

Maryam



Authors Joan and John Houk
Illustrated by Jane Pitz

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About the Authors

Joan is a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has raised six children, three of them adopted. With four children already in her family she continued her love of learning with an Associate Degree in Social Science, then a B.A. in Elementary Education, an M.S. in Conflict Management, and finally, (her husband hopes) an M.Div. from the University of Notre Dame.

During these school years she welcomed two children into her family, and after completing her M.Div. Degree she was given the position of Pastoral Director for first one, and then a second Catholic parish where there was no resident priest.

Joan is now a full-time advocate for the full inclusion of women in ministry including the priestly ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church. In 2006, intentionally breaking Church law to change it, she was ordained a priest through the Roman Catholic Womenpriest initiative (RCWP), and in 2009 was elected and ordained bishop for the Great Waters Region of RCWP. In 2019 she retired as bishop, but continues in active participation in RCWP.

Joan remains committed to the Roman Catholic Church, and works continually to convince her Church to ordain women for the good of the Church and for the women who are called to priestly ministry.

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John is a native of Dayton, Ohio, with a B.S. in Civil Engineering from the University of Dayton. His engineering career took the family to numerous places as he worked on a multitude of projects. John loved the challenge of building things; especially things that had never been built before and sometimes in new and unusual places while helping Joan raise their family.

John is now retired and is a full-time supporting partner in Joan's ministry. He shares her fire and enthusiasm for the inclusion of women at all levels of ministry and the professions. He is pleased that in his engineering field the participation of women has gone from essentially zero to approximately 30%.

After years of being "on call" John enjoys the freedom of not carrying a mobile phone or maintaining an e-mail address. He enjoys the company of his two Tomcats and writing as a creative outlet, including letters "to the editor" and to their children and grandchildren.

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Preface

As we write this it is a soft morning, light rain, cool breeze, some would say an Irish morning, a good morning to be alive. It was also that kind of morning when the story of Maryam begins.

Five years ago, we began writing love stories. We followed the old adage to write about what you know. After 60 years we have the right to claim success in love, and we like writing about love together. We know a love story when we see it, and we see love in our story. It will have its own dominant theme different than the first three stories, yet familiar.

Story 1, "Allen and Sue" is about two people who suffered the effects of violence in their lives. In Sue's words, "It's over" but then she discovers that being over not good enough, and love finds a way to new beginnings.

Story 2, "Megan and Nick" is all about two people, who, in Nick's words, found "life can flow like a meandering stream in a meadow" only to discover love entering their lives in new and surprising ways, and their meandering stream becomes turbulent.

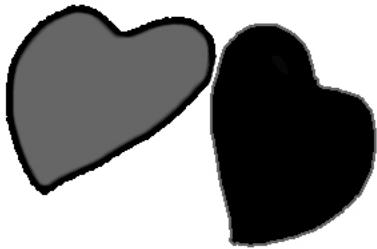
Story 3, "Billy" is the story of a young man looking for love but love finds him and he was, in his words, "only being himself".

Story 4, "Maryam" is afraid. Then she is befriended by identical twin girls, Dorothea and Bertha. The twins may look alike, but they are very different people. Will the twins really help? Maryam will find love or will love find her, or maybe not? Even on soft mornings we cannot be sure.

Cosmic energy is love, the affinity of Being with being. It is the universal property of all life and embraces all forms of energized matter. Thus, the tendency to unite: the attraction of atoms to atoms, molecule to molecule; or cell to cell. The forces of love drive the fragments of the universe to seek each other, so that the world may come into being.

Teilhard de Chardin

DOROTHEA AND BERTHA



“Thea, where’s Bea?”

The room had an unfamiliar smell. It was also cool, uncomfortably cool. Two men led Liesl and Billy to the far end of a stainless-steel wall that Liesl thought looked like a wall of drawers made by some crazy giant of a person. She was grabbing Billy’s arm so tightly that he could feel pain as the man in the white lab coat began pulling out one of the giant drawers.

The uniformed man said, it is essential that we have a positive identification, and he reached for the sheet covering the face.

Liesl shouted, No, not the face! and she let go of Billy’s arm leaving little blood marks where each fingernail had been, and she reached for the sheet that covered the feet and snatched it back. She had a moment of faint and fell against Billy.

This was not the first dead person that Billy had seen, but after coming back from Afghanistan he had hoped he had seen the last. The feet were young and female. They were perfect feet. The toes were perfectly straight with each nail carefully painted a modern pink. One could easily picture the whole person, and see a beautiful young woman. They were beautiful feet. Liesl recovered from her faint and began to cry. It’s not her; this is not our Bea.

You must be sure. There can be no mistake.

No, this is someone else’s beautiful child, but it is not Bea. Bea has a large round birth mark on her left foot, and there is no mark on this person’s foot.

I am not sure my supervisor will be happy with that level of identification.

Billy spoke up. I understand. Liesl, wait for me outside in the hall. Liesl needed no encouragement, and turned and left. If you uncover the face, I will make a positive ID for you. She was a beautiful blond child, but not his red-headed Bea. This is not our Bertha. The man was satisfied, and the white-coated man pushed the drawer back into its place.

In the hall Liesl clung to Billy. Where is she, Billy? I don't know, but thank God she is not here. We will go back to the hospital and check on Thea and find out what happened. I don't want to ever go through this again, Billy. I don't think I could take it. You will never need to. I promise. Let's go. Billy didn't pray often, but at that moment he prayed that he was right. Just as they were exiting the building a man and a woman rushed past them and into the building. Liesl took Billy's hand and again began to cry.

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It was a soft Saturday morning. Light rain and cool. Liesl had stayed in bed getting a little extra sleep, and Billy was having coffee with his girls. Bea, always the spokesperson, asked, can we use the big car? We want to go to a socker game. The big black Mercedes was their "gangster car". They had been to Chicago, summers for fun, and lately for a funeral. They had seen the gangster movies, and in the giant of a car, they were Chicago gangsters. They thought it was great fun. Sure, what time do you think you will be home? The game is in Darmstadt, we will be home for dinner.

He waved them good-bye and realized that this was a rare Saturday morning when he and Liesl were alone with the cat. He got a cup of coffee for Liesl, and went and sat on the edge of their bed. She stirred and gave him a questioning look. The girls have gone to a socker game. It's just you and me and the cat. How nice. Is that coffee for me? Yes. Put it down for later and come back to bed with me. Billy didn't need any encouragement as Liesl reached for her phone on the night stand and turned it off. After 17 years of marriage a rare quiet Saturday morning was not to be wasted.

Later at the breakfast table Liesl turned on her phone and saw the text message from Thea. *Mom, I'm at the Frankfort Hospital. Please come. Thea.* Liesl knew that Thea never used what she considered unnecessary words, but this was ridiculous. Why was Thea at the hospital? She texted back, *Why are you at the hospital?* No response. Billy, we need to go to the Frankfurt Hospital. Now? Yes, Thea is there and I don't know why.

When they arrived at the hospital they were told that there had been a multiple car accident, and that Thea had been admitted with other people and given a strong pain killer to help for when they set her leg, but no one by the name of Bertha Baxter had been admitted. They were also told that there had been one fatality. They looked quickly in on Thea, then left immediately for the morgue.

When they got back Thea was propped up in a bed with her left leg in a cast and still a little groggy from pain medication. Liesl had only one thing on her mind, where is Bea? Isn't she here? No, and we don't know where she is. Tell us what happened.

I was driving and Bea had the music turned way up and was singing, and I saw brake lights. We were in the middle lane and I tried to stop but the road must have been wet. I think the car is damaged really bad, Dad. I am so sorry.

I don't care about the car.

The air bags went off with a terrible bang and I felt this really bad pain in my left leg. Bea said, are you OK? and I said, my leg hurts, and then Bea got out of the car and that's the last time I saw her. It was crazy, Dad. There was smoke and people running and yelling. I was really scared.

Liesl could tell that this was a bad scare for Thea because those were more words than Thea usually said in a week. She looked at Billy with her "now what do we do" look. Then her phone rang. She looked at it and didn't recognize the number but she answered it anyway. Mom? Bea, is that you? Where are you? It's me, Mom. I'm at the Darmstadt Hospital. Are you injured? Only some bruises, Mom, are you with Thea? Yes, she has a broken leg, but she will be OK. We were really worried about you. We even went to the morgue thinking you may have been killed. That's creepy, Mom. I'm really OK. Where's your phone and what are you doing in Darmstadt?

I guess my phone is still in the car, and I just couldn't leave her. She had no one to call. Who are you talking about, Bea? There was a woman in another car all smashed up. I held her hand until the medics got to her, then I came with her here. She doesn't have anyone, Mom. Can you believe that? I didn't think it was possible. No family to call, no one, Mom. Is Dad there? Yes, here he is.

Dad? Yes, Bea are you OK? I'm OK but the car is totaled, Dad. I mean the whole front end is smashed. OK, Bea. As soon as we know if they are going to keep Thea or let her go home, we will come and get you. Stay where you are – don't run off to someplace else. Is Thea going to be OK? Yes, and stay put, do you understand? We thought something terrible may have happened to you. It sort of did, Dad, but I'm OK. I will stay here and wait for you. The people have been nice, they checked my seat belt bruises but I need a shower, my hair is full of little pieces of glass. Can I talk to Thea? Billy handed Thea the phone.

Thea, are you OK? Yes, but my leg hurts. No dancing for a while. I guess not.

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Who is that sitting on the step? That's Carl, Thea's boyfriend, Dad. Billy looked at Bea but didn't say, let Thea speak for herself because he had said it a thousand times to no effect. So he called up the steps, Carl, come down here and help me get Thea into the house. Carl jumped up and came down to the car with a very worried look on his face.

How long have you been sitting there, Carl? All afternoon I guess, Mrs. Baxter. He took Thea's good side and Billy the bad side and carried Thea into the house. I was worried when I heard you were in an accident. Thanks for coming, Carl. It was kind of bad, but I'll be OK.

Carl, you can use the bathroom. I'm going to fix some dinner. You can stay if you want. Thanks, Mrs. Baxter, I'd like that. Thea pointed down the hall and Carl headed in that direction. Billy and Bea were putting some pillows around Thea in the big living room chair, and Liesl went to the kitchen.

Can I be of help, Mrs. Baxter? Liesl pointed to the shelf with plates and thought, just like Thea to pick a polite and helpful boyfriend, and decided she liked Carl. It was just soup and sandwiches but no one complained.

Dad, Maryam, that's my new friend's name, needs a place to stay for a few days. The hospital will let her go home tomorrow but she is going to need help and there is no one to help her. Could she stay here until she can manage on her own again? Bea, we can't take people in that can't take care of themselves.

Maybe it will be OK, Billy. What kind of help will she need, Bea? Mom, her arm is in a sling. She may need surgery on her shoulder. They weren't sure yet, and her knees are all banged up so she won't be able to walk, at least for a couple of days.

We could get some help for her. Where does she live? She lives in Wiesbaden, Dad, but it's not just nursing care, she hasn't got anybody, Dad, and I'm her friend. I held her hand when she thought she was going to die and I sat with her in the hospital. That's nice Bea. We are pleased that you were there for this Maryam when she needed someone but we can't turn our house into a hospital.

Surprising herself, Thea spoke up. Yes we can, Dad. I know how scared she must have been. I was there. It was really bad. Liesl gave Billy her "we can do this look" and that settled it. They would bring Maryam home tomorrow.

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I didn't want to ask the nurses for a scarf for my hair. Do you have something I could wear? As Bea was looking around the car for something, Billy was thinking about how he was going to get Maryam into the house. He saw that she was a small woman, delicate looking but not fragile. He could carry her in, he decided, but he resolved to make a second call to the medical appliance store and order a wheelchair to be brought with the crutches already ordered for Thea.

So Maryam sat uncomfortably, a Muslim woman with her hair uncovered, in the front passenger seat because it was the easiest seat for her to get into. Bea called from the back. We have some beautiful scarves at home. You will be able to choose one and keep it.

Billy didn't want to pry but he couldn't just sit like a hired driver. Bea told us you live in Wiesbaden. No answer. We are pleased to be able to be helpful for a few days. Is there anything that needs attention at your home? If so, Bea could take care of whatever needs to be done.

That's right, Dad. Thanks for thinking of that. Maryam, is there something I can do for you at your house? Still no answer, then softly, I have a cat. Maryam, I will go get your cat for you. Billy, thinking that his previously quiet house was quickly getting out of his control offered hopefully, perhaps it would be better for you to care for the cat at Maryam's home. It would only be necessary for you to check on it every day or two.

Dad, Maryam needs her cat for company. Isn't that right, Maryam? Bea had a way of asking questions when she had already decided the answer. I would like to have my cat with me if it is not too much trouble. It has had no food yesterday or today.

So she can speak, Billy thought. Then he softened, remembering other people he had known in the Army who had suffered trauma. Direct me to your home and we will get your cat on the way. Maryam told him the address and he put it in his GPS.

At Maryam's apartment Bea took her key and went in to get the cat. The cat did not like strangers but Bea found its food and the hungry cat came out of its hiding place. Getting it into its carrier was a challenge but there was no scratching or biting and the cat and its food joined Maryam in the car.

The cat was quiet on Maryam's lap for the ride, and Billy was able to carry Maryam into the house while thinking that he really needed to get back to some regular exercise. Liesl met them at the door, and seeing the cat carrier gave Billy her "Really!" look. Billy was beginning to doubt Bea's "few days" and began to wonder what's next.

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It was Monday. Billy went to work. Bea reluctantly went to school complaining that if Thea didn't have to go, why did she? Her logic didn't work on Liesl, and Bea went to school but Liesl called in to her job that she was staying home. Thea was unsteady on her crutches and Maryam could get around in her wheelchair but needed a little help in the bathroom where the wheelchair wouldn't go, so Liesl really needed to stay home.

Bea's cat, it had always been "Bea's" cat, could come and go as it pleased and had decided that it would rather be outside than with another strange cat. Thea was propped up in the big chair and Maryam's cat jumped up on her lap as Liesl walked into the room. Mom, look at this cat. It doesn't know me but it has cuddled up in my lap. Cats sometimes sense when someone doesn't feel well and they will go to that person. That's really nice, Mom. I didn't sleep last night. I keep seeing brake lights and people running.

Are you comfortable in that chair? If so, maybe you can get some sleep. I'll try, Mom. I like this cat. Is Maryam still sleeping? I think so. She hasn't come out of her room yet. Try to get some sleep. The house is quiet. Oh, here is Maryam.

Could you help me in the bathroom, please? And Liesl left Thea and her new cat friend and went with Maryam to the bathroom. Then Maryam joined Liesl in the kitchen. Maryam, I'm about to have a second cup of coffee, would you like a cup with me? No, thank you, but if you have some juice that would be good. Are you in pain? Your knees are all bruised and swollen. A little but not as bad as yesterday. You have a wonderful family and Bertha is special. Bea has gone to school and the house will be quiet. The house is seldom quiet when Bea's home. It was like God sent her to me. I will never forget her kindness.

I see you have chosen the light blue scarf. It looks very nice with your dark eyes. You will need some clothes. We have plenty of things here. They may all be a little large for you, or I could have Billy go to your apartment and bring some of your things. It looks like you will be with us

for a few days. Do you have a phone? If not is there anyone you would like me to call and tell them where you are?

Maryam visibly stiffened, and at first didn't answer Liesl's question. Then slowly she responded, it is better that no one knows where I am and it would not be good for your husband to go to my apartment. Thank you for offering me something clean to wear. Perhaps later you could help me bathe a little. I would feel so much better clean, with clean clothes. Liesl suddenly had more questions but she let them wait and got Maryam some juice.

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That evening Carl came in with a chess set, and he and Thea spent the evening playing. Bea was constantly on her phone but trying not to be too loud. The house was a little like a hospital ward even at the dinner table. Billy was catching strange vibes from Liesl and when he asked discretely if there was a problem, he got Liesl's "later" look.

Now it was later and Billy asked again, is there something I should know? He already knew that Liesl was not comfortable but didn't know why. It's Maryam. Bea thought she didn't have anyone to call that could come to be with her. After talking with her today I have the feeling that she didn't want to call anyone. It could even be that she is hiding for some reason. That makes me a little nervous, Billy. You didn't ask her directly? No. She made it clear without actually saying so that she doesn't want anyone to know that she is here with us. Do you think she is hiding from the law? That seems unlikely to me. I think she is afraid for some reason. Well, we will take her back to her apartment in a few days and that will be the end of our involvement.

You think?

There was a light tap on their bedroom door and Bea came in. I need to talk about Maryam. You don't need any encouragement to talk, Bea. OK, so I'm on the phone with a friend and telling them that we have this person with us who was in the accident and I held her hand and went to the hospital with her and we brought her home and how she needs a wheelchair, and Maryam heard me and said, please don't tell people I'm here with you. What's that all about?

