police and they’re waiting to bust down that skinny door right now?” He turned the card over, scratched his nose.

“TRADE!” She hadn’t spoken this loudly since she couldn’t remember.

“Oh, *trade!* Why didn’t you say so earlier?” He winked. “What the hell do you want for it?”

She blew out an exasperated breath. “Almer.”

“Palmer! You’re crazy. Sure, Halicki threw that no-hitter in ‘75, but it was *against the piss-ant Mets*. Jesus. Palmer’s worth at least five Halickis. And that’s being generous.”

She stuck her bottom lip out. When he noticed, his smile turned soft and they both sat silently for a moment.

“Well, shit. Let me go find some kanooch more suitable to trade. Any requests?”

“O’s.”

“Any O?”

She nodded.

He made his hunched-over way back to his room. A few minutes later, he returned with an Ellie Hendricks. “Here. How’s that?”

Rosemarie held it up to her eyes and nodded.

“You hear about that game against the Blue Jays? That sorry-ass catcher can pitch!”

Just last week, the O’s were playing Toronto and losing in a bad way. Nothing worked. The Blue Jays just kept hitting and hitting, ignoring the fact that they were in last place and Baltimore needed to win to catch up to the Yankees. First Flanagan got knocked out of the game, and for a while, Earl Weaver put in a new pitcher and Toronto just knocked every ball wherever they wanted. Even Tippy Martinez couldn’t throw past them. But then Weaver surprised everyone—he gave the ball to Ellie Hendricks, Hendricks the catcher, Hendricks who hadn’t pitched since he was in elementary school.

And ol' Ellie did a good job, went two innings and gave up only one hit. He stopped the bleeding, but it was too late. The final score was 24-10.

So Rosemarie had made her first trade. She held Hendricks, but somehow, she didn't feel very satisfied.

\*

\*

\*

Trade. What else could she trade? She lay in bed, waiting for Elsie to start snoring. Outside, a steady wind blew the maple's leaves, and the streetlights cast their odd moving shadows on the wall before her. She didn't have much money, a little from Social Security, and a little from her sisters Alice and Beatrice to spend every month. If she kept buying boxes of Twinkies for both herself and Joseph, she couldn't buy anything else.

Trade. She didn't eat much and Gus seemed to always clean his plate. That might work.

Trade. Gus touched her hand yesterday as he helped her work on the bridge puzzle. And that touch jolted her again, made her heart skip. His skin was rougher than she imagined, but his touch was gentle. Men only want one thing, Nancy, her college friend, used to joke. Rosemarie wouldn't give him that, but maybe a kiss. And if she did, would he want more? Could she defend herself? To think of even trying frightened her—couldn't that cause another stroke? No, she had nothing to give. A left arm that half-worked and a voice that strangled words. And she hadn't kissed a man in so long she wasn't about to start again. Especially with that mustache.

Best just to give those cards back to Joseph, she thought as she drifted to sleep.

But the next day was Sunday, and that afternoon, in came the whole family, Joseph with his album under his arm and that wide grin. She hadn't seen him so hyper since one Christmas when he was five or six, and he dove under her bed with his toy pistol, hiding from his sister, whispering, "Is she there yet?"

No, no need to ruin his joy today.

\*

\*

\*

In the lounge two weeks after the Gladys incident, Rosemarie worked her puzzle, while Gus read the sports page. An unspoken truce seemed to have settled between Gus and Gladys. That or she'd moved on to other concerns. Gus just kept his own company, except in the lounge where sometimes he'd read one of the baseball articles out loud. He liked to gloat when he read the AL East standings, but lately, the O's had gone on a winning streak, at last. They had moved into second place, closing in on the Yankees.

"Says here they're finally televising a Yankees' game Saturday. That's tomorrow, you know. They might flip over to an O's game too, if the Yankees are drumming the sorry A's. The golf-boys will own this TV all afternoon, and they outnumber us." He put the paper down. "How about we watch the game on your TV?"

Her TV? In *her* room? Gus had only visited her here, in the lounge, or the big open dining hall. Never in the privacy of her room. And how'd he know she had a TV? She must've mentioned it once, or maybe he'd come looking when she wasn't there.

"I could walk down to the store, get us a bag of popcorn—they got one of those old-timey poppers down there. Lots of butter and salt. We could kick that ol' biddy Elsie out and have us a good time."

The thought of the two of them alone in that room thrilled and frightened her. She wanted to say no, but couldn't think of any reason, so she shrugged her shoulder.

“Listen. I'll bring an O's card as my ticket of admission. How's that sound?”

She just sat there.

“Oh, all right. I'll bring a Palmer. There. How's that?”

She didn't hesitate, nodded once. He slapped the table and asked if she still didn't want to wager a little money on the game, but Rosemarie just stared out the window and hoped Elsie might skip her bridge club and stay in the room.

That night, she wondered what she had done, what she had gotten herself into. Elsie had already said no, she wasn't missing bridge club to watch a silly ballgame. So that meant just Gus. What if he tried something and she couldn't defend herself? What if she said no and he exploded again, like he did at Gladys? Or like he did just last week at the golf-boys, when he slapped the table hard enough to knock puzzle pieces onto the floor so that they had trouble finding them. And before the fight, he did look at Gladys longer than Rosemarie liked, and not at her face either. And he did have that tattoo on his bicep—a mermaid with breasts bigger than Gladys's. When he noticed Rosemarie staring at it, he pulled up his sleeve and said, “Watch this.” He worked his muscles, moved his arm and hand so that the tattoo danced. “How 'bout that?” In disgust, Rosemarie had turned her chair and headed out of the room, his “Oh, come on,” trailing behind her, so that later, at the next meal, he apologized.

I don't like this, her mother said. What if he causes another stroke?

Yes, there was that.

\*

\*

\*

Fifteen minutes before the game, Gus knocked on her door. He wore his Yankee's cap and held a gallon-sized container of popcorn.

Rosemarie said to come in. She hoped he didn't hear the tremor in her voice.

He set the popcorn on the dresser next to the TV and the photograph of her mother. "Nice digs," he said looking around, as if this room was any different from his. Then he leaned close to her, tapped his shirt pocket, and withdrew the card. "Here. Like I promised. My ticket of admission."

The Palmer felt warm in her hands. She set it in her lap so Gus couldn't see her hand tremble.

"Oh, and I picked this for you." From the bottom of his shirt pocket, he pulled a daisy, the stem broken and a few petals missing. "Looks a little tired, doesn't it? Sorry about that."

He shifted from foot-to-foot, scratched his head. Rosemarie pointed to the TV, said to turn it on.

"Mind if I move this chair?" Gus dragged Elsie's chair from the corner, setting it so close to Rosemarie's wheelchair that they touched.

Oh, why hadn't Elsie given up her bridge club just this once?

He settled beside Rosemarie, and she smelled that aftershave again. She knew she had smelled it before, but she couldn't figure out when.

The Yankee's came to the plate first, against a rookie pitcher named John Henry Johnson.

“All right, boys. Let’s show this youngster what you got.”

The Yankees seemed to hear Gus. The second player, Willie Randolph, got on base with a single. After another batter struck out, Pinella and Chambliss both hit long drives. The A’s outfielders bobbled one and threw over the head of the cut-off man on the other, so that all three Yankee players scored. Gus hooted and clapped with each hit, and when Chambliss crossed home plate, he jumped up and shouted, “See you later, pitcher!”

Then Gus’s body blocked the TV and his bent-over frame turned toward Rosemarie and those glasses glinted in the light, so that for a moment, she couldn’t see his eyes. He stepped towards her, the moustache coming closer until the bill of his cap bumped her O’s cap and his moustache scratched her skin and she felt his lips on top of hers.

The shock of the kiss silenced both of them. Then Rosemarie shouted, “Out!” She threw off her ball cap and pointed to the door.

“Oh, Rosemarie, it was just a little kiss.”

“Out.” Her arm wavered, but she kept her finger pointed.

That’s right, she heard her mother say. He had no right. Who knows what else he might try.

“I didn’t mean any harm. It was just a kiss.”

She dropped her finger and turned to look out the window.

“Look, I’m sorry. I…”

She pointed again and said, “Leave.”

Gus turned and walked out the door.

On the TV, the A's coach pulled the rookie and signaled to the bullpen for a new pitcher.

Rosemarie flicked off the TV. She gasped so hard, but she couldn't fill her lungs. She headed down the hall—the opposite direction from Gus—past the dining room to the courtyard where a man from West Wing held the door. But too many residents and their families sat in the sun. She wanted privacy. She needed shade.

She turned her chair down the sidewalk, the voices fading behind her. Sunlight flared off the car windows, made her head throb. She wanted her sunglasses. Her ball cap, too. But no way was she going back.

The wheelchair rolled easily through the parking lot, the blacktop radiating like a dark sun. A blue car pulled in and she had to veer to the right to get out of its way. The driver waved, looking at her like, what are you doing out here?

I'm trying to breathe, she thought. Just leave me alone.

Rosemarie nosed the wheelchair through more parked cars to round the building's front corner. She knew the spot she wanted—under the maple tree that reminded her of home, close enough so that she could touch its bark, and right beside the bench where Mother used to sit.

But when Rosemarie saw the tree she stopped. The shady spot was already occupied. Was that Gus? No, please no. *Bees' butts and beetles' bottoms*. She needed her mother now, needed her to go over there and tell Gus to leave her daughter alone.

Gus sat on the bench, his little radio held to his ear. He looked at her and then turned the other way.

Fine. You just sit in that cool spot. My spot.

Rosemarie pushed the joystick forward, rolling her chair down the driveway. She didn't know where she was going. Had never been this far before. Residents like her with "needs" weren't allowed past the maple tree without someone else. But forget all of that now. Maybe she could visit that coffee shop, the one Gladys always talked about. Anywhere but here.

Where driveway met Main Street, Rosemarie stopped. A tractor-trailer blasted its horn. Two kids stared out a station wagon window, their heads turning as they passed. So many moving vehicles just a few feet away.

Sweat seeped into Rosemarie's eyes and soaked through her blouse. Her back stuck to the vinyl seat. A jacked-up car rumbled close, too loud for her ears. She was glad for that moment of pain.

All he did was kiss you, you know. And part of you had wanted that, had wondered what it would be like. You didn't have a stroke. No. Maybe that's a silly fear. Maybe that's your mother's fear. And she's gone now.

So why are you afraid? Because you can't trust this bent-over man with the broken back? Because you can't control your own heart? When the Blue Jays were beating the shit out of the O's—*shit?* Mother clucking her tongue—when the O's were getting walloped, Earl Weaver didn't give up. And Ellie Hendricks did what he was asked to do. And neither of them could control anything, not even that baseball as it left Ellie's grip and spun towards home plate. Especially not that baseball.

Rosemarie's shoulders eased a little and her breathing started to slow. Maybe she should go back.

A car came down the driveway. Rosemarie couldn't see it, but she heard the engine. She pushed the joystick to turn the wheelchair around and get out of the way. But the chair didn't budge. She tried pushing it the other direction. Nothing. That loose cable, again. No, that *damn* loose cable.

Behind her, the car tooted its horn, just a little tap, not too long, but enough to make her jump. She waved her left arm to motion the car around, but the driver didn't move. She pushed the joystick every way. The wheels wouldn't roll, the chair wouldn't budge. Her headache came back. All she could think was her mother's silly saying. *Bees' butts and beetles' bottoms. Bees' butts and beetles' bottoms.* Come, Lord Jesus, don't let me get run over today.

