



Family

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. 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. Now Joan's ministry is to serve God's people as priest to all who call upon her.

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.

2024

Preface

We began our life as storytellers in our senior years as extensions of Joan's ministry to preach the Gospel of Jesus the Christ and John's search for a creative outlet. These two life forces bubbled up into one continuing story with discrete episodes, which we have made public sequentially. The sources for our stories are the people and situations we have experienced in our lives and in the lives of the people around us. There is no intention of being autobiographical or even biographical, but the characters and situations are from life as we have experienced it. We write love stories because that's what we know, and a love story is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

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" are Allen and Sue's best friends. Their story 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 Allen and Sue's only son. Billy's Story 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, Billy's daughters, 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.

Story 5, "Jennifer" is Allen and Sue's first child whom everybody loved. She had a perfect life. In her words, "I would call it idyllic if it didn't sound fairytale-ish." Then everything changed, and again in her words, "Mom, I don't even know where I am." Can Jennifer find herself? What kind of help will she find, or not?

Story 6, "Joey," a sequel to "Jennifer," begins with Jennifer and Joseph, and Jennifer is afraid of Joseph. COVID-19 happens, and many people suffer. Joey grows up in this world, but it wasn't easy as you may remember. People loved Joey for good reasons. Maybe you will too.

Story 7, is "Family," and you may recognize many of the people from our earlier stories, but in this story, who is the fire, who is the glue, who is the rock, and who says, "No way"? In trying to be family, they are a little like a political coalition where honesty is the best policy except when it isn't. Can each person be themselves and still be welcome at the table, or maybe not. We love our story family, and hope you do too.

"Family" and all of our other six stories are available to be read, downloaded and shared from Joan's web site: <http://joanclarkhouk.com>.

The People in “Family”

We know the people in this family. They have been with us from the beginning of our storytelling ministry. They are like old friends to us with only a few new faces. Sue Baxter was one of two main characters in our first story, “Allen and Sue.” Billy Baxter and Jennifer Baxter, Allen and Sue’s children, each had their own story. Megan and Nick are old friends, who changed people’s lives. They continue to do that.

Grandma Mary, the matriarch of our Nebraska farm and mother to Josh and Jack, came into our stories with “Maryam,” when Josh brought Afghan Muslim Maryam home to the farm, and then they were married. They named their daughter, Mary, after Josh’s mother. Billy Baxter married German Liesel, and they had twin girls. Jennifer Baxter married Joseph Cohen, and have son, Joey, who has his own story. Jack, the brother to Josh, married one of the half-German twins whose name is Bea.

Maryam has a sister, Deeba, and Bea’s twin sister is Thea. Then there is Charles, who died years ago yet remains an essential part of this family. Uncle Ralph is, let’s just say, he is Uncle Ralph. Donnie is a boyfriend. Old Doctor Miller is a forever friend.

If you find this family to be a confusing mixture of people, you have entered into the secret message of this story. Families are a collection of people, who are each allowed to be themselves and still be welcome at the family table.

CHAPTER 1

“You can never say why or why not, if you never thought about it.”

Josh had a special-order bed. Even so, there were times when his feet hung over the end of the bed. None of the night sounds disturbed the giant farmer. At 2 a.m. he slept through the distant owl and the high in the sky night hawks that came in through the open bedroom window. Josh had kicked off the sheet, it was almost hot even with the slight breeze that barely ruffled the white curtain. He slept naked, always had, hated to be “all tied up” in pajamas. Maryam was covered in one of Josh’s long, white, many washed, soft T-shirts, barely so. If she were awake, she would have tugged it down.

But giant farmer Josh had spent two deployments in Afghanistan, so any, even the slightest, difference in what city folks may have thought a noisy Nebraska night, would cause him to become immediately fully awake, like a mother with a new baby, asleep but fully aware. Suddenly Josh sat upright, fully awake. He smelled smoke. New hay? No. Wood? No. The barn wasn’t on fire. He willed himself to take a slow sniff then he gently pushed Maryam on the foot. Maryam put her hands over her head and yawned.

“Maryam, what do I smell? It can’t be what I think it is.”

Maryam trying to clear her head,

“You smell something?”

“I think I smell marijuana smoke.”

“There’s no marijuana in this house.”

“Well, I think there is. I smoked it in the Army. I know what it smells like.”

Now Maryam doing her own sniff test,

“Josh, you may be right.”

“Our daughter better not have any late-night company smoking pot in this house.”

And Josh stood up to go to Little Mary’s room, then remembered he had to pull on some pants.

Maryam, now fully awake,

“Wait Josh. I’ll go look.”

She was dressed enough to tip toe into the hall and peek into Little Mary’s room. She slid back into their bedroom shaking her head, “no.”

“She’s sound asleep in her bed.”

By now Josh had on his ready for anything Carhartt pants, and went into the quiet upstairs hall sniffing and listening, and he heard voices. Dim distant voices, and just a slight whiff of marijuana smoke. As he came back into their room, he stubbed his toe on the door jam and clasped his hand over his mouth to stifle a “damn it,” then sat down on the edge of the bed favoring the little toe on his right foot.

Holding his foot, he said,

“I heard voices.”

“Could you tell who it was?”

“No.”

“Does it matter, Josh? There are no strangers in this house.

Does it matter if someone is having a joint?”

Josh slipped off his partly fastened pants and lay back on top of the sheet.

“It matters to me. Tomorrow I will find out.”

“Good, Josh. Tomorrow, Josh. But it’s really not your problem.”

“I’m going to make it my problem.”

“Tomorrow, Josh.”

She turned toward him and took her hand and moved his face to her and kissed him.

“Tomorrow, Josh.”

Josh gave in to Maryam’s “Tomorrow,” rolled over and heard the bed squeak. “Got to fix that,” he said to himself. Then, as he drifted back to sleep, he remembered the first time. They were in an upscale hotel restaurant in Afghanistan, and he was her body guard. He smiled at the ceiling remembering how his body guard instructions had been “separate rooms.” That lasted one day. He almost laughed, then thought she will want to know why I laughed, and I need to get some sleep. But they had often laughed about her having had taken the lead on important things – like now – he thought. Tomorrow – she is right – tomorrow – and Josh drifted off.

~ ~ ~

Josh’s mother, Mary, loved her huge, airy, bright kitchen. Her kitchen, no one disputed her claim, was where good things happened. People gathered. People were fed. People laughed and told stories. People planned the next day’s work on the farm. Mary was always up first, and today, wearing a flowered shirt, denim skirt and apron, she was frying a pound of bacon in a large cast iron skillet that had never seen soapy water, and – truth be told – never would, as long

as she was alive. The coffee had perked, but no one else had come down the wood steps so she used her fail safe method to get them all up – the aroma of bacon frying.

Bea, wife of Mary's second son, Jack, was the first to be drawn in. Mary was not surprised that it was Bea, the young woman friend of Maryam, who came to Maryam and Josh's wedding on the farm. So fascinated was Jack, that he followed Bea back to her home in Germany. Now they live here on the farm, and have a little boy, Billy, named after his maternal grandfather. Bea was the first to breakfast, the same way she was always the first to say what everyone else was thinking, but didn't yet have the courage to say it. Today she had on white shorts and a bright green T-shirt that brought out the beautiful color of her hazel eyes.

The brothers worked the farm and Mary, mother and grandmother, ran the house. Daughters-in-law, Bea and Maryam were farmer hands wherever they were needed by Mary in the big old house, or outside by the men. They were often needed, but their focus was always on their children, five-year-old, Little Billy, and fifteen-year-old, Little Mary.

"Mary, the bacon smells wonderful!"

"I thought that would get you up."

"Jack is up. He will be down in a minute. He is helping Billy tie his shoes."

Josh came in and gave Mary a big hug.

"I like the flowers on the table, Mom. Your garden must be doing well."

Mary smiled and pointed Bea toward a big bowl next to a basket of eggs. Bea asks,

"Are we going to have scrambled today?"

"Yes, and use them all."

Josh filled a mug with hot black coffee, stepped outside and called in,

"It's going to be dry today. We'll cut hay.

Has Migel and Luis been in for breakfast yet?"

Mary responded,

"Yes, I made them fried egg sandwiches, and they went to the barn."

Fixing her hands firmly on her hips she says,

"The hired help get up before you and Jack."

"OK, Mom. I get the message."

Migel and Luis were father and son Mexicans, who spent summers working on the farm and sending money home. They told stories of poverty in their little mountain village, and how their

summer wages made it possible for their families to live almost normal lives. Mary sent them money for travel each spring. Over the years they had become friends. Mary knew the names of their wives and children. They were almost family, at least to Mary. Today they were up working while Josh and Jack were still in the house, and Mary had made a point of it.

Little Billy skipped in with his shoes still untied. Bea scooped him up and set him at his honored place at the breakfast table and tied his shoes, thinking Jack needs to check Billy's shoes before sending him to breakfast. When Jack came in, she pointed at Billy's shoes.

“OK, but he was in a hurry to come down.”

Maryam appeared in her every day black loose top and slacks. She only wore a hajib when she was away from the house, but her hair was tied up on top of her head. Maryam was a lady in small black flat shoes. No one expected fifteen-year-old Little Mary, to be anything but last to breakfast, but when Josh said again that this was a good drying day, Jack spoke up,

“The mower has a couple of broken teeth. Little Mary has been learning how to use some tools. Maybe she could replace them while I get some other work done.”

Little Mary heard her name as she came bouncing in wearing cowboy boots, patched jeans and an old rag of a “T.”

“I’ll do it, she said, but you need to show me where the new ones are.”

Jack said, “Get some breakfast, and I’ll see you in the tool room.”

It was in every way the start of a normal summer day on a Nebraska farm, almost. Josh and Maryam had said nothing about what they had smelled in the night.

~ ~ ~

The weather held as Josh predicted, and two fields of hay were cut, ready to be raked, dried and baled. Hay was a major cash crop for the farm, and a good drying day was not to be wasted.

Breakfast was catch and go. Lunch was often taken to the people working so as not to slow things down. But at dinner, people washed up and came to the table together. So, the family was all around the dinner of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, and with warm bread fresh out of the oven, when Bea, who was famous, or infamous, for speaking loudly whatever was on her mind raised her voice above the chatter,

“I smelled marijuana in the middle of the night.”

Then Jack, best known for always trying to be helpful,

“Maybe it came in the open window, but I didn’t smell anything.”

“You were asleep, Jack, and when you sleep you wouldn’t know if the house fell down.”

People knew that Bea was right about Jack. She got a little laugh. Josh started to open his mouth, and got a sharp elbow in the ribs. Maryam jumped in,

“Jack’s right. Who would like another piece of chocolate cake?”

Little Billy’s hand shot up.

Josh wanted to talk, but he was wary of Maryam’s sharp elbow so he said nothing and the subject dropped.

Bea was alone with Mary cleaning up after dinner.

“Mary, I don’t think the smell came from outside.”

While outside on the porch, Josh almost whispered,

“Maryam, if the Mexicans are smoking pot, I need to talk to them about it.

It could get them into trouble.”

“Josh, sometimes you are not very observant. Didn’t you see Mary drop her fork when Bea said that she smelled marijuana?”

“No, what are you saying? That my mother is smoking pot all by herself in the middle of the night?”

“Josh, there were voices, and now we know it wasn’t Bea and Jack or Little Mary.”

Jack sat looking out into the coming night then asked,

“What should I do?”

“Don’t make this your problem, Josh.”

This was Maryam’s answer to almost anything that suggested stress, especially stress in the family. If you grew up in a home where conflict is an everyday thing, and you escape, you want to never go back.

The screen door banged and Little Billy rushed out.

“Will you take me fishing tomorrow, Uncle Josh?”

“I’ll be busy baling tomorrow. How would you like to ride with me in the cab of the

baler?

“Oh, can I, Uncle Josh?”

That wasn't what Little Billy wanted, but he was happy with a ride in the huge green machine. So, he banged back into the kitchen when his mom pointed at the stack of board games.

“Take a board game upstairs and play with your dad.”

Another disappointment. Little Billy liked his board game at the big kitchen table, but he picked up Chutes and Ladders” and went to find his dad. Little Mary had gone to her room with her new phone, which she never used to actually talk to anyone, but between Facebook and Google she was constantly engaged with her newest prize.

Mary found herself alone with Bea.

“I would like a little red wine. Would you like to join me?”

Bea was bossy and bold, but knew when the time was right to just sit, so she nodded yes, and sat down at the big table.

“Bea, I have been a widow for years, but there are some nights when loneliness overcomes me. I come down to the kitchen to find something to do – anything, really – anything -- take out the trash – dust the glassware – anything – until the awful loneliness feeling passes.”

Mary stops, and Bea sips her wine, sure there is more to tell.

“Last night Migel saw the kitchen light on – I guess he was out on his own little porch with his own thoughts – and he came into the kitchen to see if I needed any help. He's like that, Bea.”

Mary lay her stretched out arms on the table toward Bea, then took a deep breath, straightened herself and took a sip of wine. Bea tried to reach for Mary's hands, but Mary had pulled them back.

“I invited him in. Why not? I have known him for years, and then he asked me again if he could help. I broke down and started to cry. I haven't cried in years, Bea. He took my hands, and we sat down at the table, and I blubbered out how lonely I felt. How much I missed Charlie.”

Bea took the bottle of wine and put a little more in each glass, then sat back quiet, ready to listen all night.

“I don't mean he just heard what I said, Bea. He really listened. That's when he got a

marijuana cigarette out of his shirt pocket, lit it and gave it to me. It seemed so natural, the way he did it. It was – it was – we just connected, Bea. It was so natural.

“We talked. He wanted to know what Charlie was like. It was so natural, Bea, and my loneliness faded away. It was magical, Bea.”

Bea held her breath, but couldn't hold in what she had to ask.

“Did you take him to your bed?”

Mary had learned to expect her German, bold daughter-in-law to say anything, but Bea's question caused her to choke on her sip of wine as she pushed back from the table.

“Bea, why would you ask me such a question?

I would never do such a thing!”

“Why not, Mary? Why not?”

Mary gave Bea a wide-eyed look,

“Bea, it never entered my mind that I would do such a thing. There was never a why, or why not – it never entered my mind. You can never say why or why not, if you never thought about it.”

“No, I guess not, but now that you have thought about it, what do you think?”

“Oh, I wouldn't do it, Bea. It wouldn't be right.”

Mary got up and walked out the back kitchen door, and stood on the little porch. She could see a light on in the small square house that Charlie had built years ago, and remembered that electrician Josh had run electricity to it when he came home from Germany. Then a couple of years ago he ran a TV cable so the hired hands could watch their favorite soccer games. She took a deep breath. It was not really a house, but she cleaned it up each spring before they came for the summer. Now she had been asked a question that had never occurred to her before, and the small square house somehow looked different.

Bea was sitting alone at the table when Josh and Maryam came in from the front porch where they had gone to sit after dinner. Maryam took a hard hold of his sleeve and guided him toward the hallway to their upstairs bedroom. Josh had questions, but Maryam's hold on his sleeve included a little piece of skin – Josh asked no questions, but he gave Maryam his “what's going on” look.

“Women talk, Josh.”

At the bottom of the stairs Maryam released her hold on Josh with a little shove in the upstairs direction, turned back to the kitchen and sat down next to Bea. Mary came back from her breath of air and sat across from them. Mary took a third glass and sat it in front of Maryam, forgetting that Maryam did not drink alcohol. Bea broke the silence.

“Mary and I were talking about marijuana.”

Mary retold her story adding again,

“Maryam, he really listened, but Bea is way too bold with her talk of my taking a man to my bed.”

Maryam thought about her own experiences with men, but decided that those memories didn't apply here so she asked,

“How old were Josh and Jack when their father died?”

“Thirteen and ten.”

“That's old enough to be a big help, but not old enough to take over and run the farm.”

Mary nodded, yes.

“Then it fell on you to be responsible for everything.”

“Yes. I had to do it all. It was all on me.”

Bea, the talker, wanted to know,

“Were you able to talk to anyone?”

“I talked with the pastor after the funeral.”

“That's all?”

“Work was my way of dealing with losing Charlie, Bea. Really, work is my way of dealing with everything.”

“How were Josh and Jack?”

“They were just like me, still are. There was always more to do. But Jack was real quiet, even more quiet than usual. For a while he hardly said anything, Bea.”

Maryam thought about the house she had been living in for 15 years.

“Mary, I don't remember ever seeing a picture of Charlie.

Do you have one we could see?”

“I have an old picture album.”

Bea wants to know,

“Can we see it?”

“It’s in my room under some sheets and blankets in the cedar chest, but I guess I could get it.”

Maryam asks,

“Your boys were always like you?”

“Yes, it was all farm and school and always more. They just went to work, even quiet Jack always did his share. So, you would really like to see the old album?”

Bea answered, “Yes,” and Maryam nodded, yes. Mary went to her room to get it.

Bea looked at Maryam,

“I’m glad you asked about Charlie’s picture.”

“This was not my culture so it never occurred to me that anything may be missing. There were no pictures in my house in Afghanistan. But when Mary started talking about Charlie, I wanted to see what he looked like.”

“Maybe his boys look a lot like him.”

“Could be – maybe we will see.”

Mary brought in a thick worn and faded blue album and lay it on the table. Maryam and Bea began to turn the crinkled pages. Finally, Maryam asked,

“When was the last time Josh and Jack saw this album?”

Mary paused to answer.

“I can’t remember. It may have been out for a while after the funeral, but then I put it away.”

Maryam pointed to a picture near the front.

“Is that you and Charlie?”

Mary knew the picture, even upside-down from the opposite side of the table,

“Yes, that’s us.”

“Charlie was a whole head taller than you, Mary.”

“Yes, and Charlie is why Josh and Jack are so big.”

The women were fascinated by the pages of the little boy pictures of the two men they married. Especially Maryam.

“Mary, I want you to leave it out for Josh and Jack to see.”

“You mean just to leave it out on the table for them to find it? I couldn’t do that.”

“Then what if you brought it out after dinner tomorrow saying we asked you to, which is the truth.”

Maryam always used “we”, but in this case, Bea agrees.

“Do you really think that is a good idea?”

“Yes, we do.”

“Won’t it bring out bad feelings?”

Bea finally, and with some force,

“Maybe, Mary, but also good memories. Will you do it?”

“OK, but don’t say anything about my smoking pot with Migel.

Can’t that just be among us?”

“Yes, “we” can keep pot among us with a wink at Bea, but who knows what Bea might say.”

“Lord, Maryam, isn’t that the truth.”

~ ~ ~

After dinner that evening Migel and Luis took their plates and went to watch soccer. There were many times they would eat at their end of the huge table, but tonight they wanted soccer.

So, it was only blood family sharing dessert when Mary went to her room and brought out the old album.

“Maryam and Bea and I were talking last night and they asked about pictures, so I brought out this old album. These are the only pictures I have...”

and was about to place it in the center of the table, when Little Mary reached for it.

“Can I see it, Grandma?”

As Mary was passing the album, Little Billy pushed in,
“Me too!”

So, the two children were turning pages, Little Billy in a hurry, and Little Mary being careful not to cause any harm. Bea stood up behind them to look again. She still had questions.

Bea pointed to a picture of a man and a boy,

“Jack, is that you?”

“Probably was.” – but didn’t get up or lean over to look.

As Little Mary kept turning pages, but not as fast as Billy wanted, Josh and Jack kept getting older. Maryam wanted a new better look. Slow-moving Josh seemed to be waiting his turn, but Jack got up from the table, looking at his feet, went out onto the front porch.

Mary pushed back her chair as if to follow Jack, but Bea, who was already standing behind the children, quickly left the children with the album they had claimed, and followed Jack out onto the porch. Mary held her worry and stayed at the table.

Out on the porch Bea found Jack standing on the second step looking toward the barn. She came behind him, almost as tall as he, and quietly leaned against his back. A few moments passed,

“I need to check to make sure the lights are off in the barn.”

“OK, Jack.” And she took his huge hand and followed him.

Jack closed his hand around hers and felt her closeness. The barn was only a short walk.

Back in the kitchen the kids had gone through the album twice, Little Billy full of questions, and Little Mary trying to keep the album neat by putting loose pictures back into their little paper corners.

Little Billy looked around,

“Where are Mom and Dad?”

Mary answered,

“They went outside, Billy.”

Then, not wanting him to dash after them, suggested a “Grandma vs Billy” game, which they often played in the evenings.

“OK, Grandma, I’ll go pick one”

But everyone knew it was going to be “Chutes and Ladders”.

Maryam took the now closed album and slid it over in front of Josh. For a moment he looked at the cover, then opened it to the first page, which showed a woman with a baby and a man standing beside them. Maryam put her finger on the baby.

“That has to be you, Josh.”

Josh lingered on the picture,

“Guess so” then started slowly turning pages.

Little Mary took her new phone and disappeared upstairs.

~ ~ ~

There were no lights left on in the barn as Bea had suspected. It was all dark except for the night sky coming in the open door. Jack reached for a light switch, but Bea stopped his hand.

“We don’t need any lights, Jack.”

Then she felt a drop on her bare arm, then another drop. She realized she was feeling tears and that Jack was crying, and then she felt tears on her own face. In the near dark she could see a hay bale and she steered them toward it, leaning against Jack to sit with her. She put her head on his shoulder and cried silently with him. Some minutes passed.

“I didn’t mean to do it, Bea.”

Bea only leaned closer.

“I had never seen the bull up close. We only brought him to the farm once a year.”

Then Jack went quiet, but now Bea had to know.

“What happened, Jack?”

“I wanted to see the bull up close. He was so big. I opened the gate and went into his pen, but he charged me and knocked me down before I could close the gate.”

Bea had been on the farm long enough to know what a bull could be like. She remembered her first time seeing one, and being told to stay away.

“Did he get out, Jack?”

“Yes, and my dad saw what happened and came running.”

Jack stopped, but Bea had to know.

“What happened, Jack?”

“The bull knocked him down and stepped on him and kept going.”

Jack realizing that Bea would ask again continued.

“Dad struggled to get up then slumped over. He couldn’t walk, Bea. Josh and the hired men got the bull back in his pen. Then they took Dad to the hospital.”

Again, Bea had to know.

“Did he die?”

“Not then, but he was never the same, and then he died.”

“Days later?”

“No, longer, but he died, Bea. He knew I had opened the bull’s gate, but he never scolded me about it – never.”

“Did anyone else ever say anything about your leaving the gate open?”

“No,”

“Then he must not have told anyone else what happened.”

“I guess not, but I did it, don’t you see? I did it.”

Bea pushed – knowing that the first farm rule was if you open a gate, you close it, but not closing a gate does not bring tears to your eyes, years later, so Bea pushed.

“What do you mean, I did it?”

“I opened the gate and my father died.”

“You don’t know that, Jack.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t! Your mother told me that your dad died of cancer. Being stepped on by a bull has nothing to do with cancer.”

“But he always limped after it happened and then he died.”

“That’s not why he died, Jack.”

Bea felt a painful hollow in her chest as it sunk in that Jack had believed he had caused his father's death. How had her quiet, loving husband dealt with this kind of guilt all these years? She had to be sure.

"Did you ever tell anyone this story?"

"No, only you, Bea."

"Then it's time you did."

"I can't do that, Bea."

"Why not?"

"The idea that I should tell anyone never crossed my mind."

"Well, now it has, Jack, and you need to tell it like you told me.

Your father died of cancer, not being stepped on by a bull, that you had to see when you were ten years old."

~ ~ ~

Little Billy bulked. He didn't want to leave his Chutes and Ladders game, but Grandma Mary assured him that they could play again tomorrow. Bea took him to get his bath before settling him into bed. Maryam steered Josh into the hall and up the stairs. Jack lingered, and then spotted a bag of trash that needed to be taken outside. When he came back in Mary thanked him, but she had seen a look on Jack's face that told her that something was not right. Fearing a problem between her son and her sometimes favorite daughter-in-law she said,

"Sit with me, Jack."

And to open a conversation with her quiet son she slid the old album across the table as Jack sat as he had been asked to do. Jack looked at the now unopened album, then took a long breath, opened it and began to turn the delicate pages. Jack stopped at page 14 with a questioning look.

"That's you and Josh in your Halloween costumes.

No one knew who you were that year."

"Was I the clown? I look small."

"Yes, that's you, Jack, and now look at you – big as a tree."

Jack kept turning pages and Mary kept telling the story behind each picture, waiting for Jack to open up, but knowing that he may not – not now, or ever. Even Bea's eyes were down when they came in from the barn, but Mary waited. Eventually Jack came to the last page, and he knew it was a picture of him and his father standing beside a shiny new green tractor. Jack closed the album and visibly sagged with his faced covered by his huge hands.

"He loved you, Jack. He thought you could do anything."

Jack lifted his head and put his hands flat on the table.

“Mom, it was me that opened the gate and let the bull out.”

Mary had no idea what Jack was talking about, then

“Do you mean the time the bull got out when you were a little boy?”

“Yes, and Dad got stepped on.”

There was no picture of any bull in the album. Mary’s mind was racing trying to remember. Jack would have been about 10 years old – every farm boy knows the rules about gates – you open it, you close it – why remember it tonight? – no bull in the album, so she tried to open the door to that time for herself, and now realizing – for Jack too.

“He was a really big bull, Jack, and red – I remember that red bull.

He must have been kind of scary for a boy your age.”

“I wanted to see him up close, Mom, but I didn’t know he could move so fast.

He got out before I could close the gate and he knocked Dad down and stepped on him.

-- and then, Mom, Dad died.”

“What are you saying, Jack? Your dad didn’t die. He died months later.”

“But Dad was never the same – he was never the same, Mom – there were times he could barely walk – and then, he died.”

For a moment, Mary stared blankly across the table and the old album. At first, she didn’t believe what she was hearing, then she realized it had to be true, that her Jack may have believed that he had caused his father’s death. A shiver went up her spine and her eyes teared. Mary reached across the table, picked up her son’s hands, and opened doors between them that she didn’t know were closed.

In Maryam and Josh’s quiet room with the window opened, but the door closed, Josh pushed,

“What the hell is going on, Maryam? When you shooed me out of the kitchen last evening and said “women talk” I was OK with that. Women have a right to their own talk, but I don’t get this evening. What the hell is going on?”

Maryam was all about getting comfortable for the night, but Josh was walking back and forth fully dressed like he may need to respond to some unknown development. Maryam, almost like she was talking to a child,

“You didn’t see the faces on Bea and Jack when they came back in, did you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“They had been crying, Josh. How could you not notice?”

Josh prided himself with seeing, hearing and smelling everything and anything, especially being able to detect differences. If it didn’t “fit” Josh knew it, but now Maryam was telling him that something was wrong with his brother’s face and he didn’t see it. Then he remembered that yesterday he didn’t notice his mother’s reaction to Bea’s pot smell. He asked,

“What else am I missing? I am always aware of what is going on around me. Now you tell me I’m not. What else am I missing, and why were they crying?”

Maryam sensed his distress.

“I don’t think you have been missing anything else, but you haven’t been tuned into family feelings. You can work on that, Josh.”

Josh began to relax, a little, and started getting himself undressed for bed, which, as always, was a complete strip.

“But why had they been crying?”

“I’m not sure, but Bea and Jack are solid, so it wasn’t about them. What was new was that old album. When Bea took Billy to bed, I knew it had to be those pictures.”

“What about old pictures? Aren’t they just old pictures?”

“I don’t know, Josh. Maybe we will know tomorrow, but whatever it was, was going to be just between Jack and his mother.”

“OK, Maryam. It’s going to be a clear night that mean’s cool. We may need a blanket.

“Good idea, Josh.”

~ ~ ~

Bea looked at the bedside clock when Jack got into bed. She had gone to sleep, and now she could see that hours had passed. She pushed herself against him to warm his side, knowing what

the time on the clock meant. Jack had spent those hours with his mother, and that he almost certainly told her how he had believed his open gate caused his father's death. She felt her warmth returning to her. It was a warmth that she did not remember. In the glow of this magical warmth her mind went to a new and unexpected place. She and Jack should have another boy and name him after Jack's father. Together they would make a new Charlie.