We have been wondering the same thing. You wondered about her not wanting anyone to know she is here and didn't ask her why? No, Bea, I didn't ask her, and Dad and I were just saying that maybe it's none of our business, and we will take her back to her apartment in a few days and that will be the end of it. Mom, we can't do that. What if she is in some kind of trouble? It's not our problem, Bea.

Well, I'm going to make it my problem. I can ask her, and I will. She may come to trust us and tell us without our asking. It could be a very private thing. OK, but if she doesn't, I am going to ask her myself. Liesl looked at Billy with her "I know she will do it" look. Billy took a deep breath and silently agreed.

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She's hiding from her family, Dad. You've been talking to Maryam? I had to, you know that. It's one of these honor things, Dad. She came here to get away from her own family, her own family, Dad. Can you believe it? I know it happens, Bea.

She fell in love, Dad, and she moved in with her boyfriend. Her brothers found them, but they got away. She doesn't know where he is, but she came here to get away – from her family, Dad. Then there was the accident with pictures in the news and she had to give her name and address at the hospital. She's really afraid that now they may be able to find her.

She told you all of this? She must trust you, but how does she pay her rent, and she had a car, she must work. She's a prostitute, Dad. It was the only thing she thought she could do and not leave any trail for her family to follow.

I think it's time for all of us to talk about Maryam. It's going to be an interesting dinner table tonight.

Thanks, Dad. I came to you but Mom and Thea need to know Maryam's story. What are we going to do? I think the question, Bea, is what can we do, and the answer may be nothing.

The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others.

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (88)

SAM AND MARYAM

“Close your mouth, Sam, this is Maryam, our old woman friend.”

Life was returning to normal, if you can use that word to describe two teenage girls. There had been a family meeting with Maryam, and it was agreed that she and her cat would return to her apartment when she could get around without the wheelchair. Bea wanted to stay in touch so she agreed to visit Maryam every few days and do shopping for her if she needed it. Not to be left out Thea said that she and Carl would make occasional evening visits to give Maryam some company. And Maryam became part of the family’s new normal.

Thea’s leg mended and the cast was removed. This allowed Bea to resume her favorite sport of pretending to be Thea at school which was not possible when Thea so obviously had a cast on her leg. They were given Liesl’s old Volvo to use after it was determined that their favorite old Mercedes could not be repaired. They hated the “old lady car” but it was dependable. Liesl got a new Volvo out of the exchange and was happy with it. Billy’s electrician business was thriving. Life was “normal”.

The big thing on the family horizon was the early summer trip to Grandma and Grandpa’s place in Chicago. Last year all four went for a week, then the girls stayed another two weeks. That went well so this year Thea and Bea were going to go by themselves and stay for a month.

As the time approached it was not easy to tell who was looking forward to it more, Thea and Bea, or Liesl and Billy, who would have a quiet house for a month. They had already set aside a few days to spend in their favorite Bavarian mountains.

The amount of time the girls spent with Maryam slowed down as the girls became busy, busy. The insurance money from her totaled car gave Maryam some short-term financial stability. The Baxter family’s concern for Maryam gradually faded to casual friendship, that was until Bea came home one evening from her visit. Dad, Maryam is really scared. She was told by a friend at the mosque that two men had been asking people about her. She is sure that it could only be her brothers. She’s really scared, Dad.

So Maryam again became the topic of discussion at the dinner table. Thea surprised herself by saying, we could take Maryam with us. She would be safe and after a month maybe her brothers will have given up and gone home. Bea thought it was the best idea Thea had ever had. Liesl looked at Billy with her “why not” look. Billy said, if she has a legal passport, we can buy her a ticket. I know my parents would agree to an extra visitor. Bea left the table to go to tell Maryam Thea’s idea.

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Bea knocked on Maryam's door. No answer. She knocked again a little louder. No answer. Then she banged on the door and shouted, it's BEA! The door opened a crack and when Maryam was sure it was Bea, she let her in. I didn't expect you to come back tonight. When I heard someone at the door I was afraid. We want you to go to Chicago with us for a month. You will be perfectly safe there. We all agreed that it was a good idea. Will you go with us?

When are you going? In about a week. Maryam sat down and put her hands over her face, then, yes I will go, but a whole week? I only hope they don't find me. OK then come with me now. Pack a bag and get your cat and go with me now. You can stay at our house until we leave. Are you sure? Yes, let's go.

Maryam got up and wrapped her arms around Bea like a person who had just been saved from drowning. It took her less than ten minutes to gather some clothes and personal things, put the cat in its carrier and was ready to leave. Bea said, sit right here. I'll be back for you in a few minutes. Then she went outside. It had gotten dark and it took a few moments for her eyes to adjust. The street was empty. She waited until she was sure there was no one but her on the street then she went in and got Maryam and her cat and put them in the old Volvo.

Maryam sat quietly, not yet ready to believe that she was completely safe. Then she took off her head scarf and put it in her purse. "They" were looking for a woman in a head scarf and she felt a little safer without it. She had explained to Bea's family that she liked who she was and that the honor code that threatened her was tribal, not Muslim. Still, for now, she would not be a Muslim woman in a head scarf.

When Bea brought Maryam into the house Liesl thought – why am I not surprised. This is what Bea would do. The next day Billy helped Maryam get a visa and Liesl sat with her at the computer to get her a ticket on the same plane as Thea and Bea. Bea's cat had taken one look at Maryam's cat and it went out the cat door as if to say, not that cat again.

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The Lufthansa 747 could have been making the daily Frankfurt – Chicago flight years before Thea and Bea were born. It was old but dependable, at least everyone on board hoped so. Thea and Bea were sitting next to each other but the closest seat Liesl could find for Maryam was across the aisle one row forward. Maryam would often turn her head and chat with Bea and then Bea saw Maryam stiffen and look straight ahead. Concerned that her friend may need to be reassured that she was completely safe Bea got up and took a step forward in the aisle. What she saw made her anger flare.

Maryam had dressed in her best for this flight to safety. Her skirt was perfect in the mirror before they left for the airport. But when she sat down her hem came above her knees. Her knees had fully recovered and they were very nice knees that men would notice, and the man sitting next to Maryam had noticed. Bea saw the man's hand on Maryam's knee and moving up her leg and Bea reached for the man's hand. Maryam grabbed her hand and with a pleading look shook her head NO! Bea instantly got her unspoken message – do not bring attention to me, Bea! Bea dropped her hand and smiled at the man who pulled his hand back.

Maryam, my sister would like to talk with you. Would you change seats with me? A relaxed Maryam got up and moved to Bea's seat. Bea sat down in Maryam's place and still smiling at the man said in a calm voice, if you put your hand on my leg, I will scream that you are molesting me and there will be a policeman waiting for you when you get off the plane in Chicago. Do we have a clear understanding? The man responded by inching away and looking toward the cabin wall. Not satisfied, Bea continued. Do you understand what I said or do I need to raise my voice? The man mumbled I understand. Bea still smiling, good, you are a creep of a man but your brain is still working.

There were no more incidents on the plane but Thea and Maryam did discover that they had common interests including the status of women in developing countries. Maryam had begun to tell Thea was it was like for her when bad things began to happen in her life. But soon the cabin was dim and they were drifting off to sleep. There was no more trouble from "creepy" men. Bea had seen to that.

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As the threesome moved through the O'Hare terminal the girls thought they looked perfectly fine, if a little ruffled, to meet Grandma Sue but Maryam wanted to freshen up wanting to look nice when meeting new people so she went to the women's restroom. The girls moved on a short distance watching for Grandma, only to see their old friend Sam come running toward them.

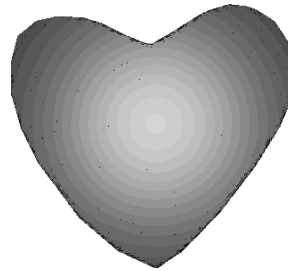
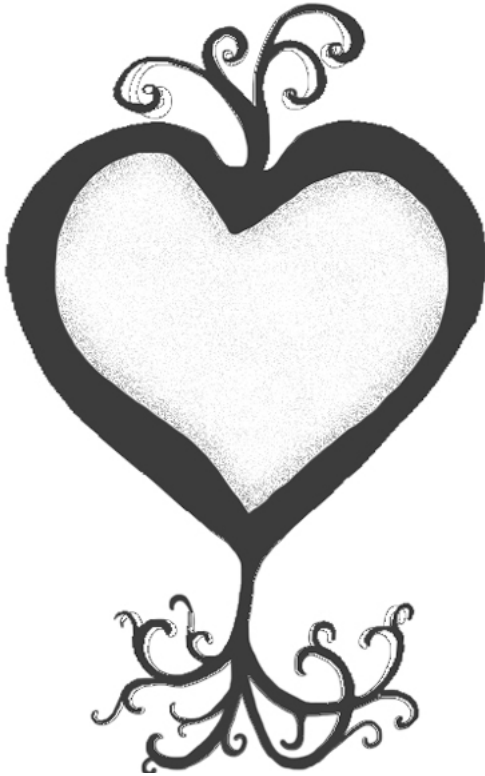
Last summer Sam had been their "big brother" taking them anywhere they wanted to go. He was three years older and had very much enjoyed his big brother role. He lived with his parents, Megan and Nick, when he was home for the summer. The girls each gave him a big hug and a kiss on both cheeks. Both Allen and Sue were busy so they asked me to come pick you up. Where is the old woman they said would be with you?

Thea looked at Bea with her "this is going to be interesting" look while wondering how "older woman" had been translated into "old woman" as the message traveled across the ocean. Bea saw a chance for some fun. She's in the restroom. It takes her awhile. You know old women don't move very fast. Thea let out a little snork. Then she saw Sam's focus shift. He was looking past her at Maryam, now a refreshed and strikingly beautiful woman. Sam struggled to control his eyes. He knew it was not polite to stare and he had just about succeeded when he realized that this vision of a woman was not walking past him but directly toward him. Then she stopped.

Close your mouth, Sam, this is Maryam, our old woman friend. Maryam, this is Sam, our good friend. He will take us to my grandparents' house. Won't you, Sam? Sam? Yes, Bea, I mean, no, Bea. I'll take you two to Allen and Sue's house but I'm going to take Maryam to my house. Maryam looked at Bea and was about to say, I don't think that is such a good idea, but Bea got the message before Maryam said it.

Sam is home from college for the summer. He lives with his parents. Right Sam? Oh, yes, that's right, Maryam. The twins' grandma said she needed some time to fix up a room for you so my mother has invited you to stay with us for a couple of days. I hope that's OK. I'm looking forward to meeting your nice mother, Sam, and thanking her for her hospitality, and she

stuck out her hand to look American. Sam shook her hand as his brain cells began to rearrange themselves into their normal position. Thea said, I'm hungry, to which Bea added, I want some Chicago pizza.



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Sam pulled up in front of Allen and Sue's house and helped the twins with their luggage. It was late in the afternoon but no one was home yet. He was going to leave them on the porch, it was a nice day, then he remembered the key under the flower pot and let them in. Will we see you tomorrow? Saturday for sure, Bea. OK, give us a hug. Thanks for picking us up.

Thea and Bea made their way to the two rooms they had used in the past. Bea liked her dad's old room that still had a basketball trophy and a picture of her dad with his Grandpop, who she never got to meet. Thea was comfortable in her Aunt Jennifer's room even though it was a little dusty. She would dust the tops of things and not say anything. She loved the great pile of pillows and big fluffy comforter, and she wished she knew her Aunt Jennifer better.

Sam went back to his car. The conversation up to now had been all Sam and Bea. Thea liked to listen rather than talk, and Maryam was trying to rediscover the English she had learned but seldom used by listening. Now they were alone in the car. He wanted to begin a conversation because he had a thousand questions but he remembered his little talk with Nick, his father when he was about thirteen.

Dad, I don't know how to talk to girls. Say something about yourself, that's always a good start. This advice had worked well before so he used it again. I go to college. I have one more year to get my bachelor degree, then I want to go to a grad school so I can be a teacher. I'll be twenty-one this fall and I like baseball. There is a Cubs game tomorrow night and I am going to go with a friend. He went on for another minute or two.

When he finally stopped talking, he realized he had taken his father's advice way too far. Too much information. I must look stupid, he thought, but when he glanced at Maryam she was smiling. It may have been clumsy but the ice had been broken, and Sam took a breath and reconcentrated on his driving.

What do you want to teach, Sam? Psychology. That's what my dad studied and he has helped a lot of people. Who are the Cubs? They are a baseball team. Have you ever been to a baseball game? No. I don't know anything about the game. Would you like to go with us? It will be tomorrow evening. I think you would like my friend, he's a nice guy. Yes, I would like to go. As a future teacher, you could teach me the rules of the game.

Sam could hardly believe how his world had suddenly expanded. It was like there were no limits. It was a lightness of spirit that he had never experienced before.

So you will be twenty-one this year? I'm twenty-eight. In America you become an adult when you turn twenty-one. I see. Is this your house? Sam had pulled up in front of his house and stopped but he hadn't noticed.

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Grandma! How good to see you! Have you girls been here long? No, Sam let us in less than an hour ago. We stopped for pizza. Then you aren't in any hurry for dinner and we can wait for your grandpa to get home. It can be late, you never know with a firefighter. Thea, how is your leg? It's all better, and she gave a little dance to prove it.

And how is your old friend, Maryam. I assume she went with Sam. The twins looked at each other and started to laugh. Let me in on the joke. Well, Grandma, Maryam isn't old. She is twenty-something, we think, and we think it's funny that "older" became "old". You should see Sam. He can't take his eyes off of Maryam.

This is not good news, girls. When I asked Megan and Nick to give Maryam a place to stay, I didn't know she was a twenty-something young woman. And beautiful, Grandma, absolutely stunning. Oh dear!

Allen came in the front door and heard Sue's, "oh dear!" Hi girls. How was the trip and what's the "oh dear" about? The twins grabbed Allen and gave him big hugs. Bea, the spokesperson said, the trip was OK. We had pizza and Grandma is worried about Sam and Maryam in the same house. Allen gave Sue a questioning look.

Allen, we thought Maryam was an older woman. The girls say she is a twenty-something and beautiful and, they laugh about it, but they tell me that Sam can't take his eyes off of her. Sue,

knowing Megan and Nick they will make sure that it is only his eyes. He's a good kid, Sue, and there shouldn't be any problem.

Allen, we know some of Maryam's history and it's not all good. Sue, we all have a history. I know, Allen, but I thought Liesl meant history like history, you know, years ago history. This could be trouble. Grandma, Maryam will not cause a problem. We have lived with her. She is a good person. She won't cause a problem. OK, Bea, but I want to meet her. I'll invite the whole family over for dinner tomorrow. Allen, how long will it take to finish the room and bath in the basement? At least a week, Sue, and that's if I take a couple of days off to work on it. Just do it, Allen.

OK, but the girls know this Maryam and they are not concerned. Maybe it's not Maryam that's the problem, Allen. Just then Sue's phone chimed a text message from Megan. *Maryam has arrived safely. Sam and Maryam are going to a Cubs game tomorrow night. One word describes her, wow!*

Sue put her phone down. They can't come to dinner tomorrow, Sam and Maryam are going to a Cubs game. Take the day off tomorrow, if you are so worried, and go meet her. I can't do that. It would look like an interrogation, Allen. We will all go to the Cubs game. You girls like baseball, don't you? Grandpa, we went to a game last summer and it was fun. OK, it's settled, and she texted Megan back. *Tell Sam to meet us outside the ballfield before the game so we can sit together. We will go to the Cubs game - all of us. Sue.* Megan texted back. *Great idea. Nick and I have other plans, have fun.*

The next day the twins were up early. They were still on "home" time so they called their mother. Mom, we are all going to a baseball game tonight. It's going to be fun. That's nice. It's early there, did you sleep well? We are fine, aren't we, Thea? I had a good night's sleep, Mom. Grandma is worried about Maryam and Sam in the same house. Your grandma has made worrying her life's purpose, girls. Maryam will not cause a problem. We told her that, Mom.

Just then Allen, always an early riser, walked in and heard Bea say, Maryam will not cause a problem. Who are you talking to, Bea? It's Mom. Put it on speaker phone. Liesl, it's nice to talk with you. We are so pleased to have the girls with us for a few days. Good morning, Allen. You must get up early. Every day, Liesl. Sue, the worrier, is concerned about Maryam. That's what Bea said. Tell her not to worry, Allen. It won't do any good, Liesl. I'm going to make my breakfast and get to work. Nice talking with you. The girls chatted with their mother for a few more minutes then joined their grandpa in the kitchen.

Bea, I heard you saved Maryam's life when she was trapped in a wrecked car? That's how she feels, Grandpa. I held her hand until they could get her out and I went to the hospital with her. It didn't seem like I saved her life. I've been to a lot of accidents, Bea. Firefighters know how important it is to keep an injured person from going into shock. You may very well have saved her life. I didn't know that. That's awesome! Are you going to the Cubs game with us? Wouldn't miss it. I want to meet this person you saved.

