

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Alice on the Road

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7k8237cp>

Author

Satterly, Faye Ann

Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Alice on the Road

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Faye Ann Satterly

September 2012

Thesis Committee:

Professor Tod Goldberg, Co-Chairperson
Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson
Professor Mark Haskell Smith

Copyright by
Faye Ann Satterly
September 2012

The Thesis of Faye Ann Satterly is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

When Alice first heard the knock on the door, she was in the back of the house, on the little southwest-facing porch she'd converted the summer before into a sunroom. Her dogs roused and began to bark, nails clacking over the hardwood floors. She didn't get up. She was ankle-deep in maps and travel books, studying. She would have to have stepped on Nebraska and Wyoming to get to the door and it wasn't as if she was expecting anyone.

The second knock was louder, a double knock-knock. The insistence of it irritated her. Her son, Owen, would have phoned first and her daughter, Libby, didn't often make the two-hour drive from Jersey on a Sunday. Fred, aka Asshole, hadn't been around in three weeks, warming Harriet Bailey's pew at St. Michael's Episcopal instead. Not that he'd bothered to tell her, but it was a small town. Word traveled. Mary was the only other intimate who came to mind and she was working.

The banging was in front of her the next time, at the window adjoining the back door. A face peered in at her over cupped hands. Alice jumped, heart racing. She hardly recognized her granddaughter, Stella, Libby's eldest, of the angelic, heart-shaped face and angry, sullen eyes. The dog barking became frenzied. Alice steeled herself, pasting on a smile and stumbled over a hidden Texas guidebook. "Stella! What a surprise!" she said, opening the door – and her arms – in greeting.

"Careful, Gram. Don't want to break a hip."

Stella brushed by her without so much as an air kiss. “Mom’s on the front porch,” she called over her shoulder with an impatient shake of her short, spiky, bleached hair. She ignored the dog tails wagging like whips against her thighs. Alice lowered her empty arms. She had to admire the girl’s talent. She could draw blood with a mere utterance.

“Front door’s locked.” Stella’s voice held an accusatory undertone that implied Alice should have been prepared, frozen in place from their last visit, still waving from the front porch.

Alice didn’t move, reluctant to leave the friendliness of her warm sunny room. It was a familiar ambivalence, loneliness sprinkled with a mild aversion to company. She listened as her granddaughter thumped insistently through the little house. She heard the unlatching of the lock and an indistinct exchange of words before the steps returned, followed by Libby’s softer more hesitant ones. Unusual for the Force of Nature that was her daughter. Her bubbly energy usually preceded her like a curling wave, a friendly warning to anyone in her path to surrender or step aside.

Libby’s face appeared in the doorway. She was pale, her rosy cheeks whitewashed. It brought out the pale blue undertones in her skin, creating dark smudges beneath her eyes. Even her red curls seemed to have lost their fire as she sagged against the doorjamb.

“Whoa. What happened to you?” Alice asked. Libby was a youthful thirty-three, not beautiful, but dazzling in the way of high-energy women whose eyes flashed

electricity when they smiled. She was as often taken for her children's elder sister as parent, but Alice could see for the first time the fifty-year-old lurking just beneath the surface. She touched her gently on the shoulders and peered into her hazel eyes, automatically shifting into mother-mode.

"Hey," she repeated, "what happened?"

Stella hovered in her mother's shadow; arms crossed over her chest. Her face darkened, and her mouth twitched, as if she were preparing to bite. Then she abruptly stepped forward, leading with her slender china doll chin.

"I'm pregnant," she blurted, "so Mom wants you to adopt me cause Stepdaddy wants me out of the house. Getting rid of the wayward child. Cause he's such a Christian."

Libby's face went from pale to ghostly. Alice sucked in her breath sharply, and saw the momentary self-satisfied shine to Stella's eyes. Pregnant. Alice had to take it in at an angle, digest it a little at a time. Of all the words to spill from the girl's mouth, there weren't many that could have surprised her more. A Bigfoot sighting, maybe, or an alien abduction or if she'd said Martin was unfaithful. She never would have guessed that, but little Stella pregnant. It was as hard to imagine as two porcupines mating.

"Jeez," was all she could manage.

"He didn't have anything to do with it."

“What?”

“Jesus. He didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Stell,” Libby chided, her tone mild, “you shouldn’t talk like that.”

“Oh right, cause using the Lord’s name in vain is going to matter now. According to Martin, I’m already on the express bus to hell.”

Alice coughed to cover her impulse to laugh out loud. “Libby,” she suggested, draping her arm over her shoulder, “why don’t we go sit down in the living room? Stella, can you bring your mother a glass of water?”

“I’m the pregnant one. Shouldn’t someone be waiting on me?” Stella ducked from the room, her sarcasm leaving a wake. She was a clever girl. Alice had to give her that. Unpredictable, flesh-eating and rabid, maybe, but undeniably clever. It was just hard to reconcile this flame-thrower with the bright-eyed little girl who had lived in this very house, toddled after she and Owen, babbling sweetly while Libby studied. Back in the pre-Martin days. Alice had a flash image of Stella and a bare-assed boy in a tangle of arms and legs, panting with childish desire, a caricature of sex. She shook her head vigorously, ashamed, as if she’d invited kiddie-porn into her brain. Stella was only a few years past giving up My Little Pony.

Libby dropped heavily into the pillowy sofa, her eyelids drooping as she sighed in a long, deep rattle. “Martin isn’t taking it well,” she whispered.

A bold understatement, Alice imagined. Poor Martin. Though twenty-five years her junior, he was more an old woman than she could ever be. Fussy, conservative, pious, and wound three turns too tight. If she met him at a party, she'd smile politely and move to the opposite end of the room. She'd wished more than once for a Xanax to crush up in his applesauce. And yet she was genuinely fond of him. He was a kind soul beneath his worries. He adored Libby and loved Stella as if she were his own. Her predicament was surely shaking his world.

Alice sank into the sofa cushion next to Libby. She patted her arm and murmured softly as if to a child. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

Libby sighed again before speaking, deflating like a punctured balloon. She let her whole body go limp, her head sinking into the downy pillow rest. She closed her eyes and began to speak in a soft voice.

"Stella hasn't been herself the past few weeks. She's been on edge, sarcastic, jumps on everything I say to her..."

Alice wondered how that was different.

"...and then I noticed she hadn't had her period for a while, and she admitted it was possible, you know, the whole pregnancy thing..."

Stella returned with a glass of water. She took a long drink and then held out what was left to her mother. Libby leveled a long sad gaze at her, but Stella appeared to ignore it. She sat sideways on the oversized chair in the opposite corner, dangling her legs over

the arm, breaking crackers into bits and tossing them to the dogs. “Big dog, little dog,” she said softly, then to her mother, “remember that book, Mom? Do we still have it?”

Libby smiled, “I’m sure we do. I read it to the boys after you.”

“It was my favorite.”

“Mine, too. Your grandmother read it to me when I was a little girl.”

For a moment, it was as if they were just girls, up to nothing more serious than idle reminiscence. Then the room fell silent, even the dogs sitting quietly, begging only with their eyes.

“Aren’t you going to finish my sad story?” Stella asked suddenly.

Libby’s smile faded and she returned to her detailed telling about Stella peeing on a stick and the little plus sign coming up and their subsequent doctor visit.

Alice let her mind drift to another day between her and Libby, when the subject instead was Libby’s pregnancy, when the baby she carried was Stella. Had they peed on sticks then? It seemed so long ago. They’d been in the kitchen one July morning, just weeks after Libby graduated from high school, Libby perched on a stool nibbling on a piece of toast while she’d stood at the sink finishing her coffee. She’d just filled the birdfeeder and was enjoying the fluttering of wings and bandying for position. When she turned to point out the male cardinal’s scarlet feathers, she suddenly noticed. Libby’s breasts had plumped. They were rounder, straining at her knit top, threatening the low

neckline. And the face that was so youthfully angular had softened, become fuller. Alice knew. She hadn't wanted to believe it, had wracked her brain trying to remember when last she'd bought her monthly supplies, but it was undeniable.

"Libby," she'd said with a sharp intake of air. Nothing more.

"Did you tell your father?" Alice asked.

"Dad?" Libby wrinkled her eyebrows, perplexed. She looked at Alice doubtfully. "You mean MY dad? Stella's grandfather? He's not a real go-to guy in a crisis."

Stella snorted. "He called me Sally last time he saw me, like I could have a name that lame."

Libby smiled. "He wasn't trying to be insulting, Stell. In Dad's time, Sally was probably cool."

Alice kept her face carefully neutral, but the Inside Alice, the one who lived only in her head, wore a giant smile. She was years past wishing her ex-husband ill. At least months. But she sure didn't want the kids to regard him as a returning hero. She'd never been a big fan of the Prodigal Son. Libby claimed he was working Step Nine of his Twelve-Step program. Apologizing. Bearing Gifts. As if that could make up, as if he could disappear for fifteen years – the hardest years – and then re-enter their lives with a simple "I'm back," and worm his way into their good graces. Her inside smile faded. He had though, and she'd facilitated it. Because it was complicated, because Owen and

Libby deserved to be loved by two parents. A single mother alone might make a good go of it, but it wasn't the same as having two parents. It'd been a bitter truth to uncover.

And now Stella seemed destined to repeat the pattern. Not just a single mother, but a barely teen-aged single mother, not even old enough to vote. And, sadly, at her tender age, it was unlikely one good thing could come out of it. Not for Stella, nor Libby, Martin and the boys and by extension, not for her. And for a brief moment, that's where her focus lingered – what it meant for her. Then she buried any thoughts of self, a practice she had elevated years before to an art form.

“...and that's when Martin overheard us. He was furious! Not so much about the pregnancy as that we – I – would keep it from him. And it was just to give Stella time, so we had a plan. You know how he is when he doesn't have a plan.” She rolled her eyes heavenwards. Then she puffed out her cheeks and let her shoulders drop.

“So I was just hoping we could stay here for a few days, you know, till things blow over. Stella's grades got her exempt from finals, so she's already finished for the year. Martin can get Sean and Bobby on the bus before he goes to work. It'll do him good.”

Alice barely noticed the silence that descended.

“Mom?”

She started, realizing that Libby was waiting for a response. “Of course,” she said, “you can stay for the rest of the week at least. I’m leaving Saturday on my trip.” She stood up, glad that the talking was done. “Should we go put on clean sheets?”

After the rooms were readied, Alice sent them to retrieve their luggage while she went to the kitchen. She peered into her pantry. Old Mother Hubbard. Not bare maybe, but only the supplies that a solitary person has. Canned soup. Peanut butter. Cans of tomatoes close to their expiration dates. Dried apricots. Raisins. Oatmeal. Granola bars. Rice. Tea. Things that didn’t go bad. While she sighed over her lack of edibles, she made a mental note of the number of times she heard the front door open and close. Too many times. A lot of luggage for a short stay. Alice frowned as she peered into the pantry. Things with Martin must be more serious than Libby was letting on.

Libby wandered into the kitchen. She seemed to have recovered her natural springy step, her twinkle. Her hair was pulled back into a fluffy ponytail, the loose wisps framing her damp face. Stella trailed behind, the level of her mood inversely proportional to her mother’s.

“What should we have for dinner, Mom?” Libby opened the refrigerator and studied. “Wow. Nothing here. Pizza, maybe? Hey,” she said twirling around, eyes bright, “we should call Owen. I never get to see him without Martin. It’ll be like old times.” She pulled a cellphone out of her purse and pushed a button, raising it to her ear.

“O? Hey, it’s me. Yeah, I’m at Mom’s. Can you come over? We can get dinner.”

Libby grinned and danced towards her mother, arm outstretched. "It'll be just us. Like old times. Nah, the old fart didn't come." She laughed into the phone. "Just Stella. Uh huh, she's done with school, so we're taking a little break from the boys. They got another week yet. I don't know, what do you want? Primo Pizza, Mom? O can pick it up on his way."

Alice nodded and closed the pantry door quietly. She mentally counted the bills in her wallet. She didn't want to part with any of them before her travels, but when Libby was around, it had a way of flying from her purse. Libby was grinning, tugging at Stella's blonde tips, tapping her feet; her activity levels a good indicator of her mood. When happy, she was all motion, uncontrollable, her face shining brighter than the sun.

"Uncle Owen wasn't coming till he heard you were here."

Stella rolled her eyes. "Right Mom. I noticed you didn't tell him you're going to be a grandmother."

Her light dimmed. "Oh, Stella, you know Owen won't care. He loves you."

"You mean like stepdaddy?"

"Martin loves you dearly. You know that, but he's scared. He doesn't know what to do." Libby put her arms around her daughter. Stella didn't resist, but she didn't reciprocate. She stood without moving, arms held at her sides, face immobile.

“Stella, you think you could take the dogs out for me?” Alice asked. She could see the protest forming on her granddaughter’s lips so she talked faster. “Pregnant people need fresh air and exercise and you know how much the dogs love you.” She reached around the pantry door, pulled the leashes off the hook and snapped them onto the dogs’ collars. Then she held out the handles. Stella perched her hands on her slender hips and turned from one adult to the other, seeking a bye. Libby waved her hand at her.

“I know what you’re doing. You just want to talk about me behind my back.” Stella snatched the leashes from Alice’s grip and glared threateningly at Sasha and Ollie. They danced, noticing only that they were going for a walk.

Alice watched out the window till she saw Stella’s back disappearing down the sidewalk. She turned slowly to Libby. “So how are you holding up? Who is the father?”

Libby shrugged. She pulled out a chair, sat down at the table, and picked up the salt and peppershakers. “We don’t know who it is and she’s not talking. That’s part of what has Martin all fired up. He needs someone to blame for taking advantage of his little girl and she’s not giving him anything.”

She shook a few sprinkles of salt onto the table and did the same with the pepper, swirling the black dots into the white with the tip of her index finger. “He asked her pointblank who the father was and she wouldn’t say. You know how the veins in his neck get puffed up. She just glared back. I was afraid he’d be pushed to violence if we didn’t get out of there.”

“Really?” Alice’s tone must have been sharper than she intended, because Libby made a face.

“Not literally, Mom. Martin has never even spanked the boys. Ever. But this was pushing him. I’ve never seen him that upset.”

“Are you worried she’s protecting someone, an older boy?”

Libby put her elbows on the table and let her chin sink into her hands. “You mean someone who should be charged with statutory rape? Martin is. There was nobody special that I knew about. That’s why it was such a surprise. I mean, she never even mentioned a boy’s name. And then,” she snapped her fingers, “just like that, she’s pregnant.”

“How far along is she?”

“The doctor said six weeks.”

“What does she want to do?”

Libby shook her head. “I don’t know. She isn’t saying much about that either. Martin and I have never agreed about abortion, but it’s different when it’s your child. I don’t want her to make a decision that will weigh on her for the rest of her life, but I don’t think I could watch her carry it full-term and then come home from the hospital with empty arms either.” The tears in her eyes overflowed in a slow trickle as Alice slid the tissue box towards her.

“She’s just a baby herself, so keeping it isn’t an easy answer either. It changes the whole family. Martin and I would be the parents and we can barely handle the three we’ve got. I don’t know if we could go back to diapers and sleepless nights. I just don’t know.”

A long silence followed. Alice shook herself out of her reverie and crossed to the table. She swept Libby’s salt and pepper mixture into her hand and threw it in the trash. “Tea?”

Libby nodded.

It was a nice transition Alice thought as she moved around her familiar kitchen. Sink to stove with the teakettle. Stove to cabinet for cups and tea leaves. Watch for the water to boil. Pour. Serve. Mindless tasks were like well-placed commas. They gave a person pause, time to process.

When the tea was poured, Libby sat and stirred, the steam rising. She sighed softly. “I never knew how hard it was for you. I mean, when it was me. You didn’t even have Dad to argue with about it.” She kept her eyes directed at the cup, a small smile wobbling at the corners.

Alice swallowed, searing her throat. She yearned to lean into the moment, soak up appreciation from her daughter. She longed to at last be recognized for her sacrifice. She wanted to blurt out “you don’t know the half of it,” confess that she’d spent nights crying herself to sleep, worrying that she couldn’t stretch her salary, her physical stamina or

even her love to one more baby. But she swallowed the words with her tea. She blinked away the unshed tears and shifted the subject.

“Summer’s almost here. What are your plans for the boys? Camp?”

Libby shrugged. “Martin’s resisting. He says it’s too expensive.” She smiled slightly as she brushed the hair off her forehead. “But I think they’ll wear him down.” She stood and carried her mug to the sink and then leaned against the counter, arms folded over her chest.

“So what about you, Mom? You’re not still working at that plumbing place, are you?”

Alice nodded.

“Aren’t you bored out of your mind? I never understood why you didn’t get a regular nurse job like Mary.”

“I would have needed too much training. I told you that. And after all those years at Mountainside, I couldn’t really imagine doing any other kind of nursing.”

Libby rolled her eyes. “I know, Mom. I know how much you miss all the old crazy people, but it’s been six years. I mean at least as a nurse you could do work you care about.”

“I’m not that interested in physical illnesses. All those body fluids. Blood. Puke. Phlegm. Yuck.”

Libby started to laugh. “Well you’d make more money as a nurse.”

There was no good answer for that. Money was an issue and for the last few years, she’d been subtracting rather than adding to savings.

“I worry about you, Mom. You don’t have anyone to take care of you and how can you retire if you can’t put anything away?”

Alice made a face. “Maybe I’ll win the lottery.”