~ ~ ~

The next morning Jack stood looking at himself in the steamy bathroom mirror while covering his chin and cheeks with hot soapy lather. He paused and looked at the shaving mug in his left hand. It was old, with a little chip on its thick rim. He had used it for years, maybe always, it had to have been his father's shaving mug. He probably knew that once, but today he felt it. It had always been his shaving mug, no doubt given to him by his mother when she saw shadows. Today he felt his father's presence and he knew that his every morning routine would include using his father's shaving mug. In the hot bathroom he felt a chill, another new ah ha moment looked back at Jack from his steamy mirror. He would not have been looking at himself this way if it were not for the women in his life, and he felt a surge of gratitude.

The old album would still be hidden away, maybe forever, if Maryam had not asked to see it. Without Bea's persistent, "What happened, Jack?" his false memory would still be bottled up inside with no way out. And his mother, didn't say how silly, or dumb, or childishly wrong he was about the gate and the bull. She just held his hands and told him the real story about his father's illness. He had been renewed by women, and as he put his mind around that new knowledge, he felt a sting and realized he nicked his chin with his, Lord only knows how old, razor. The new Jack began to laugh. He was going to show up for breakfast with a little blood spotted tissue on his chin.

Bea came into the bathroom carrying only a fresh towel, then hearing his laugh,
"You seem to be in a good mood this morning."

"I am, Bea. This is my father's shaving mug"
and held it out for Bea to see, like it was a newly found prize.

Bea stepped behind him and pressed her bare breasts against his back.
"I love you, Jack."

She tossed her towel on the rack and jumped into the shower and slid the door closed. Jack nicked himself again, and looking to see how much damage he could now blame on his wife he yelled over the hiss of the shower,

"You're a tease!"

“Yes, I am. And, no, you can’t wash my back; Little Billy is waiting for his breakfast.”

Jack had to reorient his focus from naked Bea through the shower glass to his little son standing at the bathroom door, waiting for his breakfast. The mirror showed no real damage to his face so he tore off another little piece of tissue and stuck it on the second nick. Then he turned to Little Billy,

“We will go to breakfast as soon as I get dressed.”

“What’s that stuff on your face?”

“Tissue to stop the bleeding. Get your shoes.”

“Why are you bleeding?”

“I nicked myself with my razor.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Someday I will tell you about your grandfather’s shaving mug. When you are old enough to understand.”

“I want to know about Grandpa’s mug.”

“OK. First thing to remember is to be careful when you have anything sharp in your hands. You have to pay attention to what you are doing.”

“You mean like when I am cutting an apple?”

“Exactly. Now let’s get dressed for breakfast.”

“Why weren’t you paying attention?”

Jack doubled over laughing when he suddenly realized that his son was just like his mother.

“Lucky me” he thought, then

“Later, Billy. Let’s get some breakfast.”

~ ~ ~

Josh was in a hurry.

“Can you make an egg sandwich for me? I have a busy morning.”

Mary knew how Josh liked his fried egg sandwiches, and knew that one was never enough. Thick bread, lightly toasted, firm eggs, no drippy yokes, lots of pepper, some salt, so she set to work with the four-slot toaster and frying pan while Josh filled his huge coffee mug.

Josh was thinking ahead to an evening out with Maryam. Didn't happen often enough, but he had a hay contract truck on the way and his loader with a split hydraulic line. He was in the tool shed looking for a spare hydraulic line, hoping that he would not have to cannibalize another piece of machinery, and thinking about the evening. He had suggested it to Maryam, and she agreed, but Little Mary heard, dinner and a movie,

“Me too,” she said.

That was not exactly what Josh had in mind, but he OKed, then added,

“Your mother gets to pick the movie.”

That was not what Little Mary had in mind, but what could she do? The local Four Plex was playing, “Barbie” that she really wanted to see, but there was always Donnie. Maybe he would take her before its run was over.

~ ~ ~

He found a hydraulic line he thought would work when his phone jingled in his pocket. He thought of ignoring it, but what if it was his hay customer with a change of plans so he dug it out of his pocket and looked. The phone showed “Billy Baxter,” Josh's old boss and Bea's father. Old loyalty said when the boss calls you answer no matter what you are doing at the moment.

“Hey boss, good to hear from you. What's up – it's been a while.”

The phone was silent.

Josh thought well it's a long way to Germany so he repeated,

“Hi Billy, what's up?”

Another moment passed, and Josh was about to give up on a bad connection. Maybe his old boss had butt dialed him, then the phone said,

“I need to talk to you, Josh. Are you in a quiet place?”

Josh sat down with his half mug of coffee.

“I'm in the tool room. It's just me and the cat. What can I do for you?”

“I need some help, Josh, and I don't have anyone else I could trust to ask for it.”

Josh took a breath suspecting his evening out may just have gone up in smoke.

“Whatever you need, boss. You know you can count on me.”

“That’s why I called you, Josh. I have Parkinson’s, and I don’t know how much time I have. I need to tie up loose ends, and I don’t have anyone else that I know that can get it done.”

It was Josh’s turn to be quiet. He didn’t know much about Parkinson’s except that it wasn’t good, but he wanted to be sure he heard right.

“Parkinson’s you say. That can’t be good” then a deep reality set in. “That’s really harsh. Does Bea know?”

“Only you, Josh.”

“Why the secret?”

“I need to tell everyone, but there will be a lot of questions I can’t answer unless I know you have my back.”

Josh slumped. Timing couldn’t be worse, he thought, but then it was his old friend and boss, who he owed more than he could ever pay back. He straightened up.

“Whatever you want, boss. What do you want me to do?”

“Come to Germany and sit down with me, and we will work out how to close out my business.”

“I can do that, but I can’t just get on a plane and leave.”

“Of course. Now that I know you will help me, I want to tell everyone about my condition.”

“Do you want me to tell everyone here?”

“Yes.”

“What should I say?”

“Tell them I have Parkinson’s and no one knows for sure how much longer I have, months, longer, no one knows, but that you are going to help me close out my business. Then I will be free to spend time with family.”

“OK, boss, but they will want to talk to you, especially Bea. How about a speaker phone?”

“OK, can you get people together today and call me?”

“I’ll do it right now, boss. Together we will get your business wrapped up, and you will be free to do whatever you want. Maybe spend some time here.”

“I’ll stay by the phone, Josh.”

“I’ll go to the house and call. Really sorry about your condition, boss.”

There was no response, and Josh put the phone in his pocket. A big yellow cat was sitting at Josh’s feet. He liked the bit of egg sandwich Josh gave him and hoped for more. It was only his ancestral cat quick DNA that prevented him from getting splashed with coffee as Josh threw out what was left, and almost threw the cup itself. Josh’s best and oldest friend needed him. He could do that. He would do it, but what about Billy Baxter? Parkinson’s, he said, but what does that really mean? Josh got up and headed for the house remembering how Billy Baxter gave him his first real start by making him a crew chief, and even how he would have never met Maryam without his old friend’s request to go with her as a body guard. He owed it all to Billy Baxter’s trust in him, and he wouldn’t let him down now.

Mary was surprised when she saw Josh come in through the back door to the kitchen, but the look on his face froze her to her spot by the sink, and she put her hands on the sink to steady herself.

“What’s the matter, Josh?”

“I need to get everyone in the kitchen.”

“What’s the matter, Josh?”

“Just help me get everyone here now. Then I will only have to say it once.”

It only took a few minutes to get everyone together, except Jack. Bea’s hair was still wet, and Little Mary was still in her pajamas. Maryam was fully dressed, and Little Billy was still pushing his dippy eggs around with a piece of toast. Josh motioned them around the table.

“I’m going to call Billy Baxter in Germany and put him on the speaker phone so everyone, get around the phone.”

Bea’s face drained of color.

“Is something wrong?”

“I’ll let your father tell it, Bea.”

Just then Jack came in responding to his mother’s text.

“Mom said, come to the house. I got a tractor pulled apart. Can’t this wait?”

Jack felt the weight of his mother’s look as she motioned him to the table, and quieted down.

Josh tapped Billy Baxter's number, then tapped speaker and set the phone down on the table. They heard his voice.

"Are you there, Josh?"

"We are all here, Billy."

"All of you?"

"Yes, everyone, Billy."

"Thanks, Josh. I have asked Josh to come and help me close out my electrical contracting business and he has agreed."

Bea reacted.

"Dad, why are you doing this?"

Billy Baxter not only knew his daughter's voice, but he knew that he could not dance around the question.

"Bea, it began when I started having trouble with my balance. Then I fell a couple of times, and finally got checked out. It's Parkinson's, Bea, no doubt about it."

"Dad, does that mean you are going to die!?"

"Someday, Bea, but not today or tomorrow. I am going to spend time with you and Little Billy."

"Dad, Little Billy and I are coming to Germany."

"You don't need to do that. Your mother and your sister are taking good care of me and Josh is going to help with my business. Then I can come see you, and spend time with you."

"Dad, Billy and I are coming on the next plane."

Billy Baxter knew better than to argue.

"OK, Bea. Try to fly with Josh. He can help with Little Billy."

Mary had been watching the daily Farm Report on her Mac Air. Maryam swiveled it around to face herself, and saw a man standing in front of the State House gesturing about slow farm road legislation, while ticker tape commodities were scrolling across the bottom of the screen. Corn was down, soy beans were up, and Maryam clicked it off and searched "Parkinson's". She picked Web Med off the internet then scrolled down to "symptoms."

"Billy, are you having trouble breathing?"

“Is that you, Maryam?”

“Yes, are you having any trouble breathing, Billy?”

“No, my breathing is OK, it’s just fine. It’s only my legs don’t work right.”

Mary had to ask. The farm has to run.

“How long will you need Josh? Then softened. “When will you be able to travel?”

Billy knew it could only be Mary’s voice.

“Mary, I think I will need Josh only a few weeks, but I can’t be sure. I have to close out my contracts and find other jobs for my guys. I may be able to get another business to take over one or two contracts. I don’t know yet how long it will take.”

Maryam suddenly remembered that her sister, Deeba, worked for Billy Baxter.

“What about Deeba?”

“I will find other work for her, and it won’t be too difficult. She has good office skills, and I will want her with me until all this is worked out. Deeba will have a job, Maryam.”

Maryam knew her sister to be fragile.

“Have you told her yet?”

“No, I haven’t told anyone except Liesel, and now you. I had to know if Josh could help me.”

Jack threw up his hands and angrily backed away from the circle around the table. Billy Baxter’s much liked father-in-law was going to die from Parkinson’s. Josh was going to Germany and leaving him with more work than he could get done. Bea and Little Billy were going away, for how long, no one knew. It was Jack’s worst collection of frustrations he had ever experienced, and he banged his way out the back door slamming it behind him. Little Billy started to wail. Mary grabbed him up and took him outside. Jack calmed his angry face, and took Little Billy to his favorite swing set and started pushing him in the big swinging arc that Jack knew he loved. They rocked together now, a sniffling child and a gradually accepting father. Mary could see Jack beginning to relax and went back to the circle around her table where Maryam was quizzing Billy Baxter about his symptoms.

“Billy, I think you have only early symptoms. You may have many good years left.”

“Thanks, Maryam. That’s exactly what my doctor told me, but she also told me that I should organize my life, and that’s what I am doing.”

A calmer Bea insisted,

“I am coming to see you, Dad.”

“It will be nice to have you and Billy here. Remember, travel with Josh if you can. He can help you with Little Billy.”

During this whole exchange of family concerns and feelings, Josh had said nothing. Finally, he spoke up.

“I’ll check flights and let you know, Billy.”

Maryam volunteered,

“I’ll do it, Josh. I know you have a lot to do.”

“Thanks, Maryam.”

Josh pushed the phone to his mother and went outside to find Jack pushing Little Billy on the swing.

“Jack, he is my friend. I owe him more than I can pay.”

Jack pushed Billy higher.

“I have to do this, Jack.”

Jack let Billy pump his swing.

“OK. OK, Josh, but things are really going to be tough this time of year without you.”

“What about the Miller boy?”

“You mean Donnie, who’s been hanging around Little Mary?”

“He’s a farm kid, Jack. Big and strong, and I don’t think you would have any trouble getting him to work for you.”

“You’ve got that part right, Josh. The problem will be keeping him away from Little Mary.”

“My guess is that he will be a good worker.”

“OK, what about Migel and Luis? Can we ask for extra hours? What about Sundays?”

“Talk to them, Jack. Now I need to get that loader working before the hay truck shows up. We can make some plans after he has gotten his load and left. Maybe there are things that just won’t get done.”

“OK, Josh. Billy, I need to go to the barn. You should go back in to your grandma and finish your breakfast.”

“OK, Dad.”

In the kitchen Mary had been talking to Liesel Baxter. When she saw Little Billy come in, she pointed at the phone.

“Billy, your grandma is on the phone. Say, “Hi.”

“Hi, Grandma.”

Bea jumped in.

“Tell Grandma we are coming to see her.”

“Really, Mom! When are we going?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Grandma, we are coming to see you tomorrow.”

“That’s great, Billy. We will have fun together. Now let me talk to your mother.”

“I’m here, Mom.”

“I’ll fix up your old room, Bea. It will be nice to have you home for a few days.”

“We are going to travel with Josh.”

Billy pipes up, “Is Uncle Josh coming too?”

“Yes, Billy, so eat your jelly toast, and then we can pick out some clothes to take.”

“OK, Mom. Yay, Uncle Josh is coming too!”

~ ~ ~

Little Mary saw Maryam at the computer making plane reservations. Bea was taking Little Billy up to get ready to travel. She could see Mary cleaning up after breakfast. That she should help her grandmother crossed her mind, but it looked, to her, that Mary had everything under control. If she went to the barn, they would hand her a broom and a shovel. Ugh, she thought, so she saw there was leftover coffee, warmed her cup, and went to sit on the front porch.

Billy Baxter was, for her, a distant relative. Their rare meeting had been pleasant, but there was no feeling of closeness. She thought, “I’m sorry he is not well. I’ll tell him when I get to see him – if ever.” She heard the snort of a big diesel highway tractor, and saw the 18-wheeler hay truck pulling into the yard. Life was going to go on, but what about me? Don’t believe I’ll get a dinner and a movie tonight. Now, at least, I don’t need to worry about how to dress.

Her mind drifted and her coffee got cold. Maybe I can learn how to drive the combine. Harvest season is coming. They haven't let me drive the big equipment. Could be because I broke my arm driving the little tractor, but they never said so. Uncle Jack's a good teacher. He could do it. Then maybe I won't get stuck in the house helping Grandma Mary. Then she heard a familiar gravel crunch and looked up to see Donnie Miller pulling in with his pickup with huge tires. The day suddenly looked brighter. She stood up and waved, but Donnie kept going around the side of the barn and disappeared from her view. Nothing about this day was turning out right, and she went in with a huff. Maryam was pushing back from the computer.

"Did you get reservations?"

"Yes, they can get to Chicago tomorrow, but not on a plane to Frankfurt until the next day. I made reservations for them at the Hampton Inn for tomorrow night."

"We aren't going to a movie tonight, are we?"

"I don't intend to bring it up."

What's left of this day? Nothing. She made sure her phone was in her pocket, and headed for her room. Mary called her back.

"Come collect eggs for me."

"Right now?"

"Yes, hens keep their own schedule."

Maryam saw her daughter huff over to get the big egg basket and tried to remember what "15" was like. Tomorrow she would take her daughter to a movie and let her choose.

Then she called out to Mary,

"What can I do to help? Reservations are made. They can leave in the morning, but they'll spend the night in Chicago."

"Make sure all of Josh's clothes are clean. See if Bea needs anything washed. Later, you can take lunch to the guys."

When Maryam took lunches to the barn, Bea and Little Billy went with her, and they all stayed and had lunch with "Dad." Little Billy liked eating lunch with his dad, but didn't get to do it very often. Little Mary realized that Donnie was having his lunch with the men, and grabbed lunch for herself and went along. So, Mary was having a quiet lunch noon break when her phone rang. The phone said Billy's mother, Sue Baxter, so she picked it up.

"Hi, Sue. Have you talked with Billy today?"

"Yes, Mary, and I'm having a hard time with this."

“Bea wanted to call, but we told her you would get a call from Billy, so she said she would wait and call this evening.”

“I’m surprised you got Bea to wait. Billy told me she insisted on coming to see him.”

“It was all we could do to keep her from running out the door.”

“She takes after her mother. Mary, I have spent the last hour on medical web sites, and they really don’t say how long you can last, and that’s all I wanted to know.”

“No one knows, Sue.”

“Billy told me not to worry, like that helps, and asked me to stay home so he didn’t need to worry about me on a plane. They provide wheelchairs. I would have been OK, but I’ll stay home like he asked.”

“When Bea calls this evening, she will be able to tell you about flights. They need to stay over one night. No last-minute seats to Frankfurt tomorrow.”

“Tell her to plan to come and see me if they have time.”

“I will, Sue. And Billy has promised us that he will visit here in the States. I’m sure he will spend time with you.”

“Yes, I know he will. Thanks for listening to me, Mary.”

When Mary put down the phone, she thought that Bea and Billy may not have time to see Grandma Sue, but she would let Bea tell it. She resisted looking at Web Med one more time, and closed down the face of the computer so it wouldn’t be staring at her. She started to make a grocery list – thinking it will be nice next year when Little Mary can drive and shop for her.

CHAPTER 2

“The worst thing that could have happened, didn’t happen.”

Billy Baxter and Liesel had their first meal together in the ancient restaurant, where she was now sitting sipping a perfectly chilled Riesling. Today there was a tremor in her hand as she held the glass, a tremor that had never been there before. She set the glass on the table worried that she may spill it. Yesterday after arriving home from his doctor appointment, Billy told her that he had Parkinson’s, a chronic condition, and she had flushed with anger. How could her perfect, beautiful life suddenly be ending, and she was so angry she could hardly speak.

Yesterday had not gone well.

“Are you sure! Absolutely sure?”

“Yes, Liesel, my doctor is absolutely sure about this.”

“How could this happen?”

“No one knows.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We are going to continue to enjoy life together.”

“But for how long?”

“No one knows.”

Liesel had thrown up her hands. “No one knows” had felt like a slap in the face. She wasn’t a control freak, but life had simply always gone her way, now – no one knows – she went to bed and didn’t get up until after Billy had gone to his office. There was a note on the table.

Bea, Little Billy and Josh are coming.

She called Billy at work.

“Why is Bea coming? Is there more you haven’t told me?”

“No, I told you everything. Bea insisted. I couldn’t talk her out of it, and she is bringing Little Billy. Those were her decisions, Liesel. You know how she is.”

“What about Josh?”

“I asked him to come close down the business, and he agreed.”

“You’re closing your business? What is it you are not telling me?”

“I’m closing the business so we can have time together. Maybe travel, do all the things we like to do.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this yesterday?”

“I don’t know, Liesel. I had to be sure about Josh. It was late and you had just gone to bed.”

Liesel just sat with the phone in her hand, then as if the phone had a mind of its own, called a number. The phone went silent.

“This is Liesel. Can we have lunch today?”

Then response, “Yes, I have time.”

“Noon at our usual place?”

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

Now Liesel sat with her wine mostly untouched waiting for the person with whom she had a long and intimate relationship before she met and married Billy Baxter. She was turning to her old friend and lover for answers to why her life seemed suddenly out of control. Liesel was grasping for control in her life and she had that with this person. Then Gretchen came through the door. Liesel felt a surge of familiarity and control. Eros knows no gender for her. She and Gretchen had a history, a comfortable history that morphed into simple friendship, then faded with time. Now Gretchen moved to her side, and Liesel felt her breath become relaxed.

Gretchen looked Turkish, but was all German in her manner. She sat down at the table that she and Liesel shared many times, the before Billy Baxter times. She waved the waiter away.

“You look great today, Liesel, but then you always did. Life is being good to you. I see you walking in the village, and you still walk like the lingerie model you used to be for me. Why have you called me?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Billy. I am so angry with him; I could hardly talk to him.”

“He has found another woman?”

“No. No. He is going to die. He has Parkinson’s and he is going to leave me, Gretchen. He promised he would always be there for me and now he’s going to leave me.”

Gretchen sat thoughtful for a moment.

“I think you should not worry so much about this man. Model for me again.”

Being the ever-practical German,

“I’m much too old to model your underwear line.”

“Not if you just modeled them for me.”

This is not where Liesel wanted this conversation to go. She wanted to almost scream about being angry, frustrated and abandoned, but Liesel’s body betrayed her intentions. She could feel the tension in her hips and move down her inner thighs. This was not what she wanted. Or was it? Maybe she could think better standing.

“Sit down, Liesel.

It was not a request, but a command, but then softer,

“It’s not his fault that he has Parkinson’s, but today you came back to me.”

Liesel remained standing. She could feel her knees buckling – not his fault – you came back to me. She grasped her chair and felt sweat in her armpits and down the valley of her back. She tried to speak but nothing came out, then getting control of her breath she shouted, “NO!” and fled out the restaurant door.

Liesel kept from falling by leaning against the old rough, cool stone wall. The wall was like a friend holding her steady. An old friend. She had run her hands down this rough wall as a child, and now it kept her from falling to the ground. She could smell her own fear sweat, and she remembered the smell from her experience at the morgue when she thought her daughter, Bea, may be under the white sheet. She wasn’t. The worst thing that could have happened, didn’t happen. She ran her hand over the surface of the wall like a child. The worst thing that could have happened, didn’t happen.

Liesel willed deep breaths. This was her wall. This was her village. She belonged here. This was her home. She pushed her damp back against the wall. Her village had not abandoned her. And now she knew Billy was not abandoning her. She had heard Gretchen say it, “It’s not his fault.” He was not abandoning her. He didn’t want to be sick. She found a rough spot to grasp. Her body had almost caused her to step on a slippery slope from which there was no escape. But she had said, “No.” The worst thing that could have happened, didn’t happen.

A few more deep breaths and Liesel felt herself steady enough to walk. Gradually her long confident striding walk that people had always noticed began to return as she walked toward the house her grandfather had built years ago. The steep hillside, and then the steep steps to the door, her everyday challenges melted before her confident steps. Her confidence moved upward in her body from her strong legs to her clearing mind. She sensed that new clarity with almost a feeling of euphoria, as she imagined decorating Bea’s old room for her daughter and grandchild. Maybe Little Billy wouldn’t want to sleep in the room with his mother, and would rather sleep in

the other room with his big Uncle Josh. She would let him decide. The worst thing that could have happened, didn't happen.

In the soft quiet of her favorite wing back chair, she realized how badly she wanted to hear his voice. She was desperate for the reassurance that he was OK right this minute. She started to call his phone, then put hers in her lap. I can't let him know how I feel – desperate to hear his voice – she thought as she tried to get control of her emotions. She hummed. She picked up a newspaper and began to read the headlines out loud. Satisfied that she could speak in a normal voice she called him. He answered.

“Hi, Liesel. What do you need?”

All business, she thought. Can't tell him I just wanted to hear his voice.

“Thought I would ask you what you would like for dinner?”

“Aren't you busy getting the house ready for company?”

He knows me so well, she thought.

“Yes, but I have time to fix us something nice.”

“What if we go to our favorite place for dinner then you won't need to cook?”

Liesel felt a knot in her stomach. No, she didn't want to go back there – at least not today.

“What if I fix schnitzel and spaetzle? We always liked that.”

She didn't have veal for the schnitzel, and would need to go out for it, but she added,

“It would be easy, and we like it.”

“Sounds good. I may be late.”

“Call me when you start home.”

“OK.”

Then trying to normalize,

“What if I plan to pick everyone up at the airport tomorrow? Would that help?”

“Yes, I was planning to go and pick up Josh, but you can pick up everyone, and drop off Josh here for me.”

“OK, Billy. I love you.”

“Never doubted it, Liesel. Love you too.”

Liesel put the phone in her pocket, and with new resolve headed out the door to the village butcher shop. Cleaning up bedrooms would get done whenever. As she walked down the steep

hill, she was thinking what she would wear this evening. What would he like, but not too obvious?

~ ~ ~

It was late when Billy finally got home, but Liesel had waited for his call. What she was serving for dinner was best straight from the stove to the plate, and she wanted it to be best. He walked in looking tired.

“Dinner is almost ready. Would you like a beer?”

“Yes. I’ll go splash some water on my face.”

He was gone longer than she thought a splash of water would take, and she felt concern creeping in. Is this what I’m going to be like? Wondering from minute to minute if he is OK or needs me?” Then he came out with a smile and a clean shirt.

“It smells great!”

“Schnitzel and spaetzle, the way you like it.”

He almost said, “What’s the occasion?”

But he stopped short like he did when he saw her in his favorite silky slacks and top that covered everything and hid nothing. He was the occasion. Liesel became chatty.

“I talked with your mother. She has become a medical expert. Then I talked with Bea.

They won’t get here until later tomorrow. Do you still want me to get Josh and bring him to you?” Finally, she took a breath.

“Why don’t you bring him here, and I’ll come home when he gets here.”

Serving dinner stopped Liesel’s nervous chatter, but not for long.

“It’s been more than a year since we have seen Little Billy – he will have grown. Don’t you think?”

Finally, passing the ball.

“Is he five now?”

“Yes, can you believe it! And Bea says, growing like a weed. She even told me that he can be a little bossy. You would never think that, would you? Bea says that she cut her

hair for the trip.”

This was not the Liesel he had been married to for 25 years.

“Is everything off in the kitchen, and can the dishes wait?”

Liesel felt tears, but only nodded, “yes”.

“Then come sit with me. Or we could take a walk. It’s a nice night.”

“I’m not dressed for walking.”

“Then we can talk in the living room.”

Liesel was led, not reluctantly, but led none the less. They sat in their favorite chairs, half facing one another.

“Liesel, I have no pain, and I want you to treat me like you always have. The dinner was wonderful. You look wonderful. But you chatter like my mother. I want us to have a normal life.”

“Like having Bea rush over here like she thinks you are dying? What’s normal about that?”

Billy breathed a deep sigh,

“That’s Bea. That’s not us. We can live like we always have, but with us having more time together. That’s the kind of normal I know we can be.”

Not yet willing to let go of what she was feeling, angry yesterday, afraid this morning, determined in the busy afternoon. Now, what was she feeling knowing that Billy could see the wetness on her cheeks? So, she blurted it out,

“I am so sorry that this has happened to you, Billy. I’m so sorry.”

Billy reached for her hands.

“It’s happened to us, not me – us, Liesel, and we will be like we have always been.”

“But for how long, Billy? – how long?”

“Does it matter so much? But, it could be years. Years, Liesel, and always going to be us.”

Billy squeezed her hands tighter.

“When our visitors go home, let’s spend time at our favorite place in Bavaria. Would you like that?”

“It’s not ski season in Bavaria, Billy.”

“We won’t wait. Go soon, then maybe go again in the winter.”

“We can do that?”

“Exactly. We will have more freedom than we have ever had. We can do that.”

“And visit your mother?”

“That too.”

Liesel was trying to absorb Billy’s saving sense of new freedom.

“I’ll change my shoes and we can take that walk.”

“I’d like that.”

“Then you may be tired enough to go to bed early.”

“I’d like that even better.”

~ ~ ~

Normal, normal, kept running through Liesel’s mind as she dusted and cleaned. Her twin daughters’ old rooms were ready for company. Josh would be in Thea’s old room with flowered wallpaper and sheer drapes. He would manage, she thought, but the bed would be too short. Well, she couldn’t do anything about that. Late in the afternoon she drove to the airport, not knowing that sitting on Billy’s massive oak office desk was an envelope of documents that would blow “normal” out of the water for everyone.

When they all got to the house, jet lag took over. Billy pulled Josh aside before letting him get to bed, but Bea and Little Billy were eager for a night’s sleep.

“Josh, it’s really good you agreed to come. We have a lot to talk about tomorrow.”

“If you want to go over things this evening, I’m OK with that.”

“Tomorrow, Josh. We will need all day.”

~ ~ ~

In the morning Liesel was up to see Billy and Josh off, then sat down with her second cup of coffee when Little Billy poked his head into the kitchen. She wasn’t ready to make a little boy breakfast so she said,

“Go get your clothes and shoes, and we will go to the bakery for breakfast.”