~ ~

They met as planned and Bea introduced Maryam. Sue could see that Maryam was properly dressed for a Cubs game. That had to be Megan's doing. She said, we have been wanting to meet you since we heard you were coming with our girls. I'm sorry we don't have a room for you right away but it will be ready in about a week. Sue had said everything on her mind in as nice a way as a worrier could say it. Maryam thanked Sue then put out her hand to Allen and gave him a dazzling smile.

The girls have been telling me all about their grandparents. Firefighters came to my rescue when we were in the big accident and I was very impressed by how quickly they helped me. Allen was easily twice Maryam's size but within a minute she had him in the palm of her hand. Sue looked at Allen and thought "men" but said nothing. Then they all filed into the game.

They ended up down the third base line several rows up. Sam was busy explaining the rules when he heard the crack of the bat and saw a foul ball coming his way. Being baseball smart he ducked but it wasn't the sizzling line drive he expected. Instead, it popped up and came down softly right to Maryam and she stood up and caught it.

The third baseman had run to the ball even though he knew it was foul and saw Maryam catch it and he smiled and waved at her so she threw it to him. He caught it and tossed it back and she caught it a second time and looked at Sam who had recovered from his duck. You can keep the ball, Maryam. Oh, that's nice. I like this game. Everyone around them cheered and clapped.

Allen looked at Sue and said, she says she likes this game, and I like her. I know you, Allen. You would like any pretty woman who could catch a foul ball. But Allen could tell that Sue was softening. Then the hot dog man came down the aisle. Sam said to Maryam, would you like a hot dog? It's like a sausage in a bun. Yes, I would like two please. Not to be outdone, Sam ordered two for her and two for himself. Then remembering that she was twenty-eight asked, they have beer if you would like some. No Sam, I don't drink beer but a water would be nice.

Sue heard the exchange from her seat right behind Maryam's and was impressed. Allen nudged Sue and whispered, she eats two hot dogs, Sue. You've got to like someone who eats two hot dogs. She had to say, to herself, that she was beginning to like this person that Bea had saved, but she also thought "men are so easy".

~ ~

A day of rest and some real sleep and the twins were looking for more than TV and Foosball in Grandpa's game room. Bea was looking at a magazine from the end table. Thea, look at this. It was a picture showing water and a beach and lots of people but what had caught her eye were two flying kite-like things that people seemed to be hanging from. The caption read "Kiteboarding at Silver Beach". Do you think we could do that, Thea? Fly in the air like that? I don't know, Bea, it looks kind of scary.

When Allen came home Bea showed him the picture. Where's this, Grandpa? That's a beach on the other side of the lake. Can we go there? I want to try kiteboarding. We can go there, Bea, but those things must cost a lot of money, and I am sure it's a skill, maybe a difficult skill, that you would have to learn. I don't think you can just do it. Can we go tomorrow? I have to work, Bea, and later I'm going to be busy on Maryam's room. So no, not this week.

Thea and I go everywhere by ourselves at home. Why can't we go ourselves? I guess you can. I know there's a train that runs to St. Joseph, Bea. We could take the train, can we do it? Do you have swimming suits? Yes, we do, Bea said with growing enthusiasm! OK, then, you get the train schedule then I'll take you to the train station in the morning. You need to come back the same day. No staying over. Even Sue thought it would be fun for the twins to go to the beach while wishing she could go along. So the next day the twins rode the train to St. Joseph.

Look at this, Thea, the train station is right at the beach. This is great! They went straight to the women's beach house, changed and headed for the water but there were no kiteboards on the beach. Then they noticed a young man carrying a large bundle looking very out of place so they watched. As he untied his bundle the girls could see a large colorful cloth. It must be a kiteboard. Let's go talk to him.

The twins in their identical swimsuits had been attracting attention since they arrived so it was no surprise that the young man with the kiteboard noticed them approaching. Hi, is that a kiteboard? Yes, it is. Would you like to help me set it up? It's easier with some help. This was better than Bea had hoped for and soon the young man and his kite were out on the water. Bea now had firmly set her mind on "I must try this" so when he came back to the beach Bea said, I want to try this. Can you help me?

That's not a good idea. You could get hurt. Can I just feel what it's like? OK, let me get out of my straps and you can hold it and feel what it's like. Bea knew what it was like to fly a kite and it felt as wonderful as she expected. Then there was a sudden big puff of air and she was off of her feet flying. He grabbed her by her legs and the kite dragged them down the beach before he could get it under control. Bea was delighted. Thea ran to her.

Are you OK? You look all scuffed up. I was flying, Thea. Did you see that? Everybody saw it but it's a good thing Grandma didn't see it. You need to clean up your scrapes. OK, Thea, and to the young man, thanks for letting me try it. It was great fun. I'm done for the day, would you like to have a beer with me? Thea shook her head at Bea but Bea said, yes, but we can't have a beer in a bar. They won't serve us. What if I get some beers and meet you at that park bench up on the bluff there, and he pointed. OK, Bea said, and they headed for the bath house to clean Bea up. Thea said, we shouldn't be drinking beer here. It's not legal here for us. Thea, we drink beer at home and he's a nice guy, don't be such a worrier.

They sat on the beach enjoying the view and the breeze. Soon the young man showed up with three bottles of beer and gave one to each of them, then he turned and walked quickly away. The girls looked at each other confused. Then they saw a uniformed woman far down the walkway but coming toward them. When she got to the girls she said, how old are you girls, and don't try to lie to me? Seventeen. You know you should not be drinking. We're sorry. We didn't mean to cause a problem. Give me the beer then. Where are you girls going? We need to catch the train back to Chicago. Then you better do it. If I see you with a beer again there will be a stiff fine and your parents won't like it. OK, let's go, Thea. Thea had noticed that there was a pizza place at the train station so they got a pizza and cokes.

They got back home late with Uber from the train station. I was about to go to the train station looking for you two. We're fine, Grandpa. It was a really fun day. Why are your knees

all scuffed up? So Bea had to tell the whole story. Then Thea said, don't forget the part about the beer, Bea. Bea wasn't going to tell that part but now she had to. You girls should know never to take anything to drink that has already been opened. There is a drug problem here. One of the ways innocent kids get drugs is that a person puts it in their drink without them knowing it. I see people OD-ed too often. Last week we were too late getting to a young woman and she died. Do you understand what I am telling you? Do not take a drink that has already been opened.

OK, Grandpa. We understand, but it was a fun day. Your grandmother is not going to like seeing your scuffed up knees. We want to take her to the beach and show her what it's like. She would like to go with you to the beach but you won't get her anywhere near a kiteboard. Now I want you to help me tomorrow. I need Maryam's room painted, will you do that for me? Can we paint it the color we want? As long as Grandma agrees. This could be fun, Thea. Maybe every wall a different color. How about purple? I like purple.

~ ~

Grandma, Thea couldn't sleep again last night. She says she still sees brake lights and people running. It's like the accident all over again. Let's get her some help. I know just the person, and she texted her old friend, Nick, the psychologist: *Nick, do you have time to see Thea today? Sue.* The reply came back: *Send her over. I am thinning out my client list but I always have time for a friend. Nick.* Bea, you know where Maryam is staying. Go over there and see Nick. He will talk with Thea. I'm going to work now. Keep in touch with me.

Awhile later Thea came out of the shower and into the kitchen. We are going over to Megan and Nick's house. Grandma thinks you should talk with Nick about not being able to sleep. What did you say to her? Only that I knew you were having trouble sleeping, and she said maybe Nick could help. Anyway, we can see Maryam and see how she's doing. OK, but I don't like to talk about it. What did you have for breakfast? Only some toast and coffee. Want an egg? I'll fix it. Sure, and see if there is any juice. Bea fried an egg, added some toast and juice, and put a cup of coffee in front of Thea just in case she wanted it. Then they dressed nice and went to see Nick and maybe Maryam.

Nick met them at the door. Hi, girls. It's a nice morning. Come on in. Want some breakfast? We had breakfast. How is Maryam today? Bea, Sam took her down to the loop. He said he wanted to buy her a fancy breakfast. They will probably be back soon. Thea, so you want to talk with me? Not really. Well, we will take it easy then. Go sit on my sun porch while I get myself a cup of coffee. Come on with me, Bea. This was standard Nick. His sun porch was decorated with calming colors and there was a huge salt water fish tank with beautiful fish. For years this had been his way with stressed out clients. He would put them on his peaceful sun porch by themselves for a few minutes before he began any listening session.

Thea loved his fish like Nick knew she would. Then, as if he had been trained, Nick's big fluffy cat came into the room and jumped up on Thea's lap. In about five minutes Nick came in with his cup of coffee. So, I heard you went to Silver Beach. It was great fun, Nick, but Bea's a little crazy. Well, we knew that didn't we? What do you have planned for today? Nothing exciting I guess. Then we can sit and talk for a while. And so, they did.

~ ~

When Sue got home that evening, she heard the TV in the game room and went to the sound. The girls were watching *Jeopardy*, testing their English. How was your visit, girls, and what's that on the couch with you? Nick's a nice old man, Grandma, and he gave me this big teddy bear. He said some nice person gave it to him but that he thought teddy needed a better home. I told him I was too old for stuffed animals but he said maybe I would find a little child to give him to, but for now I could keep him. He has a little red ribbon and a bow.

I see. I like him and his little red bow. Bea, did Nick give you something? No, but we talked about cats. He said time with cats is never wasted. Oh, and he knew about my adventure with the kiteboard and he thinks I should get one. What do you think, Grandma? Could I really get one? We will need to talk with Grandpa about that. Did you see Maryam? No, Sam took her to breakfast someplace nice, Nick said, but it was almost noon when we left and they weren't back yet. Sue filed that information. What do you want for dinner? Could Grandpa fix burgers on the grill? We would like that, wouldn't we, Thea? He would do that. He loves his grill.

So they had burgers and chips, with salad to please Sue. After the girls went to bed, and Allen and Sue had turned in for the night, Sue said quietly, Thea went to see your old friend, Nick, today. How'd that go, and why is he suddenly my old friend? Thea seems calmer and he gave her a teddy bear. That's pure Nick, Sue, but there's more isn't there? He told Bea she should get a kiteboard. God help us. That was my response but I didn't say it to Bea, I told her she would need to talk to you about it. Was that fair? I thought so. I love you, Sue. It's a good thing. You will talk with Bea? Good night, Sue.

Reasonable people adapt themselves to the world. Unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves. All progress, therefore, depends on unreasonable people.
George Bernard Shaw

Mahatma Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

John Robert Lewis

Sojourner Truth (born Isabella Baumfree)

Dorothy Day

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Martin Luther King, Jr.

JOAN RUTH BADER GINSBURG

Harriet Tubman (born Araminta Ross)

RICKY AND THEA

“Who knows someone who has a kiteboard?”

With Allen’s always uncertain schedule it had taken nearly two weeks to finish the extra room they had wanted to build for a long time and never got around to it. The twins were a big help. Work is always easier with extra hands. They did paint the walls, a negotiated with Sue mauve, and they all liked the color. They even helped Allen put the IKEA furniture together.

The room was ready for Maryam to move out of Megan and Nick’s house but Sam wasn’t ready to let her go. She’s all settled here, Mom. Why does she need to go to the Baxter’s? I agree that she is an easy guest but it’s better that she be at the Baxter’s as it was planned. They went to a lot of trouble to build the extra room. They were going to do that anyway. I know. Is there something going on that you should tell me about?

Megan got a cup of coffee and sat in her big chair. No, Mom. I mean, well, maybe there is. I really like Maryam. She’s special, Mom, and I don’t want her to leave. Has she encouraged you? I know she likes me. She talks to me and she’s funny but she hasn’t “encouraged” me. I know what that’s like. She isn’t like some of the girls I know. Well, maybe she did one time. Oh? Mom, I didn’t know she was in the bathroom and I walked in. I guess she was just getting out of the shower. I said I was sorry and backed out but she didn’t grab a towel or anything and she smiled at me. It was electric.

I bet it was. Maryam is an experienced woman, not a girl. That’s all good, Mom, it’s why I like her. Megan was remembering when she was twenty and was absolutely certain she had found the right person and it turned out that she was absolutely wrong. And Megan thought to herself, that’s the reason she should go to the Baxter’s.

It was my mistake. She didn’t do anything. We aren’t talking about banishing her, Sam, but you need to cool it down. How she wished her mother had said that to her but she hadn’t asked. Then Nick came along years later. I like Maryam too, Sam. If she is right for you, she will not interfere with your finishing school. She will go to the Baxter’s then back to Germany at the end of the month. What if she’s afraid to go back? What if there are people who really want to hurt her?

Megan didn’t want that to happen. No one did. Sam, I’ll talk to Allen about that. Maybe there is something we can do but for now Maryam goes to the Baxter’s as everyone expects will happen. I think I’m in love with her, Mom. It has to work both ways, Sam, and there are other things to think about. I’m not going to change my mind. Tomorrow you can help Maryam move. OK, Mom.

~ ~

Nick, I could never talk to my mother. I always thought you had a good relationship with your mother. She left you this house when she died, but why has your mother become our table conversation? Nick, I have worked to build an open relationship with our only child, and I think it paid off today. He hasn't come back from the Baxter's yet, he may be over there all evening. That's who I had a talk with him about. You mean Maryam. Yes. I like her Megan. She sits with me when I have my morning coffee. It's really nice to have someone like that sit with an old man and his coffee. What did Sam have to say? He's in love with her. I'm not surprised. I'm a little in love with her myself. She's kind, smart and beautiful. What's not to love?

Nick, Sam must finish school. He has another year at least, and she has a past. You talk just like his mother. Well, I am, and I don't want her to ruin his life. That's a little harsh and not like you. Maryam goes back to Germany in about two weeks, I think. Won't that solve your problem? What if she doesn't want to go? I suppose that's a possibility. There doesn't seem to be much we can do about it. She can't stay her forever "unless she gets married". Do you really think this has gone that far? Do you think they have been having sex? No to the sex, Nick, but Sam didn't even want her to go to the Baxter's. What's he going to be like when she is going to leave with the twins? OK, I get your point, but if she doesn't want to go back, I still don't see anything we can do to change that. She's afraid, Nick. I guess with good cause. Maybe we need to find out what we can. Call Allen and ask him to come over here.

Megan, I'm not sure what good this will do. But he called Allen, and Allen came immediately when he heard the concern in Nick's voice. What do you need, Nick? They brought Allen up to date on Sam and Maryam. Allen asked, has Maryam shown any serious interest in Sam? Megan told him about the shower incident. Megan, that could be a lot of things, all the way from a startle reflex, I see it all the time, people freeze, to it could be she really likes Sam and that was her way of showing it. I'm surprised he told you about it. Megan, getting back to her problem as Nick called it, she is here because she became afraid. What can we find out about that that we don't already know? I don't know any more than you do. Let's call Billy and Liesl.

Billy ran a business. He answered his phone any time of the day without even looking at it. Then he heard his father say, that you, Billy? Dad, what's up - are the twins OK? Liesl sat up. Speaker phone, Billy, put it on speaker phone. Liesl is listening too. So again, what's up? The twins are fine. Tell me what you know about the time when Maryam became afraid for herself and the twins talked you into letting her come with them. Is there a problem with Maryam, Liesl wanted to know?

This is Megan. Hi, Megan. It's not Maryam; it's our Sam. Oh, Liesl looked at Billy then said into the phone, I guess we should not be surprised. It was Nick's turn. That's what I said, Liesl, but Sam really likes her and Megan is concerned that Maryam may not want to go back to Germany. Has Maryam said anything about Sam or about coming back? No, Billy, but Megan wants to know if there may be a part of the story we are not aware of, and it could bear on her decision to go back. Let's see, Dad. Bea went to Maryam's apartment and she wasn't going to let her in. It seems a friend at the mosque had called her and said two men were looking for her. Megan repeated, two men at the mosque? That's what I remember, and that's all that was said. Then Bea brought her here. Thanks, Billy. I am not sure what we will do with that information

but I don't remember hearing that part. Sorry we woke you up. That's OK, Dad, and Billy touched off the phone.

Liesl turned to Billy and kissed him on the lips. Love can happen fast, can't it? We should know, and Billy reached for Liesl and pulled her toward him. Not now, Billy, I'm still half asleep. Tomorrow? In the evening, some music, you can turn off your phone for an hour. Only for an hour? We just had three days in Bavaria. Don't be greedy. After seventeen years Billy was happy with a "tomorrow". He looked at the dark ceiling thinking that he liked Sam and he liked Maryam and he hoped it would work out for them like it did for him and Liesl.

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No, Maryam didn't know who the two men at the mosque were, but it was her two brothers she was worried about. Who else could it be, as she told Allen and Sue as they talked with her? Maryam I would like to talk to our neighbor about these two men. Tina is well connected at her mosque. It's possible her Iman would see what he could find out. OK, Sue, but please don't tell this Iman that I am here with you. So Sue and Maryam walked next door to see Tina.

