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Sadie Greye,
and the Men in
the Case***

By Victoria Leigh Bennett

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EMMELINE, SADIE GREYE, AND THE MEN IN THE CASE

If you've never met an unreliable narrator, this may be a new experience for you. On the other hand, as it is a slight instance of the narrational category, you may end by saying "Oh, that's all it is! That's rather disappointing." But better to be governed by caution and to announce the appearance of such a phenomenon at the beginning (which is where it mostly occurs here) than for the reader to make his or her way all the distance through the novel only to cast it aside in disgust because they were not forewarned. So, here's the gist of the matter: the cover of this novel contains a certain image, after all, and the controlling spirit of the book, I would maintain, is indicated by that image. The image is of the hexagram Tui, number 58 in the hexagrams of the Chinese poetic oracle and book of philosophy, *The I Ching*. It refers to several controlling images and descriptive words, such as "the youngest daughter, the joyous, the lake, the mouth, the west, the autumn, metal," and such concepts. Though this story will not deal with all of the words and images, it is intended at the very least to participate in a

fictive world concerning the youngest daughter (but about that more in a moment), the joyous, and the mouth (or telling and relating something).

Now, where the unreliable part comes in is that the book is really more in a way about an old woman than a young one, though one woman in the book is older and yes, the other is verifiably younger, even breathing the spirit of youth itself. The narrator is also playing the reader slightly false in that the younger woman is actually the eldest daughter in her family; but of course, in comparison with the older woman, she is very young indeed, so these things are after all comparative. And, telling the story of the older life is at the center of the book, whereas the reader might be expecting only a young life to be described. But then, one has to remember all the times he or she heard the curmudgeonly, antique sentence, “We were all young once,” to get into the true spirit of the thing, and maybe even to appreciate the rationale of describing two women of vastly different ages as “young.” And of course, one must also realize that some old people are still what all the silly songs and stereotypical sayings refer to as “young at heart.” So, without further ado, here is the story of Emmeline (the keen old woman), Sadie Greye (the young woman,

who hated her very own name itself because it seemed to her “old-fashioned”), and their often key motivating forces, the “men in the case,” as they used to be called playfully (when not legally) in Emmeline’s day.

“He was my third husband, and the one I loved the most, although he didn’t stay long. His feet had wanderlust, and for a while, mine did, too. But he allowed me to talk him into buying this house so that we would have a place to come back to in between venturing off to places new and strange. Then, I found that my wanderlust had ended, and I wanted to stay with him in a cozy place just for the two of us, with fewer of his fly-by-night travelling friends about, whom I found I was just sick and tired of. I wanted him all to myself for the end of our lives, though I was only in what’s called now ‘late middle age’ when I started to pull out of his journeyings. At first, he would go off by himself, and then come back with tales of all sorts of strange adventures, and with treasures for me. But then, gradually, the house got full of his junk, of strange carvings, and of lovely but delicate fabrics, and of plants that didn’t live long in this

temperate climate, but seemed to die a little each time he left, as I did. He was wealthy, of course, and—"

"Of course?"

"Well, who else could pay for such nonsense as all this junketing about? You don't think I could, do you? Anyway, he sat down with me one day on the sofa when I could tell that he wanted to be off again, and took my hands, ever so gently.

"'You're not really happy with our life anymore, are you, Emmie?' He called me Emmie, as did all of my men and my closest female friends, though those weren't many, because I've never taken to other women much. 'I can't just sit here, Em. And I wouldn't be unfaithful to you, but the thing is that I meet other women who like what I like, and maybe you meet other men who want to settle down, and I think that we may have come to the end of our road. If you want, in fact even if you don't want, I think I should put the house and all our stuff so far totally in your name, and give you an income for life. You know I've got a guy, a firm, that does my investments, and lawyers, and they can arrange it all, and any other money you feel you need, within reason, you can just ask for. From

them, directly. If there's any question they can contact me. You can even keep the income if you re-marry, or if I do. As long as I'm not also supporting someone else who doesn't have some sort of money or income from work, you know.'

"Well, there were tears on both sides. I think he really did feel divided and pulled, but despite all the romance of travelling around all the time to see the world, he was a pretty practical person. And though I felt really angry with him, I loved him too much to show a lot of that, and he knew it, and that added, I think, to his feelings of guilt. So, we split up—"

"How long were you married, altogether?" Sadie Greye was curiosity itself about her aunt's life, because her parents seemed not to know her aunt very well, except that they knew she had no children. As they had three themselves, in whose lives they were both intrusively involved, this left her aunt out of most family tales, as did the fact that she had not communicated much with her brother and his wife once she and her brother were both adults. As a younger sibling, he had felt free to conduct his life without contacting her much, except for Christmas cards and the like.

“I knew him for two before we married. Then, three years. But it was wonderful while it lasted. And that man could treat you well in the bedroom! But I knew myself that if he already was noticing other women, that it wouldn’t be long before he would find one to keep him company, perhaps already had and was just waiting for me to accept the fact and let him go, and I didn’t want to disgrace and dismiss what we had had together for those blissful five years by refusing his overly generous offer. So, finally I said ‘Yes’ to it, and I’ve been single ever since. I just can’t get over him, and cried over him night after night for a long time. But I still love him, even though I’ve never seen him again, which is more than I can say for the rest. The ones of them whom I still remember fondly are just faintly warm memories. Larry the second-most perhaps, though I know you’ve probably heard the expression ‘comparisons are odious.’

“So, Sadie, who rings your chimes? I can’t believe that a young person like you doesn’t have someone. Though of course, your father and mother said nothing about that when they arranged for you to stay with me. As long as he doesn’t roar up on a motorcycle or a busted car engine sweating fumes, you can have him over any time you want. Just give me due

warning, and tell me a little about him, and that'll be fine. But no bounders, mind, no one trying to live off me for my money.”

“What’s a bounder?” Sadie Greye dawdled and put off deciding about Gene.

“People don’t use the word anymore; it’s largely a British word, from one of my—well, not husbands, but lovers. It means a real cad, which is another word I guess you don’t hear anymore. I know—I heard some teenagers calling each other ‘jerkwads.’ Does that explain better?”

Sadie grinned at her aunt, whom she’d always thought of as a maiden aunt, and said “Sure does.” She had not expected to hear these sorts of things, to even like her aunt at all; she had always thought of her as a maiden aunt. Her parents had never said anything about her aunt having been married three times, for one thing. Though of course, they had always had a tactful tendency to hide uncomfortable truths. She thought too that there were some things about herself, possibly, that had not conversely been revealed to Aunt Emma yet, as Emmeline had asked to be called. “Or just plain Emma,” she had said.

But Sadie Greye was obsessed with a young woman's questions. "Oh, more about you first! Well, what was his name? And what did he look like? Was he handsome, or just average?"

"His name was Dan, but I always called him and thought of him as Daniel. And yes, he was as handsome as the very devil. He had jet black hair even in his fifties, and the brownest of brown eyes, and olive skin. He showed his mother's Latina heritage. And he was tall and slender. Just what I liked, as it happened. He was about three years younger than I was, I think."

"Where did you meet?"

"You're full of questions today. We need to start some lunch soon. But I'll tell you that, I suppose, it's no miracle, though he often struck me when he was around as a sheer miracle of luck, my luck. We met at a friend's house when a big party was on, and for some reason, he took to me. I liked his sense of humor, and we started hanging around together. You see, neither of us really liked big parties, and it was a total coincidence for both of us, I can't remember what exactly, that we were there, as neither of us had planned to attend. We sat together and were

quiet a lot at the start, and I had no idea at the time that he liked to go about so much in the world. After we'd known each other about two years, he just up and asked me to marry him, and I just up and said 'Yes.' It was odd, but it felt freeing, because it meant that we were two people alone, without other commitments, who could do what they chose, and do it together. I'd so often felt constrained by my loves and love affairs, trapped in or out of something, and this again was a quiet choice when it started out. I guess I'll never know what started his feet itching to go places, although he always did have a real interest in old religious sites, tombs, castles, and the like. Ruins, old cities, you name it.

“Okay, now, Sadie Greye, my dear, we need to get some meal or other together. You've had a long week getting settled in here, and our talks have been fun, but we can continue them later. We need to take in some nourishment. I'm an old woman, but I do like to eat, and it's not good for you either to miss meals. It creates irregular habits.”

“Irregular habits! You sounded like Dad just then. But could I ask you one favor? Don't call me 'Sadie Greye.' I can't think why my parents

saddled me with that unfortunate middle name to begin with, but I've never liked it. Call me just 'Sadie,' please."

So, Sadie (as she preferred to be called) had gotten through several of these talks now with Emma (as she preferred to be called) without discussing the inappropriate Gene (as Sadie's parents thought of him). She had no precise idea as to what Emma would think of him, but as he didn't have lots of money to support any wanderlust he might himself be feeling, she doubted whether her aunt would instantly approve of him. Thus, she saved him for later, and wondered if she could still manage to talk on the telephone with him in her room without being overheard. She had her cell phone with her, and Emma didn't seem like a snoop, but it was early yet to be sure of anything, so she wanted to wait to test him out on Emma, at least in person. Who knew, maybe Emma would have a different perspective on him, and wouldn't consider him an unlikely candidate for a—and her thoughts said "boyfriend" at first, but then using Emma's term, she revised this in her mind to "lover." She blushed and giggled, which she did a lot. After all, she was seventeen. Only one more year before college.

It was characteristic, too, of her stuffy parents that they had decided to send her two towns away to her aunt's house for the summer so as to render her unable to be courted any more by the dangerous element Gene represented to them, just because he couldn't afford college yet and they were afraid for her college future if she continued to spend time with him. "I mean, it's not as if I were going anywhere really grand for school," she told herself, "I'm only planning to go to a small, in-state school. Why can't they consider that he might come there and get a job, and later go to school himself, when he had made some money?" She smirked to herself, though. Little did they know that her aunt was the type she so evidently was, not a maiden aunt at all, or even a simple widow or divorcée, but a thoroughly modern woman in her own way, loving men (or at least having loved plenty of them in the past) and willing to let Sadie have Gene over to visit. And then, she thought longingly of Gene's shock of curly blond hair, and his muscular arms and taut build, where she had cozied up to him plenty of times in a warm embrace, and knew that her parents probably didn't have the imagination to know about that either, or that they only feared it and didn't think it had happened yet.

She found, though, that even though she participated some in her aunt's other activities as a way of distracting her and steering her away from the topic of Gene for a while longer, her aunt was canny and wise, and just smiled at her in a funny way when she tried to change the subject, which made Sadie uncomfortable. After all, she already liked her aunt better than she liked her parents, but even helping her with the gardening didn't suffice when her aunt wanted to talk.

Finally, one day, squatting down by the marigolds at one corner of her vegetable garden while Sadie patiently held the watering can and waited for instructions, her aunt sat back further on her heels, and guarding her eyes against the sun with one hand under the brim of her straw gardening hat, asked, "Okay, my girl, enough of this! What's his name? What's his blasted name?"

"Whose?"

"Lover boy's. The one your father and mother don't especially like. I know there's somebody, because even though they wouldn't unbend enough to tell me much about it themselves, your father harrumphed at me down the phone line—which is ridiculous, considering that he's my

younger brother—and asked me if I had a safe and secure place for you to stay while you grew up a bit, away from—how did he put it?—‘undesirables,’ until it was time for you to go to school. And he clearly didn’t mean some sort of female gang, or anything like that. And from the moment you got here, I’ve been doing my own assessment of the situation, and I’ve gotten the confirmed impression that it’s not ‘undesirables’ plural that’s in question, but only one particular undesirable that has Robert and Phoebe in such a stew. Boy, what a boring lot they are! So, anyway, what’s his name? You know you don’t have to fear my spilling the beans.”

“Well, then, his name is Gene. He’s got beautiful, curly blond hair, and he’s really built. Not gross muscles, you know, but he’s strong, and tender, and sweet. And he doesn’t have lots of money like your guy did, so I can’t go off with him right now. But he wants to go to college too someday; he just can’t afford it until he makes some more money. And Dad and Mom don’t like him just because of that. They want me to go with boys who are going to go to the same school I’m going to, some

richer guys who can afford to take me out a lot to stupid dances and stuff. I don't even really like to dance that much, either."

"Well, don't I get to meet him? Ask him over sometime. Soon. Don't waste your life trying to will-they, won't-they, shall-I, shall-I about your parents, they're not going to change any time in your life or mine, probably not, anyway. Maybe start out with an afternoon visit for beer and snacks. Does he like beer?"

"Yes, he does, and he and I have gone out sometimes when I've pretended I'm with my girlfriend Amie, and we go to an old-fashioned beer garden that some people who knew his folks own. We have a great time together."

"Yes, I like beer, too. Amie, huh? French girl?"

"Half-French, on her father's side. She's really romantic-minded, and she's lied for me a bunch of times. Only, for her, well, she likes to read sad love stories where somebody always dies young, or something. I hope she gets out of it and finds a guy for herself."

"And that neither one of them dies young, let's hope."

Sadie giggled. Her aunt was amusing to her often, with her quirky sense of what was likely to happen to people. Her own private sadness didn't make her weigh other people down, apparently.

But now, Emma asked, "Speaking, though, of dying young—you said the people who own the beer garden 'knew' Gene's folks. Are they dead and gone, or something?"

"Yes, they were older when they had him. He's the youngest of three boys. His oldest brother is in the Army and is away on tour a lot. Also, the brother's getting married next spring. His girlfriend is already pregnant. And the middle brother runs an automotive shop, and is nearly ready to be able to buy it out from the owner, who's thinking of retiring. You see, Gene's family is just made up of ordinary people, and Mom and Dad, well—"

"I know Phoebe and Robert. They have pretensions. They always did. That's probably a good part of the reason they're always avoided me. Robert has less than no curiosity about my life, and probably doesn't even know that I was married the first time, or the second, and they certainly don't know that I was married the third. I just happened one day to be in

a lighthearted put-Robert-in-his-place kind of mood, one day about four years ago, and I sent him a photo of this house and of my garden. I wonder how he thinks I came by the money for it. But he's never asked. He did send me a few more Christmas and other holiday cards once I had this address, but he and your mom have never offered to visit, have never asked if I have a man or children, nothing. It beats me how people can be so off-putting. But he must have been at least a little impressed in the back of that thick skull of his, to offer to send you here. I suppose he thought he was sending you to a real backwater where you wouldn't know anybody or do anything. He must've forgotten everything he ever knew about me, though. Hell, maybe we shouldn't just stick with beer and snacks, maybe we should get the grill out and do hot dogs and hamburgers, too. What do you say? Do you trust me with your young man? Have you talked to him since you came away?" With this, she turned her piercing blue gaze back to the ground and started digging the trowel into the dirt again, over and over, turning up the soil.

“Well...yes. I have my cell phone with me. He just says that he misses me, and that if I’ll wait for him, he’ll wait for me. But so many girls have tried to take him away...”

“I agree. Don’t let the grass grow under your feet because of your silly parents. They’ll always be sticks-in-the-mud. You’ve probably never heard your dad talk about our dad, but he was exactly the same way, only maybe more so, because it was longer ago. And now, your dad is getting just like him.”

“What was your mom like? Was she like mine?”

But Emma sighed mightily. “No. No, she wasn’t. She was a fun-loving, funny, very lively and inspiring woman until she got ground under by the life of living with our dad. And then, she just started to fade away. I’ve heard of people in the old days going into what they called “declines,” but I’ve never seen it but with Ma. But finally, she did just die; she sort of starved herself to death or something. I was little at the time, and I’m not sure what it was; we weren’t allowed to talk about it, so I don’t know if there was any real disease or anything. About a year after that, Dad married some old battleax from the neighborhood, and she made our lives

a living hell until finally, I left for school, for college, that is, and Robert was already away at a boy's boarding school. But let's not talk about sad old times, let's talk about what we're going to do to get your young man here. Has his own car, does he, or will he have to get a ride here? And can he get off from work long enough? Can he get time on a weekend, maybe?"

With that, the two women, one old, one young, had started to cement their friendship, as they eagerly made plans to circumvent their close relatives' subconscious maledictions. Sadie even developed the nerve to ask Emma if she had a picture somewhere of Daniel, which made her feel like she was being very bold. But for answer, Emma just drew an old snapshot out of one of the desk drawers in the living room, and held it out to her. It was small, and the color was a bit faded, but Sadie could tell that Daniel was just as handsome and capable-looking as Emma had described him, and in a funny way, this made her have even more faith in her aunt's suggestions and decisions. Her aunt obviously knew a good-looking man when she saw one.

On the day when Gene Markey did show up, his car was old, but ran smoothly, clearly showing the care bestowed on it by his brother's auto shop, as he told them in passing when Emma remarked on the clean purr of its engine. The detailing, too, wasn't overly loud or outrageous, but just pointed up the car's finer structural points as his brother had seen them. He offered to take them out for a spin in it sometime, though he said he didn't know this area as well as his own, back in Summitsville, where he and Sadie came from.

“That's okay, there's a nature reserve around here, quite pretty, that we can go to one day. It's not far away, and we can split the cost of gas, since you'll be giving us a free lift.”

A bit stiffly, which was unusual for Gene, since thus far he had unbent under Emma's friendly treatment of him, he said, “I can afford my own gas.”

Emma laughed and said, “Now don't get offended, my dear young man. Gene. I'm an old woman with no other relative who's shown any

interest in knowing me, and I'd rather be spending a little of what I have on getting to know Sadie better and to know you than to leave it to Robert and that sullen cow Phoebe when I die, though I suppose rough language aimed at them isn't going to hurt them, and is only going to sully your and Sadie's ears with unhappy reminders. Just let me help a bit, and be my friend as well as Sadie's. As long as you behave yourself (in *my* terms, mind, which are a lot different from those of Sadie's folks), you're welcome here."

So, with Gene's help, they got out the grill and fired it up, and before long, were thoroughly enjoying themselves preparing more hot dogs and hamburgers and even later, marshmallows, than three people could well eat. Emma also had pulled some early maturing corn from her garden, and they roasted corn ears as well. When the food was ready, Emma had her little joke with them.

"Gene, Sadie, who wants to say grace?"

The two younger people stopped dead in their tracks, as if suddenly confronted by a bear or mountain lion on one of the nature trails they'd talked so happily moments before about visiting with Emma. They hadn't

figured her for that kind of conventional sort, obviously. When they paused and hemmed and hawed, Emma laughed, and continued, “Oh, well, I’ll say it. Here goes: ‘God bless Robert and God bless Phoebe, may they leave us alone as need-be; God bless Phoebe and God bless Robert, in spite of the fact that they find us too-pert.’” It was only a weak joke after all, but as it put Emma clearly on Sadie’s and Gene’s side, it was accepted as a major witticism. From that point on, none of the three of them felt the need to mention the names of the enemy, but simply carried on with their own good time.

That evening, as the warm day was coming to its close and the shadows were lengthening, Emma turned to Gene and said, “Well, my friend, it’s been a very good day to get acquainted, and I’m so glad now that we’ve met. You’re apparently from what I can tell just the sort of young man I’d prefer for my niece Sadie. Tell me, will you be staying for the night, or making your way home soon?”

He blushed quite red, and looked at Sadie, who giggled and patted his arm. He said almost defensively, “You’re given a bit to snap judgments, aren’t you? How do you know I’m not a serial killer, or something?”

“Because I’m good at the snap judgments I make, that’s why. And I don’t think I assumed you would necessarily be putting up in Sadie’s room, though that’s really dependent upon what the two of you have gotten up to before; I don’t want to interfere with things already started. No, I do have a spare room or two, and as you’ve been so good as to drive all this way on a Sunday, and presumably have to be up for work tomorrow morning, I thought I’d offer. By the way, there isn’t much we haven’t discussed, but work was one of them. Where do you work, just out of curiosity? And forgive it, I’m naturally nosy, and taking my role as Sadie’s protector seriously, though almost certainly not in terms Robert and his wife would appreciate.”

“I work as a UPS delivery driver part-time, and in a tailor’s shop putting up supplies and learning the trade from my uncle the rest of the time. Really, there’s not much call for tailors anymore, except for people who can afford it, and there aren’t many in our area, but my uncle soldiers on, and I figure the little I make with him is worth it to help him support himself. Also, some of the bigger clothing manufacturers are hiring tailors now, and I may be able to get a job with the one or other of them

in Sadie's college town, which looks like it is going to be Otter Creek, just up the way a bit. After all, we've tried to make our plans as well as we can, together. It's not easy, when her folks---well, but as you said, let's not dwell on unpleasant issues."

Emma grinned. "So, you're an ambitious young man full of industry. I really find more and more about you to approve of. I hope you'll be coming back a lot, and soon. I can't have Sadie wasting away forlornly for lack of proper male attention. Now, whether you're comfortable with it or no, just take a small contribution of twenty dollars from me for gas. That's not enough to break me, and not enough to embarrass you. Probably not enough really to help much, either, but it's the thought that counts, and the commitment to you young ones' future together. I feel I have a stake in this, you see, not to see my Sadie end up the way my mother did, married to some tired old dog like my father was."

Gene finally accepted the gift, after Sadie punched his arm gently, and said, "Please, Gene."

They made a plan for the next weekend but one, as Gene had to help his brother in the garage the next weekend; as he explained, the shop's

main mechanic was going to a wedding, and was going to be gone all weekend.

“That’s my lad!” approved Emma with heart, “A man who has a clue about what’s going on under the hood of a car. You seem to have numerous advantageous arrows to your bow.”

Gene blushed again at being so fulsomely praised. He clearly wasn’t used to receiving so much encouragement in his courtship with Sadie, though he liked Emma quite a lot already, as she did him, by mutual instinct. “Thank you so much for having me over, for taking such good care of Sadie, though I guess that’s only a little my part to say, and for being such a wonderful person to me. Maybe we can go on that nature hike sometime before long. See you soon.” And then, he hesitated. Emma, though, heartily held out her hand and shook his, impressed that he had known it was the woman’s role to offer her hand first. She then gestured to Sadie and towards Gene, and turned without looking back to go on her way around the house and douse the grill, tactfully leaving them to say their goodbyes with whatever kisses and embraces they felt like bestowing.

A little while later, after Gene pulled out slowly and without roaring his engine, though he felt like it, Sadie danced around the garden path and came back to where Emma was putting away such foodstuffs as were still out lest the local pests or bees might get into them. “Oh, Emma, I love you! Truly, I do! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” And she swept up her aunt in a tight embrace and squeezed her before letting go.

“Yes, and I’m not the only one you love, quite clearly. He seems like a very well-behaved, energetic, nice young man, and intelligent too, to think so far ahead. If there needed to be anybody to help you plan your way past your parents, I’m glad it was he.”

For the next week and a half, Sadie lived as patiently on love as she could, waiting for the next weekend to come so that she could see Gene again. But she was taken up with the natural impatience of youth, and to her, hearing about love was the next best thing to having it immediately in her life. So, one day when she and Emma were companionably cleaning vegetables from the garden and were having to clean up the

kitchen besides, since they'd dropped all sorts of dirt, loose pebbles, and vegetable matter in the floor and on the counters, she asked Emma about "your first man, your first husband."

"Well, do you want to hear about the one, or about the other? Because they weren't one and the same." Emma grinned broadly at her, waiting for a response, looking up and down again to what she was doing.

"The first man, then. How many were there before you got married the first time, anyway? I mean, if you don't mind my asking." Sadie questioned softly, and waited to see if she had offended her aunt, but it seemed that Emma was merely thinking back, and trying to find the best way to frame the story. She was a natural storyteller, and enjoyed talking about herself to the first sympathetic audience she'd had since her third husband was around, for she had been deathly lonely since then, though she'd borne up under it as well as she could; Sadie was like a long drink of cool water to her.

"Well, then, let's put it this way. I lost my virginity early, since that's where some people begin, and I only knew him for a couple of months. Can't even remember his name now, is the funny thing—no, maybe it was

Roger, or something like that. Anyway, I was seventeen, early at college, and all my sorority sisters were doing the same things, so I felt I had to, too. Didn't want to be left out, or looked at as odd, or undesirable."

"Sorority sisters!" exclaimed Sadie, surprised.

"Yes, I know, it doesn't sound like the sort of thing I'd go for. But we do lots of things when we're younger that aren't a part of our mature make-up, as you'll probably find out for yourself someday. Anyway, I got bored with him after a while. There were a few more young men like that; it was the seventies, after all, and we were all rarin' to go. I had a good time with some of them, felt I was in love sometimes, though it didn't usually last long, especially not when the young gods showed feet of clay, as often happens. Then, I met up with a major love of my life, or at least he seemed so at the time."

"Did you marry him?"

"Slow down, and don't try to get me married off just yet. But, I wanted to live with him, and I sort of did for a while: going over to his apartment and staying the night, having him over to my place to stay the night (by that time, I'd gotten bored with the sorority, and left it gladly)."

“What was his name? What did he look like?”

“Well, his name was David. And you know, I’ve always been partial to brunets. By the by, did you know that the term “brunet” is spelled differently when it’s a man—” and she spelled it out—” than it is when it’s a woman? For a woman it’s spelled ‘b-r-u-n-e-t-t-e.’ The same thing with ‘b-l-o-n-d,’ for a man, and ‘b-l-o-n-d-e’ for a woman.”

“No, I didn’t realize that,” responded Sadie dutifully, not quite ready to assume yet that her aunt’s mind was wandering with age, but waiting patiently for the diversion to be over.

“Well, no reason to dwell on that, just something that’s always interested me. Thank God we don’t call women ‘poetesses’ and “artistes’ anymore, but just ‘poets’ and ‘artists.’ Anyway, I was more or less making plans with him to move to a larger place where we both could live, when I saw him one day on the street talking intently to another woman. I didn’t know her, she wasn’t one of our college friends that I recognized, but they certainly were debating something vigorously, and they seemed to know each other well. At the time, I was made uneasy by it, but I also made a mistake—since everyone I knew thought of David as

such a desirable choice for me—the mistake of assuming that she was just some old girlfriend, trying to get his attention again. And he'd looked so angrily at her, that I thought—also a mistake—that I was safe.”

“Well? Who was she? And what happened to David? Did you move in together, or not?”

“Do you know, that prick actually allowed me to put down a deposit on the new apartment, saying that he would take the responsibility for the first month's rent in his turn, and then on the very day I was moving in, he appeared late in the day, long after I'd expected him to come and help with my stuff, and told me he couldn't move in after all. And there I was, with a new apartment that was too big for me! When I asked 'Why not?' he looked a bit funny, and stalled and shuffled around a while, and then said, 'Because my wife Sheila has come back to me, and I'm going to move in again with her.' And none of us at school had even known he had been married before. Evidently, she was the same woman I'd seen him arguing on the street with. Well, at that point in time, I was a crass and defiant lot; I just told him off, and gave him his walking papers—”

“His what?”

“An old-fashioned expression. It just means I told him to go. He seemed rather relieved than otherwise, and took off fast. I sometimes saw the two around campus after that, but it comforted me mightily to notice that he didn’t seem at all happy, but in fact seemed under the whip. Every time I saw them together, in fact, she was nagging him, or seeming to insist on something, though I was never close enough to hear, and he was always looking put upon and aggrieved.”