“You’d have to buy a ticket first.”

Stella burst through the door in a flurry of panting dogs. Alice would have kissed her for the timeliness of the interruption if she hadn’t feared being hissed at.

“Stella,” Libby said as she jumped up to hug her returning child, “did you have a good walk? Look at how happy these silly dogs are!” She bent to scratch ears and remove leashes. “I missed you,” she said laughing and squeezing her daughter’s shoulders again. Stella pretended to be above it all, but a hint of a smile flickered over her face.

Alice felt an acute nostalgia as she watched, missing daughter time, the ease that once existed between she and Libby, the laughing and chatter, the injection of energy into her quiet existence. The missing struck her with a fierceness that was physical, like a thump to her chest. She opened the pantry to hang up the dog leashes and stood with her back to the room, blinking furiously at the tears. She wondered what had happened to her life. It used to be laughter that waited just beneath the surface to erupt. Now it was tears.

And instead of eruptions, it was seepage, a chronically dripping faucet that turned into a deluge at the first hint of suffering – whether her own or the distant travail from a news story or a homemade poster of a lost pet tacked to a telephone pole. Alice shook her head.

“Hey, anybody call for pizza?” Owen appeared suddenly, poking his head through the kitchen door, two flat boxes held high. “I knocked but no one heard me. Not even these useless dogs.”

The dogs barked then, a frenzied welcome of tails and paws and happy teeth.

“Owen!” Libby said, nearly strangling him with her hug. He was a full head taller than her, but gangly and a little stooped at the shoulders. With his sweet, unlined face and thin, colorless hair, he could as easily look fifteen or fifty.

“Wow,” he said, “if I had known pizza could get this reaction, I’d have brought it sooner.”

Libby grinned at him. “Did you get a calzone?” she said, and snatched the boxes from his hands.

“I got one calzone, and it’s for Mom. You always want pizza.” He turned to Stella who was hanging in the background and winked at her. “How about giving your favorite uncle a hug?”

“My only uncle,” she said solemnly, but her mouth twitched into a grin. She relaxed against him briefly, and then pulled back.

“I’m pregnant,” she blurted, “Mom’s going to be a grandmother if I decide to keep it.”

Owen blushed beneath his dark freckles, but he pulled her closer into a long, gentle embrace. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he mouthed over her shoulder.

Libby lifted a hand, palmside up and shook her head.

When he finally released Stella, Owen grasped her small hands in his long bony fingers and peered into her face. “Let’s go sit down for a minute, OK? You can tell Uncle Owen all about it.”

She snickered. “Why? Don’t you know where babies come from?”

The color burned his cheeks more darkly and he tried to cover it with a half smile. “I guess I didn’t realize you did.”

“Ha ha, good one, Uncle Owen.” Stella lifted her finger as if putting a mark in his score column, but he grasped it and led her to the sofa. He puffed up the pillows and tucked her gently into them as if she were still a little girl, then sat down next to her. One arm circled her narrow shoulders and he tilted his head till his chin rested lightly on her hair. Alice, watching, thought two things – Owen would be such a kind father, she hoped he’d get around to it before it was too late, and that he was lucky one of those blonde spikes didn’t pierce his jugular.

Libby gripped the pizza boxes and turned towards the kitchen. “While you two talk, Mom and I will fight over the calzone.”

“Let Mom win,” Owen called over his shoulder.

2

She didn’t, of course. Libby opened the boxes as she was setting them on the counter next to the stove.

“You don’t really care about the calzone, do you Mom? You can have Primo’s anytime, right?” Libby was already biting into the crispy outer shell, gooey ricotta dripping down her chin. “Ahhhhh,” she said through a mouthful of cheese, “this is the best!”

Alice lifted the lid on the other box, folded a slice of cheese pizza and watched as the oil dripped from the tip. She could feel the heartburn coming on. She was washing it down with her cooled tea when Owen and Stella joined them in the kitchen.

“Libby,” Owen said, as she lifted the last of the calzone to her mouth, “I asked you to let Mom have that. You know she doesn’t like pizza.”

“C’mon, don’t be mad, O.” She sidled up to her brother, and insinuated herself under his arm. “Today is Martin’s turn to hate me. You can hate me tomorrow, ok?” She was grinning playfully, but her eyes reddened around the rims. “C’mon,” she coaxed, “smile and pretend you love me.”

Owen sighed and shook his head slowly. “You’re a spoiled brat, you know that?” Even as he kissed the top of her head.

“Yup and you only have yourself to blame, big brother.” She patted his face gently and smiled, pirouetting across the kitchen tiles. “I put the pizza in the oven. I thought you guys might want it warm. You weren’t giving her relationship advice, were you, Owen?”

Alice snuck a swift glance at Owen. She saw him bob his head, caught the distress in his face before he smoothly masked it. She wondered if Libby knew details of his love life. He rarely spoke about love. He mentioned women’s names, gourmet dinners they shared, bed and breakfast vacations, skiing in Vermont. He had an active social life, but it was rare he brought someone by to meet her. She didn’t pry, didn’t even feel as if she had the right. Libby wore her “Love me” needs like a brightly colored dress, so her feelings were open to discussion, but Owen asked for so little. She wondered, not for the first time, if she’d failed him.

Libby pulled the tray from the oven. “Here you go, Stell. I saved two pieces of plain cheese, your favorite.” She placed them on a napkin, then wrinkled her forehead

and turned to face her daughter. “I should be feeding you healthier meals, you know. The doctor said not too much fast food. More vegetables. Did you bring your vitamins? This is when you really need to be taking them, when the brain and nervous system is developing.”

Alice stood up abruptly and scooped the dog dishes from the floor, holding them under the tap. It was suddenly real, this life Stella carried, heartbreakingly real. She didn’t want to think about developing nervous systems or the weight of responsibility thrust on such narrow shoulders. She swirled the bowls and splashed the water into the sink before refilling them.

“You’re mad at me, aren’t you Gram?” Stella blurted, “just like Martin.”

Alice turned around in surprise to see Stella’s back as she ran from the room. Her footsteps pounded on the stairs and then receded along the creaking wood floors of the upstairs hallway. A door opened and slammed shut, the kitchen windows rattling an echo. Alice looked from Libby to Owen, her mouth a small “o” of surprise. Libby sighed and looked towards the stairs.

“I better go after her,” she said.

Alice touched her arm. “No, I’ll go.” She picked up Stella’s untouched plate and climbed the stairs. Owen’s childhood room was tucked under the eaves at the far end of the hallway. It was a lovely room – the kind where one could lie on the bed and listen to the rain thunder on the roof – though small and awkwardly shaped for furniture. Libby

had disdained it of course, but Owen had shared her appreciation of its charm. She grasped the doorknob and hesitated, assailed by ghosts of memories of other days, of Owen in his room, always tinkering, fixing or building something. Funny that he'd become an accountant. And of he and Stella playing in this very room, as soon as she'd been old enough to navigate the stairs. If Alice was calling them for dinner or retrieving Stella for bedtime, she'd loved to stand in the hallway and listen to the giggles, to the high-pitched singsong voice mingle with Owen's baritone. Libby and Stella had moved in with Martin when she was four and about to start school. Alice couldn't help wondering what might have happened if she'd stayed, if Owen could have kept her safe, kept her from transforming into a little prickly pear.

"Stella," she called softly as she turned the knob.

"Go away!" Stella growled. Alice poked in her head and saw that the child was wrapped mummy-like in the comforter, just a tuft of hair sticking out. She almost laughed.

"I locked the door. Jeez."

Alice sat down on the edge of the bed. "None of the locks work on these old doors. If you wanted privacy, you needed to stay in your own house." She set the plate on the nightstand and reached over and patted her gently.

“Stella,” she said, “you’re my favorite granddaughter, but you know, I’ve been through this before, with your mother. So, for a little while, I’m going to be sad for you. For what you’re giving up, even if you find a Martin and live happily ever after.”

Stella snorted but she didn’t pull away from Alice’s touch. It seemed a small victory.

“I’m the only one,” said the comforter.

“Hmmm?”

“Granddaughter. I’m your only granddaughter.”

Alice smiled. “That’s why I’m so sure you’re my favorite.”

“Well that’s not very special, is it?” Stella pulled the blanket down to reveal her face.

“Now you sound like your mother.”

“The spoiled brat?”

Alice smiled into the darkened room. “I don’t think you’re spoiled. Just a little uncertain.”

Stella snorted. “Duh. Welcome to fifteen.”

It was dark by the time Alice returned to her favorite chair in the sunroom. Owen had slipped out in his usual unobtrusive way and Stella had fallen asleep upstairs. Libby was in the adjoining living room, lying on the sofa, remote in hand. It felt as if days had passed. She took out her notebook where she had carefully catalogued destinations by state and waded through her litter of maps. She'd started with the Stonehenge recreations. There was one built of Styrofoam blocks in Virginia, another of old cars in Nebraska and a beautiful stone replica in the Texas hill country. In between, she'd found flying saucer-shaped houses and UFO welcome centers, as well as statues of jack-a-lobes large enough for adults to ride. There were bird and butterfly refuges in the Rio Grande Valley and a bridge in Austin from which flew thousands of bats at sunset.

"What're you doing, Mom?" Libby was at the door. Alice watched as she bent from the waist in a long, graceful line to retrieve a book from the floor. She was still supple, like a dancer. "Planning that trip you and Fred are taking? When did you say you're leaving?"

Alice unfolded a map and pretended to study it. "Saturday. But I'm going without him."

"Alone?" Her daughter looked alarmed. "Couldn't he get the time off?"

"He's retired. He has all the time in the world. But he seems to have found another interest."

“Oh my god! You mean he cheated on you? An old man? That’s so depressing.”

Alice lowered the map. “Yes, thank you, it is.”

“What an asshole.” It was Stella, apparently awakened from her nap. “He had beady eyes. You’re better off without him.”

Alice ignored Stella’s language choice, especially since it seemed such an apt description. “I didn’t know you’d ever met him,” Alice said, recollecting with some satisfaction that his eyes were on the small side.

“I saw him once.”

Though Alice silently willed her not to, Libby continued poking into her piles of travel folders, setting aside one book and picking up another. “What’s in Nebraska? Why don’t you use the internet instead of books?” Alice was wary. It was risky to be in her path when she was at full energy and in need of a project.

“Because I don’t have a computer at home. And I don’t get paid to do that on work time.”

“Stella brought her laptop. If you get an Internet hookup, she could look up places for you. And you could get an email address. Owen emails all the time.” Alice felt a tiny twinge of jealousy. She didn’t know that about her son.

“I know how to look things up. I just don’t choose to have a computer at home.”

“Look up what?” Stella opened her laptop and propped it against the back of a chair. Her fingers flew over the keys, eyebrows knotted together in concentration. She looked like her father, Alice realized with a start. Or the kid she remembered him to be. Little Joey Hagerman. He’d been a likeable kid right up until he turned sixteen. Then he’d turned into a useless punk, the kind Libby loved to take on as a project.

“Like this?” She turned the laptop screen towards her. There was a picture of Carhenge, the Stonehenge replica created out of old cars in a cornfield. Alice clapped her hands together. “How’d you know? That’s top of my list.”

Stella shrugged. “You had it marked on the map of Nebraska. And Mom talks about all the cool places you guys went like the Coral Castle in Florida and Rock City in Tennessee. We never got to do any stuff like that.”

Alice laughed. “Right. You took real trips on airplanes to resorts. Cause your father could afford to take you to nice places.”

“Step-father.”

Stella’s fingers were like magic, pattering over the keys, bringing up more pictures. She held up a picture of the Stonehenge in Washington State, on the bluffs overlooking the Columbia River. Libby’s eyes were shining. “See Mom? You should get a computer. You’d have so much fun with it. You could plan your whole trip.”

“I can’t afford it,” Alice said simply.

Her daughter's voice was animated. "Have you priced one? They're so cheap. This one was what, six or eight hundred dollars?"

"If I spent that on a computer, I couldn't afford the trip."

Libby raised her eyebrows. "And you never will if you stick with temp jobs in plumbing stores." She changed her tack when she saw Alice's frown. "Do you think it's a good idea to go now? Alone, I mean. What if something happens?"

Alice tried to brush off her remark, but the same thought had nagged at her. Stella opened the webpage for the real Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plains. Libby smiled. "I saw that. When I was eighteen, which means you saw it too. You were the size of my thumb. I thought I had the flu."

"That's on my list," Alice said.

"Yeah, you'd probably have liked it. I thought it was a bunch of rocks." Libby yawned and stretched her arms over her head. "You need more comfortable furniture in here," she said looking round, "wicker is nice to look at, but not so nice to sit in." She stood and wandered in the direction of the living room sofa and after a few minutes, Alice could hear her flipping through the channels again.

Stella sat cross-legged on the floor, thumbing slowly through Alice's pile of maps and guidebooks. She looked so vulnerable, childlike, all legs and eyes. It pained Alice to watch her. It was hard to believe that she could be pregnant. Sex was only a small part of

what she was too young for. Motherhood. Giving birth. The pain, the stretching, the milk coming in, the sleepless nights, the worry that never went away.

“She knows that you couldn’t go because you sent her. She feels bad about it.”

Stella said it so softly Alice wasn’t sure she’d spoken.

“What?”

“Mom. She knows that you couldn’t go to Stonehenge because you let her go.”

Alice tilted her head to one side. “She wanted to go. It’s what mothers do.”

That was only half true, the little lie she told herself. When she’d learned the high school band was headed to London for a competition, she had scraped up the money to send Libby. Not that Libby had asked in more than a perfunctory way. She’d played the clarinet somewhat disdainfully and was only mildly interested in travel. Alice had sent her for selfish reasons, to get her away from that boy, give her a chance to see that the world was a bigger place. But it had already been too late. She had taken a side trip to Stonehenge, gone to the place Alice most wanted to see and it hadn’t saved her. She hadn’t even been touched by it. She supposed she resented it after all.

“Do you miss him?” Stella asked.

“Miss who?”

“The Asshole.”

“No. Not so much,” Alice said, wondering how much to reveal to this woman-child, “but I miss feeling cared for. I miss being special. I miss that.”

Stella studied her for a long moment. “Maybe he wasn’t the right one.”

Alice chuckled. “No, definitely not. So it’s lucky I like my own company.”

She didn’t elaborate, didn’t say that sometime after she’d passed fifty, she’d become invisible, that if the right one came along, he’d likely pass by without even seeing her. Who would notice her faded feathers when all around were girls in bright plumage? She wanted to urge Stella to use her power wisely, use those soft curves to attract the man who would stick with her, who in old age would still see the picture of the youthful girl he carried in his head. But there were no words for imparting that kind of message, at least none that wouldn’t scar her for life.

“There’s a video of the UFO welcome center on YouTube. Want to see it?” Stella turned the screen towards Alice and they watched as a jumpy cameraman followed a man in blue jeans and t-shirt on a tour of his life-sized model of a 1950’s movie version of a flying saucer. He had a gentle voice, seemed to be making fun of himself despite his evident pride in his creation.

“What a dump. Why do you want to see that?”

Alice shrugged. “Curious I guess. I want to know why he gets up every morning, why he pours all his resources into building a flying saucer that’ll never fly.”

Stella was shaking her head. “Who cares?” She stood up suddenly. “It’s past my bedtime. I’m sleeping for two now you know.” She made a face, tucked the laptop under her arm and walked out of the room without another word.

Alice remained in place, her head cocked to one side. She was still hearing the flying saucer man’s voice, his gentle singsong explaining his version of the meaning of life. Minutes passed before she realized she was alone.

4

Alice enjoyed the quiet house at dawn. She carried her coffee to the back deck in peaceful silence. The single white Adirondack chair was still wet from dew. She swiped at it with her free hand and sat, enjoying the birds flitting between the trees and flocking to the feeder. The dogwood flowers had just passed their peak and the white petals fell as softly as snow, sprinkling the lawn between the purple violets. She never mowed till the wild violets finished blooming. By then the grass was brushing her ankles when she ventured out to fill the birdfeeders and her neighbor, Mr. Gill, whose lawn was cut as precisely as a golf course twitched whenever his eyes strayed in her direction. He’d already offered twice this spring to cut it himself. For free, he’d added, as if money were the issue. She’d pointed out the violets, but he’d recoiled as if they were snakes. I suppose you like dandelions too, he’d said. You let them go and they’ll be all over my lawn next. And then he’d disappeared into his house with a slam of the door. She didn’t remind him that she’d be taking another mowing hiatus in July when the fireflies were in

season, rising lazily from the grass at dusk to flash their phosphorescent tails. She imagined he'd have a stroke.

She smiled, patted the soft fluffy head of her big dog, Sasha, and sipped her coffee, feeling the sun warm her face. Her deck was just the right size, she noted. Perfect for her and the dogs. One of those gifts left behind by a handy boyfriend, probably Bill Number Three. She had had a predilection for dating men with the same name and Libby had slyly numbered them behind their backs. The girl could always make her laugh. Especially in retrospect as she realized she couldn't bring Bill Number Three's face immediately to mind, only his gravelly voice, thick, wavy hair, and the incessant smoking. The reason for the deck, she recalled suddenly. He'd built it because she wouldn't let him smoke in the house and he didn't want to stand on the back stoop. Which must have meant two things – he hadn't intended to quit smoking and he had intended to stay with her. She stood suddenly, waving her hand in front of her face as if wiping away the memories. Yes indeed, it was time to get out of town.