That's the story, Tina. Do you think your Iman would see what he could find out about these two men? I would be happy to try. Give me the name of the mosque, Maryam, and I will ask. He is a good friend and I trust him to be confidential. Thank you, Tina. If they were my brothers then I will know that I will no longer be safe there.

Would you two like something to drink? We don't get a chance to talk as much as we use to, Sue. I know. Life gets too busy. How is Billy? I often think about the night he was born. We almost lost both of you. I had pre-eclampsia, Maryam, and Tina sent me to the hospital in the middle of the night and it was just in time for Billy and me. And now he has these beautiful girls who saved my life, especially Bea. And Tina wanted to hear that story, so they found the time to tell it, like old friends.

Allen had seen the sparkle in Bea's eyes when she talked about kiteboarding and Nick hadn't helped. So he put out a call to friends: *Who knows someone who has a kiteboard?* It didn't take long for a response because his friends passed his search along to their friends and sure enough, he got an e-mail. *My son has a kiteboard and loves it. What do you need, Allen?* Allen responded immediately: *I need a person who will show my granddaughters how to kiteboard.* The response: *My son, who is sitting here, wants to know how old they are.* Allen: *They are both seventeen.* Response: *My son, Ricky, says he will be right over.* Allen: *That won't be necessary. Here is a number he can call to make a connection and set up a meeting.*

And on Saturday morning the twins met Ricky and a friend at the beach. So where are you girls from? We're from Germany and we are going home in about two weeks. The going home in two weeks deflated Ricky a little but he saw his chance to impress and took it. Maybe they would come back. If so he wanted them to remember him. I'll demonstrate, then you try it. But no fancy stuff for beginners. Bea heard "fancy stuff". Show us the fancy stuff, Ricky. Later. I'll show you how to put on the harness, and how to use the steering cords. Bea couldn't believe her good luck. Ricky was not only polite and helpful, he was cute. There was no fancy stuff for the girls, but they did get to try the basic steering. Even quiet Thea was yelling as she

skimmed the water, and when they went to lunch, she wanted to know when they could do it again.

When the girls got home, they were both high on kiteboarding, and Bea conspired to ask Ricky over the next day “for her grandpa’s famous burgers”. Grandpa, it was great fun. Thank you for finding Ricky for us, and he is cute too. I’ll grill some burgers for all of us tomorrow. I’m surprised you didn’t take Maryam with you. She would have been serious competition, Grandpa, but we did ask her and she said, no thanks. I think she didn’t want to interfere with our fun. She’s nice that way. She told me she likes her room, and we told her we painted it. Do you think she will go back with us? That’s up to her, Bea, but we are trying to help her decide. I like Ricky, Grandpa. I can tell, but you are going home in two weeks. There is no deciding about it.

Maryam knocked on the neighbor’s door. Tina answered. Maryam, come on in. I’m glad you came over, we may have a lot to talk about. Allen and Sue are at work and the twins are off someplace and I wanted to talk with you. Come sit in the kitchen. I have some cold juice. That would be nice, Tina. Sue told me that you are a nurse. Recently retired, Maryam. I loved my work at the hospital but I began to feel my age. Tina, I need to know if I have any diseases. You look healthy, Maryam. Is there a condition you are worried about? Tina, you know my story. Tina said, no, not really. Maryam began, when I got to Germany I had only a little money and I wasn’t sure how I would live. Then a man offered me money. It seemed the only way. Maryam paused, then, he told a friend and that’s how it began. The city there is full of men from other places. They are often alone. For over a year I entertained foreign men. I even got to know some of them well. After a while, they would go back to their homes, and usually I think, to their wives. It seemed I was harming no one, and Tina, the money was very good. These men were very generous to me.

That’s quite a story, Maryam. Now I don’t want to go back to that life and I want to be sure that I have no disease, Tina. Do you mean STD’s? Yes. That’s wise, Maryam. Women with multiple partners often contract an STD. I tried to be careful. I insisted on condoms, always condoms, and these were rich men, not men on the street. Can you help me? Yes, there is a good clinic I can take you to, very good and very confidential, but it may take several days for the tests to be completed. Thank you so much, Tina. I have no money with me. Don’t worry about the money. Are you free to go with me now? Yes. Then let’s go.

It was a short trip and a short wait at the clinic. On the way back to Tina’s house Maryam asked, can you keep this between us? Of course, Maryam. Nurses see and hear many things that are no one else’s business. What will you do when you go back to Germany? I don’t know but I will not go back to that way of life. Today I worry if I should even go back. It could be hard for you to stay. I know, Tina. Thanks for being such a friend.

~ ~

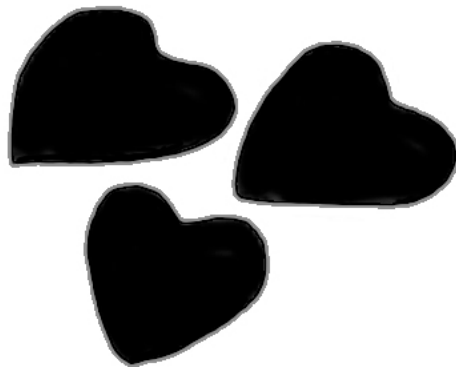
Sue arrived home from work to find Bea sitting alone in front of the TV looking glum. Hi, what are you watching? Old movies. The game shows were boring. Old movies sound boring. Where’s Thea? Ricky asked her to go out with him and she went. Well, Bea, you two can’t always be together. I know but I’m the one who likes Ricky. He made a mistake. Maybe, or maybe he likes a quieter girl. That’s stupid, Grandma. He’s stupid. Thea’s stupid. Bea, you can’t always be the popular one. I always have been, Grandma. Ricky has a problem. Where’s

Maryam? She went to the neighbor's house. I think they like to talk Muslim or something stupid like that. My, aren't we in a snit? Come help me make dinner. Do you cook often at home?

I like to bake. I make good cookies. Let's see if we have what you need and you can make some fancy cookies. I know Grandpa would like that. With a grunt Bea turned off the TV and went upstairs to the kitchen knowing it was going to take more than baking cookies to improve her mood. Ricky likes Thea! Stupid Ricky. Baking cookies helped but only a little. When Allen came in he could see the dark cloud over Bea's usually big smile. Sue gave him a "don't ask look" but Allen stumbled into it anyway. Where's Thea? Bea left the room and Sue responded, Ricky the kiteboard kid asked Thea to go out with him and you know who is not happy about it. Ricky is now stupid. She'll get over it, Sue. What's for dinner? Baked potatoes and a big salad with hard-boiled eggs and tuna on top. We were busy baking cookies. It smells good but cookies in the summer heat? Don't ask, but you need to like them.

Allen took his shower, put on some shorts and went to look for Bea, who was back in front of the TV. I hear Ricky has become stupid. Grandpa, how could he ask Thea out and not me? Good question. I also heard you like to bake. Mom lets me bake fancy cookies. It's fun. So what are you going to do this evening? Watch TV, I guess. Want to go to the fire station with me? I have some paper work that's due tomorrow. The guys could show you around. How old are they? Oh, a couple of the guys are in their twenty's. Can I take them some cookies? They would love that. I need to wash up. Thanks, Grandpa.

~ ~



Do you and Bea get confused? I mean mistaken for one another? Ricky, did you ask the wrong twin out his evening? No, no, Thea, I was just thinking that because you look so much alike. Yes it happens. Bea even pretends to be me, she thinks it's funny. I guess you don't think so, Thea. I get annoyed, but we get along. And Ricky, you do not need to pronounce the "h" in my name. Most people just say "Te-a". Thanks, so it will be "Te-a".

Who was that Maryam person I met at your house? She's a good friend. She came with us. She had never been to America before. Do you have a boyfriend back in Germany? Yes, again. Why all the questions, Ricky? You are going back home in a few days and this is my chance to get to know you. I really liked the way you listened closely when I was teaching you about kiteboarding, and you did everything exactly right the first time. I was impressed. I had a really

good time, Ricky. I could tell that too. What's your boyfriend like? His name is Carl. He's smart and quiet. We play chess. Ricky continued to question Thea. What do you do for fun? I never thought about it. Not much, I guess. You haven't told me very much about yourself.

To start with, I really like you. That's sweet, Ricky, but what do you do? I go to firefighter academy. When I graduate, I'll be a firefighter like my father and like your grandpa. OK. How long does that take? I'll be finished this year. When do you think you will come back to the US? I don't know. We come once, sometimes twice a year. This year it was twice because our great-grandma died and we came for the funeral in February. You must have been close to her. Thea shared with him. She was my favorite, she would come to visit us in Germany when we were little, then she got too old to travel. Thea, would you like to ride the Ferris Wheel down by the pier? Yes, I really would. When could we do that? It's late. What about tomorrow evening. I have the evening off. I can pick you up like I did today. Bea will want to come along. That's up to you, you can invite her if you want to. I'll think about it. Don't think too hard, and bring a sweater, it can be cool. They didn't want to say good-night. Ricky especially was thinking longer thoughts, like how much an airline ticket to Germany costs, but he didn't ask, not yet.

~ ~

Sam had gotten some work on a landscaping crew. That will help put some money in my pocket when school restarted, he thought, and if I am careful with the money, there would be money for an airline ticket to Germany. That was Sam's plan B. His A plan was to hope Maryam would stay here and, at least in his mind, that meant with him. The landscaper was looking for a full-time crew chief. He knew he could do that. He also knew that his mother would not like it. He knew she would not like it so much that he didn't even open the subject with her. But time was getting close for the twins and maybe Maryam to go home. He had to make decisions about Maryam, work, school. So he did what came natural. He went and spent the evening at Allen and Sue's house. Allen met him at the door.

Hi, Sam. How do you like the landscaping work? It's good physical exercise and I like being outside. Is Maryam here? She is at the neighbor's. We will be eating soon. You are welcome to eat with us. Bea is downstairs and Thea went out with her new friend, Ricky. Thanks, Mr. Baxter. I'll go see Bea. We don't often get to talk. Sam went to the game room. When Bea saw him come in she muted *Ellen DeGeneres*. Hi, Sam. Sit down. You ever been kiteboarding? No. I have seen them at the beach and they look like fun. You mean you never wanted to try it? Not really. Bea, I heard you and Thea tried it. What was it like? Close to flying, Sam, you should try it. You didn't come over to see me, Sam. Maryam's at our neighbor's house. I like talking to you, Bea. Don't be nice to me, Sam, I hate being second choice. Bea, I knew that about you from when you were little. You never wanted to be second at anything. I always liked that about you. Really, Sam! That's the first time you ever said it. You were never around much to say anything to, and you were a little kid. Don't give me the little sister stuff, Sam. You are only three years older than I am. Three and a half. Whatever. I'm as grown up as you are now. I noticed. Sam, you're full of surprises today. Do you know that boy Ricky asked Thea out instead of me? How could he be so stupid, Sam? I agree, how could he be so stupid? What's for dinner? Don't change the subject, Sam. Do you like me? I've always liked you, Bea. You never told me that. I just did. I think I heard the door slam. Sit down, Sam. They'll call us for dinner.

~ ~

It was a short walk from Tina's house back to Allen and Sue's but Maryam felt like running. Then she remembered that her news was not something she wanted to share. When Maryam walked in, Sue thought, floated, into the kitchen, Sue gave Maryam a questioning look. Maryam asked, are we alone? Sam and Bea are downstairs in the basement, and now Sue was really curious. Tina agreed to keep this confidential, but I have to tell someone. All my tests came back negative except I need more iron in my diet, and Maryam started to cry. Still not sure what she was hearing Sue asked, what tests are we talking about? I was very worried that I may have an STD but I don't. Can we keep that between us? Of course, Maryam. I'm so glad that worry has been lifted for you.

Suddenly not wanting to talk about it anymore Maryam asked, can I help here? Sue, knowing that was all she was going to hear said, you can set the table. Sam will be eating with us. As Maryam started to place the plates, she realized how much she had been thinking about Sam. She knew he was attracted to her, in fact everyone could see that, yet he had always been respectful. Never once had he ever tried to kiss her. But what was she feeling? Then Bea and Sam came into the kitchen talking and laughing, and her confusion increased. Was Sam a boy, or was he a man? He was full grown and handsome. Was he going to make a good husband or did he just like pretty girls? As she was having this thought Sam came over and gave her a light hug and a very big smile. Maryam, you look great. I hope you had a good day. It's been great, Sam. Are you going to stay for dinner? Hi, Bea.

Bea came over and put her arm around Maryam's shoulders and Sam nodded yes. Maryam was full of thoughts she couldn't share, but she loved these two people. Sue took charge. All of you take some iced tea and go out on the porch. It's going to be at least 30 minutes till dinner time and Allen isn't home yet. Stop cluttering up my kitchen. They did as they had been told, fully understanding the light-hearted but firm way they had been chased out of Sue's kitchen. It was her kitchen and no one questioned it.

On the porch Bea and Sam continued their conversation about the silliness of daytime TV and Maryam quietly settled in her own thoughts, but they wouldn't leave her out. Bea said, what do you talk about with Tina? You must have been over there most of the afternoon. Maryam couldn't say men, and certainly not STD's, so she said, we were talking about healthy diets. Tina thinks I should eat more green vegetables. You two find boring ways to spend your time. Sam chimed in, can't be worse than daytime TV. They were three friends with ice tea on a summer porch, and Maryam's thoughts changed to, could I be happy with this kind of life? It would be easy to say yes.

They were eating when Tina walked in the back door. I have some news to share and I thought it was worth interrupting your meal. My Iman finally got a call back from his equal in Germany and we now know who the two men were who were looking for Maryam, or at least what they were. It seems, Maryam, that you had made quite an impression at the mosque. These men heard about you and they were looking for modeling talent.

It was Sam who jumped up. You mean they didn't intend any harm! They were looking to put Maryam in a magazine! He thinks a clothing catalogue but that's the same thing, isn't it? Maryam, these men meant you no harm.

For the second time today, Maryam started to cry. Then a clamor of, great news, Tina, and Sue said, come sit with us. No, I need to get back to my own kitchen but I thought Maryam would want to know. Bea had to voice her opinion. That means you can go back with us without being afraid. That's great! And everyone agreed, except Sam, who now stayed quiet.

Maryam walked Tina back to her house. Thank you so much. That's twice today you have lifted a great worry. You will be my friend forever. I'm going to hate to see you leave, Maryam. I am not leaving right away. Perhaps we could have another afternoon together. I would like that. What are you going to do about Sam? They had talked a lot about men, including Sam. I don't know, but I have been thinking about him all afternoon, ever since I knew that I had no lingering disease. He's a good person, Maryam, and he won't stay a boy much longer. You could do a lot worse. I know, but I think he is still a boy looking for pretty girls to show off. Thank you, and she gave Tina a hug.

Back in Sue's kitchen Bea wanted to celebrate. Sue said, we have some ice cream and some of Bea's cookies, and they all agreed and finished their meal in anticipation of celebrating with Maryam. Is it alright if I skip the celebration? What I would really like is some quiet time with Sam. Maybe on the porch, Sam? Allen and Sue shared a knowing look, but Bea said, I'm going to have some ice cream and started to help Sue clear the table. Sam followed Maryam out onto the porch.

I don't want you to leave. Will you marry me? Maryam had thought all afternoon about how she would answer Sam when the time came, which she was certain it would. It would be so easy to say yes, so very easy. So she said, not now, Sam. We need time. Time to really get to know each other. Time for you to finish school. Time for me to stop being afraid of every stranger. We need time, Sam.

I don't need any time, Maryam. I know and she kissed him. He saw his beautiful woman dream disappearing and clung to her like a drowning man. Maryam could not leave him like this so she said, I want us to make a date exactly one year from today and if you still think you want to marry me you can ask me again. Can we agree? One year from today. We will mark our calendars. Ask me again next year.

What will you say? I think as we get to know each other this coming year that the answer will become clearer to us. This was not what Sam wanted, but what could he do? Can we talk on the phone? Yes, and you can visit me when you have a break during the school year. Yes, I already know what an airline ticket cost. I like the way you think ahead, Sam. Then the door banged and Bea came out with two bowls of ice cream with a cookie on top of each.

Time to celebrate! Sam and Maryam looked at each other and began to laugh. Maryam said, sit with us, Bea. There's no space between you two to sit. I'm going back in. Sam didn't say it but he was glad to see Bea go back into the house. This is when Maryam learned about Sam's persistent side. Will you marry me, Maryam? Not now, Sam. Eat your ice cream, it's melting.

What would men be without women? Scarce, Sir, mighty scarce.
Mark Twain

MARYAM AND JOSH

“Life is complicated, Maryam.”

Thea, what did you do to your hair? And that tee shirt is way too tight. Ricky likes blonds so I cut it short and colored it. Besides, now Bea can't pretend she is me and cause me trouble at school. It's my new look, Mom. Ricky's stupid, Mom. He likes Thea instead of me. Ok, Ok, now tell me about your summer visit. How are your grandparents? So the twins had to tell their best stories all over again because they told them all to their father on the way home from the airport. Maryam hadn't said anything so Liesl prompted her.