“That’s hard. I’m glad Gene’s not like that. Sorry, I’m not gloating, or anything, but men shouldn’t act that way.”

“But they often do, my dear, they often do. Still, that left room for Larry, who has always struck me as one of the joys of my existence, almost a preview of Daniel, my third husband; both of them were a bit soft-natured towards me, especially, though Larry was more of an old hippy than Dan.”

“Oh, Larry! Is he a happy one?”

“Well, if by happy you mean, did we end up together, obviously not. But if by happy you mean, did he make me happy, and do I still have

positive feelings about him after all this time, even humorous ones at his expense, though not in a mean way, then yes, one of the happiest.”

“Oh, tell me! Tell me!”

“Okay, but maybe later. Right now, let’s finish up the kitchen and get lunch started. Yes, my dear, I know you never like to have lunch, or you always want to do something else, but your figure is quite nice and you are getting plenty of exercise with these little walks you’ve been taking around to familiarize yourself with the neighborhood: you don’t need to miss meals. We don’t want you looking peaked to Gene, now do we?”

“Looking what?”

“Peaked. It means, thin and wan and stressed out, which is what you get from missing too many meals. I promise to tell you about Larry sometime soon. I love to talk, I love to talk to you, and all you have to do is remind me when we aren’t in the middle of something which needs to be concluded, as our cleaning up kitchen does now.”

So, with that, Sadie had to be content for the time being.

By the weekend, they both were looking forward eagerly to the advent of Gene upon the scene, and were planning and re-planning special menus that they thought might tempt his appetite especially, based on what Sadie knew of it. Of course, privately Emma began to feel like a sort of a third wheel when she saw Sadie gleefully dancing around and acting silly, since she knew that they were two young people and needed to be alone sometimes, and she didn't want to be too much in the way. It was her house, but maybe they needed to go out on one of Sadie's walks together, or to go off to somewhere by themselves in Gene's car. She thought about this, the more since Sadie didn't seem to have a clue about it or about excluding her, but was all set to include her in the event. But Emma was an honest sort, so she brought it up to Sadie, first thing Friday morning, before they were supposed to start cooking for the weekend.

“You know, Sadie---do you know what a ‘gooseberry’ is?”

“Yeah, it’s a sort of weird little green berry, round, with stripes and pinkish overtones here and there. I haven’t seen one for ages, not since I was at a farmer’s market. They don’t seem to be really plentiful.”

“Well, that’s one kind of gooseberry. But the word also means an old woman, or at least older woman, who acts as chaperone to a young couple who are courting, watching their behavior, keeping them in line, in short, being a real pest. Anyway, I don’t want to be that to you and Gene.”

“But you aren’t that! We had a great time with you last time he was here. I know he’s looking forward to seeing you again, he said so.”

“He’s a very lovely young man, and I admire him extremely, but not as much as you do, and should. I’m just saying that the two of you are free to go off and do things by yourselves when you want to, too, using this as sort of a base, where you’re living now. I trust you to know what’s allowable and acceptable for yourself more than your parents do, because unlike them, I can remember what being young was like; rather, unlike them, I actually was young once.” And the two of them laughed together at this. But then, Emma became serious again. “So, just keep it in mind; your young friend will want to see you alone sometimes, and that’s all

right with me. I've lived a long life, full of events, which you are wonderful enough to take an interest in, but I have plenty of thoughts to keep me company, though you have been a blessing in that regard, too. Just don't let your young man languish for private time with you, because you have things to do and say together that I can't add to or improve upon, nor should I try. I've had my day in the sun, now it's your turn."

"I just wish you had someone now, too. We could all do things as a foursome, and maybe you wouldn't have these feelings."

"Well, my sweet Sadie, if 'shoulds' and 'buts' were candy and nuts, we'd none of us go hungry. Don't worry about me. We can still all keep company sometimes. I'm just saying, don't let your opportunities go to waste. A young man like that (if you'll pardon the slightly coarse expression) is full of juice and vim and vigor, and he likes passion in his life. Yes, now you're turning pink, you know exactly what I'm talking about! I thought so. You're here for at least the summer, since your father's request that I keep you "until she's ready for school" was ambiguous—did he mean school in the fall, your last year of high school, or school next year, your first college year? I don't want to press him for

an answer just yet, because we have an excellent high school here, which your father knows about. Even when he first knew where I was, his very next Christmas card commented smugly on my being in a community with such a good school. I wondered about it then, but I'm hoping against hope now that he means to leave you here for the whole year. That way, even though it might occasion a little more back and forth for your Gene, he can at least see you freely here, and your family none the wiser. You haven't mentioned it to your two sisters, have you? I hate to say it against my own sex, but women are awfully bad to repeat things."

"No, are you kidding? Alicia is only eight, and repeats everything she hears, even though she doesn't understand a lot of it; and Fayette is fifteen, vain and kind of stupid, bad at school and taken up with totally the wrong crowd. Well, not the wrong crowd as far as Mom and Dad are concerned, but for me. They're the rich snobs and the hangers-on, who go to dances and football games and don't seem to have a plan in their heads. No, I haven't told them anything, and I won't be, either."

“Good. You know, Otter Creek University, as your bit of a slightly pretentious small college calls itself, is only a few miles away from here. You could actually live with me and—oh, but do you drive?”

“I know how, but Mom and Dad haven’t let me have the car very often. They’ve been too afraid that I’ll get out and somehow see Gene. No, Fay pretty much has dibs on the car, and also takes Alicia to her dancing lessons, and so on. But I have my license.”

“Well, then, if you wanted to commute, and if we went about it carefully with your folks, you could take my car to school. What do you think about that plan? Of course, I guess you’d need to go back to see your family at the holidays and all that.”

“I don’t know. Dad just seemed to be trying to circumvent any plans I might make for myself, and Mom was glad to be rid of me, I think. I don’t fit in with her view of a dutiful daughter.”

“We’ll work on it. Maybe Gene will have some inspirations to add.”

When Saturday morning came, however, there was to be no appearance by Gene. They had the food all ready and stored in the refrigerator, including the things that still had to be cooked, but at 9:45

precisely, Gene woke Sadie up out of a dreamy, happy snooze with a phone call.

“Sadie, I’m sorry, but I won’t be able to make it today after all. I hope you and Emma haven’t gone to too much trouble for me.”

“But why not? You’re not mad or anything, are you? Or do you have to work, or something?” Sadie was feeling very sad all of a sudden, and her eyes started to shed tears even before she knew what the problem was.

“No, you know I couldn’t get mad at you for long. And I have made my schedules carefully, so that I don’t have to work any more than necessary on Saturdays and Sundays and can drive over to see you. But in this case, it’s an emergency, a family emergency, and it’s something I can’t do anything about. You know my oldest brother George’s girlfriend, well, his fiancée, really? Becky? Well, she’s getting ready to have her baby prematurely by about two months. They’ve already done an exam, and it’s about seven months along, and it seems healthy, but they can’t take any chances. And George called early this morning from overseas, really early, and asked my other brother Ned and me to be at the hospital and be there for her. I guess a bunch of men are better than no family at

all, but it made me wish that—oh, that you and I were already married, and you could come, too. Only, Summitsville is where your folks live, and if you came back here with me now, your folks might find out. I know your mom is on some of those charity fundraisers at the hospital and stuff, and I don't want to get us parted. So, I guess I'll see you next weekend, okay? Sorry if you had a big lunch planned, or anything. Please, apologize to Emma for me, too.”

Sadie was already shedding tears, but she knew it was ill-behaved of her not to show some concern for Becky, so she said, “Well, I love you, we'll see each other next weekend. If you get a hold of a camera, take some baby pictures, okay? I guess I'm safe enough sending Becky some sort of baby gift, or something. I don't guess she'd rat us out, would she?”

His tone brightened up. “I knew you'd understand, Sadie. It's really hard not to see you, but maybe next weekend, I can drive you and Emma to the nature reserve. We could make a day of it, picnicking, swimming, hiking, whatever you want. Only, it'll have to be on the Sunday, since I work for UPS next Saturday again, in the sorting area. They aren't usually open on weekends, and I'm just a driver, but I got an extra odd shift, and

they needed me, so there I go! And no, as to your question, Becky, if she's warned, won't say anything to anybody. She's about as loyal as you are."

At this praise, Sadie made the best of things, resolving to have her cry if she needed it later on, after she told Emma. She tried not to keep Gene on the phone much longer, wished Becky well again as she had only before by implication; then, she got off the phone. When she went downstairs, Emma was humming and stirring up a fruit salad, but when she saw Sadie's face, she stopped.

"What's wrong?"

"He can't come today, after all." And Sadie hastened to explain, though she leaked a few tears out here and there while she talked. Gulping finally, she said, "And all this food! It'll spoil if we don't eat it."

"Yes, it was my impression this morning that we had already more than done what we needed to, but I noticed last time that in a party mood, we all three had healthy appetites, so I went ahead with the fruit salad, since it was the last thing on our list this morning, just to keep it fresh. Well, if you're down for breakfast now, you might as well have some. I

think I did a good job of it, and it's way too hot this morning for eggs and bacon, or pancakes, French toast, or even bagels with cream cheese. It's going to be a scorcher." And she raised a forearm to her forehead and rubbed away a little moisture that had already gathered there, even though the kitchen still seemed cool.

Sadie sighed. "What's that bit from that play, something about 'the course of true love not running smooth'?"

Emma furrowed her brow. "Well, it's Shakespeare, I know that, but I can't recall exactly which play. Just a second; let's drag out *Bartlett's Book of Familiar Quotations*." She ducked into the den next door, and brought an unwieldy volume out. "Here we go. Okay, Shakespeare, Shakespeare, Shakespeare...Here it is. Oh, I should have remembered this! It's Lysander, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He says, '...the course of true love ne'er did run smooth.' Well, at least you can be sure with your Gene that it's true love." And after wiping her fruit-juicy hands off with a dish towel, she reached over and patted Sadie's back where she stood nearby, looking at the rinds and fruit devastation of which the luscious bowl of fruit salad there was the result.

Sadie sniffed again, and decided to put a brave face on things. After all, she thought very privately, she hadn't had nearly as many romantic misadventures as her aunt had already told her about having in the brief time they had been together, and she didn't want to seem like an immature baby.

“So, can you tell me about Larry now? I mean, while we're having breakfast, if you haven't eaten?”

“About Larry? Well, I have eaten earlier, before it got so hot, but if you want some fruit salad or something else, you can get it, and I'll have some of it, too. It looks pretty refreshing, actually. Yes, I guess I can help you with your boredom at not seeing Gene by entertaining you with Larry.” Once again, her mischievous smile broke out, which to Sadie had become the sign that she herself was being teased.

“I didn't mean that! I'm never bored around you. I'm just really disappointed that we don't get to see Gene today, and I have absolutely no idea how we're going to eat all the food we got ready before it spoils. We're both going to get big and fat.” But she got a bowl, ladled some

fruit into it, and then got some yoghurt from the refrigerator and added some of that for good measure. “So, about Larry.”

Her aunt poured herself a tall glass of fruit juice from the pitcher in the refrigerator, and scraped some butter across two slices of bread she’d already taken from the toaster. She’d obviously changed her mind about having fruit salad. Then, she sat down and cast her mind back to the time when she herself had been recovering from David’s dereliction and return to his wife Sheila, leaving her herself with the too-large apartment and the too-expensive lease. “Well,” she began, munching on her toast, “Larry wasn’t someone I started out knowing. He didn’t start out as a friend of mine, or anything. I did the best I could, and advertised in the school and town papers for a roommate, female, to take over the other half of the lease. But not too many women showed up to look, because the summer semester had already started, and people were already in where they were going to be. A couple of women came along who didn’t impress me much, slovenly individuals who struck me as tarts or worse—”

“Tarts, eh?” Sadie giggled.

“You do know what that is, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes, Dad has more than once warned me not to run after Gene like a tart. I know what it means, though I resent the implication from him about my own behavior. Anyway, go on.”

“Oh, and then there were two women who wanted to come in together and take over the extra bedroom, but they were clearly lesbian lovebirds, and I just wasn’t in the mood to watch someone else being happy when I was so miserable.”

“No, I know how that can feel.”

“I was about to give up and go beg my landlord once again to let me out of the lease, when one day a long-haired, bearded man came by and asked to look. I confess, I was curious about just what he was doing there, what he was planning to say, when he clearly was not a potential female roommate.”

“Larry?”

“Larry. He looked around the living room, poked around in the closets a bit, looked critically at the second bedroom, which was a little bit small, he said, and then gave the kitchen high approval ratings for its modern finishings and equipment; he liked to cook a lot, he said. I was lost for

words, not understanding why he was so sure that he was going to be doing any cooking in the kitchen. I said, ‘Look, are you trying to find a space for a girlfriend, or something?’ He just stared at me. Then, he asked, apropos of nothing, apparently, ‘Would you mind if I lit a joint? I have plenty to share.’ This was flabbergasting; I mean, I had definitely smoked weed before, had done so with my friends, but he seemed to mean it as some sort of icebreaker, or an opening bid for apartment room. I was out of options, almost, and frankly, I was always given to entertaining my own curiosity. So, I said, ‘Oh, I guess, go ahead.’ He came and sat quite close to me on the couch where I was sitting, and before I knew it, we were sharing a joint, then two, then I broke out some Cabernet, and finally we ate almost all the snacks I had in the cupboards, everything from breakfast cereal to Pop-Tarts, to potato chips. ‘So, are you firm about having just a female living here, or can I take over the other half of the lease?’ he asked. ‘I’m clean, not much trouble, I’ll do my share of cooking and cleaning. I do have a cat, named Rat, kind of a pretentious individual of the Siamese persuasion, but I know someone else who has your same landlord, and he allowed multiple cats in that apartment, so I’m

thinking that he won't mind one here. Mind you, I'm not here without Rat. He's sort of old and grumpy now, but I owe him his last years in comfort. He's blind in one eye, which is green, not blue, and he is neutered, and doesn't generally spray furniture, or anything like that. He won't scratch or bite, though he does growl a bit at you if you almost fall over him. That sometimes happens because when he gets in your way, he can't always move fast or know which way to go, and it's easy to trip over him. But mostly, if you watch out for him, he watches out for you. He'll probably just spend most of his time on my bed or in my room and avoid you, unless you make up to him. You can do that with anchovies; he's nuts over anchovies. So, what do you say? Oh, and I won't hit on you unless you like it, or want me to.'

“Well, this all sounded very honest and ingenuous to me, and I was stuck for the rent. So, very warily at first—anyway, warily for someone who was as high as I was at the time—I produced the extra copy of the lease, pointed out all the rules and regulations, particularly the ones I'd hated the most myself. I was kind of gratified to see that he seemed to be annoyed by the same things, and more or less 'tsk-tsked' at them. But he

signed, and then said he played guitar too, and flute, and hoped that was okay, and wouldn't bother me. I was relieved, to tell you the truth. I think without realizing it, I had been dreading having another woman around at a time when I felt exposed to the world, and somehow, having an easy-going male around seemed preferable, even if he was a bit of a pothead. The next day, I took the copy of the lease to the landlord, who looked a bit puzzled, asked, 'Is this a guy's name?' and when I sort of nervously confirmed it, said 'Well, I hope you know what you're doing. Remember, if your relationship hits the skids and one of you leaves, the other one is still obligated for the lease, for at least this year.' 'Oh,' I said, 'he's just my roommate. You saw where I put "cat" on the pet part, didn't you?' 'Yes, I saw. No mess, mind, clean up after it. The litter has to be well-wrapped and put in the bin, not in the kitchen trash. Okay, well, I'm happy to see you are more stabilized as a renter now. Let's have no damage to the apartment, okay? The last people in there totally messed up the kitchen, started a fire, which is why it had to be re-done. See you later, then. Rent due by the third of the month, every month.' And that was that."

Sadie had finished her fruit salad long before, and Emma her toast and fruit juice, and yet the story had been sufficiently absorbing to both of them, one recollecting a strange encounter and the other rapt at hearing about it, that the sun was high in the sky by the time Sadie had the chance to ask another question. “Well, but how did he get to be a lover? I mean, if he said he wouldn’t hit on you. He didn’t break his word, did he?”

“He most certainly did not. Larry was the soul of generosity and discretion both, as it happened. But even though he didn’t do anything like what I’d at first feared might happen, such as bringing lots of weird friends around, or anything, and he fully lived up to all his promises to me at the lease signing, I was getting restless. And when I get restless, I’m trouble. First of all, I couldn’t shake my mind of David, and I still felt sore over what had happened. Then too, I was lonely for a man, really lonely. I found myself getting really attached to Larry and fond of his ways, and he seemed to regard me warmly, too. We smoked a lot of weed, which I asked him about at one point. ‘Where are you getting the money for all this weed? I thought you were a student in the mathematics department.’ We happened to be actually smoking at the time, and he

took another deep drag and said ‘Trust fund baby. My parents are dead, and my uncle administers the trust. And as long as I leave him alone and get good grades, he doesn’t care much what I spend money on. He doesn’t even know.’ I was sorry for him then, which only made me feel closer. That same evening, I approached him sort of hesitantly. I think I said something like, ‘Do you remember you promised not to hit on me?’ He frowned and said ‘Yeah. So, I haven’t.’ ‘But, if I wanted you to, what would it be like for you?’ He was still on the end of a reefer which he’d laid aside earlier. He took another drag on it, and looked at me. ‘Are you saying you want me to?’ ‘Yeah, I think I am saying that,’ and I kind of grinned at him. I felt very nervous. He patted the couch beside him where I’d been sitting earlier, and when I sat down by him, he asked ‘Are you sure? I don’t want to get accused of rape, or anything.’ I know I rolled my eyes at him then. ‘Larry, for God’s sake, I’m not going to accuse you of rape! What’ve I got to do, anyway—’ and about that time, he kissed me, and we went on from there.

“He was a great lover, and suffice it to say there wasn’t that much else to our story, because we lived happily together there for the rest of the

time we were graduate students, and we were as faithful to each other as the day was long, always accompanied on our way by the weed, and the booze, and the guitar, and the flute, and Rat. But then, in our last year, just at graduation time, when it would've been natural for us to be thinking of planning whether we wanted to be together or not, and where to go next, Rat died. And that seemed to take all the piss out of Larry, to use another expression you might not have heard before. I hadn't realized he'd loved that old cat so much. I asked him at one point if he would like to get a kitten, and he just shrugged, and said, 'There's no point. No cat could replace Rat.' And just like that, a bundle of fur separated us. Oh, I mean, he made sure that I was provided for as far as the tail-end of the lease went, and he still made love to me now and then, but my life seems sometimes to be a series of unhappy goodbye conversations with men I've loved, and this one was no exception. He was totally sober one day, and told me, 'I've got to go, Emmie. And I can't take you with me; I'm sorry. I'm taking an assistant professorship out at Cal Tech, and I need to start all over again. I know you've been good to me, way better probably than I deserve, and I've tried to be good to you. But you would just remind me

of our life together here. It's been happy, hasn't it? And about Rat—' and then, he broke down and started crying. It was suddenly my turn to hold him, and comfort him, and though some part of me could hardly believe that it had seemingly all come undone over a cat, some other part of me realized that it wasn't just about that. After all, we'd come together by chance, and were being parted by an equal chance. I asked him gently if he was sure he didn't want me along, as gently as he had asked me if I really wanted him to make love to me that first time, but for a guy who seemed to flow freely through life sometimes, he was adamant on that point. 'I've not cheated on you or anything, and I don't know how it is, but I just feel that I need to be on a different coast, doing something different now. I would promise to write, and maybe from that contact with you, something would come after time, but you know me better than that. You know that I don't keep in touch well with people after they're not in my immediate orbit. I guess it's something wrong with me—' 'No, don't beat yourself up about it, Larry, a lot of these things come from not having had parents around forming relationships with and for us, I have some of the same problems myself.' This was said mainly to soothe him,

because Larry wasn't the type to function well if he were too guilt-ridden, and above all, I didn't want that for him. And so, we parted, as the day determined. But you know what I think of, when I think of him?"

"What?"

"Have you heard that Tom Petty song, 'Wildflowers'?"

"Well, yes. I've heard it on your computer, playing sometimes. Nice song. That reminds you of him?"

"That reminds me of the two of us together, and of what we parted each wishing for the other. It almost hurts sometimes to hear it, because even though I've loved other men since, and my third husband Daniel the most, I can't help but worry about what ever happened to Larry, with his scruffy blond beard and long blond hair. He even a bit resembled Tom Petty. And it's like I've told you, parting from Larry was like a precursor, a prefiguration, of the later parting from Daniel."

Their conversation had been heady for Sadie, who'd never before been an older person's confidant, and when she saw how sad Emma's face was, she felt contrite for all her curiosity, repentant, even. She tried to change the subject. "What is Daniel's last name, anyway? I know Dad still mails

your cards to you to ‘Emmeline Bradshaw,’ which is our last name and your maiden name. Did you return to your maiden name after Daniel left, or what?”

“No, I have always kept Daniel’s last name, Jorgensen, which your father has never even heard. It’s caused some problems for postal carriers over the years, but usually the first name ‘Emmeline’ is a dead giveaway, and they always come asking me if that’s my mail, or if I’d like to file a change of name, address, so on and so forth. I just tell them, ‘No, that’s my idiot little brother who doesn’t know or care that I’ve been married three times; I’m still Emmeline Jorgensen to everybody else. Don’t worry if you miss the occasional letter from him, it won’t have anything important in it.’ But I’m glad I didn’t miss the last one he sent here, with the inquiry about whether or not you could stay with me for a while. You’ve perked me up and kept me going, my girl. I think I was getting bored and slightly maudlin before you came along. Anybody can be alone too much.”

This made Sadie feel a little bit better about the overall effects of her curiosity, and promised of further confidences to come. How, she

wondered, had a woman who loved to be loved as much as her aunt obviously did bear separating from three husbands? She thought that she herself would have been more than maudlin, she thought she might've gone mad from loneliness and grief. Of course, she was imagining having to separate permanently from Gene, her only frame of reference so far. But still, she thought—

“I’ve got an idea. It’s so hot today, why don’t we go down to one of the ponds around here? The one I’m thinking of, Sutter’s Pond, isn’t deep at any part, and you could take your phone in case your Gene called with news. It’s so hot! It would be so nice to get in some good, cool water. What d’you say?” And just like that, Emma was apparently recovered from her mood of sadness over Larry and then Daniel.

Though Sadie would’ve preferred, really, to take a cold shower and then go lie down on her bed, she felt that her aunt had been the tolerant one so far, and that she owed it to her to return the favor. So, she drummed up some enthusiasm for the plan, and within about half an hour, they had bathing suits on and had towels, and a few other odds and ends, such as bottled water and Sadie’s phone. Though Sutter’s Pond was within

walking distance on a temperate day, they had a parking area, and Emma elected to drive because it was so very hot that it would be uncomfortable to walk.

“Why don’t you drive, Sadie? Just to get used to my old car. It’s in pretty good repair, but it’s old.”

“Well, I don’t have my license with me.”

“Hurry back in and get it. I want you to get used to it, so that you can drive it to school if you do get to stay for the whole year. We can always hope, anyway.”

Sadie did as she was bid, and brought her small purse along with her with her license in it. She took the phone, which she had already had with her, and put it in the purse as well, with the buzzer on in case Gene called.

They got to the pond without incident, Sadie actually surprised that she had enjoyed driving again, and feeling the contagious spirit of freedom that her aunt seemed to awaken in her. They spread their towels in a secluded space, putting their private things under a corner of the towels where no one passing by could see them. Then, they both got into the cold water, which was oddly chilly on such a hot day. It wasn’t long

before Sadie realized that her aunt had been right: it was far more pleasant to be out in nature swimming than simply chilling oneself down in the shower at home. They splashed each other, and swam a bit, though it was a little too warm to be very energetic. So, they floated, and laughed and talked, and Sadie told Emma a few things about Gene, such as his age (twenty-four to her seventeen), his ability with computers, which had not been mentioned before, and his hopeful field of study if he should get to go to college after all (marine science and aquatic life).

“Well, if he’s into watery science,” said Emma, “he would’ve appreciated our trip here today. I’ve met young biologists here before, gathering water samples and tadpoles, or something.”

“It may just be a pipe dream, because he’s already feeling that he’s too old for it, or that he’ll have to work really hard to get a lot of courses under his belt at once, so as to cut down the number of years he’s in school. But I’ve told him, I can always get a job, too, and maybe help out. It may take both of us.” Sadie ducked under the water and then surfaced again, shaking her seal brown locks around her shoulders, where they clung

wetly. “Oh,” she said, “that feels good! I didn’t realize how overheated I was until we got into the water.”

Next, they got out and went to sit on the towels, which due to the gradually moving sun, were now happily in the shade. Sadie, though, heard her phone buzzing and picked it up with eagerness, thinking that it might be Gene calling with news of Becky’s baby and delivery. She at first stood above Emma tilting the screen into the light and away from the shade, and next sat down with it after drying her hands and the phone too, which she’d unintentionally gotten a bit wet. Then, she frowned. It wasn’t Gene, after all.

“Is it your young man?” asked Emma.

“No, it’s not. I don’t understand, exactly. It’s my counselor at the high school. I don’t understand what she’s doing texting me on a weekend. She doesn’t work on a weekend, especially not during the summer. She wants me to give her a call. About something to do with my courses and records. Well, I don’t understand why she didn’t call my parents first, but that’s sort of the way things are now, I guess. They do tend to want students to be proactive, if they can trust them to be concerned with their

own achievements and stuff like that. I suppose I must've impressed her. Wait just a second, let me give her a call at the number she gave, before she contacts Dad or Mom with some problem or other that they'll feel they have to act on. I certainly don't want them coming here or making me leave you at this point." Sadie peered narrowly at the number on the phone, then dialed it and waited.

"Hello. Mrs. Sanders, this is Sadie Bradshaw. You called me?" She listened for a couple of minutes. "But I don't understand."

Emma waited patiently, toweling her graying reddish locks off and trying to look uninvolved. Sadie was listening intently again.

"Do you mean, a whole year?" She listened again. "But how?"

Emma drank some of her water and watched the pond and the loons that were now out on the area where they had just been swimming. The birds seemed a bit tame even, as one of them approached on the shore near the blanket apparently looking for crumbs, but then flopped back into the water when no crumbs were forthcoming from either of the two women sitting on the towels.

“Where? Do you mean, you can set it up for me at Otter Creek University? But I still have a whole year of high school to go, don’t I?”

Emma was now interested in spite of herself. It sounded as if something was in the offing that might include Sadie’s parents in the determination, in so far as they were in the position of paying for Sadie’s college.