The drive to work was mercifully short, the most attractive feature of her current position.

“Good morning,” she called out as she entered the front door of Antonelli's Plumbing. The wide-planked wood floor squeaked under her step. It had long ago lost the luster of the finish, but it had a depressed path that was darkly glossy from constant wear. She liked the feel of it under her thin-soled shoes and the musty, lived-in smell of the building. Lou Antonelli lifted his coffee cup with a crooked smile and Nellie nodded.

Alice's desk was perpendicular to the front door and intended as gatekeeper, but most of the plumbers and contractors ignored it. Both Nellie and Lou's desks faced front, from deeper in the room. Lou's was piled with paper and catalogues. Nellie's, besides her pc, held only a stapler, a tape dispenser and a neat stack of invoices in a black tray. Alice sat down at the empty desk, stuffed her purse in the bottom drawer, turned on her desktop and began looking through inventory.

The quantity of plumbing parts was mind-numbing. Copper, PVC and plastic pipes. Connectors of every size and shape. Toilets, sinks, showers, tubs, spigots and shower heads. As if it mattered. Still, it was an easy enough job. Men came in and bought parts. Sometimes they returned them.

The bell over the door jangled as the first customer burst through the door. Don Crawford had a box tucked awkwardly under one arm. He brushed past Alice without notice and dropped the package onto Lou's desk.

"What'd I tell you, Lou? I knew the old biddy wouldn't like it. She doesn't want to pull the sprayer out of the faucet. She doesn't care that it's the style now. Don't she beat all?"

Alice ducked her head and smiled into her computer screen. She was certain that Lou Antonelli recognized where plumbing stood on the life and death scale, but he never let on. He gave each customer's issue, no matter how trite, his full attention.

She could hear him pecking the keys slowly with his thick, arthritic fingers. “What do you think she’d think of this one?” he asked Don as he turned the screen toward him.

“Who the hell knows?” Don said, “I thought she’d like the other one. I asked her to come with me, but she probably didn’t think riding in my old truck would look right either.”

“Huh. Might be the toilet and plunger you painted on the side of the door.” From across the room, Alice could see Lou’s eyes twinkling behind his glasses. He didn’t possess attractive features. His nose was too big, his eyes were too close, but he had a certain unexpected sparkle that made up for it.

The bell jangled again. Boots clunked across the floor, this time stopping at Nellie’s desk. “I need me one of those fittings,” Harold Abel started in his mosquito whine voice, “threaded on the inside, with the angle to it, like for the Petersons’ job last spring.” His shoulders slumped, belly thrust forward, his face reflecting a conflicting mix of defeat and entitlement, as if he thought she owed him, but had little hope of satisfaction.

Alice’s fingers stopped moving. She felt like a voyeur to the scene about to unfold. A guilty voyeur, because despite the abuse she knew was coming, she didn’t feel empathy. He was a fool. Why else would he persist in seeking Nellie, who despite her round apple cheeks and Mrs. Santa Claus appearance had the warmth of a rattlesnake?

“Well fuck me, Hardly Able. You believe I have nothing better to do than remember every job you work – if working is what you call it?”

Alice heard Don snicker as Harold shifted from one foot to the other. He mumbled, “you’re the one suggested it in the first place.”

“Of course I did, cause you don’t have the sense you were born with. That doesn’t mean I commit all your stupidity to memory cause if I did, there wouldn’t be room in the gray matter for anything else. Who is foolish enough to hire you anyway? Good thing for you they don’t talk to me first.” Her fingers were moving over the keys as she talked. Despite her protests, she remembered everything. “I ought to make you go to the back and find it yourself,” she called behind her as she went to the stock room.

“This it?” she asked when she returned, holding it up, as if her being wrong was even possible, “I brought two extra. You ought to keep them in your toolbox so you don’t have to bother me for something so foolish.”

Harold held up his hands in protest. “Hey now, I’m not made of money like some of your other customers.”

Alice thought she detected a neon Kick Me sign flashing on his chest.

“You cheap bastard. It’s a few bucks. I can charge you three times as much and hide them in my desk till next time or you can take them with you.”

Harold muttered under his breath as he fumbled with his wallet.

“And next time, don’t waltz in here without so much as a hello and kiss-my-ass.”

Nellie was still standing, elbows akimbo. “If you don’t learn some manners, I’ll forget all your orders from now on. And you know, it wouldn’t hurt you to bring some damned donuts now and then.”

After he shuffled out the door, Nellie winked at Alice and sat down. Alice lifted one side of her mouth in return, carefully neutral. She was comfortable at Antonelli’s. Her father had been a contractor. Her brother and cousins were all in the trades. She had slipped into the routine without a ripple. The thought of remaining there long term, however, gave her an irresistible desire to poke a fork in her eye. The days were all the same. The men came in during the morning with their colorful jokes and litany of troubles, but by midafternoon it was quiet. There were only deliveries to catalog and an agonizingly slow countdown to quitting time.

Mary called on her way home. “Hey, how about a drink? I can pick you up.”

“Sorry, I can’t. Libby’s home for a few days with Stella.”

“Too bad for me,” Mary was saying, “Joe’s going out tonight and I was hoping we could stretch drinks into dinner. Hey, what’d you decide to do about your trip?”

“I’m leaving Saturday.”

“Then we have to have a quick drink so you can tell me about it.”

“Sorry Mare, I really need to get home.” She stopped before inviting Mary to visit her instead. She didn’t know if Stella wanted her news to go public, but telling Mary would guarantee that it did.

“Will you take lots of pictures? Especially of that thing made of the cars in the cornfield.”

“Sure.”

“You could email them to me if you’d join the 21st century.”

“Oh my god, have you been talking to Libby? She’s been all over me about buying a laptop.”

“That’s cause Libby and I have our priorities straight. Hey, well, if I don’t see you before you go, call me from the road. You should have plenty of time.”

Alice could still hear her cackling as she hung up the phone. She shook her head and then started the afternoon clock-watch, tediously matching invoices and shipping labels to box after box of fittings as she watched the second hand slowly circle. At 4:25, just as Alice thought she could bear no more, Nellie jangled the keys, but before she could reach the door, the handle twisted. It was Jeff Collard, a contractor from Highland, the next town north, and he had a list. Nellie stood and raised her brows at him. He set a bakery box on Alice’s desk, then grinned.

“I’ll be quick, Nellie. And I brought something to ease the pain.”

“Yeah, well you put it on the wrong desk.” She propped her hands on her hips and stuck out her elbows as if trying to make herself more threatening.

He did not seem intimidated. “Alice,” he nodded, “I know these vultures, so I’m starting with you or you might not get any.” Alice hesitated, looking first to Nellie and Lou before slitting the tape on the box. She lifted the top and sniffed. “I love ginger cookies.”

“Bring that list back here while she drools,” Nellie said impatiently, “let’s get on it.”

Jeff grinned, winked at Alice and walked back to Nellie’s desk. He made a show of unfolding his list and rubbing it carefully over the edge of the desk. “You got any coffee around here Nellie? I work faster with a cup of coffee in my hand.” When she glared icily, he just grinned wider. Lou nudged his elbow and set a Styrofoam cup next to him apologetically. “Not as fresh as it was a couple hours ago.”

It was ten minutes past closing when Jeff stood and stretched and Nellie nudged him towards the door. “You know we open at 7:30 every morning and we lock the doors at 4:30, just like we have for the last thirty years. That gives you nine hours to get in here.”

Lou stepped up behind her and stuck out his hand, “happy to be doing business with you, Jeff, anytime.” He smiled one of his sparkly grins. As Nellie put the key in the lock, Alice closed down her computer and wrestled her purse from the desk drawer.

“That’s the third time we’ve seen Jeff Collard in the last two weeks, isn’t it Lou?”
Nellie asked.

“It is,” Lou agreed, “don’t think we’ve seen him twice in a year before. You?”

“Nope, I always thought he was on the squeaky side, you know, cheap, cheap.
Home Depot man.”

Alice was only half listening. “See you tomorrow,” she said as she slung her purse
to her shoulder.

5

Libby and Stella were waiting at the kitchen table when Alice entered. Libby sang
out a welcome. “Hi Mom, how was work today?” Her eyes were twinkling with enough
cheeriness to make up for Stella who hunched silently over her laptop. Alice allowed
herself the smallest moment of disappointment over the lack of enticing cooking aromas.
Not that she’d ever observed Libby cooking, but she’d nursed a secret hope. She stooped
to pat the dogs and then gave Libby a hug.

“Hey, guess what I found in your pantry?” Libby said, holding up a blue box
triumphantly, “mac and cheese. Wouldn’t you like to make some for your favorite
daughter and granddaughter?”

Alice groaned. Libby jumped up with a grin. “And guess what else I found?” She crinkled a bag of chocolate chips. “You could make us cookies to go with it. My two favorite comfort foods.” She laughed, inviting Sasha to jump up so she could grab her paws and dance her around the kitchen, chanting, “cookies, cookies, cookies.”

“You had comfort yesterday, remember? When you ate my calzone.” Alice tried to sound cross, but not even the dogs were fooled. She picked up the blue box and went to the cabinet for a pot. “We should have something green, too. Something healthy.”

“I didn’t see anything green in your refrigerator, I mean that wasn’t growing on something else.” Libby laughed heartily at her own joke, swiping a bottle from the counter and dumping a pill into her hand. “Here, Stel, better take an extra vitamin. Grandma doesn’t have any greens.”

Alice raised her eyes heavenward, while Libby laughed. “Oh, admit it, Mom. You miss having me around.”

“More than you will ever know,” she agreed and walked quickly out of the kitchen so her daughter wouldn’t see the mist in her eyes. More than you will ever know. In her bedroom, she changed to loose-waisted sweats. Fred had hated sweatpants. He said no woman looked good in pants that bunched up around their behinds. He actually said that, behinds. Like the word ass was too crude or too personal, too something. What a prissy little dick-faced jerk. Which of course didn’t say much for her. She’d had the twit in her house, at her table, even in her bed. She stared at her lavender sheets and comforter. Maybe she should have a ceremonial burn, watch them go up in flames, but

no. She shook her head even as the thought was born. A gesture that dramatic was more Mary or Libby's style. To her, no statement, no matter how bold, warranted the waste of good Egyptian cotton.

She was called back to the kitchen by the whistling of the teakettle. Libby was pouring hot water into cups. "Hey, I found something green to go with dinner. You have green tea. Wow, " she grinned, "but I can't believe you still have a tea kettle that whistles loud enough to wake the neighbors."

"Yeah," said Alice, "Sears was out of the one that yells 'Alice, the water's hot.'"

Stella snorted and burst out laughing. "Good one, Gram, good one." Alice smiled appreciatively. She missed the sound of laughter in the house, the energy and spontaneity of it. The walls used to vibrate with the sound, with Libby and Owen, and later little Stella, as much a part of their daily life as breathing. She strained to think of clever words that would spark another round. But though she ruminated during the preparation of mac and cheese all the way through the measuring and mixing of cookie dough, she could find nothing. She had no funny stories about her day – the Nellie and Harold saga seemed too mean-spirited to share – no adventures that might incite a giggle. Her life was devoid of material, the teakettle statement a lucky fluke. Somehow over time, she had become dull, dull, dull. Maybe it was just adulthood, Alice thought. Maybe real adulthood meant the end of laughter, which sounded better than the alternative – that it was just hers that was lacking.

After dinner the house settled into familiar quiet, each taking their thoughts to separate corners. She gravitated towards her porch to her travel books. Four days before she embarked on her adventure, and there was none of the usual excitement, no bubble of anticipation. She poked at the pile of maps with her big toe. Anhedonia. It had been a word of the day on her desk calendar once. The state of nothing being fun, a malady that seemed to be afflicting her. She couldn't even decide on an itinerary. There were too many choices. She curled up on the one fat overstuffed chair in the room and wrapped herself in an old afghan. Then she leaned her head back and closed her eyes, trying to isolate the feelings that churned just beneath the surface.

Worry was one. She'd been counting on Fred's half of the funds to make it affordable. By herself, she'd be reduced to camping and she'd never put up the tent without Owen's help. Anxiety. What if she'd been too ambitious about the drive, had packed too many hours between destinations – so that when she arrived at an Alliance, Nebraska cornfield, she was too bleary-eyed to appreciate a Stonehenge caricature made of stacked cars. How foolish would she feel? It was crazy. When she was still traveling with the kids and limited by their insistence on Disney World destinations, she'd fantasized about a vacation of her own choosing. Now that she had it, it seemed overrated. Maybe her choices were dumb, the whole trip better left a fantasy. Especially alone. If there was no one to laugh with, no one to share the awe over the uniqueness of the sites, would she still feel the joy? She sighed. Self-pity was ridiculous. Three weeks off to take the trip of a lifetime and she was feeling sorry for herself. But it wasn't just self-pity. It was worse. She felt shame. Going alone said she was a loser, that no one

wanted her. Her eyes popped open and she rose out of her chair, slapping her hands on her hips. Fuck that shit. She was going and she was going to enjoy every fucking moment.

“I found a dinosaur park in Virginia. Mom said you liked dinosaurs,” Stella said, appearing in the doorway with her computer in hand, “dinosaurs and UFO places. Seems like a weird combination.”

Alice nodded, grateful to be rescued from her own dour thoughts. “Yeah,” she acknowledged, “if there was a dinosaur on every corner, I probably wouldn’t be interested anymore.”

Stella sat on the floor and curled her spine into an S. “Well then, I found something else you might like. I found it when I was looking at the picture of the bats flying out from under that bridge.” She pulled up another page. Alice moved closer, lowered her reading glasses from the top of her head and squinted.

“What is that? Some kind of rope?”

“Snakes.”

Alice pulled back. “Eww.”

“It’s a place you can go in Manitoba, Canada, in spring to watch the snakes wake up. Red-sided garter snakes. Thousands of them come out in April and May.” She clicked on an arrow and started a video.

“Omigod. A river of snakes. That’s disgusting. Look at them.”

“You should go there.”

Alice shivered. “I don’t think so.”

Stella shrugged. “How can you like dinosaurs and not snakes? That doesn’t make sense.”

Alice tilted her head to one side, trying to fathom the relationship. “I probably wouldn’t like dinosaurs if they were alive,” she said finally and that seemed to satisfy her granddaughter. They spent the rest of the evening together, side-by-side, weighing the endless itinerary possibilities. Then, abruptly, Stella stood, yawned and disappeared.

6

On Wednesday, Alice whistled as she walked to the parking lot after work, not a habit she often indulged. It was a vestige of childhood, an art she’d perfected before she was old enough to be self-conscious or worry about creating mouth wrinkles. She smiled at her foolishness. She was looking forward to getting home, to another evening with Stella and Libby. Maybe they could get Thai take-out, something a little unusual as a treat. She wondered if Stella liked Thai and reminded herself not to get too invested in Stella’s likes and dislikes. For two nights, she’d been civil. Tonight she was as likely to be surly. Still she felt happy on the short ride, spontaneously puckering into a rousing

chorus of Disney's "When you Wish upon a Star." Until she saw Martin's car parked in the driveway.

Of course. Libby and Stella weren't at her house for a relaxing vacation. They were escaping the conflict created by the little intruder sprouting inside Stella. She sat in the car for a few moments, steeling herself for the confrontation she was certain was playing out in her house. Martin had driven two hours from Jersey on a weeknight. It was unheard of. She knew how he felt about sticking to the routine, staying on schedule. She straightened her shoulders and prepared for the siege. When she reached the front door, she saw Martin's back at the kitchen counter and Sean and Bobby chasing the dogs through the living room. She stepped carefully inside. The tension was so thick it felt like all the air had been sucked out. She could barely breathe. She hated domestic tension. In six years of marriage, she'd had enough for a lifetime, maybe two.

Martin was speaking in a stiff tone. "We need to work this out as a family. Together. And we can't do that if you stay here."

They'd each taken positions in opposition to the other. Libby sat at the table with her arms crossed, poised as if ready to spring. Stella was on the other side of the counter bar. "I'm part of the family, you know. It's my body, my life and no one is listening to me," she said, her voice fevered, high-pitched.

Martin refused to even look at her, or acknowledge that she was speaking. Which only made her turn up the volume. "Do you hear me?" she shrieked.

Sean snatched Sasha's tail and pulled hard. Sasha, normally patient, looked ready to snap when Alice interceded. She plied Sean's fingers from the tail, lifted him in a big bear hug and then leaned down to Bobby. "Wow, you're getting so big, I can't even lift you anymore." Bobby planted his feet and caricatured a muscleman flex.

"Who'd like some homemade cookies?" she asked, before planting a kiss on Martin's cheek.

Martin raised an arm and patted her shoulder awkwardly. His cheeks flushed red amplifying the blanching around his eyes. Like a sickly raccoon, Alice thought.

"Alice," he nodded, "my apologies for bringing our troubles to your home."

She tried to engage his eyes, but he fixed on a spot over her head. "Why don't you have a seat, Martin? I'll bring you some iced tea, and some milk for the boys."

He refused to be softened. "Nothing for me, thanks." Though the words could barely escape his clenched jaw. His posture was rigid and his back so unnaturally straight, it appeared brittle, as if one jostle and he would shatter like the thinnest pane of glass. His lips pulled to the right and Alice thought she detected a tremble. It made her chest ache to see the rawness of it. He was terrified. He was frightened of losing control, of losing all that really mattered to him – his family.