What did you think of Chicago? Too big but everyone was very nice to me. Now Bea pushed. Tell Mom about Sam. Sam asked me to marry him. That was quick. What did you say? I told him not now, maybe a year from now. We both have things we need to do. He needs to finish school and I need to stop being afraid of every stranger.

Mom, can you believe it? Maryam went to Chicago for nothing. Those strange men wanted her to model clothes. I heard that, Bea, but it looks like her trip was not “for nothing”. Mom, she wiggles her little finger and Sam comes running. Bea, sometimes you are not very nice. It's the truth, Mom. OK, you two go take showers and get a nap. Then you can help me put out some lunch. Maryam, can you sit for a minute? Yes.

I'm impressed with the way you responded to Sam. It would have been easy to say yes, Liesl. I like him and I like his family. But I remember when I was so sure I had to be with my boyfriend right away. I knew I had made a mistake even before my brothers found us, and he ran away. It was like I could see myself in Sam. I do like him, Liesl, and he would be a good husband, but not now. I think you made a good decision. Maryam, you can stay here as long as you want. Finally Maryam's sleepy cat heard her voice and came out from its nap and jumped on her lap.

I want to go back to my apartment, tomorrow would be good. Maryam, did Billy talk to you in the car about working for him? If not, I know he will ask you this evening. He needs office help. If you register as an expat you could work for him. He didn't say anything but I'll think about it. First, I must talk with my family, and I need help. I don't have enough money. Perhaps I could borrow it against future wages. I'm sure Billy would do that. But I have a bigger problem, I'm afraid to go by myself. I need to tell them I'm sorry that I hurt them and that I will not be coming back ever. The most important thing is they must know that if they harm me here, they will be put in jail for life. I must do this, Liesl. I understand. Who will you get to go with you? I don't know.

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You're late today. We needed to finish a job today so I stayed and worked with the crew, we got it done. It feels good. Where is everybody? They all went to bed. Still getting over their

overnight flight. Would you like some dinner? Sure. Anything and a cold beer, thanks. Billy cleaned up then sat down with warmed-up leftovers. Maryam thinks she would like to work for you. Well, nothing is sure for her. She wants to go home to see her family, Billy. That doesn't sound like a good idea. I agree, yet she is set on it. And she wants someone to go with her. When Bea heard that, she wanted to go. That's an even worse idea. You know Bea, she is always willing to do anything to be helpful but she has a special place for Maryam. I think ever since the accident, Maryam has been special to her.

If Maryam insists on going, we can help. If she doesn't want to take money I can let her work it off, Liesl. That's what I told her, Billy. Want another beer? Yes, thanks. What she would need, after listening to her story about her brothers, is a bodyguard. Billy, we could hire one. I suppose but I don't always trust a person whose only motive is getting paid. There's no talking her out of this, Billy. OK, there is a person we could ask. I trust him, in fact, I am going to make him my next crew chief. That's Josh. Do you remember him? You mean the big kid I met when you had the employee picnic? Yes, that's him. He was Airborne Ranger. Thought he would be career Army, then he had one too many deployments. He's a big strong kid and smart.

Do you think sending him off with Maryam for a week is a good idea? I get your point. If he's willing to do this, I'll make it clear that it would be strictly business. You can tell him all you want, Billy, but... So what if they get to like each other, Liesl. That would give him another reason to bring her back in one piece. One piece, Billy? That's just a way of speaking, Liesl. OK, but do you think he will do it? An all-expense paid week with Maryam? He would jump at the chance. I'll bring him over so he can meet her. She has to agree with our choice. I don't think this will be a problem. OK, bring him over tomorrow. He can help Maryam move back to her apartment.

~ ~

Maryam, this is Josh. He has agreed to go with you. Maryam stuck out her hand and it disappeared. She felt rough callouses but no pressure. These are a working man's hands, not soft college boy hands, she thought. She looked up at his smile and felt safe. If I had a man like this I would never be afraid, she thought, but she said, hi, Josh. Thank you for being willing to go with me. It's nice to meet you, Maryam, while thinking anyone who wanted to harm someone like this must be crazy. Billy said you would help me move to my apartment. I'll need a few minutes to get my things together. I hope you don't mind waiting. I have all afternoon. Take your time.

Remember, Josh, she is never to be out of your sight, but separate rooms at night. Can't do both, boss. Yes, you can, Josh. Figure it out. OK, only business. You didn't tell me how pretty she is. I knew you'd figure that out too. Got to go. Get her settled. Then take her to the airport on Monday. Here are the tickets and money. I have to go back to work.

Josh stuck the envelope in his shirt pocket and looked for a place to sit and wait, thinking he was going to do a lot of sitting and waiting for a whole week but that he would like it. Then the door banged open and Bea came in from outside. Hi, I'm Bea, you must be Josh. My dad said you were going with Maryam. Yes, that's who I am. Are you one of the twins your dad talks about? So he talks about us, does he? How did you get so big? I eat a lot. I bet you do. You're American. Where in America? Nebraska. I grew up on a farm.

One of those big farms I have seen in pictures, Josh? I've been to Chicago. That's where my dad's parents live. It's too big.

Where's your sister? Does she look just like you? Yes, out with her boyfriend. They went to a soccer game all dressed up, in team colors. Do you have a boyfriend, Bea? I did in Chicago but Thea, that's my sister's name, stole him. Ouch! Yeh, want something to eat? I've never been to Nebraska. What's it like? It's big, but not big like Chicago. You can see forever. I'd like to see that. Would you take me there sometime, Josh? My, you are a bold one, Bea. That's what people say. I like you, Josh. Come have some cookies. I made them myself. Josh went with Bea, thinking that his boss must never be bored with two like her around.

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Sam had slipped from Maryam's mind until her phone rang and she saw the familiar number. So she answered, hi, Sam. Hi, Maryam. Are you really going back to visit your parents? That seems so dangerous. I was hoping you would see that and change your mind. It's something I must do, Sam, or I'll never feel free of their anger. But it will be OK, I have a man who works for Billy who has agreed to go with me, I feel safe with him. On one side Sam was glad she felt safe with this man but the way Maryam said it left a question.

You know this person? What's he like? Sam, I only met him today. He helped me move back into my apartment. He is a very nice man and really big, Sam. No one will bother me while he is with me. You are alone in your apartment? Is that safe? Maryam heard a strange little edge in Sam's voice. Yes, I am alone, and it's perfectly safe for me to be here. We will fly to my home on Monday. Josh already has the tickets. I am allowing a week to travel there and back so there will be times when my phone will not work. A whole week? Maryam, that seems like a long time. You said this Josh person works for Billy, what does he do? I guess he does electrical work, that's Billy's business. Josh is American and had been in the Army. When he got out, he stayed to work for Billy here.

How old do you think he is? This was one too many questions, but Maryam answered in a neutral voice. He's about my age, then she realized that was probably not what Sam wanted to hear. Do you trust him? Billy trusts him and so do I, it will be OK, Sam. When I get back, I will start working in Billy's office, I can do that kind of work. Then still trying to change the subject, are you all ready to go back to school? Sam answered, I have a few more days to get myself ready. It will be my last year and I know what to expect. I love you, Maryam. I know, Sam. I'm sorry I worry you but it will be OK. I am safe here and I will be safe on my trip home and back. Say hello to your parents. I miss talking with Megan and I love Nick. Please tell them I said, hello. When the call ended Maryam felt a strain that hadn't been there before. She expected Sam to be concerned about her, she knew how he felt about her, but there was what, jealousy? If she was right about that, it was not a good sign. She could never live with a jealous man.

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It was going to be a long plane ride. Maryam looked at Josh sitting beside her and he had gone to sleep. What am I going to do for these hours with this mountain of a man sleeping beside me, she thought? She knew she attracted men, all kinds of men. She had seen it in Josh's eyes

when they met. But were her good looks a blessing or a curse? She began to think of the men she had known.

Her first boyfriend was handsome, even beautiful. The fact that he liked her, little Maryam, was intoxicating. He also offered her a way out of a future that included an arranged marriage. She saw her mother's life and she hated it. This beautiful man also collected other women. She didn't know that at first, and the knowledge had been crushing. It was then that she began to look for another way out of the tribal village life that she hated. Her beautiful boyfriend took her to live in the city and that was how she found a way out. He was a beautiful, miserable man, but without him she would still be a slave to who knows what kind of men. So her memory of him was mixed, but did it matter? Surely, she would never see him again. He was gone from her life.

Then there were the rich, lonely men. At first she had thought how strange it was that they wanted to talk. It had never been just about sex, they wanted to tell her about their jobs, their money, and her biggest surprise, they often wanted to talk about their wives. There were times, she remembered, that in the quiet after one of these men went on his way that she felt as a priest confessor must feel, with a head full of someone else's life and no one to share that knowledge with. But they had been generous, lavishly generous, with their money. Lonely rich men. That thought didn't make sense but she knew it was true, and then they were gone. She couldn't be angry with them, but she felt used. Not abused but used, and then they were gone.

She saw a pattern that gave her a chill and she found the airline blanket and covered herself. She had been used by men and then they were gone. This thought frightened her more than the thought of her violent brothers who were only driven to harm her by some tribal demand for purity. Women's purity or theirs? Theirs, it had to be theirs, it was all about them. Too much, way too much thinking, and she looked for a magazine to read. Then she felt Josh stir and realized he was looking at her. You, OK? It was like he had read her mind. No, she was not OK, but she said, just tired I think, and then to herself, yes, I am tired, tired of men.

As Josh drifted back to sleep, she thought. This is a simple man sitting beside me. He would never be full of questions. He lives in the present. Could I be happy with a man like that, she thought, and what about Sam? In Josh's sleep he sagged toward her. It was a warm feeling and she knew he would not use her and then be gone, at least for a week, but then what would he do? She felt warm again and it wasn't the blanket. Maybe that was enough for now and she tried to sleep.

~ ~

Army training took over and Josh insisted on the oldest car in the rental car lot and on a cheap place to stay the night. He unpacked some old work clothes and took the car into an alley and threw dirt on it. He couldn't do anything about his size but he could slouch behind the wheel. He didn't know how many "enemies" there would be but there was only one of him. Surprise was the key to success if there was any kind of confrontation. A nice clean car and nice clothes would stand out and that's the last thing we wanted.

Josh shadowed Maryam through the market as she bought bread and cheese and fruit. He picked up six Cokes and they spent a quiet evening eating in his room, which was next to hers.

When night came he showed her how to push a chair under the door knob. No way to know, he thought, how many people had a key and it was a flimsy door anyway. You knock on the wall if you need me. Don't open the door for anyone.

Thanks, Josh, and she closed the door and propped the chair then she lay down on the bed next to the common wall knowing that Josh was right on the other side. She wondered, if I tap on the wall and open the door what would he do? Would he come to me and treat me like a little girl that needed to be tucked in? She fell asleep thinking that was exactly what he would do.

Josh's feet hung over the end of his bed but the only thing that bothered him was that he may not be alone. Well, he thought, if a few bug bites are the only bad thing that happens tonight I can deal with that. He went to sleep counting on being as invisible as possible tomorrow.

Where to Maryam? How far is this village? My village is a long way, it may take half a day to drive there. But I do not want to go to my village today, I want to go to the house of some friends, it's on the other side of the city. I will tell you how to go there. Josh drove the hour or so to a nice part of the city and he didn't like it.

You need to tell me what's going on, Maryam. I can't do my job if you don't tell me everything. It's OK, Josh. I need to talk to some friends. There is no danger there for you to be worried about. Don't keep secrets from me, Maryam. It's something I have to do. Don't worry, and she had heard Josh's words "can't do my job" and was pleased that he was serious about keeping her safe but not sure she liked being "his job".

Josh let Maryam out at the nice house that she pointed to and found a shady spot for him and the car, no AC in this old rental, and popped a Coke and waited. He could see the front of the house and the street, but he didn't like not knowing what Maryam was doing in this place.

Maryam was in the house too long, Josh thought, and he was about to go to the door to make sure she was OK when she came out and walked to the street. It was a chance for him to watch the way she moved and he liked what he saw. There was no mistake, Maryam was both beautiful and confident. Then he started the car and moved it to pick her up.

What's next, Maryam? That's all for today. Tomorrow we will go to my village. Did I see a McDonald's sign on the way over here? Probably. Help me find it on our way back, I need more that bread and cheese. We will find it, and they did, and Josh got his bag of burgers.

It was another quiet night and in the morning Maryam directed Josh out of the city. It did take most of the morning to get to a track that led off the main road. Take this road, Josh. It didn't look like a road and there were no signs. There were never any signs, but Josh turned off and they bounced up the track that was the road to Maryam's village. Josh had been looking at the countryside with a farmer's eyes. These fields were not Nebraska corn but here and there was a melon patch that he recognized. Then he saw a cluster of houses and Maryam said, this is my village. Stop in front of that house and stay in the car. Say what you came to say, but don't go inside. Got that, Maryam? don't go inside. OK, Josh, and she walked up the path to the door and knocked.

Josh could see an old man at the door but couldn't understand what was being said, but Maryam didn't go in. He scanned the street. It was mid-day empty except there were two men slowly walking down the street in his direction. He watched them. No weapons, no boots, flip-flops, small, each about half his size and he slouched down. Then they stopped. Josh saw their focus shift and they were looking directly at Maryam, who remained standing outside the door of her house. Then he saw them resume walking but now with a purpose. They hadn't even looked in his direction. Good, Josh thought, but who were they? Two men suddenly focused on Maryam. That's all Josh needed to know.

As they passed his car Josh got out and stepped behind them. They suddenly noticed him but it was too late. He grabbed one in each hand and banged them together like a cymbal player, and with a thud he dropped them on the street and started up the path toward Maryam. He called out, time to go, Maryam. Maryam's back was turned, but the old man had seen what had happened on the street and reached out to grab her, but she stepped back and his grab missed. Time to go, Maryam. Not yet, Josh.

Josh had seen enough. He picked up Maryam and headed back to the car. He could see the two men up on their knees and he saw people coming out of other houses, and Maryam began screaming the name, DEEBA! He tossed Maryam in the car and moved around behind the wheel and started the engine, with Maryam yelling, NO Josh! Then Josh saw a flash of movement and he was about to put the car in gear when he realized that what he saw was a young girl running down the path from the house and she jumped into the back seat. Now, Josh GO!

The two men were on their feet and Josh didn't need any more encouragement. He headed down the track to the road without saying anything but he could see Maryam reaching around and holding the girl's hand. As he turned onto the main road he was watching the rear-view mirror and no one was following. OK, Maryam, who's this in the back? She's my sister. Josh didn't say anything for a few minutes, then he said, this was all about your sister, wasn't it? Yes. You have to level with me, Maryam. I know, Josh, and I will. Take us back to the house where we were yesterday. OK, do we have time to stop at McDonald's?

~ ~

Maryam stayed in the house with her sister long enough for Josh to finish his new bag of burgers and a couple of Cokes. She got in the car and took a deep breath. We are not going back to that flea bag hotel tonight. Whatever you say, Josh. We are going to take this old car back and go to a nice hotel where we can shower and I can shave. Then we will have a good meal and a glass of beer. I don't drink beer. OK, some wine then. I don't drink wine, Josh. OK, we have a quiet evening and rest tomorrow. Then we get our flight back. You OK with that? Yes.

She knew Josh had questions. I know you have questions, Josh. Maryam, I know you will tell me whatever you can share whenever you want to. Billy asked me to bring you back in one piece and I don't need to know more than what I already know. Your sister was a surprise but you seem to be happy with the way things worked out, whatever that is. That's enough for me. You look tired, Maryam. I guess I am, but I do want to tell you about my sister, tonight over that nice meal you want, is that OK? Sure. One piece, Josh? Just a way of speaking, Maryam.

All went as Josh planned and he was sitting in the hotel dining room with a glass of beer when he sensed stir around him. Immediately he was alert, then he saw Maryam coming between the tables being led by a waiter and he stood up to greet her knowing that everyone in the dining room was watching. The head scarf that Maryam had been wearing was gone and she had on a very small black dress, simple but elegant. Josh never liked being the center of attention but he was tonight, with everyone thinking “lucky man”. Then for the first time he thought, I could get used to this. Maryam smiled at the waiter and said, lemon water, please, and Josh thought the waiter moved even faster than usual. Maryam, you are beautiful.

Nice of you to notice, Josh. You clean up pretty good yourself. Now I need to tell you about my sister. The people in that house are part of a network that helps women. That’s how I got to Germany. I have been sending them money that they could use to get my sister into the EU, and they will do that, but it may take a while. Then she will join me. Life can be complicated. It doesn’t seem that way for you, Josh. I don’t worry myself about things that I can’t do anything about. That’s why I like you, Josh.

She likes me? That was a new piece of information for Josh and it felt good. The waiter was hovering. I want the T-bone, rare. And you, madam? The salmon, please. Maryam wanted to tell more but how much more? She hesitated. She saw Josh waved for another beer and thought, I need to explain some things, but why? Josh no longer seemed to need explanations. So she said, my brothers thought I dishonored our family and they had to save the family honor. Josh sipped his second beer. I was like a frightened child thinking there was a monster under the bed, I was seeing my brothers in every shadow.