“Okay, thank you. Yes, I guess, go ahead. I will choose the classes whenever I get the paperwork from Otter Creek. Sure. Okay. Yes, my father will be paying for my college there. Maybe send him a copy of the paperwork you send me, but tell him that I’ve already agreed to the advance. There’s no point in staying in high school any longer than I have to. I just didn’t understand when I took those courses that they could be used for Advanced Placement. Yes, thank you. I really appreciate your calling me. Goodbye.” She started to hang up. “Have a nice summer,” she added as an afterthought.

“Do you want to talk about it?” asked Emma, interested in spite of her determination at first not to ask.

“Well, imagine that! It turns out that I have just enough credits to go ahead and go to Otter Creek at the end of this summer, because some of the high school classes I was taking were considered Advanced Placement courses. I don’t need to stay in high school anymore. That will be a big ego boost for my father.”

“And your mother?”

“My mother is almost never impressed by academic stuff. Dad’s a little more likely to consider it an honor. You know what, I should call him before he has a chance to call me, and tell him about my achievement. And maybe I can tell him at the same time that I want to stay here with you and do as you suggest, taking your car back and forth to school. If you’re sure it won’t be an imposition, that is. After all, I’m going to be eighteen in September. Unless he’s going to refuse totally to pay for my classes if I stay here, I almost think he’ll be glad to be rid of me, too.”

Emma sat up. “Congratulations, Sadie! You’re making an effort to be free, and I thoroughly applaud it. But be careful how you go about it; don’t be too obvious. And don’t get bold and defiant. If he says anything about Gene, play dumb. Act like you’re being submissive; say anything,

but don't argue. Robert will argue as long as you'll let him, otherwise. Wait, why don't we make tracks for home quickly, so that you can call him from the landline? That'll be much more convincing to him than a call from a cell phone out at the pondside. Believe me, I know my brother."

So, they gathered up all their things, and quickly got home in the old blue car of Emma's. Once at home, they planned their strategy carefully. Emma said, "Let me call them and ask to talk to your dad. He'll feel better, even though he doesn't really respect me as an individual, if I act as a sort of authority figure for once, and tell him about the call. I'll say you got the call, but I'll preface my call with the good news, that you've earned the right to go to college a year early, because you took some courses in high school that put you in advance." So, Emma took the lead, and playing off her tricks on her brother as she had done all her life, she managed to get his agreement, provisionally, for Sadie to continue to stay with her and go to college from her house. It helped that Robert didn't have to worry about supplying a car, or any more food for his offspring, and wouldn't have to do more than see that the rest of her clothes and

books got mailed to her for the fall and winter seasons. He was wealthy, but like a lot of wealthy people, he didn't at all mind cutting costs.

"He's on board, Sadie. He even sounded totally smug, as if he had thought of it himself." She chortled loudly, and then said, "What good news we'll have for Gene the next time we see him! But we're going to have to be careful for a while not to encourage in any way any chance visit from your parents."

"I can barely believe it," said Sadie. "It's like a dream. We sort of paid the fee of missing Gene's company for one week, and it was really depressing, but then we got the benefit of Mrs. Sanders' call. What a trade-off! I think you're right, Gene will be delighted. This way, he can come over and see me here, and when he gets ready to come to Otter Creek, whether it's the university or the town, he and I will be able to be together."

But then, Gene didn't call. They waited until nine o'clock that night, and still, he hadn't called. Sadie started to pace with worry, while Emma sat silently on one of the couches in front of her, frowning a little. Emma felt a bit angry at Gene; she'd just met him a couple of weeks before, and

had given him the right to visit whenever he liked. But the fact that he hadn't taken even a moment to call Sadie all day long bothered her intensely. She had had her share of delinquent lovers, and she was worried for Sadie lest Gene had been putting one over on them both.

It got to be ten o'clock. Though she was sad for Sadie, Emma was also older and felt really tired after their active day. She said, "Sadie, my dear, I'm going to go on to bed now. Don't stay up all night. All sorts of things happen in hospitals; you don't know but what something happened and Gene is all caught up with family matters. Please go to bed and get some sleep before it gets to be too late. Don't get irate with him just yet, okay?"

At this touch of sympathy, Sadie burst into tears, and cried and cried and cried. "It seems like just when things start to go right, and I can finally be more independent, that then something I don't understand happens. It's not like Gene at all to be late, or not to call. He's never not called before."

"What's the second brother's name? Not George, you said that was the oldest one. What was the other one's name?"

"Ned."

“Do you have his phone number? Can you call him and make sure that everything is all right?”

Sadie shrugged helplessly and shook her head. She couldn't trust herself to speak just at that moment. Then, she said, “I really don't feel like going to bed right now. I promise, I won't make any noise. But I can't just go on tamely to bed as if nothing were wrong.” And she flopped down on the couch and huddled up into a lump.

Emma came over and hugged her. “Okay. I understand. I'll go on, I've got to get my sleep; I'm a lot older than you, and I don't often stay up all night anymore. But I'll see you in the morning, and I imagine things will be better then. Get something to eat or drink if you feel like it.” She laughed mirthlessly, wishing she could be of use. “It's not as if we don't have plenty of food,” she joked, but Sadie looked so mournful at this that she felt she'd said the wrong thing, and went on up to bed without another word.

At first, Sadie was tempted to try to call Gene at his number, only then she remembered that he was in the hospital, and that they didn't want people answering or calling on cell phones inside. He'd have to go outside

to use his phone, where he wasn't around medical equipment. She felt sheerly miserable. They'd never had anything like this happen to them before, and though there were all sorts of possible explanations, it was with her as it is with a lot of young lovers: there's always the worst imagination applied to what might have happened when something doesn't turn out as usual. She knew that logically, Gene could be perfectly all right and just tired out from his stint with Ned at the hospital. But he had never forgotten or neglected to call her before when he said he was going to, and that pattern of regularity alone made her uneasy by its absence.

She went into the kitchen, realizing that Emma had been trying to comfort her by offering food and drink; she'd never thought that Emma was mocking her, but when someone is as upset as Sadie was, it's very easy to say the wrong thing to her. She opened the refrigerator door and got out some potato and egg salad, and put it in a bowl. After eating a little of it, she realized that they had both eaten quite lightly when they'd gotten home, since they were so excited to outwit Robert Bradshaw and get their way about Sadie's continued residence with Emma. Then, she

ate a chicken leg that they had barbequed. This brief meal distracted her for a few minutes and seemed to help, although the barbeque sat a little uneasily on her stomach and needed to be followed by a bit of yoghurt to settle it down.

Finally, she went back into the living room and sat on the couch, cried herself out for a while, softly, then for the comfort that Emma had tried to offer in person, Sadie instead curled up with one of Emma's crocheted blankets and lay down on the couch, her phone on the floor beside her, in case Gene called. Once, she woke up disoriented, and looked around, bleary-eyed, then glanced at her watch. Two-forty-five, and still no call. Likely he wouldn't call now. She sighed, and curled back up into the blanket again, falling asleep almost immediately.

When she woke up, it was broad morning, seven o'clock by her watch. She felt stiff, and unfolded herself slowly from the couch and the blanket. Hearing her yawn, Emma came to the door of the room, an odd smile on her face. She said, "Sadie, I've something to show you. Come with me."

Sadie wasn't really in the mood to be distracted from her woes, but Emma took her hand and led her to the front door, parting the little white

curtain that hung in two folds over the center glass to keep the curious from looking in. At first, Sadie thought Emma just wanted her to see the sunrise, and she started to turn away; then, she took another look. There, parked out front on the curb, was Gene's green Camry, and she could see even from a distance that he was huddled up behind the wheel, fast asleep.

“Gene!” she exclaimed. “How long has he been there?”

“I really don't know. I got up about half an hour ago, and I was looking out at the grass, thinking that it needed to be mowed, when suddenly I noticed him parked there. I don't know what happened, or when he got there, but if I were you, I'd go out and wake him up, and find out. Better yet, bring him in for some breakfast. I'll wait for the two of you to get back before starting anything, but even with as young bones as the two of you have, you're both likely to be a bit sore from the places you chose to sleep last night. And give him a big welcome! After all, he was supposed to work today, wasn't he? And instead, he drove over here, probably just to reassure you. Make him feel welcome.”

“You don't have to tell me that, Aunt Emma. I'm not a total numbskull.” She hugged her aunt affectionately, then grabbed a jacket

from the coat stand and put it around her, since the day outside was still a bit chilly for summer, which she'd been able to feel when the front door was briefly opened by her aunt.

Sadie ran out to the driver's side window and tapped three times on the pane, trying not to startle Gene, but to wake him up gently. He stirred, but turned a shoulder towards the noise, and curled to the opposite side again. She tapped once more, a little louder this time. Gene sat up, staring straight forward, looking confused; he was clearly emerging from a deep sleep, in spite of the potential discomfort of his surroundings. Then, he glanced towards where the sound had come from. When he saw Sadie standing there, he grabbed his keys from the dashboard, cracked the door open, and said "Sadie!"

As she waited for him to get out, Sadie stood back and looked up and down the street. There was no one out on the front lawns except a man four houses down, who seemed to be getting his mower ready to mow his front lawn. Sadie looked at the grass on Emma's lawn quickly, thought, "I should be the one to offer to mow for Emma," before the thought slipped totally out of her head.

“What happened at the hospital, Gene? Is everybody all right? Are you all right? Why didn’t you call?” She was anxious, but tried to keep any sort of reproach out of her voice. No need to start a quarrel with Gene, after he’d driven all this way and slept in his car so as not to disturb them too early.

“Are you upset with me? I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it. In all the rush, I forgot my charger, and so I couldn’t even re-charge my phone from the car, and Ned had to leave the hospital before I did to get to the garage for work. They were rebuilding a chassis that needed his special touch, I guess.”

“Come on in and tell us about what happened. Emma is going to get you some breakfast. All of us will have breakfast, together.” She held up her arms for an embrace, and he willingly hugged and kissed her in the middle of the street. Then, feeling slightly self-conscious, they laughed a little, and went on into the house, where Emma was waiting in the kitchen getting the frying pan out and sorting out which of the foods they’d prepared already were good for a breakfast meal.

While Emma was cheerily making remarks to them, not saying much after her one inquiry as to how Becky and the baby were doing, they set the table and then sat there, waiting for whatever meal she wanted to serve. Knowing that some savory leftovers might be tasty too, she put some of the barbequed chicken out, several salads, and then did Gene in particular some fried eggs and bacon, stirring up some oatmeal with brown sugar for herself. Sadie tried to skate by with just a cup or two of coffee, she was so ready to hear Gene's news, but Emma insisted that she eat something too, after her long night on the couch. Once they were all seated, the two women started to pelt Gene with questions. He held up his hands, laughing in protest, then started to tell them while they ate about what had happened that had delayed him and kept him from calling.

“First of all,” he said, “Becky and the baby seem basically okay, but she's exhausted because it was such a hard delivery, and she felt a little faint and weak, so they're watching her in the ICU today, just as a precaution. The baby is in the premie ward, but it seems pretty healthy, especially for having been two months premature. In fact, Becky's doctor was wondering if maybe they'd miscalculated the dates or something, and

it was an older baby than they thought. It should be ready to go home with her very soon, as it turns out.” He ate hungrily for a few minutes, as did they all, and then he looked up into what had become a pause at the table, and laughed a little defensively.

“And, I’m sorry that I didn’t call at some point, but George took my and Ned’s first call out around noon, when Becky had just started serious labor, and we were standing outside in the hospital park talking to him and reassuring him over Ned’s crackly connection. Then, we went back inside and sat in the waiting room for hours, until about eight-thirty in the evening; they came in and said that Becky had had a baby boy. She and George had wanted to be surprised, and besides, Becky had been afraid to have amniocentesis, but now they knew. So, as soon as she was comfortable, we both went in to see her, and even for somebody who wasn’t feeling top-notch, she was very talkative. She named him George, Jr., by the way, and immediately started calling him ‘Georgie.’

“‘Georgie,’” repeated Sadie. “That’s cute. So? What happened next?”

“Well, after about another half hour, Ned called George with the news, and then left. I scooted into the cafeteria and had something quick to eat,

one of those sandwiches from boxes, a salad, and a milkshake. When I was getting ready to go, I thought I'd better just make one more trip up to see that Becky was resting okay, but when I got back upstairs, that's when the doctor came in to talk to her and tell her that she would be in the ICU for about twenty-four hours. You can imagine how she felt, I guess. It worried both of us until the doctor reassured us that in cases like hers, first baby, heart-something-or-other on her part that temporarily made her feel weak, it was standard procedure."

Again, he concentrated on his meal for a minute or two, leaving his audience still waiting and trying to fill in the narrational gap by eating breakfast themselves, though they were lighter eaters this morning, and were waiting for the end of his relation.

"Then, I went out to the parking lot, trying to call you and let you know what had happened, and that I would be over today sometime, if I could rearrange my work schedule. But not only had I forgotten my charger, I'd let my phone run down, and my car battery was dead, too." They made sympathetic noises.

“That car is absolutely dependable under ordinary circumstances, but I’d accidentally left the driver’s side door cracked open since I parked that morning, and for some reason I’m not sure of, two of the inside car lights were on, so it was as dead as could be. I went back into the hospital and asked around as quietly as I could in the waiting room, where there were still lots of people, if anyone could give me a jump with my jumper cables. Finally, one old guy from out on one of the farms obliged, and I got home at about eleven. I debated about whether or not it was too late even to call and just leave a message, but at that point, I got a call from George again. He wanted me to let Becky know that he was going to be home on leave in three weeks, and that just as luck would have it, he’d gotten a field promotion to sargeant. Well, that made it necessary for congratulations, and all of that, and then it was definitely too late to call. I’m sorry if I worried you both.”

The two women offered him a chorus of “it’s all rights” and “we understands” and “what else could you dos” now that they understood the circumstances. But he went on.

“Anyway, I called in last night for a family leave-of-absence from my job today, so that I could come over this morning and let you know how things had gone. Again, just luckily (our luck seems at least to have held true last night), I got a switchboard operator I knew, and she put through my request to the scheduling office. I had to wait for a while to hear back, but I did have time to re-charge my phone. Still, I didn’t want to call in the wee hours, so I decided I would just drive over and wait for daylight. I started at one point to come up on the porch and sleep, but when I was pulling in, a patrol car came around the block, and I was afraid they’d think I was some sort of vagrant. As it was, after going around the block three times and still finding me there, the policemen stopped and inquired my business, but when I explained, they were very friendly, and told me just to be as quiet as possible and if I had to go, to go without revving up the engine. And then, I fell asleep, and that was all until Sadie tapped on my window this morning.” He was mostly finished eating by now, but gratefully accepted another hot cup of coffee poured out by Emma, which as she saw, he loaded up with cream and sugar, stirring it vigorously.

Sadie, who'd already forgiven him for being late and not calling almost as soon as she'd seen him parked on the curb, kissed him on his cheek, and patted his arm. "I'm really glad you came to let us know that everything is all right, but I'm sorry you had to miss work. I know they usually find you very reliable."

"It's okay; I was able to pick up another shift in the middle of the week, when I was supposed to have an afternoon off. Wow! What a night! Thanks so much, Emma, for the breakfast. What are you two going to be doing today? Oh, wait, before I forget it—" He reached into his jacket pocket and drew out a yellow flyer. He put it across the table in between the two of them for them to read.

"New Covid-19 Precautions." Emma read this aloud. "I thought we were over this stuff. Masks to be worn again indoors in events taking place in public or in crowded indoor venues."

"Apparently not according to the CDC, though, who's sticking to its ending of mask restrictions for the already thoroughly vaccinated. Well, I guess I'm okay. I did go ahead and bring the masks I had with me,

because when I came here at the beginning of the summer, people were still getting their second vaccine,” said Sadie.

“Some people don’t have their vaccinations yet,” contributed Gene. “There are locations where we’ve been warned still to wear our own masks when we go there in the UPS vans.”

“Well, I guess we just keep watching the news for this area,” said Emma. “As to what we were going to do today—we hadn’t made any plans yet. Are you going to be here, Gene? Should I make my own arrangements and leave the two of you young ones to have a good day by yourselves, after all the excitement? I do have some yard work I could do.”

“No, Emma, I’m going to mow the lawn for you this week,” insisted Sadie. “I do know how to run a lawn mower, you know.”

“Yes, but I have lots of things outside to do: I’ve got to trim the bushes, do some gardening, bring in some vegetables, think about what to do with the places on the fence where the paint has peeled...”

“I know there’s probably a lot to do, but I was wondering if maybe we could go ahead and go to the nature reserve for a picnic, the three of us.

That way, we can have a nice day outside in the open air, and the food you said you'd be preparing for yesterday needn't go to waste. If you want to, that is. It's not nearly as hot outside today as it was yesterday. If you want to," Gene repeated, as if not quite sure whether he was invited still to be around.

"Oh, that sounds like fun!" responded Sadie. "C'mon, Emma, come with us. You wouldn't want to miss having a good time just because you don't want to be a cran—no, a gooseberry."

Gene looked confused. "A what?"

Sadie giggled and explained. "Oh, Emma," said Gene, "Don't worry about being a chaperone. We can go and do things together just the two of us another time. This is something we planned to do all together. You're great to be with as a friend, an ordinary person. You don't need to feel that you're too old to be a good companion for us." His tone was so obviously sincere that even the bold Emma flushed a little.

"Well, okay, if the two of you really feel that way. But before school starts for Sadie in the fall—" Then she exclaimed to Sadie, "Wait! We forgot to tell Gene your news. How about this? I'll go and get the picnic

stuff out, the basket, and umbrella, and blankets, stuff like that. I can't recollect just exactly where in the garage I put everything. You tell Gene your news about school while I'm gone. That way, we can leave before it gets too late." As Emma walked out of the room, she heard Sadie's excitement as she was starting to tell Gene about her upcoming fall start at Otter Creek University, and smiled to herself. She had at least found them a way to spend a little while alone without her around.

Before they could go, too, Emma and Sadie both needed to get ready a bit more, Emma because she was still in her pajamas and housecoat, Sadie because she had slept in her clothes and needed to wash up and change. Gene only had the clothes with him that he stood up in, which he had changed at home the night before, but when Emma offered him a shower and told him she had a few extra disposable razors for him to get a shave, he willingly accepted the favors. Then, Emma and Sadie packed up the picnic basket with Gene's helpful supervision, and getting everything together, they all got into Gene's car and drove to Kendall Nature Reserve, a little way up the main interstate nearby.

There were lots of family groups already there when they got there, but they managed to find a space on one side of the main wooded area where there was a picnic table free, and no one too close at hand. For most of the early day, Emma sat relaxing on the blankets, answering remarks and joking with them as the opportunities presented themselves, but basically taking her ease. They played a game of Frisbee, then, the three of them, and then a game of keep-away also with the Frisbee, with Gene good-naturedly being odd man out to Emma and Sadie. After they ate, they all became more somnolent, and it was time for a nap. All of them needed some extra sleep, because Gene and Sadie had slept uncomfortably the night before after being up late, and Emma, for her, had passed a restless night worrying about her young friends.

After putting some of the things other than the blankets back into the car, Gene asked them how they felt about fishing. Emma was used to fishing, having gone many a day with her second husband Ed (Sadie made a note to herself to ask again about those husbands another time). Sadie, however, though intrigued, had never done more than watch people fish, and was interested to learn the basics from Gene, since he had known how

even from his boyhood. Gene uncrinkled his license from his wallet, looked at it, and then asked Emma how she felt about stretching the rules a little bit, since neither she nor Sadie had a license. They agreed to go ahead, because Emma felt that the rangers were more likely to be making their rounds where the crowds were gathered, and if they caught them, would likely only give them a warning.

So, with some trepidation about hurting the worms (which Gene had dug up in a patch of moist soil with a trowel from his car trunk), Sadie learned to place a worm on the hook; she, however, to Gene's approval did not act silly or squeamish or squeal girlishly about doing it as her sister Fayette would have done, Gene felt sure. He had met Fayette once at a party she and Sadie had attended before Fayette managed to raise the alarm to her parents about Sadie's interest in Gene. Instead, Sadie quietly followed Gene's instructions, and watched Emma's example, doing as they did as far as she was able. She was also careful with Gene's fishing equipment (which he usually kept stored in his trunk as well); this earned her further kudos with her older companions. They fished for about an hour and a half, but the fish didn't seem to be biting. It was already three-

thirty in the afternoon, so Emma proposed that before the shadows lengthened into evening and the woods got dark, they should go for a quick hike. This entailed yet another briefer walk back to the car to put the equipment and blankets away, but they were all in the best of moods now that they'd been well-rested and entertained and fed.

The woods were already becoming slightly shadowy and mysterious-looking, with only a few stray sunbeams filtering down through the tops of the trees to the ground below. Slanting light guided them on as they walked, Emma pointing out various plants and wildflowers of which she knew the names, telling something about their etymologies if they had unusually picturesque or strange nicknames, and all three of them glad that they hadn't neglected the bug spray, as the gnats and flies and possibly even ticks and other bugs under the trees gathered to pester them. When they got to the end of the trail, there was nothing to do but walk it back again in reverse, as they had not elected to go on one of the circular trails. By the time they got back, they were all happy, somewhat tired, and full of jokes, riddles, and other fun verbal remainders of their day together.

Gene drove them home and they unloaded the car; then, he was asked in for another brief meal before he left. Sadie felt there was something still to be done, and she pulled Emma aside for a few minutes' whispered consultation. Emma answered in the affirmative, took her into the other room for a moment, and then kept Gene company while Sadie was away on whatever curious errand had taken her into the living room. They heard the printer running for a moment, then Sadie came back in and handed Gene a printed-out gift certificate for Baby Boutique in Summitsville. This was obviously for Becky. Gene felt touched.

“It’s from me and Emma both,” said Sadie. She’d used Emma’s credit card and given Emma some cash from her allowance from her parents to pay for her part of it; her father also ran her a small credit card, but she didn’t want him to see the charge on it.

“But this is too much!” exclaimed Gene. “Becky will be embarrassed.”

“Point out that it’s from both of us,” suggested Emma. “Men probably have no notion, but baby clothes and things are expensive, more than they used to be. Tell her too if she gets me some sizes before the little guy gets

too big, that I'll crochet her some baby things as well, for the colder weather.”

Before long, it was time for Gene to go, as he had to work the next day. He thanked Emma again and staunchly refused to take any money for gas from her this time, since he'd just been paid on Friday and felt flush. She said goodbye to him at the door, where he surprised her with a big friendly hug, and then Sadie walked him out to his car and they said their more private goodbyes out there. They made a firm commitment to meet up the next weekend, but as there was some question of a carnival coming to Otter Creek that week, they debated briefly whether or not they were safe to go. On the one hand, Sadie's father and mother disliked such public entertainments intensely and were extremely unlikely to put in an appearance; on the other hand, her little sister Alicia was more likely to go either with friends or by cajoling her elder sister Fayette to take her, and Fayette would probably take her in order to meet up with some of her own high school crowd there. With regret, they decided not to take the chance. After all, there would be other carnivals and fairs when they would already be together publicly, and free to attend.

Sadie wound herself around Gene in a tight embrace and he responded in kind, the two of them feeling just the least bit hesitant because they were in the middle of the street. But since it was a very quiet street, they saw no other passersby or cars in transit until almost the very end of their closing embrace. A police car pulled around the block just as Sadie was letting go of Gene and he was getting into the driver's seat. The policeman looked a bit familiar, and Gene thought it might've been one of the two from last night, just coming on duty again. Sure enough, as they drove slowly past, the cop raised a friendly hand, said "Good evening, folks," at which Sadie smiled and Gene gave an answering wave.

Then, Gene said, "Okay, Sadie, love, give me a call soon. I'll see you next weekend."

Hearing herself addressed as "love" in addition to her name made Sadie feel flirtatious, and she leaned over and kissed him again with rather more passion before he rolled up his window. Then, she watched him drive away on up the street. She sighed. True, they were getting to see each other more often now, and in more congenial circumstances, than they ever had before. But it was getting harder and harder not to leave

caution to the winds and make love to him upstairs in Emma's first guest room, where Sadie was sleeping now. True, Emma hadn't forbidden it, had even glancingly hinted that they might if they were already intimate that way, but Sadie and Gene had never had a chance to do more than have rather intense and heavy make-out sessions skulking around in his car at times in Summitsville when she'd managed to sneak away from her family. Sadie suspected that Gene wasn't a virgin as she was, but he'd always been so slow and careful and considerate with her that she didn't want to make him think that she felt anything lacking in his response. She sighed again; she determined to talk to Emma about it sometime and get her advice and more, her permission, which she felt was due Emma even more than she'd ever felt it was due her own parents.

“So, you said that you used to fish a lot with your second husband, Ed. What was he like?” Sadie asked, with perplexity looking again at Emma's fence. The fence across the side which abutted on the sidewalk was normal height for a picket fence, about waist-high or slightly higher, and

had a handsome gate set in the middle. But the two sides of the fence were only two feet or so high, though they separated each house lot from the other. She decided finally that it must be a deliberate design feature and went on with her conversation with Emma. They had already painted the tall part the day before, so now she and Emma put a fresh coat of white paint on the two-foot-high fence behind the flower beds. They were wearing heavy galoshes that Emma had had in the garage, because they had to walk in the beds in between the flower sets in order to reach all the pickets. Sadie, though, was having a harder time keeping her balance; the galoshes were looser on her, her feet being a little smaller than Emma's. She'd put her first foot forward into the soft soil, and when she pulled it up to re-position it after stepping onto the other one, the mud-like dirt sucked the boot down and nearly pulled it off. This would cause both of them to collapse into laughter, and more than once, Sadie fell backwards and landed on her bottom, which luckily was clad in old shorts. One of these times, she landed squarely in the middle of a large, lovely peony plant of Emma's and then was properly apologetic at the damaged blooms and leaves. But Emma just rooted among the blossoms and cut them off

above the point where they'd been damaged, vowing to take them inside and put them in water in a bowl on the table.

“At least now we have an excuse to keep vases of flowers inside,” said Emma. “Otherwise, it sometimes seems like a bit of a waste.”

Sadie disputed this, however, loving to see vases of flowers in a house, even if you did have to throw them out because they died so soon. Returning to the original subject of their conversation when she thought of it, though, she said, “And about Ed? Where'd you meet him? And what was he like?”

“Oh, Ed. Ed was really good husband material, kind, funny, intelligent, but he was my old husband. He was twenty-five years older than I was. Let's see, I must've been—well, Larry left when we were both about twenty-nine or thirty. I went a few years unsuccessfully searching around to find someone to have a baby with. I really wanted one at that point; I'm not sure why, now, I wouldn't have made a good young mother.”

“I think you would've made a great mother; you're a great aunt, and I think it probably takes some of the same skills.”

“Well, but I said I wouldn’t have made a good *young* mother. Probably if someone had come along and done all the diaper changing and breastfeeding and actual bearing for me, and keeping kids from drawing with crayons on the walls, and knowing whether to give small spankings or not, all that stuff—maybe if I’d had a surrogate mother, and two nannies, and maybe even a governess, I’d have been an okay mom. But after I got tired of making commitments to men who didn’t seem later to have made any real commitments to me, I gave up looking. I was married briefly after Larry, too, but it wasn’t a serious thing.