The car finally pulled up beside her, and the passenger, a woman in a pink blouse, rolled down her window. "Are you OK?"

The AC wafted from the car like a cool cloud over Rosemarie. She nodded and smiled. She even waved. No, I'm not OK, but I think I'll just sit out here and bake a little longer and maybe that'll cure me of all silliness forever.

The woman's face was full of doubt and concern. "Do you want us to go back and get someone to help you?"

Rosemarie shook her head. She hated to be rescued, hated so many years of always having to ask for help. Why do it again? Why not just sit here a little while longer?

A man's voice came from behind. "Good afternoon, ma'am," his breathing heavy as he got close. The woman turned, startled. "Thanks for stopping to check, but we'll be all right."

The woman turned her neck even farther to look at Gus, her eyebrows rumped. Then she turned directly to Rosemarie. "Are *you* OK?"

Am I OK? Her head pounded, she could tell her face and arms were already sunburned, and her shitty wheelchair had busted right in the middle of the road—but yes, she was OK. Rosemarie nodded and gave her a thumbs-up. The woman peered once more at Gus before she rolled up her window and the car pulled out onto Main.

"Where the hell you headed?" That gravelly voice.

"O-air."

"No air? Yeah, I know what you mean. This damn humidity sops up all the oxygen." His breathing still deep and coming in short gasps.

She meant *nowhere*, but she let it go.

"How's this Cadillac of yours?"

Rosemarie shook her head.

"That's what I thought." He slowly crouched down beside the chair to face her.

"Do you want me to tinker with it?"

She nodded.

"I'll need to touch the joystick, OK?"

She nodded again.

His hand tried the joystick, and nothing happened. “Battery, I bet,” he mumbled as he shifted around to the back. He jostled her seat as he worked underneath her. “Yep, damn loose connections.” She could hear him fiddling with something. “Try it now.” She touched the joystick and almost ran the chair out into the traffic.

“Whoa, there.” He stood beside her. “How about we turn this buggy around and get out of this heat?”

She pointed to the joystick. “Oo eer.”

He didn’t understand, so she held out her hand. He went to hold hers, but instead, she placed his palm on the lever and made him steer.

“Ah orry,” Rosemarie said, her head jostling over the bumps.

“What’s that?” Another tractor-trailer roared past.

“Ah orry.”

“Sorry? What the hell for?” They moved slowly up the small hill of the driveway. “You know, I bet that game’s still on. What say we go have a look? In the lounge if you want. Maybe those golf-boys will let a lady choose the channel for a change. How’s that sound?”

Rosemarie nodded. She watched his hand on the joystick. She almost reached out to touch it, but then let her own hand fall in her lap.

### CHAPTER III

### CIRCUMSTANCE

Rosemarie sat in the lobby waiting before Joseph finally pulled up at half-past ten. He hugged her and apologized and greeted Nurse Louise and signed the form and got Rosemarie in the car and the old wheelchair in the trunk and off they went, down the driveway and out onto Main, Joseph all chatter about graduation. She patted her purse and decided not to ask about him being late.

She had wanted to go on this trip for a long time. Wanted to go on two daytrips, actually, but wasn't sure she had energy for one, let alone two, so she had to choose: go north over the mountain to Path Valley, where she grew up and spent so many years; or east to Harrisburg, where she went to nursing school. Where she met Hobie. Where she spent the best years of her life.

They were heading east.

"I hate that song, you know?" Joseph hummed the first lines of "Pomp and Circumstance." "I've had to play that thing for six years now, over and over until everyone's filed in, and they made us seniors play it at our own graduation. Then it just sticks in your head for days after. Torture."

Rosemarie smiled but didn't look at him. Joseph liked to face her when he talked, too much so. So she kept her focus ahead as he drove through the streets of row houses and gas stations, the cars parked so close, and the day already growing warm.

Joseph went on about the ceremony, the boring speakers, the party in the school gym for “the class of 1982”—he said this last in a sardonic voice. Rosemarie half listened. She thought about his future, her nephew, this special child. He was going to the local state college in the fall, planning on studying medicine—because of her, she knew. But he was also going to live at home, and this troubled her. What would his future be like if he never moved out, away from his mother? Alice, her sister, was like their mother—too full of a love that wouldn’t let you go. Somehow Rosemarie hoped this trip might help him think of living on his own, or transferring. Maybe if he saw what she had done way back, when she went off to school, a country girl in the big city for the first time—maybe he’d change. So she asked him to take her, not his mother or her friend, Middy, just Joseph.

Plus she enjoyed his company, even if she felt a little guilty about him spending time with her and not out with his friends. She wasn’t sure what he would be doing today if he wasn’t here with her—probably fishing with his best friend, or watching TV with his girlfriend. But no, Rosemarie wasn’t like Alice in her love; she didn’t want to control him, just be with him.

“And big, fat Jessica Stevens tripped in front of the whole crowd when she went up to get her diploma. Everyone laughed. You had to.” He shook his head.

This didn’t sound like Joseph. One time, only four or five years ago, Joseph and his family were visiting when a bird flew into Rosemarie’s closed window and broke its neck. Joseph ran out, found it on the ground, and held it up for everyone inside to see, the

tiny head rolling to the side. He hadn't cried, but she could tell he had been upset. Where did that Joseph go?

Plus she wondered how much bigger Jessica was than Joseph. His belly pushed against the steering wheel, and the remains of a box of donuts lay on the seat between them. When that bird died, he wasn't skinny, but he wasn't fat, either. "Husky," his mother used to call him. He was far past that now.

Joseph saw her looking. "Hey, have a donut. I saved you one."

Rosemarie shook her head and said no thanks.

\* \* \*

They left town, the houses replaced by rows of corn, pointy leaves and stunted stalks, all dried up in the summer drought.

Joseph turned the radio down. "Are you comfy?"

She nodded. That's one of the things Rosemarie liked about Joseph. He could exhaust her sometimes with his chatter and questions, but he wasn't afraid to ask those questions, wasn't afraid to listen to her fumbling through a conversation. Besides, this was the only version of her speech he had ever known, so he could usually understand her, often better than anyone else, including Alice. He could decipher her words, read her face, but he hadn't yet seen her write—no one but the therapist had. Rosemarie never thought her left hand would hold a pen on paper and make anything more than scribble, but she had been practicing, her fingers becoming stronger. A pad and pen waited in her purse.

"When did you move to Harrisburg?" Joseph asked.

“ifty,” she said.

“1950. Did you ever live away from home before then?”

She shook her head no. “Ah wa om-ick.”

“Homesick?”

She nodded.

“I bet so. Harrisburg’s a big city.”

“Ah oved it.”

She repeated herself twice before Joseph asked, “You loved it?”

Rosemarie nodded emphatically.

“Mom always says she had to get married to get indoor plumbing and a phone.

Guess you had to go to college.”

Again, she nodded. Just an outhouse, a hand pump for the well, and a quarter-mile walk to the neighbors for a phone.

“I couldn’t imagine not having a phone.”

Rosemarie stared at him.

“I mean water, sure. A shower, definitely. But a phone, too. Jeez. How did you talk with your friends?”

Rosemarie only shrugged. She wrote letters, when she went away to school. Lots of letters.

Joseph turned onto the entrance ramp, and Rosemarie looked back at old Route 11. “Thought we’d try this new section of the interstate,” Joseph hollered over the roar of the wind. “Get some speed.” The white concrete stretched out before them, wide like the

Conococheague, and Rosemarie felt her head go back as Joseph pressed the accelerator. He let off the gas when he reached fifty-five. “Don’t want another ticket,” he glanced at her. “I’m still paying for the first one.”

A ticket? Joseph? Rosemarie wondered if his parents knew. She doubted it.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye: his easy smile, how focused he was on the road and the dashboard. She had never learned to drive and always feared going fast. Not like her classmate Jeanine, who drove a little convertible. Once, during the summer after her first year, when they both had the day off, Jeanine invited her for a ride. They got out of the city and headed north, the wide Susquehanna beside them, the concrete underneath gently rocking the car. Jeanine had thick black hair, much like Rosemarie’s, but longer, and when she pulled off her scarf, that hair just sailed behind her like a windsock. “This is what it’s like to fly,” she had shouted to Rosemarie, who felt her heart jolt just a little when she saw the speedometer needle touch eighty-five.

“Can we slow down?” she had to shout.

Jeanine pretended to ignore her, so Rosemarie yelled it again, louder. Then, Jeanine took her foot off the accelerator, and the car immediately slowed. She didn’t look across the seat at Rosemarie. At the next intersection, Jeanine turned around and headed back to their dorm. She never invited Rosemarie again.

Why had she always been so afraid, so cautious? Not Jeanine, who drove that car and climbed up on the dormitory roof and dated a different man every month, and who, like Rosemarie, had earned good grades and admittance into a Master’s program. They both wanted to teach nursing. But then the stroke.

Rosemarie looked over at Joseph. “Aster,” she said.

He shook his head, his round cheeks dimpled in a grin. “Say it again.”

She repeated, and then a third time.

“You want to go faster?”

She smiled and nodded.

“Okay!” Joseph floored the gas and the sudden speed pushed them into their seats.

She felt airborne, no tires touching ground, no past dragging behind, no future but this long stretch of road ahead. Just all air and speed and motion—pure motion. She understood Jeanine now, and how Rosemarie had ruined that day.

Joseph touched the brake and they slowed back to the speed limit. “A cop likes to sit on the other side of this hill. He almost got me the last time I came through here.” When they crested the top, another car flew past, and soon a trooper pulled out from the median, the red light circling on his roof, the siren sounding. The police car roared by them, Joseph yelling “Ooowee!” and a mile later, they passed both cars parked on the shoulder, the trooper just putting on his hat as he stepped out.

“That was close. You almost got me in trouble, Aunt Rosemarie.”

She just shook her head.

Hobie never drove fast, and that was one of the things that attracted her to him—his cautiousness, like hers. He preferred walking along the river or across the bridge to the city’s island. Hobie with his long fingers. “Surgeon’s fingers,” he had told her, “one day.”

He had become a surgeon. And he still lived in the city—had a wife and children. So Rosemarie had heard from Middy, her classmate, the one who visited the most, the one who organized their classmates and got the funds to buy her a motorized wheelchair. The one who became a real friend, not a pitying one who visited because of guilt and went away thankful for her own good legs and arm and body. No, Middy just came because she liked Rosemarie. She still lived in the city and had invited them for lunch. But first, Rosemarie wanted to look around and ride along familiar streets.

The interstate angled across the valley so that Blue Mountain slowly came closer. Rosemarie had traveled across that mountain over and over in her head. Her cousin Dottie used to give her rides to school. No interstate back then, just the long curvy road over Round Top, through Blain and over Blue Mountain to come out at Carlisle and then the busy Route 11 to click-click you along to the new Harvey Taylor Bridge and that wide Susquehanna. Over and over she had followed that road in her head for so many years. Ridden it back to school and Hobie and a time before it all changed.

Hobie—what if she saw him today walking the streets? Would she recognize him—hair thinning or gone, glasses maybe? What if he saw her?