Josh reached over and covered her hand with his, and Maryam began to cry. I can’t let this go any further without telling him where all the money for my sister came from. All the money for my sister came from generous men, Josh. Josh didn’t take his hand away. Life’s complicated, Maryam. Here comes our dinner.

~ ~

Josh’s life has a rhythm, hard work, break time, work hard, take a break, then more work hard. This was his break day. His life rhythm had little to do with God resting on the seventh day but he thought that God had it right. It was just the way his body and mind worked best. No break day, and the muscles and the brain get tired and mistakes happen. He grew up aware of family and friends on farms who were missing fingers or limbs. The consequences of not being sharply focused had been reinforced by his time in a war zone. So Josh worked hard but he knew how to relax. Today he would relax. Job well done, finished, relax.

So he was surprised that his mind kept going back to “his job”. Was it Maryam in her little black dress? It certainly wasn’t the brothers. They had been easy. Not the sister, although he didn’t like surprises. What was it? His job, with a little planning, had been easy enough, why was it lingering in his mind? He was angry that’s why. This was highly unusual for him and he didn’t like it. Maryam was at the center of his very, un-Josh-like, angry feeling. They had agreed to meet for lunch and he was going to tell her how angry he was and how unnatural it made he feel.

Maryam had slept the sleep of the mentally exhausted. She woke up feeling refreshed. She had rescued her sister and found, she was sure, a new friend. She even resisted trying to make her phone work. There was time enough to let people know that she had accomplished what she had come to do and that she was safely on her way home. Today she would relax with her new friend.

So when Josh and Maryam met for lunch they were mentally and emotionally in very different places. Maryam bounced into the hotel dining room to find Josh sitting stone-faced with a half empty beer glass. She sat down and the waiter remembered her and brought lemon water. We did it, Josh. It feels good. A big load has been lifted. Josh's expression didn't change. A morose Josh? Did someone die? No one has died, Maryam, but I would like to kill a few people. You want to talk about it? You are my new best friend. Best friends listen. I know your story, Maryam. How many women could tell the same kind of story? Millions, Josh, and you can't change that. I can be angry. Doesn't help, Josh. Let's leave this place and go get a bag of burgers. I think I'm in love with you, Maryam. So you can talk. That's nice to know. Let's go.

~ ~

Josh could talk. Who knew? He told Maryam how his mother would sing as she hung the family clothes on the line to dry. How there was always a breeze in Nebraska. How his father had tied wooden blocks on the pedals so he could drive the tractor because when he was little his feet couldn't reach them. Maryam had a hard time thinking that he had ever been that small.

He talked about how he liked Billy, his boss, because he would give him a job and let him do it his way, and that he wanted to be crew chief and have his own truck and crew. But feeling angry followed him like a little cloud. So finally, Maryam said, if you want to help women in trouble, I'll tell you how to send money to the people who can help them directly. He liked that.

The afternoon took them down tree-lined streets and through a row of stalls where they bought small musical instruments, one for each twin. As the sun got low they found their way back to their hotel. Billy told me separate rooms and I agreed, but I didn't know it would be this hard. I think you should keep your promise, Josh. OK, but I don't like it. Bea told me a man named Sam had asked you to marry him. Is that true? Oh, she did, did she? I don't think she thought it was a secret. She was very matter of fact about it.

Yes, Sam is a nice young man and he did ask me to marry him. What did you tell him? I told him not now and that he should ask me again in a year. That's a long time, Maryam. Do you think he will wait a whole year to ask you again? No, I don't think so, Josh. And what will you say? Don't push, Josh.

Josh went quiet. He had used up his full year's-worth of talking in one afternoon. Maryam tried to bring him back to the present where she knew he was most comfortable. Where would you like to have dinner? No answer. Would you like to go to our rooms and freshen up and then decide? No answer. So she kissed him, in the hotel lobby, in front of an admiring group of people. Then she asked him again. Where would you like to have dinner, Josh? Grand Island, Nebraska.

Would you take me there? I would like to try driving a tractor. When he kissed her, her feet no longer touched the floor and as she was lifted up she felt the freedom she had always wanted. When she could speak she said, I think I'll have the salmon again, it was very good last night. Josh set her down, took her hand and headed toward the dining room. There would be no separate rooms tonight.

The closer one approaches to God, the simpler one becomes.

St. Teresa of Avila



MARYAM AND MARY

“Maryam looked at the piece of bone in her hand and sat back against one of the decorated timber posts.”

It’s not fair, Mom. What’s not fair, Bea? Come have some breakfast. Another boyfriend has been stolen away and from right under my nose. Mom, did you know that Josh has asked Maryam to go with him to meet his mother? His mother, Mom. I didn’t know Josh was your boyfriend. Well, he could have been, he likes me. I don’t want any breakfast.

I think you are just being silly. School will be starting in a few weeks. Do you need any new clothes? Mom, have you seen the way Thea dresses? I wouldn’t be caught dead in clothes like that, tight tees and short skirts, yuck. Maybe it is time for you to choose your own style instead of trying to look just like Thea. You mean old ladies’ clothes?

Bea, go find something to do. Take the car and go shop for a new outfit for school. I don’t like that car. It’s too small, and who likes grey? nobody likes grey. Then take a walk. There is a little shop close enough to walk to. Maybe you will see someone you know and can have a coffee with. Bea didn’t answer, but she left the house.

Billy came down for breakfast. What was Bea huffing and puffing about? You know Bea. She is either euphoric or dying. This was one of her miserable days. It started, I think, when Maryam told her Josh had asked her to go with him to meet his mother, seems she had eyes for Josh. We were happy to have twin girls, weren’t we? Yes, and this stage will pass. Toast and eggs? Scrambled today. Do we have any rye bread? Scrambled with rye toast coming up.

Liesl handed Billy a cup of coffee and set about fixing their breakfast. Billy had not been surprised that Josh and Maryam had come back, in their words, “best friends”. He thought they were well suited to each other. He wasn’t trying to play match maker. Josh was the right man to go with Maryam because he knew Josh could handle most any situation and he wasn’t surprised that they came back friends. Now Josh wants another week off to take her “to meet his mother”, he said. The big work load would happen with a couple of new contracts that would start in the fall so Josh would get his week off as “partial payment for a job well done”.

Liesl sat down with Billy bringing their eggs and toast. What he asked for sounded good so she had made the same thing for herself. What do you think of the Josh and Maryam connection? Liesl, I think it can work. Josh never seems to worry about anything and Maryam needs some stability. I agree. I wonder what his mother will think? I bet she has never met a Muslim woman before. I guess we will know soon enough. Josh doesn’t need his mother’s permission, we didn’t. We hoped for it and we got it. Yes, and I love your parents. Eat your eggs, they’re getting cold.

~ ~

Maryam, this is my mother, Mary. Mom, – I know her name, Josh. You look a little soft Josh. You must be eating pretty good. Then looking at Maryam she said, this was a surprise visit. It must be all about you. Josh, your brother's in the barn. Maryam and I want to talk. Josh gave his mother a hug and headed for the barn to see his brother. Mary motioned Maryam into her huge kitchen.

Would you like some coffee? You must be tired. I don't like flying, wears me out. You don't look like a farm girl, but Josh must like you. Are you going to marry him?

No coffee, thank you, and he hasn't asked me but I'll say yes if he does. Maryam saw a huge woman in a huge kitchen and felt small. Everything is so big here.

We are big people. Farming is hard work. I don't think you could do it. Would you and Josh want to live here?

We haven't talked about it. Josh doesn't say much.

He's always been that way. Can't get a word out of him. Would you like something to eat? dinner's a way off.

If you have some juice, that would be nice.

Mary got out a jug of what looked like orange juice, poured a big glass full and handed it to Maryam. It was enough juice to last her a week. So, you don't drink coffee? Sit down with me. You are the first woman my Josh has brought home. Then Mary softened a little.

We must seem very strange to you. Josh told me he helped you rescue your sister but that's all I could get out of him. It didn't make any sense. Was your sister in some kind of trouble? Our father was going to force her to marry an old man. It had been the same for me. I got away, then went back and helped her.

Do you know how strange that sounds, escaping from your own family? It's tribal custom. Women do not have any rights. They are told what to do and who to marry. It's been that way forever. When I ran away, they tried to kill me. Mary warmed her coffee then sat back down. You must be a courageous woman. I don't feel courageous, but I love the freedom I feel when I am with your Josh.

Are you a religious person? I have never met a Muslim woman up close before. Mary, I like who I am, and being a Muslim is part of who I am. Do you always wear a head scarf? I like the color. It's the Virgin Mary's color. Maryam responded, I don't always wear it, and Mary the Mother of Jesus is the most important woman in the Muslim tradition. I didn't know that. We have a lot to talk about, I'm not like Josh, I love to talk.

~ ~

The afternoon went by without being noticed, and then Josh and his just as big but younger brother came into the house. Josh introduced Maryam and she gave the tree trunk of a brother

a hug. Josh, did you know that the Virgin Mary is the only woman mentioned in the Quran? A whole chapter is named after her. No, Mom. We never talked about it. Then you don't know that the baby Jesus spoke up to defend his mother who was being harassed by men who didn't believe a virgin could have a baby. Why don't we tell that story? Josh took it as a rhetorical question and didn't answer but he could tell that the afternoon had gone well.

Get cleaned up, all of you, dinner will be ready soon. Show Maryam her room and bath then get right back here. Mary had always kept her sons on a short leash but they didn't feel it. They knew she had struggled after their father died and Josh knew she wanted him to come home. He had often thought that someday he would but the time never seemed right. It didn't take long for everyone to get back to the kitchen and around the table. Maryam had never seen so much food in one place, then two other men came in and sat on the bench at the end of the table. These men are our seasonal help. They eat with us. Pass the food, Josh, don't just sit there.

Josh had been day-dreaming about the kiss Maryam had given him a few minutes ago and wondering what it would be like for them to live here together. Mary's voice broke the spell and he passed the potatoes. After the meal it was all hands in the kitchen to clean up. Maryam had a chance to ask one of the different looking men where he came from. We come from Mexico to work and send money home. There is no work where we live. Do you have wives? Yes, and children. We miss them but here there is work for us. Then he and the other man went outside and she could see them smoking.

Mary had seen the exchange. We couldn't make the farm work without them. They spend a few months with us every year. We send them money for travel. It's the same men each year? Yes, it's a father and his son. They are good workers. Did you get enough to eat? I didn't see much food on your plate. It was very good, Mary. I like your cooking. Do you know how to cook? Not like this. But I would like to learn.

Josh was talking to his brother, who was telling him about how wet it had been this year. Mary called across the room. When are you going to ask this woman to marry you, Josh? Josh didn't say anything, but he knew that the answer was today.

~ ~

Josh motioned Maryam to follow him and he took her into the equipment shed. He pointed her toward the smallest tractor and she climbed up onto the seat. She could hold the steering wheel but there was no way she could reach the pedals. We use this old tractor to pull wagons and do odd jobs. Would you like to learn how to drive it? I can't reach the foot pedals, Josh. I can fix that, but first I want to ask you a question. Do you think you could live on a farm? What are you asking me, Josh? I'm asking you to marry me. Yes, I will, but the farm must wait.

Josh plucked her off of the tractor and held her. She didn't think he was ever going to let her go and she loved the thought. Finally, he set her down and they walked together back to the house. I asked her, Mom, and she said yes. This time it was Mary, who gave her a long hug. Then she had to know. Will you live here on the farm? There is plenty of room and lots of work. I could use the help. I'm not getting younger, you know. Josh looked at Maryam.

Mary, there are things I need to do back in Germany. My sister will be coming and I need to help her get a start in life there. I don't want her alone and desperate like I was. Josh knows that it was generous men, who provided me with the money for me to live, and to send money to get my sister out.

Mary looked at Josh and he nodded, then she turned to Maryam. It is beyond my imagining that your family would want you dead or that you would need to turn to generous men, as you said, to live.

You have been isolated from those things here, Mary, but it is the fate of many, many women that they have no control of their lives. They do what they have to, to survive. As far as living here, I want to marry your Josh, but it may be a year or two, I don't know how long, until we can talk about living here on the farm.

I want to see your children around my table. Speak up, Josh. She said yes, Mom. That was all I needed to hear. If she says she has to go back, then we go back. Maryam was now assuming her role as spokesperson. We need to go back to Germany now, but I would like to have our wedding here. Perhaps, at the end of the year. Would that be OK?

It wasn't what Mary hoped but she said, it would be wonderful. You could be here for the holidays and we would invite everyone. There are a couple of friends we would like to bring with us, actually, they are twin girls. She would always say "we". How old are they? Do you think one of them would be interested in Josh's brother? I think they are eighteen, and you can never tell about one of them. She saved my life. Oh, I must hear that story. You are certainly an interesting woman. Josh smiled.

Maryam knew that it had been a difficult day for Josh's mother. She knew Mary wanted a wife for Josh but that she never expected a wife for Josh like herself. But they had talked a lot. Josh's father and his death kept coming up. This surprised Maryam but his death fit with Mary's questions about what Muslims believed. So when Josh took her hand and led her to his room she said, Josh, your mother is a very religious person and I think I gained her confidence. I don't want to do anything that will spoil that.

You think Mom is religious? I never thought so. Maybe your father's death has caused her to think about life and death in new ways. We will have a lifetime together, but not tonight. I don't want to take the chance of making a bad first impression. Would you like to move in with me when we get back to Germany? Yes. I would like that. If your apartment isn't big enough, we could get a bigger one. My place is a dump, you wouldn't want to live there. I like the idea of finding a new place with you. Let's do that, but you can stay with me while we look. In the morning I need to change my travel plans. I will need to stay over at least one day in Chicago. Is this about Sam? Yes, and it won't be easy. I'll stay with you. I would like that but I need to see Sam by myself.

~ ~

The next day Maryam made three phone calls, first to Sam saying she was stopping in Chicago, and that they needed to talk. He was full of questions but she said, when I get there, Sam. Then she called Sue Baxter and asked if she and Josh could stay there, and she was assured

that they had a place to stay. Finally the airline, to change their flights. Josh was impressed, so he said so.

I'm impressed! I can organize, Josh, wait until you see my apartment. Maryam was an organized person. This was new information for Josh and he could smell problems. He would need to improve his game. No more piles of clothes on the nearest chair, went through his mind.

When they got to Chicago and to the Baxters', Sue met them at her door. Maryam introduced Josh. So you are the one who went with Maryam as a bodyguard. You look like a good choice. No need for a bodyguard here but come in. I sense there is a story to tell or you wouldn't be here. Thanks for putting us up for a night, Sue. We were visiting Josh's mother and now we are on our way back to Germany.

You went to visit his mother? This must be serious. It is. We are going to be married at the end of the year. Josh, do you ever talk? I can talk OK, Mrs. Baxter, but Maryam does it better. It's Sue, Josh. I like you already, and you needed to stop in Chicago because?

Josh was on a roll. She wants to talk to her friend, Sam, and she needed to see him in person. Sue looked at Maryam. Sue, Sam asked me to marry him and I told him not now, but now I need to tell him no, and I don't want him to think it's because of something he did or said. He's going to be disappointed, Maryam. He has told everyone that you two have a date next year. It was my mistake to suggest that we talk in a year. Now I have to fix it. I want to see him this evening. I'm thinking a neutral place, not at his home. Invite him over. You can sit on my porch. The weather is nice.

Sue loved her porch with its swing and flowers. It was made for welcoming but now it would be a place for a parting. Sue couldn't linger on that thought so she said, where is this wedding going to happen? In Nebraska at Josh's mother's farm. Oh, that sounds like a great idea. Would you like to come? Yes, and I think Allen would like that. We will be sending invitations, won't we, Josh, and I will include Tina, your neighbor. We became good friends. Now I need to call Sam and ask him to come over this evening. Would 8 o'clock be OK?

After dinner Allen took Josh to his favorite place, his game room in the basement, and they talked Army. Sue found a book to read and Maryam watched for Sam. When she saw him drive up, she went out on the porch and sat on the two-person swing. I didn't think I would see you again this soon. Why are you in Chicago? You look nice as always, Sam. I had to tell you that I can't marry you... and I didn't want to do that on the phone.

We had a date next year, you said, and you came all the way here just to tell me that? Sam, telling you that we would talk in a year was my mistake, and I am really sorry about that. I should never have suggested it. Now I know I can't marry you and I needed to tell you now and not wait. Sam sat down on the swing, then stood back up. It would help if I knew why.

I'm in love with a man named Josh, whose mother has a farm in Nebraska. He took me to visit her and now we are on our way back to Germany. We will be married at the end of the year.

How could all this happen so fast? Shouldn't we have talked about it? I feel completely left out and I thought we had an agreement. We did have an agreement and now I have to break it, and I am really sorry. I didn't plan it this way. It just happened. Sam hesitated for a moment, then walked back to his car. Maryam got up and went and knocked on Tina's door.