“And then, one day during the time I was working as a well-known reporter’s proofreader, film clippings girl, and general dogsbody, I met up with Ed, who was one of the sound engineers at the tv station. So, I’d guess I was about forty-three or -four, something like that. In my view, no longer young enough to have kids. He started out by showing me the sound booth, then gradually introduced me to how it worked. Back in those days, it wasn’t nearly as automated, digitalized, computerized, whatever the word is that I’m looking for, as it is now. It took a lot more handling. He was a calm sort of man, with a very wry, dry wit and a

peculiar way of turning situations on their heads and looking at them from a totally different angle. I can't exactly explain how it was with him, except to say that even though he wasn't a copy editor or a director, producer, anything like that, most of the reporters liked to discuss their work with him if there was time, before they turned it in to the higher ups. He was almost the breathing spirit of the station that way. Everyone knew him, and I can't think of a single person who disliked him.

“I was about forty-three, so I guess he was roughly sixty-eight when we met, though he didn't act like it. He drank and smoked with the best of them, and never became one of the worst of them, if you see what I mean. I drank too, then, a lot more than now, and he'd come by and get me out from under whatever heavy work load the reporters, plural, had foisted on me—because by then, I was a departmental wonder on account of the way I could organize film clippings and stories and things so fast and accurately. My original boss, the one reporter, had had to share me, and I got a larger salary, and Ed made sure I got better working conditions. We'd go out carousing with a bunch of fellow spirits after work, but a lot of additional stuff got done while we were at the bars and restaurants at

night and early mornings. It was a hard-living life, and in those years, I probably accumulated more wrinkles and sagging parts than at any other time I can remember. Three years after Ed was gone, it took another three years of a huge love affair with a yoga instructor who put me on a hearty vegetarian diet to make all that had gone wrong with my system right.

“But they were spiritually good years with Ed. You know, that’s one thing I’ll never understand: people feel lots of times that only when you’re physically clean of contaminants in your system can you be said truly to be clean spiritually, but that’s a bit fraudulent, I think. Sometimes, *in vino veritas*, it seems.”

“*In vino--?*”

“*In vino veritas*; ‘In wine, there is truth. Latin.’”

“Yes, I’ve taken a little Latin. I just wondered what the particular truth was that you were talking about.”

“Oh, just the spirit of Ed. I didn’t really marry him because I loved him so much; I mean, I did, but mostly in the way we all did. I mainly admired him and looked up to him. Don’t get me wrong, but he was the father we all would have liked to have had. We were a gang of misfits,

and he licked us into order, made something of us. He and I were just up so many nights together that it was easier to get married so that people at the station wouldn't be distressed or scandalized if we spent the night in the same bedroom or the same motel room or the same trailer night after night. I mean, it was still a small city back in Clarendon in those days, and people would talk about anything. It was a sort of partnership we had. I could probably count by flashing my ten fingers three times the number of times we actually made love in those nine or ten years.”

“If you liked him that much, why did you split up? Sorry, that wasn't put very tactfully. But, I already know you had a third husband. What broke you up from Ed?”

“Nothing broke us up. Ed died.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry!” exclaimed Sadie. “How old was he when he died?”

“He was a very well-preserved (or maybe I should say ‘pickled’) seventy-seven.”

“What did he finally die of, do you mind me asking? Was it the drinking and smoking? Or the late nights?”

“Neither one, actually, at least not *his* drinking and smoking and late nights. It might have been the pilot’s, I guess, it was a small plane. No, he died in a plane crash just outside Chicago, where his part of the sound crew had been going to study some new sound boards and techniques before our station bought any. All of them died, as well as some others from the station who’d been with them. I was supposed to be on board, too, but at the last minute, I came down with flu and had to stay home.”

“Wow! Lucky for you—well, at least in one way.”

“Yes, I guess, but it didn’t feel lucky. The station was becoming mismanaged because of all the new people they had to interview and hire suddenly, and the old guard was largely gone, either in the accident or just by attrition. I couldn’t bear to be there without Ed, and so I quit. Ed and I had socked away a pretty nice income between the two of us, so I had some time and some space to myself to think things through.

“Incidentally, I went fishing by myself a lot of times then, just to feel closer to Ed. I can remember that in the old days, he always had tackle in his car trunk, even took it on a couple of planes with us, and wherever we were, we would fish. If we had good luck, he’d cook it on the spot if

possible, keeping a little saltshaker and some camping silverware in his tackle box as well. Or if we didn't have time for that, he would hand the catch over to the first person he saw who wasn't doing so well with theirs. If we had bad luck sometimes, and I said something about the fish not biting, he'd say 'Yes, but I am.' I'm not sure what that meant, but he always thought it was very funny."

"He sounds like he must've been a really nice man. I'm sorry I can't meet him."

"Thanks for saying so, Sadie. We all have our troubles to bear. And ours, right now, include finishing up painting this fence around on the other sides a little better. That's my grass lot on the right-hand side over there, so it doesn't matter if we spill a little paint on it, but Mrs. Macomber will be out to have our heads on a platter if we spill any paint on her grass on this left-hand side. You asked me what the drop cloths were for earlier, and I told you they were to cover some grass? Well, I wasn't joking. I think maybe you thought I was."

"I sort of just thought you'd forgotten. Does she mind if we walk on her side?"

“No, but no paint drops. That sort of means that you’ll have to pull back her grass from the fence pickets until the point where the painted part meets the unpainted board part is exposed, and then place the drop cloth there. Are you ready to be scrutinized through her lace curtains and watched for every mistake?”

“I guess so. So, she doesn’t have to paint her part of the fence, and gets a free paint job, but still has the right to criticize?”

Emma laughed. “That’s about the size of it. Although the fence is technically on my part of the property line on that side. Her grass is her boundary. We’ve worked it out by this time, but I always dread doing her part of it myself, and leave it ‘till last, as you see, so I can understand how nervous you might feel. Just take your time. It’s not actually all that long a stretch, and by the time we get to the trash can area where the chain-link fence is, the picket fence cuts just across to my property. We can do that part of it, the backyard, some other day. It’s cool and dry today and tomorrow, so as long as we get done a few hours before dew fall, it’ll dry okay, but maybe we can wait a few days after that to do the back, because after tomorrow it’s rain in the forecast, and that’ll give us a break.”

“Okay.”

They tugged the drop cloths onto the sidewalk and around to the other side of the fence, and Sadie positioned hers as Emma had told her to do. Together, the two cloths were long enough that they covered most of the fence line area that they had to traverse and paint. Just as Sadie was bringing the two buckets and the brushes around to where Emma was tucking her drop cloth into the turf, they heard a screen door slam. Startled, Sadie jumped and dropped one of the brushes, which luckily landed on the cloth.

When she looked up onto the porch next door, she saw a huge black woman with beautiful purplish-black skin and her hair in a large bun on the back of her head standing watching them warily. She was wearing a long Indian caftan with gold threads and multicolored beads on it.

“Here, now!” she said, pointing at Sadie’s brush. “Don’t you girls get any paint on my lawn. My man Peter just cut that grass five days ago, there’s no excuse to be getting anything on it like paint.”

Emma grinned a bit to hear herself described as a “girl” by a woman who was probably at least fifteen years younger than she, but answered,

“Don’t you worry, Mrs. Macomber, this is my niece Sadie, and I’ve already told her to be careful and not to spill anything on your grass.” She looked up at the porch and waved a stray hand in greeting.

“Well, then, okay. She’s kind of clumsy with her brushes, though, isn’t she?” She chuckled, then said “Do a good job!” and turned and headed back inside.

“You heard the lady, Sadie, don’t be so clumsy,” said Emma, picking up her bucket of paint and brush that Sadie had just placed by her on her cloth. “I told you, didn’t I?” And then she laughed, too.

Sadie smiled back at her, and then, they started painting again in earnest, intent on doing as good a job as possible. It helped a bit that Mrs. Macomber’s fence line on that side was unencumbered with bushes or flowers; instead, her bushes and flowers were all either in front of her house or along her other unfenced property line, which bounded the far sidewalk. They painted in silence now, each trying to finish and be able to go inside, because though it was a dry day, the heat was intense, and they had neglected to bring any water or Gatorade out with them on the assumption that they wouldn’t be taking too long. Luckily, Emma had

already sanded the fence down two days before, and it had turned out only to need one coat of paint, because she kept up the painting regularly.

But it turned out that today, Mrs. Macomber and her man Peter were in the mood for some conversation with the intruders, so the two of them sat down on their porch after about fifteen minutes or so, he in an antique rocking chair on the far side, facing the street, and Mrs. Macomber on the near side also facing the street, in a comfortable porch swing.

“This weekend will be the Fourth of July,” observed Peter to the empty air.

“Peter, this is my niece, Sadie,” Emma turned from her squatting position to say to him, waving her hand towards Sadie.

“Sure enough. I thought there was a lot of young persons around here all of a sudden.”

“Yes, the other one’s her young man,” answered Mrs. Macomber knowledgeably, to which remark Sadie blushed and answered,

“His name is Gene. My parents don’t like him.”

“Emma does, though,” responded the mischievous Peter and laughed.

“So, you just stay here, darlin’, with Aunt Emma,” Mrs. Macomber advised.

“I will, Mrs. Macomber, as long as I can,” said Sadie.

“Yessir, the Fourth of July. In-de-pen-dence Day,” intoned Peter.
“We’re getting some steaks and ice cream.”

“Well, it’s on the weekend, so I’m hoping that Sadie’s friend Gene can come over and celebrate with us, but he has family commitments, too, so it may just be the two of us. There’re going to be fireworks over the lake, but that’s two miles and a half up the road, so we’ll probably just try to see them over the trees in the backyard. I don’t see the point in dragging out the car and getting all caught up in the crowded line of cars going in and out at the site. Or, I guess we could watch from upstairs through the picture window, if it’s too hot. I hate to waste air conditioning if it’s not necessary, though; it’s so expensive.” This was Emma, as she gave another lick or two of the brush to the picket she was painting and then, after turning her head to look at it, went on to the next.

“Yeah, I seen the two of them billing and cooing out on the street the other morning,” teased Peter.

“Now, Peter, behave yourself,” scolded Mrs. Macomber.

“What did I say?” he said. “I only speak truth. I’m happy for them.”

“I doubt they care whether *you’re* happy or not,” his wife answered.

“I doubt *you* married to suit *them*.”

“No, I sure didn’t. It suits me just fine,” responded the incorrigible Peter.

“Well, the parents are a bit of a problem; they’re sort of corncob people, Peter, to use that familiar old term. You probably know the type,” answered Emma.

“Yeah, I do. One thousand dollar a plate.”

“You got it,” said Emma, smiling over at Sadie, who was feeling good at being sympathized with, but not entirely taking in all the ins-and-outs of the conversation.

It got a little later, and the shadows were lengthening on the street while Emma and Sadie were finishing up their job, quite creditably, as it turned out. The two observers on the porch continued to talk to them and keep them company, until Mrs. Macomber had a peek at a filigree gold watch on her left wrist.

After a few more affable exchanges, in which Mrs. Macomber even unbent enough to tell Emma and Sadie that they were “developing sure hands” with the painting, Mrs. Macomber said to her husband,

“Okay, old man, go get your hat. It’s time to be going to church.”

“Oh, no! Why today? I go on Sunday, sure as shootin’. Why do I have to go on Wednesdays too?”

“Because the devil’s got you by one toe already when you act like that! Now, go get your hat. I’m not going to tell you again.”

Peter went inside then, pretending to grumble some more just for amusement’s sake and to aggravate his wife, saying, “Why don’t you love on me in the middle of the street in front of God and everybody like that young one does her man? Are you ashamed of me?” But as he was saying this, he beat it quickly back into the house where she couldn’t answer him well.

He came back just as Emma was standing back looking at their work from the lawn, and Mrs. Macomber was also regarding it critically from the porch. “I do believe you missed a spot, Emma,” Peter said.

“Now, she did not! Where on that fence do you see a spot?” Mrs. Macomber was as incensed as if she’d been doing the painting herself.

“Ignore him, Emma, he’s just teasing again. It looks right fine.”

“Or maybe it’s that being fussed at so much makes me see spots before my eyes,” Peter conjectured, but smirking right at Emma all the time.

Emma and Sadie both grinned back at him, while Mrs. Macomber’s voice lowered dangerously. “Go and get the car out,” was her only response to his latest sally.

But if he couldn’t have the last word, he was determined to have the last gesture. He sidled past his wife ducking his head and tipping his hat repeatedly, and jerked away quickly when she swatted at him with her hand. Then, he made for the garage on the far side of their house in earnest, and a few minutes later, the car was idling on the street where he was waiting.

Mrs. Macomber went inside for a moment, and in less time than it had taken for Peter to go in and put his hat on, she came back out with a turban on her head which matched her dress, the hair from the back of her head now evidently tucked up inside the cloth. “Thank you very kindly for

doing the fence, today, Emma,” she said. “You can expect to see an apple crumble pie on your porch in a day or two.”

Emma smiled back and said, “Well, I do appreciate it, Mrs. Macomber, but you know you don’t have to do that. I don’t mind in the least.”

“Nor do I,” said Mrs. Macomber with dignity. “Now I’ve got to get the old man to church before he goes and sets off somebody else.”

“Well, we know he’s just teasing. I don’t mind at all, and I don’t think Sadie does either.”

“I know that, but I can’t seem to stop him from setting people off. Anyway, you have a good evening. We’ll be seeing you.” And she walked towards the car with a slow, stately stride, a small gathered purse in her hand.

When Peter saw her coming at last, he blew one long beep on the horn; she said something else to him, but got in and settled herself without looking back. Peter hung one hand out the window and waved back at Sadie and Emma, to which they responded.

Then it was time to go in. The two women sealed up their paint cans properly and washed out their brushes, before next getting themselves

cleaned up in the garage sink and changing into cleaner clothes they'd put aside on a chair there earlier. While they were having a light supper, mainly composed of fruit salad, chicken salad, and iced tea, Sadie asked Emma about the things that had confused her in regard to their neighbors.

“Why do you call her ‘Mrs. Macomber,’ but him ‘Peter’?”

“Because that’s the way she always introduces herself, and he just says, ‘You call me Peter.’”

“‘You can call me Peter’?”

“No, more like a gentle command, or an instruction: ‘You call me Peter.’”

“But she calls you ‘Emma,’ and you’re older than she is. It seems sort of impolite.”

“Well, that’s a matter of perspective. When I first met her, which incidentally, was the first time I painted the fence once during a time when Daniel was away from home and I needed something to do, I saw her in her yard sort of watching me, and I went over and said ‘Hi, I’m Emma Jorgensen. You can call me ‘Emma.’ And I held out my hand.”

“And what did she do?”

“She very regally condescended to shake my hand, and said ‘You can call me “Mrs. Macomber.”’ So, that’s what she wants to be called.”

“But she’s going to bake you an apple crumble pie for the fence painting.”

“That’s right. Once it was a rhubarb tart, once a batch of cookies, always sweets, she knows I have a taste for them, since I’ve written her so many ‘thank-you’ notes. And I put the notes back in the pan after I wash it out, and the next morning, there’s always a short note saying exactly the same thing practically every time: ‘And thank you for painting the fence, and also thank you for returning my pan clean. Mrs. Macomber.’”

Sadie shrugged. Better Mrs. Macomber than her own mother, who didn’t even live on such good terms with much of anyone, though she made social pretenses with people whom she considered to be more important or richer than she. “Well, but what was that remark to Peter about my parents being ‘corncob people’?”

“I’m actually surprised we got by with that. We probably did because I said it instead of Peter. It’s an expression of his, and he gets in trouble

with her if he says it out loud; not that that always stops him. It means ‘people who have corncocks up their asses,’ or snobs, hateful people, arrogant people.”

“Ah-ha! Then I understand ‘one thousand dollars a plate,’” said Sadie, laughing at how outraged she could imagine her parents being if they could’ve heard themselves being referred to in those terms. “It means they eat off thousand dollar plates, right?”

“Close. Actually, I think it refers to the sorts of expensive charity dinners and fundraisers that your mother *does* go to, after all, and your father too, sometimes.”

They talked a little more, watched some breaking news on Emma’s older model tv, and then took their showers and got ready for bed, because they were both bushed by the day’s activities. It was still comparatively early to go to bed, only 9:30, but Emma excused herself and went on up, after locking up and turning off all the extra lights. Sadie watched part of an old movie, but she could hear thunder in the distance, and though storm activity hadn’t been predicted for that evening, and it might simply have been heat lightning sounding off, she didn’t want to take the chance that

it would come in on the tv set. So, she went upstairs to her room too, and waited for it to be time to call Gene, or to get a call from Gene, she couldn't quite remember which they had agreed upon for that night. He had mentioned driving George back from the airport where his plane was coming in, and she knew he might have been delayed either at the airport or at George's and Becky's, or both.

When she finally called at about 11:30 after not having heard from him, however, he answered immediately. "I had almost given up waiting for you to call," he said. "I got back about 9:00."

"So early! I hadn't expected that. I thought maybe you'd want to spend some more time with your brother's family, and I couldn't remember who was supposed to call whom. Sorry! Do you have early work tomorrow?"

"Not until 10:00. So, how did the fence painting go?"

She described some of the things that had been done and said, giving him also a brief history of Emma's marriage to Ed. She'd been telling him about some of Emma's adventures, but as judiciously as possible,

because the first time she'd been incautious enough to mention that Emma seemed to have had a lot of experience with men, he'd said,

“I like Emma a lot, and I think she's a good sort of person. I just hope she's not giving you any ideas.”

“Ideas? What sort of ideas?”

“Well, she seems to have had a lot of lovers, and husbands, too. I was hoping you could make do with just me.”

“I can, I will. Don't worry about that. Emma's just had some bad luck is all. And she believes in trying again when things don't go right, I guess.”

He'd then proclaimed manfully, “Well, I figure I'll just have to see that things go right, then, won't I?”

Now, he said, “So she was with the older man nine years, huh? I didn't realize she'd even been a widow.”

“Nine or ten years, she wasn't exact. Anyway, hearing about her life is fascinating to me, and it helps pass the time when we're doing chores. She's quite a talker.”

“She seems really vigorous and healthy for an older person. How old is she now, anyway?”

“Well, we could figure it out. Let’s see, she was fifty-three when Ed died. Then, she got together with a yoga instructor three years after that; that makes fifty-six. She stayed with him for three years, which makes fifty-nine, although I don’t know the full story of that yet. After that, she met Daniel and was with him for about two years, I think she said, before she married him. That’s sixty-one. Then, they were married for three years or so, that’s sixty-four. And she’s been without him now for a while; I think she told me the other day that sometimes six years could seem like an eternity. That was when I asked her how long it’d actually been since he’d gone. So, I’d say she’s somewhere between sixty-nine and seventy-one. Maybe a good round seventy?” Sadie felt slightly ashamed of herself, but she was looking at a pad from her bedside table drawer where she’d already figured some of the dates Emma had revealed to her. It wasn’t really invasion of privacy, though, she thought, since she and Gene both loved Emma, and were concerned for her.

“Man, and she never seems to stop going!”

They continued along with this track for another few minutes, and then Sadie asked, “So, what are you doing on the Fourth? Are you free, or is your family getting together?”

He sounded contrite. “My family is going to have a picnic, and I kind of need and sort of want to be there because it’s been so long since George was home, and with Georgie around now, and all that, you know... It would be so great if you and I were already married, and you could be a part of it all; I know they’d love you. Becky really appreciated the gift certificate, and she’s asked me several times for your and Emma’s address so that she could send you a thank-you and some more baby pictures, but I keep forgetting to give it to her. I’ll do better, though. But maybe in the evening, I know you said there were going to be fireworks after dark. Maybe I could come for that.”

“That would be nice,” said Sadie, disappointed but wanting to have him for as long as she could on the holiday.

“You don’t sound that excited.”

“We will be really happy to see you; I guess I’m just wishing too that things could be different, that my family wasn’t so stupid.”

“It won’t be that much longer now. You know, my uncle in the tailor shop has arranged an interview for me for an internship as assistant cutter to start in the fall at a manufacturer’s in Otter Creek. It’s Down By the Crick manufacturers, I know you’ve heard of that one, high end sporting wear, sort of like L. L. Bean. I think I can just make it financially for the four months of it if I change my delivery route for UPS to that area and find a place there to live. I’ll be working a lot, but probably not more than usual, and you and I’ll be closer. I couldn’t tell you about it before, because he just told me about it today. Isn’t that great?”

“It really is. All I have to do is get past my eighteenth birthday in September, and then I can do what I want.”

“Yeah, but be careful; don’t be too defiant. You still need your family’s money to go to school on. I mean, once you’re eighteen, your family can’t strictly forbid you to see me, and I guess we could go ahead and get married, but if you still want to go to school, you might as well take advantage of the free tuition while you can, until you can get some sort of scholarship or assistantship. Maybe they’ll just accept that we’re married, and figure that they don’t want to be embarrassed by not having

you in school. It could happen.” He stopped. “Or, I guess if we were determined to have everything our own way and do it the hard way too, we could just get married and both of us work and go to school at the same time. It’s just that I’ve seen people get really old and worn out trying to do that, and that much pressure isn’t always the best thing for relationships. But, it’s up to you. We’ve got time to discuss it again before we have to decide.”

But as it turned out, events pushed them down the road almost faster than they could travel. At first, Sadie thought of it as her fault, because she had been the more passionately committed one of the two of them to becoming physically intimate. It wasn’t that Gene was lacking in interest in the subject, but it was as if because he knew what it entailed, he was better prepared to wait patiently for her. She had always valued that in him before, but the closer she drew to her eighteenth birthday, the more certain things that her sister Fayette had hinted about in the past rankled: Sadie’s virginal state, her naïvête about men, her lack of a steady boyfriend to squire her around, *et cetera*. Fayette was quickly acquiring a reputation as one of the “faster” set of young women, but their parents

were blind to this because the crowd she ran with was all wealthy and connected in its individual members. Sadie had only once ventured on trying to tell her mother this, to point out that Gene was both respectable and hardworking by contrast, and her mother had become furiously angry and had verbally eviscerated her for (supposedly) being envious of her sister's success. Sadie felt that she could definitely manage to conduct with one steady young man what her airheaded sister Fayette had managed to do with several, and to conduct it to better purpose. So, she approached Emma the afternoon of the third of July, and broached the delicate subject of perhaps allowing Gene to stay over.

Emma was cutting up vegetables for a roast beef dinner that she was planning to deliver to a needier family from down the block who'd just had a death, and she said nothing at first, but kept cutting. Then, she stopped, looked up at Sadie, pointed the tip of the knife at her, and asked, "So, what's changed? Why the hurry?"

"Are you saying 'No'?"

"Of course I'm not. It's not my place. You are old enough to decide for yourself, under certain circumstances, and if you and Gene were

already married, I certainly wouldn't refuse to let you share a room, with whatever attendant hi-jinks—were you already married, which I understand is the plan. I'm just curious as to why all the sudden now is the time. Has Gene asked to stay over?"

"No. But he's going to come over to see the fireworks with us the night of the Fourth, after dark, so it'll already be late. And, he has the next day off, which means he can at least spend the morning of it here before he needs to be off to his family again. And Belcher's Falls is just up the way, and after dark, they don't patrol it for skinny-dippers. Oh, please?"

"Don't wheedle me, young woman. Have you ever been skinny-dipping?"

"Once at a farmer's pond near Summitsville, when that beast Fayette would take me anywhere with her. Of course, some of her rough gang came by, and I had to get out and get dressed because of the way they were acting, but in this case, Gene would be with me, and I would be protected."

“Not having a skinny-dip area patrolled by anyone is a double-edged sword. If people own a pond, like the farmer did, they can sort of control who’s on their property and who’s not. A public area without police protection is a different kettle of fish; it could attract drunks, rapists, brawlers—I know you don’t want to get hurt, or have Gene injured in a fight over you, anything like that.” Emma stopped to check the oven temperature and place the roast in the oven before she went to the table and sat down, signalling to Sadie to join her there.

“Did Gene bring up the topic of going skinny-dipping after the fireworks, or did you?”

“I did. He said it sounded like fun, but he wasn’t sure whether I was ready for that—that even made me a little mad, it sounded so condescending and superior—and he told me to put it in front of you and ask you what you think. So, that’s what I’m doing. And I just thought that afterwards, since Belcher’s Falls is so much closer to us here than it is to Summitsville, that he could come back here and spend the night with me for the first time.” She blushed, but met Emma’s direct gaze fearlessly and stood her ground.

“No embarrassing encounters for me in the hallway with a naked man, no broken bedframe from too many gymnastics, no loud music at all hours of the day and night?”

Sadie burred a laugh, and said, “No, no, and no.”

“Do you even know how to do what you want to do?”

Sadie was miffed after all. “Well, it can’t be that hard to do, people have been doing it for all time. And I’m pretty sure that Gene knows what to do. I’ve read the books, of course.”

“Oh, of course, the books. That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

“I meant, as far as you’ve ever told me, you’re not on the pill. Do you have protection, and do you know how to use it?”

“I figured either Gene or I could get some, if we went out today.”

“Is he waiting for me to make this big decision for the two of you, too?”

“No, I’ve just talked to him about the skinny-dipping.”

“Ah, Gene, a temptress is luring you forth!”

“Be serious, Emma. I can walk to town today, and anyone over sixteen can get condoms.”

“Do you know what brand to buy?”

“It can’t be that hard to figure out. Maybe I could ask the pharmacist.”

“If it’s a young male pharmacist in this town, you’d better hope you don’t either embarrass him silly, or get fresh treatment. Okay, as soon as I finish my roast and we deliver it, in a couple of hours or so, I’ll take you to town and help you make some selections. It might be just as well to get two kinds. You presumably haven’t discussed this with Gene, either.”

“I kind of wanted to surprise him.”

“Take him off his guard, you probably mean. Well, all birds have to fly the nest sometime or other. I’m just glad Robert doesn’t know what his allowance money is going for. Be sure not to hand over your credit card by mistake, you don’t want your father and mother coming barrel-heading down on us some day to find out what den of iniquity I’m running here.” And with this, Emma reached out and patted Sadie’s arm to show her some reassurance; it was clear to her that it hadn’t been an easy topic for the otherwise modest Sadie to bring up.

So, Sadie called Gene back and told him that Emma had been cautious about the skinny-dipping, but didn't totally nix it. Gene suggested that they go with suits on and see what the situation was like before making any decision about whether or not to stay clothed. This seemed like a good compromise to Sadie, and she agreed. Then, she told him that she had asked Emma also if he could come over and spend the night, and that Emma had said 'Yes.'

He hesitated a little more about this. "Was that all there was to it, just 'Yes'?"

"Well, no, we discussed it for a while. She is a better parent figure than she admits to being. But I have her permission for you to stay with me as long as, let's see, you don't appear naked in the hall, we don't break the bed—"

"Jesus, Sadie!" exclaimed Gene.