"You look tired, Martin," she continued. She pulled four tall glasses from the cabinet, and reached into the refrigerator for the pitcher of tea. "The boys have been a handful, I bet, with spring here and school almost out."

She could see the flare, the hands that fisted, the danger in his eyes, but she counted on his impeccable manners to hold him in check. “I’ll bet you’ve missed the girls.”

Libby was watching her, eyes unreadable.

“Yes,” he said, unable to muffle his anger, “I need my wife at home.”

“Of course you do,” she said warmly and smiled at him. “Here, boys, you have to sit at the table to eat those cookies, ok? And here’s your milk. Your tea, Martin. And Libby, Stella, some tea for you, too.”

Libby took the glass offered to her and held it in both hands as if it might slip from between her fingers. Stella didn’t move, so Alice set her glass on the counter beside her. Martin didn’t react at first, but finally reached for the sugar and snuck a longing glance at the cookies. Alice plucked two from the plate and placed them on a napkin next to his elbow. He hesitated for another long moment, before pulling out a chair and sitting down heavily. “Thank you.”

She smiled at him and suppressed an urge to wrap her arms around him and murmur in his ear that it all would turn out ok. Pretend for a moment that she had that kind of magic, the kind she’d had when the kids were little.

Sean poked Bobby and grabbed at his cookie. “There’s plenty to go around, Sean,” Alice said. She laid a hand on his arm as she drew the dish closer. “Be nice to

your brother.” It was always simpler being the voyeur looking in. The resolution appeared obvious. Be kinder.

She remembered her days at the psych hospital when the group dynamics would slip out of balance. A patient would erupt in anger and if not contained, the entire room could become an inferno of raging emotion. The staff had to be quick or the damage inflicted could take months to repair. Intervention in those situations had been her particular gift. She’d often been able to snatch a solution from the air, to find a win-win that allowed temperatures to cool while the patients tried to find a new path through their difficulties. But at work she had only to discover the solution. There was plenty of other staff to carry the burden of implementation. In her personal life, she sometimes got into the middle before remembering that there wasn’t another shift to hand it off to.

She turned towards her daughter and touched her gently on the forearm. “Libby, I think that Martin is right. You should go home with him and the boys, but I’d be grateful if you’d allow Stella to stay with me, and come along on my trip. She could be my navigator. It’d give us a chance to really visit.”

Behind her, she could hear an expulsion of air from Stella’s chest, whether from horror or joy, she couldn’t be certain. It didn’t matter. She could see by the relief on the faces in front of her that it was already done. She had set this thing in motion and now it had a life of its own. Arrangements would be made; Stella’s things would be fetched. Alice would have a passenger as she investigated roadside attractions.

Libby called Alice at work on Friday. She sounded formal, a little Martin-ish.

“I’ve brought Stella’s things that she needs for the trip. I’m going to pick her up and take her to dinner if you don’t mind. We won’t be late.”

“Okay. I’ll see you when you get back?”

Alice tried not to be offended that she hadn’t been included. Mother and daughter needed time together she reminded herself. Still, she felt a pang as she tried to finish up her accounts, get them in order before she turned them over to Nellie. When she finished, she stood and stretched and looked around the office.

“Where’s Lou?” she asked Nellie.

“He left a little early.”

“Is he coming back?” She felt deflated. She liked Lou. She thought he’d liked her enough to say good-bye.

Nellie shrugged.

Alice busied herself at the desk, returning it to the neutral blandness that indicated it belonged to everyone and no one. She was done with the plumbing supply house. When she returned from her vacation, there would be a new position, another vacancy to be filled temporarily. Maybe something more interesting, she told herself, more

meaningful, though she knew meaningful jobs didn't often require temporary help.

People seeking a life sentence took those.

The back door squeaked open and Lou's heavy step echoed over the wood floors.

"Jesus Christ, what took you so long? Did you have to drive to Manhattan for that cake?" Nellie asked. She was smiling despite her words. "We need some fresh coffee," she said, getting up.

Lou set down the box and opened it on Alice's desk. "Flourless chocolate cake for you. It feels like he replaced the flour with butter. Bring the forks Nellie!" Then he pulled out an envelope. "We robbed petty cash to get you a Starbucks card. If you ration yourself, it might get you to Nebraska."

Alice blinked rapidly. "Lou," she said, "Nellie, this was so nice of you guys."

"Yeah, well don't go all soft on us," Nellie was saying when the front door swung wide. It was Jeff Collard, looking fresh from a shower, doused in a musky cologne Alice remembered from high school.

"Hey," he said, "why didn't you tell me you celebrated Fridays like this? I would have brought the beer."

Lou jerked his head towards Alice. "We're giving a special send-off to our Gal Friday."

Alice smiled. "Yup, they're so happy to be getting rid of me, Lou threw a party."

Jeff ran his hand over his stubbly hair. “Getting rid of you, huh? Where’re you headed?” His voice stayed easy, his tone unchanged, but Alice thought she could detect a reduction in the wattage of his smile.

“She’s only going for a few weeks. Taking a little roadtrip,” Lou interjected. “Her job will be waiting when she gets back.” He folded his hands over his belly, looking very pleased with himself, like a frog who’d just snatched a passing fly.

Alice turned to him. “But you hired someone.”

He shrugged. “Didn’t seem like she was any fun, so I told her you’d changed your mind.”

Nellie was grinning. Alice started to protest, but Lou shooed her with a wave of the hand. “When you get back to town, come by and we’ll talk. You’ve done a good job for us.” He tilted his head in Jeff’s direction. “Brought us some new business.”

Jeff started to protest, then stuffed his hands in his pockets and shrugged good-naturedly.

“We’re not doing any more business today. Sit down and have some cake.” Nellie commanded. “And fresh coffee,” she said retrieving the pot, “but don’t be getting any ideas. You come by most Fridays at this hour and that damned door will close in your face. I don’t care how short your list.”

Jeff nodded and grinned. “Got it.”

The cake was cut, coffee passed and for a few moments they were busy Oohing and Ahhing over the cake.

Between bites, Lou nodded his head in Jeff's direction. "You ever do any work over in Marlboro?"

"Sure, some of the men live up that way. They're happy to have something closer to home."

Lou's eyes twinkled, but he kept his tone carefully neutral. "Ever do any for the Simonton's?"

"No way in hell," Jeff said and they all laughed, Alice even though she had no idea why it was funny. "I heard about them. George Stakos told me he did a two-week job for them that turned into three months. Husband would tell him one thing, then the wife would get him to tear it out." He took a swallow of coffee. "He called me once. I told him I was too busy." He paused dramatically. "I suggested Harold Abel." And they all broke up again.

She was glad he was there, Alice decided, as he and Lou traded banter. They were funny together, their stories mostly harmless and it kept the focus off her and questions about her future. Questions she couldn't answer. Nearly an hour passed before Nellie rose and said they were infringing on her weekend and it was time to get out. They were all still smiling as they went out the door.

Jeff walked Alice to the car. “Time for a drink?” he asked. She looked at him in surprise, then started to shake her head, thinking of the packing that lay ahead. So much yet to do, get the house cleaned and ready to sit vacant for a few weeks, pull out clothes, shoes, dog dishes, leashes, toys, beds, tent, sleeping bags, her bird and butterfly books, binoculars, camera – and squeeze it all into her Prius with whatever paraphernalia Stella had. Still, she wasn’t anxious to begin. And it was a nice surprise, his unexpected interest in her. She wanted to bathe in it for a few moments, soothe her wounded ego, make up for being rejected by the Dickhead.

“I’m not much of a drinker,” she admitted, “but if we go to the Brite Star, I could eat while you drink. I could stand a cheeseburger chaser after that cake.”

“Sure, you want me to follow you? You look like a quick get-away-girl, the kind who likes to have her own car.”

Alice laughed. “Wow, are you always this astute or am I that obvious?”

“No, it’s all me. I’m a pretty brilliant guy.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and grinned. “Race you.”

The diner was doing a robust business when they arrived. Seniors taking advantage of the early bird specials. They took the last empty booth. After the waitress dropped off menus, Alice busied herself reading though she knew it by heart. It gave her a chance to breathe, to adjust to being there with a man who was practically a stranger. It was just like high school, she decided. At 56, she was back in high school, asking a boy

stupid questions, trying to discover if he had anything going for him besides being cute. That was the trouble with being single after forty. Things got out of order. Here she was dating when in a few short years, she'd be ready for adult diapers.

Once they placed their orders, there was nothing left but to look at each other. She wished not for the first time that she had Mary's facility for small talk, that she could just slide into twenty questions and not feel like she was invading the other's personal space. She wanted to ask about the thin white scar that sliced from his right eyebrow all the way to his jaw. She tried to imagine the cause – car accident? Bar fight? Pirate's sword?

He saved her from social panic. "So tell me about yourself," he said, "What brought you to Antonelli's?"

She smiled. "My hospital closed. I started doing temp jobs and Lou needed somebody to keep up with the inventory, so here I am."

The waitress dropped off a bottle of Sam Adams. "What hospital was that?"

"I was a nurse at Mountainside." She could feel him studying her then. The same way people always did, like they wondered who wanted to work with crazy people, worried that maybe it had rubbed off on her – or that she was evaluating them, thinking she would discover their secret – that they were crazy too.

"How about you? Have you always been a contractor?"

"Nope, I was a baby first, then I played Little League..." He grinned. "Yeah, basically, I followed my father into business." He shrugged. "Pays the bills."

Their cheeseburgers arrived and they began to eat silently. “So,” he asked between bites, “Where are you headed on this roadtrip of yours?”

“As far as we can go in three weeks. I picked out a few destinations around the country and then we’ll stop at anything interesting in between.”

He took a pause before asking, “we?”

“My granddaughter.” And then in the name of full disclosure, she added, “A friend was supposed to go, but he’s not now.”

“The lawyer?”

She looked at him sharply, eyes narrowed.

He gestured with his hands. “I asked around, just to see if there was someone else in the picture before...you know. I’m not much good at the dating thing.”

“Yet you asked anyway.”

He laughed. “Yeah, when I heard who it was, I figured you wouldn’t see him for long. He’s kind of a dullard.”

“So you’ve met him.”

He nodded. “Did a little work for him a few years back. A little stiff. Maybe you saw a different side, but the guy I met was definitely lacking in the humor department.”

“Wow, you were right. You are brilliant. So what would I hear if I asked around about you?”

“Great guy. Wife was an idiot for leaving.” Then he chuckled, a little ruefully. “Maybe that I work too much, don’t always pay enough attention to the rest of my life, that my poor long-suffering wife had no choice but to walk.” He lifted one shoulder. “It’s a lot more fun to talk about you. Where are these far destinations of yours?”

8

On the way home, Alice thought with some satisfaction that her visit to the diner with Jeff had added just the right tone to her final day at Antonelli’s. Because it was going to be her last day, of course, no matter how flattering it was to be wanted – she simply could not bear one more day in plumbing supply. It had been irritating to have Jeff say that, though. That had been the only sour note, his parting advice that she return to nursing. As if he knew. One shared cheeseburger and he was already thinking he knew what was best for her. She shook her head. And then he’d tugged her cellphone out of her hand, programmed in his number and told her to call him. She wanted to blame it on his gender, but she suspected she played a part, that where Harold Able wore a “Kick me” sign, she had an aura that said “Boss me, tell me what to do.” Then she was annoyed when people insisted on doing just that. She was a mess, she thought. Her whole life was

a mess. Everything in it was askew. She missed having her kids at home. She missed Mary-time since she'd remarried. And she missed being married herself, even after three decades. She needed a serious reassessment of her life. She needed to get out of town.

As she pulled up to her house, she noticed Owen's car parked at the curb. He climbed out and stood waiting as she pulled into the driveway. "Owen! I didn't know you were coming by. Did you come to see me off?" she called out, smiling broadly.

But his bearing was odd. Stiff, she thought. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm fine." But his tone was odd, as well, as if he was suppressing some terrible emotion that threatened to erupt with the slightest prodding.

She studied his face, the ruffled hair, "What is it? Did something happen?" she pressed, "Is it Libby? Or Stella?"

His cheeks puffed out and he blew out his breath in exasperation. "Can we go inside?"

"Of course." But his bearing unnerved her. It took two tries to fit her key into the lock, which sent the dogs into a tizzy on the other side of the door. She finally managed to push it open, herding the dogs towards the kitchen to the backdoor. She stood at the open slider for a moment, watching them yelp and chase each other enthusiastically, while she took a breath and searched her memory for any hint to Owen's distress. It was so unlike him. He followed more slowly, pausing to pull her mail from the box and toss it on the kitchen counter.

“What’re you doing with the mail when you’re gone? Do you need me to pick it up?”

She closed the door before turning to him, lightly touching his forearm. “No, of course not. I didn’t want to ask you to come all the way over here everyday. I went to the post office and stopped it.”

He pulled his arm away and gripped the edge of the countertop. “I’m your son. You didn’t think you could ask me to do that one little thing for you?”

Alice had a great urge to reach up and lay her hand on his forehead, check for a fever. “Of course I could have,” she soothed, “and you would have done it, too. But you live ten miles away and it just seems like a lot of unnecessary traveling.”

“Yeah? Well, you’d do it for me in a heartbeat. And it’s not like I have a whole lot else to do.” The last was said with bitterness, so unlike the boy-man she knew.

“Owen, are you okay?”

“I told you I was fine,” he said rubbing his hand over his eyes. “Libby told me you’re taking Stella on your trip.”

Alice laughed, feeling a rush of relief. “Yeah, that should be a challenge, don’t you think? Little Miss Prickly Pear.”

“Then why’re you doing it?” Owen looked tense, his mouth tight and flat, his eyes cool and distant.

Alice shrugged. "I don't know. They were all fighting. Martin looked ready to blow and it just came out. I thought it might do the family good, you know, to have a little break from each other."

"Yes, but why is that your problem? It's Libby's mess. Let her clean it up."

Alice felt uncertain. This was uncharted territory. She rarely saw Owen angry and never at her. She didn't know the right words to stop it, to make him happy.

Owen was running his hand through his hair in short choppy thrusts. He took two steps to the side, then reversed as if the room was too small to contain him. "Mom," he started again, "you're always taking care of everyone else. Letting people take advantage of you. When are you going to do something for yourself? Cause I can tell you no one else will do it for you if you don't."

Alice mouth opened in response, but no words fell out. He waited for a moment before continuing. "You've invited Stella, who's made sulking into a science, on your dream trip. You think that is going to be fun? We didn't let you do anything you wanted to do. What do you think it's going to be like with her?"

"I thought you loved Stella."

"Of course I love her," he exploded, "but that doesn't mean I can't see her for what she is. A regular porcupine, determined to puncture the bubble of everyone around her. And you won't even have a buffer. Just you and she in a car for hours at a time. This is your dream trip and you're letting her ruin it."

“It wasn’t my dream to go alone,” she said softly.

He deflated then, all the anger seeming to dissipate in one long sigh, shoulders slumping, neck drooping. “So what happened to what’s his name? I thought he was going with you.”

“So did I, but seems like he’s taken up with Millie Bailey.” She had to look away, ashamed to be admitting her apparent failure to her son. Everyone seemed to recognize Fred as a dickhead dullard and yet he’d rejected her.

“I thought I saw him in the grocery store with her,” he said nodding.

“The grocery store? Jesus Christ!” It was more of a slap in the face somehow for him to be caught in such a domestic, intimate scene in public. Only people who mean to eat together and then maybe go to bed and get up together, grocery shopped together.

Owen was shaking his head slowly. “I don’t know what you saw in the man anyway. He was way beneath you.”

“He’s a lawyer, you know.”

“Exactly.” She glanced at him, startled and caught the twinkle. They both laughed. “She’s a nice enough woman,” she offered, “I wonder what she sees in him.”

“That’s easy. Status, money, creature comforts. She was widowed young and never wanted to go back to taking care of herself. She doesn’t need him to be exciting, just to be there, be someone she can pamper and feed.”

Alice was staring at him. He was full of surprises. “How do you know that?” she asked.

He smiled. “I’m tempted to say I’m omnipotent and know everything, but the truth is I’ve done her taxes the last few years. Sometimes when you’re in someone’s house, doing their taxes, getting them to locate all their papers, they treat it like seeing a priest, like they’re at confession. I know more about her small life than I ever wanted to.”

Alice went to the kitchen door and let the dogs in with a rush of fresh air, while she absorbed his words. “You make her sound so conniving,” she said. “Do you think people are really like that?”

“You can call it what you want. Maybe you like a softer word. The thing is, people do what’s in their best interest and she thinks it’s in her best interest to find a man to take her husband’s place. Someone presentable, of good means. Her husband left her comfortably well off, so she just needs someone who can add an extra layer of security to it. Someone safely boring, who looks decent enough in a pair of pants to go to dinner parties with her.”

Alice didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Owen, when did you become so cynical?”

She went to the refrigerator and filled two glasses with ice, then moved to the tap. “Here you go,” she said pushing one glass towards him, “I don’t even have a glass of tea to offer, unless you want it hot.”

Owen sat at the counter. “I don’t get it, Mom. I thought this trip was meant to be a time to find yourself. How do you do that with a 15 year old who turns bristling into a full-time occupation? Add all those pregnancy hormones rushing through her system.” He blew out a breath. “She may be a step up from Fred, but I had hoped he might bring someone else to the table, at least be your equal in some way. Though I hear that even Stella had his number.”

“I don’t let everyone take advantage. I left your father,” she said, the only defense she could muster.