This sounded like an adventure so he was off like a shot, came back mostly dressed, and carrying his shoes. Liesel helped him with his shoes, and they were headed down the hill to the village bakery.

“It’s all hills, Grandma.”

“Walking in our village makes your legs and heart strong. Are you hungry?”

“Really hungry, Grandma. I didn’t eat much yesterday.”

“Well, you may have whatever you like.”

“Whatever you like” added to Little Billy’s sense of breakfast adventure. When they walked into the bakery, he thought he was in a fairy wonderland of beautiful food.

“Freda, this is my grandson, Billy from America. He is named after his grandfather. I told him he could have anything he wanted for breakfast.”

Billy stood transfixed so Freda coached,

“You may like this roll. It has a sausage inside, or this sweet roll, or if your grandma said, ‘anything’ then you may like both.”

Billy said, “Both,” and was handed a man-sized breakfast.

Sitting in a booth, Billy enjoyed his roll with sausage inside, then looked at the sweet roll. Liesel said,

“Let’s get a little bag and take that home with us.”

Little Billy trudged up the hill back to the house carrying his bakery bag and feeling very confident. They found Bea finally getting up. “Normal,” Liesel was saying to herself.

Talk between Billy and Josh was taking a new direction, and the office space didn’t fit what they needed to talk about so they went to find a quiet place for lunch and a beer. Josh asked the questions.

“Are you saying that you don’t want to close out your business?”

“I panicked, Josh. I thought I may die quickly, but now I am the same as yesterday, even the same as I was a month ago. That new contract award has caused me to rethink my business.”

“If you are not closing down, we can have a little visit, and I’ll go on home.”

“That’s not what I’m thinking, Josh. I can run a business like I always have, at least for now, but I can’t handle this new contract. I’m asking you if you can do it.”

“Billy, you’ll need to tell me more about it.”

So, Billy laid it out for Josh, and Josh listened.

At home, around the dinner table, Josh and Billy shared nothing about business. This did not surprise Liesel because Billy didn’t bring his work home. Josh looked at the time, and took his phone to his “teen girl” room.

Liesel had fluffed pillows and straightened the down cover. The bed looked much too nice to sit on, but there was no way for Josh to fit into Thea’s little blue barrel chair so he sat down on the end of the bed and heard it squeak under his weight. Then he called Maryam, who answered,

“Hi Josh. How was your flight?”

“No problems, but the seats were designed by an idiot.”

“Maybe you should get first class on the way home.”

Josh straightened his back, took a breath and said,

“I need to tell you about Billy’s business.”

“I don’t need to know about Billy’s business.”

Josh pushed ahead.

“Before Billy knew he had Parkinson’s, he put in a bid as an electrical sub-contractor for a big general contractor doing reconstruction business in Ukraine.”

“I thought Billy was only working in Germany.”

“He was, but he saw a chance to grow doing the kind of work he did in the Army in Iraq so, he put in a bid and they have awarded him the contract.”

“Well, he just won’t accept it, right? Your mother and daughter would like to talk to you.”

“Not now, Maryam. I need to tell you about the contract.”

Getting bored and frustrated,

“Go ahead, Josh, but there are things I need to tell you too.”

“Maryam, we need to talk about this now.”

Maryam reluctantly connected.

“OK, Josh, why do you need to tell me about this?”

“It’s a big general contract for fifty million dollars.”

“That’s a lot of money, Josh, and Billy would get a piece of that?”

“Yes, but the general has a task order contract. That means that Ukraine can add work, any amount of work, and the contract could grow by negotiation, not competitive bidding.”

“Get to the point, Josh. I don’t need a lecture on construction contracting.”

“The point, Maryam, is that there is almost no limit. The general contract could run into hundreds of millions, even a billion dollars.”

“That’s a lot of money to walk away from, Josh.”

“What if we don’t walk away from it?”

“What are you saying?”

“When Billy saw how much money was involved, he told me today he would take me on as chief of operations, and he would let me run the company.”

“But I thought Billy wanted to close his business and spend time with his family. I heard him say it.”

“He wants to push back like he said, but now he has asked me to take over. It would be my running the business, and we would be wealthy, Maryam, wealthy, rich people. I never thought I would ever be rich, and you and Little Mary and Liesel and Billy. We would all be rich.”

“I don’t like this at all, Josh, not at all.”

“How can you say that?”

Now growing angry,

“Josh, I don’t want you to do this.”

“I have to tell you how important this is to me.”

Maryam realized phone limits.

“Then we need face-to-face, and with Liesel and Billy. I’ll come to Germany.”

“How soon can you come?”

“I know it will take at least two days. I don’t like this, Josh.”

Josh mentally calculated. He had to say “yes” to Billy’s offer within twenty days because Billy only had twenty days to accept and sign the contract. Pushing on,

“You will like it when you see all the possibilities.”

“I only agree to sit down with you, and it has to be with Liesel and Billy too.”

“Come as soon as you can.”

“I will. Now you must talk to your mother and your daughter, but absolutely not about Billy’s business.”

“OK, Maryam. Put them on.”

Josh recognized his mother’s voice.

“How are you feeling, Josh? Plane ride and time shift always causes me problems.”

“I’m OK, Mom.”

And so, it went for about 20 minutes. Chatter with Little Mary, and say, “Hi” to Jack.

~ ~ ~

Back in Germany Little Billy had decided he wasn’t ready to give up sleeping in the same room as his mother, especially since it was a strange house. So, when Liesel offered to put a cot in Josh’s room, he responded, “Not tonight, Grandma.” Then in the morning Bea helped him get dressed with fresh clothes from his own suitcase, sent him off to breakfast and sat down to call his father. Billy went down the steps to get his breakfast from his grandmother like he always did at home, but his grandmother was not in the kitchen. In fact, she was still in the shower. But Billy was hungry. His other grandmother always had his breakfast ready for him. He had never needed to wait for it. Then he remembered that yesterday this grandmother took him to the bakery for his breakfast. So out the door he went and down the hill to the bakery. He went in, sat down in the same booth, but nothing happened. No breakfast showed up in front of him.

Billy recognized Freda in her apron behind the counter, and she even smiled at him, but she was talking with another person and no breakfast was coming his way. Just then an old man came into the bakery. Billy thought he had to be really old. His clothes hung loose, he was bent over, and he was using a cane. Billy had never seen anyone looking this old, and the old man looked a little scary. But Freda had smiled when he came in so he must be OK. He spoke to Freda then turned to Billy and spoke to him in English.

“Freda here tells me you are a visitor from America.”

Billy smiled and nodded.

“Would you like to have some breakfast with me?”

Billy sat a little taller and smiled.

“OK, what would you like? You can go over there and pick something out.”

Billy walked over to the glass case and pointed. The old man said,

“OK, Freda, give us two of those and a milk and a coffee, and my sweet roll.”

Billy was happily eating his breakfast with his new old friend when Bea walked in. Bea had spent the first nineteen years of her life in this village and was not worried about her son going out for a morning walk, but Liesel told her where she might find him. She knew everyone and everyone knew her. She looked at Billy,

“So, this is where you went. Your grandmother thought you would remember yesterday’s breakfast. Henry, are you buying my son’s breakfast?”

“Bea! How nice to see you. I didn’t know he belonged to you. He doesn’t talk much, but he can point really well. Sit with us.”

Things change slowly in this village; even old Henry had aged slowly. The last time Bea saw him he was having the same breakfast in the same bakery at the same time of the morning. By the time Bea, Billy and Henry had finished their breakfast, enough villagers had been in and out of the bakery spreading the news so that the village now knew Bea was visiting with her son.

After breakfast Bea decided to take Billy for a walk around the village. They got a lot of smiles and waves. Bea took Billy a complete circle around the village center and pointed up the hill toward their house so that she was sure he knew the way home. Then she told him he was free to roam the village as she had always done as a child. Billy had been free to roam about the farm, but the village was different. He had never imagined so many interesting things like shop windows with wonders he had never seen. He saw mannequins in fine clothes, shoe stores, another bakery with big decorated cakes in the windows, and sidewalks full of different looking people. And his mother said he was free to enjoy it all. But right this minute he decided to walk back to his house to be sure he knew the way.

~ ~ ~

Mary had heard snatches of the phone call between Maryam and Josh so later when Maryam announced that she was going to Germany to help Josh with some of Billy’s business, she kind of knew that there may be a problem. But she said only,

“I hope you don’t need to stay long. There is a lot to do around here.”

Little Mary almost said, “Take me along,” but thought better of it like maybe she would be trying to get out of work. Besides when Jack sent Donnie to town for a part, she got to go along. Jack shrugged when he heard, but went on about his work. So, there was no additional sense of stress at the farm caused by Maryam leaving, but Mary was suspicious.

~ ~ ~

When Bea and Little Billy were back at the house after his breakfast and tour of the village, she said to Liesel,

“You were right. That’s where he was, and having breakfast with Old Henry. I am surprised that Henry is still alive because he was really old the last time I saw him.”

Liesel responded,

“People, men especially, live long lives here. Your dad has gone to work with Josh. Oh, and Maryam is coming tomorrow.”

Maryam was as close to Bea as her own twin sister. When Bea was still a teenager, she had held Maryam’s hand after a car accident, and at the moment, Maryam thought she might die. Bea “adopted” the older, more worldly Maryam, and now they were married to brothers. So, Bea was delighted when she learned that Maryam was coming to Germany. The why question took a few moments to form. Then in Bea fashion,

“Why is Maryam coming here?”

“It has to do with your father’s business.”

“Maryam has never had anything to do with Dad’s business. Why now?”

“There will be a family meeting when she gets here. It has to do with money.”

“Why is all this going on without my being told about it?”

Bea was feeling left out of the family circle and didn’t like it.

“Why didn’t I know about this?”

“It just came up last night, Bea, and I didn’t know Maryam was coming tomorrow until this morning, and you were off with Billy.

Bea felt better, but still had questions. She was the last to know and didn’t like it.

“What about money? I never thought money was a problem. Do we need money?”

“No, we don’t need any money.”

“You aren’t going to tell me, are you? But Mom, you can’t just say there will be a family meeting. I want to know why.”

Liesel wanted everyone in the room when the story was told, but she gave up.

“Bea, your dad could be rich if he keeps working, and that’s what needs to be talked about.”

Liesel's attempt didn't help.

"I don't want my dad to be rich. I want him to stop working and spend time with me and Little Billy."

"Say that tomorrow, but it's best if you hear the whole story."

Bea was still not happy, but with a daughter's sigh,

"Is there anything I need to do? What can I do to help?"

"Put the clean dishes away, then find Little Billy something fun to do."

Bea put the dishes away then looked for Little Billy, and discovered he was nowhere in the house. Liesel and Bea were not worried, even when lunch came and went, and still no Little Billy.

Finally, Bea said,

"I'll go look for Billy. Is there anything you need that I can pick up while I'm out?"

"It would be nice to have some fresh flowers for the table."

"OK, Mom." And Bea went out the door.

It didn't take Bea long to discover that Little Billy was not within the center of the village she had shown him. People remembered seeing him, but not in the last hour or so. Bea widened her search. All the while, Little Billy was having fun with a new friend, a huge Brindle dog that loved to play chase and catch.

Earlier Little Billy had looked down a narrow, shaded street and could see at the far end open ground and a real castle in the center. The sight drew him like a magnet draws iron. There he found a few people enjoying the castle grounds and the huge dog. Little Billy loved all kinds of animals, and as he ran toward the dog, the dog saw in Little Billy a chance to run and play that its elderly owner no longer had the energy for. And that's where Bea found him. She quickly hid the worry that had been creeping in. Little Billy saw her and came running toward her with the dog close behind him.

"Hi, Mom. This is Bruno."

Bea patted the dog's head and the dog's owner waved.

"I think you should come home for some lunch, Billy."

"Ah, Mom. I'm not hungry. Can't I stay here?"

"OK, Billy. I'm going to buy some flowers for Grandma and then I'll come back here for you. Stay here where I can find you. You, stay right here."

"OK, Mom."

He really meant “OK Mom” until the dog’s owner got up to leave and the dog obediently went with her. When Bea got back there was no dog and no Little Billy. For the first time she thought, what if he grows up to be just like me? Then, maybe he hasn’t gone far, and she looked for a place to sit down. Was that Little Billy’s small voice? She looked across the castle green and didn’t see him, then she looked up. Little Billy was in a tree, but not just any tree. He had discovered the steep tree-covered hillside behind the castle. Climbing up the hill, he came to a tree with low branches he could reach. They presented an invitation he couldn’t refuse, so up the tree he climbed. When Bea followed his voice to the tree, Little Billy looked like he was way, way up in the air. Once again, she had to calm her voice as she connected with the fact that he might only be a few feet above the ground at the base of his climbing tree. Bea shouted, but calmly, so as not to make his climb an even bigger adventure by falling.

“Billy, come down. We need to take these flowers to Grandma.”

She couldn’t help adding, “I asked you to stay here and wait for me.”

“I’m here, Mom.”

In his mind, if he could see “here,” then he was “here”.

On his way back down the hill his feet couldn’t keep up, causing him to tumble down the last part of the bushy slope, and he jumped back up covered with leaves and a scratch or two. He was as happy as Bea had ever seen him, and at that moment she changed what she was going to say from “No more climbing trees” to,

“Let’s brush you off so your grandma will let you in the house.”

“OK, Mom.”

As she brushed him off,

“I see you have a little blood on your pants.”

“It’s OK, Mom, it doesn’t hurt.”

“Let’s go home, Billy. Maybe you will need some new pants.”

“OK, Mom.”

Little Billy took off running ahead pleased that he had played with a big dog, climbed a tree, and had blood on his pants to show off to whomever would listen to his story of adventure at the castle.

~ ~ ~

That evening with everyone home around the flower decorated table Little Billy could tell his adventure story about a big dog, and mountain climbing with the tree, and his patched knee. Josh had to ask,

“Does it hurt?”

“No, Uncle Josh. My knee doesn’t hurt, but Mom says I may need a new pair of pants.”

Liesel chimed in,

“That’s a good idea. We will look for a chance to go shopping.”

“OK, Grandma.”

And so, the evening was conspicuously quiet except for Little Billy’s adventure and deciding who would pick up Maryam at the airport. Bea couldn’t stand the quiet or holding her questions that she knew no one would answer, but she thought, maybe there is a way around this conspiracy of silence so she asked,

“When did you stop working, Mom?”

“When my mother became ill. I stayed home to take care of your grandmother until she died. Then I didn’t go back to work.”

“Didn’t you like your work at the bank?”

“Yes, I did like it. It felt good to do the work your grandfather had always done, and the money was good. Work also gave me the feeling of independence that I have always liked.”

“But you gave it up.”

“Well, Bea, it wasn’t like I gave it up. It was more like I no longer needed to be like my father, and decided to be more like my mother.”

“How so?”

“Active in village matters. Keeping a beautiful home – and thank you for picking up the flowers for me.”

“You don’t need the income anymore?”

Bea was circling around to her argument.

“No. We have no outstanding bills and there is sufficient steady income from interest bearing accounts. Your dad and I are financially stable.”

Bea closed in, as she turned to her father.

“Why do you want to be rich? Mom just said you have everything you need?”

Billy tried to dodge Bea’s question.

“Tomorrow, Bea.”

Bea pushed back from the table, but only half way.

“Why tomorrow, Dad?”

“We need everyone around the table, and that includes Maryam.”

Billy went to the kitchen to help, and to escape Bea. Bea got out a big bag of Legos and sat down on the floor with Little Billy.

“Let’s build a tower.”

“And a dog. Can we build a dog?”

“OK, and a dog.”

Josh went to his quiet place and called his brother, Jack. He didn’t want to talk to Jack, but he knew the conversation had to happen. He opened with farm talk.

“How is Donnie working out?”

“Good kid. Does what I ask him to do, but not much else.”

“That’s what kids that age, are like.”

Etc. etc.

Finally,

“There is going to be a family discussion about money tomorrow, and we want you and Mom to listen in. It may mean my staying in Germany a little longer.”

“How much longer you talking about? It hasn’t been easy, and harvest season is coming up. How much longer, Josh?”

Josh couldn’t bring himself to say, maybe years, but why, why couldn’t he just say it? But he couldn’t.

“That will be part of the discussion tomorrow, Jack. Can you be on the call?”

“It sounds like I have to be.”

“OK, is Mom there?”

“Right here. I’ll hand her the phone.”

The call reverted to farm, weather, and Little Mary. Little Mary went to the movies with Donnie, Mary informed Josh. Then, “Are you eating right, Josh?” Always a mother’s question.

~ ~ ~

In the morning Liesel went to get Maryam at the airport. Little Billy wanted to go to the bakery and have breakfast with Old Henry. Bea took him aside,

“Here is some money. Give it to Freda, and she will give you some change back. Don’t go running off to other places. After breakfast you come on home.”

“OK, Mom.” And off he went to the bakery.

Billy and Josh had papers spread on the table, pointing and waving hands to yes, or a no. Figuring how this could all work was not going to be easy.

Bea had wanted to go with her son, but she also wanted him to experience his new village freedom. She paced around, resisting looking over her father’s shoulder, then went to the kitchen and began doing what she always did best, baked cookies.

By mid-morning Liesel brought Maryam in looking tired. Josh gave her a hug, but she said that she needed a nap, and disappeared into Josh’s room. Little Billy came back from the bakery having actually listened to his mother, not to run off to another adventure.

~ ~ ~

Finally, after a light lunch and Maryam looking a little better, Billy and Josh could no longer put off the talk. Josh selected his brother’s number and tapped it. When he heard an answer, he put it on speaker phone. They heard Mary’s voice on the phone.

“This is Mom. It’s been stressful and busy here, but Jack is across the table and I asked Little Mary to stay home and listen in.”

Josh replied,

“Thanks, Mom. Hi, Jack and Little Mary. Billy is going to start.”

Billy began trying his best to make a long complex business story family short.

“You know I have Parkinson’s and that made me want to close out my business, and that was why I asked Josh to come help me. I only found out two days ago that a bid I put in

was accepted with the potential of really big money. The only way it could work is if I stepped back from actually running the company, took a back seat, and Josh would run the company.”

Silence. Then Mary said,

“Josh, does that mean you would have to stay in Germany?”

“Yes, Mom, that’s what it means.”

There was a loud banging around, like a door slamming. Maryam called into the phone,

“What’s that, Mary?”

“Jack just when out the back door.”

Josh put his hands to his face.

“Why won’t he even listen, Mom?”

“I guess he thinks there is nothing more to listen to. Have you made up your mind about this?”

“We would be rich, Mom. Really rich. We would never want for anything.”

“That’s nice, Josh, but you know I have everything I ever wanted. My two boys at home with their wives and my grandchildren. I am already a rich woman, Josh.”

“Mom, there’s more to it than just money. Our business would help people restore their lives in Ukraine. Billy and I know how to do that, and make a lot of money doing it. Mom, are you listening?”

“That may be nice for the people in Ukraine, but we would no longer be a Nebraska farm family. If we quit farming, sell out to big Ag, which is what we would have to do, that would cause real hardship to lives here, Josh. When family farms sell out, the county goes under, the town dries up, schools close. We know this happens. We saw it in other counties, Josh.”

“One farm won’t do that, Mom.”

“Maybe not, but it could change the way our neighbors think, then they sell, and the county loses everyone.”

Josh slammed his fist on the table.

“We can’t help what other people do!”

Liesel grabbed the flowers and said loudly,

“We need a break.”

Then the phone literally shouted,

“This is all dumb! Really dumb, stupid dumb! What about me! Where am I going to go!

You talk about making money and selling our farm, like I didn’t exist!

You don’t think about me! You can take your old money and your old farm! I don’t want any of it, ever!”

The phone made a loud cracking sound and went dead. Everyone knew it was Little Mary, and Liesel didn’t need to say again that they needed a break. Little Billy heard the shouting and the loud bang of the phone. He looked up from his Legos and started to cry.

Everyone scattered as Liesel wiped up the water from the spilled flower vase. Maryam was closest to Little Billy so she went to him and his Legos.

“What if we try to build a house?”

“Why is everyone so angry?”

“We are trying to solve a problem. Everyone will be OK. Let’s build a house.”

Little Billy quieted down. Liesel went to the kitchen to make a fresh pot of coffee, and Bea followed her to set out some of her cookies on a tray, took them into the room with Little Billy, and said to pick one for himself. The cookies helped.

Billy and Josh went into the living room together. Bea took charge of Little Billy, and Maryam went to Josh.

“Josh, don’t do this.”

“I’ll visit often.”

“I may not be there.”

“Where will you be – back with your generous gentlemen friends?”

Maryam stiffened. Stood stock still. Then turned and walked away saying,

“Good-bye, Josh,” as she pushed past Liesel trying to bring coffee.

Liesel had heard the exchange, put the coffee on the table and followed Maryam.

“That was a foolish thing for him to say, Maryam. He’s angry. Angry men say foolish things.”

“I’m the fool, Liesel, to think that part of my life was forgotten. Now I know it isn’t. I’m going to the airport and getting the next flight back to my daughter. Didn’t you hear how distressed she was on the phone? I’m going back to her, Liesel, and together we will decide what to do next.”

Bea and Little Billy were with his Legos when Maryam went by with her little overnight case.

Bea asked,

“Where are you going?”

“To get the next flight out.”

Bea thought for a second,

“My dad doesn’t need me here. I really need to get back to Jack. If you wait a few minutes, we will get ready and go with you.”

Little Billy spoke up,

“Where are we going?”

“Home.”

“I don’t want to go home. I like it here.”

Liesel heard the exchange.

“What if he stays with me for a few days, then we will travel together for a visit.”

Turning to her son, Bea asked,

“Would you like to stay with Grandma for a few days, then ride on the plane with her?”

“Yes.”

So, it was quickly decided that Maryam and Bea would go to the airport to get the next plane out, and Little Billy would stay with his grandma. Maryam said to Liesel,

“We will get a motel room until we can get on a flight.”

~ ~ ~

Billy and Josh sat in a quiet gasthaus looking at each other over their beers, then Josh ordered some soft pretzels saying, “I always liked beer and soft pretzels.”

Billy looking directly at Josh,

“I panicked when they told me I had Parkinson’s. It was like I was going to die in a week, but I’m no different than I was when they told me.”

“That’s good, Boss.”

“But that’s why I called you. I thought my end was near, but it isn’t.”

“You saying you don’t need me?”

“You are a big help in closing my business. It will go faster with you here, but I could do it by myself.”

“What about the Ukraine contract?”

“Josh, you would have to do it.”

“I want to do it, but nobody else wants me to.”

“You got that right.”

“Boss, that’s the global construction world. I learned that when I was in the Army on deployment. Men work away from home. I saw it on all the jobs I was assigned to. Jobs are in one place and the men are from someplace else. That’s the military way, and the global construction world. And what’s the difference if I want to do the same thing?”

“The difference, Josh, is this would not be the Army sending you someplace, and you are not a poor man looking for work anywhere you can find it.”

“So, I want to help people get their lights and heat back on, and can earn good money.”

Billy sipped his beer and took one of Josh’s soft pretzels.

“That’s not what I heard you say, Josh.”

“What did I say?”

“You said you wanted to be a rich man.”

“What’s wrong with that!”

“Maybe you should ask your family?”

“OK, let’s go back to the house, and I’ll talk to Maryam.”

Josh put the remaining pretzel in his pocket and Billy paid.

It was a short walk back to the house, and when they came in, they found Liesel with Little Billy and his Legos. Josh asked,

“Where’s Maryam? I need to talk to her.”

“Maryam and Bea went to the airport.”

Josh started to ask, “Why” but then it hit him, and he sat down.

“What am I going to do, Liesel?”

“You said foolish things, Josh.”

“I know, but I can’t put them back into my mouth.”

“I think you should try.”

“I need to talk to Jack. We always worked things out.”

He took out his phone and put in Jack’s number. There was no response, just dead silence. Josh tried again. Silence. He gave up and called his mother’s phone. Mary answered.

“Mom, is that you? I called Jack’s phone and it didn’t answer.”

“Josh, Little Mary threw Jack’s phone against the wall. Jack said that he didn’t want his phone anyway. Things are not good here, Josh.”

Josh took a couple of slow breaths.

“Mom, Maryam and Bea have gone to the airport to get a flight back.”

“I see. What about Little Billy?”

Josh looked at Liesel.

“Is Little Billy staying with you?”

“Yes.”

“Mom, Little Billy is going to be here with Liesel for a few days,” looking at Liesel for confirmation. Liesel nodded.

“Oh, I see, but what are you going to do, Josh?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I thought everyone would understand.”

“I said stupid things to Maryam because I was angry.”

“You need to fix that, Josh.”

“How can I do that if she is on her way home?”

“You need to figure out a way.”

Josh knew well his mother’s tone of voice when she added,

“Just do it, Josh.”

Josh remembered hearing that voice when he was a naughty child and refused to eat his peas. Josh hated peas.

~ ~ ~

Sitting in their hotel suite, looking out the window at the Frankfurt Airport terminal building Maryam became thoughtful.

“I don’t want to leave Josh. I thought he had put my past out of his mind. For fifteen years he has never brought it up – ever hinted that he was thinking about my being a prostitute.”

Bea reacts,

“I don’t know if some things ever completely go away. I can remember the car accident when we met as clearly as yesterday.”

“But he said it, Bea. He said it. It had to be right there on his mind. I don’t want to leave Josh. Am I doing the right thing, Bea?”

“Do you have plans? What would you do?”

“What I know is Little Mary needs me. I heard deep anger in her voice.”

“And I know Jack needs me. Jack goes into his shell when things don’t go well. I can help him. Maybe Josh needs you too, Maryam.”

“Maybe, but he has his mind set on being a rich man. I absolutely know what that’s like, Bea. I won’t live with a man like that.”

Maryam was feeling the stress of a major life decision she had never thought she would have to face. Walking back from the airport-facing window and into the bedroom, she lay face down on the bed. Bea turned on the TV. Japanese TV program in a Swiss hotel at the Frankfurt Airport. Bea picked up her phone and selected Jack’s number. Silence. Try again. Silence. Then she tried Mary’s number. Mary answered.

“Hello, Mary. I was trying to get Jack, but his phone won’t answer.”

“Little Mary threw it against the wall, Bea, but my phone is OK. Jack is out on the tractor. I heard it go past the house. Where are you, Bea? Liesel said that you and Maryam were trying to get a flight.”

“Mary, Maryam and I are at the Swiss hotel at the airport waiting for a flight out tomorrow. Please tell Jack I am coming home. And tell him that Little Billy is going to stay with Grandma Liesel for a few days, and they will fly to the U.S. together.”

“I’ll be sure to tell Jack about your and Little Billy’s plans. I’ll tell him the first time I see him.”

“Thanks, Mary. I want to be with Jack.” And she tapped the red dot.

Mary put her phone down and sat back. What to do, she thought? Then she picked up her phone and selected Josh’s number. Josh answered,

“Hi Mom. I still don’t know what to do. How can I explain things to Maryam if I can’t talk with her?”

“Maryam and Bea are at the Swiss hotel at the airport waiting for a flight out tomorrow.”

“Mom, do you know their room number? Maryam hasn’t answered my calls. You say they are at the Swiss hotel?”

“Yes, Josh, waiting for a flight tomorrow. Tomorrow, Josh.”

Josh thought, then said for a second time today,

“Thanks, Mom.”

Josh turned to Billy and Liesel.

“They are at the Swiss hotel at the airport. I’m going there.”

Liesel suggested,

“Maybe you should call her first.”

“She doesn’t answer, Liesel.”

“You won’t find her if she won’t answer her phone. That’s a big hotel. A lot of important people stay there. They will not give you a room number. They won’t even tell you if she is staying there. Their privacy policy is very strict.”

“I have to try. What else can I do?” And Josh went out the door.

~ ~ ~

The hotel clerk looked like she was out of a fashion magazine. She had a beautiful, confident smile that said, “I can solve any problem or answer any questions,” but she would not look into the hotel register to see if Maryam was registered.

“Our guests can always depend upon our privacy policy,” she said with, if possible, an even bigger smile.

“Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

Josh often the largest, handsomest man in the room, confidently returned the possibly multi-message smile and responded,

“No, but can you direct me toward the restaurant?”

Another smile and a pointed finger, and Josh went to the restaurant wondering what more he could do. Wait in the lobby all night? They would surely ask him to leave. He ordered a beer and pretzels. When they came, he sipped and nibbled without any enjoyment. Then he heard his mother say, “Just do it, Josh” and he picked up his phone and texted Maryam.

Maryam I’m in the hotel restaurant. Please come. Josh

He kept thinking what else he could do. Check flight times. Wait for her at airport security. He called Lufthansa – who else would they be flying with? No, they had no seat on tomorrow’s flight to Chicago, and the waiting list is long. Josh looked at his beer and pretzels. He was hungry, but he wanted another reason to keep his table, like after ordering a meal so, he sipped and nibbled and waited.

Maryam heard the phone ding. Her determination to not answer her phone was solid, but, she thought, does that apply to text messages? So, she looked.

“Bea, he’s in the hotel restaurant.”

“If it were me, I would go to him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely yes. I would go to him.”

“OK, Bea, but I may not be very long.”

Then ancient instincts took over and she asked,

“How do I look?”

“Not so good. You could use some fixing up.”

“Help me freshen up, Bea.”

About twenty minutes later she went out the hotel room door not knowing what she would say or what she would do.

~ ~ ~

Josh was Army deployment trained. He always sat so he could see the door and anyone coming into the room, but at that moment he was looking down at his hands and still wondering what more he could do. He heard the room go quiet and he was alerted toward the door. Maryam was winding her way through the tables. When he saw her, he remembered how people always stopped talking and looked up when she came into the room, and he stood up. He was doing what his mother had always taught him. “Josh, stand up when a lady comes into the room.” He stayed standing until she got to his table, then helped her with her chair. Maryam recognized Josh, the old school gentleman and relaxed, but only a little. The waiter hurried to their table. Josh spoke,

“Lemon water please, and another beer.”

Josh, remembered. Maryam noticed.

“I was angry and I have been foolish.”

Maryam was not sure where Josh was headed so she asked,

“Do you mean you were foolish when I told you about my time with rich, generous men, and you held my hand and said, ‘Life is complicated, Maryam.’ Was that when you were foolish, Josh?”

“No, Maryam. Never that. I have never been sorry for a minute.”

“That’s not the way you sounded this morning, Josh.”

“I was angry and foolish.”

“OK, Josh, but I don’t want an angry, foolish, rich Josh.”

“I want it all, Maryam.”

“I knew many very wealthy men, and they were hollow men, Josh. Hollow inside. They used me like a toy. Oh, they liked to talk – about themselves – about their money – even about their wives, and of course, how their beautiful wives made them look good and feel important. Money does that to a man, Josh. It just does, and I will not stay married to that kind of man.”

Josh knew, really knew for sure, that what he had just heard Maryam say came from a steely certainty born of her experience. The waiter brought lemon water and beer and lingered. Josh hesitated, looked at Maryam across the table and said to the waiter,

“I’ll have a T bone steak, rare, with baked potato, and the lady will have the salmon and a salad with vinaigrette dressing.”

Josh reached out his big paw of a hand and took hold of Maryam’s small but strong hand.

“Life’s complicated, Maryam. But I’m not. Can I stay a month to help Billy close down? Then I’ll come back to the farm.”

Maryam looked at the waiter and said,

“I would like a baked potato also” and didn’t take her hand away.

~ ~ ~

It had been more than an hour since Maryam left the room, and Bea couldn’t wait any longer. She went down to the lobby and spied into the restaurant. She saw her best friend in animated conversation with her husband’s brother. She slipped back into the lobby and texted Maryam,

I’ll sleep on the couch tonight.

Maryam heard the ding, and now thinking that texts should be looked at, at least today. So, she looked, smiled and texted back,

Thank you, Bea.

Josh asked, “What was that about?”

“Women’s talk, Josh. Not for you to worry about.”

Then Bea selected her mother’s number. Liesel saw Bea’s name on her phone and answered it. Putting it on speaker, she said to Little Billy,

“It’s your mom, Billy.”

That got an immediate enthusiastic, “Hi Mom. I’m on speaker.”

“Is your grandma there?”

“I’m right here, Bea.”

“OK, Mom, you can explain to Billy that he can have Josh’s room all to himself tonight.”

“Really, Mom?”

“Yes, Billy, it’s time for you to be a big boy with your own room.”

“I am a big boy.”

“I know you are. Sleep well. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Mom, I only packed a few things for Billy. He may need some clothes.”

“We will go shopping tomorrow. Have you talked with your sister?”

“Mom, things have been so crazy, but I’ll call her this evening.”

“Tell her to call me. It would be nice for her to visit while Little Billy is here.”

Liesel smiled as she put down her phone. She walked into the next room where her husband of twenty-five years was being thoughtfully quiet. She sat down next to him and put her hand on his knee.

“They worked it out.”

“I knew Josh wouldn’t let Maryam get away.”

“Oh, you knew, did you?”

“Yes, I did. I know Josh.”

~ ~ ~

Deeba was younger, taller and more slender than Maryam, but everyone seeing them together would know they were sisters. Fifteen years earlier Josh thought he was helping Maryam reconcile with her family, only to discover that their trip to Afghanistan was all about rescuing her sister, Deeba. They were successful in getting Deeba away from her family and an arranged wedding where she would have had no say in any part of her life. Maryam made arrangements to get her sister to Germany, and she and Josh made space for Deeba in their apartment. Soon it then became clear that Deeba had imprinted on Josh. He could hardly sit down without her wanting to be on his lap. They found Deeba her own apartment and connected her with the Baxter twins. The Deeba-Josh problem had been solved. Then fifteen years later, Josh came back to Germany to help Billy Baxter, and found Deeba to be an important employee of the company.

~ ~ ~

Bea went back to the hotel room and called her twin sister, Thea, whom she used to aggravate by going to school and pretended to be her. Thea answered,

“Is that you, Bea? You fly over here – now Mom says you’re flying back.”

“Did you talk with Mom?”

“Just a few minutes ago, and she said that you were on your way home, but she didn’t say how or why.”

“The family was in chaos, Thea, but it’s better now. Jack is really upset, and I need to be with him. I’m sorry we didn’t connect. But it would be nice for you to find a day to visit. Little Billy is staying with Mom for a few days.”

“Yes, she told me. I will try in the morning to arrange time at my work for a day off to visit. You seem to be saying that the family problems have been solved.”

“All I can say is that they have gotten better, in fact, in the last two hours.”

“You and Mom are just alike, Bea. I could never keep up with you.”

The conversation evolved into good memories and life style decisions. Twin sisters trying to reconnect.

~ ~ ~

Deeba had her sister’s intelligence and curiosity. When she went to work for Billy Baxter’s company, she quickly learned how the business work flowed, becoming Billy’s valued administrative assistant. As it turned out, she was the one to help Josh sort his way through the business paper maze.

There had been no time for Maryam to connect except for two short phone calls. The day Maryam left to go back to the U.S., Josh was the one to tell her that Maryam had gone home. He saw no reason to offer any explanation except to say that he was sure Maryam would eventually tell her all about it. Having heard “women’s talk” often enough, he thought he was on good ground. Maryam and Deeba would talk. He didn’t need to.

The next day Deeba came to the office in one of those dresses that covered everything but hid nothing. The other women in the office wondered to each other,

“What’s that all about?”

The men thought that this was really a good day to come to the office and not be out on work sites. Josh tried not to stare, not to notice, and to focus on office paperwork. But he did notice – how much Deeba looked like her sister, and he liked it.

Lunchtime came, and Deeba asked,

“Come have lunch with me, Josh.”

Josh thought, Deeba is family, Maryam's sister, and I'm hungry for some good German food so he responded,

“Sure, that would be nice. Do you have a place you like?”

“Yes, and it's not far. We can walk there.”

“All right, Deeba, you lead the way.”

The place was large, and Josh was hungry so, he ordered steak and eggs. Deeba began talking about Josh.

“Do you remember how you helped me start a new life? You were a big help to me. And I remember us in the same apartment until you helped me get a place of my own.”

And so, she went on about how she even remembered him driving the car that helped her escape, to how he gave her money for new clothes and shoes. Josh was comfortable remembering with her, as he enjoyed a very good steak and eggs, thinking I'll come here for lunch again. The table was being cleared when Deeba said,

“They have rooms here.”

Josh almost said – that's nice. I like this place – but for once his slow moving and slow talking saved him so he reacted to the “they have rooms” with,

“We need to get back to the office. We have a lot of work to do, and much of it we need to work together on.”

Deeba persisted,

“Just once, Josh, just once? No one will know. Maryam is far away. It can be just you and me, Josh. Just once?”

Josh stood up, and Deeba pushed back her chair, came to his side of the table, reached way up and put her arms around his neck. Josh took her by the waist and slowly, but firmly lifted her up and away from him until she was forced to release her hold on his neck. He eased her down onto her own feet at arm's length. He had felt the firmness and lightness of her body that felt wonderfully familiar. He shook off the feeling and said,

“No, Deeba. No, we need to go back to the office now.”

“Just once, Josh?”

“It wouldn't be just once.”

Sensing an opening, she persisted,

“Then whenever you want. It would be you and me, Josh, whenever you want.”

“No, it won’t work. It can’t work that way.”

Josh started back up the street toward their office. Deeba caught up and took his hand. Josh moved his hand away, but said nothing. Josh had experienced sudden fascination with other women and knew the feeling, but this was different. Gradually the thought settled in as he remembered how Deeba had years ago followed him around and always wanted to be on his lap. He was an obsession. It was a new thought, and he felt stupid. Why didn’t he see this? He had been like a fly in a spider’s web, almost helpless. Now they had to work together. At least, he thought, Deeba had stopped asking and was walking alongside of him quietly.

It took a few minutes to walk back to the office, and his feeling stupid began to recede into maybe he had handled this OK, not great, but he had stepped back from the edge and said, “No.” Then the thought occurred to him, what would he say to Maryam when he got home? Honesty is the best policy – except when it isn’t. He would tell Maryam about working with Deeba, but not about lunch.

CHAPTER 3

“Antenna, Josh?”

Little Billy had recovered from his jet lag, and by the time he got himself up, Grandma Liesel was already in the kitchen.

“Good morning, Billy. What would you like for breakfast?”

“I like dippy eggs and toast.”

“And how about some orange juice?”

“Sure, Grandma.”

“I see a hole in the knee of your pants. This would be a good day for us to get some new clothes for you. What do you think?”

“I like my pants, but new clothes would be alright.”

So, after breakfast the two of them went off to the clothing store. Liesel had only raised daughters. She approached new clothes for her grandson as a shared adventure. She didn't know his size, but it only took holding things up to him to get new pants and shirts right. Then he spied a light grey jacket, and on its back was a little neatly embroidered bear wearing a German flag vest.

“Grandma, look at that coat. Can I have one of those?”

“Let's see if they have one that fits, and how about a cap?”

Little Billy walked, head up, a “new man” out of the store wearing his new jacket and cap that made him look a year or two older. Then they went to the shoe store.

“My dad always wears boots.”

“You mean like those with pretty stitching in the leather?”

“No, Little Mary wears boots like that. My dad wears lace up boots like these” and he points.

So Little Billy got boots like his father's.

~ ~ ~

After lunch Liesel had Little Billy show off his new clothes and boots, and sent pictures to Grandma Mary, and couldn't forget Grandma Sue in Chicago. Later she got a call back from Grandma Mary.

"We saw the pictures. Little Billy looks so grown up in his new clothes, and Jack was pleased that he was wearing boots. Did he really want boots instead of shoes?"

"Yes, he did, Mary. He said he wanted to wear boots like his father."

"That may seem small to you and me, but it isn't. I could tell that Jack really liked the boots. Life is still tense here, but – would you believe it – the boots helped. Jack said he was going to stay up and wait for Bea to get home tonight. He wants to make sure Bea gets home OK from the airport. Thanks again for the pictures. Can Little Billy say hello?"

"Here he is."

"Hi, Grandma. I got new clothes and boots."

"I saw the pictures. You look more grown up. Your dad really likes your new boots."

"Is he there?"

"He's outside. I'll go get him. Can you wait a minute?"

"I can wait, Grandma."

As Mary went to get Jack, she thought about waiting, and the times when waiting is the best thing you can do.

Next evening, with Bea and Maryam gone, Little Billy tucked in on his cot in Josh's room, and Josh in front of the TV, Liesel started a conversation she had been wanting to have with Billy. She warmed up Billy with family small talk.

"Have you called your mother?"

"When I was diagnosed, but not since."

"I sent her pictures of Little Billy and his new clothes and boots. He really likes his boots, and I told her we would stop and see her on our way to Nebraska."

"That's nice, but Bea takes Little Billy to Chicago often enough that my mother doesn't feel left out."

"I know, but I don't get to see her often, and we have had good family time together."

"She will enjoy your visit."

"Call your mother more often, Billy."

Liesel continued family small talk.

“I think Little Billy and I should plan three days in Chicago, and I would stay a week in Nebraska. What do you think?”

“Sounds good, Liesel. Josh and I will manage.”

Liesel had been waiting for this opening.

“I had been wanting to talk to you about your calling Josh.”

Billy shrugged a disinterested body language OK. Liesel finally asked her question.

“If you didn’t have Parkinson’s and were awarded this Ukraine contract, what would you have done?”

“I guess I would have accepted it.”

“Would that have meant you would have had to go to Ukraine?”

“Well, yes, at least part of the time. Up front, all the time maybe. I never worked it out. I bid a lot of jobs and only get a few. I saw a job I knew how to do so I bid it.”

“Maybe we should have talked about it, Billy.”

“OK, yes, maybe we should have, but I don’t bring my business home. We don’t talk about my business around the table. It seemed just another bid when I did it.”

Liesel pushed on.

“You would have been away too much. Don’t you remember when the Army sent you on deployment? I remember, and it was a lonely time, Billy.”

Billy was finally tuning in to Liesel’s question.

“Well, it didn’t happen.”

“For some time, even before your diagnosis and the Ukraine bid happened, I had been thinking of asking you to close down your business to spend more time with me and your girls and Little Billy. Maybe do some traveling.”

“You never told me that.”

“I knew your work was important to you. That’s why I never asked, but I thought about what it would be like.”

“Liesel, I have to have something to do, something to be proud of. It makes life interesting and it brings in good money.”

That's why I never said anything, but still I often thought about the things we could do together if you weren't working all the time."

"You thought this often, you say?"

"Yes, I guess I did."

"Then you should have said what you were thinking. It's not like you to be quiet about anything."

"OK, but I didn't, and now I don't need to."

Liesel reached behind her chair and pulled out a stack of travel guides, and handed them to Billy.

"I promise you won't be bored for lack of things to do. I promise, Billy."

Billy started to laugh.

"When did you start collecting travel guides?"

"Some time ago, but I went out and got a new stack yesterday."

For the thousandth time, Billy knew he had married the right woman.

~ ~ ~

Next morning Little Billy was up even earlier, but Liesel was ready for him. With bright eyes and full of anticipation, he asked,

"Can I go to the bakery for breakfast?"

Liesel hesitated then thought, why not? I'll go too. She made sure he was dressed in his new gray jacket with the German bear on the back, and off they went down the hill leaving a note for Billy and Josh to fix their own breakfast.

When they arrived, Old Henry was in his favorite booth, and Little Billy ran over to give him a hug. Then he went to the display case and pointed to his now favorite, roll with a sausage in it. Liesel got a roll and coffee, stood and talked to Freda, then joined Old Henry and Little Billy.

"Your grandson has been telling me about how he likes to play with a big dog at the castle yard."

Billy nods with his mouth full. Liesel responds,

"Yes, we heard about the big dog."

Old Henry asks,

“Do you think you would like a dog? My dog has a litter of puppies, which is why she hasn’t been here with me for breakfast. I have puppies to give away. Do you think you would like one?”

Little Billy jumped up, looked at his grandmother,

“Can I? Can I?”

Liesel gives Old Henry an almost stern look then turns to Little Billy.

“In a few days you will be going home.”

Little Billy pleaded,

“Please?”

Then to Old Henry,

“What kind of dog is it? I like big dogs.”

“Oh, it’s very small now, but it will get big.”

Liesel rolled her eyes. She had seen Old Henry’s dog and knew how big it was. She was sure any puppy would grow that big or bigger. Looking for a way out she said,

“We will ask your mother about a dog for you, but it may not be possible to take a dog on an airplane.”

“When can we call her?”

“This evening after dinner.”

“OK, Grandma.”

Then to Old Henry,

“Can I see the puppies?”

“I think it’s best to wait until your grandmother talks with your mother.”

Billy’s “OK” was half-hearted. He wanted to see the puppies. Then he remembered his new jacket and turned around for Old Henry to see.

“I like the bear with the German colors.”

“How nice.”

“Grandma bought it for me.”

“Grandmas are nice, aren’t they?”

Liesel smiled knowing that Old Henry was really interested in a nice grandma who would say yes to a puppy.

~ ~ ~

Liesel had texted a heads-up about a puppy so that when the call was made Bea had already talked to Jack about a dog, and he thought it was OK. It made it easier when Liesel texted that Old Henry's dog was a Black Lab, and Jack, at least, had some sense of what this dog would be like, and not a huge, unknown German breed. After dinner Liesel made the call.

“Bea, Little Billy wants to ask you a question.”

“Hi, Mom. Can I have a dog? Old Henry's dog has puppies and he wants to give me one.”

“You would have to take care of it. Make sure it had food and water. Keep it company. Can you do that?”

“I can do that, Mom. Can I have a dog?”

“Yes, you can have a dog. Let me talk with your grandmother.”

Little Billy danced away from the phone. He was going to have a dog.

~ ~ ~

The week went fast for Little Billy and his grandmother. There was a day at the zoo, a day getting introduced to every shop keeper in the village, breakfast with Old Henry, and finally, Little Billy got to meet Old Henry's dog and her puppies. When Little Billy walked up to the pile of puppies, who were playing on top of each other, one of them left the pile and came over to sniff Little Billy. Old Henry said,

“This one seems to like you, Billy. What do you think?”

Little Billy sat down next to the puppy, who jumped on his legs, and the deal was made, no one else needed to be consulted.

~ ~ ~

The highly organized Liesel set to work calling the veterinary clinic, as Old Henry was sure the puppy would need its shots, then the airline, pet store, and just to make sure, the American Consulate. But she neglected to consult the puppy, who everyone would discover had a mind of its own.

The day before their scheduled flight, they brought the puppy to Liesel and Billy's house to spend the night, and to be sure to be available in the morning. This puppy had never been all by itself before and expressed its distress by crying for its mother and siblings. Liesel fixed a soft bed. That was no help. Finally, to let the household get some sleep, she fixed a pillow and blanket for Little Billy next to his puppy's bed. The puppy quieted down and people did get a good night's sleep, but some were relieved that the puppy was going to America tomorrow. Little Billy and his puppy were now new best friends.

~ ~ ~

Liesel was an experienced traveler, including traveling with two small children, but a small child with a dog presented new challenges. She had to get help with the crate, and saw the sad face on Little Billy as his puppy was carted off to be put in the belly of the plane. Retrieving the dog in Chicago, and getting dog, child and luggage to Grandma Sue's house required German organization, and giving directions as needed. Liesel was up to the task, but by the time she got the whole lot to Grandma's house, she needed a nap and the dog needed a walk.

Grandma Sue knew what dogs needed.

"The back yard is fenced. Perhaps you could put the puppy in the yard instead of taking it for a walk. I'll put some lunch together. Little Billy, are you hungry?"

"A little bit, Grandma. They gave us food on the airplane, but it wasn't very good."

The puppy went to the yard, and Liesel and Sue caught up on family. Sue wanted to know all about her son's Parkinson's, but there wasn't much to tell. To Sue, the confirming news that her Billy would have time to travel and visit was the best news. After lunch Little Billy went to spend time with his puppy only to discover an empty yard.

The two grandmothers went to look after Little Billy, who came in with a quivering lip saying that his puppy was gone. They discovered a small hole under the fence. What to do? Sue decided, "We will go in three different directions until we find it."

Sue was the one who found it, but not before it had found something very smelly to roll in. She picked up the smelly puppy and headed back, calling for Little Billy that she had found it. Ever organized Liesel was wondering why she had failed to anticipate what life with a puppy was like.

~ ~ ~

In the morning the puddle on the kitchen floor was wiped up without comment, and the puppy went for a walk on its leash. Sue announced to Liesel and Little Billy that she had invited her daughter, Jennifer and family over for dinner. Now Jennifer and her husband, Joseph, had a young boy named, Joey. They were to arrive about five and stay for dinner. When they came in, Joey immediately saw the puppy, who responded like every Black Lab – the puppy had a new friend. Little Billy put the puppy on its leash and the two boys went out together and down the street laughing, pausing only long enough for the puppy to smell every clump of grass. At the house Jennifer wanted to be filled in and began asking questions.

“There must be a story, Liesel. Bea and Maryam went to Germany, and then, it seems almost overnight, turned around and headed home leaving you with Little Billy and a puppy. There must be a story.”

Liesel began with Billy’s Parkinson’s, and Jennifer interrupts.

“How is he doing? My brother has never been a communicator?”

“He is doing surprisingly well, and no one is more-happy about that than he is.”

Then Liesel went on about Josh coming, decisions needed to be made, Bea and Maryam rushing to help, and how things stood today. Jennifer had more questions while Joseph, the quiet, stable husband just listened, but finally he had to say something.

“Billy and Josh made the right decision. Billy can retire, and I have always placed Josh on the family farm. They made the right decision not to go ahead with that big dollar contract.”

Jennifer smiled. This was more than she usually heard from Joseph and she liked it. So she had to add,

“You’re absolutely right, Joseph. They did the right thing.”

Liesel wanted to add what she thought was the best part of the story. She and Billy would travel and visit, including spending time here with Sue.

Sue needed to add that when Jennifer and Billy’s father died, she had thought of traveling, maybe taking a cruise, even moving to Nebraska to be with her granddaughter and Little Billy, but decided to stay in Chicago. So, she told them,

“I had thought about traveling, but my friends, and my Jennifer, Joseph and Joey are right here. Bea brings Little Billy to see me. This is my home, and I like it here.”

Liesel asked Sue, after the three “J’s” left for home, if Sue had seen their old friends, Megan and Nick recently. Sue responded,

“Not real recently.”

Liesel asks,

“Can we go see them tomorrow. Little Billy and I have one more day here, and I would like to see them. They are like family.”

Sue called Megan and a visit was arranged.

~ ~ ~

Next morning on their way to visit, Sue was thinking about what she had felt like when Nick, the Franciscan Brother counselor, had saved her life. But that was a long story, and before Megan and Nick were married, so she refocused on today. When they arrived, they could see that Megan had converted Nick’s counseling sun porch into a bedroom for Nick. Nick could no longer climb the stairs, and he loved his sunporch so it was a natural conversion. And that is where Sue, Liesel, Little Billy and his puppy found Nick sitting in a big lounge chair with lap blanket.

The visit had an early moment when the puppy and Nick’s cat saw each other. There was a “woof” and a “hiss” and the cat ran up the stairs with the puppy trying to follow, thinking it had found a new playmate. The cat thought otherwise and remained out of sight with Liesel making sure the puppy didn’t follow the cat. Nick asked Little Billy,

“What’s your dog’s name?”

Little Billy really hadn’t settled on a name, but he liked “Buddy” so from that moment on the puppy became Buddy, and that’s what he told Nick.

“Oh, that’s a nice name.”

Then Megan took charge as was her habit.

“Can I get each of you something to drink? How about some tea and cookies, and milk for you, Billy?”

There was a parade into the kitchen, but Liesel stayed, taking in Nick’s situation. Liesel observes,

“Nick, I like the way you have fixed up your sun porch.”

“Oh, that’s all Megan. She treats me very well, but she should have married a younger

man.”

Liesel thought it best not to comment. She wanted to tell Nick about Billy’s Parkinson’s diagnosis but hesitated. Why burden an obviously ill old man with a younger man’s problems? Then she relented, and in her direct German way,

“Billy has Parkinson’s.”

Nick had spent his whole life counseling people with all kinds of problems so his natural reaction was,

“And what will you do, Liesel?”

“Nick, he’s going to retire and we are going to travel.”

“That’s all good, Liesel” – but matching Liesel’s directness,

“But what about yourself?”

“Oh, I’ll be OK, Nick.”

“Yes, you will, but only if you make conscious decisions to care for yourself. Megan looks after me, but look at her, Liesel. She is healthy and fit for her age. Don’t let yourself slide down into a pit of poor health, and worse – depression. It can happen, Liesel. Don’t let it happen to you.”

“You are right, Nick. I had a bad day, but I feel that Billy and I can have a good life. I can see Buddy likes you.”

“Dogs like me, Liesel.”

“So do a lot of people, Nick, but isn’t he a little heavy on your lap?”

As Liesel bent over to give Nick a hug, Buddy jumped down and the kitchen gang came in with tea, milk and cookies. Little Billy had spotted Nick’s salt water fish tank. Nick saw Little Billy eyeing the fish.

“Do you like my fish?”

Nick already knew the answer because Little Billy had moved to the fish, and had his nose an inch from the glass. Nick knew the power of his fish to calm clients, but that’s another long story so today he just said,

“Would you like to feed the fish?” – pointing at the fish food can – “only a small pinch of food.”

Little Billy was finally distracted from the fish by cookies and milk. Sue wanted some time with Nick, but not with a group, so she mentally settled on, “I’ll come back later,” and said nothing. The visit settled into storytelling and enjoying a boy and his puppy, who needed to be taken for a

walk. Then there were hugs and good-byes. Liesel and Sue silently conspired to keep the visit short.

Megan took the tea and cookies service back to the kitchen. She opened her special cabinet and fixed herself a glass of red wine. She went back to Nick in his recliner. She set her glass on her mother's very old dark wood end table. She lifted Nick's lap blanket. The urine bag was only half full of dark fluid. It didn't need to be emptied. She put her hand on Nick's arm.

“What nice people, and wasn't that puppy cute?”

Nick smiled,

“Did you see its feet? It's going to be huge.”

“It liked being on your lap. Billy and his dog are going to be inseparable.”

Nick closed his eyes remembering,

“I had a dog once when I was a little boy.”

“I don't remember you ever talking about it.”

“She would sit on the porch waiting for me when I came home from school. Every day she would be there waiting.”

Nick stopped. Megan tried to see his face, but he had turned away remembering.

“She would jump and bark when she saw me. So glad to see me, Megan. It was wonderful to be greeted that way every day.”

“Nick, maybe she will greet you again.”

“What a wonderful thought.”

Megan sipped her wine and gave Nick's arm a squeeze.

“I thought you would say something about your metastasized cancer, but you didn't.”

“It wasn't the right time, but I do want to talk to Sue again. You should too.”

“You mean because she is a widow? How long has it been since Allen died? Four years?”

“I think five. I remember when I suggested she needed a change of scenery and a friend drove her out to Nebraska.”

“Didn't Joey go with her?”

“Yes, and by all accounts it was a successful visit.”

Nick flexed his legs and back against his chair.

“Now I would like to talk to Sue. Give her a call tomorrow after Liesel and Little Billy have gone.”

“I’ll call her after lunch tomorrow. How much longer do you think they will continue calling him Little Billy?”

“Until the day he says, ‘I’m not little any more’ and that day may be soon. I saw some independence.”

“So did I. Do you need your pain meds?”

“Yes, that would be good. I didn’t want to be asleep for company.”

Megan went to the kitchen and came back with water and a pill in a little paper cup.

“This is going to make you sleepy. Do you want to get into bed?”

“No, I’m OK in this great chair. You know it was Sue Baxter that helped me not be afraid of women.”

“I do remember your telling me that story.”

“So, you see if it wasn’t for her, I would never have had the courage to ask you to marry me.”

“I’ll remember to thank her.”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

And as Nick’s eyes were closing in sleep,

“Be sure to call her tomorrow.”