"—and we don't play loud music all night." She giggled into the silence onto the other end of the phone.

"Well, I guess I'd better pay a trip to the pharmacy on the way over, then," he finally said.

“Emma was going to take me to the one here and help me pick. But would you rather go?”

“Yes, I definitely would. Don’t worry, I won’t forget.” He waited a minute, and when she said nothing more, not knowing exactly how to conclude the discussion, it became a little awkward.

“You don’t mind, do you, Gene? I mean, my jumping the gun, sort of?”

“Mind! I’ve been waiting—but neither one of us can help that. We’re just going to have to be very considerate of Emma and not do anything to embarrass her or make difficulties for her.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Emma is kind of hard to embarrass.”

“I think her feelings and her treatment of us have both been very delicate.”

“I didn’t mean that, I just meant, I wish my mother were like her. When Mom wants to put me down, she always acts like I’ve embarrassed her, or something.”

With a few warmer statements and expressions of affection, they concluded their conversation, and Gene said he’d be there around eight

o'clock or so. Sadie plugged the phone back into the charger, and went on down to tell Emma that their plans had changed a bit, and that it was no longer necessary to go to town, because Gene was going to take care of their errand. She sat and kept Emma company while the roast finished, and they talked of various things, none of them terribly significant.

When the roast was done, Emma asked, "Would you like to go to the Randall's with me to deliver the meal?"

"Sure," answered Sadie. "A roast is pretty heavy, isn't it? And you've also got those two bags of groceries you were talking about taking along."

"Yes, I want to get there before Mr. Randall gets home from work, too. It's his eldest son that got killed in the last troop movements before we started pulling out of Afghanistan, and he's a very proud man, and hurting a lot, according to his wife. I don't want to give him the opportunity to get on his high horse and refuse the roast or the groceries."

"Is his wife the same way?"

"Heavens, no. She's a quiet, little, shy thing, about fifteen years younger than he is, and she appreciates every least little thing somebody does for her. She'll probably just put the groceries away really quickly

before he comes home, and he'll be none the wiser. It's the tradition, too, to take people prepared meals when they've had a death in the family, so if she's already got the roast on the table, and we're long gone, he's not likely to cause a problem."

When the roast was out of the oven, Sadie saw that it was in a disposable aluminum roasting pan, which would make it a little harder to transport without incident, but which eliminated the necessity for Mrs. Randall to return anything. But then, Emma got a huge, sturdy paper sack with tough rope handles on it, and the two of them hefted the roasting pan up into the sack and placed it securely, taking care not to spill any of the juice in the bag.

"Why don't we each take a bag of groceries to the car, and then you can help me with the roast separately?" she proposed. "The Randalls are only down near the southern end of the street on the west side opposite us, but I know we'll need the car. Let's make tracks, it's getting late!"

Sure enough, when they headed out to the car, some shadows had already started to gather in the trees, but the sun was still bright and high, so they were able to make their delivery and socialize a bit. They

expressed their condolences, although refusing politely the tea and cookies that Mrs. Randall haphazardly offered, since they could see that her five younger children were running madly about and keeping her busy, and one teenaged girl was crying mournfully in a corner. Emma stepped over and patted her shoulder and said something comforting to her, but they got away as soon as it was possible to, since they had their own plans to make for the next day.

This time, Emma had picked up some filet mignon, several pieces as well as a porterhouse cut in case Gene was hungry when he came over the next night. She didn't imagine that he would be, after celebrating with his family all day, but the mention Peter next door had made of steaks for the Fourth had stuck in her mind, and Sadie had agreed with her that it sounded good. She pointed out to Sadie that filet mignon was really more of a woman's cut, whereas men went for sirloins or porterhouses or ribeyes. But they were well-provided for in any case, and Emma gave Sadie permission to fix steak the morning of the fifth if Gene should want one.

“Just in case you are both totally exhausted,” she teased.

Sadie blushed, but got pert enough the next minute to tease back and say, “I bow to your superior knowledge,” an expression her English teacher had used to mock them with when someone made an egregious mistake in class.

They made a few other dishes in a desultory fashion, not feeling like exerting themselves much that late in the afternoon. After all, they had lots of ice cream and steak (as their neighbor had spoken of getting, too), and Emma always seemed to keep in a stock of cool casserole-style salads and cut-up vegetables with dips during hot weather. Sadie was hoping that all of the cooking and preparations that had been going on during the summer weren't only for her benefit, as she said to Emma at one point.

“Well, yes and no. I don't normally have this much food around, but it's really nice and companionable to have someone to cook for and with again.” She looked from the kitchen table where they sat, out the back door and into space. It was the first time in a long time that she had mentioned even glancingly her previous loneliness before Sadie came.

Sadie felt guilty now that she was planning further happiness with Gene, and that Emma was alone. It was a rapidly intensifying feeling, as

she considered how she would feel without her choice of mate around. “Well, I’m here now, Emma, and unless something happens, I’ll be here for years while I’m in college. I only hope Dad doesn’t cut off my money, or anything. I’ve been saving up some of it to take to the bank and put in a little account, not much, but some, to pay you back for all the things you’ve supplied: the food, the utilities, the wear and tear on things.”

“Don’t be silly, Sadie, you know I have plenty of money, and your Dad, even without knowing where it comes from, has a nose for money, too. He knows that I must have something to maintain this house and property, and since I didn’t ask him for an income for you to live on, he’s quite rightly concluded that I’m in the pink financially. That’s Robert all over: ask for the favor first, and then only offer something for it if the person asks. But there’s little or no wear and tear on things; you’re not the destructive sort, and you’ve helped a lot with the upkeep of the house and yard. You’re excellent company, too.”

“Mostly, I seem to be sticking my nose in your business.”

“Again, nonsense. You surely know how much old people like talking about themselves. No, you’re very good company.”

“And I will always be, if I can.”

“Always? Always is a long time, Sadie. You’re going to be having your own fish to fry sooner rather than later, and you’ll be leaving. It’s only natural.”

“But I’ll still come and see you, Emma. You know I will. You’re better than my mother to me.” Sadie was tearing up and getting a little distressed now, at the progression of years and events as Emma, with her longer life, saw them.

“Yes, I hope you will. And who knows, if I get old and senile, there may be a time when I need you and Gene to help Daniel’s firm set up some resource for me to live in assisted living, or a nursing home, or memory care, something like that. And I know I can count on you for that. In fact, let me show you something they’ve been drafting up. Come in here.”

Sadie followed Emma into the living room to the carved walnut desk, and stood while Emma opened the lid and pulled a roll of paper out from one of the pigeonholes in the inside. Emma showed a typed copy of a legal document, with her name, Daniel’s name, the name of Ormond,

Price, and Zimmerman, evidently Daniel's lawyers, and several blank spaces for other signatures. It was a starkly stated "In the event that" sort of document which Sadie had no trouble understanding, but she felt very bad about its existence, because she didn't like to think of putting Emma in some sort of home. She had heard all sorts of horror stories and bad things about even the expensive ones when sitting with her mother and her mother's friends.

"You can put your signature here now, if you want to," said Emma. Then, she smiled. "But, if you plan to add Gene's last name to yours when you marry, be sure and don't write all the way to the end of the line. Here's his space. We'll not bother him with it for this visit, but maybe sometime soon. Is that all right?" She was the one to seem hesitant now, as if Sadie were someone whom she was asking permission of in a reversal of their roles of earlier in the day, as in fact she was.

Sadie said, "Well, I'll always do my best for you, Emma," and obliged by picking up a pen and signing. "But let's not be sad. This makes me feel very sad. I'd rather be close and check in on you than put you in one of those places."

“Well, you see, eventually, it’ll have to have Daniel’s signature on it too, since it’ll have to be his money continuing to support me if I need support. As soon as Gene has a chance to look it over and see if he wants to sign it, I’ll send it to the lawyers, and they can take it from there. Don’t worry, Sadie, by the time I’m in that state, I probably won’t care if you keep me in a pickle jar.” And she laughed loud and long at what wasn’t really funny to Sadie, but things were sad enough, and so Sadie just hugged her, tried not to cry, and laughed too, as much as she was able.

“Now!” concluded Emma briskly, “Let’s eat something and watch the news. We’ll need to get to bed a little earlier tonight, since we have such *big* plans for tomorrow,” and she rolled her eyes at Sadie comically and winked.

Her continued good humor was disarming, but Sadie had earlier seen the distant, melancholy look on Emma’s face while she’d been staring blankly through the back door, and she wasn’t entirely convinced. She would have to talk to Gene about what they could do. Maybe it would even be possible to buy a house here in Waterstone Barrier after they were married, to be near to Emma and look after her. Or, maybe they would

somehow be able to buy Emma's very house if she got ill or incapacitated, from the company or from her, and live there to be with her until she died. "Oh, I know," thought Sadie, "that Gene wouldn't mind."

Emma kept Sadie busy, however, for the rest of the evening, asking about her family in more depth, about what her sisters were like, about the few family events that Robert or Phoebe had condescended to describe, and inquiring about "what had actually happened." As Sadie was young and hopeful, and had inherited Emma's liking for conversation and ability to analyze people and situations, this helped distract her and to some extent end her immediate worries about her aunt.

That night, Emma dreamed that she was with Daniel in the François I castle with the ornate spiral staircase again, the one which they had visited on their honeymoon. She fought dimly to remember its name, the castle, as she climbed up the winding staircase after Daniel, who was quickly disappearing in front of her up the turns and twists. She thought at first it was Cassis or Framboise, then thought that was certainly the name of something she had liked to eat at the time; Chambois, then, perhaps, but at every wrong word choice, Daniel got farther and farther away. She

started to struggle to keep up with him, realized as she was climbing that she was waking up, that not only had they not been allowed on the staircase itself, but had only been allowed to look at it from below; as Daniel disappeared around the final turn at the top, she popped awake, said “Chambord,” rubbed her eyes, then feeling her pillow wet with tears, shrugged at herself impatiently and turned over, going off to sleep again almost right away.

The next morning when she came down to the kitchen, Sadie already had her coffee on, and also the tea kettle on the stove was whistling away; Sadie sometimes preferred tea. Sadie was solicitous. “How did you sleep, Aunt Emma?” She didn’t usually address Emma as “Aunt,” but it seemed appropriate after their conversations of the day before, which had somehow underlined their familial relationship.

“Well, I guess. A few weird dreams. Why? How did you sleep?” Emma poured coffee and cream, and sat down at the table, looking across at Sadie.

“Oh, I slept okay. I just asked you because I went by your room last night on the way to look out the back picture window, and I heard you talking to yourself.”

“Yeah, at one point I was trying to remember the name of a castle. One I saw in France.”

“I’d like to go to France someday,” said Sadie.

“If anybody can get there, I imagine you and Gene can. The two of you have impressed me as being very busy, smart, and industrious people.” Emma stood up and poked her head in the cupboard, pulling out her favorite oats, and the brown sugar bag, going next to the refrigerator for some butter. “Do you want me to fix you something,” she asked, taking another sip of coffee, “or do you want to wait? Thanks for the coffee, by the way.”

“Oh, I guess I’ll wait a while, and then maybe toast a bagel, or something. I’m not really hungry right now.”

The silence was companionable, and Sadie sat with Emma while she ate, not bothering her with questions or remarks, until she saw Emma

pouring another generous amount of brown sugar on the already heaped bowl of oats. Emma had done herself proud this morning.

“Did your yoga instructor guy let you eat that much brown sugar on your oats?” she joked.

“No, nor many oats either, at least not with much butter. He said I ate too much meat, and too many carbs. I’ve never been fat, but I was definitely droopy after Ed passed on. Carter put me on a strict vegetarian diet and only let me drink water and unsweetened green tea for the longest time. I had to sneak around him to get anything fun, and he could smell the meat on my body, or at least he said he could.”

“Was that his name, Carter? That doesn’t sound like an Indian yogi.”

“His mother was English; his name was Carter Rey. As to how much of a yogi he was, I almost think that was strictly a matter of interpretation. He knew several forms of yoga, but with me he seemed always to be concentrating on the tantric, which you know has a little something to do with sex, and he kept talking about my chakras being the wrong color, or out of alignment, or something. I found it all hard to follow, and frankly, I wasn’t trying too hard. I felt younger and younger the healthier and

healthier I got, and I was only too happy to jump his bones when the opportunity presented itself. Of course, there's no telling whether or not he was actually faithful, he did teach classes of mostly women, and it was always tantric-this and tantric-that. We had an apartment together for about three years, though, and he was so obsessed with spiritual and physical cleanliness that I could feel sure I wouldn't pick up anything from him. And of course, he taught several other forms of yoga, too, so I felt fairly safe. Ritual cleanliness can make you feel really superior, and I went around at the little, piddly jobs I worked to earn a bit of money feeling better than others for a few years, which might have been good for me." She laughed. What she was amused by wasn't entirely clear, though it seemed to have to do with the yogi again.

"What?" prompted Sadie.

"Well, every now and then, I still do some yoga as taught by Carter; not the tantric stuff, but the other positions and varieties, the ones I liked the most, whose names usually slip my mind these days. In fact, once I decided to do some of it out in the yard, and it scandalized some of the neighbors, just plain yoga, with no one else around. When Peter was out

raking his yard one day, and I was out clipping dead flowers off my roses, a couple of the ladies from around here went by. I spoke, but they glared at me, and refused to answer. I was astounded, since they'd always been friendly before. I looked at Peter, but you know him; he was getting his usual comedy out of things. 'They don't like to see old womens dancing in the yard. That's what they said to Elisabeth.'

"'Elsabeth?' I was unfamiliar with the name.

"'Mrs. Macomber,' he whispered. At just that point, she called out to him, 'Old man, get in here this minute.'

"I thought, 'Uh-oh, I'm in for it now; Mrs. Macomber is down on me, too.'

"But when he went in, she came out, and came over towards me with a friendlier expression than I'd ever seen. 'Don't you pay any attention to the gossips, little lady. Everybody has a right to pray in their own way.'

"I said, 'You know, that was yoga I was doing.'

"She said, 'And I know that, too. I don't hold any truck with it, but maybe that's because I'm too copious.'

"'Copious?'" echoed Sadie.

“I fancy she was referring to her weight. Anyway, at least I had my near neighbors on my side. The others unbent a little after a while, but then I had learned my lesson, and did the rest of my yoga in the house or out in the backyard. I’m just sort of a nine days’ wonder around here, a minor goofball, an eccentric.”

“That’s a funny story, Emma. You know, I think you don’t take yourself seriously enough sometimes. But then, maybe I take myself too seriously, and could learn a thing or two.”

They conversed about this and that for a few minutes, then Sadie wanted to know more about Carter Rey, and specifically about how the relationship had ended.

“Carter wanted to go to India and live, and I didn’t; it was that simple. I was afraid of the crowds, and the fact was that it was almost a sort of claustrophobia at the time. I seemed to develop it spontaneously at any mention of going to India, or travelling at all, for that matter, even in what must have been much smaller crowds around Clarendon. But he really wanted to go, and started saving up money and selling some of his possessions to make ready. For one thing, his father was fairly well-off,

and had bought him a marvelous sound system that I absolutely loved, but he sold that, too; we had a major argument about it, because he started by offering to leave it with me until he came back, and then he changed his mind and said he didn't know if he *was* coming back. He'd written and sent tapes to an ashram which was willing to take him on semi-permanently. That settled it. I moved out to a smaller apartment, dramatically claiming whatever mutual property I could wrest from him in a series of really selfish gestures, and left him to fend for himself. It had been mainly about sex, anyway, and that had been great while it lasted, but the first thing I had on my first night in my new place was a cheeseburger and large fries from McDonald's. Marvelously, my aversion to crowds disappeared, so that by the time Daniel came along and first proposed travelling, I was as eager as he was. As I guess he still is," she seemed to be unable to prevent herself from making this last reflection in a pensive tone. But then, something else occurred to her. "So, why were you up in the middle of the night looking out the upstairs picture window? Just wanting to see where we're possibly going to be watching the fireworks from? Or was something wrong?"

“No, nothing was wrong; I just wanted to go and think. You have so many nice plants in there that it reminds me of pictures of conservatories in magazines.”

“Well, it’s not glass all the way around, for one thing, though it does have a nice, big window, and lets in a lot of eastern light in the mornings. When it’s not too hot, it’s a nice place to take a tray up and have breakfast.”

“Yes, I saw the tray tables and chairs folded against the north wall. Did Daniel build this house, or did it come this way?”

“No, he didn’t build it, but we made a few renovations, including to the conservatory, to use your word. There was originally a large skylight up there in the ceiling, but it had leaked a little bit, so we took out the wall instead, built in the picture window, closed the skylight permanently, and totally repaired the ceiling. I for one like it much better this way.”

“I think I would, too.”

“So, what had you thinking instead of sleeping in the middle of the night, Sadie?”

Sadie paused for a moment, then answered. “I was trying to figure out if I’m just trying to show up my sister Fayette, who’s always getting seriously involved with one guy after another (with Mom’s apparent ignorance or approval), or if I’m really ready to make this change in my and Gene’s relationship this soon.”

“And if I may ask, what did you decide? Or did you?”

“I think I want to go ahead. I mean, I know basically what’s involved, so I’m not as stupid as Fayette thinks. And I’d trust Gene to the ends of the earth to be gentle and loving, and considerate. I’m just a little nervous, is all.”

“That’s understandable. I mean, it seems that for Fayette, there’s always another bus along in a minute, but for you—well, this is the man you feel you want to spend the rest of your life with. More’s at stake.”

“I definitely don’t feel like waiting until I can marry him and we can live together. That may be at least a couple of years down the road, and I think we’re both getting really impatient, not only with my family, but with not being able to be together in public because of them. Actually, that’s sort of the same thing. And what we can do in public is somehow

connected with what we can do in private, even though it's not identical. We can't really confirm our relationship to be serious in public until we've been fully serious with each other in private. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes, I do. Just try to trust Gene and yourself, yourself and your instincts most of all. That will help, believe me. Take a positive attitude, and for God's sake, stop worrying. Funny how we both were wakeful last night."

"I'm sorry you were, but I'm also glad I'm not the one who woke you up."

"No, I was only awake from time to time, I slept most of the night. It's okay. We'll have time to catch naps during the middle of the day today, after the parade goes by, if you're interested."

"Oh, a parade! Yes, I like a parade well enough. Are you saying it comes by here, or do we have to go somewhere to see it?"

"They play on the town commons for about fifteen or twenty minutes, patriotic songs, then they march up and down some of the residential streets, the ones that happen to be wide enough and aren't near hospitals or churches. This happens to be one of them, so we can sit out on the

front porch and watch for them. You'll be able to hear them very well from a distance when they start. I mean, it's mainly junior high and high school bands, and a few parade floats and cars from the VFW and so on and so forth, not a symphony orchestra, but good fun nevertheless. What time is it now? Let's see, 10:30. If you're going to get that bagel with cream cheese, you should probably do it. If you don't mind my saying so, you might want to change sheets and tidy up around the room before Gene gets here tonight."

"Yeah, sorry! The sheets were all in the floor when I woke up this morning, even though I did get back to sleep okay after my stroll. And my stuff is all over the place. Sorry, Emma. I normally keep it neater."

"I know you do. Just trying to help you get your day organized and work off some of that nervous energy, not trying to nag or boss you around. In general, you're a very clean house guest."

Emma got up and got more coffee, putting her empty oatmeal bowl in the sink and running water in it. Then, she went outside in her pajamas and housecoat to the backyard, dragging the clean grill out to the middle of the pavement and putting the charcoal brickette bag beside of it, along

with the lighter fluid from the garage; she put the vegetable skewers on the side panel of the grill. Next, she positioned the three deck chairs close but not too close to all of this, and went back inside. Gene was supposed to be here at eight o'clock, but who knew? It was uncertain whether the two younger people would prefer, when they got ready to watch the fireworks, to see them from outside, above the trees, out in the open air where one could hear them in the distance, too. But even with air conditioning upstairs in front of the picture window, it might seem a little airless and artificial. And what if they wanted to do marshmallows before they went skinny-dipping? Emma smiled at herself then, realizing that she was nearly as fidgety as Sadie, only about different things.

The parade had come and gone, with its blares of horns, tootles of woodwinds, booming of tubas, some out-of-time marching to mismatched drumbeats, and a lot more precision marching, to give them credit. The cars full of notables of various kinds had passed, and the floats had left a

few stray crêpe-paper flowers made by the high school debutantes in the street behind them, all hot pink, Kelly green, and custard yellow.

Emma and Sadie were at the grill, getting their filet mignon and vegetable shish kebobs done. They'd had brief naps stretched out on two of the couches in the living room, and were feeling ready for the rest of their day.

Emma said, "You know, I've never done filet mignon on the grill before; I hope it doesn't make it tough."

"I don't see how it can, after the steaks were marinated for so long, overnight and all."

"Well, we'll go ahead and hope for the best. If Gene wants steak tomorrow morning, you might better do them inside in the pan. I can marinate again tonight while you two are at the falls, after all."

"What else are you going to do while we're gone?"

"Oh, I don't know, probably improve my mind. Read a book I started a couple of weeks ago, something like that."

"Emma, c'mon, now. Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

“And show my unsightly self in the altogether, at my age? Are you daft?”

“I didn’t mean that. We can keep our suits on if you want to come. It might be fun. Night swimming, and all that.”

“Just be careful not to drown.”

“Gene and I both like to have you along when we go places.”

“That may be, but just now I suspect that you’re fighting a little shy of Gene.”

“What does that mean?”

“Maybe losing your nerve, just the tiniest bit?”

“Never!”

Emma snorted. “Let’s wait and see. I mean, not *let’s* see, but I wouldn’t blame you for being a little bit—oh, I don’t know, getting cold feet at first. Fayette’s apparently made such a big deal of it.”

“Well, I guess it is a big deal. Okay, it is. But I mean it, and I think Gene does, too.”

“I expect, then, that Peter next door will be seeing more of what he calls ‘billing and cooing’ out in the street soon.”

Sadie giggled. “He loves to make jokes and tease, doesn’t he? I wonder what he and Mrs. Macomber were like when they first got married.”

“Well, I can tell you that, at least what they looked like. He was very proud to show me their wedding photo from his wallet, one day when she was up in town and he wasn’t. Mrs. Macomber was taller than he is back then too, but she was just a wispy, little tiny slip of a thing, about the same size around as he is now. I guess it’s the effect of too many apple crumble pies, or something. Oh, that reminds me, she brought that over sometime early this morning, and luckily, she did as she always does and put it in the chest I’d left out on the porch, because when I went out this morning, there was a stray dog on the steps sniffing up to the door with a great deal of interest. But he hadn’t touched it yet, so I guess we’re all right. Maybe we can save it and have it with some ice cream when Gene gets here. Of course, you shouldn’t have too much before you go in swimming, but I’ve heard, at least, that Belcher’s Falls is not too treacherous, nor too deep in the pool. Just be careful not to spend too much time under water. I know

they have spotlights at a lot of the ponds and so forth, but I don't know what they have there.”

“I know you think I'm still nervous, but I really trust Gene to look after me and protect me. That's one thing that my folks didn't believe in or really like, the fact that he's several years older than I am. But I like that he knows his way around a little more than I do, and can help me look after myself. I think it would be immodest always to want to have all the answers myself, as if no one ever needed anyone else's help.”

Emma considered this for a minute. She'd always been fairly self-determined, but she knew from being around Sadie that though Sadie was intelligent, she had a softer nature, was gentler-spoken. “That may well be a good way to think of things, Sadie. Just don't ever let anyone walk on you. I don't mean Gene, I don't even think he's capable of that sort of behavior; I just mean, you're going to be going to college, and there are going to be arrogant professors among the lot, and pompous grad students, and unscrupulous fellow undergraduates. Be suspicious of people who set off your alarm bells, and don't give them an easy pass. You have a good head on your shoulders, so don't be afraid to use it.”

Sadie laughed a bit defensively. “You must’ve had a bad time in school, to be so certain about the sorts of people I’m likely to meet. Surely they aren’t all that bad.”

“No, of course they aren’t! I didn’t mean that. I only meant, be wary when necessary. Don’t tolerate either fools or bullies gladly. I’m just very fond of you, Sadie, and I don’t want to see you hurt. And you can’t leave even Gene to do all the taking care of you, because he’s going to be under stress, too, with the new job, and the effort to get to school himself.”

Sadie for the first time looked a bit put out at Emma. “Emma, I’m not just going to be a big baby, a big drag on Gene! I can help take care of him, too. If we do get to live together after a while, if we get married, I can cook for him while he works, and clean. Taking classes is more fluid in time arrangements, so that I’ll have plenty of time to look after him. I think I’m a modern person, but I don’t mind doing traditional female stuff for Gene, not for Gene. He would never take advantage of it, for one thing. Why do you keep talking down to me today? Is it because of tonight, and what—what Gene and I are going to do?”

“No, it’s not that at all! And I’m not talking down to you. I’m just aware, from a much older person’s point of view, that bad things can happen to sweet, kind, generous people like you and Gene, and I sort of want to protect the two of you with what I know, with my experience of life. And face it, Gene’s been out in the world more than you, and has probably had a few bad experiences already that have kept him from making too many overly forgiving mistakes. Hell, his experience with life is part of what you value, you just said so a little while ago. No, Sadie, don’t worry. I’m not trying to rain on your parade, as the saying goes. I’m just being an old fuss-budget, probably because you’ve listened to me so willingly for so long that it’s gone to my head. Pay attention to my advice, but try not to let the parts that seem too cynical undermine you, at the same time. We all have somewhat different experiences, after all.”

Sadie’s face changed once more, and again she was giving her aunt a sunny smile. Suddenly, they looked back down at the grill, where things had been proceeding to get done while they talked. The vegetables were just a little browner than they should have been, and they both exclaimed and started grabbing the skewers and putting them onto plates. Next, they

examined the steaks, but they had a while still to go, another minute or two at least.

“Do you care for some potato salad, do you think?” asked Emma, leaving it up to Sadie. “Or would you rather cut up some potato squares and put them on skewers too, with salt, to roast them? That can be good, and it doesn’t take too long.”

“No, let’s be lazy, and have the potato salad. I’ll come in in a few minutes and carry the lemonade out. That pitcher is heavy, and you’ll have the ceramic bowl with the salad in it.”

“Oh, we can’t leave the lemonade in the pitcher that we use inside, because it doesn’t have a closed lid, and the bees’ll get into it. Pour it into the red plastic one; you know, the one with the white lid that I keep on the back of the sink. That’s lighter and bigger, so you can put a few ice cubes in it to keep it cold.”

“Will do,” said Sadie, using the grill fork to take the meat off and put it on their plates. “This really smells good. Before I ever move anywhere else at any time, I’m going to hold you up for your recipes. And don’t tell me like you did last time that it’s just a bit of this and just a bit of that.

You're going to have to remember it and write it down." She smiled over her shoulder at Emma, but at the last minute noticed that Emma was once again looking unwontedly serious.

All she said, though, was "Yes, and I'm going to miss you, too, Sadie, a lot, when it's time for you to go."