Owen wiped at the sweat that dripped from the cold glass. “Yeah and then you took up with five more just like him, three of them named Bill.”

“I was a single mother with two kids. What were my options if I wanted company?”

“I’m just saying. If you thought more highly of yourself, you could have found company that was worthy of you at least. And you sure wouldn’t be wasting yourself on these idiotic temp jobs when you’re a trained nurse.”

She stared at him, feeling the tears threatening. Her Owen, her last ally.

He sighed. “I’m just mad at myself, Mom, cause I’m just like you.”

“You say that like it’s a death sentence.”

“Doesn’t it feel that way to you sometimes?”

“I don't know. I thought being a good person counted for something. Being able to sleep at night knowing you do the right thing.”

“Maybe you can sleep at night cause there's no one there to keep you awake.” He waved his hand at her when he noticed the hurt look. “I'm sorry. I'm really just talking to myself.”

Alice studied her son. At thirty-eight, he was still her boy. “Owen, has someone hurt you? Broken your heart? We never talk about such things.”

He sighed again. “No, and tonight probably isn't the time to start. The only thing you better start tonight is packing. Doesn't look like you've even started.”

“No, not really,” she said looking around, beginning her inventory of the things she would need.

Owen stood up. “Take this time for you, Mom, as much as you can. Think about things.”

Alice watched him quizzically. “Things? Like work? Antonelli's offered me a full time position when I get back.”

“Now there's the kiss of death. You told them no, right?”

She shrugged. She was losing interest in the topic, was tired of herself. “I tried to,” she said, “staying makes me want to poke myself with a fork, but I left it up in the

air. There was a contractor there when they offered. It felt rude to say no in front of him.”

She cleared her throat. “Then he asked me out for a drink.”

Owen’s mouth dropped open, before he moved close enough to wrap his arms around her, gently resting his chin on her hair. “To quote my sister, ‘you’re a piece of work’, Mom. A real piece of work.”

Alice smiled into his shoulder, relieved that he was back to the Owen she knew. “I’ll miss you, Owen,” she whispered into his ear, “especially when it’s time to put up the tent.”

He pushed her away. “No, you are not taking Miss Cranky Pants camping, are you? You’re even braver than I thought.” He shook his head, with a half smile. “OK, well if there’s nothing I can do for you while you’re gone, I’ll get out of your hair, let you get packed.”

“I’m going to leave some lights on, but maybe you could ride by now and then and check on the place?”

He nodded. “Sure, no problem. Drive safely. You can’t fix this for Stella, you know. You have to let her and Libby work it out.”

Alice smiled. “OK,” she reassured him, unwilling to press him further for an explanation.

As he turned to go, Stella and Libby burst through the front door. Stella, as if to prove Owen’s warning, was scowling fiercely. Libby barely took notice of her brother,

instead marching towards Alice as if on a mission, hand extended. “Martin sent some money to cover Stella’s expenses.”

Alice’s response was automatic. She lifted her hand before thinking, as if to push the envelope away. “Oh no, that wouldn’t be right. This whole thing was my idea.”

She could hear Owen sputtering behind her.

“Mom,” Libby said, sharper this time. “Humor Martin and me. Please. Stella is our responsibility. She has spending money, too, so don’t spoil her. You don’t have to say yes every time she wants something.” Libby took in a deep breath and pasted on a bright smile. “Make sure she takes her vitamins. And remember, she’s just on loan. You can’t keep her.”

Alice smiled to keep from saying the politically incorrect words she was thinking – that there was no way in hell she’d want to keep her.

9

“Why are we taking the dogs?” Stella asked again. Alice had pulled the car up onto the grass near the backdoor and was loading the car. Luggage, tent and sleeping bags in the trunk, reserving the backseat for dog beds, dishes and assorted toys, balls and leashes. She stood upright and poked at the spot near her lower back that always got a catch in it.

“Can’t Owen take care of them? Why do they need so much stuff? There’s hardly any room left for us.”

Alice cocked her head to one side and looked at her. “Owen always gets taken advantage of. So you’re going to be responsible for one of them, for feeding and watering him, for getting him walked.”

“Which one?” Stella whined as she followed her up the steps and into the house for a final look around.

“The little one.” Alice surveyed her sunroom for any stray maps, bending to look under the chair, lifting the cushions off the wicker furniture.

“Ollie? The little piece of shit you call the Spawn of Satan?” Her upper lip curled in disdain.

Alice smiled. “The one and the same. He’ll be good practice for you.”

“Are you comparing a baby to a dog? Not a great image for an impressionable young girl.”

Alice had to turn so she didn’t show her smile, headed to the kitchen and studied the sparse contents of the refrigerator. “I’ve got some bottled water and a couple of apples. I guess I should have bought stuff for sandwiches.”

Stella looked over her shoulder. “The dogs have more food than we do. And me with child. Nice one, Gram.”

“Is all your stuff in the car?” Alice was suddenly remembering how exhausting it was traveling with kids. How had she forgotten? Maybe it was like the pain of childbirth. You had to forget instantly or you’d never allow yourself to be pregnant again. And she hadn’t wanted to give up car trips. The kids had begged to go to Disney World every year during their in-between years. So she’d dressed up her memories, suffused them with a golden glow so that the following year, she still had the heart to do it again. It hadn’t been her favorite destination. Orlando appeared to her like a massive and unnecessary alteration of nature. She went to keep up a front for the kids, to show them that they could do the same things that kids from two-parent families did. Except those other kids flew.

A tapping on the front door set off the dogs. Stella peeked out the window and bent over laughing. “It’s the Asshole and he’s got a suitcase. This ought to be good.”

Alice’s mouth gaped open, and she sucked in a sharp breath. She leaned against the closed door and tried to regain her composure.

“Fred,” she said, as she pulled the door wide. “What a surprise.”

He smiled wanly, as if turning up his lips was an effort, and spoke in a falsely cheery voice. “Do I have the wrong day? Aren’t we supposed to be leaving today?”

Alice looked him over slowly from head to toe, while he shifted from one penny-loafed foot to the other. He was one of those lucky men who had gotten more attractive as he aged. He still had Newman-blue eyes and the creases that lined his face camouflaged the skin imperfections, enhanced the cheekbones, even disguised some of

his awkward self-conscious tics, the lip that twitched and the restless eye shifting. He was half a head taller than she, with a full head of neatly combed silvery hair, dressed in trousers and cotton sweater. He just looked old, she decided, and stuffy. The bluest of eyes couldn't disguise attitude.

“Are you serious? I haven't talked to you in two weeks. And you've been half living at Millie Bailey's.”

He stiffened. “I'm certainly not living with Ms. Bailey. That's just untrue. I'd think you know me better than to think a thing like that. I'm a man of my word. We planned this little excursion and now I'm here. If you're saying you don't want me, well that's on you.”

Alice stepped out on the porch to face him. “Little excursion? Fred, we were supposed to go for three weeks. What do you have in that bag, huh? Enough for one night?” She poked it with her toe and it slid easily. “Is there anything in it at all? Open it.”

He snatched it and took a step backwards. “I will not. Are you having some kind of emotional breakdown? I'm not going to be questioned by you. Maybe this trip isn't such a good idea.”

They did a little dance, Alice moving towards him, even as he moved away. “The trip is a great idea. But I'm not taking it with you. Cause you're a whiny spineless little

asshole, Fred! Now get the fuck off my porch and take your pathetic empty suitcase with you.”

From inside the house, Stella shrieked with laughter. Alice wished she had recorded the exchange for Owen.

10

Alice was four hours into her trip when she realized how deflated she felt. They had gotten a late start. That was part of it. And when she'd pictured herself starting off on an adventure, it'd been with some kind of fanfare – she waving gaily at the crowd through the open window, like the Wizard leaving Oz in his balloon. Or there was a celestial send-off, the early morning gray giving way to a rosy blush just as she pulled away from the curb. A positive omen about the coming adventure. But, of course, if she'd departed at sunrise, she'd have missed Fred's priceless appearance on her porch. Whatever else transpired, that was a scene she'd replay many times.

But there was more. The driving, an activity she actually enjoyed, was not any fun. She had intentionally chosen Interstate 81 for its pastoral route through Pennsylvania, avoiding the east coast crush of New York-Baltimore-D.C. traffic. Instead she found herself sandwiched by 18-wheelers. They either crawled up the hills, blocking both lanes, or roared past her on the downhill, sucking her little Prius into the whoosh of their wake. Her arms ached from the tension of holding the wheel. And Stella wasn't exactly

scintillating company. She'd pressed her pillow against the passenger window and fallen asleep minutes after pulling out of the driveway. Alice punched at the radio searching for a listenable station. She was beginning to suspect that the road was no different from the rest of her life.

Stella awakened once, just long enough to complain of hunger and sulk through lunch at an out-of-the-way silver diner in the Poconos, the kind Fred would have loved. Stella didn't. She wanted Taco Bell. But Alice chose to get a real break from driving, sit in a booth with red shiny seats and ask her granddaughter the important questions, the ones that would influence how free she felt to dawdle.

"How far along are you? Your mother never said." Alice asked as she nibbled at her burger and French fries. Stella took one bite of her grilled cheese before pushing it away.

"She said. You just weren't listening." Stella's mouth curved in an expression that might have passed for a smile. "Seven weeks. Sometimes I don't listen to her either."

"Did you take your vitamins today?"

"You asked me that at breakfast, remember? I hope Alzheimer's isn't genetic."

"You've got some tough decisions ahead," Alice observed, ignoring the sarcasm. If her granddaughter was going to go through with the pregnancy, she needed to start prenatal care. If she wasn't, then she had an even smaller window in which to make an

alternative choice. She wondered that Libby had not been more specific about instructions.

“Not according to Martin. He thinks there’s only one decision.” Stella was saying.

“What’s that?”

Stella pulled back incredulously. With her lovely long neck, she reminded Alice of an angry swan about to hiss and strike. “You know Martin, don’t you?” She nearly choked on his name. “He wants me to disappear and come back seven months later with a flat stomach pretending like nothing ever happened. Like I’m still a virgin.” She gave a short, harsh laugh. Alice noticed that her fingers fluttered lightly over her belly, as if in protection.

The pathos of it all was too much for Alice. She ducked her head and pretended an interest in the last of her fries. When she could trust her voice not to quaver she spoke. “What do you want to do?”

Stella shrugged.

“What about the father?”

Stella snorted. “The sperm donor? He doesn’t want to know anything about it. Where’s the bathroom in this place anyway?” She stood abruptly and walked away from the table. Alice watched her. She had no idea what to do with this one. She was making Libby look easy in comparison.

The waitress appeared at Alice's elbow, wearing her bright, polished smile. "Everything ok?" she asked as she efficiently snatched at plates and silverware.

Alice wanted to blurt out her worries to this stranger, but could tell by the vacancy in her eyes that she was elsewhere, saving the best part of her for her life outside of work.

"Dessert for you ladies?"

She hesitated. When they'd passed the bakery counter on the way in, she'd spied a dark, gooey, chocolate pie that had caused her teeth to ache in anticipation. The sign said they were made fresh daily on site. Fred would have had a piece – and relished every bite.

"Just the check," she said.

As she finished paying, she spied Stella disappearing through the front door. She hurried after her, her heartbeat quickening, overtaken by a sudden unreasonable fear that she might try to run away. It's not like she'd asked to come on this trip or even expressed the least interest in going. Alice could understand why running might seem a reasonable alternative to the other choices she faced. But as she reached the front door, she saw her in the parking lot slouched against the car, elbows resting on the roof, chin in her hands. Alice called to her.

"We should walk the dogs out back, before we get going."

Stella nodded with as little motion as possible, but she didn't protest when Alice placed Ollie's leash in her hand. She didn't reflexively jerk the leash when Ollie strained

at his collar and tried to pull her along. She even smiled when he leapt into the air and tried to catch a slow-moving bumblebee mid-flight. But once back in the car, she inserted her earbuds and turned the dial on the tiny purple ipod with her thumb. Alice may as well been driving alone.

11

A dark cloud descended over Alice as she drove through the Pennsylvania mountains. She could feel it pressing down on her shoulders, squeezing her chest like a constrictor. She hated clouds, at least those from her own personal weather system. She started a list of other things she hated, the dog slobber on the windows, men named Fred or Bill, stupid people who insisted on driving in the left lane even when they weren't passing, men who took advantage of young girls who were vulnerable beneath their thorns. Alice realized she was beginning to agree with Martin's assessment of the situation. Besides the obvious problem of being much too young, there was something about the whole pregnancy that didn't add up. She sighed and shifted restlessly, raising and lowering her shoulders, adjusting her hands on the steering wheel. Only a few hours

into Day 1 and already her arms were starting to ache. Another thing Fred was supposed to do – relieve her with the driving.

Outside the car, the sun shone brightly over green rolling fields dotted with cows and horses, and long mountain ridges blued with distance. A beautiful vista tainted by the filter of her mood, which turned gloomier as she considered how long she had anticipated this trip, how completely different it was turning out than she had planned. She glanced over at Stella, eyes closed, her chest rising and falling evenly with her breath. For her, it was likely that nothing was turning out the way she had planned.

Maryland and West Virginia, flat after the contours of Pennsylvania, passed by quickly without her notice. It wasn't till she saw a Welcome to Virginia sign that her spirits lifted. Virginia was home to Foamhenge, the first attraction on her checklist – a full-size replica of Stonehenge built entirely out of foam blocks in some crazy devotee's field. She remembered the first time she had seen a picture of the real Stonehenge.

Mr. Lane's back was to the class, which didn't mean he didn't see everyone. He always seemed to know what was going on, who the troublemakers were. His arms were stretched above his head as he taped the top of a poster to the green chalkboard and began carefully unrolling it. The room filled with his words, but Alice didn't hear any of them. She was too busy pretending not to stare at Danny Caswell, who sat two seats away and up one row. His silky white-blonde hair fell over his face as he hunched over his desk, his

hand moving busily over paper. Drawing again. He was always drawing, airplanes usually or cars.

“Can anyone name this place?” Mr. Lane raised his voice as he turned to face the room. “Danny?”

Danny dropped his pen and flushed a deep red. He rubbed the palms of his hands against his pant legs and tilted his head to one side. Alice instantly felt sorry for him. The price of the blue eyes and fair-haired good looks was that embarrassment was hard to hide.

“Danny?” Mr. Lane said again.

Danny shook his head.

“No?” Mr. Lane smiled. He looked benign enough, but his voice was velvety, soft, the way it could be just before he started yelling.

“Huh,” he said. “I figured since you weren’t paying attention, you already knew about this place. So, anyone else?” He thumped his finger against the poster and scanned the room.

Alice’s eyes followed the tapping finger. The poster seemed unremarkable at first. A broad green expanse of grass, and big rocks against a deep, blue sky. But something about it captured her attention. It was the rocks. They had a circular pattern that wasn’t a result of nature. And they were huge. Mr. Lane was explaining that the stones had been in that circle for centuries, before big earth-moving machines were invented.

“It’s not unreasonable to believe that with enough men working together, the stones could be stood upright, don’t you think?” Mr. Lane backed away from the poster and walked between the desks, stopping along side Danny. “But first they would have to be made into the same shape, then moved here. How much do you suppose each of these rocks weighs? Several tons? So how did they move them without any machinery to help? What’s that?”

He turned around to another student. “Exactly. Say that louder, Gary, so the class can hear.”

Gary Cobey, hair as orange as his freckles, cleared his throat, “Uh, I said, how’d they get those stones on top?”

“Right,” said Mr. Lane, “even if we could imagine how they’d find stones that size, carve them to the right shape and then move them miles and miles to this exact space, how did they ever lift the stones up to form the caps?”

Alice stared at the picture until she was there in the wide green field, gazing up reverently at the giant rocks. No man, not even her father who was strong as any man she’d ever seen, not even he was strong enough to push those stones into a circle. And he, even with all the men on his work crew and all the men in the church, even all the men in town, couldn’t lift the stones to the top. So the source of the arrangement had to be something else. The mysterious Something Else. She shivered as she stared at the picture. Shivered and giggled at the same time.

If the timing worked out, she could get to Foamhenge before sunset. She could see what a man who must have been as enamored with the great mystery as she was had created. She smiled widely and for a moment saw herself as someone else might – as Stella might if she ever opened her eyes – a person lost in her own Walter Mitty world, smiling to herself about something that was happening only inside her head. Her father used to do that. She hadn't thought of it in years, the way he would be attending to some mindless task like driving or mowing the grass and he'd suddenly start to snicker. She'd asked him once what was so funny. She was sitting next to him in the front seat. He was a quiet man and he'd been silent a long time, leaving her to her own thoughts. Then she'd seen the smile, heard his tiny snort of air that said inside he was laughing. She'd wanted to enter his world, see it from the inside. "Dad, what's so funny?" but her asking had only made his smile fade. He wouldn't look at her. He'd just shaken his head and his face had turned solemn, like he'd been caught in some terrible act. She'd never asked again. She was like him, though, an odd revelation so many years after his passing. She was like her father and she'd never noticed before. She had a fleeting image of a giant unseen web connecting each human securely to all the others, its sparkly filaments visible only for milliseconds at a time.