Megan took her half empty glass to her favorite wing back chair angled so she could see the man, who had been her friend for twenty years before he became her husband. It was like the chair held her close as she settled into its softness and she closed her eyes. Then she heard a small sound. Opening her eyes she saw that Nick’s cat had jumped up on his lap. Did she see a little smile on Nick’s face? How nice, she thought. What would life be like without a dog waiting for you, and a cat on your lap?

~ ~ ~

The day Bea and Maryam arrived home it was late. Not much news was shared except that it was good to be home, and so glad you are home safe – that was Mary. Maryam sat with her daughter only long enough to assure her that, yes, your father will be home in a few weeks and he will not stay in Germany. Bea had something she wanted to say to Jack, but just being with him tonight was enough. The house went dark and quiet as if it was experiencing a collective sigh of relief. It was going to be OK; it hoped.

Morning was as normal as it could be, missing Little Billy and Josh. Jack went to work on his to-do list, and Maryam and Mary really had time to catch up and think about Liesel and Little Billy coming. Mary asked Little Mary to feed the chickens and collect eggs then go see if she could help Jack. Little Mary jumped to her tasks knowing that Donnie would be with Jack. Bea gathered up all the bedding and clothes and made it laundry day, even though it wasn't Saturday. Mary noticed Bea bustling around, but shrugged it off as just being glad to be home.

That evening Bea took Jack by the hand and tugged him into taking a walk. She opened the conversation she had been wanting to have.

“I missed you a lot.”

She leaned against Jack as they rounded the barn.

“It's going to be OK. Josh will be home in a few weeks.”

Then, like out of nowhere she asked,

“What was your father's name?”

Jack was used to Bea's out of the blue questions so he provided an informal response.

“Charles, but I guess Charlie because that's what everyone called him – Charlie.”

“How would you like to have a little Charlie?”

Jack stopped walking and turned toward Bea in the now near dark.

“Do you mean that?”

“I do.”

Jack picked her up and did a complete spin with Bea hanging on. Little Mary came around the corner of the barn and said,

“Oh, sorry. Dad is on the phone and wants to talk to Uncle Jack. Maybe you want to call him back.”

Bea responds now with her feet back on the ground,

“It's OK. We were just discussing family. We will walk back with you.”

This wasn't exactly what Jack was thinking, but what could he do? He was outnumbered.

~ ~ ~

Maryam looked at her phone when it chimed, and saw her younger sister's name so she answered not sure what to expect because months could go by without a call.

"Hello, Deeba. It's been a while."

"Mr. Baxter is closing his business, and he has helped me find a new job."

"Billy Baxter is a good man. Do you know what you will be doing?"

"It looks like an administrative assistant kind of job. He must have given me a good reference."

The talk went on about office kind of work and how you had to be accurate, especially with money. Maryam said that she was glad things were working out for her. Then Deeba came to why she had really called.

"I will have time between jobs and I would like to visit you. Would that be OK?"

"Yes, we have plenty of room. Come and stay as long as you want. Why don't you ask Josh what his travel plans are? Maybe you could travel with him."

"Thank you for the suggestion. I'll talk to him."

There was more about what the weather would be like, and how to pack with what kind of clothes. Deeba had never been on a farm before. The call ended pleasantly, and Maryam went to Mary.

"Deeba wants to come and visit."

"I hope you told her it was OK."

"I did, and we talked about clothes and weather. Deeba and I don't talk much, but for years we shared the same room so we connect easily. I also told her to talk to Josh. Maybe they could travel together. That would make it easier for her."

"Shouldn't you have talked with Josh first?"

"Oh, he will be fine with having Deeba travel with him. They have known each other for a long time. What should we fix for dinner?"

"How about pot roast?"

"Great idea, Mary. I'll peel the potatoes and carrots."

Bea and Jack decided to keep their new family decision to themselves until they really had a firm story to tell. The always observant Mary noticed a happy Bea and a Jack that looked more like his old self, but with even a lighter step. She chalked it up as glad to be home and worry lifted, and embraced the brightness she was seeing and experiencing herself. Nothing pleased Mary

more than having happy people around her table. Then Liesel, Little Billy and Buddy brought instant chaos.

Little Billy turned his dog loose and ran to the barn to look for his dad. The dog sensing its new freedom ran into the pasture with the cows with Little Mary chasing after. The cows, for themselves, looked rather amused by this little animal that wanted to play. Little Mary was making sure the dog didn't get stepped on by an amused cow. Mary ran to Liesel, who had given up on trying to control her charges, and gave Liesel a huge farm hug.

After a few minutes life on the farm began to return to some kind of normal with Little Billy's dog being, at least temporarily, supervised by Little Mary. The unpacking, and finally resting, especially for Liesel, finally settled in. All they needed to be a family again was for Josh to come home.

~ ~ ~

Maryam had developed a routine. She would call Josh, then skip a day before she would call him again. This was her way of staying connected, but not cling. So, when Josh saw her name on his phone on an unexpected day, he answered with a slight sense of apprehension.

“Hi. What's up?”

“How is closing the business coming?”

“It's going OK. Is that why you called?”

“Well yes, but also, we needed to talk because Deeba said that she is going to come visit here between jobs, and I want you to make sure things go well for her. She has never flown to the US before. Get her on the same flight with you, and make sure she makes connections in Chicago.”

Maryam waited for an answer, then,

“Josh, are you there? It would be even better if you had seats together.”

“Josh, can you hear me?”

“I can hear you. Tell her not to come.”

Maryam digested that for a moment, then,

“What's going on, Josh?”

The ball had bounced back to Josh.

“Do you remember when we were able to get Deeba away from your family and then she lived with us?”

There was an edge in Maryam’s response,

“Of course I remember.”

“And do you remember how she always wanted to sit in my lap and we agreed that her living with us was not working?”

“Why ask the obvious, Josh? What are you saying? She can’t sit on your lap on Lufthansa.”

Josh finally had to say what he didn’t want to say.

“It’s more than that now. She has come on to me pretty strong. Even though I made it crystal clear that there was not going to be any relationship like that between us, I don’t think she has given up.”

Maryam took her phone and walked outside. This call needed to become private.

“Josh, I can’t just tell her not to come. She is my sister.”

Josh’s turn.

“I don’t think she wants to visit because she is your sister.”

Trying to get her head around what Josh was suggesting,

“Do you mean that you think she wants to visit here to be with you?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I think.”

Finally, Maryam had to accept that Josh may be right. If her sister was anything, she was strong-willed and could even be demanding. Now Maryam had to know it all.

“How far has this gone, Josh?”

“Far enough that I am sure this is what she thinks she wants. Tell her not to come.”

“I trust you, Josh. I know you can handle this flirtation.”

“It is not a flirtation, Maryam, it’s an obsession. I will always say no, but there is no telling what she might try. I don’t want her traveling with me, or worse, in the house with me.”

“Josh, I hate talking about this on the phone. I absolutely trust you.”

“You can’t fly back over here to talk about your sister. We both know all we need to know about her, and I don’t want to be her obsession.”

“Josh, I need a little time to think. Can I call you back?”

“Sure, but I don’t need any time to think.”

“OK, I’ll call you back.”

Maryam put her phone in her pocket like it was hot, too hot, in her hand. She needed some quiet time. Little Billy came running by with Buddy, and she smiled when Little Billy handed her Buddy’s favorite ball and said,

“Toss it. He likes to play fetch.”

Maryam tossed the ball and the dog brought it back and dropped it at her feet looking up clearly saying that was fun; let’s do it again. Maryam tossed the ball to Little Billy and sat down on the front steps as Little Billy and dog ran on.

She put her hands to her face and thought, this is my home. Josh and I belong here with our daughter and Mary and Bea and Jack. Last week I threatened to leave. The thought caused her whole body to shake, and she shook her head – I can’t do that again. I can’t demand Josh to do what I want. Maybe he will, but what will that do to us? We have to work this out. I can’t become a domineering, demanding wife.

It had only been a few minutes, but she took out her phone and tapped Josh’s number. He answered immediately with,

“We need to work this out, Maryam.”

“Josh, what if Deeba only stays here a short time, maybe two weeks?”

“How about one week?”

“Can’t we agree on two weeks?”

“OK, two weeks. But how will we get her to leave?”

This was real progress, and Maryam felt relief in her whole body.

“You buy her round-trip tickets, Josh, with a return date. I’ll suggest the two weeks and you buy the tickets.”

Josh knew how to work with any situation, even when it was bad so he began problem-solving.

“Why did she say she wanted to visit now?”

“She said that she had a break between jobs.”

“I know the people she will be working with and there was no talk of a break between

jobs, but they must have agreed to it. I'll talk with them about making it only a two-week break."

"How will you explain that?"

"I know they need her, and I'll think up some kind of excuse. I miss you."

"I love you too. I'm sorry you have to put up with my sister."

"I'm not going to complain about her anymore, but if things happen at the farm, you will have to take her out behind the barn for a talk."

"Behind the barn, Josh?"

"Farm talk, Maryam. But you know my mother. She always has her antenna waving to spot trouble, and she will."

"Antenna, Josh?"

"OK, OK, we will do this. I'll give you our travel schedule when I have it. Give my mother a hug."

Maryam put her now body warm phone in her pocket and went to look for Little Billy and his dog.

~ ~ ~

After dinner Little Mary went to her room and changed into a sweater and short skirt. When she came back to the kitchen she announced,

"Donnie is coming to pick me up, and we are going to the movies."

Maryam asks,

"You mean the Miller boy, who has been helping on the farm?"

"Yes, Mom."

"He's too old for you."

"Mom, I'm not a little kid anymore."

"Maybe not, but you are only fifteen, and how old is Donnie?"

Maryam had seen the tall lanky kid in a cowboy hat coming and going in his big pickup truck. Now she was struggling to imagine her little daughter in some kind of regular relationship, and didn't like what she was feeling, so she asks the obvious,

“He must be about eighteen. That's too old for you.”

Over the past couple of years, Little Mary had begun asserting herself. She tried fixing her hair in different ways, painting her fingernails, choosing the latest popular styles in teen clothes, and spending hours in the bathroom primping and posing in the mirror.

It was like, right in front of her eyes, her little girl was becoming a young woman. To make it worse, Maryam and her daughter did not always see things in the same way. Little Mary could be moody, pouting one moment, snapping at her mother without warning, dancing around the kitchen in a happy moment, or secluding herself in her bedroom another moment.

Grandma Mary heard the exchange and guessed Maryam's distress.

“I have known Donnie since he was a little boy. He is Doctor Miller's grandson, but he is a little old for you, Mary.”

Grandma had dropped the “Little” and Maryam's daughter would never be little again. Now “just Mary” spoke up,

“I like him, Grandma. He's funny. I'll have a good time.”

Bea was still at the table nursing her coffee and a cookie remembering when she was fifteen and boys started to find her interesting, so in Bea's fashion, she said,

“Mary, you go to the movies with Donnie and come straight home. No parking in the dark.”

Mary blushed a little, and Maryam added,

“Don't you have school tomorrow? You are not to be out late.”

“OK, Mom.”

Everyone heard the gravel crunch and Mary announced,

“He's here” and ran out the door.

Maryam looked at the other two women and asked,

“How did she grow up so fast?”

Bea responded, “It happens that way.”

Grandma Mary, which is how she will now be called, said,

“Don’t you both remember when you were fifteen? I do.”

Grandma Mary sat back down at the table and reached for one of Bea’s cookies, remembering,

“I had boyfriends, but Charlie was my favorite. We would sit together on the school bus. When he got an old car, he would drive us to school.”

Bea shares,

“Thea and I looked so much alike that I would pretend to be her and try to fool her boyfriends.”

Maryam joins in,

“You women talk like you had many boyfriends. I had only one. My family didn’t allow any young men around me. But one found a way, and I ran off with him.”

The women had not heard this part of Maryam’s story and wanted to hear more.

Liesel thought about her first “boyfriend” but decided this wasn’t the time.

~ ~ ~

Jack came in later to find the women in his family in animated conversation about teenage boys. Feeling left out and curious,

“Did I miss something?”

Bea responds,

“We are just watching Mary grow up. I saw her leave with Donnie.”

Jack said,

“I thought that might happen.”

Bea again,

“Oh, you did, did you?”

“When he started coming around even when I didn’t need him, I knew he had other interests.”

Maryam wanted to know,

“You saw Mary growing up, didn’t you?”

“It wasn’t hard to see, Maryam.”

“Well, I didn’t want to see it.”

“Maybe men see young women first.”

Grandma Mary added,

“Maybe before they see themselves.”

Bea laughed, and Maryam lamented,

“I’m not ready for this.”

Jack reached for a cookie then asked Maryam,

“When is Josh coming home?”

“On Monday,” she replies.

“Good, that Miller kid may not be much help when he starts spending all this time on the porch with Little Mary.”

Grandma Mary shared with Jack,

“We think it’s time to drop the “little”.

“I think you’re right because I think she already has.”

~ ~ ~

When Liesel heard Maryam say that Josh was traveling home on Monday she knew, and by now everyone knew, that Deeba would be with him. She had a thought and she called Billy.

“Billy, Josh and Deeba are traveling here on Monday. Why don’t you come with them?”

“I can do that, but I thought you were going to come here and we would plan some travel dates.”

“What if we start traveling together here in the US? I would like to see the South West and the West Coast. What do you think?”

“Well, I have never been to the desert part of the US with its big cacti and Native people. Yes, I think that would be an interesting trip.”

“Good, then you can try to get on their flight.”

“I’ll talk with Josh, and come to see you there, and we can travel the West.”

So, it was agreed. Billy, Josh and Deeba would come together.

~ ~ ~

As they motored through the country toward the farm, Josh was pointing out neighbors’ farms and explaining field crops. Deeba was not interested and slouched in the back seat. As they pulled into the farm yard, Billy asks,

“Why is there a city bus in your yard?”

Josh was as surprised as Billy by the sight of the big vehicle parked next to his barn, but he reacted,

“Look at the fancy flames and striped paint job! That’s no city bus. It’s an RV, a motor home!”

“I didn’t know you owned a motor home.”

“We don’t, but it looks like maybe you do.”

“I asked Liesel to rent a car for us. I’m no bus driver.”

“Liesel must have had to drive it here, so it looks like you already have a driver.”

Billy had a flashback remembering riding with Liesel behind the wheel going a hundred mph-plus on the autobahn. How fast will she drive this huge bus-like motor home flashed past his mind? Then they were walking up the path to the house. Liesel rushed out of the house and grabbed Billy.

“Do you like it?”

Billy had a mental moment, then,

“Do you mean the bus?”

“It’s not a bus, but it’s like a luxury hotel on wheels. Wait until you see the inside.”

“You drove it?”

“Everything is effortless, smooth as silk. Come I’ll show you inside.”

She took Billy by the hand, and she almost skipped toward her new great idea.

Josh went to find Jack. Deeba was trying to shake off being half-asleep, but was shocked awake by the enormous size of everything she saw. Maryam gave her sister a big hug, and sensing Deeba's new curiosity, took her toward the equipment shed to see the house-sized machines with Little Billy and his dog tagging along behind. As they walked back toward the house with Deeba full of questions, a big wheel pickup crunched and rumbled up the gravel drive. The tall lanky Donnie in cowboy hat and boots jumped out. Little Billy ran up to him.

“Hi, Donnie.”

Having learned good manners from his mother,

“This is Deeba, visiting from Germany.”

Deeba's curiosity became fascination by the man and the truck package, and she stuck out her hand, and in learned bold German fashion said,

“Would you take me for a ride? I never saw a truck like that before.”

“Name's Donnie, and sure, climb in.”

Climbing was what you had to do to get in. Deeba managed without help, but in the process showed a lot of herself, which was impossible for Donnie not to notice as he was preparing to provide the now unnecessary help getting in.

Donnie loved to make the most of every chance he had to show off his prized possession, and roared out of the driveway with Deeba holding on. He knew exactly how to show off his truck and went directly to the worse piece of road in the county a happy man-child.

Maryam rolled her eyes as Mary came out of the house.

“Where's Donnie going? We were going into town for a party.”

“He's taking Deeba for a ride.”

“It better be a quick ride.” Mary stalked back into the house.

Donnie was looking for maximum effect. The road was full of muddy holes that the kids used to see how muddy they could get without getting stuck. When Donnie pulled back into the farm yard, Mary looked out and saw Donnie's truck covered with mud. Deeba jumped out looking like she had just been to Disney World, with Donnie following close behind. Mary thought too close.

“I thought you were going to take me to a party.”

“It's not too late. Let's go.”

He was responding to Mary, but his eyes were on Deeba.

“I’m not going with you in that muddy truck” and for the second time stalked back into the house.

Josh heard the exchange.

“Take your truck down to the barn and hose it off. Maybe she will change her mind.”

Maryam scowled at Josh, thinking that she would rather have Mary home than at some unknown party, but she only said,

“It’s close to dinner time. It would be nice if your daughter would stay home to be with our guests for dinner.”

The issue was settled with Donnie roaring off in his truck with its muddy proof that it was the best in the county.

~ ~ ~

Next morning the house woke up to singing. Maryam knew the sound and found her sister standing in front of an east-facing window singing a song they had often sang together as children. Maryam put her arm around Deeba’s waist and began singing along with her. After a few moments Deeba stopped and looked at Maryam.

“I can breathe,” and Deeba took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I can breathe,” she repeated.

Maryam and her sister had shared an ironlike confinement in a home that was more like a prison. Maryam drew her sister close knowing exactly when she herself had the feeling of freedom, and it was with Josh. Now they were both able to feel freedom together. They hugged each other for what seemed like a long time until Maryam broke the silence.

“Let’s go have some breakfast. Grandma Mary will already be in the kitchen.”

“Is she always up first?”

“Always. Let’s go to breakfast.”

The aroma of bacon frying and bread toasting greeted them as they entered the kitchen. Grandma Mary saw them come in.

“Was that you I heard singing? You have good voices.”

Deeba smiled, and Grandma Mary asked,

“I would like to know the words. It sounded so sweet.”

“The song is about children playing in a garden and trying to catch butterflies. Then they learn to be quiet and the butterflies come to them.”

“Our mother taught us.”

“How nice!”

“Our mother loved butterflies.”

Miguel and Luis were getting up, ready to leave Grandma Mary at the breakfast table. Luis addressed Maryam and Deeba,

“We heard you two singing. We often sing as a family back home, and my father here has a guitar. Would anyone like to sing with us in the evening?”

Maryam and Deeba said, “Yes,” and Grandma Mary said,

“I would really like that. We can sing together on the porch after dinner.”

It was a plan, so Miguel and Luis went off to the barn. As the rest of the family straggled into the kitchen, Grandma Mary announced that there would be singing on the porch after dinner – everyone was invited. Grandma Mary added,

“Deeba started the idea by singing before breakfast this morning.”

Mary, now just Mary, was not ready to give Deeba credit for any good idea. She saw Deeba as competition. Even though Deeba was twice her age and maybe more, she was unfair competition. Donnie on the other hand was, in her mind, now stupid Donnie.

“I don’t want to sing on the porch in Deeba’s language. And I don’t want to sing in Spanish either.”

She made herself a toast and egg sandwich and went out the door. Josh noticed his daughter’s fit of pique.

“She has her nose out of joint.”

Maryam gave him a questioning look.

“Just a way of speaking, Maryam.”

Everyone else knew what Josh meant, and why, except maybe Deeba, who seemed unmoved by Mary’s mini outburst.

~ ~ ~

It was laundry day, and Liesel began thinking about the trip with Billy out west in the motor home and realized that she did not have all the clothes she needed. The American West could be hot or cold, wet or dry. She would make sure she was prepared. And there were other items of clothing she wanted and hadn't packed. She needed a trip to town. She also wanted time with no longer "little" Mary. She found "angry" Mary helping with the day's laundry.

"How would you like to go to town with me and help me find some new clothes?"

"I'm supposed to help with the laundry," she replied, as she was hanging sheets on the clothes line.

"There is plenty of help with the laundry," being careful not to mention Aunt Deeba.

"Go ask your mother if you can go with me. We will take the motor home."

"The motor home?"

"Yes, we will find a place to park it, and you can give me a walking tour of the shops."

Mary had yet to even be in the motor home so the idea of going down the road taking your kitchen and bedroom with you intrigued her.

"OK, I'll change and tell Mom."

Liesel noticed the "tell" and not ask as she remembered her own daughters when they were fifteen.

Mary was surprised by the view of the road sitting up high with lots of glass. Liesel found a place to park the big motor home at the edge of the business district, and the two of them began walking down the main street. It was really like a walking mall. Liesel was mentally comparing it with her village. The big difference was the street was perfectly flat and straight. She could see the two blocks of businesses lined up, she thought, like soldiers on parade. Very different than her hilly village. As they walked looking into shop windows Liesel opened the subject she had wanted to talk about.

"Donnie likes you."

"Well, he did."

"You think he doesn't like you anymore?"

"Did you see him with Deeba? Stupid Donnie."

"Did you know that Deeba is thirty-six?"

"No, I guess I didn't."

"That's twice your age, and she will be going home in a few days."

“Then why is Donnie all ga-ga over her?”

“Boys Donnie’s age aren’t very smart about those things. When you call Donnie stupid, you are not far from the truth.”

“Really?”

“You need to be the smart one, Mary. Don’t give boys everything they want.”

Liesel wanted Mary to linger on that thought so she pointed,

“Let’s look in this store. I see some slacks and a blouse that may look good on me or on you.”

“On me?”

“Why not? Let’s go in and have a look.”

Liesel had raised two daughters and knew that there were times when they didn’t necessarily like the way they looked, or even like themselves. When she looked at no longer “little” Mary, she could see a pretty fifteen-year-old, but with the right clothes a stunning “twenty-year-old”. Without consulting anyone she decided to be Aunt Liesel, who bought Mary some “nice” things to wear. Then maybe she would not be so worried about “Stupid” Donnie. She could, instead, be her own self. That was Liesel’s plan.

Liesel would get a couple of grown women outfits for herself and for Mary. She also wanted some black lacy things for herself because she knew Billy liked black. When she started looking in the women’s intimate clothing store, Aunt Liesel had an opportunity to open another subject.

“I was twenty-five when I first saw Billy.”

“Really? That old?”

“Yes, and he was so handsome, so American, and I wanted to meet him, and I did. Then I knew he was going to come to a Fasching party so I went to the party wearing a tight sweater with nothing underneath.”

“You really did?”

“Yes, I did, and when I knew he really noticed, I gave him my address.”

“Wow!”

“Don’t forget, I was twenty-five and already knew the kind of man I wanted.”

Then to make sure she had made her point,

“You are only fifteen and not ready for Fasching parties in tight sweaters.”

Now Aunt Liesel wanted Mary to be her co-conspirator in choosing some flirty grown women things. “They” picked a soft, fitted sweater to, sort of, match her Fasching party story, and some black under garments, which “they” would not talk about with the other women.

The co-conspirators got back in the big motor home with Aunt Liesel feeling that she had connected with Mary. They had clothes for Liesel, clothes for Mary, and a small box that Liesel put in a drawer in the motor home bedroom.

Mary was thinking, and almost saying out loud,

“Deeba would go home. Donnie was ‘stupid,’ but that’s what eighteen-year-old boys were like. And she was going to be in full charge of her boy / girl friendships.”

While Mary was checking off her new self-image, Liesel was cautious of the road, but with a quiet sigh she knew that life for fifteen-year-old Mary, soon to be a woman, could become complicated. With her eye on the road, she knew that all of us women must live through our own experiences. She remembered that her first love was another woman. But that’s another story.

~ ~ ~

When the shoppers got back to the farm, they were anxious to show off their new clothes. Bags in hand, the two disappeared into a bedroom to change. Liesel appeared first in beige linen slacks and a cream knit top, an outfit casual enough for a trip in a motor home. When Mary came out in a brown polka dot dress with a rather low scoop neckline, Maryam had mixed feelings as she saw her daughter again transforming into a young woman. She liked what she saw, but behind that thought was, I’m not ready for this. But as she watched little Mary, there was now no doubt that the “little” was forever gone, and surprise, so was the petulant teen she had seen just this morning. Maryam had to say,

“You look very nice in those clothes.”

Then after a small hesitation,

“But not for school yet.”

“Why not, Mom?”

“Because the boys may think you are older than you really are.”

“I can take care of myself. Liesel told me to be in charge, and I am going to do that ‘just like she did.’ Well, maybe not exactly like she did.”

Maryam decided this was not the time to ask how Liesel may have been in charge when she was Mary’s age, but she knew she was talking to a new Mary. Then she responded,

“Joey called while you were out. He wanted to make sure it was still OK for him to come for the summer like he did last year. I told him to come as soon as school was over.”

“He’s my friend, Mom. You should have talked to me.”

“Don’t you want him to come? You were best of friends last summer. You were always together.”

“Mom, he is still a little boy. I can’t have him following me around.”

Maryam had a sudden realization. She hadn’t thought about how three years age difference didn’t seem to matter last year, but now it may mean a lot. Oh, she thought, this may be very difficult for Joey. Did she make a mistake when she assured Joey that it would be OK for him to come? What to do? Perhaps he shouldn’t come for the whole summer, but she had already told him it was OK. Grandma Mary had heard the Joey exchange and sensed the problem, so she suggested,

“Maybe Joey can be big brother for Little Billy.”

Both Maryam and Mary liked the idea, but would Joey?

~ ~ ~

Grandma Mary was all about family. She listened, and carefully observed whatever was happening in her world. She wanted above all else to see happy people around her big kitchen table. She had been challenged by the death of her husband and raising two boys on her own. She had met these challenges, but faced the challenge of each of her sons marrying very different women. Again, she listened and adopted her daughters-in-law as if they were her own daughters. Today she was thinking about them.

Maryam was the easiest even though she was the most different. Bea, bold, brash German Bea, had become Grandma Mary’s close confidant. She always knew where she stood with Bea. There were never any hidden agendas, and Grandma Mary really liked that. Deeba was why her mind had gone to Maryam and Bea. Deeba was different. Grandma Mary saw that the sisters liked each other, but there was a tension that she could feel. It didn’t take her long to figure out that the tension she saw was all about men, and Josh in particular.

As she watched and listened, she saw Deeba always wanting to sit next to Josh at the table. She followed him around. She wore clothes that didn’t fit on the farm, but was sure to attract male attention. This morning, she saw Deeba following Josh out the door wearing white skinny shorts and pink loose top. Was she bare under that top? – she couldn’t be sure. But the shoes, nothing more than a few thin gold straps. Yes, she had pretty feet, but those shoes? Grandma Mary

shook her head and reached for paper and a pencil and began making a list for her next trip into town.

Out in the barn Deeba chattered along after Josh, who, trying not to be obvious, was avoiding being caught in a corner where he couldn't get out without pushing past her. He felt like a prey animal watching for danger and not wanting to be caught in a corner with no escape. But Josh had work to do, and a feed trough was broken and it needed to be fixed. So, he picked up some tools and headed out into the feed lot with Deeba close behind.

That was when he heard the loud shriek from Deeba, and thought what is she up to now? As he turned, he saw the source of her sudden distress. Deeba had stepped into a fresh cowpie, and the warm grey goo was oozing up between her pretty toes and covering her gold strapped feet. He took her by the hand and helped her take a step backward. The look on her face told him that she had not stepped on the cowpie to get his attention so he felt some natural concern for her and said,

“I think you should go to the house and change your shoes.”

Josh made sure she took a safe route out of the feed lot and refocused on fixing the broken feed trough. He stifled a laugh and felt a moment of relief that Deeba was someone else's problem – at least for a few minutes.

Grandma Mary heard a little noise that sounded like “Help please,” and when she went to investigate, she found Deeba standing at her kitchen door. At first she only saw Deeba's distressed look, then looking down she saw Deeba's problem. Calmly she directed Deeba to sit on the step.

“I'll get a bucket of water and some rags. You just sit there.”

Trying to be almost casual, she came back with the bucket of water and rags.

“I see you stepped into some cow flop.”

Grandma Mary undid the little gold straps and tossed the shoe into the yard. Then she put Deeba's foot into the bucket, working her hands around and between the toes. Looking up she could see that Deeba was crying.