Sadie got quiet and turned back to the plates, putting their silverware together on them, and feeling that she had somehow said the wrong thing. It seemed so unfair that Emma had to be alone and unhappy, while Sadie herself had Gene, and was hoping to go to school and then later to be married.

They ate their meal happily, making jokes and each, had they known it, trying to be light-hearted for the benefit of the other, passing the holiday with a full awareness of the passing of time; Emma was thinking that she might before very long be all on her own again, if Sadie decided to live with Gene near campus in Otter Creek instead of staying with her for the next four years, as originally planned, and as they had a bit deceptively arranged with Robert. She wondered if she should perhaps get some sort of live-in companion. A paid companion was, of course, dreary business

compared to someone like Sadie, with whom she had come to have a really close relationship of affection, but perhaps more tolerable than being totally alone. And Sadie was with the unintentional egotism of youth thinking mainly about the night to come, and wondering what it was going to be like to be on a sort of unofficial honeymoon at last with the man she'd chosen and who had chosen her; as the day drew nearer and nearer to its close, she didn't really think about much else. She did take a moment to recognize, though, that she owed so much of her happiness with Gene to Emma's tolerance, and was passingly glad that her parents were miles and miles away and couldn't interfere.

About six o'clock, it started to get cooler suddenly, and the bugs made themselves even more pestiferous than they had before, the mosquitoes in particular putting in their first appearance in large numbers. The women stepped inside and put on some insect repellent again, in the assumption that the first applied earlier against the gnats must've worn off. When they went back out, Emma asked if she should leave the grill on in case Gene wanted marshmallows when he came, but Sadie negatived this and

said that he probably would be content with the apple crumble pie and ice cream, since it sounded quite a bit better than marshmallows.

They sat in companionable silence after agreeing that probably it would be nicer to watch the fireworks from the backyard rather than upstairs inside away from the excitement; Sadie in particular was quiet, wishing that she could hear more from Emma about some of her romantic exploits, but not wanting to be too intrusive when they were enjoying the peace and quiet of the evening. But after a while, it was in fact Emma who brought the subject up, and once again, Sadie became an interested listener to a story of romantic chances and results.

“You know,” said Emma, “the funny thing is that we started our acquaintance with me telling you about Daniel, my third husband, just because he’s the one I think of the most all the time now, and later, you asked about Ed, my second husband. And I guess I’ve given you a fair notion, too, of all the in-betweens. But we’ve never talked about my first husband. You’ve never asked, and it’s never occurred to me before that I hadn’t told you. Do you want to hear about him now, or maybe some

other time? Or, are you entirely bored with the subject matter, and hope I'll never mention it again?"

"I'd love to hear! I feel it helps me to know people better to hear you talk. I seem to remember you did say something about being married after Larry, but it not being serious. You didn't say more, because I'd asked about Ed, the second one, and we were painting the fence at the time."

"Well, it wasn't immediately after Larry, by any means. Larry left when I was just done with graduate school, and I was about twenty-nine or thirty at the time. And you know about my baby-fixation phase. This was right in the middle of that, when I was about thirty-five or so. As you know, I was desperately wanting a baby, and I couldn't seem to make any commitments stick that way. I was in a bar one night, drinking with some of my graduate school friends I'd met up with again—"

"—Sorry, Emma, you never did tell me what you took for graduate school."

"I took Journalism and Communications, which was one of the ways I got the piss-ant little job with the reporter years later, after I decided to take it more seriously. Anyway, they introduced me to this guy named

Andrew when I was about as drunk as a skunk, and I started weeping all over him, so my friends have told me, and telling him my troubles, and ended by asking him if he wanted to get married and have a baby. I don't really remember much about him now, except that he was a pretty fair-minded and nice sort of guy, and he put me in a cab and took me home. To my own home, and he didn't do anything else. But a week later, he called me and wanted to talk for a few minutes. He said that he couldn't do much about making babies or getting them made, but that his brother, who was a half-brother by a Spanish father, and who wasn't a U. S. citizen, needed to get married to an American girl so that he could establish citizenship and get a green card, and the rest of it. He said I could try the baby idea out on the brother if things turned out to be permanent, but that if I happened to be interested, his brother had a small income and knew how to drive and was some sort of chemist or other. A few other odd facts like that. The brother's name was Antonio, and it was arranged for me to meet him the next week.

“He seemed to be an average sort of guy, though he was about five years younger than I was, and was another one with a guitar. But he could

really play, classical guitar and all that, and so to slip him past INS, we set up household after exchanging enough facts to feel that we could pass the interview when it came up.

“Antonio was a very quiet sort of fellow, keeping himself to himself in his part of the apartment. Since it was a one-bedroom, so as not to raise the wrong sort of red flag with INS if they came snooping, we slept in the same bed, but even when unconscious, he allowed me my space, and kept to his half. We designated a little bay window area off the dining room his for his music and his private possessions other than clothes and things, and he seemed to be quite content just to float along in the marriage, looking for jobs in whatever chemistry area it was that he was in. I think it had something to do with single-celled organisms, or something.

“One day, he came in with news about his career: it turned out that he had a job interview with one of the biotech companies in Clarendon, and he wanted to go out and celebrate with all his friends if he got the job; he made friends easily, so there were lots of them. We had been careful not to reveal to any of them what exactly our arrangement was, so some congratulations came my way as well, as his wife. The friends of mine

who came had been warned not to mention anything about his citizenship concerns, too, but I hadn't thought to tell them not to mention my desire to have a baby, because I had just put it out of my own mind until Antonio and I had a stabler relationship.

“One of them teased me about now being the time for a baby in Antonio's hearing, and when we got home by ourselves that night, the subject came up, in spades. He was very angry at first, and felt trapped, but when I pointed out to him quite reasonably that I hadn't tried to trick or seduce him to get a baby, but had only been living with him as his wife for two years while we both worked and went about our individual business, he calmed down.

“Then, the subject started to intrigue him, it appeared. He asked me at one point if I wanted a baby badly enough to have one with him and then go ahead and divorce him anyway, as we had been planning to do sometime after he would have his citizenship papers. That, I had to think about further. He gave me some time, but even though I didn't love Antonio, and he and I had only become friends out of a practical necessity on one side and what seemed to have been unfounded hopes on the other,

I didn't really want to try, with my small income from assorted little jobs, to pull a single parent routine. I had hoped we could have a marriage of convenience complete with a child or children, but it seemed it wasn't in the cards.

“So, after he had his citizenship papers, we waited another year in order not to rouse suspicions, and then we calmly parted ways, with no love lost on either side. The last I heard of him, about thirty years ago or so, he was working for some biological concern out in California, and had become quite successful. He had gotten married again, to a Filipina, and he had had a child; I don't know if it was a boy or girl. I guess I felt a bit of residual bitterness when I heard that, but when I thought about it logically, it was only a long shot to begin with.

“And that's the story of my first marriage, without all the bells and whistles, which would have been basically boring, since nothing much changed during those years.”

“I'm sorry that you couldn't get together with anyone to have a baby. I would've had one more cousin, brought up by somebody who is a good

parent figure,” responded Sadie, being stoutly supportive of Emma’s claims on the world.

“Well, shoulda, woulda, coulda. After all this time, when I look back on it, I think that if I’d really been committed to bearing children, I would’ve been willing to make some compromises. Oh, Sadie, look at the time! While we’ve been nattering, another hour has passed. It’s 7:40. Gene will likely be here in twenty minutes. Do you have your towel bag and stuff ready to go once the fireworks are over? They’ll start as soon as dark comes, around about 8:30 or 9:00, and they usually last for about half an hour. At least you won’t be coming home too late. Remember to lock the front door behind you when you come back in, you two. I’ll be up in bed reading or asleep, and even in this area, I never leave the door unlocked all night.”

“Yes, I got everything in my room ready, straightened it up and everything. My towel bag is just inside the door there, and I’ve got on my suit underneath my clothes.”

“So, you gave up the idea of skinny-dipping?”

“No, but Gene thought we should get there and see how things were before we ditched our suits. That seemed like a good idea to me, too, so that’s what we’re doing.”

“That young man is a prince in disguise. He’s got so many good ideas, and is so full of merit and good sense! If you don’t marry him, I’m going to marry him myself,” Emma joked.

They watched the shades of evening slowly deepening in the corners of the backyard, then Emma doused the grill and Sadie raked the old charcoal when the grill was cool into a patch of dirt that they planned to use for fertilizer. It wasn’t long before they heard a quiet motor approaching up the street on the other side of the house. Sadie ran around the concrete path to greet Gene, and Emma lighted the one picnic table candle that they had put out to provide illumination and drive away bugs while their company was with them. She didn’t want to go round, but left the two lovers to their own devices, uninterrupted.

It was a good ten minutes before Sadie appeared again, with Gene in tow. When Emma saw him, she said,

“So, Gene, Happy Fourth! How’s the family doing? How are George and Becky? And Georgie, of course.”

“Hi, Emma. Happy Fourth to you. George is all full of himself now that he’s got a son. I myself would’ve been just as happy with a daughter, but even though George has never said otherwise, I feel like some of that macho-style military stuff has rubbed off on him, and he’s really glad the baby is a boy. He’s already talking about military schools, though Becky shushes him, and seems to think that Georgie is going to be an artist or something, because he already responds so vividly to colors, according to her. I know a baby’s basic vision doesn’t really develop this early, though I don’t know about color reception; but I would never tell Becky that, just like I would never tell George that I have visions already of his baby hiking along a military trail with a bayonet and a diaper on, when George talks so prematurely.”

“Sounds like the little family is doing well.” Emma patted the back of the third chair. “Come and have a seat, Gene. How is everyone else? How are Ned, and his wife? I don’t know her name.”

“Ned’s wife is called Capper, because she works in a restaurant-bar, where she has to wear a cute little red cap, and she hates it. She’s not crazy about the nickname, either, but likes it better than her name, Elizabeth Jane. She had to work the early morning shift this morning, but by the time the other three of us were ready with the picnic, at 12:30, she was able to come along. We kept it kind of low-key, just a barbeque sort of thing in a local park. Their three kids, Donny, Jake, and Polly, the triplets, were very present and active, of course, making the requisite amount of noise and mayhem for three ten-year-olds. We played a few games, like Frisbee and two-handed softball, and Polly brought her Twister game and the kids amused themselves with that for a good while, during which time the adults got some time to visit and exchange stories about adult stuff. It was a pretty good time. And I ate a lot, as usually happens when we cook out. The out-of-doors always seems to spur my appetite.”

“Well, then, how about this?” asked Sadie. “The next-door neighbor sent over an apple crumble pie and we have ice cream to go on it. Are you interested in dessert?”

“Sorry, but I don’t think I could right now. Can I take a raincheck until we get back from swimming tonight?” He came over and plopped down in the third chair, taking a deep breath and swatting at the mosquitoes that were still attempting to make headway against the bug spray and the picnic candle, which was burning some sort of repellent-wax combination.

Emma ducked into the kitchen and brought out the Deet spray, handing it over to Gene with the recommendation that even if he’d already put some on, he should re-apply it. “I imagine you’ll encounter some pesky insect life down near the water, too; it’s around in the woods, and it’s really their territory more than it is that of humans. Why don’t you just take it with you?”

“Sure, thanks. So, how was your day? Emma, Sadie? What did you two get up to?”

Sadie gave Gene a rundown of their day so far, mentioning the parade and the meal they had, and told him that they had basically just been relaxing and gossiping for most of the time.

It was soon after Gene had arrived that they heard the first explosive sound from over the trees, and they were delighted to find that it was possible to see most of the higher fireworks over the wooded area at the back of Emma's yard, though they were unable to see what were probably the less remarkable ones that didn't go quite so high up. There were only the three of them in their audience, not a whole admiring crowd, but they still ooh-ed and ahh-ed a lot at the more beautiful color and design combinations. And when the finale came, with its repeated and innovative explosions and highest-flying combustibles, they cheered. At just that moment, they heard a little bit of noise from the backyard next door: it was Peter and Mrs. Macomber.

Peter was shouting, "That the way to go! Blow it up, boys, blow it up!" Mrs. Macomber, more gently reproving than she'd been to him before, but still corrective, was saying, "Now, listen to yourself old man. You sound like a firebug." "I ain't no firebug, Elsabeth, you know that. This is Independence Day! If I can't yell at fireworks now, when can I?" "Okay, okay. Settle down. I'm not interfering with your rights. Just keep your voice down a notch." They continued to talk in their usual manner,

but the three in the next yard were preoccupied with their own conversation, and heard no more.

After another half hour or so, Emma prodded the young people gently to go ahead and head over to Belcher's Falls if they didn't want to be too late getting back. She was privately afraid that they were lingering around a bit because they didn't want to leave her alone there, and she wanted to clear up and put things away as a method of distracting herself from the fact that she was by herself. She was thinking that she would definitely need to make some arrangement for herself with a helper of some kind to live in once Sadie left again, and she didn't look forward to it. There didn't seem to be any help for it, though, so on the surface she put on a cheerful tone, and shooed them out. Once the two younger people were assured that she had things to do while they were gone, Sadie ran upstairs and got her towel bag and flipflops, running happily back out to join Gene.

Emma waited until they were definitely gone, then she allowed herself to relax. She sat thinking for a long while, remembering whether she intended to or not the times when she and Daniel had gone places and done things together. Even though they had been a much older couple in

years than Sadie and Gene were, they had felt so romantically inclined toward each other that it had felt like a totally new day to Emma when Daniel was around. She started to remember what it had been like to be in Evian-les-Bains with him and drinking in a small bar on Bastille Day, watching the fireworks there over Lake Geneva, walking back to their hotel while tipsy, exchanging greetings in high school French with other couples, crawling into the large bed there and making love as if they'd been new young lovers. As she put the bowls and plates into the sink and started to do the pre-machine rinse, her mind then wandered to other places and times again, fireworks along the Nile at some local holiday, fireworks in India during a religious festival, with all the brightly colored fabrics in the dancers' robes, and the face paintings of people celebrating, and the brilliantly-hued powders that the dancers threw over the heads of the crowd. She remembered again, to her regret, the day when Daniel had made her his offer, and then also the day when she had sadly accepted.

“Would it have been so hard on me to go along with him again?” she grieved aloud, tears starting to course down her face unimpeded. The one thing she hadn't been able to do with Sadie around, the one thing she'd

been free to do when alone, was to admit her unhappiness and to weep when she felt like weeping. She wasn't even sure whether she wasn't also grieving the prospective loss of Sadie as well as the absence of Daniel. She didn't even know why she was so sure that Sadie somehow wouldn't be living with her the whole four years of school as arranged with Robert, but the impetus of the two young people who'd just left towards each other seemed to inform her ahead of time that Sadie wouldn't be staying much longer. Finally, she allowed herself just to sit at the table and weep it all out, until there were no more tears that could come; then, she finished up with the clearing away, had a cup of green tea, and went upstairs to get ready for bed and to try to involve herself in the book she was reading, *A Gentleman in Moscow*.

At the parking area for Belcher's Falls, Gene opened Sadie's door and helped her out, looking around to see how many other cars were there. Evidently not many people had thought to come for night swimming after fireworks and other celebrations, because there were only six other cars

in the whole lot. He'd been there another time about three years before, but his memory of the exact trails around the falls were a little sketchy. He thought he remembered, though, a little inlet-shaped area around a bit deeper in the woods on one side of the waterfall pool, where at the time there had been a distant floodlight shedding just enough illumination to aid general safety. They made their way there, Sadie a little quiet and shy now that the time had arrived when they would start their more intimate contact, Gene matter-of-factly guiding her on the path around the pool.

Finally, they came to the secluded inlet. The rocks surrounding it were large, flat rocks where they could put down their blankets, and as Gene spread their blankets out on two neighboring rocks, Sadie slipped off her flipflops and dragged one toe through the water at the edge.

"It's chilly!" she said, and glanced around her nervously, but there didn't seem to be anyone else close. This caused her to relax a little, and she looked up at Gene and gave him a tentative smile.

"Well, do you think it's too cold for us, or do you still want to go in?" he asked, touching her shoulder.

"I'd like to go in. Give me a minute," she said.

“There’s nobody much around here. But if you feel you want to leave your suit on, you can, Sadie. Do what you want to do,” he said softly.

Without answering, Sadie peeled off her shorts and top, leaving only her two-piece suit on. Then, turning her eyes on Gene for a moment, she started to slip her shoulder straps down. Not missing her gesture, he took up one of the large bath towels and held it up around her; even though there were no others around to see her, this reassured her. She shrugged out of her top, and then taking a deep breath, she looked down and pulled off her suit bottom. Standing there, hesitating, she then turned her head towards him over one shoulder, where he was still holding the towel high.

His voice became a bit huskier, and looking down at her over her shoulder, he said, “Sadie, you’re beautiful.”

She turned to him and kissed him, and he dropped the towel and returned her embrace. After a moment or two, in an attitude of exhilaration and high spirits, she moved forward and jumped into the water, gasping as the water first closed over her head, and then broke as she started paddling and rose to the top again. Gene threw his clothes off,

including his suit, and for just a moment, she peeked at him before he jumped in to join her.

They swam around in the pool, gradually losing their shyness of each other. The woods were sheltering, but the two swimmers began to make some noise, and had races from one end of the pool to the other, gradually going closer and closer to the area where one of the minor waterfalls was. When they ducked under the water of the falls, Sadie got the giggles, and Gene reached out and grabbed her to him, tickling her ribs and then gathering her long brown hair in his hands and guiding it over one shoulder. “I caught a mermaid,” he observed, ducking under the falling water with her in his grasp.

As they were playing in the water, at the same time, they looked up to the area around the curve off the waterfalls and saw about five other swimmers, also naked, shouting and diving and making a lot more noise. Hoping they themselves had not been seen, they elected to swim back for their retreat in the privacy of the inlet where they’d started.

After they’d swum for about an hour or more, Gene observed, “Too bad there’s not a sun out now; it’d be nice to get warmed up in sunlight.”

“Do people come here during the daytime, too?” Sadie asked.

“I think it’s actually too public an area for skinny-dipping during the day, though I’m sure there may be heartier spirits who do. But I’ve heard that some of the police do patrol and warn people off from naked swimming. I don’t think they actually arrest anybody, but I’ve never been here during the day. Only once or twice at night.”

Sadie felt her face flush in the darkness, and was glad that Gene couldn’t see her blushing. “With another girlfriend?” she asked, knowing that if it was an affirmative answer, that she’d still want to be there with Gene, though she’d not be able to help feeling jealous.

“God, no!” responded Gene. “With my brothers, a few years ago. You’re the first—and last—woman I’ve ever brought here.”

This answer earned him a watery embrace and a passionate kiss from her, and after another ten minutes or so, they crawled up onto the rocks and toweled off. The wind was cool, but after a few moments, they noticed that the air was still sultry enough to allow of them stretching out on their blankets and resting. They continued to take shy looks at each other, pleased and gratified by what they saw.

It was after some thunder and lightning had made an appearance and they were discussing if it might be time to call it an evening and go on to Emma's that they heard someone moving around in the woods behind them; Gene turned his head and put an arm around Sadie protectively, but he didn't see anyone. The noise stilled, and they talked softly for a few moments, reaching in defense for their towels and covering themselves. Then, they heard a sly giggle, and a male remark, and another giggle. After a few more minutes, whoever it was passed by on up the path towards the falls and into the darkness.

“Near miss,” observed Gene. “What do you say we get dressed now and go?” he asked. He picked up his wristwatch from under his blanket and held down the dayglo light. “Wow, it's already twelve-oh-seven!” he said. “We're going to have to be extra quiet going into Emma's.”

They got dressed and quickly made their way back along the trail, meeting only two or three young teens on the way, two girls and a boy, who darted past them and didn't look back. When they got to the carpark, there were only three other cars, and Gene reversed and pulled out without

saying much else. They'd had a full evening already, but there was more to come before their night would be over.

Sadie felt a little bolder now that the sexual matters between them had been initiated by their naked swim, and she flirted with Gene and got him laughing and teasing her in return, though she felt with a thrill of anticipation that now his voice held a deeper timbre and seemed full of some kind of promise for the night. When they pulled up in front of Emma's, the lights were all out except the porch light that Emma had left burning, and the stairwell light up the stairs in front of them inside.

They entered, and Sadie locked the door behind them; then, they made their way cautiously up the stairs, trying to avoid making any noise that might awaken Emma. Gene paused at Sadie's door and waited for her to open it, looking down at her and thinking that now he was being totally accepted by the woman whom he loved, whom he had loved almost ever since he had first met her when she came in to order a dress suit in his uncle's tailor shop. He had waited patiently, talked to her gently, tolerated her parents' interference with as much restraint as he could muster. And now, because her aunt had taken another view of him and thought well of

him, he was going to be allowed to be with her as he had longed to be, in her arms and fully in her heart.

“Gene, can we stop for a minute?” Sadie was tearful in the moment she spoke. “There must be something wrong; I know I want you, but it hurts. There must be something wrong.”

“Sadie, we don’t have to go ahead right now if you don’t want to. But you’re a virgin. It always hurts some to a virgin the first time, sometimes even the second time. The hymen has to be broken; you know that already, if you think about it. You told me once about that book you were reading, remember?”

But Sadie felt like being humored and petted a little bit more, and she said, “Did it hurt you the first time when you were a virgin?”

Gene laughed out loud, and stroked her breasts and waist sympathetically. “Not the same way, Sadie. Not so much for men, except if the girl is a virgin for him the first time, too. Then it can pinch a little, if the woman is nervous and tight. It’s just the way of it.”

“But, is it pinching you now, because I’m a virgin and tight?”

He nuzzled her ear and murmured, “Well, you weren’t tight when we started out tonight; you were ready for me. All soft and moist. But you’ve tightened up because it does hurt. Do you want to stop? We can snuggle for a while if you want. It doesn’t help that I’m wearing a rubber, because even if it’s lubricated, it’s rougher than a man’s thing by itself. But that’s the way it is with us right now.” And he kept kissing her and stroking her all over, entering as far as possible into her feelings.

“Well, could you take the rubber off? Then it would be just you and me. Please?”

“But Sadie, if you were to get pregnant right now, it would confirm all your folks’ worst ideas about me, and you’d have a harder time at school, trying to get schoolwork done and be a new mother, too. And we couldn’t leave off getting married until it’s more convenient, we’d want to be married right away. Are you ready to take those chances?”

“I’m sorry, Gene. I wasn’t thinking so much either of how hard things are with you.”

He chuckled ruefully. “Well, at this exact moment, things aren’t so hard with me, if you see what I mean. Our little conversational interlude has made me lose it temporarily. If we go on ahead, I’m going to have to put another one on. Or, if you’re serious about taking our chances—where are you anyway in your cycle? It’s never foolproof, of course, but if you don’t think you’re ovulating...just know that if you get pregnant, we’re getting married immediately. You’re past seventeen, and at eighteen you don’t need a guardian’s consent for that. Even if your dad could still pull you back home until you’re eighteen, it would hardly be worth his while. But I think you’re safe with Emma for now.”

She reached a hand over to her bedside table and got her calendar out. “Oh, Gene, it should be all right. I’ve only got three days left this month. Let’s go ahead without anything between us.”

He looked grave, but then said, “Okay, my love, let’s go.” He got rid of the prophylactic, and began with her again, and she with him, caressing and licking, the two of them pledged and determined now to belong one to the other. After another fifteen minutes or so, Sadie gave a small gasp of pain, and it was all over.

“It’ll be easier than that the next time,” whispered Gene, continuing to stroke her and make love to her gently and sweetly. When he pulled away and stopped, Sadie kissed him on his neck and face, content.

“And it’s done!” she exclaimed, jubilant. “I’m not a virgin anymore! Whoopee!”

“Shh, you’ll wake Emma up. And you’d better be saving all that ‘Whoopee!’ for me, too.”

Sadie felt something wet under herself, and looked. “Oh, no! Look at that! I bled like a stuck pig! Oh, poor Emma’s towel. But I guess it’s good that we put it underneath. Shame on you for knowing that we should do that!” But she was clearly in a boisterous mood.

“I know you won’t want to hear this, but just like they say in all the old movies, ‘This ain’t my first rodeo.’”

“Yeah, well, Mr. Man, you’d better forget about going to anymore rodeos. You’re all mine, now!”

He was happy to be addressed so, but said, “Where did you hear that, ‘Mr. Man?’”

“It’s what I heard Mrs. Macomber next door calling her husband Peter when he got out of line with her.”

“Uh-oh. All these older women close by are giving you ideas about bossing me around. I see how it is.”

“You better believe it. Listen, are you hungry at all?”

He paused. “I am, a little. But I’m also in fear of that creaking fourth step of Emma’s. Do you think we can get downstairs and back up again later without waking her up?”

“Oh, I think so. She’s in general a pretty heavy sleeper. Let’s go and get cleaned up first, and I need to put something else on so that I won’t drip anything gross on Emma’s kitchen chairs. You want to go first and let me get something else to wear? I promise it’ll be a frilly nightie...”

“You’d better be careful with those frilly nighties, if you don’t want to get in trouble with me again,” he said, joining in the tease.

“Fetishist!” she challenged.

“Don’t call names, or I’ll have to punish you. Like this!” he said, slapping her lightly on the bottom as she rose up above him and stepped across onto the bed mat.

“Shh! You, yourself!” she waited for him to come back once he’d gotten out of bed taking a clean pair of shorts and a robe he’d brought along with him. Meanwhile, she got clean underthings and necessities out and the sexiest nightie she could find to take in when it was her turn.

Before much time had passed at all, they were creeping down the staircase and into the kitchen, where the apple crumble pie and ice cream awaited them. Sadie offered Gene the steak they’d bought for him, but he said he’d rather have it in the morning after a good night’s sleep, and that after such a sweet experience, he was in the mood for some sweets. She didn’t discourage him from saying such silly and over-the-top sorts of things, but instead joined in and giggled, her signature sound lately, and pinched, and swooped on his cheeks to leave affectionate little kisses.

Upstairs, Emma was smiling. She’d been awakened about half an hour ago by the sound of them murmuring softly at a distance in the bedroom down the hall, and she’d heard them go downstairs, where they were not nearly as quiet as they thought they were being. But with the resiliency of a kind peculiar to age instead of youth, she concluded that all must be well, and turned over and went back to sleep, not hearing them creep back

up the stairs when they were finished eating and playing games downstairs. So, the momentous evening ended, with contentment for the time being on all sides.