A blue road sign indicated there was a campsite ahead and reminded her she should be looking for a place to set up camp while there was plenty of daylight. Not that she'd never set up the tent by flashlight. But that was when she had had willing and practiced hands with her. The kids had each known their parts. She assembled the

fiberglass sticks into poles. Owen crawled inside the tent and magically found the loops with his fingers, then helped her guide the poles through them while Libby hammered the stakes into the ground. And voila – in less than twenty minutes, they were throwing the bags in and fighting over sleeping space. With Stella, things might not go so easily. Daylight would be an essential ally.

A billboard off in the field proclaimed that Yogi Bear camping was fun for the whole family. That brought a smile to Alice's lips. It was almost worth the stop just to see how Little Miss Prickles would fare amidst so much forced happiness. She turned on the blinker, tapped her brakes and then passed the exit without turning off. She instantly had second thoughts. She could almost hear Owen's sensible voice in her head. "Set up the tent, then it's all done before we get dinner."

But it was too late. With or without Owen, she'd already made up her mind. She leaned in closer to the steering wheel, pressed her foot to the accelerator, and tried to gauge the angle of the sun. She was betting they could make it before sundown. She glanced over at Stella, who was either still sleeping or making a good pretense of it, her fingers loose around her ipod, a tiny trail of spittle escaping the corner of her mouth. A new worry insinuated itself into her brain. What was with all the sleeping? She tried to remember Libby at that age. Libby had always been in motion, even in the car. Wanting to play the alphabet game or Car Bingo, or sing or discuss every tiny detail of every corner of the Magic Kingdom she expected to see. But Stella had missed nearly a whole day of bright sunlight. She'd only taken a break from napping to eat, though she'd hardly

done that either. It could be the pregnancy. Was it the first trimester that made a woman tired? Or the last, or maybe both? Libby hadn't seemed to be bothered by either. Maybe Stella was just sleeping to escape, because she was depressed. Alice supposed she should be observing her more closely, taking a more responsible role. She just wasn't sure what the responsible role was with Stella.

She passed a Starbucks sign, and gazed at it longingly, but pressed her foot a little harder. She was pushing 80, her absolute upper limit in the Prius, when she saw the road sign for Natural Bridge. She wished she had splurged on a portable GPS for the car, but she had to rely on her memory, on her recollection of what she'd read in a book about roadside attractions. Foamhenge, she was almost certain, was off the Natural Bridge exit. She cut her wheels and flew off the exit ramp, tires squealing as she held to the tight curve.

"Jeez, Gram," Stella said, suddenly wide-eyed as she gripped her safety belt. "When did you take up racecar driving?"

Alice didn't answer, but she slowed as she reached the end of the ramp. There was no sign of Foamhenge or indication of which way to turn. She closed her eyes for a moment and decided to continue towards Natural Bridge. The old macadam highway offered a much different ride than the interstate. It was contoured to the topography. The car rolled up and over the first hill, delivering a roller coaster belly-flutter as she crested the top and dropped down the other side. She liked it. It felt real. Unlike the soulless interstates that had been built by blasting through the countryside, forcing the landscape

to conform to a prescribed grade. Even her tires sounded different, quieter. Then she saw the marker she'd been looking for. FOAMHENGGE, in big cartoonish letters. Alice slowed and turned into an empty field. They had arrived.

"Where are we?" Stella asked.

"Foamhenge." Alice kept her response short. She was feeling oddly emotional.

"You're kidding, right?" Stella craned her neck to take in the deserted surroundings, "we're in some farmer's field in the middle of nowhere."

Alice gripped the wheel with both hands and leaned forward to search the landscape. "There," she pointed. The field was edged in scraggly cedars interspersed with deciduous trees wearing the bright green leaves of spring. Above the tree line, stood tall, unnaturally gray boulders. "That must be it."

"Whoa. Now that you've seen it, can we go? I don't like it here."

Alice paid her no mind. She shifted into drive and bumped the car cautiously over the red clay, scraping the bottom on the ruts. Though there were no other cars, it was apparent by the tire tracks that she wasn't the first to visit. When she reached the row of trees on the far side of the open field, she carefully nosed the car into position and opened the windows. Silence, except for the panting of the dogs, and surprisingly warm. She sniffed. The grass smelled fresh-mown and there was a spicy pungency in the air from the cedar trees. Alice slowly unhooked her seatbelt, climbed out of the car and pivoted, taking in her surroundings. A blue jay flew squawking overhead, and she could hear

crows cawing in the distance. There was a break in the trees just to the right of the car and through the low shrubbery, a path led up the hill. She turned and gestured at Stella to follow.

Stella shook her head. "I'll wait in the car."

"C'mon." Alice was impatient.

"No way," Stella called, "I watch TV. This is just the kind of deserted place that mass murderers like to hang out looking for victims, especially women."

Alice hesitated, hands on her hips. She looked up the hill. The sunlight was slanting across the tall red-tipped grasses that grew beyond the mowed path, bathing them in a golden light. And above, on the bluff, stood the circle of gray, beckoning to her. She turned towards the car. A dog hung out each side, panting happily. If there was any danger, they weren't seeing it. She called again to Stella who just shook her head. Then she walked up to her door, pulled it open and watched the pillow tumble out on the grass.

"We're all getting out. We're going up the hill and we're going to have fun doing it. Bring the dog leashes," she commanded. Then she opened the back door and released the dogs. They bounced to the ground as if on springs and raced up the hill, barking and chasing each other. She followed more slowly.

Stella, despite her lack of enthusiasm, was close on her heels, "You know if that little devil dog takes off, I'm not chasing him. You said we could never let them out without their leashes."

Alice stopped and turned to her granddaughter, taking in the hair spikes, the blue nail polish. “I said you can’t.”

“That’s like a double standard.”

“Not like a double standard. It is a double standard. They’re my dogs and I’ll say when they can be off the leash.”

“I didn’t know you went to the Martin school of parenting,” Stella sniffed.

Alice opened her mouth and closed it again before anything else slipped out that she would later regret. The grassy path was short and steep. In just a few moments they were cresting the top. A bench was waiting on each side of the path. Maybe for those overcome by the sight, Alice thought wryly. There was a breeze, just stiff enough to set the scene, to whoosh through the foam boulders and create a sense of desolation.

“This is just what Mom said,” Stella called, panting, from just a few steps behind, “she told me she was pissed off when she went to the real Stonehenge too. These places must have a bad voodoo energy that makes people mean.”

“What?” Alice said whirling to face her, “what are you talking about? I am not pissed off.”

Stella arched one brow. “Sure, Gram.”

“I’m not pissed off,” but her voice was loud even to her ears.

She stepped in a small circle, critically eying the rocks of Foamhenge. It was supposed to be a life-sized replica, that was the claim at least, but the circle was too small and tight, the lines too regular, the stones too close together. The foam stones looked too much like foam instead of stone and the contours looked hollowed out instead of rounded, concave instead of convex. At one time, they'd been painted gray, but the paint had soaked in, nearly disappearing into the material, allowing the white foam to show through in blotchy streaks. Something, maybe a determined woodpecker, had dug holes at a height of about seven feet. The artist had patched them, but it looked patched, like spackle on drywall before running over it with the scraper. Blobby and bumpy. She poked her toe at the nearest imitation rock, at the little pile of white foam beads that surrounded the base, like the droppings of albino bunnies.

“There’s the slaughter stone. Where the druids sacrificed virgins.” Stella was pointing to a boulder, placed flat in the center of the tall half-circle of foam rocks.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, they did not sacrifice people.”

“Why do you think they pushed all those rocks around? For fun? Stonehenge wasn’t some happy fairy tale place. It was where the Druids hung out performing creepy religious rituals.” She crossed her arms over her chest and pushed her lower lip out. “And they probably did it at sunset.”

Alice reached out to touch the boulder she was closest to. The texture was rough, but forgiving, and held none of the coldness of natural rock. She was torn between laughing and crying.

“It doesn’t look very real, does it?” Alice said, half to herself.

Stella snorted a laugh, “that’s cause it’s not real, Gram.”

Alice kept her back to her, taking a moment to gauge her own feelings, to fight the acute disappointment, the desire to give in to weeping. It was silly of course, even a little crazy. She knew they had driven eight hours just to see a Stonehenge made out of Styrofoam. She knew it and yet. And yet. Maybe at some level, she’d been indulging in magical thinking. That when they arrived it would be transformed like a fairy tale into the real thing. Or at least into something real enough that she could pretend. She shook her head and looked out beyond the stones. It didn’t even look like the windswept Salisbury Plain. The hill, the trees, the scrubby underbrush, and a distant view of the Blue Ridge Mountains – none of that was like the real thing. A dog barked, another howled, then a door banged. Just down the hill, a mere football field away Alice spied a house through the trees. She watched as first one, then two, then three boys raced out the door and around the yard, sending their dogs into a frenzy. There weren’t any houses within a hundred feet of Stonehenge. She was sure of that.

“Gram,” Stella’s voice had a plaintive edge, “that’s why you wanted to come, right? For kitsch. To see the fake Stonehenge the crazy man built.”

She could hear the need in her voice. That snapped her out of her mood. Stella needed her to be an adult. She went to stand by her, feeling a rush of affection for the grandchild that tried to push everyone away. She wanted to reach out and circle her shoulders reassuringly. She hesitated, her arm almost aching at the restraint. Then she

gave in, placed her arm gently around her and could feel the stiffening, the rigidity with which Stella kept herself separate. Alice didn't withdraw, just patted softly, the way she had with Libby when she needed comforting. She thought she could feel a slight thaw before Stella ducked from her embrace.

Stella moved towards the horizontal rock she had called the slaughter stone. She walked the length of it, her finger trailing along the edge. "Do you think I'm being punished?" she asked suddenly.

"Punished?" Alice echoed. She felt ashamed. She'd been so caught up in her own disappointment, she hadn't considered Stella. The poor girl thought the trip was her punishment.

"Is that why I'm pregnant? I'm being punished by God for having sex?" she continued.

Alice gasped.

"No, no, of course not. It doesn't work like that. Pregnancy is never a punishment. It might be an unplanned consequence, but a new life is never begun to punish a person."

Stella shrugged. "Martin thinks I'm being punished for having sex." Even with her face averted, she couldn't hide the pain in her voice.

Alice wished a guidebook would mysteriously appear and offer sage advice. With her own children, it'd been difficult enough, but at least with them, she could say what she believed, say anything that she thought might help. With the child of other parents,

she needed to tread more carefully, try to deliver a message that followed their beliefs, but of course she wasn't really sure what those were. She took a deep breath and plunged in.

“People think a lot of stuff, but most of it is crap.”

Stella snorted. Alice continued, “I don't know why people attach morality to sex, sweetie. I've never understood that. It's neither bad nor good. It's a natural desire.” She hesitated, searching for more meaningful words, something that would soothe Stella's pain without diminishing her feelings.

“The thing is, it's so personal, that it's a lot easier on the heart and soul to share it with someone you really care for, that you don't mind looking in the eye after its over. It's more enjoyable that way, but if sometime you forget and do it out of curiosity or because it feels good, or because you want to act like a grown up, or feel loved, well that certainly doesn't make you a bad person. That's what I believe anyway.”

Stella walked around to the other side of the slaughter stone. “Did you see this? There's a Merlin statue,” she said pointing.

Alice shook her head slightly. She guessed that was the signal that the conversation was over. She followed her granddaughter to the other side of the circle. There was a large lifelike Merlin half-crouched in his blue flowing robes, arms outstretched, poised as if in mid-spell.

Alice started to laugh. “It looks like this guy thought Stonehenge was a happy fairy place after all, created by Merlin.”

“No, he didn’t. He says that Merlin is just one theory. See? He’s got all these signs posted that tell about it,” Stella was saying as she bent to read. “Ewww. It says he made a mold of his friend’s face after he died and that’s how he made Merlin’s face. Ewww. That is creepy.”

“It’s a good Merlin. He looks real.” Alice turned back to the circle and resurveyed the giant foam stones. They cast long, dark shadows on the grass. In the fading afternoon light, they had become solid, regal, and mysterious. Underlying the campiness of the artist’s missives, of Merlin, the blotchy paint, and the bulky patches, there was still the hint of the sacred. It called up the ancient, gave a sense of the continuity of life. She wondered that she hadn’t seen it before. “It’s all pretty real actually. I mean the stones are the right size and he’s even got the caps on top.”

“You’re not reading the signs, Gram. This one says that the men are still working. See, there’s one more rock to be stood up. He says there’s 689 men working right now, but they’re in the woods taking a break.”

“I hope Ollie doesn’t find one.”

Stella started to laugh, a real laugh that came from some happy place she usually tried to keep hidden. “Yeah, Ollie would make a tasty meal. I think the man had a really

good time creating this place. He even has a sign that says you better not vandalize because he might be hiding in the bushes and jump out and catch you.”

Alice smiled, feeling herself relax. “That must have been a big job getting all those blocks into the circle. I wonder how he painted them? Scaffolding maybe?” She wandered around and between the stones, touching them gently. Sasha and Ollie returned from their wanderings looking sheepish, full of tangles, and nudged at Alice’s hand for attention. She scratched behind ears, one hand to each dog.

“The sun’s going down, Gram, and I don’t want to be here when all those men come back from break.”

Alice stood upright and looked at the sky. Stella was right. The sun had slipped behind the hills. But for a moment, it cast a final golden pink wash over Foamhenge, lending it a magical air.

“Ohhhhh,” Alice said, slapping her forehead. “I forgot the camera. We should have taken pictures. Wait here while I run to the car.”

Stella slipped her cellphone out of her pocket. “You need to join the twenty-first century, Gram. You don’t need to carry a camera anymore.” She held up the phone towards Alice and clicked. Then she pushed a button and turned the screen to show her. “See? And in a second I can send it to Mom and Owen. There. Now can we go?”

“Will you take some pictures of the signs too?”

Stella rolled her eyes and huffed, “One of each sign and then I’m going. Not all magic is good you know and I don’t want to be here in the dark.”

Alice nodded, but after Stella clicked her last picture and started down the path, she lingered for a moment longer, breathing in a sweet smell that she imagined might be honeysuckle. She hadn’t seen any vines, but dusk and dawn, unlike any other time of day, had a mysterious way of distributing scents. She inhaled deeply and blew out the air in a soft sigh. It had turned into a mostly good day.

12

They had barely driven back to the interstate before the night turned pitch. The car’s headlights cut a path as if a tunnel through the darkness. The stars twinkled to life one by one, till Alice could spy the Northern Cross overhead. The traffic had thinned considerably and the trucks seemed to have gone to ground.

“Where did you send the pictures?” Alice asked suddenly, “the ones you just took. You said you sent them to your mom and Owen.”

“I sent them to their cellphones with a text message.” Stella’s head was back on her pillow, the ipod in her hand, but the earbuds were loose around her neck.

“How can you send them to me?”

“You don’t have a camera on your phone? Do you text? Or have an email address?”

Alice shook her head.

“You need to get one, Gram. How do you expect people to stay in touch? And you don’t have to get your own computer you know. They have them in libraries. You can just get a free email account and then go to the library and look at it. Or use your work computer. Do you know where you’ll work when we get home?”

Alice shook her head again. “No, not yet.” She didn’t tell her about the possibility of staying at Antonelli’s. She feared it would sound as depressing to Stella as it did to her.

“Have you sent pictures to your Uncle Owen before?”

Stella didn’t answer, but Alice could sense the motion of a shrug. She kept talking, trying to keep her involved, though she could feel her withdrawing behind her mental moat. “Does he ever send you pictures? Of him and his friends? Or a girlfriend?”

Stella snickered. “You don’t have to pretend for me. I’m not blind. I know Uncle Owen only likes boys.”

Alice drew in her breath sharply. She wrinkled her forehead. “What?”

“Gram,” Stella said. “You know what I mean. Uncle Owen doesn’t have girlfriends. Well, he has girl friends. He’s got lots of those, but not like girlfriend girlfriends.”

What was the child saying? She took in another breath, but it felt like there wasn’t enough oxygen in the car, maybe the world. “What?” was all she could stutter; as her grip tightened so hard around the wheel she thought it might fracture in her hands. She replayed Owen’s life in scenes like she was thumbing through a deck of cards. Owen the toddler with the halo of curly hair. Owen the sensitive soul in grade school. Sweet Owen in high school, practical and sensible, going to the prom with what was her name? That mousy little thing, who practically glowed with Owen’s attention. Owen bringing home his roommate from college, and then the next year another one, and the roommate he’d had to share expenses the last few years. Till he’d suddenly moved out and bought his own place. Even Stella had put all the parts together. Even Stella knew the score. Only she was blind. Or she was the only one he hadn’t told. Either way, there’d be no grandchildren from him. No little Owens running around with his thin, curly hair and goofy grin.

“You knew Owen is gay, right? You’re his mother. Of course you knew,” Stella was saying softly. She was watching her, her face changing as it sunk in. “How could you not have known? Everybody knows. Even Martin.”

Alice accepted each pronouncement like a blow. It was true. She should have known. “Is that why he’s been so sad lately? Robert wasn’t just his roommate? They, they,” she swallowed, “broke up?”

Stella was nodding solemnly from her corner. “This is too much responsibility for a young girl, you know. I shouldn’t have to tell my grandmother that my uncle is gay. I need to listen to music now.” With that, she stuck in her ear buds and turned her face to the pillow.

Alice sighed, lifting and dropping her shoulders. Her face was burning. After the first shock had worn off, the shame had settled in. Her shame that she had failed him as a mother, never sensing his feelings, his predilection for other men. Never really being there for him, feeling his pain when a relationship deteriorated, never even noting when one roommate was traded in for another. No wonder he resented her indulgence towards Libby. There had been so many signs and she’d never even been curious. Where had she been? She wondered if her son-of-a-bitch ex-husband knew. That would be the nail in the coffin, the final statement of her worthlessness as a human if even David had been observant enough to pick it up.