Ah, don't be silly, she thought. You won't see him. And if you do, he wouldn't recognize you with your bloated legs and wobbly head and body stuck in a wheelchair. And in that moment, she realized what she wanted, what she needed to see one last time. It wasn't Hobie or Harrisburg. No, she needed to see their bench. Hobie and Rosemarie's bench, where they first kissed on a bitter cold January evening, the river frozen, the sun setting in a hard, red line. And as winter turned to spring, the bench was where they

always ended up talking until five minutes before curfew, the river a streak of silver in the dusk sky. They had to run the two blocks to get to her dorm, just as the house-mother was about to lock the door. And later still, the bench where Hobie carved their initials—R.B.+H.M. with a heart around it. She had watched those long fingers hold the knife, forgotten to look out for anyone approaching, as he told her, but instead had become so entranced by how quickly he worked, how smoothly the knife cut, that there it was, a lopsided heart, when Hobie, not Rosemarie, spotted a stranger coming toward them and Hobie turned to cover his artwork with his back, hide the knife under his thigh. The stranger just nodded as he walked by, and Rosemarie couldn't tell if he had seen or not. Hobie scolded her, but she didn't care. She ran her finger over that heart and knew she'd be with him forever.

Such vain dreams.

That bench. She wanted to see that bench.

\* \* \*

Joseph sang along to a song on the radio, slower than the last one, and again, Rosemarie could only understand a few lines, "Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind." She loved Joseph's voice, a rich tenor good enough to earn him a spot in the state choir. And she liked this song's melody, the lack of noise. She wanted to tell Joseph, but she knew her effort and his effort and the time both efforts took would ruin the moment, so she just listened.

At the second verse, Joseph yelled, "Sing along, Aunt Rosemarie!"

She shook her head.

“Come on, just hum the tune.”

No, don't do this.

“Oh, just try.”

Please, no.

The chorus picked up, and Joseph sang loudly while looking at her, his face so sweet and earnest. She tried to hum and something came out, scratchy, but whole.

“That's right. I heard that.”

She tried again, stringing a few more notes together. In all these years since her stroke, she had listened to songs on the radio, heard her mother sing in the kitchen, but had never tried to sing along...and she didn't know why. Growing up, she sang in church and the school choir, always a quiet alto next to Alice's loud soprano. Why had she never tried?

The notes vibrated in her chest. The words didn't matter, she could just hum the tune, a simple one, nice and slow.

“Here comes the best part, the harmony,” Joseph yelled quickly. “You keep humming the melody and I'll back you up.”

She heard both lines, heard that other part, the one she used to sing, and for a moment her voice wavered between. Oh, it's been too long. But Joseph kept singing, moving his hand to the beat, urging, so she tried again, and on the second line, she heard. Her voice. It worked. It didn't need letters or syllables. The sound wasn't strong, and it hurt her throat, but she was humming. Really humming.

When it ended, Joseph whooped and beat the car's ceiling. "That was great! We need to do that again." He started turning knobs, searching the radio for other stations, other songs. Rosemarie smiled, but she was hot, her face flushed. She wanted to feel that wind. Joseph had his window rolled down, so she wanted hers all the way down, too. She tried the handle with her good hand, but she couldn't reach it, her belt too tight. She had to tap Joseph to get his attention.

"Winow own." She pointed.

He understood the second time. She expected him to pull over, but instead he reached across the seat and her body and started cranking the handle. He could barely reach it, his right arm across her knees, his left hand still on the wheel, his belly squishing the donut box. His head bobbed below the level of the dashboard. Rosemarie looked up to see their car drifting onto the wide shoulder. Joseph kept turning the handle, cranking it round and round. The new air blasted her face.

"Op!" she tried to yell over the roar of the wind.

"I almost got it."

"O! Op! Ow!" She made a fist and beat on his back, her knuckles suddenly hurting from pounding so hard. Ahead, the road narrowed, the shoulder disappeared. A bridge. She felt like she was being aimed for the guardrail. She let out a scream.

"There," he said and sat back straight to suddenly see where he was steering.

"Shit!" He swerved to the left and the bridge's side rail slipped past her, just inches from her open window. The car jerked from side-to-side, the steering wheel gripped in his

hands, but he held on, tapped the brake until he gained control. Another car passed, hugging the left shoulder, the driver yelling at them.

“Damn, Auntie. Sorry about that.”

She had never heard Joseph swear before. Damn Auntie indeed, for she was the cause of them just about dying—both of them.

Joseph blew out a big breath. “That’s the second time this morning you almost got me in trouble.” He wiped one palm on his pants, then the other. He turned off the radio, and for a while, they rode in silence.

\* \* \*

They exited the interstate at Camp Hill, and as the road angled down toward the river, she glimpsed the state capital through the trees. They had to wait through several red lights, and the lack of wind and the sudden heat made her joints ache.

“Sorry, but my AC’s busted,” Joseph said. Sweat soaked his underarms in dark moons. He turned the fan on high, but it only blasted more hot air. The heat made it hard to breathe, and sweat seeped into Rosemarie’s eyes. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She hadn’t sweated this much since she lived on the farm.

At last she saw the Harvey Taylor Bridge with its massive stone piers. She remembered all the ice those pillars caught during spring thaw. A little of that ice sounded good right now.

The Susquehanna appeared below, so wide and calm. Pigeons flew in circles above the bridge and a heron flapped slow and easy along the water’s surface. Rosemarie wanted Joseph to drive slowly so she could see the islands and watch the ripples. “Lo,”

she said, but he gunned it, almost hitting the car ahead. “No, lo.” She tried to draw out the word and made a motion with her good hand, but the car was already most of the way across the bridge.

“You meant slow?”

She nodded.

“I thought you were afraid of the water. I thought you said *go*. Well, we’ll park somewhere and get a better look at the river, OK? Now, you just point where you want me to turn and we’ll drive around for a little first.”

At the end of the bridge, Rosemarie wanted Joseph to turn right onto Front Street, so she could look for her dormitory, the hospital, the bench, but the light was green and Joseph didn’t see her finger pointing in time, so they went straight.

“Sorry, Aunt Rosemarie,” he said again. “I’m not used to this city traffic.”

Rosemarie kept her gaze out the side window.

At the next intersection, he made sure to look for her finger earlier, so they made the right turn onto Third with no problems. She wanted to see the downtown. Loew’s Theatre was gone, where Hobie had taken her to see *Roman Holiday*. But there was Pomeroy’s. The department store still had the big scrolled sign of its name on the front, though the windows looked empty, only a few people near the entrance. That’s where she and Vivian, her roommate, went to buy Rosemarie’s maid-of-honor dress, summer of 1953, right after graduation. It seemed all of her classmates suddenly got married, the nursing school prohibitions finally gone, secret engagements no longer secret. Everyone had been so afraid of what happened to Phyllis Thompson, expelled because one of the

teachers saw her showing off her ring. No engagements, no marriages, and definitely no pregnancies—only books and labs and good grades.

That morning, she and Vivian had walked the five blocks arm-in-arm, bickering. (“What color do you want?” “I don’t care. I want you to be able to wear this after the wedding.” “But it’s your wedding. What color do you want me to wear?” “I don’t care.”) Eventually they settled on a soft mint green. Rosemarie remembered her cheeks had hurt from smiling as she stood on the dais and the tailor measured and pinned and told her to hold her arms up and turn this way and that, all the time her best friend watching, glowing. What a different world that had been, when Rosemarie had dreamed of walking down the aisle in her own wedding, her father beside her, the preacher waiting near the altar, Vivian, her maid of honor on one side, Hobie on the other.

Joseph drove the car around several blocks, both of them craning to take in the sky scrapers and the golden-domed capital. Finally, they made it back to the river where he turned left on Front Street with buildings on one side, the river on the other. The bench would be first, on the right; the hospital and her old dorm on the left. 107 Front Street—how many times had she written that as the return address on letters home?

There was the Episcopal Church that she went to one time with Nancy. Nancy lived down the hall and had grown up just a few blocks away. Rosemarie never told anyone but Vivian that it was her first time living with indoor plumbing. Around Nancy and the other city girls, Rosemarie felt so ashamed of her home, the farm, the poverty.

Rosemarie turned as they passed a bench, but she couldn’t tell if that was the one—a huge oak used to shade it. This bench only had a small weeping willow.

The dormitory would be coming up in two blocks. Rosemarie hoped they could find a parking spot so she could just look for a bit, admire the arched windows and brown stones. Their dormitory had once been a mansion that the hospital bought and converted into tiny little rooms. She and Vivian got stuck on the top floor—what used to be the attic. No elevator, three flights of stairs, and no air conditioning. For the first month, Rosemarie hit her head on the slanted ceiling every time she woke. Their one window opened to the fire escape for the floor, which meant it also was the only access to the roof. Jeanine and Nancy and their buddies would knock on their door and politely invite them along as they traipsed through the room, out the window, onto the fire escape, and then up onto the roof. Vivian usually headed to the lounge, saying, “I don’t want to be here when they slide off.” Rosemarie watched their bobby-socked feet disappear as they climbed over the gutter. They were crazy, she told them, but they just went on without her. She heard their penny loafers tapping on the slick tin, heard them laughing and yelling and clapping to hear the sounds echo back from the nearby office building.

When they climbed back through her window, they told her how beautiful the river was from so high, and how ideal the roof would be for sunbathing. They would be back, they promised, and she would be more than welcome to come along. But they all knew Rosemarie would never go on the roof.

Joseph tried to drive slowly in all the traffic. They passed the house of William Maclay, one of Pennsylvania’s first senators. Rosemarie used to rub the house’s white stones those first months when she was the most homesick, thinking that if these stones survived in this place for so long, she could too for just a few years.

Behind the house, though, stood a new high-rise she didn't recognize. And there was another massive office building right there on Front Street, and another, and another. Where was the old Executive Mansion with its fancy columns and massive doors? Surely they didn't tear *that* down. She wanted Joseph to stop the car, but the city had changed all the parking spots along Front into a driving lane, three lanes of traffic just pushing them forward. They had to keep moving. No stopping, no reminiscing, no registering of so many changes...no, none of that, not here, anyway...but there was another new high-rise...Middy had warned her that so much had changed in thirty years, but she hadn't given details...no, Rosemarie had expected nothing like this—everything different, everyone just moving forward, no one looking around, no one but her and Joseph.

Ahead on the right, Rosemarie saw City Island and the Market Street Bridge, the one she and Hobie used to walk across to explore the island, listen for owls at night, kiss in the abandoned ballpark.

Joseph and Rosemarie passed the blue sign for the hospital, its arrow pointing to the left. Rosemarie kept looking, looking for the dormitory...but it wasn't there. The view of the river was the right one, with that railroad bridge downstream, but back to her left, nothing was familiar, the dormitory gone, replaced by the window-glare of a new hospital building at least ten-stories tall.

"Where should I go?" Joseph asked. Front Street ended with signs for an interstate ahead. She pointed to the left, where Paxton Street connected to Second to loop around the hospital. Joseph swung the car across the middle lane and into the left, just missing

another car that blasted its horn. Joseph gave a feeble wave to the angry driver.

Rosemarie kept looking at the hospital.

At the next light, she pointed left and made a circle in the air with her finger.

“You want to go around again?”

She nodded. The second time around the hospital complex was no better. Joseph steered into a smaller side street, but realized at the last moment that he had turned the wrong way into a one-way, so he pulled into a parking lot and turned around. Rosemarie thought she recognized one of the hospital buildings on the other side of a parking deck, but she wasn't sure, and neither of them knew how to get closer. She motioned for Joseph to head towards Second Street once more. She had had enough hospital looking. The river was still there, though, and that bench. So around they went again, and this time they found a parking spot on a side street. Joseph pulled in and they both sat in stunned silence for a moment.

“It would take me a while to get used to this city driving,” he said. He sagged against his door and stared ahead.

Rosemarie wanted to say she didn't like it either, but she just shook her head and asked for some water, which he reached for from the back seat along with a candy bar. They both took drinks from the same cup, but she said no to part of the candy.