It was August 24th, and Sadie had just spent her first half-week of classes at Otter Creek University starting the week before. And it was seventeen more days until her eighteenth birthday on September 10th. She was full of high spirits at the new things she was learning, because she was a good student and relished developing her mind. It didn't hurt either that Gene's UPS route had been successfully shifted to Otter Creek, or that his uncle had managed to arrange the internship for him as assistant cutter at Down By the Crick, Inc. in the same city as well. He was making do with a little less money until the internship would turn into a full-fledged job, but he was learning his trade well, and getting lots of praise and recommendations, so that he at times considered forgetting about going to college and instead making a permanent career of his job in the clothing manufacturing trade. Only his own love of knowledge about

marine animals kept him inclined to focus on a future in academia, or made him sometimes worry about spreading himself too thin. On evenings when it wasn't possible to get together with Sadie, he read lots of books. He had researched the school bookstore's shelves for textbooks on his chosen field, and had bought the few best ones, not able to afford many at a time. Also, he found some biology students working around one of the lakes nearby on an outing he'd taken, and he pumped them for knowledge about some of the differences between marine animals and freshwater animals, since fresh water was all that was around him in a radius of about a hundred and fifty miles. He was hoping to be able to take Sadie on a honeymoon to the oceanside at some point after the marriage celebration, whenever it might be, not only so that he and she could enjoy the beautiful surroundings, but also so that he could look into some of the things he was learning from his reading.

Emma had duly sent her legal paper in to the law firm after Gene had signed it, too; he, like Sadie, preferred to think of them eventually living nearby somewhere and looking after Emma from a close distance, but Emma felt privately to herself that these were only impractical though

kind pipe dreams, and that the two young people would sometime or other be pulled away to a different location simply because they were both bright and ambitious and would have other imperatives for their lives someday.

She, however, made it a point to have them around while she could, and made a habit of having Gene over for meals with her and Sadie, on the pretense that she liked the company, which was true enough on the face of it, but more secretly so that she could see him well-nourished and help him save money. He had never been comfortable with her plan to help him pay for gas, and the only time he accepted it now was when it could be represented to him that his car had been used for Sadie's or Emma's benefit solely.

It was true, Otter Creek was closer to Waterstone Barrier, where Emma lived, than Summitsville had been. Still, with Gene working as hard as he did and studying on his own, and Sadie studying for her classes and trying to choose a major field of study, the two of them did not in reality have much more time to be together than they had before. It was just that now they could enjoy sexual solace in each other's arms as well as more

ordinary forms of companionship, and this seemed to keep them largely contented with their tough lot and busy schedules.

Robert had requested regular reports on Sadie's progress before he released her tuition money in the fall, and so she decided it was simpler just to have a duplicate school record sent to him at his address than to have to write him repeated personal letters and notes enclosing the records herself. It was clear from his relief at this plan that he preferred a fairly impersonal method like this, too, being as how he had never felt as close to his eldest daughter, who had a tendency to think for herself, as he did to his other two girls, who to her seemed simply not to think much at all.

Sadie did wish from time to time that Fayette had been more of the type of sister that she could chat and exchange news with, but there was little or nothing that she could have revealed to Fayette about her life now that would not have been repeated with opprobrium to Phoebe, then to Robert, in both of which places it would have occasioned Sadie much trouble and heartache. Phoebe did write at one point to ask whether she needed any clothes or shoes or makeup, but Sadie simply requested the continuation of her cash allowance and her small credit card account and

assured her mother that she would shop for herself locally, which reassured that lady. For she too, like Robert, did not especially like her eldest daughter, the independent thinker, and was glad not to have to waste either time or energy of her own in providing for her.

All in all, Sadie was happy with her existence with Emma and Gene, and made only a few casual friends at college, knowing that people knew people, in the sense that some of the students of Otter Creek were the detestable rich lot she'd distrusted so much in Summitsville; she didn't want to make the mistake of revealing anything about her current life which could get back to her family to anyone who might have the connections with them to repeat things she didn't want repeated, so she had a bit of a lonely time as an undergraduate, not joining clubs or social activities. Only the thought that sooner rather than later she would be married to Gene kept her determined to follow her instincts and leave people at their distance away from her.

“Looka there. No, that black se-dan. What that man think he’s doing?”

Peter gestured toward a car farther down the block in front of the Randalls.

“Even the Randalls, poor folks that they are, have the right to some company. And some privacy, Peter, so don’t point. It’s rude.”

“He look rude to me.”

“Nobody asked you.”

“Maybe somebody should; I been here a long time. Some peoples think I’m a fine conversationalist.”

“Not me; I think you’re a damned old nuisance sometimes.”

He just smiled in a knowing way. “And sometimes not, too.”

“Oh, shut up, anyway.”

And he did, for the moment.

Two days later, Peter said to Mrs. Macomber, “Elsabeth, there he go again.”

“Who? Who are you talking about?”

“The man in that black se-dan.”

“Just sedan. Say: ‘sedan.’”

“Sedan, then. The man in that black sedan.”

“Well, what business is that of yours? Likely the Randalls have company again, and that’s all. Now, leave me alone, I’m trying to relax.”

“While you puttin’ your face back in the sun, he takin’ your picture like you’s a beauty queen.”

Mrs. Macomber looked, but the black car was far down the block, and she didn’t see the driver doing anything but writing on something. “Oh, he is not. He’s writing something down. Maybe he’s a real estate agent.”

“Nobody sellin’ on this block.”

“You don’t know that. What makes you think you know everybody’s business?”

“Because if you know, I know, and you know everybody’s business.”

“I don’t recall observing anything on the issue at all.”

“I would’ve heard tell of it,” Peter stuck stubbornly to his point.

“Well, what do you care, anyway? Maybe he’s taking your beauty queen picture.”

He paused in the argument to approach a side topic. “I ain’t so pretty as you.”

“Now, don’t think you can come that one over on me, old man. Just you settle down and sit on your porch and be decent. Folks have their own ways of doing, and it’s none of your concern.”

But Peter felt he knew better, and he was just waiting for his opportunity to prove it. One day when Mrs. Macomber was having her nails done downtown and wasn’t expected back until late afternoon, he saw the black car that had attracted his attention several times before. It had moved farther up the street towards his end. It was still parked on the western side of the street however, opposite his own house and that of Emma Jorgensen. He said half-aloud, “Now’s my time. We’ll find this fellow out, or my name ain’t Jack Robinson.”

He eased up out of his chair and stretched casually, looking up and down the street as if just thinking about something totally ordinary. Then, he strolled just as slowly down his own walk, and paused at the corner of his lot. As if choosing an arbitrary direction, he crossed over the street and sauntered down the western side until he drew even with the rolled-down driver’s window of the black sedan.

“Well, hello there, neighbor!” he offered.

The man didn't reply, but shifted a toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other and barely nodded. He was dressed in a dark suit of some cheaper material, and wore a dark brown tie; his eyes were hidden behind dark shades.

Peter disliked him on sight; still, he tried again. "So, what are you out doin' this fine mornin'?"

The suited man wrote down something quickly on his notepad, and then put it aside on the passenger seat. Peter, unquelled, bent down and leaned on the top of the car. From there, he could also see an expensive camera with a telephoto lens. "Whatcha takin' pitchers of?"

The man evidently felt the conversation was becoming uncomfortable, but in looking up for inspiration, he saw the big willow tree just on the side of the street beside them. Attempting to be dialectal, he responded, "Oh, I just reckoned I would take me one of this tree here. Nice tree."

Peter inwardly greeted this with scorn, but tried again. "Oh, you like this one? Well, there's some the next street over even better. Maybe you better go look at them. Nature's beautiful, ain't it?"

The man wasn't to be driven away so easily, though. "No, I think this one will do me for a while. Excuse me, will you?" And he rolled up the window. Yet, he still sat there, obviously waiting for Peter to leave.

There was nothing for Peter to do but to meander on up the street, and keep an eye on his suspect from his own porch. So, he went on back, convinced even more that the man was up to no good, and that even as prejudiced a party as Mrs. Macomber would have to admit there was something wrong when he told her the news.

But when Mrs. Macomber got back, she was preoccupied with the apparently bad job that the nail operator had done on her nails, and she just half-listened to his relation of the story the first time. When he finally got her attention and re-told the story, she said only,

"Well see, I told you. Man minding his own business, taking pictures of trees. Ouch, she cut the cuticle too close just there. I don't know why I keep paying for it, they haven't done it right since the parlor changed hands. Oh, what is it, Peter, what now?"

"But you don't take pitchers of the same tree over and over again, and you especially don't take pitchers of a tree right spankin' next to you on

the sidewalk with a special camera with one of them telescope lenses on it.” He was overwrought and indignant, because he knew he wasn’t stupid, and both the man and Elisabeth were treating him like he was.

“Oh, Peter, why don’t you—a telephoto lens?” And she put a beautifully-nailed hand over her eyes and scanned the street for the car. But when she looked, all the man was doing was sitting, writing something. She lost interest.

“Mark my words, he’s up to something.” Peter followed her into the house as she got up and went in to get something cool to drink. She could be heard from the next street to upbraid him roundly, but still, the idea of a telephoto lens was in her head now; Peter had put it there, and try as she might, she couldn’t get it out. She didn’t want to admit it, but she wondered, too. She determined on the one hand not to give Peter the satisfaction of knowing that he had disturbed her, but on the other hand, to watch the man a little herself.

The next couple of days, he wasn’t there, and Peter grumbled, but they both relaxed on the subject. Then after a couple of days’ rain, which were such bad weather that everyone kept indoors, Peter saw him down the

block, parked discreetly in a spot between two other cars, and a few doors below Emma's. Mrs. Macomber peered down that way, but then she sat down, saying nothing, and Peter held his peace for a little while.

It was a Saturday, and the weather was once again stifling. Mrs. Macomber had her fan out on the porch and pointed at her swing. The blades whirred round steadily, just seeming to move the stale air around without providing much relief. Peter wasn't wearing his usual neat short-sleeved shirt, but instead had on a tee shirt and denim shorts, a special dispensation from his wife because of the hot weather.

In the next half hour, though, several things happened. First, Gene pulled up directly in front of Emma's house in his old Camry, taking out a potted plant that he had promised to put down in Emma's backyard for her in a place where one of her other flowers had not done well, and was in fact mostly dead. He set the pot up on the hood of his car then, and reached in to get his keys out of the ignition.

While he was standing there, Sadie came tripping out from behind the house and approached him, just as the car in front of the black sedan pulled away from the curb and went on away up the street, leaving the

Macomers an unobstructed view of the man in the questionable car. Sadie reached up her arms for a hug, and she and Gene stood kissing by his car for a minute or two, talking nonsense and being foolish together, as accepted lovers often do.

Even Mrs. Macomber couldn't deny what happened next: the man in the black car leaned across into his own passenger seat to get a clearer view of the two young people standing there in the street, and held up the camera with the long lens, snapping repeated photos of the couple. They parted and Sadie left Gene to carry his plant into the backyard, as she once again danced around to the back of the house, talking to him all the way as he followed. The man took photos until there was no one in front of the house at all. Then, he sat making notes of some kind in his everlasting notebook, evidently waiting for something else to happen.

But Peter wasn't waiting; he had been vindicated, and he said to Mrs. Macomber: "You seen that, didn't you? I told you so, I told you so! Only I figure it wasn't us but Little Miss and Prince Charming there that he was fixing to get them pitchers of. What we going to do? I'm going to tell

Emma. She gets to know.” He half-stood, but Mrs. Macomber rose majestically and waved him back down.

“This isn’t none of your business, Peter. This is women’s business. You sit there and be still. I’ll talk to Emma and the little girl.” Though she had never in all the time that Emma had lived beside of her knocked on Emma’s front door before, she crossed over at a slow pace to the other yard now, and knocked. There was no answer at first. Then, Sadie popped back around and looked up to see who was there. Mrs. Macomber beckoned her over and said,

“Hello there, Missy. Now you go around and bring back your Aunt Emma with you. We have to have some women’s talk.”

Sadie looked puzzled, but readily got Emma to the front of the house and waited while she and Mrs. Macomber initiated their conversation with neighborly greetings. Mrs. Macomber wasn’t wasting any time, though. To Emma, she said,

“Emma, you don’t know this, maybe, or maybe you are putting your house up for sale, or something, but that there man down in the black car along the road there has been parked for a week or two now, and Peter

swears that he's been taking pictures of you folks all the time. Now, Peter is an old woman about things sometimes, but he is sometimes right, too. And that man there just got a fine shot of Missy here and her sweet thing out there a-kissing on each other. I figure if it is a house shot, that the man's looking to put something personal to the sale. Just thought I should warn you."

Emma swiftly turned towards the car and putting her hand above her eyes the way Mrs. Macomber had earlier done to keep the sun out, stared at the car and the man for a few minutes where he sat making notes again. Then, she called stepped to the edge of the yard and called lustily and loudly, "Gene! Come out here out front quick!"

When Gene came as called, Emma said, "We've got company. I don't know who it is, but it's nobody I've invited. He's been taking pictures of us for a couple of weeks, and Mrs. Macomber says that he just got one of you and Sadie together. You'd better step to it. It must be that damned Robert's doing."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Sadie, "and we've been so lucky so far!"

Gene, so apprised, headed briskly off towards the parked car and approached it, clearly intending to come to grips with the man. But just as he drew even with the car and grabbed onto the passenger side door handle, the man started his engine and pulled out swiftly, Gene's hand losing its grip on the handle.

"I got a good look at him," offered Gene, when he came back, "but he was wearing heavy shades, and I couldn't see his eyes. He had a big camera in the seat beside him, though, and a notebook of some kind. I figure whatever he came for, he's already got it. Since we've noticed him, we've probably driven him away. I guess too that the damage, whatever it is, is already done." He put a reassuring arm around Sadie, and said, clearly for her benefit, "We can always go ahead and get married. It's only another week and a half before Sadie's eighteenth birthday. I think that if he's presented with a done deal, that Mr. Bradshaw might relent and go ahead and pay her tuition." But in actuality, he was far from sanguine about this possibility.

"Well, if he doesn't, I'll just get a job like you have, Gene, and work my way through. Or, I could go and find one of those campus jobs that

are always pinned up on the notice boards, and maybe earn some money for school that way.”

Peter by this time had come up to where they were standing, and he observed, “Yessir, I noticed him a long time back, but I couldn’t get my old woman here to pay attention to me. Now I guess you’ll listen to me the next time.”

“You be still,” Mrs. Macomber responded. “I’m not your old anything. Just because you saw him first doesn’t mean anything. Who would suspect that he was up to something like that?”

“I did. I suspected it,” Peter argued back. “He must be one of those blamed snoopy private eye detectives, or something. I sure hope Little Missy here ain’t in trouble. If only people had listened to me—”

“Get back on the porch! Emma, I’m so sorry. We’ll run him off if we see him again. I don’t hold with that kind of thing, for sure.” And with that, she herded Peter back onto their porch, where he sat the rest of the day even when she was inside, watching and waiting unsuccessfully for the man to come back.

“Tree photos, for sure!” Peter muttered to himself with due scorn. “Who would believe that, I ask you?” He carried on this sullen converse with himself periodically for the rest of the day, feeling ignored and disregarded.

Finally, his wife came to the door around suppertime, and spoke to him with rather more consideration in her voice than usual. “C’mon, now, old Peter, come on in and have your supper. You know how’s I don’t hold with gossip.”

“Not me, either! Do you hear me gossiping? But when a man can’t sit on his own front porch without being snooped at—”

“He wasn’t snooping at you. Emma’s house was the one he was watching.”

“I seen him, though, more than a week or two ago. He started out taking pitchers of us all. We all something somebody wants to know about. Just you wait, they’ll be dust from this storm yet.” And for the time, at least, he refused to be made up to, keeping his “grumpus face” on (as his wife put it).

In any event, they didn't have long to wait for developments. The private eye had done his work thoroughly, and the next week, Robert called and asked in a wrathful tone to talk to Sadie. Emma was the one who took the call, and she said, prevaricating for as long as possible, "Sadie? Well, let me see, I'm not sure she's here right now, she might have gone out for some groceries. Just a minute, let me go check. Sadie!" she called aloud, even though Sadie had been reading in the kitchen, and could hear her just fine. So, Sadie crept in quietly, while Emma put the phone on speaker phone so that Sadie could hear the conversation.

"No, Robert, sorry, Sadie doesn't seem to be here right now. Can I have her call you?"

But Robert was still on the boil, and was determined to have it out with at least Emma in Sadie's place. "I've been trying to reach her now all morning long on her cell phone, with no success. Don't think I don't know what's going on there, you ridiculous old spinster. You're interfering with my plans for my own family, and I'm not going to stand for it. Be prepared to have Sadie picked up by my service tomorrow. I

know she's been seeing that package delivery boy, what's his name, Gerald Something, and I won't tolerate it. And to be out in the woods naked as a jaybird with him, too." Emma tried to interject a denial, wondering just how he knew about that; Sadie's eyes got big and round, and she watched Emma with dismay. "Yes, there's no pointing in lying about it, one of Fayette's friends saw them there, back about a month and a half ago. I could hardly credit that Sadie Greye would go so against my wishes in this matter, and I thought that you would have more sense than to actively promote it, but when I had it looked into, I found to my utter disappointment that the girl was right: it was Sadie and that boy."

"Well," Emma returned to the charge as well as she could, "What makes you so sure? If the girl you mention was out in the woods naked with somebody herself, how do you know she didn't just make it up to excuse her own behavior?"

Incensed, Robert decided to take a more personal tack. "I suppose you think you're witty, you conspiratorial old bat, you. Just because you're a cankered old virgin is no reason to try to make a whore out of my once decent daughter. Disobedience won't be tolerated!" He sounded as if he

were foaming at the mouth with rage, and it rankled with Sadie in the extreme that Emma should be treated to so many insults on her behalf. She reached out for the phone, and took it out of Emma's hand. Emma tried to stop her by maintaining her hold on the phone, but Sadie had made up her mind, and spoke into the phone in a calm, though nervous, tone.

“Daddy, you can stop insulting Emma for what I did. She's been married before and has experience with men that I can rely on—”

Her father snorted angrily and prepared to interrupt, but Sadie rode over him verbally, and continued. “I can rely on her for all the support and advice and experience that you and Mama never gave me, and I'm not going to come home again. Some day soon, Gene—his name is Gene—is going to college, too, and he and I are going to be married when I get to be eighteen.”

“Over my dead body,” Robert challenged, not being able to think of anything more original because he had no experience of having been defied by his eldest daughter much.

“Well, I hope it doesn't come to that,” Sadie was pert, and grinned with reassurance at the anxious Emma when she said this. “But whether you

like it or not, we've got our future mapped out together, and that's what we're going to do. There's no point in dragging me back home, because the very day I'm eighteen, I'll just leave again, in the clothes I'm standing up in, if necessary. So, just accept it with a good grace, and stop insulting everybody." She paused and waited.

"You may think you've won your case, but I can stop your allowance and cut off your credit card, and cancel the payment of your tuition, young lady; now see what your Aunt Emma thinks of that."

"If you do those things, then you do them, Daddy, I'll just get a job and fend for myself. I have Gene's support and Aunt Emma's, and I'm happier now than I've ever been. If you've been looking at my school reports for the short time I've been in classes, you know the things I'm interested in and working on, and I hope that those things, when completed, will end up making you proud of me. But I'm not going to change my mind." Again, she stopped and gave him a moment to respond.

"Why can't you be like Fayette? She's making friends in the right crowd of people, going to events and meeting important contacts, and

getting ready to make a fine career for herself, with respect for our wishes. Why can't you do that?"

"Daddy, Fayette is pulling the wool over your eyes: she has been with multiple boys, since you bring the subject up, and she's disgracing you more than I ever thought of doing, because everyone knows it about her. Just, you and Mom don't seem to know. If you want to put a stop to something, maybe you should concentrate on Fayette." She gave him a minute to breathe, but stopped him before he could speak again. "I'm going to do well at school, I know; I really like it. It would be very petty of you to cut off my tuition now, but of course, I can't stop you. Just send me a notice of what you intend to do in a letter or an email, and I'll deal with that in my own time. Now, if there's nothing else, I have to get off the phone, Emma has lunch ready. Goodbye, Daddy."

"You haven't heard the last of this, young lady," Robert threatened impotently, but Sadie put down the phone receiver anyway.

Emma looked up at her and patted her on the back. "Full of stereotypical phrasings and remarks, isn't he? But Robert was never one to think complexly. Well, I guess we've exhausted our conversational

resources with him for one day, anyway. I don't think he'll be calling back anytime soon.”

In the next few days, though, Sadie had her credit card declined at a local shoe store; still, her weekly cash allowance from her mother arrived on time. This seemed to suggest that her father had made good on his word, at least as far as stopping her spending money, but that for some reason, her mother was holding off on doing so. Sadie knew that the second semester's tuition wasn't due yet, so she continued to work hard on her schoolwork, hoping that her doing well at her courses might convince her father over time not to cancel her tuition as well. And, in a strategic move which she thought might earn her some brownie points with him, she added to her courses a beginning business course. She really felt she had no particular interest in or use for it, but since her father worked at an investment company, she thought this bit of sleight-of-hand might help sway him. In another strategic gesture, she also chose a major early, electing to concentrate on English and Language Arts, which had been her mother's major years and years ago, when she had gone through college. Thus, Sadie Greye was learning some hard lessons, but she

appreciated even more how supportive Emma had been and was still being, and she told Gene that they were now obligated by both affection and concern to be there for Emma whenever it might turn out that she needed them.

On Sadie's birthday, a Friday, Gene came over for dinner after work, and the three of them set up a meal on the backyard picnic table; they were having guests, Mrs. Macomber and Peter having accepted their invitation after due consideration. The other four roundly commiserated with Sadie, and they had a good time all making jokes about the absent father who so objected to his daughter's relationship with a man whom the other three could see was so clearly suited to her. So, it was with a real sadness and angry hostility at her father that Sadie, when she went in to take a late day call from her school counselor, came back out and told them that her father had asked for and received a tuition refund for the portion of Sadie's stipend that hadn't been spent yet. Apparently, such a thing was still possible until the end of September. This left them all nonplussed, though

Emma suggested that maybe she could ask the law firm overseeing her own finances either to advance the money gratis or to float Sadie a loan of the amount, as Emma's unofficial ward.

Gene hugged Sadie, and said, "I'm beginning to wonder how long you're going to continue to think I'm worth it, love."

Sadie turned to him and hugged him back, not saying much, but taking another drink of iced tea and shrugging at them all. "Well, he said what he was going to do, and he's done it. I just wonder now why my mother is continuing the allowance, and I'm wondering if he knows anything about that."

Peter fretted. "What make a man so mean to his own kin?"

"Peter, not your affair to comment on. Eat your meal and hush up."

This was Mrs. Macomber, although the next minute, she reached across for Sadie's hand, and turned it right side up. "Let's see: well, you've got a very long life line, long, long, long in fact. And your love line is well-marked and solid, which means this young man here, I'll be bound. Nice and deep in the groove, too. You're going to have more than one child, and they will be healthy. Now, your hand's too unmarked yet for me to

see more. But this line up here shows that you're scholarly and intelligent, and this one says you'll go far in life. Not so bad, after all." And then, she patted the hand, and put it back down, smiling encouragingly at Sadie. "Not to worry, it may all come right."

"I'm going to tell the pastor that you been reading fortunes again," Peter offered, not accepting her edict about being still.

"That's okay; I read his, too. He just said if I had luck that way, that it was because I know people so well. Just don't you worry about what I do; you worry about your own soul, and what you do. It could use some polishing up." But she was more gentle in her tone this time.

"My soul okay, I reckon. And my eyesight real good. I'm the one that caught that old bustard taking pitchers, after all."

Mrs. Macomber didn't shush him this time, just shook her head at him that today was not the time to bring the incident up.

They sat together in support, though their celebratory feelings were a little deflated now that Sadie's father had made good on his word. Still, as Emma reflectively pointed out, "the worm has no more stings. There's

nothing more he can do; you're eighteen, and on your own. And you have a place here with me, as long as you want one."

"I had hoped to pay you back some, though, from the allowance I was saving up. Now, that's going to be less, though my mother hasn't stopped what she calls my 'dress allowance,' I guess."

"Early days yet to say exactly what your mother's going to do. I think that she is something of a cipher to her husband sometimes. She's done things before that were opaque and meaningless to Robert, when they were first married."

Peter poked Mrs. Macomber in the ribs with his elbow. "A cipher?"

Mrs. Macomber responded, "A mystery, old man. Just like it's a mystery to me why I ever let you come anywhere with me. Emma, now don't clear those plates all by yourself. Let me help. You young folks stay out here with Peter. He'll gab at you, probably, but there's no help for that. And you, Peter, you stay within the confines of proper conversation, do you hear me?"

She went into the kitchen with Emma, carrying used plates; it was the first time either of them had ever been in the other's house. Mrs.

Macomber, though, wanted to be reassured by her hostess about a couple of things; her concern touched Emma considerably.

“You don’t think that father of hers is equal to having her kidnapped, or anything like that, do you?”

“No, no,” returned Emma. “Nothing illegal. Though harassing someone with a private eye seems a bit shady to me, and a little beyond the bounds even of what Robert usually gets up to. No, he may not be much intimidated by me, but on the other hand, he regards me as a sort of loose cannon, and he just can’t figure out where I get my money from. It’s good if he stays perplexed; it’ll keep him a bit better in line.”

They rinsed the dishes and loaded up the dishwasher, chatting for a few more relaxed minutes about other neighbors on the block, and their affairs and troubles. Mrs. Macomber seemed to know nearly everyone, and to be clear on what their individual problems were, though Emma hadn’t often seen her stray beyond her own property line.

“How are the Randalls, have you heard?” asked Emma.

“Oh, yeah, the kids are all in school now, since the little one got to be six. Mr. Randall seems to be doing better at work now that the oldest

boy's death is getting a bit back in the past. Elder Owens at the church works in the office where Mr. Randall is in the warehouse, and he says that Mr. Randall has started whistling some at his job again. I guess that's a better sign."

"Yes, that does sound better. Mrs. Macomber, I have to thank you and Peter so, so much for watching out for me and Sadie. And Gene. I don't know exactly what they're going to do now, but they have enough heart for anything together, I guess. If I could carry Sadie's tuition, I would, but my former husband's directive to the law firm was that there wasn't to be anybody provided for with my money who didn't have a job. I think that was intended to shut out other men trying to take advantage of me, but the law firm is applying that rule absolutely, and Sadie is not my official, legal ward, though now that she's eighteen, she's more or less on her own. Of course, there would also be her books and other incidental expenses to consider, which can mount up. But you have done more than your part in being a good neighbor to us, and I want you to know that if there's ever anything I can do for you, all you have to do is ask. And I

mean it.” On impulse, Emma gave Mrs. Macomber a big hug, and a kiss on the cheek.

“Oh, here now, Emma, don’t you worry about that. We always been good neighbors to each other. I’m just keeping the ball going. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

After the evening was over, Sadie went out and sat with Gene in his car, and they talked privately. Gene had to work the next day at the clothing company, so he wouldn’t be able to stay the night. He wanted still to be with Sadie as long as he could on her birthday, and to make sure that her part of it was happy. Now, her father’s influence had brought trouble and difficulty down on them.

Gene said, “We could go ahead and move in together, and get married, and then you could get a job and go to school at the same time. Can you think of a way to do the school paperwork so that you could get a loan? I can maybe pay some of your tuition until at least the end of the first semester.”