She kept driving. She settled in for the next level of emotion over the news. Owen was her boy, her only son and he was gay. Instead of liking girls like other young men, he liked boys. He did things—personal private things that she didn’t want to consider – with other men. He’d never create life. He’d never come home with his wife and kids for Christmas, like normal men did. Like normal men. Her son wasn’t normal. He was queer.

He was a homo. A fag. A flamer. She ran the list through her head of all the defamatory terms she'd heard people use to describe homosexual men. She started to cry, while staring straight ahead. She didn't want to swipe at her tears, didn't want Stella to detect the motion, know that she was sick with knowledge. Her little boy. Were people mean to him? Did they pick on him? Did they call kind Owen terrible names because he loved men? When he was in tenth grade and Donnie Sanford was bullying him, was that what it was about? Was he calling him a queer? A thin rivulet of snot ran from her nose and she just let it drip.

13

“Are we going to drive all night? I’m getting hungry.”

Alice glanced at the clock, then over at her granddaughter who was sitting straight up, face illuminated a ghostly blue by the dashboard lights. It felt like days had passed, but it'd barely been an hour. She nodded. She had to pull herself together. “We should stop. Tell me when you see something you’d like to eat. There’s a town coming up.”

More silent minutes ticked by.

“Gram, are you going to tell Owen? That I told you?” Stella’s voice had a catch in it. “I don’t want him to be mad at me.” This last came out in a rush, her voice lifting to a

squeak. She'd not shed one public tear about her pregnancy, but she looked completely miserable at the possibility of betraying Owen. It made her easier to love.

"No," Alice said softly, "I need to talk to him about it, but I can find another way to bring it up, if you want me to." She felt just a twinge of shame that she was pretending she'd put off that confrontation for Stella's sake. Hadn't there been enough lying? She was doing it for herself. She simply didn't know how to confront her 38-year-old son about hiding something so fundamental to his identity without implicating her own complicity. She'd thought of a dozen conversation starters in the last hour, each more inappropriate than the last.

"Hi Honey. I hear you're never going to make me a grandmother..." Or "Owen? It's Mom. The only one you never told?" Or maybe the last idea was the most honest. "Owen? It's Mom. Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

She'd never used that word in the same sentence with her son's name, barely remembered ever being angry with him, but she was shocked by his news, to find he had a secret identity that was only secret from her. Coming out of the closet. Suddenly she understood on a personal level what the term really meant because hers was the only closet he had bothered staying in. An image came to mind of Owen at six. He'd been playing hide and seek with Libby. She'd walked into her room and yanked open the closet door as she prepared to change from her work clothes. There he'd been, standing soldier straight with arms pressed to his sides, wedged between her dresses, an index finger rising to press against his lips. He never spoke, his coal black eyes saying it all.

Don't tell Libby. She'd been so impressed. He'd looked so earnest, so still, was so intent upon the game. Her smile said it's our secret and she had closed the door even as Libby came running in, Mom, I can't find Owen.

She didn't want him to be gay. She didn't want his life to be harder than it had to be. With three grandchildren, it seemed almost greedy, but the truth was that it pained her to learn that she would never hold a little Owen in her arms, never hear the term Grandma come from his offspring. This new Owen was hard to accept, challenging to adjust to but it was the surprise that was the hardest, that he'd never given her the slightest hint, that her mother intuition had failed so utterly.

A passing sign caught her eye. She had to shake her head, remind herself that she needed to attend to the grandchild she had, the one sitting in the car with her. "Did you still want Taco Bell? Since you didn't get it for lunch?"

"Sure," Stella said, without much enthusiasm.

"Drive-thru?"

They each ordered more than they wanted. Quesadillas, burritos, nachos, cinnamon twists, large drinks – and somehow managed to swallow it all as if it was their last meal, as if they'd spent days in the desert without food or drink.

"We shouldn't be eating so late," Alice said, when she stopped to take a breath, thinking that she did not want to add one more parenting failure to her list, "from now on we're going to get a schedule and stay on it. And we need to stop at healthy places where

you can get vegetables, not just fast food, alright?” She looked at Stella who nodded on cue. “Your mother will kill me if I don’t take good care of you.”

“Then we have to go to bed early, too. Martin thinks ‘early to bed and early to rise’ gives you a free pass into heaven.”

Alice smiled.

“Can we stay at the Hampton Inn? I saw a sign for one. They always have pools, you know.”

Alice glanced over her shoulder, giving a passing thought to the tent in the trunk.

“And I read that they take dogs.”

“You read it?”

“On my phone. I looked it up.”

Alice nodded. She was too tired to protest. She felt bruised inside, weary. The promise of a comfortable bed was suddenly impossible to resist. She backed out of the parking space and out onto the side road.

“They have free breakfast, too, with waffles.”

“Was that on your phone?”

“No, Martin likes Hamptons. He thinks they’re a good value. That’s where he likes to stop.”

“So there is something you two agree on.”

“Right, we like the same hotel chain,” Stella snorted.

“But he took you there, to a place that had a pool and waffles for breakfast. Stuff you like. He didn’t have to.” Alice knew it was a stretch, but she felt he deserved defending.

Stella made an impatient sound and turned towards the window. “There it is,” she said, pointing at the sign. A few moments passed before she added, “he told Mom once that we should stop because it was safe and it’d give me a chance to go to the pool alone, without Sean and Bobby tagging after me. He said I needed some space from the boys after being stuck in the car with them for hours.”

Alice kept silent, but she nodded in the cocoon of the front seat. She had an incomplete picture of Martin. She knew only what she saw when he visited, and since they didn’t live far enough away to spend the night nor close enough to drop by for dinner, she saw only snippets of what life might be like with him.

“It’s more than my real father ever did.”

Alice tried to keep from showing her surprise. “I didn’t know you knew him.”

“He came to the house a few weeks ago to tell Mom that he’d created a college fund for me, since he’d been so worthless as a parent. She probably forgot to tell you. I told her I was pregnant right after he left.”

Alice nodded. That kind of news had a way of obliterating all other memories, at least for the short term. “So how did it go?”

“He said he hadn’t told his parents about me till we moved to New Jersey to live with Martin and that his mother might not ever forgive him for depriving her of being a grandmother. And then he told me I was a lot better off with Martin, and he hoped I’d had a happy life.”

Alice turned into the hotel parking lot and pulled up to the door. She turned to Stella, giving her her full attention. “Wow. He told you that you were better off with Martin?”

“Yeah, so I told him to go fuck himself.”

Alice burst into laughter. She laughed and laughed, rocking back and forth, shaking with each peal, bordering on hysteria. Then Stella’s shoulders started to shake and they laughed without restraint, releasing all the pent up emotion of the past few days.

“Oh dear, I bet that surprised him,” Alice said as she wiped her face.

“Yeah, Mom said I needed to apologize, but Martin said to let it be, I had a right to my opinion.”

“Martin has a whole other side I didn’t know about.”

“He said I shouldn’t use that language except in extreme situations, but that qualified as an extreme situation.” She released the door handle. “Can we go in now? I think the pool closes at 10.”

Check-in was dispensed with quickly and Alice pulled the car around to the entrance nearest to their room. While Stella went to find the pool, Alice took care of the dogs and tested a bed. It felt cushiony and plush, perfect. She pushed her suitcase into a corner and rummaged for nightclothes. She didn’t bother with a shower, just a cursory brushing of her teeth and a quick swipe of a washcloth over her face. There would be plenty of time for showering in the morning, time to regroup and plan, to remind Stella that they couldn’t afford more nights in a hotel. But for the moment, she just needed to let her mind go blank, not think. She needed the kind of blankness that only came with sleep. She changed, then tugged at the bedcovers. After plumping the pillows, she climbed onto the bed, sinking into the softness, a satisfied Ahhhhhh escaping her lips. The remote was in her hand and she was just about to indulge in mindless television when her cellphone rang.

She scrambled out of bed, trying to remember where she’d buried her purse. “Hello?” she said breathlessly on the fourth ring.

“Hey.” It was David, the only person in the world who would say ‘hey’ in that familiar way as if of course she should know who it was despite being divorced for nearly thirty years.

“How did you get this number?” She searched through her sometimes faulty memory, but could not come up with any time he would have caught her so off guard that she shared her cellphone number.

“Martin gave it to me.”

“Oh my god, no more cookies for him.”

“Hey c’mon, don’t be like that. I just needed to talk to you and there was no other way.”

Alice shook her head slowly and sat down on the side of the bed. She wanted to climb back into the nice warm nest, but she didn’t want to talk to him from bed. It was too intimate.

“What’s up?”

“How’s Stella?”

“She’s fine.”

“Is she there with you?”

“She went down to the pool.”

“By herself?”

She wanted to ask what the hell he knew about the right age for a kid to go to the pool by themselves. “Yes, by herself,” she said. “She’s fifteen. Do you want her to call you back? She has her own cellphone, you know. Why didn’t Martin give you that?”

“I didn’t ask. I wanted to talk to you first. Libby filled me in on what’s going on. I thought maybe I should tell her that I’m here for her, if she needs anything. You know, that kind of thing.”

She rolled her eyes and gestured as if sticking her finger down her throat. “OK, do you want me to tell her that?”

“No, I should tell her myself I guess.”

“O.K.” She waited. He had this way of talking in circles, getting to his point on the second or third swing. She wanted to ask about Owen, find out what he knew, but she feared his answer.

“Libby’s worried. She thinks you’re going to take Stella from her.”

“What?” Alice wrapped herself in the blanket, suddenly cold.

“She figures no one can be a more perfect mother than you and Stella will want to live with you instead of her.”

“Did Libby really say that? She actually told you I was too perfect or are they your words?”

“Maybe it wasn’t in quite those words...”

“You are such an asshole.”

“...but I knew what she meant. It's hard to live up to Miss Perfect. You can be pretty intimidating, never having any weaknesses or making a mistake.”

Alice stood up and started to pace. “What kind of shit do you tell yourself? I am nowhere near perfect, but I had two kids to raise and no help in sight. What did you think I was going to do? Leave them like you did?”

“You know what I mean. Other mothers raise kids alone. But they recognize their limits. They don't try to pretend they can do everything. They may get the kids fed, but they're not taking them off to Disney World every year.”

She started to laugh, but it was harsh and humorless. “So you're calling me twenty-five years later to complain that I took the kids to Disney World? And why didn't you bitch about it then? Oh yeah, because you were too busy drinking and snorting coke to notice what I did with the kids.”

“I'm just telling you the truth. Your daughter is afraid that you're trying to steal her daughter. She's afraid she'll love you more than her.”

“Did you know that Libby used to accuse me of loving the dog more than her? Because she was so insecure, so afraid of being left. She was like a vessel that could never get filled. You know, I really could've used help with that. I may have been able to get them to Disney World, but I couldn't make up for them feeling like their father didn't love them.”

“Yeah, it’s all about me. Cause perfect Alice couldn’t be making her daughter feel insecure. And that’s fine. I was a fucking asshole and I’m sorrier than you can ever imagine. OK? Really. And you can think what you want. I just wanted you to know about Libby.”

Cellphones were an entirely unsatisfying means of communicating. There was no click, no final hanging up. Just dead air and uncertainty. Was he gone or still breathing on the other end?

“You there?” he said.

“Yes.” She didn’t offer more, but she didn’t hang up either.

“How do you think Stella’s doing really?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think she really understands what’s going on, how this will affect the rest of her life. Whatever happens.”

“She’s probably thinking it turned out ok for her mother. She doesn’t know it was only thanks to you.”

Another of his tricks. Tell her what a disappointing human she was, then turn around and tell her she was wonderful. He was the master of roller coaster mind games, though she didn’t believe it was a trait he cultivated. It just seemed to emanate from him naturally.

“Except for Disney World?”

He surprised her by laughing. “Yeah, except for Disney World, you did ok.”

“Thanks.” Saying anything else would have been pointless, uncivil, which is just how he liked it. He should have been a politician or at least a lawyer. They lapsed into silence. She sat down again, this time on the desk chair.

“Have you talked to Owen?” she asked suddenly.

“Nah, he’s still pretty mopey over that Robert character. He doesn’t have much to say to me.”

She closed her eyes and jammed her forehead with the tips of her fingers, over and over. So even the asshole knew. She couldn’t stop herself. “Yeah well maybe this is when he really needs his father, but you probably didn’t think of that.”

“Like I said, we can’t all be perfect like you. I know you won’t believe me, but I’m telling you as a favor. So you know. You can be a real asshole sometimes yourself. A real fucking asshole.”

“Wow, thanks for helping me!”

“You know I wasn’t an addict when I married you.”

She nearly gasped, but hoped she stopped herself before he heard it. “Is blame one of the twelve steps?”

“I really don’t want to fight with you, Alice, cause you’re always right and you always win.”

“I am always right, but you still win.”

“I'm getting married.”

Alice was stunned. She was glad he wasn't in front of her, grateful for the anonymity of a phone line. She hadn't seen that coming. “What?” she stuttered at last.

“That's why I called. Libby said I should tell you.”

Of course, she should have been more suspicious about his concern for Stella. Whenever she started to question her judgment about him, he proved her right once again. “Married. What is she, Libby's age?”

“No, she's older than Libby.”

She recognized the hedge. She'd only been making a dig about the age thing, hadn't thought it was true. She wanted to throw up. Her life really was one big stereotype. “What, ten years?”

“Eight. Not that it matters.”

She laughed.

“What's so funny?”

“Nothing. Just that I spent twenty years raising the kids, killing myself trying to be both parents, earn enough to feed them. You wasted your life and you're the one getting married. Seems a little ironic.”

“Why would you get married again? What would you need another husband for? Remember when I used to say that being so good didn’t get you anywhere? Remember your answer? You said virtue was it's own reward.”

“I never said that.”

“You did. Some things get burned into your memory, you know?”

“Then you’re right.”

“What?”

“I am a fucking asshole.”

She snapped her phone shut and threw it on the bed. When she looked up, Stella was in the open doorway, still dripping from the pool, eyes wide. She looked ready to bolt. “Was that Uncle Owen?”

Alice started to chuckle, but the horror on her granddaughter’s face stopped her. “No, no, no, of course not. Owen and I would never talk like that, no matter what. That was his father. Your grandfather. We were just having a little disagreement.”

She stood up and went to the door, gently pulling Stella inside and closing the door behind her. “How was the pool, sweetie? Was the water nice?”

Stella sat down hard on the side of her bed, pulling the towel tight. Her voice was small and flat. “It was about me, wasn’t it? You were having a fight because of me.”

Alice smiled. “Not even close. It was just a variation on the same argument we’ve had for the last thirty years. It started well before you were born.”

She stepped closer to Stella and gently touched her shoulder, noticing the start of a shiver. “You need to get in a hot shower, out of this wet bathing suit, OK? Then we can talk. One of the saddest and happiest lessons in this life is that it’s not always about you.”

Stella made a show of rolling her eyes. “Thanks, Gram. Just what every kid wants to hear. You should package those little Gram-isms and put them in a book.”

14

“Where are we going today?” demanded a voice from the other bed.

Alice opened her eyes. Ollie was licking her face, his sandpaper tongue edging towards her ear. She pushed him away, but his short little legs were strong. She had to sit up to get away from him. She wasn’t ready to be awake. She hated transitions. At home she hit the snooze button at least three times before opening her eyes. But here she was with a teen-ager barely ten feet from her wanting a plan. She shook her head, trying to clear the fuzz. Memories of the previous day started to filter through. None she wished to re-live.

“We need to take these dogs out.”

“Are we still going to the stupid UFO place?”

“Yes,” Alice said because it was the expected answer. She rubbed her eyes and then ran her fingers through her hair like a comb. Sasha pushed her nose into her elbow and she patted her head absently.

Stella’s laptop sat open and she touched the keys with almost no sound. “It’s going to take us all day to get to there, you know. But I found a place to go after that, a giant tree house in Tennessee, on our way to Carhenge.”

Alice focused her gaze on her, trying to psychically force her to stop talking, at least for another fifteen minutes, but Stella wasn’t accepting messages. “Look at this place. I think you’d like it, Gram,” she said, turning the screen to show the tree house.

Alice tried not to look, to stay mentally blank for just a few more minutes, but the picture was intriguing. She leaned closer. It was a huge structure, extending between several large trees, with various levels, doors and windows and gingerbread trim edging the roofline.

“It says he spent years building it and even though it has no trespassing signs, he lets people go in.” Stella was smiling, almost beseeching, or as beseeching as she could be. “It’s the fastest route to Carhenge after the UFO place. And on the way we can go to the Smokies and Gatlinburg for Hillbilly Golf. You’ll like it. Martin even liked it. Well, he didn’t completely hate it.”

“I didn’t bring a Tennessee map,” Alice said at last. It was weak, but it was all she had left.

“We don’t need it. I’ve got a Smartphone, you know, with GPS.” Stella held her phone in her hand, waving it as if it were a flag.

“There’s no more hotels,” Alice warned, “we have to find campsites.”

“There’s a campground in the Smoky Mountain National Park. And if you take me to Hillbilly Golf, I’ll go camping without bitching about it.”