“Time to get out and look at the river?” Joseph asked.

Rosemarie nodded and waited, watching the heat shimmer on the pavement. Out on Front Street, cars and trucks sped so fast that the tree branches twisted and showed the undersides of leaves. But here on the side street, no air moved. She felt like an overripe

plum ready to fall, skin stretched, the flies hovering nearby. Nothing to hold onto.

Nothing the same.

The car bounced as Joseph opened the trunk and hauled out her old wheelchair. She watched him in the side-view mirror, his round face turning red, his glasses sliding down his nose. Why couldn't he just get it assembled so she could get out of this oven? Rosemarie had watched the aides put the chair together back at the home, slipping the foot rests easily in place, mashing down the brake. She heard him swear, saw him wipe his forehead. She needed air, young man, hurry it up. At least come open this door. But he kept clinking metal parts, bending over his big belly.

When he rolled the chair to her door, she saw the foot rests were switched—they stuck out to the sides. They would do nothing but get in the way. And she needed them, otherwise her puffed up feet would drag on the ground. She pointed, tried to explain.

“I tried, Auntie.”

“Ry a-ain.” It hurt to breathe, to push the words out. She had never felt this frustrated with Joseph, never this short. “Ry a-ain,” she said louder. Switch the foot pedals, can't you see?

Joseph knelt on the sidewalk, his hands fumbling. He looked so helpless, a foot rest in his hand. Something broke in Rosemarie. She pointed to the metal cylinder. She yelled, “AIR,” and he knew she meant *there* where he finally slid the part into place, and then the other one slid in quickly, too.

He apologized, unbuckled her seatbelt, lifted her gently, and settled her into the wheelchair. Before she could slide down, Joseph had the belt around her waist and

fastened. He handed her her purse, and Rosemarie's breathing slowed back to normal as they headed toward the river and the bench.

They waited for the light, car exhaust thick around them, before crossing Front Street, where they found a paved walking path, the shade of young trees, the river below. She pointed to the right, away from the hospital. If she remembered, the bench was upriver towards City Island. But she couldn't be sure.

Joseph was silent now as he pushed her along from shade to sun to shade, past one bench. Then another. Then another. Each bench was made of cement, solid, no wood. Not at all what she remembered.

Near the Market Street Bridge, Joseph stopped at a concrete monument, plain white with bars and numbers on one side. Arrows with years indicated flood crests. They both had to look up at the highest, 1972, when the river was over thirty-three feet deep.

Joseph let out a low whistle. "Imagine how high that must've been." He stepped beside her and started pointing and moving in a slow circle. "It would've covered the street, for sure. Probably the first floors of all those buildings, and it'd come close to covering that bridge. Man-oh-man."

Rosemarie stared at the marker. How stupid she felt. Of course Hurricane Agnes would've taken away the bench and that giant oak. She had watched the news coverage on her little black-and-white, the boats floating down these streets. What a fool she had been, what a fool. For once she was glad she could hardly speak, that she hadn't told Joseph or anyone about the bench.

But what had she expected—Hobie to be sitting on their bench waiting for her?  
What an utter, utter fool.

She closed her eyes and listened to the traffic and the faint *ssshing* of the water below.

“Where to now, Aunt Rosemarie?” Joseph calling her back. Joseph looking at her closely, worry on his face. Joseph so small even with that belly.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Why id you augh?” Rosemarie asked, her voice tired, quieter, making Joseph lean close for her to repeat it again.

“Laugh at what?” He stood with the sun behind him, so that she saw only his silhouette.

“Essica.”

He stepped back. “You mean last night at graduation? When Jessica tripped?”

Rosemarie nodded.

“I don’t know. It was funny. Everyone laughed.”

“Don’t.”

“OK, Auntie.” His shoulders slumped.

She wanted to say more, that it wasn’t like him, but this felt new, like she was being Alice, his mom, and not his doting aunt. Somehow she wanted to be both. She stayed quiet and pointed back down the path they had come. Joseph steered her chair, and she felt his weight pushing her forward. She remembered her purse, the gift.

At the first shaded bench they came to, she motioned for him to stop. He maneuvered her chair so that they sat side-by-side, him on the bench, her in her chair. The river glistened with sun, hurt her eyes, but the wind carried the smell of it—cleaner than all that street exhaust, but also a little rank, like a dead fish floated in the shallows. That smell from her college days when she needed to hear the wind off this water—a sound that used to quiet her when all the chemistry and anatomy books filled her head too full. Just walk to the river and sit and be still.

Rosemarie fumbled with her purse until she pulled out the envelope and handed it to Joseph.

“What’s this?”

Rosemarie didn’t answer, just pointed.

He held it a long time, studying the outside, not attempting to open it. His name. She had practiced and practiced until it finally became legible, the hand-writing careful and slanted this way and that, like a child’s, but it was his name.

“You wrote this.” It wasn’t a question, but it wasn’t really a statement either. “I mean, you wrote my name, Aunt Rosemarie?”

She grinned and nodded and pointed again, for him to open it. He did, carefully, not wanting to rip her work. The fifty-dollar bill fell out and he grabbed it and hugged her and thanked her. Then he read the card, the *Congratulations and Love, Aunt Rosemarie*, again in her hand.

“When did you learn to write? I mean, I know you wrote before, but now, with your left hand, you know?”

She pulled the pad and pen from her purse and wrote *three months*.

“Let me try.” Joseph held the pen in his left hand and his scribble looked something like a name. “That’s supposed to be *Aunt Rosemarie*. Not sure anyone could make it out. Not sure *I* can read it.” He handed the pen and pad back. “You’re amazing, Auntie.

But she wasn’t done. And she didn’t know how to say or write what else was on her mind. So she tried the pen. It took her a long time, Joseph watching, then looking out at the river. Finally, she handed him the paper.

“*I moved away from home to go to school,*” he read aloud. “*You can too.*” He looked away from her, back toward the direction of the car. He didn’t speak.

Rosemarie waited. She was afraid she had written too much. But if she didn’t, she feared he might never climb on a roof, never do anything that wasn’t safe. Still, she waited for him to say something. What if he didn’t? What if he just pushed her back to the car and they headed on? Surely he wouldn’t, but still, Joseph didn’t speak. He pulled another candy bar from his shirt pocket, slowly opened it, and started eating. This time, he didn’t offer her any.

“What if I don’t want to?”

Rosemarie breathed out a little relief, and then wrote, *You have to sometime. Like now*. She wanted to tell him about his grandmother, the person she had loved the most in this world, even, she now realized, more than Hobie. Of how Mother loved her so much, too much, and how they both didn’t want Rosemarie to move away that first year of nursing school. They had no choice, though. Those were the circumstances, of going to

school, of growing up, of love. She wanted to say how much his own mom was like Mother, that she too needed to learn to love in a different way, like Mother eventually did, partly anyway.

Joseph kept eating and looking the other way. “What if they laugh at me?”

She thought she heard a snuffle as she wrote more. *You pick yourself up and go on, like that girl. You do your best. You find other friends. You sing, Joseph, you sing.*

While she wrote, he got up and threw the candy wrapper in a trashcan and pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose. She was glad when he sat back beside her.

After he read her words, he nodded and handed the pad back. She wanted to reach out for his hand, but she didn’t know what he would do, so she just watched out of the corner of her eye. He kept looking out at the river. Finally he said, “You know why I was late picking you up?”

She shook her head.

“Your friend, Gus, stopped me out in the parking lot. Gave me this, my graduation gift.” From his back pocket, Joseph pulled out a paper bag that held a flask. “He made me open it, and then he said it’s only right to test a new bottle with a friend, so we both took a swig right there in broad daylight. He swore a lot. Then he said it was good whiskey, best he could find.” Joseph rested the bottle on the bench between them. “I don’t know, Auntie. I never had this stuff before, but it felt like my throat was on fire.”

For a moment Rosemarie wanted to swear at Gus—that scoundrel. That bent-over little devil corrupting her nephew. But then she thought about what she had just told

Joseph. If he moved to a dorm, he'd be drinking eventually. Maybe Gus was right. Oh, but Alice would be so mad.

Rosemarie reached over and tapped the lid, and Joseph understood. He unscrewed it and held it out to her. She didn't trust her grip, so she held onto his wrist and guided it to her lips. The whiskey hit the back of her throat and made her cough, and Joseph used his handkerchief to dab at what dribbled down her chin. Then she pointed to the bottle and to him, and Joseph drank and coughed and drank again and leaned over to give Rosemarie another sip that felt good as it burned all the way down.

## CHAPTER IV

### O'S

Gus sat on the bench at the back of the Nursing Home property, chewing his cigar and resting his hands on his cane. Far across the field, kids wore bright red caps and slapped their mitts; the pitcher scuffed the dirt and wound up. When the batter made contact, the ball flew high and long, the ping of the aluminum taking a second or two to reach Gus while the outfielder chased down the fly. The leftfielder was the closest, the quickest, and the one that made him remember coaching Ralph so many years ago. Too many damn years.

The scrapper caught the fly and hurled it back to the pitcher. “That a boy!” Gus yelled across the stream and wide stretch of bottom land. The boy surprised him and waved, so he clapped and yelled again. “That a boy!” Scrapper crouched forward, hands on knees, waiting for the next batter.

This bench was the only place Gus could get away from all the perfumy muck the nurses used to cover the other smells that all the old farts farted. And it was the only place he could smoke his cigar and not get nagged, the only place he could find some damn peace and quiet. He'd like a drink—god, every hour of every day he got thirsty—but not anymore. That all stopped years ago, the neuropathy so bad he couldn't feel his feet, couldn't walk. He fell so damn much that Ralph and the doctor said enough. It took three years of falling and drinking and breaking a wrist and falling some more before he

gave in. Be dry and walk with a cane or never walk again. That's what the doctor said. On good days, that's what Gus told himself.

And on good days, he had to admit that the Home was a good move, even with the crowded halls, the buzzing lights, the moaning roommate and his goddamn stench, even with all that. But he only admitted this to himself, no one else, and only now after a year of not having to cook for himself or do laundry or clean his room. A year of living dry. Ralph, his son, was still the biggest bastard in the world to cart off his old man, sell the house, and park Gus's car in his own garage. It was like Ralph had forgotten his mother, Iris, rest her soul—forgotten that his own father had lived in that house for forty-five years. The fucker'd learn whenever he read the will.

Across the stream, the next batter struck out to end the inning, and Scrapper sprinted as fast as he could across the infield and into the dugout. To be so damn young again.

Young as Rosemarie, all caged up in that busted body and only now turning fifty to his almost-seventy. Hell, she wasn't much older than Ralph. What was this old man doing chasing a younger woman? Gus snorted at the idea of chasing. Like she could run with those swollen, worthless legs and only one half-good arm. Like *he* could run with his busted back and feet that went numb if he stood for more than a few minutes. No, he wasn't chasing, and she wasn't running, or asking for pity, either.

But he loved her. What a goddamn surprise. He was getting to be such a soft-ass in his old age. Fifty years ago—hell, twenty years ago—he'd've never spent five minutes with a cripple girl, let alone confess his love for her, especially if she couldn't put out,

refused to, about had a stroke when he suggested they go to her room when her roommate was somewhere else. No, just let him hold her hand and get that smile beamed right at him, and he'd be happy, even if he was sober. Pathetic, he knew, but oh well.