It took only a few minutes for Maryam to tell Tina her story about Josh, and now Sam. You must call Sam's mother. Now would be best. I will do it now, and she scrolled her contact list and tapped Megan's number. Megan, this is Maryam. Maryam, where are you? Sam said you were coming to Chicago. Is everything OK?

I'm fine. I'm staying at Sue Baxter's house. I had to tell Sam that I could not marry him. Oh, that is not a surprise to me or his father. We saw so many differences, but he will be very disappointed. Have you already told him? Yes, and he left a few minutes ago and I wanted you to know. Thank you, Maryam. That was very thoughtful. Sam and I can talk about important things. Now I will be ready when he comes in. Will you have time to visit us while you are here?

No, I don't think so. Nick will be disappointed. I'm sorry. Josh, that's the man I am going to marry is here with me. We were visiting his mother. We will be having our wedding at her home in Nebraska at the end of the year. We will send you an invitation. Maryam, I'm not sure that will work for the best. But please invite us. Thanks, Megan, for everything, and she put down the phone. You were right, Tina. That was the right thing to do.

~ ~

On the plane they had talked about going directly to Maryam's apartment or stopping to see Billy. Josh wanted to talk to his boss because he knew there were new contracts and Billy was counting on him for one of them. Josh got his way. Billy invited them in. How's Nebraska? It's good to see you back.

My mother and brother look great. It was good to see them and to spend a couple of days on the farm. But Maryam wanted to be here for her sister, and I knew there was a lot of work for me so we came back. It sounds like coming back was not a sure thing. Maryam answered Billy's question. I like Josh's mother, Mary, and the farm too, but my sister is coming and I need to be here for her. Maybe the Nebraska farm is in our future, but not now. We are going to be married there at the end of December. We would like the twins to come to the wedding.

Bea walked in and heard wedding in December. Oh, I want to go. Dad, let's all go. Bea gave Maryam a big hug. We hope you will all come. Tomorrow Josh and I are going to look for an apartment. Bea, would you like to help us look? Yes, that sounds like fun.

Billy had drawn Josh off to the side and handed him a roll of drawings for the new contract that he wanted Josh to work on. Josh stuck them under his arm. Then he heard Maryam say, can you keep my cat for a few days while we find a new place? She knew the answer would be yes but she wanted to get the conversation back on apartments. Liesl came in.

So you two are going to get married. I have a chicken in the slow cooker. Stay for a while and tell me about your trip. I want to spend a whole evening telling you about our trip but not today, please. We are very tired, aren't we, Josh? Josh didn't feel very tired but he was not

stupid either. He was quickly learning how Maryam used the term “we”. Yes, it’s been a long day. I’ll never get use to these overnight flights.

They said their good-byes, and it was a short quiet trip to Maryam’s old apartment. Josh opened the windows and looked into the refrigerator. Not much there. He looked in the cupboards. Not much there either, and he was fondly remembering Liesl’s offer of slow cooked chicken. Maryam went into the bathroom and Josh rolled out the drawings Billy gave him to see what kind of work he was going to be dealing with as a new crew chief.

Maryam came out of the bathroom dressed only in a short robe. She rolled up the drawings and said, you can read those drawings tomorrow. Josh sat her on his lap and said, yes, I can. I see only a single size bed. We won’t need a bigger bed today, will we? No, I guess we won’t. I love you. I know. Later we will go out for a nice dinner. Josh knew he was marrying the right woman.

~ ~

With Bea’s help they found a new apartment, and settled into a routine. Life was almost domestic, that was, until one evening Maryam got a call, went to the train station and brought her sister, Deeba, to the new apartment. Deeba was a near copy of Maryam. A little taller, and slender in the extreme. They were sisters, anyone could see that, but that’s where the similarity stopped. They were definitely not the same people. It was like Maryam had received all of the fire and enthusiasm for life.

At first Maryam was content to let Deeba adapt on her own schedule. She hoped new clothes, good food and room of her own would eventually bring Deeba out of her gloomy shell. There were hints of improvement when Josh was around. Josh sensed that his natural friendliness could be misinterpreted so he tried to put on a neutral face but he wasn’t very good at it. It was obvious that Deeba wanted his attention and he didn’t know what to do about it.

About a month passed and Josh was feeling an increasing tension. So one evening Josh asked Maryam, can we go for a walk? Sure. After a few minutes Josh said, this isn’t working. I know. We should get her an apartment of her own. Not yet, Josh. She isn’t ready to manage on her own. It’s not working, Maryam. Can we give it another month? OK, but what do I do when she wants to sit in my lap? She needs to get out of the apartment, get with other people. I agree. I’m going to call Bea and see if the twins can include her in some fun things. Maybe take her to a movie. What if we get her some language classes? Maybe that would help. She is still not speaking much German. I like German classes. She will need English too.

I’m glad you suggested a walk, because I wanted to tell you that I may be pregnant. Are you sure? That would be great. When will you know for sure? My periods are not regular but if I don’t get my period in another week, I’ll get a test. We should know in a week.

So it was agreed. They would ask the twins to include Deeba, and they would find a way to help her with a new language. But they agreed only for another month. Then if there was no improvement Deeba would need a place of her own. Josh felt his domestic tension dissolve. He was going to be a father.

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The twins adopted Deeba. Even though Deeba was two years older than the twins, they found common interests. At first, staying over at the twins' house was just for one night then it became a regular thing and Josh and Maryam's domestic life improved.

Even though it was way off, Maryam began to talk with Josh's mother about the Nebraska wedding. Mary wanted to do it all and Maryam was pleased to let her. There was not much she could do at a distance anyway. Josh was just pleased that these two important women in his life were getting along so well. Maryam's test was positive. Life was good.

Then it was suddenly time to make travel plans and pick what clothes to take. Deeba had begun to show some interest in life. Being included in the wedding talk had helped and Josh noticed. She is beginning to perk up and the gaunt look is gone. She has your good looks, Maryam, especially now that she has been eating better. I think she has put on some weight.

Getting the twins involved in her life was the best thing we did, Josh. After the wedding, we will help her find work and a place of her own. She's going to be OK. I think she is learning a little English. It's Bea. We should start using English with her too. Knowing some English will make her more comfortable at your mother's house.

Maryam, do you think I look best in this dress or the slacks and top? Deeba was coming alive. I think the slacks and top for the flight, and pack the dress. It will be cold there. Josh says there may be snow so you will need warm clothes too.

Maryam was surprised and pleased when Mary told her that she had received a positive response to the invitation from Megan and Nick, and that Sam was a possible and that he wanted to bring a friend. She told Josh. Sam wants to bring a friend to the wedding? So, he has moved on. It makes me feel good to know that, Josh. You are getting a pretty big bump. I know. I am going to need new clothes. I like the way you look. Thanks, Josh. I feel fat. Forget that, Maryam. You look great. And she did.

The twins conspired to be on the same flight then convinced their parents that it was a good idea for them too. So they all arrived at the farm at the same time in a big rental van. Mary said it looked like an invasion. Josh's brother, Jack, thought he had never seen so many pretty women in one place before. He went to Josh and said, come see the new tractor. Bea heard the exchange and fell in step with the two huge men, thinking, I'm going to like this wedding.

Mary was not a wedding planner, and she had never been to a wedding at Christmastime. But she accepted the task of planner joyfully. When she was told that Maryam was pregnant, she almost danced around her kitchen. Her approach was to plan small pieces, and put it all together.

She rejected the idea of asking her pastor, who would preside at the wedding, to dress as Santa Claus. Tacky, she thought. But the idea that the wedding and Christmas would be one celebration stuck in her mind. Why not on the same day? Christmas in the morning, wedding in the afternoon? Too busy, busy. The day needed to be all one piece. Mary settled on that scheme and Maryam agreed. A Muslim celebrating the birth of Jesus? Muslims don't do

religious celebrations in the same way as Christians, but Jesus was a special prophet, so why not celebrate his birth?

The gift-giving was easy to meld together. The invitation would look little like a Christmas card, but not say Christmas party. The decorations would be easy to mix and match. Mary was pleased with the way her Christmas wedding was coming together. The more she thought about it, the better she liked it. When the crowd from Germany arrived, she was relaxed and prepared. It was two days until Christmas and she put them to work decorating the inside of the barn. She explained what she wanted and put Josh in charge. Then she turned her attention to the reception dinner.

Bea was helping Josh with the decorations. Thea was staying close to Deeba to make sure she felt welcomed and included. Maryam was right beside Mary learning and helping. Jack was there too, doing the heavy lifting. Billy was stringing the lights and Liesl had to see what a working Nebraska farm was like so she was looking in all the sheds. That's when she discovered the two horses. She found Jack and asked, what do you do with the two horses? We don't work horses anymore. They are just for pleasure riding. They are like old friends. We have had them for years.

Bea, always alert, heard "horses". You have horses to ride? Would you teach me how to ride a horse? Sure, Bea. Wait until I get these benches lined up then we will take a little ride. Liesl smiled and walked back to the house. She was always amazed at how her Bea could find new fun things to do.

Jack put Bea on the oldest and calmest horse and they started down the path away from the barn. They came to a little rise in the ground that allowed them to see a line of trees far into the distance. How much of this land is yours, Jack? Everything you can see. Everything? All the way to that tree line? Yes. How long would it take to ride a horse there and back? All day, Bea. I've got all day, Jack.

Can we go faster, Jack? Jack urged the horses to a trot. Bea couldn't get in rhythm with the horse so Jack urged them to a nice slow canter. Bea loved it but said, faster, Jack! Hang on, Bea, and he pushed them to a full gallop. Soon they were far from the barn and Jack slowed them back down to a walk. Bea's red hair had been flying, and to Jack she seemed like a radiant vision of a woman. Then he noticed the old horse she was riding was favoring a front leg. He watched for a few more steps then stopped them.

I think we pushed your old mare more than she was used to, Bea, she has a slight limp. We will have to walk them back. To Bea this was just another opportunity for adventure. The sun was low by now and she could see the beginning of a pink sunset. I'm sorry about the horse. Will she be alright? I think it's just old age, Bea. I'll keep an eye on her but no more riding for a while.

I have never been to a wedding in a barn. We use it for all kinds of parties. We have lots of friends who like to get together. A lot of them will be at the wedding, I think. You don't talk much but you don't seem to have any trouble talking to me. Jack was quiet. Then he tried to explain himself. When you grow up around big animals like horses and cows you learn to move slow and not make loud noises, so I guess that's just the way I am. I'm no big animal, Jack.

Jack's mind was going places he never expected and the only thing he knew to do was to stop talking. Bea took his hand and they walked along in silence. Bea could hear the night sound of birds looking for their roost and a strange bird calling high in the sky above them. Then it was like someone had flipped the switch and it was dark. The stars came out, millions of stars. Bea could tell that it was going to be a long walk back to the barn. She found the sound of the horses walking and the sounds of the night and the night sky mesmerizing. She could smell the dampness and feel the air growing moist.

Jack, this is beautiful! It took Jack a minute to understand and respond. It was what he knew and it surprised him that what he had experienced every night of his life could be beautiful to a stranger.

Try to watch out for ground hog holes. I don't want two lame legs to deal with. If I stepped in a hole and hurt my leg would you carry me? You mean like this, and he lifted her up, cradle style. I like this even better than riding your horse, Jack. He put her down thinking that she was right. She had felt light as a feather yet she was a full-grown woman. He wondered how many more surprises he would have tonight. Then she kissed him.

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Mary's day was over. She was relaxing at her kitchen table with a small glass of red wine. Thea and Deeba, however, were in animated conversation about the stories of Jesus, especially about his birth. It was, after all, only one more day until Christmas. Deeba was insisting that the stories in the Quran were literally true in every detail while Thea was trying to explain that those stories were mythical, wonderful stories, but not necessarily literal. Mary was enjoying listening, but not participating. These were arguments of little interest to her. The RSVP list – now that needed to be correct – and she thought it was.

Maryam and Josh had found a big couch to share. Josh was telling her about how his friends had been nervous and even gotten drunk the day before their weddings. He assured her that he felt no nervousness and that one beer would be his limit. Maryam, who never touched alcohol, didn't know why anyone ever needed it, but she was not concerned about his one beer.

Liesl was telling Billy about all the things she had seen around the farm. Everything is so big, she told him. She had never imagined tractors and equipment that looked as big as houses. Then she said, Bea wasn't with us for dinner. I hope she is OK. She called across the room to Josh. Do you know where Bea and Jack went? No, but Jack knows every inch of this farm. I'm sure they are fine. They will be along soon, and hungry.

Liesl was not ready to let go of her concern. Jack was obviously a competent young man but he didn't know Bea and that worried her. Josh could tell that she was still concerned so he said, if they are not back in another hour I'll go check on them. Liesl went to the nearest window and looked out. It was total darkness. OK, Josh, can I go with you? Josh could tell that Liesl's concern was not going away. Let's go now, Liesl. I'll get out the four-wheeler, it has good lights, and he motioned to Liesl to follow him.

Billy always with complete confidence in Josh, went over and sat with Maryam and said, you know how Bea will try anything. That's what worries Liesl. I know. It has been very good for me to be her friend. She helps me to see possibilities. I really like her. Josh will find them but maybe they don't want to be found. I think that may be what is behind Liesl's worrying. Bea is bold but only eighteen and in a few days we will be far from Nebraska.

Josh had hardly got the four-wheeler out and got a hundred yards down the path when its lights picked up two people and two horses in the distance. He heard Jack call out from way down the path, if that's you, Josh, turn off those lights. Josh switched off the lights and killed the engine and the night settled on them like a blanket. Liesl sat quietly for a few moments then said, can you turn this thing around? They don't need our help. Yes, it can turn in its on length. Then let's go back to the house.

Josh started the four-wheeler, spun it around and started back down the path. He reached for the light switch and Liesl asked, can you drive back without the lights? Sure, I'll crawl it back. I love the night. Josh, I didn't know what night was like here. It's quite lovely, isn't it? Josh knew he wasn't being asked a question so he concentrated on following the path back. They could see lights in the windows of the house. It was like they were calling them.

Josh, what made you leave this place? He knew this was a real question. I wanted to see what was out there and I found Maryam. Will you come back here? Another real question. Mom wants me to come back. She really likes Maryam. So maybe we will, but not now. Are you nervous about getting married? Billy told me it was the best thing he ever did. That was answer enough for Liesl. It was also enough for her to stop worrying about Bea. Life was good.

~ ~

The day before any wedding is a test. If the families endure the test without creating lasting animosities then one can predict a lasting relationship. All the signs at the farm were positive for a good prognosis. Decorations were 90% complete. Some had to happen at the last minute. The anticipated local guests had been counted and Allen, Sue and Billy's sister, Jennifer, and the other Chicago guests had found comfortable accommodations in town.

Pastor Martin wanted a rehearsal. Who is to be the best man? Is that you, Jack? Yes, Pastor. And do you have the rings in a secure place? Mom has them but I know where they are. And who is this lovely young woman? Maryam answered, this is my sister, Deeba, Pastor. She only speaks a little English but I will translate if she has questions. Pastor was happy with that and continued. Mary, who will do the music? Three people from the Church choir, you know them well. They know the music we want and they didn't think they needed to be here. Good, Mary. I trust them. So the rehearsal continued with knowing where to stand and what to say and how to say it. Mary told Pastor that there was something she wanted to say at the end of the ceremony before his final blessing and it was agreed.

Josh asked Maryam, are you happy with how my mother has all this planned? We have talked a lot, Josh. My parents would not have considered anything I wanted, including who I was going to marry. It will be simple and beautiful. I am very happy with what Mary has planned.

Have you seen Sam and his parents? I want to meet them. They called to say they were here but we won't see them until tomorrow at the wedding, unless they just show up this evening. You seem to be curious. Why would you want to meet him? I don't know why, I just would. He was once important to you, maybe that's why. And I would like to meet his new girlfriend too. OK, Josh, whatever. I do hope to remain friends with Sam and his family, they were very welcoming to me. See, it's not so strange that I would like to meet them, is it? I guess not.

I wanted their neighbor, Tina, to come but she couldn't make it. It's going to be a very nice group of guests. I suppose you will get to see some old friends. I don't know who all Mom has invited, maybe an old girlfriend or two. You're teasing me, Josh. Never forget that old girlfriends and old boyfriends are "old" for good reasons. I won't forget, Maryam. I will have no second thoughts.

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Mary was an artist in the kitchen and she had always wanted to find other ways to express the artist part of herself. This wedding was her big chance and she wasn't going to miss it. The barn was her canvas and she painted it with lights, figures and cloth.

She had started with the timber columns and beams and wrapped each one with strings of little white Christmas lights. These would be the only lights in the cavernous space of the large barn except for one more. It was a brilliant star shining down on the platform where the bride and groom would stand.