“It's OK, honey. Cow flop isn't dangerous, only messy.”

She lifted the pretty foot out of the bucket and began to dry it with a clean rag. Deeba leaned forward and put her hand on Grandma Mary's shoulder and in a small voice said,

“Thank you.”

“That's OK, Deeba. You may want to cleanup better.”

Deeba didn't take her hand away from Grandma Mary's shoulder. Setting the bucket and rags aside she said,

“Why don't you do a better job on your foot, put on other shoes, then go to town with me. I have my shopping list all ready. Maybe you could buy a new pair of shoes.” Deeba smiled.

“We are all about family here. If you step in cow flop, someone will help you wash your feet.”

Grandma Mary started to laugh. Deeba took off her other little shoe and tossed it into the yard with its mate.

“I would like to go with you and buy different shoes.”

~ ~ ~

When Josh came in at the end of his day he saw Deeba in blue jeans, a sweat shirt with “Huskers” on the front, and wearing brown chukka boots.

Deeba made a loop around the table showing off her new farm clothes. Everyone had already told her how nice she looked, so the second fashion show was for Josh. No one noticed, or at least no one said anything, except Mary mumbled something that sounded like “she's just showing off,” but it was said in a way that it could be ignored.

Josh watched as the “new” Deeba was setting the table for dinner and helping at the stove. He wondered, “what's this all about?” but he thought he had to say how nice Deeba looked because she did.

“You look like you are ready to cheer the Nebraska team with that new shirt.”

Mary spoke up addressing Deeba,

“Donnie is taking me to a baseball game tomorrow. Would you like to go with us?”

Some eyes opened, but no one said anything, except Little Billy piped up,

“Me too!”

The new Deeba reacted,

“Yes, I would like to go. Can Little Billy go too?”

Bea saw a quiet evening with Jack,

“Yes, he can go.”

Josh pointed at Little Billy.

“I saw your dog in the feed lot. You had better check his feet. Where is he?”

“Under the table, Uncle Josh.”

Grandma Mary shook her finger at Little Billy.

“You get that dog out of my kitchen and wash his feet.”

By now everyone had heard about Deeba’s stepping in cow flop. The whole bunch began laughing at Grandma Mary’s faked stern talk about dirty feet in her kitchen. Maryam noticed that her sister was laughing with everyone else, and felt some Deeba-caused tension begin to ease.

As Deeba found herself helping cleanup after dinner she began to feel how this family works, and her mind went to how nice it would be for her to be a part of it, then the revelation – she wished she were her sister. The thought caused her to almost drop the plate she was drying. She looked at her sister and wondered, for the first time, if she had always wanted to be her older sister. She took another dish to dry, remembering:

Maryam had always gotten to do things first. She had the first boyfriend. She escaped the dread of her family then came back for her with a real man. Now she had this family. It was a new sobering thought. She didn’t like being the younger sister. She didn’t even like being Deeba. She wanted to be Maryam, and Josh was part of that longing – to be what? Someone else? Something else? She put the dish towel down and went outside the back kitchen door and sat down on the step where she had had her foot washed, and began to cry a second time today.

Grandma Mary had been with Deeba much of the day. Foot washing, shopping, then Deeba helping in the kitchen. She really liked what she thought she saw happening. She saw a softening in Deeba’s manner, and even in the way she moved. When she saw Deeba go out the kitchen door, she waited a few minutes then approached her. Then when realized that Deeba was crying, she took the dish drying towel she was carrying, handed it to Deeba, then sat down beside her.

“Have you ever been to a baseball game?”

Deeba wiped her eyes and mumbled, “No.”

“It can be a lot of fun.”

“I have to go home next week.”

“Do you have a nice apartment?”

“No. I mean, it’s OK.”

“Do you have nice friends?”

“Not so many.”

The short questions and even shorter answers went on for a few minutes with Deeba dabbing her eyes, and Grandma Mary working up to her real question. Finally, Deeba opened the door to the subject Grandma Mary had been waiting for.

“I really like it here.”

“Do you like it here, or do you really like Josh?”

Deeba wiped her eyes and turned toward Grandma Mary.

“Josh is so big and handsome.”

“So is my other son, Jack.”

Deeba looked down at her hands and passed the dish towel back to Grandma Mary.

“But Jack’s married.”

“My boy, Josh, is married twice.”

“Twice?”

“Yes, twice. First to this farm, and then to your sister. He will never leave either of them.”

“I thought he might.”

“I’m surprised you thought that.”

“I knew what was happening to Mr. Baxter’s business and thought that Josh would stay in Germany and become rich.”

“You wanted that for Josh?”

“Yes. It didn’t happen, but I thought there was still a chance so I came here.”

“And now you like it here.”

“Yes, I really do. Now I have to go home to a cold apartment and a new job I may not like, and I really like it here.”

Grandma Mary stood up, took Deeba by the hand and said,

“Let’s take a walk and break in those new shoes.”

“Josh was born in that house. He went into the Army then came back bringing Maryam with him. He will not leave this place again. This is his home.”

Grandma Mary took Deeba a little further into the first pasture, and a curious cow walked toward them. Grandma Mary knew this honey brown Jersey. She had been with her when she gave birth to her latest calf. Deeba stiffened and leaned away from the cow. Mary invited,

“Put your hand on her soft nose. This cow is one of God’s gentlest creatures.”

Deeba was still not sure she liked being so close to a very large animal, but she did cautiously reach out and touched the cow’s soft nose. She felt the velvety warm nose and looked into her big dark eyes with curly eyelashes and was won over. Grandma Mary let the moment linger.

“This is the other end of what you stepped in.”

“I like this end much better.”

Grandma Mary thought she saw a hint of a laugh, and decided to build on this moment.

“How would you like to have a glass of wine, or juice, with me and talk about men?”

“Yes, I really would. This cow is so much different than I thought it would be.”

Grandma Mary corrected,

“She.”

Deeba looked at the cow and placed her hand on her nose again. Grandma Mary pushed on.

“Would you like to have Bea and Maryam join us, or would you rather it be just you and me?”

“We could ask if they would like to join us.”

“Oh, I already know their answer. Men are one of the favorite things they want to talk about.”

For the second time today Grandma Mary heard Deeba laugh.

CHAPTER 4

“I don’t want to leave, Josh.”

Bea wanted a send-off party for her mom and dad. She was worried about her dad’s condition and wanted everyone to remain in a positive mood. And she just liked parties. She saw an opportunity for fun, and she took it. She bought balloons and streamers, and asked Mary to help her decorate the center aisle of the barn. Mary told her that Donnie had a good sound system so Bea told her to invite Donnie and his sound system, and friends, if he wanted.

Bea assigned herself food and drinks. Grandma Mary volunteered to make pulled pork in her electric roaster, baked beans and potato salad. She will enlist Liesel and Billy to help her. Bea checked out recipes on the internet to create dips for chips. There would be Coke and coffee with cookies, of course. Beer and pretzels with German mustard would be in the old tack room that still smelled like horse harness leather. Josh and Jack’s jobs were to set up the tables and chairs, and to move anything heavy.

Maryam offered to go to town and get gifts for Liesel and Billy. What to get them was talked about all day when Liesel and Billy were not around. Mary offered that there was a place in town that would stencil names on shirts. Deeba added that she had found her sweatshirt really nice on cool evenings. So it was decided, two sweatshirts with names. Everyone liked Bea’s idea of a party, and began to anticipate a fun day.

Meanwhile, Maryam had been counting down the days remaining for her sister, Deeba’s visit, but she sensed that Deeba’s presence had become less of a problem. She even saw that Deeba was trying to fit into the farm and family routine. After breakfast she walked with Josh toward the barn.

“Has Deeba been a problem for you?”

“Less so recently. Maybe since she stepped into the cow flop.”

“That was funny, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, after the fact, and after my mother took her under her wing.”

Maryam gave him a questioning look.

“Just a way of speaking, Maryam.”

“OK, Josh. We need to think about her trip planning, but I don’t want to start yet and make it look like I am trying to rush her leaving.”

“Make sure that there is no change in plans.”

“OK, Josh.”

Josh kept walking toward the barn, and Maryam turned back to the house. Josh thought he had said all that needed to be said, and hoped he was right.

~ ~ ~

Everything was party-ready when Donnie showed up with his big sound system, two friends and his grandfather, old Doctor Miller. Everyone was pleased to see Doctor Miller, especially Maryam, who mentally gave Donnie a little gold star for including his grandfather in the party. Dr. Miller brought Josh and Jack into the world and patched them up as they grew to be huge men. Grandma Mary gave him a big hug, hiding the surprise she felt because it was rumored that he had been slipping toward dementia. Bea found him a comfortable place to sit and brought him a Coke, then sat down next to him. He smiled a thank you, then,

“Don’t you have anything stronger, Bea?”

Bea went to exchange the Coke for a beer and a plate of pretzels. She wanted to talk, and saved the untouched Coke for herself. Mary helped Donnie set up his sound system then declared herself party DJ and began to take requests. Liesel and Billy had on their gift sweatshirts and Deeba, wanting to be part of things, was wearing her Husker shirt.

Little Billy came over to say, “Hi” to Doctor Miller with his dog close behind. The dog didn’t wag its tail, it wagged its whole body. Doctor Miller put his hand on the dog’s head, and it put a front paw on his leg. Little Billy said,

“Buddy likes you, Doctor Miller.”

“This kind of dog likes everybody.”

“I brought him home from Germany.”

“That must have been an adventure.”

Turning to Bea,

“That’s quite a boy you have, Bea.”

“Oh, he keeps me busy.”

Little Billy ran off to talk to Donnie’s friends, always looking for new fishing partners.

“He may be one of the last children I delivered.”

“He is going to be six, and will go into first grade in the fall.”

“Yes, that sounds about right. Six years ago. Why the party?”

“It’s for my mom and dad. They are going to make a trip out west.”

Then Bea thought, why not? and added,

“My dad has Parkinson’s.”

“Oh, that’s not good. You can’t fix Parkinson’s, but there are some new medications that seem to delay the symptoms. If he is living in Germany, they would know what to do for him. How is he feeling?”

“Mostly he has trouble with his balance and walking. Mom wants them to travel because they never had the time before.”

“That’s a good idea. Who is the woman in the Nebraska shirt?”

“That’s Deeba, Maryam’s sister. She’s visiting from Germany.”

“She doesn’t look German.”

“No, she’s from Afghanistan like Maryam.”

The old man gave Bea a puzzled look so Bea steered the conversation in the direction she wanted it to go.

“Did you deliver both Josh and Jack?”

“Oh yes, and I told Mary to stop having such big children. I spent my life bringing people in and patching them up, and I didn’t want to have to patch up Mary.”

This was the opening Bea was waiting for.

“Did you patch up her husband, Charles?”

Doctor Miller’s face clouded, then,

“More than once.”

Bea waited a moment, then went on,

“Jack told me that his father was stepped on by a bull.”

Doctor Miller’s face cleared.

“Yes, I remember, broken ribs but no punctures.”

“People don’t die from broken ribs, do they?”

“No. I taped him up. That was all he needed. It’s interesting that Jack would remember that. He must not have been very old. Who is that woman in the Nebraska shirt? She is very pretty in a different sort of way.”

“That’s Deeba, Maryam’s sister from Afghanistan.”

“Why is she here?”

“She came to visit her sister.”

“That’s nice. Ask her to come over. I would like to meet her.”

Deeba had heard her name and walked over.

“Hi. I’m Deeba.”

“You’re a pretty thing. Where are you from?”

“I’m visiting from Germany.”

“You like it here?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Why are you visiting?”

“I came to visit my sister, Maryam.”

“Oh, I know Maryam. I delivered her baby some years ago. You look a little like her.”

Turning to Bea, “Why are you having this party?”

Bea explained again knowing that old Doctor Miller would forget again, but also now completely sure that the story about Jack’s father was true. He did not die from being stepped on by a bull. Bea went and found Jack and gave him a big hug. He thought, “what did I do,” but only smiled and hugged back.

Grandma and Liesel brought out the picnic lunch and spread it on a long folding table then announced, “Lunch is ready.” As people were eating, Jack challenged everyone to a cornhole competition. People teamed up, with Deeba teamed with Donnie. Mary pretended not to notice. Grandma took two plates and settled next to her old friend, Doctor Miller. Maryam glanced down the center aisle of the big barn and remembered her wedding to Josh in this same space, but that’s another story. She walked over to Josh,

“Do you remember our wedding in this barn?”

“Of course I do.”

“Deeba will be leaving next week, and I will turn forty.”

“You don’t look forty.”

“Thank you, but can we leave the balloons and streamers up and celebrate my birthday and Deeba’s going home?”

“Sure. Why not? Can’t say the balloons will last that long, but sure, it will be fun.”

Josh called loudly over to Jack,

“We are going to leave the balloons up. Maryam is going to be forty next week!”

Maryam punched Josh on the arm.

“You didn’t need to tell the whole world how old I am.”

“Did you want a mystery birthday party?”

“I guess not, but when you said it so loud, I felt old.”

As she said these words, a small crowd gathered around her to congratulate and compliment her. Josh smiled and convinced Maryam to team with him. Josh was a pro at cornhole competition. Maryam, not so much, but the two of them were a competitive force.

Billy grabbed his grandson and they went outside to play Frisbee. The dog thought the Frisbee was for him, and Little Billy had to chase after the dog, who nabbed the Frisbee more than once.

Donnie and Deeba lost at cornhole so he went to DJ Mary and asked for some dance music. He and his friends began inviting people to line dance with them. He even took Grandma by the hand and pulled her into the line. Only old Doctor Miller refused an invitation. He made it clear that he was happy sitting on his bale of hay with his beer. The dog saw its chance to seal the deal with its new friend and jumped up beside him. Bea was quick to snap a picture.

Josh went into the tack room for a beer. He and Maryam had done well at the cornhole competition, but Jack and Bea were the winners. Bea was being smug about it, and Josh just wanted another beer. When he turned to leave with a beer in one hand and pretzels in the other, he saw the only way out was past Deeba, who had followed him. Josh struggled to stay calm.

“The party for Maryam can be for you too. A sort of sending off party.”

“I don’t want to leave, Josh.”

“I’m glad you are having a good experience here. People seem to enjoy the way you have adapted.”

“Except Mary.”

“Well, she sees you as competition, and she is only fifteen. I think it’s normal and nothing to be concerned about.”

Deeba debated with herself then said,

“I wanted to be Maryam.”

“That can’t happen.”

“I know that now. Grandma Mary helped me. Josh, I had always wanted to be Maryam.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. How did my mother help?”

“She likes me. It’s as simple as that, Josh.”

“My mother is special that way. What will you do?”

“I’m going home to a new job that you helped find for me.”

“Then it will be a real party for both you and your sister. Would you like a beer? I just opened this one.”

“Josh, you know I don’t drink beer.”

“Never?”

Just then Little Billy’s dog crashed into the room hitting Deeba’s legs, and almost knocking her into Josh. She straightened herself up and laughed.

“Never, Josh. I’m just trying to be who I am.”

Little Billy followed his dog into the room.

“Doctor Miller asked me to get him another beer.”

“Here, take this one. Then go to the house and get two cans of apple juice out of the fridge for Maryam and Deeba.”

“OK, Uncle Josh.”

Deeba stood aside to let Little Billy and his dog go on their errands. She turned back to Josh.

“Thanks for being my friend. You don’t need to hide from me anymore.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“Yes, and even a little fun, except for when I stepped into the cow flop.”

“The farm is a dangerous place, Deeba.”

“Yes, and I am sad that I am leaving. Your family even has a party when someone leaves.”

“Yes, we do. Really, we look for any reason to have a party.”

~ ~ ~

In the evening Liesel took Billy aside.

“I like Donnie. Did you see how he helped his grandfather to the bathroom, and he even had a wooden box for him to stand on to get in that high pick-up truck? I like him.”

“I was busy with Little Billy, but I noticed how well he fit in with his music and dancing, and of course, Mary is why he comes around.”

Liesel changed the subject.

“Let’s spend the night in the motor home.”

“Our bed in the house is comfortable.”

“I know, but the motor home would be more private, and I would like to try out the bed to see if it is comfortable for us.”

“So, you want privacy.”

“Yes. Then if we make a little noise, we won’t disturb anyone.”

“Are you thinking of making a lot of noise?”

“Could happen.”

Liesel leaned against Billy.

“Let’s try the motor home bed tonight. I’ll tell people we want to see if it is comfortable before we leave tomorrow.”

“OK. I’ll get my toothbrush and pajamas.”

“You won’t need your pajamas.”

Liesel took his hand, and they walked around the house to tell people they would spend the night in the motor home. Billy was thinking that their trip out West could be a really good vacation. Was this why she wanted the motor home? If so, he knew for the thousandth time that he had married the right woman.

~ ~ ~

The travelers left the next day after assuring everyone that the motor home was comfortable. But Grandma insisted they take enough food for a week. Liesel said, “How about three days?” and so, off they went to see the big open country they had only heard about. The Deeba-Maryam party was going to be easy. Cake and ice cream in the decorated barn. Donnie had left his sound system when he heard the balloons were going to stay up, and promised to be back for the party. It was a quiet normal day, until it wasn’t.

Mary took her mother aside.

“I did a stupid thing.”

Maryam waited.

“I sent someone a picture I shouldn’t have.”

“Who are you talking about? And what kind of picture?”

“His name is Dan, but I’m not sure it’s his real name. I met him on the internet, and he really liked me. So, when he asked me for a picture, I sent him one. From the waist up, Mom, only from the waist up.”

“You mean without a shirt on?”

“He wanted to know what I looked like, and he was so nice about it.”

Maryam shook her head.

“That was really stupid.”

“But then he told me he was going to put my picture out on the web so all his friends could see it if I didn’t come and meet with him.”

“I think we should tell your father.”

“Do we have to?”

“Yes, and the whole story.”

“I feel so stupid, Mom.”

Maryam found Josh and told Josh the story with Mary looking at her feet. Josh reacted.

“Is that the whole story? You never met this person?”

“No Dad. We only talked on the phone.”

“OK. You know how dumb that was?”

“Yes.”

“This is what we are going to do. Mary, invite him over, and Jack and I will have a little talk with him.”

Mary agreed to do as her dad asked, and the time was set for “Dan” to visit. Josh and Jack got Cokes and snacks and sat on the porch. And sat, and sat. Dan, or whatever his name was, never showed up. Jack went back to fixing fences and Josh shrugged it off to Maryam.

“Tell Mary I think her problem is over.”

“But what if he does show her picture to his friends?”

“Can’t help that, can we? Maybe this was a cheap lesson for her.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“We never did anything like that, did we?”

“No, Josh. I just ran off with my boyfriend.”

“God, let’s hope she doesn’t do that. What’s for dinner.”

“Fried chicken.”

“How about mashed potatoes and gravy with it?”

“Sure, and I’ll get Mary to help.”

“Maybe we should be finding more for her to do.”

“Don’t want to restrict her phone.”

“OK, but there are more things she could become involved in. I’ll think about it, but I don’t want it to look like punishment.”

“We all put in a full day. She can do more.”

“Right, Josh. Right now, I’ll put her to work in the kitchen.”

~ ~ ~

Like so many women Maryam was not really happy to be forty years old. She was not fully aware that many people, including men, think that women at the age of forty and beyond are at their very best. Hesitantly, Maryam accepted her fortieth birthday as a reason to have a party. Maryam was ready to party, but not ready for the giant red and white banner that Josh had helped Bea string over the big barn door that shouted, “Maryam is 40.” But she laughed. Even Deeba laughed, and was glad that she wasn’t the one who was forty, but didn’t say that to anyone. Deeba didn’t want to be forty like her sister. Was that a new thought?

With Liesel and Billy on their way, Grandma had more time to do what she liked to do best, which was to cook fancy. She baked a big chocolate cake and had Little Billy help her decorate it with white icing and HAPPY BIRTHDAY in big block letters.

In the pantry under some dusty boxes, Grandma found her little used old-fashioned hand cranked ice cream maker. Little Billy was fascinated by the idea that they would make their own ice cream. He was unaware of the work required to crank out the ice cream so, when he asked, “Can I make the ice cream, Grandma?” she said, “Yes” but you may need some help.

~ ~ ~

Party day dawned with a warm sun that reminded Josh and Jack that summer was coming, and they were pleased to think they were ready. In the summer, work slowed after the spring dash to get everything in the ground. The brothers were ready for the day off, and they invited Miguel and Luis to the party. Josh decided it was his day to operate his grill and declared he would grill chicken quarters with his special spray-on sauce. Everyone was in the barn when they heard a roar and a gravel crunch. Mary looked out and saw Donnie jump down from his tall truck. She ran to him, grabbed his arm and took him into the party barn.

Maryam noticed, and Jack called to Donnie,

“You always seem to show up when there is food.”

“Are you cooking, Jack?”

“No. Josh is cooking.”

“Well then, it should be better than your peanut butter and jellies.”

“Hey, you ate a lot of my lunch sandwiches and didn’t complain when you worked for me.”

Maryam edged her way into the conversation. She thought that if Donnie was going to be around a lot, and not just when they needed extra help, she wanted to know more about him. So, she said,

“How about giving me a birthday ride in that truck of yours?”

Mary’s mouth dropped open, but Donnie, always eager to show off his truck said,

“Sure. Hop in. Let’s go for a birthday ride.”

Mary walked over to her father and said,

“Did you see what Mom did?”

“What did she do?”

as he turned the chicken quarters and sprayed them with his special sauce.

“Dad, she went off with Donnie in his truck.”

“She’ll be back.”

“Don’t you care?”

“No. I’m sure she will be back for her chicken and ice cream. They probably just went for a ride. Go help Grandma and Little Billy. Tell them I like vanilla.”

“Vanilla!”

“Yes, then I can put all kinds of good things on it. Tell them to put out the sprinkles and chocolate sauce. Oh, and cherries, if they have any.”

Mary huffed away. At fifteen, she didn’t understand either her mother or her father.

~ ~ ~

Donnie loved talking about his truck. How he had put in a bigger engine and bigger wheels, and Maryam was all about getting Donnie to talk about himself. Finally, she had to do a little prompting.

“I think Mary told me you were a senior this past year. That means a graduation party.”

“Yes, my parents have it all planned out. It’s going to be a great party.”

“Do you have plans after graduation?”

“Yes.”

Maryam was looking for more than one-word answers, but she waited. Maybe he would get the hint and say more. Maybe Donnie was on to Mary’s mother’s interest, or he finally decided to talk a little about himself instead of his truck.

“I’ll be going to the University of Nebraska.”

“That sounds important. Have you decided on a major area of study?”

“Yes. I’m going to take their pre-med program.”

“That’s two-hundred miles from here. Will you be around to help Jack this summer?”

“Yes. This is my favorite section of road. All of us with trucks try to drive through the mud without getting stuck.”

“That’s good. I know Jack likes your work.”

“He said that?”

“Yes, he did, and that he hoped you would be available in the future.”

“I’ll be home for summers and looking for work. If Jack needs me, I like working for him.”

They hit the biggest mud hole, and Maryam was a little late in grabbing the seat. It was a mild bump on the head, and she laughed. She had what she needed, and could turn her attention to keeping her seat and laughing.

Come fall Donnie would be far away and she would have one less thing to worry about. Mary would be able to focus on school without a Donnie distraction. But then a thought occurred to her, what if they stayed close friends? So, when they cleared the mud, she had one more question.

“If you become a doctor, do you think you would come back here?”

“Don’t know, but I would like that. The town’s not growing, but I don’t like big cities.

I’ll find a place. Ready to go back?”

“Yes. That was a great ride. The ice cream should be ready by now.”

~ ~ ~

Maryam got her chicken quarter and sat next to Josh.

“Donnie wants to be a doctor.”

“Runs in the family.”

“He’ll be gone to university in the fall.”

“So, you asked a lot of questions.”

“Well, I wanted to know.”

“And now what?”

“I like him. I think he knew he was being questioned by Mary’s mother. He’s no dummy.”

“Don’t let Mary know. She thinks you shouldn’t go for rides with her boyfriend.”

“She said that?”

“Didn’t need to. I saw her nose in the air.”

~ ~ ~

Back in Chicago, Megan had invited Sue to visit Nick, but Sue delayed several days. Sue had seen that Nick’s sun room was really a hospital room. She noticed that Nick never moved while she was there days ago, and she thought she saw the corner of a urine bag sticking out from under his lap blanket. Nick was in much worse condition than he had let on to visitors. Did she really want to know how much worse? Finally, she had run out of excuses to herself, and called Megan to ask if it was OK to visit that afternoon. It was.

On her way to see Nick, she rehearsed what she would say to her old friend, and maybe more important, what not to say. She put a smile on when she met Megan coming to the door. Inside she saw that Nick was in his recliner chair looking like he hadn’t moved from when she saw him the week before. Megan took charge and gave Sue a hug and pointed to Nick.

“There is a chair by Nick. He knows you are coming. I’ll make us some coffee,” and moved toward the kitchen.

Coffee was Megan’s excuse to allow the two old friends some personal space. Sue went to the visitor’s chair and sat down. Nick opened his eyes, reached out and took Sue’s hand, but said nothing. A few moments passed, then,

“I knew you would come.”

“Of course, I would come. Can I do anything for you?”

“Yes. Sit with me for a while. I didn’t take my pain pill because I knew you were coming.”

“Was that a wise thing to do, Nick?”

“Maybe not wise, but they make me fall asleep and I wanted to talk with you.”

“Oh, then I won’t stay long.”

What to say kept going through Sue’s mind, but she had no good answers, until she had to ask.

“What happened, Nick?”

“Prostate cancer, went everywhere before they found it.”

“They can’t treat it?”

“Too far gone, Sue, but they do a good job of keeping me comfortable. Hospice nurses are the greatest.”

Sue digested Hospice. Nick looked at Sue.

“You look well. You have been taking care of yourself. I still notice how nice you look.”

“Thanks, Nick. My doctor daughter pushes me to do the healthy thing.”

“How is Jennifer doing?”

“Very well.”

“And Joey?”

“He’s growing fast. Seems like he needs new shoes every few months.”

“We had a great time, Joey and I.”

“I’ll bring him with me next time I come.”

“That would be nice, but soon.”

Sue was trying to get a grip on what Nick was telling her. Had she waited almost too long to visit? What she said just popped out.

“How soon, Nick?”

“Don’t know really, but they keep upping my meds. Soon I won’t be very good at conversation.”

Sue squeezed his hand. Nick had said, soon. Holding his hand was the only response she could manage. Nick broke the silence.

“There is something you can do for me.”

“Whatever it is, Nick. You saved my life.”

“And you changed mine, but what I want is very simple.”

“Megan,” he called out. “Would you bring that little album of pictures of me and Joey? The one with all the fish on the stringer.”

Megan called back,

“Sure, Nick”

and she brought him the little picture album.

“Sue, I would like you to give Joey these pictures. We had some great time together.”

“Don’t you want to give them to him yourself?”

“I would like to see him, but even tomorrow is uncertain.”

“Not even tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow I could be asleep from pain meds and gone in a few days. Nobody knows.”

Sue heaved a breath.

“I almost waited too long. I didn’t want to see you this way.”

“I understand. I have been avoiding the mirror myself.”

Sue got up, leaned over and hugged Nick as Megan brought in the little album.

“Oh, should I be jealous?”

“Yes, you should. I love this man, have loved him for a long time, and I almost waited too long to come and see him.”

“But you didn’t. I’ll go get the coffee. Nick, do you want some cookies?”

“Yes, I do. Do you have any of my favorite sugar cookies?”

“I do.”

“That would be wonderful.”

Sue sat back in her chair, again lost for words. Nick filled in the blank moment.

“This won’t be the last time we see each other.”

“I try to share your hope.”

“Love always wants to last forever, Sue.”

“I know, Nick.”

Sue felt her body slowly relaxing into the softness, and sudden familiarity, of Nick’s visitor’s chair. Was this the same chair she had sat in in Nick’s counseling office all those years ago? But that’s another story. Megan brought in the coffee and Nick’s favorite sugar cookies, and Sue no longer wondered what she would say. She had said it all, but then added,

“I’ll bring Joey over tomorrow.”