And she had a college degree next to his barely graduating from high school. Shit, she almost had her master's. He'd had a master's, for sure. A master's in climbing ladders, painting trim, getting out of bed every goddamn morning to hustle jobs and feed the family and put his son through school so Ralph could sell insurance and send his pop to the old folk's home. Damn it all anyway. Yet Rosemarie didn't seem to mind being with him.

Gus pulled out his wallet, thumbed the slot where his license used to be, and checked his Yankee's schedule. "Absolute Fucking-A," he muttered. He had remembered right. "Perfect." He finally knew what he could do for Rosemarie's birthday. He spit the tip of his cigar into the stream ("Swallow that, fish.") and headed in to supper.

That evening, Gus walked beside Rosemarie as she maneuvered her wheelchair through the halls. "I need you to do me a favor. Could you be in your *old* wheelchair tomorrow? Think you could handle that?" He chewed his mustache and waited. She kept moving. He knew how much she hated that old chair.

"I got a surprise planned for your birthday, you know? But it doesn't include that big chair—it'll just get in the way. Can you break loose from it for a day?"

She stopped and faced him.

Those eyes, those goddamn eyes—he could drown in those pools of blue.

Rosemarie smiled that lopsided grin.

At her door, he bent to kiss her cheek and say good night. “Be ready to go after breakfast, about ten o’clock. And wear your O’s cap. You’ll need it.”

\*

\*

\*

The next morning, Gus sat in a taxi on the other side of town, looking at his son’s house. The two-story white columns framing the front door. The giant potted plants. The four-car garage in the back. Such a long way from the little bungalow he grew up in. And what thanks did Gus get? A kick in the ass, thank you very much.

Gus told the driver to wait. He could leave once he saw the red Cadillac pulling out.

Gus closed the car door quietly, pulled his ball cap down low, and fingered the key in his pocket. Ralph should be at work, Lori, his wife, too. That just left the babysitter and Cody, his grandson.

A clinking sound came from behind the house as Gus kept moving up the little hill, staying along the side of the yard. At the house corner, he saw Cody throwing rocks into a can. He wore a Yankee’s cap, of course, but backwards, the bill riding his neck.

If Gus waited too long for the boy to go inside, the taxi would leave and Gus would be stranded. Best to get the boy on his side. “Hey Cody.” Gus tried to keep his voice low.

“Grandpa! What are you doing here?”

“Ssh. Come here.”

Cody ran and hugged him. He was ten, still young enough to want to hold Gus's hand, yet old enough to know things. And like Ralph, he had Iris's high forehead and dark hair.

Cody said the babysitter was inside watching TV, like Gus had hoped.

"Listen, I'm taking the car for a little spin. Don't tell your Mom or Pop, OK?"

"Can I come?"

Of course, he'd want that. Jesus. Gus knew the hell he'd catch, but then he remembered the house and car no longer his, and all the good times he used to have with Cody, before the accident, before he got shut away from this is only grandchild.

"Well, why not?"

Cody jumped and started shouting, but Gus grabbed his shoulder and pointed to the house. "Let's leave a note for the sitter, OK?"

In the garage, Gus found his cherry red 1959 El Dorado. His son was still a bastard, but maybe not yet the biggest one in the world. He'd earn that title if he ever sold the car.

Cody helped pull off the tarp, the red shiny as it was when Gus and Ralph finished painting it, the father-son project he tried to stay sober through years ago, back when Ralph was in junior high. Gus ran his hand over the tail fin, along the roof, and over the hood. The battery cranked and the big V8 hummed so low and smooth.

Cody scribbled a note and stuck it in the backdoor. Then the two of them pulled out of the garage and onto the street, heading for the Home. Gus guessed he might have an hour before the babysitter panicked and called Ralph. He hoped that was enough.

\*

\*

\*

At the Home, Gus pushed Rosemarie toward the main door, her fuzzy black hair sticking out from under her O's cap. Cody walked beside him, a little behind. He had never met Rosemarie, didn't want to shake her hand when Gus introduced them to each other.

"What's wrong with her?" Cody whispered as they moved down the hall.

"Not a thing. She just had a stroke a while back, but she's my best friend, so you treat her right."

The boy stared.

"And don't stare. She's not going to hurt you."

At the front desk, Gus leaned on the counter and said, "We're taking this young lady out for a walk to celebrate her birthday, OK?" The nurse said fine and handed him a form to sign. Then he wheeled Rosemarie out the door and into the bright summer sun.

"Easy as peach pits," he whispered in her ear.

"Where oo?"

"You'll see, just you wait."

The sun made the El Dorado sparkle. God, how long had it been since he'd had it out for a cruise? Gus steered Rosemarie through the parking lot, her head bobbing over the bumpy pavement. They stopped beside the Cadillac.

"Cody and I want to take you on a birthday cruise," Gus said. "If you want, we can even put the top down."

Rosemarie reached out and touched one of the taillights that stood high like a fin. Then from her purse, she pulled out a notepad and pencil. The pad kept slipping off her lap, so Gus held it on the armrest while Cody watched, his mouth open.

Rosemarie wrote: *How did you get it here?*

“How else? I drove,” Gus said.

More scribbling. *Your license?*

Damn. She remembered. Best not lie. “Who needs a license?” He walked around buffing the hood with his sleeve. “Besides, I’m sober now.” He opened the passenger door. “Come, my lady. Let me take you for a ride in my chariot.”

They waited, Cody’s eyes moving from Gus to Rosemarie and back.

Gus hoped he had the strength to lift her into the car—surely he did, little thing like her. He focused on her face, those blue eyes. Don’t look away, he kept saying to himself. Come on, Rosemarie, this will be good. We’ll have some fun. Trust me.

For a long time, Rosemarie said nothing. Then, finally, she asked, “Where oo?”

“Ah, you expect us to ruin a birthday surprise? Forget that. You’ll find out soon enough, won’t she, Cody?” He wheeled her close to the door and unbuckled her strap and lifted her in.

Cody slid in behind the steering wheel and pretended to drive. “Can I, can I?”

Gus told him not yet, he’d be sixteen soon enough. “Now, you can sit upfront between us, or in the back.”

Cody climbed into the rear seat.

“You buckled in?” Gus said to the rearview mirror.

Cody said yes and filled the car with talk of all the Yankees he hoped to see—Guidry and Bucky Dent and, of course, Reggie Jackson. Gus had told him earlier not to say anything about where they were going, but the boy couldn't stop. Gus kept his eyes forward. He felt Rosemarie's eyes on him, but he didn't look. She was in the car. That was enough for now.

He drove below the speed limit and left plenty of room between the El Dorado and the car ahead. No cops in the rearview. No silver BMW, either—Ralph's car. Gus wondered how long it would take before Ralph found out, before Lori demanded Gus die in jail like she did the last time.

As they drove, Cody counted tractor-trailers, counted birds, counted bridges, counted any goddamn thing. His ears stuck out under his Yankee's cap, his left hand hidden in his ball glove. The bridge of his nose had that scar and slight crook.

It had been so long since Gus had been sober *and* behind the wheel that he felt like a young man again, sixteen and his driver's license just minted and the world new. He tapped the steering wheel with his thumbs. Baltimore was still the closest and best place to see his team. Like it or not, O's fans. Just watch me and my boy sit in our blue caps and holler.

At the Maryland border, Rosemarie asked, "How's ur on?"

Gus leaned close to her, and she had to repeat twice.

"My son? Ralph's all right, I guess. The best thing about him is he looks like his mother, God rest her soul."

"Wha was she ike?"

“She was a saint. I think about all the crap I put her through with all my drinking, and damn, if she never left me.” Why hold on to that lie? he wondered. Why not just fess up? She did leave you that last year, and then she went and died before you could make it up to her.

“Why u ate him?”

“Who, Ralph?”

She nodded.

“He put me in the Home. Against my will. That’s why.”

“So?”

They rode in silence for a long while.

\*

\*

\*

At the ballpark, heat waves shimmered above the parking lot. “Look at all of these cars,” Gus said as he maneuvered the El Dorado. He wanted to park way out to avoid someone scraping a door on the Cadillac, but he settled for close, given he’d have to push Rosemarie and make it to some place to rest before his legs and feet grew too numb. “We’re even early. I expected a crowd, but Jesus, not this.”

Cody helped him get the chair out of the trunk, but still they hooked a wheel on the edge, making Gus’s arms tremble. Used to be he threw his ladders up on top of the pickup, slung around five-gallon paint cans. He hated growing old.

After he bought tickets, Gus saw that Rosemarie’s face was flush and her breathing shallow. “How about I find us some shade and something to drink?” Her head

bobbled like a doll's as he pushed her over the bumps. He needed to sit, too. Cody trailed behind. "Come on, kid. Stick close."

Gus pulled down his Yankee's cap as they approached the cops at the entrance. Surely Ralph had no notion of where they were, and no one at the Nursing Home would figure this out. They might be missing, but what could they do to him at the Home? Take away his license? Ha! Kick him out? Maybe. And what would Ralph do—sell the car? Take away Cody? He'd have to deal with that later.

The more Gus thought about it, the more he liked the idea of Ralph having to leave that office to drive all the way to Baltimore to retrieve them. He might even catch the end of the game, but he'd be too pissed for that. No, better that no one finds out, no one at all, if that's even fucking possible. Better some other time they come down here with Ralph driving, a father-son-grandson shindig. Hell, better that Ralph drive him and this lovely lady down here together. He probably would've done that today, Gus realized, but too late for that now.

One of the cops, a black man with a wide forehead and graying hair, stared at Gus.

Be nice to me, asshole. It's this lady's birthday, for Christ's sake.

The cop took a few steps toward them. He didn't smile.

"Howdy," Gus said.

The officer nodded and asked, "What's a Yankee doing pushing this lovely O's fan around?" Then he grinned.

Gus let out a big breath. He listened as the cop pointed them toward the ramp that Gus had missed.

A moment later, as he and Cody pushed her up the concrete entrance, he heard Rosemarie say something. He guessed it was “That was close,” but he wasn’t sure.

\* \* \*

Inside the stadium, Gus felt the relief of the cool darkness and saw it on Rosemarie’s face. Cody turned quiet, awed by the crowd and high-ceiling catacombs. Gus found a stand where he bought lemonades and hotdogs for the three of them, and a caramel apple for the boy. Then they joined the throng and found their gate.

From the tunnel, the field sparkled. Even with sunglasses, the light hurt. As they moved through the passageway, all sound and light intensified. But then they were in the open again, sound no longer funneled, the light diffused, but the heat notched back up twenty degrees.

The stadium spread out before them. Rows and rows of chairs all facing the chalked diamond and the smoothed dirt with that little mountain in the center. Gus tried to imagine never having seen this before. How Rosemarie had listened to games for years on that tiny radio or watched on that puny black-and-white. How she could’ve never imagined the size of this place, this crowd, the noise. She saw him watching her and gave him that lopsided grin. Gus wanted to clap and shout, he was so happy.

Gus eased her to their spot close to third base, with a good view of the whole field. He set the wheelchair’s brakes, sat beside her, and ate his hotdog in three bites.

Cody stood the whole time, staring at the players warming up. Ketchup slid off of his hot dog onto his shirt.

Gus noticed Rosemarie hadn't touched her hotdog. "Need some help with that?" He gently put the sandwich to her mouth, and she bit off a small bite. As he leaned to give her another bite, she said, "Ot."

"Oh. Sorry. Mine was just right."

"No. Ee." She touched her finger to her chest and looked up at the sun.

"Yeah, I see what you mean." He put the hotdog down in her lap. "You watch her, Cody, and don't leave. I'll be right back." Then he hurried away.