“No, I could probably do it, but that wouldn’t be fair. You don’t make very much as a driver, and I don’t think we can live together and pay tuition both out of that.”

“Well, then, make some arrangements to put things on hold until the second semester. I’ve been promised that if my internship continues to go well, I’ll get a permanent position at the clothing company in February.”

“You didn’t tell me that before!”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“But can you make enough money as an assistant cutter to pay for extra things? I wouldn’t think so.”

“It’s not what you seem to think: I don’t actually cut the materials myself; my position is more like a sort of foreman’s position. I manage the workers who man the machines. It’s automated, Sadie, for heaven’s sake!” And he kidded her about her naïvête.

“But you did the actual cutting at your uncle’s, didn’t you? How does one skill set transfer to the other skill set?”

“That’s a complicated question, and I’ll answer it for you sometime, but right now, we have to worry about you and your situation. Do you want to go ahead and get married, and move in with me in Otter Creek? There’s just room enough in my apartment, though we’ll be a bit crowded.”

Sadie looked at him, longing to say “Yes.” But other considerations held her back. “Gene, I just don’t feel that I can leave Emma right now. I see her face sometimes, and I can’t think why I never noticed before so much how she looks very sad. She is dreading my moving out and on, I know, although she tries to be brave about being alone again. And one day when I brought it up directly, she just dismissed it by saying something flippant, like ‘Oh, well, I’ll hire a companion, then.’ I know she doesn’t really want a stranger to live with her in her house, she’s so private a person, in spite of the way she’s been so generous to us. Can’t you move in here, into my room, and live with us here for a while, at least?”

“And what am I supposed to do with my bits of furniture, and books and stuff? I’ll grant you it’s not much, but there’s way too much to bring

and park on Emma. And you're the one who's related to her. I love Emma dearly, for your sake as well as her own, but I'm not her kith and kin. She doesn't owe it to me to put me up in her house, and it wouldn't be very manly of me to accept."

"Couldn't you put your stuff in storage? You'd just basically be sleeping over a few more nights a week than you already do." Sadie's lower lip trembled at the thought of having to leave Emma all alone without any support, but she didn't seem to be making any headway in her disagreement with Gene.

"Of course not! I'd be staying seven nights a week, as opposed to the occasional one or two, and even if I contributed to the household expenses, it'd be an imposition on someone who's been nothing but kind and generous and hospitable to me. Never mind what she's been to you, too. No, Sadie, if you want to stay with Emma, that's fine, but we can't impose on her further as a couple."

This wasn't to be the last conversation of this sort that Gene and Sadie had, but the result was always the same: Gene refused to move in with Sadie and Emma, and forbade Sadie to mention the matter to Emma (as

far as his new authority as a man in Sadie's life went, though, when he used the word "forbid" to her, she shoved his shoulder and laughed at him, and then he laughed, too).

There didn't seem to be a way to arrange things suitably, so Sadie whiled her time away looking through the Waterstone Barrier papers for jobs, and Gene worked at the Otter Creek factory and UPS, and they spent what time they had left over together and sometimes with Emma. Sadie finally found a "remote job" working from home over her computer for a small retailer who needed some proofreading done, and she socked away several thousand dollars in an account before this temporary job ended the third week of September. Then, she was back at looking for jobs again, having developed a taste for remote work, and this time her job search went further afield, to jobs across the state. She found a few odds and ends, enough to keep her busy, but the getting of the jobs seemed to be nearly as competitive and arduous as the working of them, and by the middle of October, she was twiddling her hands nervously and wondering what to do next.

One night after she and Emma had watched the old movie *Interlude*, which seemed to amuse Emma, but made Sadie weep sentimental tears, Emma went to bed early while Sadie once again got on the computer at the living room desk where Emma had allowed her to set up. She felt especially nervous this night, and was more alert than she might otherwise have been, both to noises inside and outside the house.

First, a group of adolescent boys went by out along the sidewalk, making lots of noise and by the sound of it clearly discarding beer cans for someone else to pick up. Then, just as Sadie felt assured that they were gone, she was frightened nearly out of her wits by the sudden wailing of a mating couple of cats out in the front bushes. Last of the night noises came the creaking of the back porch, which spooked her because it sounded as if someone were creeping around back there, although Emma had told her before that the boards tended to creak when the weather changed.

Sadie listened intently, but finally at about 12:00 in the morning, the noises stopped, and she wearily made her way up to bed, to try to sleep her doldrums off. Just as she entered the hallway, though, she heard

passionate crying coming from Emma's room. She hesitated, wondering whether Emma was truly asleep and just having a bad dream, or whether she should tap on the door and see if everything was all right, or what to do. While she lingered at the top of the stairs, she saw Emma come out of her room and enter the small bathroom across the hall from her. She waited. Emma came out again, bathing her eyes with a damp washcloth and going back into her own room. At the last minute, she heard Emma sigh heavily and groan, "Oh, Daniel, Daniel, Daniel! Why, why, why?" Then, the door shut. There was no rest now for Sadie that night, but a lot of tossing and turning, as she agonized over her aunt's predicament and her own. She felt she had to do something, but what could she do? There was no answer from the now quiet night, so she hid her face in her pillow, and wept too.

Two days later, while Emma was out doing some grocery shopping, having told the insistent Sadie that it was just a few things and that she really didn't need any help to pick them up, Sadie sat at the desk, once again trolling for online jobs. She was still reflecting about what she'd seen of Emma two nights before, and worrying about her aunt, being very

reluctant to leave her on her own again, though Gene had assured her that if she moved in with him in Otter Creek, that they would visit Emma every weekend when they weren't spending time with his family in Summitsville. Sadie tried to be comforted by this, but still she delayed on plans to move in with Gene, though she'd already started organizing her things for moving.

While she was sitting there, her eyes fell on the rolled-up scroll of legal paper having to do with Emma's provisions for herself in the case that she needed to be put in a home of some sort. Idly, Sadie pulled it out of the pigeonhole and looked at it, looking at the letterhead and Emma's and hers and Gene's signatures at the bottom. Below theirs were another two signatures, Daniel's and someone else's. This was only a scanned copy of the document which had been turned in to the lawyers, of course, so it was a bit pale. The letterhead with the law agency's name, address, telephone number, fax, and email address were placed neatly at the top. Sadie viewed it morosely. Then, she sat up straight: she had an idea, but she felt she had to work quickly, before Emma got back. And she knew that Gene would disapprove, but he was not helping her with her plans for

making her aunt comfortable, so he, Sadie concluded, didn't have a right to comment yet. Not until things turned out one way or the other.

Sadie dialed the agency's number, and within three rings, the reception desk answered. Sadie asked to speak to Mr. Ormond, which looked like the last name signed to their document, though the first name which went with Ormond was largely illegible.

"Do you mean Ms. Ormond?" queried the receptionist a little stiffly.

"Oh, sorry, I guess I do. The first name on my contract wasn't really legible."

The receptionist became more cordial again. "It's 'Lydia.'"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought it might be 'Lyle.' A little hard to read."

The receptionist, however, now had realized that the person on the other end had a contract, and after saying, "I'll see if she's free. Just a moment."

Within three minutes, a sophisticated and at the same time warm-toned voice came on the line. "Hello? Yes? How can I help? Who's calling?"

Sadie took a deep breath and spoke in a rush, trying to be as concise and convincing as possible, without giving too much away. "Hello. This

is Sadie Bradshaw. I recently signed a contract for my aunt, Emmeline Jorgensen, and I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh, Emma! How’s she doing?”

“Not great,” Sadie said carefully, “but not terrible, either. I know that Mr. Jorgensen probably left a number where he could be contacted in the event that she needs any additional money or has any other needs. I wonder if I might have that number so that I could talk to him, too. He doesn’t know me, but Emma trusted me to commit to helping take care of her later, should the need arise, and I’d really like to talk with him, if I might.”

Lydia Ormond paused. “Well, he did leave a number where he could be reached, it’s true. He usually does, when he goes from place to place. But even though he left a number for his next address, I rather fancy he’s in transit to it right now, and won’t be available for a couple of days. You see, he carries a cell phone, but often forgets to charge it up and so forth. He’s very good at getting landline numbers for places to us, though. Just the old school way of doing things, I guess. What’s wrong, exactly? Is

Emma in need of extra cash? She's never had to make a request like this before."

Sadie felt more confident now that she'd gotten so far, and she answered, "Oh, no, she's fine for money, as far as she's said. I just wanted to discuss a family matter with him that I sort of thought needed his attention. I don't mean to be a bother. I'm Emma's niece," she mentioned again, hoping that "family matter" and "niece" would clinch the deal. The next moment, it appeared to have done so, because Lydia Ormond said,

"Well, yes, I suppose I can see my way clear, Ms.—Bradshaw, was it?—to doing that. In two or three days' time, Mr. Jorgensen should be checked in at the Traveller's Inn on Vanuatu."

"Vanuatu?" asked Sadie, doubtfully.

"Used to be known as the New Hebrides. He's at an archeological site there, pottering around." She chuckled, as if this struck her as a little eccentric as well. She gave Sadie the number and the international calling code for the country, said, "It's sort of near Australia," asked once more if there was anything she herself need do, then rang off with a pleasant

goodbye when Sadie confirmed that this was all that she needed. Now if only Lydia Ormond didn't call Emma in the meantime to check on her.

For the next three days, giving it the full time she'd been given by Ms. Ormond before she could expect to reach Daniel, Sadie was nervous and even once attracted Emma's attention when she unusually enough snapped at Gene, whose feelings were hurt. She apologized to them both, making her lack of success at finding a new job the excuse, then had to listen patiently to their reassurances and comfortings as the price for her lie.

At last, the time arrived when Daniel was surely secure in Vanuatu. She had researched it and found out that Vanuatu was fifteen hours ahead of the Eastern U. S., and so figured to make her call on her cell phone at 8:00 a.m. the next morning, which would be 11:00 p.m. in Vanuatu. Even if Daniel stayed out at night to carouse with some choice spirits—and Emma hadn't indicated anything like that about him—he would surely be back at his hotel by that time, and getting ready to turn in. Her notion of an archeological dig was that it started early in the morning, so she felt fairly confident in her time scheme.

But it was difficult to accomplish her goal, which seemed to require more planning than had gone into it; this was discouraging at first. She stayed up in her room hoping that Emma would conclude that she was sleeping in. But just as she put the call through, Emma tapped on the door and stuck her head in, saying softly when she saw that Sadie was on the phone, which Sadie desperately held up and pointed to, “Oh, okay. I was going to trim the flowers today. I’ll talk to you later.”

She had to wait for a couple more rings for anyone to answer, feeling that this was a bad sign to start out with. Then, her phone line was very crackly, and the connection didn’t sound good. At long last, a sleepy-sounding male voice answered in an accent which Sadie was only able to identify as “island.” He said, “Yes? Do you know how late it is?”

She said “Yes, but this is very important. I need to speak to Daniel Jorgensen.”

He responded in an even crabbier tone, “No. No Danial Jutterson here. Sorry,” and seemed to be preparing to hang up.

“No, wait!” exclaimed Sadie. “I said Dan-i-el Jor-gen-sen.”

“Your line is bad. Repeat, please.”

She repeated, “Daniel Jorgensen. He’s visiting the archeological digs there,” she offered as a last hope.

“Daniel What-the-last-name?”

“Daniel Jorgensen. J-o-r-g-e-n-“

“Oh, Mr. Jorgensen. Why you didn’t say so? Yes, he’s here. But he’s in his room now. Getting ready to sleep. You call back tomorrow.”

A trifle testily, she answered, “This is an important international call; I can’t call back tomorrow. Please get him on the phone right now. This is his niece. Sadie Bradshaw.”

“His niece? Then, what you want to wake him up when he sleeping for? Yes? Miss?”

“Look, please, just get him. It’s family business, very important. It’s about Emma,” she said, playing her last card.

“Who all these people you mention? Sadie and Emma. You all related?”

“Please, sir, I know he would thank you for letting him talk to me. Please, this call is costing a lot of money. Just tell him that his niece is calling about Emma. I know he’ll come to the phone. Maybe even give

you a big tip,” she ventured, hoping that Daniel was not a tight-fisted man.

The hotel clerk said defensively, “I not let just anyone disturb Mr. Jorgensen for a little tip. He comes here many times to see our island history, and he always a good tipper, but he never asks for anything much, he just like that.”

“But I’m his niece!”

“Okay, okay, I tap on his door because you’re his niece. But if he don’t want to talk to you, then I will hang you up.”

“Don’t forget, it’s about Emma.”

“Sadie and Emma again,” he sighed. She could almost see him shaking his head. “Okay, hang on. It’s late; if he’s not asleep, I’ll get him.”

All but crossing her fingers, she waited. And waited. After about ten minutes, the line made a beep, and she grimaced in dismay. Had the man hung up? But no, the next minute, a man’s voice, a pleasant tenor, answered.

“This is Daniel Jorgensen. Who is this?”

“Uncle Daniel, this is Sadie Bradshaw. I’m your niece.”

Warily, the voice responded, “I don’t have a niece named Sadie. Who is this, please?”

“Yes, you do. Well, I guess I’m Emma’s niece, really. I called you about her.”

“Is Emma well? Does she need something? I’ve signed the paper already that was forwarded to me and returned it by fax. Is there something wrong?”

Sadie felt totally exasperated with both the hotel clerk and Daniel by now, in their male obstreperousness and fatheadedness. “Not in the sense you mean. But I’m staying with Emma right now, and I’m worried about her. Sometimes—well, she wakes up crying at night about you. I hear her, but she doesn’t know it. I think she really misses you.”

“I’m on a dig right now. I can’t get away immediately.” This was not said in an unfriendly tone, but the attitude sounded final.

“I know she misses you. She’s told me about you,” Sadie prodded with determination. If he wouldn’t, he wouldn’t, but she was trying to convince him that he should come and see Emma.

“Sadie, is that your name? Thank you for your call, Sadie. Goodnight.” And with that, the phone line clicked, and the line was free once again.

“Damn men! Why do they have to be so know-it-all and stubborn?” exclaimed Sadie. It didn’t sound like Daniel believed her, or maybe he really was some uncaring rich man who was just providing for Emma out of a sense of guilt. And now, the fat might really be in the fire. What if he decided to discontinue Emma’s money because Sadie had bothered him? How was Emma supposed to live then? Sadie went on down to the kitchen, trying to hope that all the money she’d spent on the call hadn’t entirely gone to waste.

Down in the kitchen, Sadie got some cereal, berries, and yoghurt for breakfast, taking a long, critical look at Emma’s face when she turned around from getting herself one of her many cups of morning coffee. Emma’s eyes looked shadowed, as if she hadn’t slept all that well, but her tone was cheerful enough.

“Do you feel like clipping off dead flower heads with me? The hydrangeas look ghastly. Of course, they won’t really look right until next

spring, when they bloom again, but I like to neaten them up now and again anyway.” She sipped at her coffee and waited for Sadie’s answer.

Sadie almost said, “Emma, I just did something really stupid,” but she couldn’t bring herself to leave off hoping that better things would come of her interference. So, she bore up under her own sense of guilt as well as she could, and agreed to help deadhead the bushes after breakfast.

That was the least she could do, keep Emma company for as long as she continued to live with her.

After they finished, Emma proposed a thorough cleaning of the bathrooms and the kitchen, and Sadie was glad enough to have something distracting to do that she eagerly consented to help. Then, it was time for lunch, and they settled for simple sandwiches and side salads, as it was a hot day for October.

October was fine and golden, with orange fires and brown shades in some of the leaves, and redbush flaming out at the corners of lots and yards where it had been planted. Sadie and Emma sat outside sometimes now on the front porch, taking in the afternoon sun, and feeling the autumn sweet melancholy that was always the result of the year changing.

Peter often called across the intervening space, but as Mrs. Macomber said in correcting him more than once, “Peter, the whole block doesn’t want to hear your big mouth. You just trot yourself on over to the property line and speak to Emma and Sadie if you have a notion, same as I do.” That this flatly contradicted what sometimes happened when both couples were already comfortable sitting down didn’t seem to faze her. She and her husband just seemed to communicate that way, and when she was inconsistent in her remarks to him, this just seemed to give him something else to respond to.

At the beginning of November, the weather became more chill, and Sadie slipped steadily into a sort of sad state, torn between Gene’s urgings that she marry him and come to live with him, and the pleasant and happy dwelling that Emma had shared with her so generously. But one day, Emma asked both of them to come around to the back and sit on the porch there for a quick consultation. It didn’t turn out to be quick, but it was certainly thorough, as Emma had intended when she lured them back there.

She started out with this: “Okay, my dears, it’s past time now, as things have developed, for you two to be getting settled down in the same place, together. Have you got space made for Sadie’s things, Gene?”

“I do, but you know her feelings better than that, Emma. She doesn’t want to leave the home you’ve given her here just yet, and I don’t want to make her unhappy by insisting.” But he looked unhappy himself.

“Well, we’re just going to have to convince her, aren’t we, Gene?” answered Emma.

Sadie said nothing. Her plan to help Emma had obviously fallen through, nothing else that could improve the situation had come to fruition, and she was very sad, too. But even so, she knew that Emma was right, and that it was time for her to go to a new home.

“Look, Sadie, I have plenty to keep me busy around here. I have friends like the Macomers to talk to when I want to. And I’m old now, and getting near the end of my life, and don’t need to be coddled and supported so much. You know that you’ve promised to come and visit me, and if I need to go somewhere else to live, in safer surroundings,

we've already taken care of the paperwork for that. Thank God for Daniel! He's really been very good to me all these years."

Sadie burst into tears, but could think of nothing else to say, so the three of them began to make plans for her to move into Gene's apartment with him in Otter Creek, to be followed with a wedding that Emma and his family would attend once he and Sadie had the time to plan it. He proposed waiting for the wedding until Spring had come around again, and Emma said she thought that was a fine arrangement. So, there was really nothing more for Sadie to do than to agree to her two companions' not-so-gentle pressure with a "Yes, okay," but she felt that her moving in would be accompanied with a number of regrets concerning Emma, and she wished that had not been the case.

Thus, one day early in November, Sadie and Gene rented a U-Haul truck, a small one, as she had not brought to Emma's or had mailed to her many of her old possessions from her father's house. They loaded up and drove to Gene's Abbott St. apartment in Otter Creek, in a quiet section near the college, and Gene had one of his buddies from UPS there to help them unload Sadie's boxes of books and clothes, and the few sticks of

furniture that Emma had been able to prevail upon them to take from her house. The work was soon over with that much help, and after his friend Joseph had lunch with them and left, Gene approached Sadie and asked if she felt like putting things away now, or wanted to leave it until another day.

Sadie felt depressed, though it was nice to think of being in a place alone with just Gene. “We have to go over and see Emma on weekends. We promised,” she said.

Gene thought this was making an unpleasant and onerous duty of something that they might otherwise do with pleasure, and said so. “I never said that we should forget her,” he remarked. “But I want you to meet and be a part of my family, too, and we’ll need some of our non-work time for them as well.”

She shrugged sullenly. He frowned. This wasn’t like his Sadie. “Sadie, don’t you love me anymore?”

“Of course I love you. Of course I do. It’s just that this is hard.”

“You’ll see Emma again soon enough. I know how close you two have gotten, and she’s a big favorite of mine, too. Don’t worry so much, little

bean,” he said softly, stroking her cheek. “I guess, then, that you want to wait for another day to sort through things and put everything up.”

They turned in early that night, and Gene resorted to lovemaking to calm Sadie’s fears, which turned out to be a fairly good tactic. She cheered up, and then momentarily for her decided to tell him about the phone call to Daniel Jorgensen.

When she finished the tale, which he listened to in silence with a serious expression on his face, he said, “Oh, Sadie! I know all the world loves a lover, but maybe you shouldn’t have meddled. What do you think Emma’s going to do for funds if he takes the house, or cuts off her money? We don’t know him, and it doesn’t sound like he exactly believed you.”

“It’s not that I don’t think he believed me; it’s just that he didn’t even seem to know about my existence, and he hasn’t talked to Emma for a long time. But if she’s seventy, he’s about sixty-seven, and it’s time for him to be settling down, too.”

“That’s not for you to determine. You can’t make plans for other people, just because we convinced you to settle down. Sadie, Sadie, Sadie! What am I going to do with you?”

She grinned mischievously and said, “Maybe some more of that other would help.”

“That other? You mean, what we were doing before?”

She nodded, and he said, “Well, okay.” When they had once more done what they could to let each other know how deeply they were in love, he said, “I’m not even sure whether or not you should tell Emma that you called him. He doesn’t seem to have responded so far, and it might just worry her more. Or maybe it’s more like a lie, a lie of omission, not to tell her. I’m not sure.”

Sadie nodded. “If you think I should tell her, Gene, I will. I don’t think she’ll get mad at me or forbid me the house, as my parents probably would do. I just hope that there are no—what’s the word?—repercussions.”

“So do I. Let me think about it some. We both need to think about it.”

Two weeks later, they had decided nothing yet, but were set to go over to Emma’s house because the first snowfall had come, especially heavy for the time of year, and Gene wanted to shovel off Emma’s walk for her.

The last couple of times they had seen her, she had looked a little thinner, but seemed basically cheery and happy to see them.

When they pulled up in front of her house, Gene saw Peter out next door, doing for his own house and path exactly what Gene proposed to do for Emma's. "Hey there, Gene!" called Peter. Gene raised a hand and waved it at the older man, taking his shovel out of his trunk as he did so, and then slamming the lid shut again.

"Hi, Peter! This is really a heavy one, isn't it? All wet and solid, not fluffy at all."

"This the kind that do be the hardest to lift. But you know, we can't leave it for the womens to do." Still, Peter was cheerily humming as he shoveled, and didn't seem put out at all to be doing the work.

The two men shoveled and chatted back and forth, while Mrs. Macomber sat wrapped in a gigantic fur coat on her porch, watching, and Sadie went in to visit with Emma for a while.

"Do you want a cup of hot tea, Sadie?" asked Emma, who was brightly dressed all in a full-length red velour dress from the back of her closet.

“Sure. I love hot tea on a cold day, you know. That’s a pretty dress. I’ve not often seen you in a long dress before.”

“It’s an old Christmas dress that I used to wear when I was with Daniel. He liked it. It’s the first snowfall, after all. Christmas will be here in no time.” And she turned back to the stove and put the kettle on. Sadie wished she could see Emma’s face, but Emma didn’t turn around again right away, and when she did, her expression seemed ordinary.

“So, are you all moved in over on Abbott St. now? That’s a nice area. I think if I were to live in a less rural place again, I would choose a place like that.” If Emma was aware of being checked up on, she was obviously determined to give no cause for alarm.

“Yes, I’ve got a place for everything, and everything in its place now,” proffered Sadie, using an old catchphrase to state succinctly for Emma what they were talking about. But suddenly, using stereotypical things to communicate with Emma seemed forced, and she longed for a more spontaneous, free conversation. It was just that it felt artificial not to be able to tell Emma about her phone call to Daniel, and it also felt less than natural not to be living with Emma anymore, suddenly.

They continued to chit-chat sporadically, to make vague plans for activities to take place during the upcoming Thanksgiving season, and now it was necessary for Sadie to tell Emma that she was invited to come with them for the Thanksgiving meal to Ned's and Capper's, where Gene's brother and sister-in-law and their three kids would be hosting the meal for Becky and Georgie and Gene and Sadie, George being out of the country on a tour of duty again. "Oh, I don't know," said Emma, meditatively. "That's a long way to drive, especially if the weather's anything like this."

"But Gene and I are going to pick you up and bring you back. It won't be any trouble at all, honest. Please come!"

"We'll see," said Emma. "I can't think why a whole gang of young people want to hang around with an old thing like me, anyway. I told you once before that you are daft."

"Stop it!" said Sadie. "Now, you can't say that we can visit and do things for you, and then not accept a perfectly nice invitation for a party when you get one. You'll get to meet Becky and see the baby, too."

Emma closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again and smiled. “Well, maybe. Did I tell you that last week I mailed her that baby jacket and cap I made her? I got a prompt thank-you back, along with the assurance that they fit just fine. That’s something, anyway. Any more school plans yet?”

“We’re waiting until next semester to try again, when Gene’s going to have two salaries.” By this time, they’d slipped mostly back into their old relationship, with the difference somehow in Emma, who seemed a little fatigued, or sleepy. But Sadie persisted, and finally got a halfway commitment for Thanksgiving, which she had to accept as being as good as it could get for the moment. They continued to talk until Gene knocked at the door, and Emma went to let him in with Sadie trailing behind her. Emma gave him a big hug, and asked him if he wanted something to eat or drink for his efforts, but he said it wasn’t necessary, and that he and Sadie still had to go to the grocery store even for lunch things for the week, because their stock of groceries had run out. He thanked Emma for the offer anyway, and then told Sadie he’d wait for her in the car.

Sadie continued to talk to Emma for another ten minutes or so, not eager to leave after so brief a visit. But at last, Emma herself reminded her that Gene was patiently waiting out in the car. So, Sadie gave her aunt a hug and a kiss on her cheek where she still sat at the table with her tea, and headed on back out the front door.

The snow had stopped falling by the time that she stepped out, and the sun was brightly reflecting off the ice crystals and the lawns where the old snow was packed down and frozen. A few people were out on the sidewalk up and down the street, walking with caution across the white-covered surface, trying not to slip and fall. As Sadie came down the walk, she noticed that one of them, a tall man with dark, graying hair and a slight shadow of matching beard, was standing in front of the house looking directly at it. She paused, wondering if he had some connection with the private eye that Gene had driven away back in the summer, but he looked very gaunt and at the same time politely restrained in his mannerisms, and when he saw her, he paused, too. Then, as if reassured by something unspoken, he put his hand to the gate and opened it, stepping in and slowly walking forward. This stopped Sadie again.

As he reached her on the walk, he met her gaze with a pair of intent brown eyes, and queried, “Sadie?”

Something about him looked and sounded familiar, but she couldn't place him yet. While she stood still, not answering, he smiled and patted her on her near shoulder, then passed on up the sidewalk towards the house. He was walking so slowly, that even though it was not a really long walk, Sadie had time to dash to the safety of Gene's car and get in the passenger seat. He looked at her, his gaze questioning. She rolled down her window and picked up her phone to call Emma and warn her that she had some odd company on the way up her walk, but by this time, he had reached the door. In silence, she and Gene watched him tap gently at the door, and then louder when no one opened it.

Abruptly, Emma appeared, looking up at him with wonder and then welcome. Gene asked, “Sadie?”

“Shhh!” she responded, determined to hear what was said.

The man reached out and softly touched one of Emma's arms; straining her ears, Sadie heard him say in a low tone as Gene got ready to turn the engine on and pull out, “I'm back, Emmie. I'm ready to come home.”

“Who is that?” asked Gene. “Is it all right for us to go?”

“Yes, Gene, it’s all right to go. That’s him, that’s Daniel. It’s all right for us to go now.” And they pulled off down the road, Gene looking back in his mirror for one last glance at the front of the house as the door closed behind its newly admitted tenant.