“I have to bribe you?” Alice listened for her echo, uncertain of whether the words had sounded so indignant as she was feeling. Stella was bobbing her head, apparently unoffended. “I can be bribed,” she said. She moved her computer aside and threw off the blanket. “C’mon. We should get going so the whole day isn’t wasted on a fake UFO.”

Alice opened her mouth, but Stella was already waving her words away. “I know. The dogs. I’ll take them out while you get ready. I don’t need a shower. I went swimming last night.” Stella was dressed and out the door so quickly the dogs could barely keep up.

The room was quiet after they left, just the hum of the air handler and the distant ding of the elevator bell. Alice lay back and pulled the blanket up to her nose. She thought to call Mary and review the past twenty-four hours with her, get her perspective, but telling her about Owen before she’d even had a chance to talk with him seemed a betrayal. And what if she knew? What if everyone knew and thought her blind for not knowing? Like being the last to know Fred’s alliances had shifted. At least Libby had made David tell her about his bimbo.

She threw off the covers suddenly and walked to the bathroom for a shower. Staying in bed with her thoughts had become very unappealing.

15

“This is it?” Stella asked, “Whoa. Maybe it’d be better if I chose the destinations for a while, Gram.”

They had pulled into an unpaved parking area behind a convenience store. At the edge of the lot, was their intended destination. Alice climbed out of the car to take a closer look – at what appeared to be a junk heap. Broad planks from an enclosure fence littered the ground like a set of giant pick-up sticks. Within its vague circle stood a bedraggled 1950’s style two-story wooden flying saucer, covered in silver paint and tin. The floor sagged from the roof, held up in intervals by stacked cement blocks and single 4” by 4” posts. The seams that attached the curved floor to the ceiling gapped, exposing fat rusty nails and rotting plywood. The second story was a smaller version of the first with an open viewing deck. It looked like a jaunty beret, tilted to one side.

“Told you, Gram, didn’t I? When we watched the video on YouTube. I don’t know why you wanted to come to this dump.”

But Alice wasn’t listening. She was picturing a cartoon mouse from her childhood, a little mouse who never knew when to stop talking. She walked around the structure amazed at the accumulation of junk. A lawnmower, baskets, bottles, ladders,

crushed soda cans, old paintbrushes, stray cement blocks, empty paint cans, lawn chairs, a traffic cone, a mailbox, a blue plastic tub and a fire extinguisher that dangled from an aluminum rafter. On the far side was the entrance, a ramp that hung open like a whale's mouth, engaged by pulleys and a rusty motor, presumably used to raise and lower it. Behind the saucer was a small house trailer, with windows that appeared boarded over.

"Hey," Alice said, "the windows look covered up. I hope nothing's happened to the guy."

"He's fine," said a youthful voice at her elbow.

Alice looked down startled at a sun-browned boy with a shaved head that was just beginning to sprout glistening blonde stubs. His too-big white t-shirt hung loosely over unhemmed knee-length cargo pants and his sockless feet were jammed into bright yellow high-topped sneakers. His pockets bulged as if filled with treasures.

"What happened to the place? He's not still living in that trailer, is he?"

"Yes, ma'am. He still lives there. He's doing repairs is all. His truck's gone. That's how you know if he's home. If you want to know more, I can give you the parking lot tour. For five bucks." He nodded over at Stella. "Each."

Stella started sputtering. "A tour of what?"

"Yeah?" said Alice, ignoring her grandchild, "and what do we get for five bucks each?"

He pulled a wad of paper out of one pocket. From another, he pulled a handful of keychains. “I tell you about Mr. J’s project. I got it all written down so’s I don’t forget anything. And then when we get done, you get a keychain with a picture for free.”

“So if I give you ten dollars we get a tour and two keychains?”

“Gram, this is crap,” Stella said loudly. “You are not going to give him money, are you?”

“So, can you tell me why he did this?” Alice said, sweeping her arm to indicate the entire compound. “I mean what inspired him to spend months...”

“Years.” he corrected, “I can remember exactly how many soon as you pay.”

Alice started to laugh and pulled a wilted ten from her purse. He turned his back to her and dragged a green trash bag from behind some shrubbery, opening it with a dramatic flourish. He turned towards her and assumed a new face. “Welcome to the UFO Rest Stop Museum. Our tour will take 30 minutes and then there will be time for questions.”

“Make it the short version,” Alice said. “It’s hot and I’ve got to keep the car running for the dogs.”

He took a sharp intake of breath and began his recitation, pulling props from the bag as needed. “Mr. J. was out in his garden one night in 1987 planting some watermelon, on account of him hearing that watermelons grow bigger if they’re planted in the dark. And he saw some lights in the sky. So he leaned on his hoe and he says they

was red and green and moved all kind of crazy ways, up and sideways and then stopped. He watched for more'n an hour and he started feeling like maybe they was watching him too. Says they came closer, but maybe only in his mind and they talked to him straight from their minds to his and said they were kind of tired. They'd sure like to stop, but there didn't seem to be anyplace they could rest. So, he started thinking that maybe he should fix something up for next time. He's been working on it ever since. On nights and weekends and between jobs. It started falling apart a couple years ago on account of the weather, so he pulled it apart and started over."

Alice admired his style. He had bits of foil and chunks of wood and old pie plates that he explained were the very same materials that had gone into the making of the UFO Rest Area. There was a crinkled star chart ripped from a magazine that he used to explain the probable origins of UFOs and he had pictures of Mr. J. standing beside the ramp that lead inside his flying saucer and another of him sitting inside in an overstuffed recliner with a couple of cats on his lap. Aliens, he explained, really liked cats. By the time he finished talking, even Stella was paying attention.

"So why do you suppose he works so hard on it?" Alice asked. "It doesn't seem like he makes any money on it or anything."

"No ma'am, he does it for the love of the aliens. He said when they talked to his mind, he liked them right off. And he says everyone should feel welcome here in Bowman, no matter where they start from. And he did good cause it brought you here, right?"

Alice smiled. “That it did. So, does the tour include recommendations for a very late lunch? My granddaughter is hungry.”

“Yes, ma’am. The Daisy Lunch Counter. It’s the only place unless you drive over to the Sheetz. They got sandwiches at Sheetz, but not as good as Daisy’s.”

“Well thank you,” said Alice, shaking his hand solemnly. “Does the tour guide accept tips?”

He grinned widely. “Yes, Ma’am, if you think I was good enough.”

Daisy’s was only a block from the parking lot on the other side of the street. It was small, just a handful of booths and a long red counter, with old-fashioned metal stools that looked like they could spin forever. The storefront was glass, with dusty blue-checked gingham curtains stretching across the lower half, remnants of a past era. Alice half-expected to see Andy of Mayberry walk in the front door. She was glad that Stella chose to sit at the counter, where they had a good view of the empty street. The waitress dropped menus in front of them.

“What a pathetic town this is. The flying saucer is the biggest excitement in the whole place,” Stella complained.

Alice put a finger to her lips, signaling that she should watch what she was saying, keep from insulting the town in front of one of its inhabitants, but the waitress seemed to be paying them no mind. She took their order without any hint of curiosity about the strangers sitting at her counter. Alice found herself ordering egg salad on toast,

not because she wanted it, but because it seemed like it belonged with the gingham curtains.

Alice handed Stella her keychain. “Wow. A laminated picture of a rundown flying saucer. Sure glad we drove seven hours for this. Did you find out what you wanted to know at least?”

Alice twirled around on her counter stool. When she was facing Stella again, she said, “Well, I found out why he does it.”

“Cause he loves aliens? Cause the aliens talked to him in his head?” She pointed a finger to the side of her head and twirled it around. “Crazy,” she whispered, “a certifiable lunatic. You probably liked it cause he reminded you of the crazy people where you used to work.”

Alice smiled. “I liked that he did it for love.”

Stella snorted. “Alien love. Isn’t that against the law or something?”

“Apparently not in South Carolina.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, watching the waitress as she bustled behind the counter, setting paper placemats in front of them, then napkins and silverware.

“Did you know your grandfather was getting married?” Alice asked suddenly, turning towards Stella, remembering David’s news of the night before.

“Whoa,” Stella said, “you’re kidding.” Alice felt a momentary flash of triumph for being the first to know. It was short-lived. Stella considered only a moment before speaking. “You mean to Cynthia?”

“You’ve met her?”

“He took us out to dinner a few weeks ago and he brought her.”

Alice tried to visualize that. A family dinner with Libby, Martin, Stella and the boys, David and his bimbo, but without her. It hurt. Not that he deigned to take them to dinner, but that there could be a family gathering and she wasn’t included. She couldn’t help asking, “What’s she like?”

Stella shrugged. “OK.” She lifted a hand and turned it over. “You know. Regular. Not the smartest person in the room.” She laughed shortly. “Ever.” She turned in her seat to face her more fully. “Gram, were you really married to him?”

Alice nodded. “For six years, but we were young. Why?”

Stella raised her shoulder. “You don’t seem like you go together. He seems, I don’t know. Just not very serious.” She turned to look out the front window. “Cynthia’s pretty, you know, in that snotty sorority girl way. But you’re more like a grown-up.”

Alice glanced over at her. She kept her expression smooth, unchanged. She supposed that in her unique style, Stella thought she was paying her a compliment. She didn’t want to admit to her – depress her by acknowledging – that even at fifty-six she would have preferred to be the one described as pretty, even if the word snotty followed

as a descriptor. But a grown-up? It sounded like an ankle-swelling woman in comfortable shoes.

“Yup,” Alice said, “that’s me. The grownup. The boring, mature one.” Then she spun herself around twice on the counter stool, holding her feet up. “And according to your grandfather, a driven perfectionist whose expectations are impossible to meet.”

Stella shrugged. “Just like him to share the blame, but he’s the one who walked out. On you and his kids. Mom and Owen. They didn’t do anything to him, they weren’t perfectionists. He didn’t even call them or remember their birthdays or Christmas or anything. What’s his excuse for that?” Her words tumbled out in a rush. She was breathing in short little gasps.

“Sounds like you’re talking about your father as well as your grandfather,” Alice suggested gently, reaching out a hand to touch her arm.

Stella yanked her arm away, as if the touch had burned her flesh. “Mr. College Fund? Yeah, can’t wait to tell him I can’t spend his precious money on college. I’ll be buying baby food instead. Who’s he going to blame that on? Huh? Mom? Cause she stuck around?”

Alice looked around the luncheonette. Other diners had come in to occupy the booths and were eyeing them curiously. Suddenly she wished they had not chosen a spot quite so public as the counter. She lowered her voice. “So you’ve decided that you want to keep the baby?”

“I don’t get to decide.” Stella whirled on her, hair bristling like an angry dog. She was nearly screaming. The other patrons went silent so that her every word seemed to echo off the old walls. “I don’t even get to have any say. Martin thinks he gets to decide what is best for me and my baby and I’m not even there to fight for myself.” She stood up and looked around the room defiantly. “What are you looking at?” Eight pair of eyes looked away.

The waitress, her brown face smoothly expressionless, seemingly untouched by the drama, set their plates down without a word. “I’m not hungry,” Stella said and stomped out the door.

Alice looked after her helplessly. She felt as if she were in uncharted waters. Libby’s dramatics had been so much more predictable, so much less mysterious. Or maybe she had just known her better. She stood uncertainly and turned to the waitress to ask for the check.

“Sit yourself back down and eat,” the woman urged, as she lifted Stella’s plate. “She isn’t going anywhere. Nowhere to get to in this little town. We’ll get hers wrapped up good,” she said as she pulled out plastic wrap from a large roll and tucked it around the sandwich, “she’ll be wanting it later.” She dropped it in a brown bag with a handful of chips, then walked to the end of the counter, pulled a blueberry pie out of the glass display and sliced off a wedge. “Now you take your time and have some pie for dessert. You gonna need your strength to deal with that girl.” She clucked her tongue softly as she prepared the bill. “The pie’s free today. Not for none of you,” she called, pointing her

knife in the direction of the booths, “A flying saucer special for tourists.” She let her mouth curve up briefly as she set the ticket on the counter. “These teen-agers today, they’ll wear you right out, if you let them.”

Alice could only manage a nod and wobbly smile in response. She was afraid if she spoke, she’d set off that damned internal faucet, she was so touched by the unexpected kindness. She stayed as long as she dared, chewing deliberately on her sandwich, enjoying the big chunks of egg in the salad. Then she lingered over the pie, because it deserved her full attention. Fresh and homemade, the fruit a hint of tart with the sweet. Finally she stood, left a generous tip and walked out the door in search of Stella.

She didn’t have far to go. The car was parked halfway down the block under the friendly shade of a broad-leaved tree, keeping the dogs cool. Stella was perched on the curb alongside it, head down, speaking into her cellphone. She looked up as Alice approached and held out the phone. “Mom wants to talk to you,” she said.

“Trade you,” Alice said, holding out the brown bag. She needed a moment to compose herself. It was never a good idea to speak with Libby if she didn’t have her wits about her.

“Hello?” she said into the sleek rectangular phone.

“Mom, what’s going on? Stella says she made a scene in some little café.”

“It was nothing, you know,” Alice said, looking at Stella, “she feels just as put out as you did when I tried to force you to look at roadside attractions. And she doesn’t even have Owen around to commiserate with. She’s alone with an eccentric old woman.”

Libby sighed. “Don’t cover for her Mom, and don’t let her get away with being rude. I told her to apologize, so make sure she does.”

Alice nodded, then remembered the phone. “Okay,” she said.

“Thanks for keeping her. It’s given me time to get Martin calmed down a little. Whatever happens has to be a decision she can live with, and he knows that in his own way, but I have to let him say it out loud first like it’s his idea. We’ve got an appointment with the pastor first of next week. That should help him.”

Alice was thinking that it would depend on what the pastor said, but into the phone, she just breathed a noncommittal “Uh huh.”

“Well, are you having an ok time? Stella said you’ve seen a fake Stonehenge so far and a flying saucer.”

Alice chuckled despite herself. Coming from someone else’s mouth, it sounded rather pathetic. “Yup, we have, and Stella has been thrilled to see both places, but she chose the next attraction, so if she doesn’t like it, they’ll be no one to blame but her.”

Stella looked up from the sidewalk and rolled her eyes.

“Where is that?” Libby asked.

“Some giant treehouse in Tennessee and a place called Hillbilly Golf.”

“Hillbilly Golf? That’s in Gatlinburg, isn’t it? How’d she talk you into that?

You’re not going to try to take her on a hike are you, in the Smoky Mountain National Park? Good luck if you are, cause she likes that stuff even less than we did. Let me say good-bye to her. Will she remind her to call me everyday? I want to know what’s going on, the first time she feels the little butterfly flutter...” Libby’s voice caught.

“Love you,” Alice said softly and handed the phone back to her granddaughter, thinking that having grandchildren didn’t protect her from pain. It only compounded the amount of sadness she could feel for her children. Child, she corrected as she reminded herself that there would be no children for Owen.

Back in the car, Stella opened the paper bag. “Thanks, Gram, I was starving. Probably why I started yelling. My blood sugar dropped too low.”

Alice just smiled. That was as close to an apology as she hoped to get. “Where’s the map? I’ve got to figure out the best way to go from here. We have to drive through the park to get to Gatlinburg, right?”

“Yeah, but we don’t need a map, we can use my phone.”

“But I can’t see your phone from the driver’s seat,” Alice said, “and I like to know where I’m going.”

Stella put her sandwich on her lap long enough to type into her phone. “OK, but I bet my phone will tell me which road to take way before you figure it out on your stupid map.”

Alice ignored her, unfolding the map and spreading it over the steering wheel. Sasha poked her head up from the back seat and laid her chin on Alice’s shoulder, begging silently to be pet.

“Got it,” Stella crowed, “go right at the stop sign.”

“So does that mean you’re staying awake? Cause your phone is only good if you can tell me what it says,” Alice said, “so if you’re planning on listening to that ipod the whole time or taking a nap, I need to know what roads to look for.”

Stella sighed audibly. “Go right here, then you go right again at the next road and then you go right again and stop.”

Alice put the car in gear, pulled away from the curb soundlessly and put on her blinker to make the first turn. “We’re going around in a circle to get back on the road we came in on?”

Stella snorted impatiently. “You forgot to take UFO pictures and if I don’t have pictures, no one will believe we drove seven hours to get to such a stupid place.” She pointed to the parking lot.

Alice reached over and took Stella's hand before she could exit. "Thank you Stella, I would have been really sad if I had gotten all the way to the Smokies and realized I didn't have any pictures of this place."

"Yeah, and I would have been really sad if I had to listen to you complain about it." She turned to the backseat. "C'mon dogs, we're going to take get your picture sitting in front of the UFO. You can send it to your doggie friends. Hey, look who's here." Their tour guide was waving at them from the lot, grinning. "That kid is smart. He knows a mark when he sees it."

Stella got out with a slam of the door and held out three dollars to the boy. They spoke for a couple of minutes and he waved the money away. She came around to Alice's side of the car, where Alice was wrangling dogs trying to get their leashes attached.

"C'mon Gram, the kid is waiting. And he wouldn't take money. He said picture-taking is included in the tour."

After she commanded Sasha to sit next to Alice, Stella picked up Ollie and stood on her other side. "Family photo first," she said to the boy. Then she asked for another of just the dogs and one of Alice and finally one last picture of her alone with Ollie. "Ready?" he called. She smiled a big wide grin as he pressed the shutter.

When Alice looked surprised, Stella said, "When I show the picture to the baby, I want her to think I was happy."