When Gus returned, he said the guy selling Orioles' gear heard it was supposed to be one of the hottest days on record. Gus opened an umbrella—they only had black and orange ones, no blue and white—and tucked it into her chair.

The players lined up along the baselines and took off their caps. Everyone but Rosemarie stood for the Star-Spangled Banner. Even though he expected it, Gus was jolted on the very first word when the whole stadium yelled "O!" Near the end of the anthem, Gus mouthed, "Here it comes." All three of them yelled "O!" the second time, even Gus.

When the crowd sat back down, Jim Palmer walked to the mound, then faced home plate. Gus leaned over to Rosemarie. "Don't drool too much and make me jealous, now." She waved him away. The first pitch popped in Dempsey's glove, and the ump hollered strike.

"Come on, boys," Cody yelled, slapping his mitt.

“Come on, boys,” Gus yelled too. Most of the Oriole’s fans ignored them, but a man with a tub-sized belly muttered, “Ah, shut up.” He sat directly behind them, and some of his popcorn spilled down the back of Gus’s shirt. Gus turned and glared, but the man rested the bucket of popcorn on his belly, blocking his view of Gus. When Yankee side retired, the stadium organ played those steady, building scales.

In the second, Reggie Jackson came up to bat, Palmer’s old teammate. On the very first pitch he hit a solo homerun over the right field wall. Gus and Cody whooped and hollered over the other fans who booed. Tub-Belly yelled, “Traitor!” When Jackson rounded third, he raised his hand, a salute to Gus and Cody, his only fans in the whole park, it seemed.

Reggie stomped his foot on home plate, and Gus sat back down, still clapping. “That was great, wasn’t it?” He nudged Rosemarie with his elbow. “You wait. You’ll be owing me some money pretty soon.” He offered her a sip of Coke which went down the wrong way and Rosemarie coughed and coughed, her whole body shaking. Gus put his hand on her forehead and with his other he rubbed her back.

She motioned for another sip.

“You sure? Don’t choke on me like that.”

She nodded.

“Hey, we’re sharing, remember? I might have to get my own.”

She rested her head and watched Gus finish the drink. Then she reached into the sunlight, startling him. His hand felt sweaty and rough against hers.

\*

\*

\*

Tub-Belly finished his popcorn, and Gus saw the oriole on his shirt stretched so wide it looked like a turkey. Whenever the O's got a runner on base, the big man would yell, "There he *goes!*" so loud Gus spilt his drink the first time. Tub-Belly ignored him when he turned to look, kept his focus on the game so he could time his yell. He'd wait as the Yankee's pitcher wound up, looked to first to check the runner, and then just as he lifted his leg, Tub-Belly yelled, "There he *goes!*" And the "goes" had all these weird sounds, the *g* getting sucked in at the same time the rest of the word got vomited out. The man spit out more than just those words; Gus saw a drop of saliva make rings in his Coke. He thought about throwing it in Tub-Belly's face, but poured it out instead.

Cody turned to Tub-Belly, staring long enough to make everyone uncomfortable. Gus just let him do it. He had a roll of quarters in his pocket to make a fist around. He was ready.

"Why's he doing that?" Cody leaned over and asked Gus.

"The dumbshit thinks he can help the runner by throwing off the pitcher, maybe getting the catcher to drop the ball. But our guys know better than to listen to pissants."

Tub-Belly ignored them, even though Gus said this loud enough for everyone to hear. "There he *goes!*" he yelled again, but the batter struck out and the inning ended.

An inning later, the Yankees had a player on first, and Cody surprised everyone by yelling, "There he *goes!*" his voice high-pitched, but the accent right so that he sounded like the man behind them, except on helium. Even Tubby laughed. Cody's timing was off, though, so the next time the pitcher wound up, Gus counted to three, and right after Palmer checked the runner, he whispered, "*Now!*" They both yelled it, loud as

they could. The hitter knocked a shallow fly into foul territory that the third baseman caught to end the inning.

“There he goes,” Tub-Belly said in a regular voice to no one. And Gus had to nod because there went any hope of a Yankee rally.

Gus tapped the three words on his knee—There. He. Goes. Cody looked so much like his father at that age, the cowlick and freckles—Ralph slapping his hand in his mitt. Where did his son go? Off to school, off to his own life with a wife and a grandson Gus never got to see unless he kidnapped him. Why hadn’t they made this trip more often, worn their blue hats in a sea of orange, yelled so loud their throats hurt? Hell, why didn’t they come now, just get away for little. Drink beers together. Yeah. Drink beers. Ralph didn’t drink. And neither, now, did Gus.

The last time he drank, he only remembered bits, but this was what he pieced together: Gus picked up Cody from school, like he did every Tuesday. Usually, they went to the park to throw some ball, but Gus had forgotten to restock his stash of PBRs under the driver’s seat, plus he wanted to show off his grandson, so they stopped at The New Man Bar & Grill. Janey, the barkeep, fawned over Cody, gave him free Cokes and fries. By the time they left the bar, it was already dark, and a mile later, Gus drove the little car—thank God it wasn’t the El Dorado—into a fence. Not fast, but fast enough to cut his head on the windshield. Fast enough to throw Cody—unseat-belted-in Cody—into the dashboard and break his nose. Cody wailed, “My nose, my nose.” Then the cop lights throbbed, and Cody yelled, “We’re going to jail. We’re going to jail.” Someone somehow got ahold of Ralph or Iris, and they picked up Cody at the hospital. But they didn’t pick

up Gus. No, they let the cops throw him in the stock tank, where he got kicked by his cellmates, where he puked in the one drain in the center of the cement floor. Where he stayed yelling for another drink. And no family to post bail. Later, Ralph shut the door in his face, yelling to never come back. Cody staring from the upstairs window, his nose all bandaged. Going home to an empty house, the note from Iris. Then, a year later, learning from a friend that Iris had died, had been sick several months. Had no desire to see him. Even at her funeral. Even though he was clean. He had promised in a letter—several letters—to never drink. All of them unanswered. He didn't even know where she lived that last year.

No wonder Ralph left. More wonder that he didn't move across the country instead of just across town.

Gus hoped he'd forgive him for today—the car, the kid, the running away. Gus'd have to apologize, but it'd be a sober apology. His son had already forgiven so much, there might be hope. But he also knew there might not.

\*

\*

\*

Palmer, The Underwear Boy Wonder, kept hurling fastballs and curves, all strikes—so much damn control. Control, yeah, control—that's what A.A. had given Gus, or at least the sense of it. Ah, hell. Gus Gifford didn't have Palmer's control. But he had gained it back some, had learned again what it felt like to say no, to throw hello's without any slurs, even throw curveball jokes that made sense to more than just him. And to drive! He had made it here. All that, he hated to admit, thanks to Ralph and the Nursing Home. Fucking-A. He might have to rewrite the will again.

Then he found this new love he had no right to, yet there she was, that big billed O's cap shading her pale skin—probably sunburned skin, thanks to him. Did Rosemarie imagine Palmer standing out there in his civvies? That'd sell some tickets, if all the men didn't get grossed out. Gus laughed at the thought, but he couldn't laugh at the Orioles' bats. In the bottom of the second, they answered Reggie's run with two homeruns of their own. Guidry, the Yankee pitcher, was good, but not today. Gus figured Jackson's run might be all they got.

By the ninth inning, the score was 10-1, and Palmer just needed three outs to seal it. He got them through grounders and a pop-up, and that was that. Cody wanted to stay for autographs, but the players were too far away, and Gus couldn't watch him and stay close to Rosemarie, so he said, maybe next time. "Best get you back to the car," Gus said and started wheeling Rosemarie through the stadium. The rest of the crowd had the same idea, so they made slow progress as the streetlights flickered on in the lot.

He drove out of Baltimore with the sun setting over his left shoulder, a swipe of color to the west. Soon, darkness filled the countryside, and Gus turned on his lights. An hour later, at the York exit—halfway home—the police found them.

What took you so long, Gus wanted to say. He felt the sweat pop on his forehead. He'd been keeping it a notch under the speed limit, for what good that did.

From the backseat, Cody coughed. "Are they going to put you in jail like the last time?" He was rubbing his nose when Gus said no, he didn't need to worry about that. They'd be all right.

“Any problems?” Gus squinted up at the officer. A white guy, older, ready to retire, from what Gus could see behind that damn light.

“You have a taillight out, sir.”

Jeez—that’s it? “Really? I didn’t notice that. Sorry, officer.” And here he was sweet talking a cop.

“I need to see your license.”

Gus took his time reaching into his pocket. Sweat dripped from his armpits. Cody sniffled in the backseat. Other cars whizzed by. The moon hung in the east like a spotlight.

Right as Gus opened his wallet, Rosemarie said something that neither Gus nor the officer understood. They ignored her.

Gus thumbed the empty slot. He looked in the other compartments, opened the coin purse. “Huh. It doesn’t seem to be here,” he said to the light beam.

“I need to see your license,” the policeman repeated.

“It’s usually right there,” Gus pointed to the empty slot. “I don’t know where it got to.”

Rosemarie shouted this time. The policeman shined his light into her face, so she shielded her eyes. She spoke again, and then she started scribbling on her notepad.

“She had a stroke a long time ago,” Gus said in a low voice.

“I see.”

“Today’s her birthday. She just turned fifty.”

The officer said nothing, just kept his light on Rosemarie’s hand.

“I took her to the ballgame for a surprise. She’s been an O’s fan all her life and never been to a game. Can you believe it? And boy, that Palmer shut down my Yankees, just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “Guess that makes it a good birthday present, uh?”

“And your license?”

“I just don’t know, I really don’t. It was there yesterday.”

Rosemarie thrust her notepad across the seat.

The officer studied it for a moment before handing it to Gus. “Can you read this?”

Gus read it aloud, slowly. “I took his license as a joke. I didn’t know he’d be driving today. I’m sorry.”

The cop shone the light directly on Rosemarie’s face. She squinted but didn’t look away.

Damn, where’d she get that poker-face? Gus said nothing. Maybe this would work. Maybe he and Rosemarie could start their own mafia in the nursing home. Who knew what kind of racket they could scheme up?

Or maybe she could help deal with Ralph when the time came.

“Where is it now?”

Rosemarie scribbled some more. Cody sniffled, but he was quiet, thank the broken-nose baseball gods for that. Finally Gus read her note: “I left it in my room in Carlisle.”

The policeman sighed and let the light beam hit the ground.

“And I suppose you don’t have anything to prove you’ve been to the game today, do you?”

“Here’s my ball glove.” Cody reached over the front seat.

“And here are our tickets,” Gus said, pulling out the stubs from his shirt pocket.

The officer held the tickets, studied them for a long moment.

Gus drummed the steering wheel. This might work. He’d still have to face Ralph and his daughter-in-law and all their wrath. He’d done them wrong, no doubt there, even if they’d done Gus wrong over the years. He shouldn’t’ve involved Cody. He knew how much they loved this child—their child, not his. They’d be frantic, ready to put Gus in jail again—what kind of sentence did child abduction carry? And how could he talk any lawyer into helping him for free? No, please dear baseball gods, let’s not go there. Please help him figure out some way to make it up to his son. Gus didn’t want to lose Cody again. And he didn’t want to be disowned again, either.

Maybe Rosemarie and Cody could be there with him, his team, help take the heat.

But now, as the officer peered at those tickets, Gus realized this *would* fucking work, at least here, at least until they got on down the road. Their lone homerun like Reggie hit. Or no, Rosemarie was delivering the ultimate fastball, like her boy Palmer, all the control in the universe, and Gus and Cody there catching the pop-ups, making the outs.