Nick smiled and reached for a cookie.

~ ~ ~

Next day Sue called Megan to see if it were OK to bring Joey over.

“He’s been asleep all day, Sue. I have called our son, Sam to come and Nick’s Franciscan brothers. We don’t think he will make it another day.”

Sue digested what she was hearing. She and Nick had said all the important things.

“I think we won’t come, but I’ll tell Joey.”

“OK, Sue. Thanks for being such a good friend.”

Sue decided she wanted to be with Joey, and not just on the phone. Joey was an alert twelve-year-old, but she wanted to be next to him when she told him about his good friend, Nick. She drove over to her daughter, Jennifer’s house, and had Joey sit on the big couch. She told him that his Uncle Nick was dying, and his pain meds had made him unable to stay awake. Joey reacted,

“I want to see him. He’s my friend.”

“He won’t be able to talk to you, but he gave me a little album of pictures. He wanted you to have this.”

Joey looked at the album, set it aside and said,

“I want to go see him.”

“But he will just be sleeping.”

“He talked to you, Grandma.”

“That was yesterday.”

“I want to go.”

“OK, Joey. Get some shoes on, and we will go see Uncle Nick.”

Sue called Megan and said that she and Joey would make a short visit.

When Sue and Joey arrived, the house seemed crowded with people Joey didn’t know, but Megan made a path for Joey. Joey leaned toward Nick.

“Uncle Nick, it’s me, Joey.”

“Nick’s eyes flickered.”

“It’s me, Uncle Nick. It’s Joey.”

Nick opened his eyes and smiled.

“Did you get the little album?”

“Yes, Grandma gave it to me.”

“We had good times, didn’t we?”

Then he looked past Joey.

“Thanks for bringing him, Sue.”

Megan spoke for everyone.

“Nick, do you need anything?”

“Open the window. Some fresh air would be nice.”

Nick pushed up a little in his lounge chair as Megan opened the nearest window. One of the brothers crossed himself and squeezed in to put his hand on Nick’s shoulder.

“We are here with you, Nick.”

“I love you all. Megan, maybe Joey would like some cookies.”

Megan took Joey to the kitchen, and Nick’s family of brothers gathered close to him and began praying the Our Father. Nick closed his eyes.

~ ~ ~

Sue took Joey home and told her doctor daughter about what happened. Jennifer responded,

“This is not unusual. People can rally for a short time, even a few days.”

“It was Joey, who insisted on going to see Nick, and I am glad he did. It was good for him, and good for the whole family. Joey is all packed and ready for his summer on the farm.”

“He really likes the farm, doesn’t he?”

“He really does Mom, but especially his little friend, Mary. Would you like to stay for dinner? Joseph will be home soon.”

“That sounds good. What are you having?”

“Chicken in the slow cooker.”

~ ~ ~

Nick died that night, but Nick’s family of Franciscan brothers would talk about Joey’s visit, and how Nick had rallied enough to say good-bye to his young friend.

CHAPTER 5

“You don’t know your birthday?”

Back on the farm, it was the day before Joey was to arrive. The talk was unusually quiet with Liesel and Billy on the road, and Deeba on her way home. There were the regular visitor details, like: who would go pick up Joey at the airport? was his room clean and ready? would he be there for dinner? Individually, there was some thinking about how Joey will fit in, and how he would spend his time, and their thoughts didn’t match up very well. They didn’t know that yet, but they would soon find out.

Joey, of course, had his own big plans for how he would spend his summer on the farm. His plans focused on Mary, his best friend from last summer, and on the four-wheeler dream, go-anywhere machine he had learned to drive last year. His dream summer was Mary and his dream machine, magic carpet-like, taking in the whole farm and beyond.

In Josh’s mind Joey was the perfect go-for assistant. A valuable helper timesaver because there was always a need to go fetch a tool, a part, or help with the other end of a long board, or eyes on the other side of a piece of work. Josh was looking forward to getting a lot more done with Joey’s help, and he planned to make the most of Joey’s time on the farm.

Jack was thinking about how to raise boys. The one he had and the one he thought may be on the way. What did Joey and his Billy need to know? He also thought safety first. Big animal safety. How to sharpen a knife, names of tools and how to use them. Was Joey ready to swing an axe safely? How about a shot gun? He would find out.

Maryam had started to worry about how her Mary and Joey would get along. They were best friends last year. The three years difference in age didn’t seem important then. Now it looked to her like an oceanwide gap, or maybe not. She didn’t know what to expect. Joey would have grown up some also. So, she worried like that was her job as mother.

Bea, on the other hand, saw Joey as a fun kid that would be a great playmate for her Little Billy. As for Little Billy, he had only one thought. No one ever had enough spare time to spend with him, or to take him fishing nearly as often as he wanted. The last two times his dad had taken him fishing, he really only got to watch. Maybe Joey could take him every day, or at least most days, and he could really learn how to fish.

Mary really wasn’t thinking very much about Joey being there for the summer. Last summer they had been pals, had an adventure or two, but what was she going to do with a little boy? Her self-image had radically changed, and it no longer fit as a pal with a little boy. So mostly she put

Joey out of her thoughts. Joey was other people's problem, not hers. She had other things on her mind.

Grandma liked Joey and looked forward to his visits. She had helped him fit in, be part of things, and that remained her first interest. She knew what food he liked, and she would be sure to fix it for him. She would involve him in the everyday things around the house and kitchen. But she too was thinking about the Mary-Joey friendship, and thought – Joey needs to do some things, maybe do some things to help him feel good about himself. She thought Joey projects, things he would be able to say, "I did it!" She would talk to her boys about Joey projects.

~ ~ ~

Joey got off the plane with only a backpack. When Bea and Little Billy took him to get his baggage, Joey only picked up a guitar case. Little Billy knew what that was.

"Do you play the guitar?"

"A little."

"Could you teach me how to play?"

"Sure, what little I know."

Bea ushered them to the car with Little Billy chattering away about his dog, and how he liked to go fishing.

"Can you take me fishing?"

"Sure. We can do that."

"Sure," was Joey's answer to all questions, but his mind was someplace else.

When they got to the house it was near dinnertime. Joey smelled his way into the kitchen where Grandma and Maryam greeted him with big hugs, and "Are you hungry? Would you like something to drink?" Joey answered, "Sure" to both questions. Grandma asked, "Is that a guitar case? Put your backpack in the corner." Joey really did enjoy the warm welcome, and his "Sure," was sincere. He put down his things and sat down at the corner of the table. He got his Coke. He had waited as long as he could to ask,

"Where's Mary?"

The women answered,

"Oh, she's upstairs. We expect her to be down in a minute or two."

The women went back to preparing dinner. Bea left to find Jack and tell him that she was back from the airport. Little Billy brought his dog to meet Joey, but still no Mary. Joey heard a rumble and a crunch outside and at the same time heard Mary run down the steps and into the kitchen.

“Hi, Joey. Grandma, I won’t be here for dinner. Donnie is taking me out.”

And she went out the front door with a bang.

Joey got up and looked out the front window and saw his summer dissolve before his eyes as he saw Mary being helped into a pickup truck by a tall boy in a cowboy hat. Joey stood there for a minute, then walked back through the kitchen and out the back door. Little Billy’s dog thought he wanted to play and brought him a wet tennis ball. Joey took the ball, tossed it, wiped his hand and sat down on the top step looking blankly into the far pasture.

Grandma, who always saw everything, came out and sat down next to Joey. This was her confessional back step. She put her arm around Joey’s shoulders, but said nothing. The dog brought its tennis ball back and persisted. Then Little Billy came out, and the dog gave up on Joey, and instead pushed the ball against Little Billy’s leg and they both ran off to play.

Joey’s disappointment knew no words. He slumped there on the step looking at his feet. Grandma took her arm away.

“She will be back later and will spend some time with you. Dinner is about ready. Jack and Josh will be glad to see you. Did you know Miguel plays the guitar? Maybe you two can play some songs for us this evening.”

Just then Jack walked up.

“Good to see you, Joey! I think you have grown half a foot since last summer. Let’s get some dinner.”

Grandma pointed to Little Billy and his dog.

“Why don’t you play with Little Billy and his dog while we finish getting dinner ready.”

“Sure, Grandma.”

As Grandma and Jack made their way into the kitchen she tugged at Jack’s sleeve.

“Mary went out with Donnie.”

“Oh, I see. What’s for dinner?”

“Cabbage rolls.”

“Smells great.”

In the kitchen, Grandma could see Joey in the yard with Little Billy so she huddled the family.

“We need to make Joey feel welcome. He’s down because Mary went out. What can we do?”

Maryam suggested,

“Let’s set him a special place at the table.”

And so it went, around and around with ideas. Josh came in.

“I saw Joey. He’s grown.”

He was told the problem. Josh responded,

“Well, I thought he was just part of the family, but if you think we need a big welcome celebration, then get out the party hats.”

When Joey and Little Billy were finally called in to dinner, the family was ready. Little Billy jumped up exclaiming, “Wow, a party!” Joey saw a chair decorated with paper streamers and his name fancy on a big piece of paper taped to the back, and everyone wearing colorful pointed hats. Grandma motioned to the special Joey chair, “Welcome home, Joey.”

Jack slapped him on the back.

“After dinner I have a project, you may like. We have an old four-wheeler that hasn’t been running for two years. If you can get it running, you can have it for the summer.

Joey smiled,

“Just for me?”

“Yes, really. Now let’s eat.”

~ ~ ~

During dinner Little Billy begged Joey again about taking him fishing. Bea asked him if he would like to learn how to bake cookies. Josh asked if he would like to help him clean out and organize his tool shed, and help build some new shelves.

At first Joey poked at his plate of cabbage rolls, then he realized that they tasted pretty good and finished them off. Grandma saw that and gave him another one.

“Growing boys need food.”

Joey looked at Jack.

“Can I see the old four-wheeler?”

“Yes, but how about some dessert first?”

“OK.”

Little Billy persisted,

“Will you take me fishing tomorrow?”

“OK.”

Bea added,

“If you catch enough fish, we will have fried fish for dinner.”

~ ~ ~

The family lingered around cake and whatever anyone wanted to drink. No one wanted to end the party until Joey asked Jack,

“When can we see the old four-wheeler?”

“Let’s go now before it gets too dark. Little Billy, why don’t you come along? You may learn something.”

Behind the barn was a lean-to shed where the old four-wheeler had been parked two years ago. Weeds had crept in and at some point, a tarp had been thrown over it, but now it was more like a big old rag. Jack pulled it off.

“When we bought a new one, we just parked the old one here. It will be a lot of work to get it cleaned up and running again.”

Joey saw flat tires, torn seat, worn paint and a magic carpet machine waiting for him to clean it up. Jack pulled on it, but it wouldn’t move.

“Tomorrow we will use the little tractor to pull it around to near my tool shed. You can clean it up there.”

Joey pushed weeds aside and sat in it imagining moving the controls. Little Billy climbed on too and made engine sounds. He was going to be involved in this machine’s resurrection. Jack had to coax them both back to the house.

“Tomorrow, we will pull it around front. Joey, you can use my tools, but you have to put

things back where you found them.”
“OK, Uncle Jack.”

Grandma saw them coming back toward the house and remembered Joey’s guitar case. As they stepped up on the porch, she asked Joey,

“Why don’t you bring your guitar out here on the porch and play for us?”
“OK, Grandma.”

Grandma noticed that Joey had replaced his “Sure” with “OK.”

When the others heard Joey’s tuning, they came out and found comfortable seats. As the sun was disappearing and Joey had strummed a few cords, Donnie’s pickup crunched up the driveway. Mary jumped out and skipped up the walk to the porch. When she saw Joey with his guitar she asked,

“Do you know *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*?”

Joey strummed the opening cords, then stopped. Mary pushed,

“Keep playing, Joey.”

Joey kept playing, and when he played the cords for “blue birds fly” Mary started singing. Joey stopped again. Mary persisted,

“Don’t you remember when we would sing this song together last summer? Start again from the beginning.”

Joey began again, sitting a little straighter and playing firmer cords with Mary singing along until the verse, “why then, oh why, can’t I?” and she held that final note. Everyone clapped. Joey smiled.

“Jack’s giving me the old four-wheeler, if I can get it running.”

Mary sat down with him.

“Will you take me for a ride?”

Joey sat up even straighter.

“You can drive, if you want.”

“OK, Joey. You get it running, and we will take turns driving.”

Grandma asked,

“What other songs do you know?”

“Lots, I guess.”

Miguel asked,

“Do you have a favorite guitar player?”

“Yes.”

“And who is that?”

“Chet Atkins.”

“Oh, he is very good. Do you think you could play like him some day?”

“Maybe.”

“Would you like to learn some Mexican music, like salsa?”

“OK.”

And so it went until Bea took Billy off to bed, and the men called it a night, but Grandma wanted to make a point.

“Joey, you and Mary sound pretty good together.”

Mary added, “Let’s practice after dinner tomorrow.”

Joey smiled and said, “OK.”

On his way to his room, Joey could be heard quietly saying, “where trouble melts like lemon drops, high above the chimney tops.”

~ ~ ~

Next morning Grandma was hustling around her kitchen very pleased with her family and how they had welcomed Joey yesterday. When the weather allowed, she had windows open so she jumped when she heard a great backfire followed by loud coughs and sputters. Looking out she saw a smiling Joey standing next to a coughing old four-wheeler. Joey was making noisy progress getting the old machine to run again. Grandma took a deep breath. Joey was going to be successful, and she saw a happy twelve-year-old boy.

~ ~ ~

When Joey came to the kitchen door for dinner, Grandma saw a very dirty Joey.

“Don’t come in here with those dirty clothes. Wait here, and I’ll toss you a clean tee shirt and jeans.”

When she handed him clean clothes, she saw badly blackened hands.

“Do you have a nail brush?”

“What’s that?”

“Ask one of the men. You can’t come into my kitchen with hands like that.”

“OK,” he answered,

and went off to change clothes and learn how mechanics wash their hands.

Mary came into the kitchen.

“Was that Joey?”

“Yes, and he was all dirty so I sent him back to get cleaned up.”

“I like him, Grandma.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear you say that because you are really important to him.”

“I am?”

“You may be the most important person in his life right now.”

“Grandma, I don’t want to be that important.”

“Can’t be helped. Just be real with him. If you like singing with him, then say so, but don’t fake it. That would be the worst thing you could do.”

“You make it sound so serious.”

“Mary, he is a twelve-year-old boy. They can be very serious about first loves.”

Mary sat down better to think.

“How can I help, Grandma?”

“Set the table. Joey is just family. Nudge your dad and Uncle Jack to have Joey sit between them.”

“OK, Grandma, but I don’t like being Joey’s first love. That just doesn’t feel right.”

“Can’t be helped. You do sing and play well together.”

“That’s because I like him.”

“That’s how he needs you to be.”

“I’ll be nice to him.”

“No, you need to be real with him.”

“I’ll try, Grandma.”

~ ~ ~

The next day Little Billy got his wish when Joey took him fishing in the farm pond. He learned how to handle a slippery fish with prickly fins. He was beaming when he brought his mother the dozen bluegills he had caught and cleaned. Bea gave him a hug.

“We will deep fry them, and everyone will get a taste of your fish tonight at dinner. Your grandpa will be back in a few days, and you can show him what you learned about fishing.”

“I can show him how I do it. Do you think he will go with me?”

“I know he will. Now go wash your hands. You smell like a fisherman.”

Little Billy sniffed his hands to get a good whiff of what a real fisherman smells like. His dog was sniffing his pants, getting a good smell of what a fisherman’s pants smell like. Little Billy danced off with his dog to wash his hands knowing that everyone would be able to taste how good a fishman he was. Bea called Joey aside.

“It was really nice that you took Little Billy fishing.”

“It was fun because they are easy to catch.”

“Don’t tell him that.”

“I didn’t say how easy it was. It was good fun for both of us.”

“When will you get that old four-wheeler running?”

“I hope tomorrow. Uncle Jack says he would help me take the carburetor apart and clean it.”

“Do you like working with your Uncle Jack?”

“I do because he teaches me things.”

Bea found herself with Grandma for a minute.

“I think things are going well for Joey. I think he especially liked the welcoming party.”

“I believe you’re right, Bea. Doesn’t everyone like parties, especially when it’s for them.”

“Mary likes to invite Donnie.”

“I think Donnie likes to be with Mary.”

“I like the way he brings old Doctor Miller, his grandfather. I was able to sit and talk with him when he was here.”

“Grandma, he remembers taking care of you like it was yesterday; however, he forgets what was said a few minutes ago.”

“Bea, I think that’s common in very old people. I remember when both Jack and Josh were born like it was yesterday, yet have to write down what I need at the store or I will forget half of it.”

“Grandma, you’re not old.”

“Thanks, Bea. Help me with dinner.”

Miguel came in early for dinner, sat down out of the way, then raised a point to the two women.

“You really like to have parties, don’t you?”

Grandma responded,

“Yes, we do, Miguel. Hardly a month goes by without a good reason to have a party – like birthdays. When is your birthday?”

“I don’t know. Maybe in the summer.”

“You don’t know your birthday. Well, then you have never had a birthday party.”

“No, I never had one.”

“We will have a party for you. Tomorrow you will have the chair of honor, and we will fix a special meal for you.”

“Please, no. I do not want a chair of honor.”

Grandma, still thinking of ways to make Miguel’s first birthday party special, asked,

“Would you like Mexican food for dinner tomorrow? I could cook it best if you showed me how.”

“You would need to buy Mexican.”

“Go to the store with me and we will get everything we need. We will do that in the morning before Josh puts you to work on something else.”

“Are you sure this is OK to do?”

“Miguel, it may not always look like I am the boss, but it will be OK if you take time to shop with me.”

Josh came in the kitchen door.

“What’s this about being boss?”

“We are going to have a birthday party tomorrow for Miguel.”

“I didn’t know it was his birthday”

“Miguel isn’t sure either, but we are going to do it anyway, and he needs to go to the store with me in the morning to get what we need for a Mexican dinner.”

“Whatever you say, Mom.”

Grandma looked at Miguel, and gave him a wink.

~ ~ ~

At the local store, Grandma was surprised by the size of the Mexican food section she had never really noticed before. There were taco shells, tortillas in every size, black beans, canned this and canned that, but Miguel told Grandma he would like tamales and mole. The store had chicken and some spices, but no corn husks. She asked the grocer, and he directed her to a little Mexican food store on a back street that she didn’t even know was there. They would have a genuine Mexican dinner. Grandma told the family about the little Mexican store declaring that they would have Mexican dinner more often.

That evening Miguel heard *Happy Birthday* sung for him for the first time. Little Billy asked Miguel,

“How old are you?”

“I don’t know, but my son, Luis, is twenty-nine.”

Bea picked up on the twenty-nine and added twenty-one.

“Then you can be fifty today. That’s a great birthday to celebrate.”

“I like being fifty. When I tell my wife, I will get more respect.”

Everyone laughed, but Miguel was only half joking. He was now officially a respectable fifty years old.

As they began clearing the table, Bea noticed an unopened package that had been set off to the side. She looked at the mailing label and it said, “William.” There was only one William so she called Little Billy over and said,

“There’s a package here for you. It says, William, and that’s you, Billy.”

“I’m William?”

“Yes, open the package. I think it’s from your grandfather.”

When Little Billy opened the package, he found two baseball gloves and a baseball. There was a note.

“Hi Billy. I always liked to play baseball. When I get back, we can play catch together.

Ask your uncles if they have a baseball bat. If they don't, maybe they could get one for us." Signed, *Grandpa*.

Everyone had to look and even try on the two gloves. Jack tossed the ball to Little Billy.

"Billy, you and I can practice catch until your grandpa gets here."

"OK, Dad."

Bea let the "William" on the package sink in, and she noticed the "Billy" note and that Jack had dropped the "little" when he asked about playing catch. Her son was no longer "Little" Billy, and she would pass the word. Everyone agreed that "Little Billy" no longer fit.

~ ~ ~

Grandma was always the last to bed. She had to make sure her kitchen was in order, and attention given to windows and doors as required by the weather. She was pleased with her life and especially with her family. Sitting quietly at her table with a small sip of wine was her ultimate end to a perfect day.

The party and food had been a success so she had an even better reason to savor her place in the world this evening when there was a tap at the door. She could see Miguel through the screen door and waved him in.

"I wanted to thank you for my birthday party. I am writing to my wife to tell her about what you have done for me."

"Can you sit and talk a little?"

"Si. Yes."

"Would you like a small glass of wine with me?"

"I'd like that. Thank you."

Grandma refilled her glass and poured one for Miguel. Bea's question popped into her mind, "Did you take him to bed?" and how she answered, "I have never thought of such a thing." Now she was looking across the table at a physically healthy man, probably twenty years younger than herself – and he was her friend – maybe a good friend – and she had the thought that she had told Bea had never happened. She would never be able to say that again.

Grandma was Mary again. In her mind her age disappeared and the last vestiges of her late-night loneliness faded like mist when the sun comes up.

"Tell me more about the village you live in. How would I be treated if I visited there?"

"You would be given the chair of honor at dinner. And there would be a fiesta with music

and dancing.”

“I have heard you play, and talk of salsa. Could you get your guitar and teach me to dance the salsa?”

“Now, tonight?”

“Yes.”

Miguel went to get his guitar leaving “Mary” to think. She thought, “I should have said tomorrow.” But then he was back, and strummed a few cords saying,

“We move our feet like this.”

Tomorrow I will show everyone how to dance the salsa, and a new thought – what if they all want to visit Miguel’s village in the winter and experience a real Mexican party?

Josh sat up. What was he hearing? Maryam felt him stir and came awake.

“Maryam, what do I hear?”

“Sounds like music and someone laughing.”

“Who could that be? Oh, you think?”

“Who else, Josh. Go back to sleep.”

~ ~ ~

There was no being secret about the old four-wheeler. It coughed, rattled and smoked, leaving a trail of noise and smelly air wherever it went. But in a few days Joey had enough confidence in it to ask Mary if she would like to drive it, and maybe go to the far creek for a noon picnic.

Mary responded,

“I’ll need to tell my mother where we are going and ask her to help me pack some lunch.

It’s a little early for lunch. Why don’t we meet back here in an hour?”

“OK, sure. I’ll talk to Uncle Jack to see if I should take anything along.”

Mary found her mother in the kitchen.

“Joey and I are going to take the old four-wheeler to the far creek and have a picnic there.

Help me put together a nice picnic. I want it to be nice for Joey.”

Maryam spread ham slices and cheese and buns on the table, a couple of candy bars, a bag of chips, Cokes and a root beer while Mary looked for a basket. Mary thought maybe this was a good time to talk to her mother about her earlier conversation with Liesel.

“Mom, Liesel told me that I should always be in control of my relationship with boys, but

I don't want to boss Joey around."

"I don't think that is what Liesel meant. I think she meant you shouldn't let anyone do anything to you that you don't want, not just always be boss."

"Joey never asks me to do anything that I don't want to do. Grandma thinks I am Joey's first love, and that I need to be real with him."

"She said that?"

"Yes."

"She may be right, and it wouldn't be good for him if you were only being nice. That's what I think she meant. I see Joey as a boy who wants to please you, so you need to be careful not to ask him to do things you know he shouldn't."

"How do I know?"

"Do you want him to continue to be your friend and do things together, like a picnic lunch? Can you do those things and just be a friend?"

"Sure, OK, I want to do things with him because he's my friend."

"You're even beginning to sound like him. Don't worry about always doing the right thing, but kissing is not a good idea."

"Mom, he's a little boy. I wouldn't do that."

"It's going to be a long summer. Put the cold drinks next to the sandwiches. The creek is a long way. I hope you don't have to walk back. That old machine makes a terrible racket."

"OK, Mom. We won't be gone all day."

~ ~ ~

Maryam did her mother-thing after the picnic pair left.

"Jack, will that old machine get them to the creek and back? Isn't that more than a mile?"

"They'll be OK, but it's more like two miles. Weather's nice. They will have a good time."

Maryam felt a little better. She had stopped worrying about her daughter going out with Donnie in his big pickup. Why was she worried about Mary and little Joey in an old machine? Then she remembered again what it was like for her when she was fifteen. She went to find Josh, and see if he needed any help. Just then Billy and his dog ran up with his two new gloves and ball.

"Want to play catch with me?"

"OK, tossing only; no hard throwing."

The dog ran along with them to the yard, hoping that there would be some misses that he could chase. Josh wasn't going to get any help anytime soon.

~ ~ ~

The creek was only a few steps wide, but there were riffles and pools. Joey was wishing he had brought his fishing things, but put that thought aside when Mary got out the lunch basket. But he couldn't get fishing out of his mind even when eating a ham and cheese sandwich with his favorite root beer. His thoughts went back to his very first fishing experience.

"When COVID-19 was causing people to be sick, I had to live with my Uncle Nick, and he took me fishing out on the big lake."

"Why couldn't you live with your parents?"

"They were both sick. My mother almost died."

"They closed school here and we stayed home, except when we needed to buy food."

"I was about nine years old, and I really missed school."

"What was your Uncle Nick like? I don't think I ever met him."

"He helped people. He was a counselor. A few days before I came to the farm, he died.

He gave me an album of pictures, pictures of fishing."

"Did you bring it along?"

"No, but now I wish I had. He was my best friend."

Mary had found a place to sit on a big rock, and took off her shoes so she could put her feet in the creek. Joey followed, and discovered that the creek was cold on his bare feet. Mary had an idea.

"Why don't we take pictures this summer, then we will have our own photo album?"

"Do you have a camera?"

"My phone takes good pictures." Maybe too good, she thought.

It was decided. This would be a photo album summer. Joey took a little corner of bread and tossed it into the creek. It floated downstream a few feet then disappeared with hardly a ripple.

"I want to come back here and go fishing."

"And take pictures."

Joey and Mary had discovered that they could make decisions together, and how good it felt inside. They were becoming friends in a new way.

~ ~ ~

When Jack came in for dinner, he had smelled that the old four-wheeler had made it back, but he was surprised to see Joey and Mary in the kitchen with aprons on. Mary spoke up.

“Bea is teaching us how to bake fancy cookies.”

“Joey, you look good in that apron, but I don’t see any food stains on it. Can’t be a good cookie baker with a clean apron.”

Joey laughed. Mary came to his defense.

“Joey will mix the dough, and I’ll see to it that he gets some on himself.”

Bea looked at her students more carefully. Was she seeing competition or cooperation? Either way she liked it.

~ ~ ~

The cookies were a success. After dinner the musicians gathered on the porch to learn new songs. Grandma astounded everyone by offering to teach them how to dance the salsa. In her busy kitchen she had forgotten to mention that she had received a call from Joey’s parents. They want to visit, and she had suggested the upcoming July 4th week when Liesel and Billy were scheduled to get back. The July 4th idea went around with some “great ideas,” with Joey leading the enthusiasm.

~ ~ ~

Talking about a July 4th celebration became contagious. Grandma called Joey’s parents back to ask if they were going to bring Joey’s other grandmother with them. The answer was,

“We will ask Sue. We think she will come.”

Mary asked for the phone.

“Hi. This is Mary. Joey told me about his best friend, Nick, and about a photo album.

He wanted me to see it, but he didn’t bring it with him. Could you bring it when you

come?”

“We think we know the album he is talking about, and we will bring it. It’s good for Joey that he is talking to you about his friend, Nick. Is your grandma still there, Mary?”

“Yes. I’ll give her the phone back.”

“I’m back.”

“What do you think of inviting Nick’s widow, Megan, to come with us?”

“I think that’s a great idea. She and your mother are good friends, aren’t they?”

“They are really good friends. We will invite both of them. Do you have enough room?”

“We do. It will be a good family gathering.”

Bea heard the conversation turn to family, and she instantly called her sister, Thea.

“We are going to gather as a family for July 4th week. Come and be with us. Bring your husband, Carl, with you.”

Thea agreed, so there will be two more. Maryam had been calling her sister about once a week so she thought, why not? and called Deeba.

“We are going to gather as a family. I would like you to come. Talk to Thea. Maybe you could travel together.”