Then there were the angels. Mary had asked the women of her Church to create angels for her and they had created with enthusiasm. They had made dozens. Some no bigger than your hands, some as big as a small child, and then Mary with Jack's help had placed them all about the great columns' beams and rafters of the barn, but none of the angels were completely visible. There was a wing here, a face there, each one almost but not quite hidden.

The lights, each very small but together glowing, the half-hidden angels, not completely there but everywhere, the star and the double row of benches creating a center aisle, all this together pulled people in and enveloped them. Some later told Mary they felt like they were being held like a child.

Mary was delighted with her creation but she wasn't finished. Half way back on each row of benches was a single bench draped off as if reserved for special people. There were no "reserved" signs, only draped green cloths with a flower design covering the two benches.

The grass in front of the barn began to fill with cars. People were loudly greeting old friends and introducing themselves to strangers. Then the boldest, sensing the time, began to drift into the barn and the loud talking turned into low murmuring. Was this a church? If so it was not like any church they had ever experienced. And who were those benches reserved for? There was a shared "ah ha" moment that started with an old man, one of Mary's local guests, who said, the draped benches were for those who could not be with them today. People began to think of those they knew or had known who were no longer with them, and in their minds, they reached out to the missing.

The old tack room had been converted into a dressing room for the bride and her bridesmaids. It had been swept out and two full length mirrors placed on one wall with a circle of chairs on a carpet in the center. Maryam, her sister, and the twins who would be bridesmaids, immediately felt at home in this space. Even the smell of old leather seemed to make it personal.

They could hear the music begin and Jack came to the door to lead Mary to her place. That's when he noticed Bea, and he forgot his assigned task. Bea was beautiful with her red hair combed down her back, she was wearing a very formfitting green dress. Bea had been careful not to outdress the bride but with her long red hair and in her green dress she was stunning. Mary took Jack's arm and gently guided him to the center aisle.

Maryam and Josh walked down the aisle together with the twins and Deeba following. Jack was waiting. Having regained his composure he patted his pocket to confirm that he had the rings. Beautiful women. Large handsome men. A silver haired pastor with his colorful stole. Together they made a grand picture. But it seemed to everyone in the barn church that the stars above the wedding party shown down brightest on the child that would obviously be born soon.

Maryam's child had moved down much sooner than she expected and her dress stretched tight in that unexpected direction. When she had tried the dress on a week earlier, she had looked pleasantly round. She had looked every bit the part of a beautiful pregnant woman and she had been very pleased with her wedding dress. Today she knew that she looked like a woman about to give birth and she felt unnerved by the sudden change. The women in the barn church looked at each other with knowing expressions. Was this baby going to be born right in front of their eyes?

As Pastor Martin began the ceremony, he seemed nervous and hurried as he stole a glance at Maryam's very obviously stretched dress. He was an experienced pastor but he was also a farmer. He knew all about birthing. He knew you can't say wait, and he had never presided at a wedding where the bride looked like she was about to give birth. He wanted Maryam to be fully married before that happened. The people, especially the women, noticed his rushed prayers and that increased their own unexpected tension.

So when Maryam and Josh turned to face the assembly as the newly married couple, the clapping and cheers were more than the usual congratulation, it was also a relief of collective tension as Pastor Martin took a cloth to his brow in the already cool barn church. It was then that Mary got up from her seat and stood with the newly married couple. When she spoke it was loud enough for the whole assembly to hear, Maryam, are you feeling contractions? A somewhat flustered Maryam answered loudly. No, Mary. I can feel the baby move but not contractions. A sense of relief again spread among the women who knew what it was like to have a baby about to be born but not yet.

Mary continued, then I have time to be the prophet. I predict that this child will be a challenging presence to all who know her. She will ask why there is such division and hatred in the world and she will demand answers. Our old ways will not satisfy her. She will ask why we celebrate the birth of a peace-loving child on this very day every year and yet, we do not listen to his message that we are all one. I know that the birth of every child carries with it the hope of a new beginning, but I know Maryam and Josh, and I know this child will be our hope in her own

unique way. I want this child sitting at my kitchen table. Even more I want her to be our new hope, and I predict that she will be. Then Mary turned and gave both Maryam and Josh a hug.

The assembly stood as the musicians led them in the hymn, "Let There Be Peace on Earth", and Pastor Martin put his hand on Maryam's child in blessing. *Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me...with God as our Father, family all are we...as the assembly's members nodded in agreement, let us walk with each other, in perfect harmony...* moving some to reach for tissues to dab the tears away.

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At the reception Maryam and her unborn child were the center of everyone's attention. She was constantly given good wishes and questions, mostly questions that she couldn't answer. Maryam, what is your due date? I don't know. I thought it was at least six weeks away but now I don't know. Are you going to stay here to have this baby? Same "I don't know" answer. Do you know if it's a girl? The baby is a girl. Do you have a name? No. Finally, Mary had to rescue her from the well-meaning questioners even though she had the same questions herself.

Come sit with me and eat a little. Thanks, Mary. It was all beautiful. I loved the angels. It was like we were being watched over and protected. And the lights were like the night sky here in Nebraska. Thank you for a beautiful experience. It was my gift to you and Josh. Are you sure you wouldn't like something to eat? A little juice would be nice and a quiet place to sit.

Mary found Maryam a soft chair and brought her a glass of juice. Josh was hovering beside her. Mary assured him, Maryam is healthy and she will have a healthy baby. Go be with your friends. Tomorrow I will take her to see my doctor to be absolutely sure she is OK and get a new due date.

Maryam did not enjoy all the personal questions and noise. Parties were fine, but not for her today. She wondered if it would be rude for her to go to the house and be by herself? Then she saw her friend, Sam, and a young woman coming toward her. Maryam, this is Mary, my friend from school. Mary wanted to meet you. Another Mary. How nice. It's nice that you came all this way for our wedding. Do you live in Chicago?

Maryam was putting on her best face for Sam and his friend but the strain she was feeling was showing because Mary said, you must have had a long day, but the wedding was beautiful. My home is in Madison but Sam and I go to college together in Chicago, and she began to tug at Sam's sleeve. He got the hint and said, I hope you and Josh can visit Chicago in the future. Thank you, Sam. Billy's sister, Jennifer, has already given me a standing invitation. Sam, please send your parents over, I would like to see them.

Sam and his new friend drifted away and in a few minutes Sam's parents, Megan and Nick, came over. Maryam had talked with them the day before the wedding but she had a new concern. Megan put her hand on Maryam's arm. I know you will have the best of care but if there is ever anything we can do to help, you can count on us, right, Nick?

Nick leaned toward Maryam. You are what I always imagined Mary the Mother of Jesus must have looked like. Thank you, Nick. I don't feel special, only tired. I am not concerned about

myself, but I am really worried about Sam's new friend, Mary. Megan looked at Nick, and Maryam could tell they had seen the same problem, Mary looked very much like a younger Maryam.

If Sam tries to make her be another me, she will never be able to be herself. This is not good for her, Megan. We know. We hope it will just be a passing friendship but we became more concerned when he wanted to bring her to your wedding. Now that she has seen you up close maybe she will see the problem herself. It will not be easy on Sam if she walks away, but she should.

Nick had to know. Will you have this baby here in the U.S.? I may not have a choice, Nick. This child seems to have a mind of her own. Maybe she will be another Mary. As they walked away Megan said to Nick, Maryam and her baby will be healthy, won't they? She looks tired but glowing in good health. No doubt about it, Megan, and that baby is very likely to be a U.S. citizen.

Allen, Sue and Jennifer had been giving Maryam some space but she motioned them over. Half kidding but completely serious, Maryam said, you know this is all Bea's doing. Jennifer responded, yes, isn't it wonderful! and I really want to spend more time with Bea. The wedding and reception was declared a success by all as they reluctantly drifted away.

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The old doctor told Maryam that she was full term and that she should expect to deliver her baby any day now. Then, knowing her situation he said, there should be no travel. You need to be prepared to stay until the baby can travel, which may be several weeks. Then turning to his old friend and Maryam's new mother-in-law, looks like you will have a baby at your house. She answered, it's been a while, Ed, but would you believe I still have a few things from when Jack was a baby? I believe it. This is a full term and large baby. I don't expect any problems, but keep my number handy.

Maryam thanked the doctor, then on the ride home she told Mary, Josh and I were intimate only once, exactly nine months ago, and I didn't have any symptoms of being pregnant until later when we started living together. It looks like that one time was enough. Do you feel OK? Yes, and I like your doctor. Thanks for everything, Mary.

When they got to the farm everyone was gathered around the kitchen table waiting to hear what the doctor had said. Maryam spoke directly to Josh. Our baby could come any time, I won't be able to travel back to Germany with you. Then I will stay here with you.

Then there was a discussion of travel plans, which became loud when Bea said that she was going to stay with Maryam and Josh. Her mother reminded her that she was in the middle of her last school year, so Bea compromised. She would stay only until the baby was born, and it was agreed. Thea and Deebea would fly back with Liesl and Billy as scheduled. Josh would stay as long as he thought he needed to, and Bea would stay only until the baby was born. Liesl understood Bea's close relationship to Maryam but she also suspected there was another reason Bea wanted to stay and his name was Jack.

So later she took Bea aside. You really want to stay because of Jack, don't you? He likes me, Mom. I can see that, but you won't know how much he likes you until some time passes. Thea came home after your summer vacation thinking she was in love with someone and he only called a few times and that was the end of it.

That was Ricky. Jack's not like that. He's a stable man. Yes, and you like fun and excitement. This farm, as beautiful as it is, could get old and boring quickly, Bea. Give Jack some time, don't rush him. What if he doesn't want time? I'll believe that when I see him standing at our door back home. He has already told me he wants to visit me. Then he may be the man for you but not here and not now. I'm not a child, Mom. I know and that's what worries me.

~ ~

Maryam felt disconnected. She knew it wasn't because Josh had gone to town with his brother to get parts for a broken machine. She didn't need him right beside her every minute of every day. She was even sure that he would go back to his job after the baby was born and take Bea with him. She had complete confidence in her new mother-in-law and she was prepared to stay without Josh as long as she needed to.

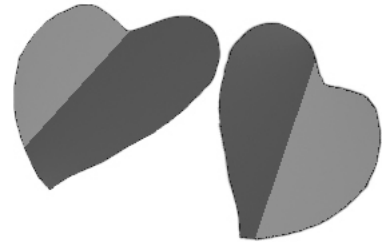
She also didn't think that the expectant waiting every pregnant woman experiences was causing her to feel at loose ends. Bea had gone to town with Jack and Josh. Mary was busy in her kitchen. Maryam put on a light coat and walked to the barn.

Mary had said that she wanted a New Year's Eve party and she had told Jack to push the benches to the sides but otherwise leave the barn decorated for the party. The inside of the barn was dark. Maryam looked for a switch, found one at the door and flipped it on. A row of lights came on down the center and she looked for a place to sit and think. She wanted to be all by herself but then she saw that she wasn't alone.

A large orange cat was sitting near the place where she and Josh had married one another two days before. Maryam had always liked cats but she had never seen one as big as this one. Then it got up and walked toward her. She could see that this was really a much larger cat than her own cat, who she knew was being well cared for. The cat stopped right in front of her and sat down. She looked carefully at the cat and noticed that it didn't look quite right, its mouth was partly open. That's not normal, she thought, and bent over for a closer look. The cat didn't move. She could tell that there was something in the cat's mouth and she felt it with her fingers. It felt like it might be a piece of bone and she moved it with her fingers and it came out in her hand. The cat closed its mouth, shook its head and walked away. Maryam looked at the piece of bone in her hand and sat back against one of the decorated timber posts.

Maryam sat quietly long enough for Mary to become concerned and came looking for her. So this is where you are. I was worried. Are you OK? Do you know the large orange cat? I know the really big one. So you saw it. He keeps to himself. I'm surprised you even saw it. It came up to me while I was sitting here. Really? He must have sensed that you like cats. He never comes near anyone. It had a bone in its mouth. It couldn't close its mouth and it let me remove it. See here it is and she handed Mary the piece of bone.

Mary sat down next to her not quite believing Maryam's story but there was the piece of bone in her hand. She knew that cat lived in the barn but that it didn't trust anyone and always kept its distance. Why would it come to Maryam? Mary, I was feeling uneasy and didn't know why. I came in the barn to sit in the quiet and think. I now have the answer I was looking for. I don't want to leave this place. I want Josh and our baby to be at home here. I don't want to go back to Germany. Mary put her arms around Maryam and started to cry.



~ ~

It was snowing the morning that Josh brought Maryam and Little Mary home from the hospital. Josh looked at the sky and thought of everything that needed to be done before the first big snow of the season. Maryam was looking straight ahead and could see the farm approaching. The windows in the big house were all casting light on the new snow as if someone was expected and welcome. She leaned against Josh because she knew the light in all the windows was for her and Little Mary, Maryam was home.

Bea met them at the door. She's beautiful, Maryam. Can I hold her? Come to the kitchen. Mary is teaching me how to cook. Maryam handed Bea her bundle and walked with Bea to the kitchen. Mary had made a place for the baby in her kitchen and Bea settled Little Mary there. Josh saw that all was well and went to help his brother. Mary sat down next to the baby.

It looks like you got home just in time. By the way it is snowing, the roads may be closed by tonight. Maryam smiled. In her mind the new snow was going to keep out the world that had not been kind to her. It was like the snow was closing that door forever and she said, I love the snow, Mary. I hope it snows all day and all night. Well, it might, and the county plows always gets to us last.

Maryam took off her coat, thinking it would be OK if the county plow truck didn't come for days, then she asked, can we bring one of the big chairs into the kitchen? I need to sit and feed the baby. Bea and Mary brought in a big chair and placed it in a warm corner. That's where Maryam was sitting with Little Mary when Josh and Jack came in brushing snow off their jackets. Josh looked at Bea. We may need to change our flight.

Bea thought that was good news and looked out at the snow and seeing another day with Jack. Jack, always trying to be helpful said, I could hitch up the horses to our old wagon and take you to the main road where you could call for a ride into town. Bea responded, you don't need to take the horses out in the snow, Jack. If I miss a few days of school, it won't matter. I'll be done with school in the spring anyway.

Jack didn't want Bea to leave, but his helpful nature made him suggest the horses. Mary heard the exchange and decided it was time to encourage the relationship she saw developing, and knowing Jack, she said, Bea cooked supper today, she learns fast. Some day she will be a good

cook. You boys, clean up for supper. Catching Mary's message Bea had to add, I can bake the best fancy cookies. I will bake some tonight. For Jack that was the final piece of information he needed. Bea was the woman he had been waiting for.

End of Story, or is it The Beginning?

Bea's Famous Sugar Cookies

2 ½ cups sifted flour	½ cup shortening or butter
¼ teaspoon salt	1 cup sugar
2 teaspoon baking powder	2 eggs, beaten
	1 tablespoon milk

Sift flour, salt & baking powder together. Cream shortening & sugar together, add eggs & vanilla. Then add sifted ingredients & milk. Roll 1/8" for crisp or 1/4" for thick. Cut with glass or cookie cutter shapes. Sprinkle with sugar & bake on baking sheet in moderate oven, 375°F for 12 minutes. Makes 2 ½ dozen.

Epilogue

New snow covers all the earth's scars, and to Maryam the new snow was a symbol of her new life. She was home. She had attracted many men, and finally found one who would not "not use her and then be gone".

Everyone's future looked bright. Bea told Jack she would be 19 soon and he said he would come to Germany to help her celebrate. Thea would fall in love with her childhood boyfriend, and they would marry and buy a house near Liesl and Billy, who would continue to take annual Bavarian vacations where they would fall in love again and again. Deeba would work in Billy's office and meet the perfect man for her. Josh would finish Billy's contract and return to the farm to stay.

In a year or two, Bea and Jack would be married in the barn church and Mary's dream of grandchildren around her table would come true.

Little Mary, as she will always be called at home, will be elected to the school board, then the county council, and on to the state legislature. She will make the world a better place for women and children.

We can imagine this future, and it may happen exactly that way. Then there is Bea. No one ever knows what Bea might do, and there are accidents that can set one's life on an unexpected new trajectory. Storytelling is an ancient tradition. When Jesus was asked a question, he often told a story. We too like to read stories, and tell them. Do you have a story that needs to be told?

Afterword

It would be nice for you to think that Maryam's experience with honor killing was not part of your world, your personal world, but it is. Please open your Bible to Deuteronomy 22:13-21.

Did you read it? The world has changed you say, but it hasn't.

The United Nations Population Fund has estimated that there are 5,000 honor killings a year...Our estimate is that at least 6,000 and probably more, honor killings take place annually around the world.

Half the Sky, #1 National Bestseller by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wu Dunn

Josh was angry, and Maryam told him how he could help. There are many good programs. The following four are listed as examples. Clicking on these web sites will tell you what they do and how to participate. You may not change the world but you could very well change someone's life.

Afghan Institute of Learning, www.creatinghope.org

Heifer International, www.heifer.org

New Light, www.newlightindia.org

Tostan, www.tostan.org