“All right.” The officer handed back the ticket stubs. “You take it slow going home. And get that light fixed, OK?”

Gus said yes, sir, and thank you, officer, and we’ll be real safe, and I’ll get it fixed tomorrow. Then, when the officer had stepped back to his patrol car, Gus whistled, long and low. He put his blinker on, pulled back into the traffic. Beside him, he saw

Rosemarie's shoulders twitching. Then he heard suppressed giggling. Then full out laughter.

“What's wrong with her?” Cody asked.

“Not a thing, young man. Not a thing.” Gus joined her with loud snorts. And then Cody started in too, a high-pitched chortle. All three of them laughing hard enough to make their eyes tear up, so that ahead, the taillights smeared like falling stars, the headlights in the other lanes became comets racing past, the earth a giant fastball slung hard, speeding out into the universe to home.

CHAPTER V  
BEAUTIFUL, BROKEN

Betty was packing her supper, getting ready for her 3-11 shift, when Louise called. “Just wanted to tell you ahead of time,” she said. “Rosemarie died. The undertaker just left.”

Betty had to sit down. She checked the clock, her sandwich half-made on the counter. She’d get ready in time, she always did—but just a moment now in her empty house, Ralph at work, and Amy far away in Virginia. The rain looking so cold, the light so gray.

She warmed her hands on her cup of tea. Steam fogging her glasses. Her elbow on the windowsill. Outside, the rain pummeled her daffodils, yellow heads not bobbing anymore. Just bent to the ground with all the weight. She held the cup and breathed in the steam and watched the daffodils.

Betty wrote the intake report when Rosemarie and her mother Anna came to Meadowview. When was that, seven or eight years ago? 1975, probably. Yes, right after Andrew’s first surgery, when Amy started candy-stripping and Betty felt like she could breathe again, Andrew home at last and about to head back to school. Amy was too young to officially volunteer, but Betty’s boss knew Amy and Andrew, and he knew what this could mean to the family, so he had said yes. One of the many kindnesses of that

time. One that Betty remembered among so many she knew she forgot and could never repay.

And she remembered the day Rosemarie and Anna came to the Home, how frightened both had been. Who wouldn't be coming into a busy, crowded home, especially if you had been each other's only companion for decades?

They had demanded a private room for Rosemarie, without any windows. And she insisted on arriving in the night. "Un-igh urs my eyes," she said. Her blue eyes sometimes flicked sideways, but they looked at you with such intensity. And that voice warbled with hardly any consonants, all vowels and pauses and breaths. Anna had to translate. "Sunlight hurts her eyes," she said. "Any light does, so please, we need you to use the lamp in the corner and not the overhead. Thank you." Anna, the school teacher, took charge, and for those first days, Betty remembered catching herself at the door, flicking on the overhead out of habit only to quickly turn it off.

During that intake interview, Rosemarie told her she had been a nurse, and she graduated from Harrisburg Hospital nursing school. So they all shared that, Rosemarie and her and Louise, though Rosemarie had graduated in 1953, a decade before them. Rosemarie had even started studying for her Masters. Then the stroke. Then her mother gave up teaching to become the nurse until she couldn't do it any longer. Then they moved to Meadowview, where Betty got to interview them while thinking about her son, wondering if he was resting like he was supposed to be, or out playing in the stream with his best friend.

\*

\*

\*

\*

In the workroom, Betty put her supper in the fridge and turned to find Louise with her arms open for a hug. Betty really didn't like hugging, but she embraced her friend anyway. The two of them roomed together in college, and here, twenty years later, through childbirths, death, and Louise's divorce, they were still best friends. Louise had those sagging dark eye circles even back then. For a moment, Betty wondered if *she* had changed so little, but she knew better—just look at these crow's feet and these sagging breasts that nursed two babies.

"It probably was a heart attack," Louise said. She had called to notify the family—Rosemarie's sister. "We didn't have time to clean the room, though. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," Betty said. "You did the hard part. I'll do the room."

She checked on her nurses and aides, made sure they knew their cases for the evening. They had a new person in Room 33, so Betty walked the long, familiar halls to make sure she was settling in.

Betty knocked on Mrs. King's door. "Come in," rang the odd little voice. She sat in a new Lazy-boy by the window where she read a magazine. They greeted each other, and Mrs. King's affected accent surprised Betty. British maybe, even though Betty was sure she grew up right here in Carlisle. Mrs. King said that *yes, she was all settled in nicely, thank you and thank you, but no, she hadn't a need for anything.*

This had been Anna Roberts's room once, made cozy with braided rugs and a double-wedding-ring quilt. Anna had died two years ago. Up until her last months, she had kept helping her daughter at mealtime. She tied Rosemarie's bib, made sure she could reach her fork, inserted the bent straw she preferred into her cup of iced coffee.

Then stood beside her as she ate, talking in a low voice. Betty always wanted to linger, to listen in. She had known Rosemarie's body in some very personal ways—the contents of her bedpan, that mole on her pale ankle she touched every time she changed her socks—yet she had wanted more. Like what did Rosemarie feel? What did she think of her mother? She had such piercing blue eyes, light as bluets and as sharp as their leaves—what did she see?

And Betty felt the same with Anna—what did she think about? She could understand her more easily than Rosemarie, but the older woman had always kept a certain distance. Did she ever regret having this beautiful, broken daughter the way Betty was just now admitting that sometimes she wondered if her life would have been better off without ever having Andrew, that beautiful, broken boy who had a hole in his heart—that hole that somehow took a part of Ralph's smile, a chunk of their marriage—that hole that made Amy even more quiet and serious—that hole that Betty still felt sucked into, even now, almost a year after Andrew died.

And yes, died is the word. Dying, dies, dead. He didn't pass on or cross over or get called away or whatever other garbage you wanted to sugarcoat it with. Andrew. Is. Dead. She had seen so many residents die, and yes, she had used those other words too—but not anymore. And no more talk of heaven either. Who knew where that was or if it existed? She only knew this: Andrew died. Andrew is dead. Andrew is never coming back.

\* \* \* \*

The bell for supper chimed. Betty put aside her paperwork and hurried off to help those who could get to the dining hall ready to go.

The slow procession moved like a parade, tennis-shoed striders tapping down the hall with their canes, followed by the bent-over band of residents pushing their walkers, followed by the wheelchair flotilla, one or two rolling their own chair, but most pushed by aides. They needed a marching song, not the watered down musack coming through the speakers. Some year Betty wanted to give them Sousa.

Then there was Mr. Jacobs yelling from his room, “There’s mud in my soup. Mud, I say. There’s mud in my soup.” He was in the last stages of Alzheimer’s, so he stayed in bed. And no matter if she sent her best aide or her worst, Betty still heard Mr. Jacobs complain. Usually, if he listened to anyone, it was Betty. So she went to convince him that the Germans hadn’t poisoned his soup, that the beef broth was really good. He needed to eat.

He quieted when she entered, but he still wouldn’t touch the soup. He only ate the crackers and green Jell-O. Fine, Betty thought. He got enough down for the medicines. He’ll be asleep soon enough. She took his tray and headed back to her station. Before she could sit to eat her own meal, though, she wanted to clean Rosemarie’s room. She wanted to get that over with while Elsie, Rosemarie’s roommate, was at supper.

The room held a different silence. Betty stood at the doorway and took it in. The thunderstorm had passed, so late daylight slanted through the window. That light and the blooming forsythia beneath the windowsill made the room glow. Rosemarie’s wheelchair sat in the corner, her Orioles cap resting on the joystick.

Betty had felt this different silence here one other time. It was after Anna's death, and Rosemarie sunk into her bed, like she could make her thin body disappear into that thin mattress. She didn't want to sit in her wheelchair or drive it along the hallways to deliver the mail. Gus hadn't moved into the Home, yet, so Rosemarie really had no other friends. And she had no interest in food. She was already too skinny. Every time Betty shifted her in her bed, she felt her ribs, the bony points of her hips.

So after a day of trying to get her to eat, of tying on her bib like Mrs. Roberts, sticking the straw in just so, and having Rosemarie turn her head away, Betty called Alice, Rosemarie's sister, and asked her to come. That didn't help either. Alice only stayed a half-hour. On her way out, she stopped by the nurse's station and said she didn't know what to do. She left more worried than when she had arrived.

That evening when Betty's shift ended, she slipped into Rosemarie's room to say goodbye. Rosemarie didn't move. Betty rubbed her shoulder, and as she did so, Rosemarie reached up and held her hand. She didn't speak; they just held hands. And when she really started to cry, Betty closed the door and crawled into her bed and lay beside her. She held her until the whole-body sobbing eased and her breathing slowed. It was all she knew to do.

After Andrew died, she wished Ralph had held her like that. God, how she wished it. That night after the failed operation, they drove away from the hospital in silence. The backseat empty. When they exited the interstate, Ralph said he didn't expect her to fix supper, so he stopped for a burger at a drive-thru. She ordered some fries, but didn't touch them. They sat in the car under a streetlight in the parking lot, and Ralph ate—he

could always eat—and Betty stared at the sign pointing to the university on the other side of town, where Ralph worked in the power plant, and where Andrew had taken a week of summer art camp for so many years. The boy could draw, like his father, who used to pencil cartoons of co-workers on the back of work orders.

Betty had kept a folder of all of Andrew's work, amazed at the progression from summer to summer. He still drew the goats, his favorite subject, but there were also still-lives of fruit bowls and ink drawings of his own hands and landscapes of the Blue Mountain that he woke up to every morning. That he waked up to.

Last summer, Andrew stopped giving his work to her. He shared it, like before, but put it in a portfolio that he hoped to show to colleges where he wanted to study graphic design or illustrating or something like that after he graduated. This year.

The night after the doctor came out of surgery and she knew before he even spoke a word, knew from his frown and creased forehead—that night she had wanted to be held, just simply held. Instead, when they got home, Ralph went out to feed his goats and Betty undressed and went to bed. He was gone a long time. When he finally came to bed, he slipped under the covers and touched her hand, once, before turning onto his side, away from her. Soon he began to snore. He didn't hold her. He hadn't held her in the eleven months since.

\* \* \* \*

In Rosemarie's room, Betty flicked on the overhead, then quickly turned it off. She walked to the bedside table and turned on the lamp, its light warm and quiet.

When they first arrived, Rosemarie and Anna had been so adamant about the darkness, that fear of light so strong. Twenty years of it, Rosemarie never getting out, living with shades drawn. In her new room, she wanted the staff to keep the overhead off, which Betty didn't like anyway, that ugly buzz and glare. But sometimes, when you're trying to read a thermometer, a floor lamp just didn't give enough light. So they told her to close her eyes and worked quickly. Or sometimes, they put her huge, round sunglasses over her eyes, black against her pale skin.

That initial week, Betty escorted the optometrist called in to examine Rosemarie. Anna Roberts was there, too, of course, to translate. The doctor had red hair, a big belly.

First thing he did was turn on the overhead. "Now, what's wrong with your eyes?" he asked. Rosemarie squinted and covered her eyes with her forearm.

"Light hurts them," her mother said. "We were told that light might trigger another episode, another stroke, and make her worse. So we use the floor lamp." Anna Roberts clicked off the overhead. She didn't weigh much more than Rosemarie, the both of them so slight. But Betty saw she wouldn't back down from the burly doctor.

"Well, let's have a look." He pulled out his pen light, flicked it on. Rosemarie panicked. She rolled to her side, threw her arm over her eyes. "Oooh!" Even the doctor understood that no.

"Listen," he said. "We're not going to hurt you. This is a simple pen light. I can work without the overhead lights, but I can't work without this. I need to shine it into your eyes so I can examine your pupils."

Rosemarie lowered her arm to her chin.

“I’ve never in my life heard of light triggering a stroke. Occasionally, it causes epileptic seizures, but that is very rare, and you don’t suffer from epilepsy, do you?”

Rosemarie shook her head and her mother said no, not that they knew of.

“Then this light should cause no problems. And besides, if it does, we’re here, doctors and nurses in a great facility.”

Rosemarie lowered her arm to her chest. “O-ee un.”

“Only one eye,” Anna said.

“OK, fine. I can’t look at them both at the same time anyway.”

Rosemarie gripped her mother’s hand. The doctor bent forward with his light. He pried open her eyelid and focused the beam into the pupil. He asked her to look to the left and right. She did. Nothing happened.

The doctor clicked off the light. “That one looks fine. Let’s look at the other.”

Rosemarie allowed him to repeat the process, and again, nothing happened.

He put drops in her eyes, waited for them to take effect, explaining that the drops dilated the pupils and allowed him to look at the back of each eye. Again, he repeated the process, and again, the piercing light caused no harm. When he finally stood, he told her the drops would wear off in a few hours. Otherwise, her eyes were perfectly fine.

“Healthy, even.” He tucked his pen light into his shirt pocket. “I think getting out for sunlight would do you wonders, Ms. Roberts. Maybe they can even find a room with a window for you.”

Neither daughter nor mother responded. They just watched Betty and the doctor leave.

\*

\*

\*

\*

Betty balled up the soiled sheets and carried them down the hall to the laundry hamper. She found two cardboard boxes and started emptying the drawers—underwear, camis, pants, an Orioles sweatshirt with a stain of food. She wondered about Gus Gifford, Rosemarie’s boyfriend, though she wasn’t sure what to call their friendship. It was close, close enough for them to sneak off and drive all the way to Baltimore for a game. Without permission. With him having no license. They got back fine, but not without Mr. Gifford’s son threatening to sue the Home. Betty didn’t know how the director smoothed that one out, but he did.

Had anyone told Mr. Gifford yet about Rosemarie’s death? Surely he knew, the gossip in the Home so quick to spread. She hoped Louise had remembered to tell him personally. Betty made a note to go check on him after a while.

Into the smaller box, Betty placed the items from Rosemarie’s bedside stand—a family bible that Anna used to read to her from, an O’s ballgame program from last year, some small earrings, sunglasses. A brush with a few black strands in it. She held this in her lap. When Anna got too sick, Betty took over brushing Rosemarie’s tangle of hair, hair so black and fine. Then Betty’d choose a scarf and tie it around Rosemarie’s neck, to hide the scar.

Rosemarie seldom complained. At least Betty couldn’t remember many complaints. And after seven years, Betty felt she could understand her most of the time. Had to understand her after Anna died. Had to admit, though, to not understanding her some of the time. Maybe a lot of the time. They both would get so frustrated, the words

just not there in Rosemarie's mouth or in Betty's ears. Usually Betty just did what she thought best. Sometimes she had to ignore Rosemarie's eyes, look away, pretend.

Then, these last two years, a new PT had gotten Rosemarie using her left hand more. First, she scribbled lines and circles, and once Betty walked into the room to find the PT and Rosemarie laughing at whatever she had drawn on her pad. That was the first she had heard that sweet high laugh after Anna had died, and for a moment, Betty was jealous that the PT had done this, had triggered that change. Rosemarie held up the pad for Betty to read. Wobbly letters spelled L-O-O-K and she had even drawn two eyes in the "O's". From then on, a notepad and pen traveled in a little purse with Rosemarie wherever she went, those sprawling words leaving a trail.

Betty picked up the pad from the bedside table. "YES" and "NO" had their own pages followed by pages with smaller writing: "Tea." "Thank you." "Tomorrow."

For a long time, Betty had given up on the idea of *tomorrow*. She had just pushed herself into her work, moving without thinking, some days not remembering anything that happened, ending back in the driveway staring at their house, the goats at the fence watching her.

During those weeks and months after, no matter how much she tried to avoid it, she always ended up sitting on the floor in Andrew's room. She didn't touch anything—not his neatly-made bed that she had changed the sheets on the morning of his operation, wanting him to have clean sheets for when he returned; not his turtle collection stacked on shelves by his desk; not his notebook of drawings, many of them of the goats right outside his window, portraits labeled "Isabel," "Rose," "Munchie." Betty would just sit

until darkness filled the window and the house grew even quieter. She had no idea where Ralph was or how he spent his days during this time.

They had known going in that it was a risky operation—but the doctors had convinced them it was riskier not to operate. Were they right? Was it God’s will? She hated that phrase, had turned from the minister at the grave when he said those words. God’s will to take a child? And this is a God of love? Nothing made any sense anymore.

\* \* \* \*

Rosemarie’s roommate, Elsie, entered the room, her big chin leading the way. Betty always found something crude about her and wondered how Rosemarie put up with her snoring and lack of manners. They seemed to get along, roommates for at least five years, Betty wasn’t sure. And she wasn’t sure how much Rosemarie just went along with the assignment, deciding not to protest or request a room change, just accept it as her lot, like so much else. No wonder she had loved Gus who always complained and rebelled and drove his Cadillac even when he had no license. Betty wished Ralph had a little more of that in him, like he used to when they were dating and he ran all the way—on his own two feet—from Shippensburg to Oaktown, ten-and-a-half miles—just to see her. He was so tall and skinny then, like Andrew had become, Andrew also having that runner’s build and stubborn will, just not the heart, the physical heart, just not enough. Jesus, not enough.

Elsie popped out her dentures and wiped them on her blouse, the way Ralph always cleaned his glasses. When she was satisfied they didn’t hold any strands of supper in them, she replaced them in her mouth and then picked up her *Reader’s Digest*. She

didn't look around the room, just at the magazine cover. "Mighty quiet in here now, ain't it?"

Betty agreed.

Elsie stood in the middle of the room, like she didn't know what to do.

"Did you have a good supper?" Betty asked.

"Yes, yes we did." And then she turned and headed toward the lounge to read.

\* \* \* \*

As she left, Elsie passed the big mirror that she and Rosemarie had shared, and in its top corner, Betty noticed the sugar maple leaf her daughter had taken home and pressed in wax paper. Betty carefully pried the tape off the corners. This yellow leaf, faded but still lined with hints of brightness, she wanted to take home for Amy.

One fall, a year or so after Rosemarie and Anna had moved in, Amy came scurrying to the work station to find her mother. Betty remembered how tall and gangly her daughter was back then, how she had just started to fill out her candy-stripping uniform. She leaned over the counter and whispered in a hurried way, "Come help me, Mom. Rosemarie wants to go outside!"

As they walked down the hall, Amy told her how she had brought in a leaf from that tree out front and then simply asked her if she wanted to go see it herself. Rosemarie said yes.

Anna wasn't in the room, just Rosemarie, smiling and sitting in her old wheelchair, she didn't have the motorized one yet. She held up the leaf when she saw

Betty and said something neither Betty nor Amy could understand. She tried again, shrugged, and then simply pointed toward the door.

Betty wanted to shout, but she didn't. Instead, she found a cardigan and helped put it on. As she did so, Rosemarie pointed to her eyes and to a drawer, where Amy found sunglasses and slid them onto her face. Then the three of them moved down the hall towards the main entrance. They passed other residents and several other nurses and aides, a few of them making second glances, trying to hide their shock. Again, Betty wanted to shout, but instead she just smiled so hard her face hurt.

Amy held the door while Betty pushed Rosemarie through. It wasn't cold, just sunny and a little breezy.

For a moment, the sunlight was so bright that Betty feared Rosemarie would cry out and want to go back inside. She held her hand above her head, and Betty pushed a little faster. Then they stopped under the maple, and that glow. The leaves waved like so many hands above them, hands grabbing the light and changing it, brightening it somehow, yet not too much that it hurt your eyes when you looked up into all those waving hands.

Betty set the chair brake before settling on the bench beside Rosemarie. They both watched Amy grab a falling leaf and hold it out to Rosemarie, who said thank you. Then Amy picked up a few off the picnic table and placed them in her lap, and Rosemarie kept saying, "An oo," and Amy kept saying, "You're welcome," and Betty kept holding Rosemarie's good hand, trying not to squeeze too hard.

One leaf landed on Rosemarie's head and Amy started laughing. Rosemarie reached up for it and she started laughing, too. Behind the wheelchair, Betty could see Mrs. Roberts and the other nurses standing inside the door, watching. Louise was crying. So was Mrs. Roberts.

Amy scooped up a pile of leaves and threw them in the air so that they came down again, filling Rosemarie's and Betty's laps.

"Oo i agai," Rosemarie said, and Amy threw more and more, armfuls piling up, the air filled with the clattering of leaves.

It was like something opened inside all of them that day, like the light and leaves had given them a door to step through, and they did.

\* \* \* \*

In the bottom of Rosemarie's drawer, Betty found a picture that she had forgotten. She held it up for a moment, turning it to the window. And then it disappeared in a wash of tears, tears so thick the world rained, the room blurred. Betty collapsed onto the floor, her back against the bed, her finger and thumb still pinching the drawing. She just sobbed and sobbed until finally her breaths came in gasps, the air wracking her lungs. The tears slowed and her breathing eased. From Rosemarie's table she took several hankies and blew her nose and wiped her face.

The drawing lay on the floor before her.

Years ago, when Andrew was nine or ten, he heard his sister talking so excitedly about candy-striping, he wanted to do it, too. But he was too young—several years too young—so they compromised and told him he could shadow his mother for a day. Betty

expected him to be “grossed out” (to use his words) when she had to give a client a shot and take blood, but Andrew held his tongue and watched. He didn’t even say anything about the needles at lunch that day.

In the afternoon, she had to change a patient’s diapers, so she told Andrew to take his pencils and paper to the lounge, and she’d come get him after a bit. She heard the ruckus before she finished, so she hurried through her work and then hurried down the hallway. In the lounge, she found Andrew in the corner, with Anna and Rosemarie in her wheelchair between him and Mrs. Poff, an Alzheimer’s patient who thought Andrew was her own son, here to take her home. Betty learned from Anna that Mrs. Poff had grabbed Andrew’s arm, and it had taken all of Anna’s and Andrew’s strength to pry her fingers free. Rosemarie had been the one to see what was happening, to wake her mother who had been dozing in her chair, and then to try to wedge her wheelchair between to two.

Betty had asked Andrew if he was all right, and he grinned and nodded. Whatever fright he had felt had disappeared. Then Betty escorted Mrs. Poff out the door and to her room where she administered a shot to calm her. When she returned, Andrew was drawing again while he talked with Anna about school. Rosemarie listened, and Betty could sense immediately how quickly the three of them had become friends.

Later, Andrew said he guessed was done with candy-striping or hanging out with his mom at work; he’d rather stay home and ride his bike. But he did hand her a drawing to give to Anna and Rosemarie, signed at the bottom, “Andrew Peterson.”

Betty wiped her eyes again to look at her son’s art. He had such talent. Even then, so young, you could see he knew about shapes and proportions, and he was beginning to

understand darkness and light. The three of them—Rosemarie and Anna and Andrew—all sat at a picnic table, some daffodils blooming nearby. The two women watched Andrew draw, and all three grinned from their pencil faces. Beneath them around their feet, pools of dark lines made shadowed outlines of their bodies.