Deeba didn’t need any encouragement. She would come. Mary said,

“I want Donnie to come,” and Bea added, “Bring his grandfather.”

Billy had caught the spirit as people were counting on their fingers how many to plan for. Bea took charge of the planning, and the others were happy to let her do it. Billy chimed in,

“What about Buddy? Isn’t my dog family too?”

The dog was added to the finger count.

~ ~ ~

Bea’s mind went into high gear during dinner that evening as she mentally started planning their July 4th week. To herself, “We have to have an evening of fireworks, and games, and prizes, etc., etc.” Then her mind shifted, and she thought, “I’ll tell everyone that Jack and I are going to have a baby.” She would stand up in front of the family and make the big announcement. Suddenly, she couldn’t wait any longer, and blurted out,

“Jack and I are going to have a baby, and if it’s a boy we will call him Charles.”
Jack corrected, “Not Charles – Charlie.”

The laughing and congratulations went on for several minutes. Then Grandma raised her fingers,
“We need to recount and add one more.”

~ ~ ~

As Grandma was completing her every evening kitchen cleanup, she signaled Bea to linger with her. Bea motioned to Jack to take Billy for his bath, then turned to Grandma.

“I have all kinds of ideas for our July 4th week.”

“I bet you do, but I wanted to thank you for being my daughter-in-law. You have been such a blessing to me and Jack.”

“Do you like that we want to have a boy and name him Charlie?”

“I love it, Bea. Can’t wait to have another little one like Billy in my kitchen with me. I also wanted to thank you for asking me, “Did I?” and I responded, “Never thought of such a thing.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, I thought it – but I didn’t do it, Bea.”

Bea started to laugh.

“That’s what I did too, Bea. I started to laugh. I was remembering all the times that Charlie and I were together in our own bed. We would laugh, Bea, and now I can remember that. You did that for me. You helped Jack know he didn’t cause Charlie’s death. You helped me to remember and laugh. Now you will bring a new Charlie into the world.”

She grabbed Bea and crushed her in a bear hug for the ages. Bea croaked out,

“I want fireworks. Big fireworks.”

“Talk to Donnie. I bet he knows how to get them.”

Grandma let Bea go free. “Make them big, Bea.”

CHAPTER 6

“Don’t get drawn into politics with him.”

As Bea was making lists, Grandma was counting fingers. She sat down with a thud. What to do? She waited until the after-dinner calm to open the subject.

“We are planning a family gathering over July 4th week.”

People looked at each other with a “We know that look.”

“I think we should think about making it an annual family reunion. Bringing family together once a year should be possible for us even though some who live far away may not always be able to come every year.”

Bea,

“That’s a great idea, Grandma.”

Only Josh sensed that his mother may have more to say.

“And I like that we are going to use our Independence Day celebration to celebrate family.”

Josh shifted his weight. Now he thought he knew for sure what was coming next.

“Not everyone agrees with the way things are done by our federal government, or even how things are done in Nebraska.”

There were smiles that said, OK Grandma, where are you going with this, except Josh, who was not smiling.

Grandma continued,

“We can’t have a family reunion, maybe an annual reunion, without Charlie’s brother, Ralph.”

Josh was right; this was about his Uncle Ralph, with whom had had major problems to the point that he didn’t ever want to see him again – certainly not at any kind of, supposed to be happy, family celebration.

“Mom, I don’t want him here.”

“Josh, he only lives in Grand Island. We invite people from Chicago and Europe, but

don't invite someone who only lives an hour away. We can't do that."

The only other person at the table, who even knew Uncle Ralph a little, was Jack. He didn't particularly like the man, but he had avoided confrontations mainly by just being somewhere else. The rest had only vague memories of a large man in fancy clothes, making short visits over the years. It was only Josh, who had the bitter taste in his mouth when his Uncle Ralph's name was mentioned, and the last thing he wanted to do was to explain to the rest of the family why he had violent thoughts about his uncle. Unfortunately, Bea was at the table.

"Josh, what's wrong with Uncle Ralph?"

Josh knew he couldn't escape Bea's question – it was Bea – no way to escape.

"He's a rich big Ag, hates immigrants, tells everyone how to live their lives, right-wing political hack."

Grandma,

"I have to agree with you, Josh. He has told me how to live my life a time or two even when I was dating his brother, Charles. But I can't leave him out."

"Then I'll take a Canadian fishing trip that week, and you can have anyone you want to come to our "family reunion."

Josh pushed back almost knocking over his chair, got up and went out the door.

Maryam ran after him, almost literally running to keep up, as Josh headed for the barn. She asked between breaths,

"What's wrong with your Uncle Ralph?"

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

"I did, but what's a hack?"

She was having trouble keeping up and asking questions, so her question hit Josh in the back. He stopped and turned toward her.

"My uncle is a chicken shit politician."

"Chicken shit, Josh?"

"He gets the county board of directors to weasel-word the rules so he can make a lot of money."

"Weasel-word?"

Josh finally took a breath.

"Maryam, he is useless, can't really do anything, but rigs the rules to make money."

“Rigs the rules?”

Josh loved his Afghan Muslim wife so he slowly gave an example.

“He talked the county into requiring a certain kind of stone for all the county roads – and guess who owns the only quarry that has it?”

“Your chicken shit Uncle Ralph, I bet.”

Josh stifled a laugh, took Maryam by the hand and said,

“If you are going to follow me to the barn, I’ll put you to work.”

“OK, Josh, what do you want me to do?”

“You can be my fire watch.”

“I watch a fire?”

“No. You watch to make sure I don’t start a fire.”

“Just tell me, Josh.”

“I’m going to weld a new brace on this wagon, but I can’t see the other side. You walk around the other side, and watch to see if there is any fire.”

Maryam walked to the other side while Josh was lighting his torch. She called over,

“What do I say if I see fire?”

“Just say, stop.”

“Only just, stop?”

“Well, you can scream, fire-fire, but just stop is good enough.”

Josh began to weld up the brace, then as he worked, he called over to Maryam,

“He hates Muslims, told me you should be deported.”

“He really is a chicken shit, isn’t he, but Josh, he’s your uncle so he has to be invited.

Oh, stop, Josh. I see smoke.”

“You’re going to see more than smoke if my uncle comes here, Maryam. I’m almost finished here. Watch your language around the kids.”

“He has to be invited, Josh.”

“OK. Bea said there would be fireworks. Maybe we could get him to help shoot off some fireworks. Accidents can happen, Maryam.”

“Am I a good firewatcher?”

“The best. I’ll hold my tongue for one day only.”

“And I’ll watch my language, but I really don’t like your chicken shit Uncle Ralph. So,

he wants to deport me, does he. Well, that isn't going to happen, is it?"

"No, it isn't."

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Tell my mom I have calmed down, and bring me a couple of Cokes."

Maryam went back to the house and found Grandma and Bea in conversation about Uncle Ralph. She saw Billy and asked him to take a couple of Cokes to his Uncle Josh and one for himself, and a bag of chips because Uncle Josh likes chips with his Coke. Then she joined the women's conversation, asking Grandma,

"You must have known Charles' brother years ago."

"Maryam, I knew him before I knew Charlie."

"You knew Ralph first?"

"He was a couple of years older, and I liked him, until I met his brother."

Bea was listening.

"Do you think he felt second best?"

"Could be, but he never let on. He was at our wedding, and I know Charlie spoke to him often."

Maryam shared,

"Josh really doesn't like him, and seems to have good reasons."

"Ralph was around more often after Charlie died, but Josh was still young. I don't think they talked a lot."

Bea asked,

"You say he was around a lot. Was he just being helpful to a widow, or, or – you know what I mean?"

"Bea, he was married. I didn't see anything to be concerned about, but then his marriage broke up. After that he was around more. Then he wanted to buy this farm, and I said, 'No.' Me and my boys were going to keep and run this farm. I remember that he was not happy with my 'No.'"

Maryam said, "I think maybe he was never happy with your first 'No.'"

Grandma sat down with a frown,

"Men are strange, Maryam, but you really think he was smarting from my marrying Charlie and not him?"

“Smarting?”

“Like a sting, Maryam.”

“Yes, he may have a sting that never goes away.”

“He’s a rich man, Maryam. He could find a wife if he wanted one.”

Bea was taking this all in and said,

“I think Maryam may be right. Men can compensate for not getting what they want, and sometimes it’s with money.”

Grandma responded in disbelief,

“Oh, I don’t believe you two. I’m an older woman, and he’s at least two years older than me. We are not children.”

Maryam wanted to bring the others up-to-date on where things stood with Josh.

“Josh has calmed down and told me that he can hold his tongue for one day. He also told me that Uncle Ralph wanted to deport me.”

“He must have said that to Josh, but I know he doesn’t like that we have Mexicans working for us. But I still think I need to invite him. He’s family.”

Bea and Maryam agreed, but Maryam added,

“Maybe you saw some of what we see about Ralph now, when you chose Charlie instead of him.”

“I only chose the man I really liked.”

Bea, “Our best choices come from within.”

Maryam addressing Grandma,

“I’m so glad you chose to keep this farm. It must not have been easy.”

Thinking back on it all, Grandma answered with confidence,

“Bea is right. I didn’t think about it – really didn’t. It was right there in front of me. This farm was going to be mine and my boys.”

Turning to Maryam, “Maryam, will you keep a tight rein on Josh?”

“Tight rein?”

“Stick close to him and don’t let him do anything to his uncle.”

“OK, but I can’t guarantee there won’t be fireworks.”

Bea remembered,

“Fireworks! I need to talk to Donnie about where to get them. Where’s Mary? She must have his number.”

Grandma laughed,

“Yes, I think she really has his number.”

Maryam didn’t ask.

The people in the house and those in the barn were startled by the sudden blast of twin diesel horns. Josh started out of the barn to see who was driving up knowing that there were no hay customer trucks expected today – not the day before the big 4th. By now the truckers would have made their way home for the holiday. What he saw was Liesel and Billy in their giant motor home with Liesel driving and pulling the horn rope and waving out the driver-side window. People came tumbling out of the house as Liesel hit the brakes making a loud air hiss. Billy and Liesel were back with a blast and a hiss.

Billy and Buddy came running from around back of the house and beat everyone to the motor home. His grandpa jumped down, picked Billy up and swung him around. Buddy’s bark added to the welcome. Then everyone was gathered in front of the motor home. Grandma shouted into the crowd,

“Lunch is ready and I fixed extra. Come on into the house.”

Josh and Jack took Grandpa Billy into the barn to make sure nothing was left running or burning. It also gave them a chance to ask privately how Billy was feeling.

“I have to be careful not to fall, but otherwise I am doing well.”

Josh said,

“When we heard Parkinson’s, we only knew one person who had it, and they went downhill kind of quick.”

“That’s not happening to me. What’s new around here?”

Jack was quick to answer.

“Bea wants to make getting together on the 4th an annual thing. So, you are going to be hearing annual family reunion. We like the idea, but then we are already here.”

Bea was Billy's daughter.

"She is always full of ideas, but I like the idea of getting together once a year."

Jack again,

"And Bea and I are going to have a baby again this winter and name him – if the baby is a boy – after my father Charlie. So, we will have a Billy named after you, and a Charlie after my dad.

"Things sure happen fast around here. What else should I know before we join the crowd?"

Jack looked at Josh who gave Jack his best "why not" look.

"We have an Uncle Ralph, our dad's brother, who is not around much because we don't get along."

Jack acknowledged, "That's putting it mildly."

"But Mom insisted we invite him. He's family. She insists."

"Is there something I need to know about your Uncle Ralph?"

Josh said,

"Don't get drawn into politics with him."

"OK, thanks for the heads-up. I learned to stay out of politics in the Army. I'm hungry."

As the three of them made their way to the house, Billy ran up.

"I know how to catch fish. Will you take me fishing?"

~ ~ ~

Grandma was up early as usual, and saw the sun coming up promising a perfect day for a July 4th picnic and family reunion. She counted again. Twenty, she thought, but didn't include the newly announced baby or Billy's insistence that Buddy was family. And what if there were an unexpected guest? She settled for twenty-five as her working number. That's what she told Bea when Bea came to breakfast.

"I want to plan for twenty-five. What do you think?"

Bea counted off.

"We may not have that many, but let's plan for twenty-five."

As people showed up for breakfast, Bea gave them jobs. Sweep out the main aisle in the barn. Set up the cornhole game. Put drinks in coolers, and on and on, until Bea was happy with her own planning skills.

Joey's parents and the two Chicago widows made the decision to stay in a motel in town so as not to make "too much work" for the others. Liesel and Billy stayed in their motorhome. Some would not be staying overnight. Everyone was accounted for.

~ ~ ~

Billy convinced his grandpa to go fishing, but agreed that they would put whatever they caught back into the pond. Bea had cautioned her son that today was not the day for extra work in the kitchen to fry bluegills.

Summer clothes, picnic clothes, meant shorts and fancy tops. Liesel couldn't help how good she looked in white shorts and a green tee shirt that said "Grand Canyon" on the front, but everyone noticed. Jack could see Bea in twenty years and liked what he saw.

When the Chicago crowd showed up, Grandma took charge of them to make sure they felt included and comfortable.

Josh had told Miguel and Luis that this was a day without work and to just join in. Miguel found a place to sit with his guitar, and a small group gathered to talk and listen.

Donnie helped old Doctor Miller to a seat in the center of the action. Bea took Donnie aside and asked if he had the requested fireworks and would he be in charge of them? Donnie gave a "yes" to both questions.

Uncle Ralph made a practiced entrance pulling up in an almost classic Cadillac that would draw attention in any parking lot. Western cut clothes, shined boots and all. Uncle Ralph had arrived and everyone knew it. Josh looked for a place out of view, and Grandma went to Ralph with her hand out.

"Nice to see you, Mary. You said on the phone that you wanted to make this an annual family reunion. I would enjoy spending more time with you and your boys."

That was not exactly what Grandma had in mind, but she smiled and steered Ralph into the crowd. Old Doctor Miller noticed him.

"Hi, Ralph. Somehow, I didn't expect to see you here."

Ralph let the comment die, as he smiled and suggested the same to his old doctor.

As Uncle Ralph circulated his eye was drawn to a long-legged woman in short white shorts that he had never seen before. He edged in Liesel's direction until he was close enough to introduce himself. Billy saw it happening. In fact, he had seen it happen many times and was always pleased that he should have a wife that attracted men. So, Billy smiled at himself, then remembered what the guys had told him – no politics. He had neglected to say anything to Liesel about no politics with Ralph, but now it was too late.

Ralph introduced himself.

“Hello, I'm Uncle Ralph to Jack and Josh.”

“Nice to meet you, Uncle Ralph. My name is Liesel.”

“I have known Mary forever. Mary married my brother, Charles. I don't come around much, but Mary asked me to come. A family reunion kind of thing.”

“If you are uncle to Jack and Josh, I am surprised that you don't come around more often. Why is that?”

Ralph was feeling challenged by this beautiful woman's personal question, and he rose to it.

“Mary's boys are not too smart. I offered to buy this farm and make them rich two or three times, but they always said “No.” Not too smart. Did you say your name is Liesel?”

“Yes, you say it nicely.”

Ralph's confidence rose another notch.

“When those two boys went off and married foreign women, I knew they didn't care about this country. There are plenty of Nebraska women they could have married.”

“I think I saw you drive up by yourself in that beautiful car. Are you married?”

“Was, but she was a poor wife so we parted. Doesn't matter. She's no longer in the picture.”

At that moment Ralph heard singing and could see Miguel with his guitar. He pointed,

“And these boys bring in illegal Mexicans to take jobs away from local men. I tried to get them deported, but they have some fake papers that allow them to stay in this country. We can't make America great again with illegal Mexicans taking all the good jobs. America is for Americans.”

“Of course. Do you have some kind of business? You seem well off financially.”

“I have contracts with the county.”

“They must pay very well. But I don’t understand why you would want to buy this farm?”

“These boys don’t know how to make money. I wouldn’t keep the farm. I would sell it to the conglomerate that is buying up farms. They know how to make money farming the right way. It’s big business in Nebraska.”

“So, you would buy the farm, then sell it for a profit. That sounds like a sound business plan. Have you done this with other farms?”

“Yes.”

“And it worked out well?”

“I made a lot of money.”

“I heard a hesitation in that answer.”

“Let’s just say there are people in this country who don’t know how to make money.”

“And you do. I can see that. Maybe not everyone likes the way you make money.”

“That’s their problem. You didn’t say if you work, or how you make a living. I could guess as a model of some kind.”

“Yes, I was at one time. Now I work in international finance. Large companies ask me to manage their investments.”

Ralph was trying to get his head around this new information.

“And where do you do this?”

“At my home in Frankfurt, Germany. My daughter, Bea, also a German, is married to Mary’s son, Jack. Much of what you have told me sounds very similar to my country trying to become great again in the wrong way.”

“How so?”

“We tried to become great again; we called it our *Third Reich*. Germany would be an empire that would rule the world, but first we must get rid of those people who were not perfect Germans. First, we drove them out. Then deported them. Then killed them. That is why I think you sound very much like my country in the 1930’s.”

“You can’t really believe we Americans would do such a thing!”

“Why not. I heard you say it, and I watched helmeted men storm your capital building shouting, ‘*Fourth Reich.*’ I heard, ‘*Immigrants pollute the gene pool.*’ That’s German talk; ruthless ethnic talk.”

“I can’t believe what you are suggesting.”

“Perhaps we have talked about this long enough, but I know what I see and what I hear. Would you like to have a beer with me?”

Mexicans and foreign wives are not America’s problem. I spent the last month in some very good American cities and villages. I believe America is a great place today. If there is a problem, it’s that people don’t know how good they have it. Come have a beer with me. There could be a business plan that would make you rich and more welcome here.”

“Would you charge me a large fee?”

“No, you are family. But I will not waste my time if you have no intention to listen.”

Billy walked up because he had seen their conversation lasting long enough that he may need to rescue his attractive wife. He was wrong.

“Billy, this is the boys’ Uncle Ralph. We have been talking politics and business. Grab a beer and join us.”

~ ~ ~

Billy had stopped being surprised by what his wife could do, or would do, so it was only a quick “really?” look at Liesel before he stuck out his hand to the hated Uncle Ralph. They took three beers to a quiet place and began to talk about successful business plans. The party continued with some intentionally avoiding the three beer drinkers, and some simply enjoying catching up. Some time had passed when Bea announced cornhole competition.

“Pick a partner. Pick a good one because there are prizes for the winners.”

Billy grabbed his grandpa and Maryam took Liesel, which left Uncle Ralph sitting by himself. Bea saw what happened.

“You are my husband’s Uncle Ralph. I don’t think we have ever met. My name is Bea, just Bea, and that’s my little boy over there at the cornhole game. No one has selected

you for a partner, I see. Will you be my partner?"

"I may not be very good."

"But maybe you will be lucky. Be my partner."

Josh and Jack saw the interaction. That the German and unaware part of the family should sit with Uncle Ralph didn't ring any bells, but when they saw Bea grab Uncle Ralph by the hand leading him to play cornhole, they looked at each other and moved where they could see and hear and maybe even act if it came to that.

Bea and Uncle Ralph were third in the que for the game. Bea asked,

"If you are our uncle, why don't I ever see you around?"

"I'm not very popular with Mary's boys."

"You talk about them as if they were still boys."

"I knew Mary before they were born. In fact, I introduced Mary to my brother, Charles."

"You introduced them, then Mary married Charles. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's what happened."

"Is that why you continue to cause problems for the family and don't come around much?"

That's holding a grudge a long time."

"Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"Isn't it?"

"I think we shouldn't be talking about my personal life."

"What should we talk about? How about that Jack and I are going to have a baby this winter and name him after Jack's father, your brother? Jack insists that we call him Charlie, not Charles. What did you call your brother?"

Uncle Ralph backed away from Bea and started to take a long walk around the barn that would lead to his luxury car. Bea was not going to let him go. She matched his stride.

"You didn't answer my question. We are going to bring a new little person into the world. What should we name him?"

No answer. When they got to his car Bea put her hand on the door.

"You are part of this family, and I care about what you think. Come back to the barn with me."

Uncle Ralph leaned against his car but didn't move.

"Are you afraid to play cornhole because you may not be very good at it?"

“You are the pushiest woman I have ever met.”

“People say that about me. I’m German. That’s what German women are like. I want an answer, and I want to play cornhole toss, and you are just standing here next to your fancy car.”

Uncle Ralph looked like he needed his car, or anything, to lean on. Bea looked past the car and saw Jack and Josh pretending not to notice what was happening. Bea turned Uncle Ralph toward them.

“Do you see those two boys over there. They always like to partner when we play cornhole because they think they can always win. Let go of this fancy car and come help me show them some real competition.”

Jack and Josh couldn’t quite believe what they were seeing. Uncle Ralph being led by the hand back toward the barn.

Josh looked at Jack,

“Don’t think she needs our help.”

“If she decides she needs something from you, don’t come to me asking for help.”

~ ~ ~

Joey had waited for all the welcoming and catching up with family, but he had waited as long as he could. He went up to his dad.

“Dad, I want to show you my four-wheeler.”

“You have a four-wheeler?”

“It was in the bone yard and Uncle Jack said that if I got it running, I could have it for the summer. I want to show you how it runs.”

Joseph was a city person. He called the plumber or electrician to take care of any problem at home. The apartment building he managed had a maintenance man so Joseph was amazed that his son could take an old machine and make it run. When Joey started it, and Joseph heard it rattle and saw the smoke, he wasn’t sure he wanted to be near it. But Joey pointed to the seat.

“Come on, Dad. I’ll give you a ride.”

Joseph always wanted to be a good father, but getting on this smoking thing for a ride pushed his good dad limits. He managed to overcome his reservations. Joey spun the four-wheeler 180 degrees and headed down the rough pasture path. Joseph looked for something to hold on to, but

there wasn't anything except the seat he was sitting on. He grabbed the edges of the seat next to his legs and forced a smile. Then he looked at his beaming son and began to relax. This was his Joey having the time of his life, and he, Joseph, became determined to not just live through it, but to enter his son's four-wheeler world.

When they got back to the barn, Joseph went to Joey's mother, Jennifer.

"You have to take a ride on Joey's four-wheeler."

"I saw him go up to his grandmother. I think he wants to give everyone a ride. What was it like?"

"There are no words. You have to see for yourself."

So, everyone had to see for themselves, and Joey was the happiest person at the party. He had not only succeeded, but had the rare chance to prove to others what he could do.

Donnie had seen Joey giving rides, and heard the rattle and saw the smoke. He took Joey aside.

"Your four-wheeler needs a new engine. When my pickup needed one, I went to the junk yard and found a bigger one that I could put in. You may be able to find a better engine for your four-wheeler."

"You really think so?"

"Doesn't cost anything to look."

"Could you take me to the junk yard?"

"Ask if you could go, and we will pick a day next week."

Joey didn't think his day could get any better, but suddenly it did. If he could do an engine swap, maybe there was nothing he couldn't do.

CHAPTER 7

“Why don’t you come to Chicago in October?”

Bea’s twin sister, Thea, and her husband, Carl, traveled with Deeba. Two flights and a rental car converted casual friends into family. It was Deeba then who took charge of the other two and became tour guide on the farm. She showed them the giant green machines, the old horses, but her favorite was the brown Jersey cow because the cow had always come to her when she went into the pasture. Now the cow seemed to remember Deeba as she introduced her, being mindful of how everyone placed their feet.

Being up close with Thea and Carl made Bea think that she wanted her children to experience their German side and began making plans to spend some serious time with her sister and parents. The Christmas season came to her mind, and in her mind, she began planning a trip.

Sue and Megan, the Chicago widows, naturally gravitated to Grandma Mary, who loved to show off her latest kitchen ideas. Then they discovered that they all had birthdays in October. Megan had an idea.

“Mary, why don’t you come to Chicago in October. It’s a nice time of year, and we can celebrate our birthdays together.”

“I don’t like to fly.”

Sue encouraged Mary.

“It’s a long drive. I remember when Joey and I did it. Flying is a better way. I finally got used to it myself.”

So, it was settled. There would be a birthday celebration for the three of them in October together in Chicago.

~ ~ ~

Maryam not only struggled with the Nebraska way of speaking, she was not naturally a party person. They didn’t do a lot of celebrating where she came from, so there was a steep learning curve to become comfortable with her family’s frequent party ways.

But she knew the difference between her home country and the freedom she felt with her new family. She didn’t miss the fact that this July 4th celebration was about that very freedom she felt

so strongly. So, when she dressed this morning, it was all red, white and blue. Old Doctor Miller noticed and waved her over.

“You sure know how to dress for a party.”

“Doctor Miller, I love the freedom I feel here. It is so different than where I come from.”

“Where is that?”

“Afghanistan. I am Muslim.”

“Joey’s father was introduced to me as Mr. Cohen. That’s a Jewish name.”

“Yes, and we have German family, and Mexican almost family. Where did your family come from?”

“We are all Swedes, and Norwegians. Big quiet people, been here for three or four generations now. My mother’s whole side of the family is Swedish. Married into English ancestry. Where did you say you came from?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Yes, I remember. How did you get here?”

“I married Josh.”

“I helped Mary give birth to Josh. Then came Jack. I told Mary, not more big children.”

“Can I get you anything?”

“A cold beer would be nice.”

As Maryam went off to get a beer for old Doctor Miller, a drink she never touched herself, she began thinking about Joey’s mother, Grandma Sue. Maybe she and Megan were Catholic. Joey’s father was Jewish. Josh’s close family went to a Community Church on special occasions. The pastor had presided at her and Josh’s wedding. Then she thought about how all these people came from different places in the world and yet were family. It was possible. What she was experiencing was possible. Family didn’t mean sameness. It meant freedom to be who you are and be welcome.

Bea saw Maryam walking with a beer.

“What are you doing, Maryam?”

“It’s not for me, Bea; it’s for old Doctor Miller.”

“Maryam, I took him a beer just a few minutes ago, and there was already one sitting next to him.”

“It’s OK, Bea. Old Doctor Miller can have as many beers as he wants. He reminded me of how different we all are, and that’s how families work.”

“He told you that?”

“No, but he knows it, and now, so do I.”

~ ~ ~

Mary was showing her mother some of the pictures she was taking. Maryam noticed that the picture of Uncle Ralph in his fancy western cut clothes was slanted and off center so she asked,

“Your picture of Uncle Ralph is crooked.”

“He didn’t want me to take his picture, but I pretended to be talking on the phone and that’s what I got, him holding out his hand and saying, no. Mom, I don’t think he likes being family. Why did he come?”

“I saw Liesel and Billy sitting with him. I hope that helped him be more comfortable. But your dad doesn’t want anything to do with his Uncle Ralph.”

“I kind of like him, Mom.”

“Best keep that to yourself, at least for today.”

Mary wanted a final group picture and she was trying to herd people into one place without much luck, so she told Joey to help her to round people up for a picture. The two of them were having some success, but there were two people missing, Billy and Uncle Ralph. Joey finally found them playing catch with Billy’s new gloves and ball.

Billy called out to Joey,

“Uncle Ralph used to play baseball, Joey. He was a pitcher. He was showing me how to grip the ball when I throw it.”

“You need to come with me to get a group picture taken.”

Uncle Ralph lagged behind. Billy called out,

“Come on, Uncle Ralph. Stand next to me with Buddy.”

Mary had seen group photos and wanted hers to look professional. She thought, sort by size. No couples should be together. What about widows, she wondered? Should they be together or mixed in? So, she asked her mother.

“Just tell them to shove together and see what happens.”

And that’s what she did. Then she made an announcement. I am going to make a hard copy album of our family reunion to keep with other albums. If you want an album, let me know and I will make one for you too. If not, you will get digital copies. Three people wanted albums, but

everyone wanted to look at the pictures on Mary's phone. There was Grandma Mary on Joey's four-wheeler, Deeba with the Jersey cow. No one asked why Uncle Ralph looked like he was falling.

As dusk approached, Mary and Joey entertained with songs they had been practicing. Mary invited people to sing along if they knew the words. Mary called out songs to find one that everyone would know. Turned out everyone knew, *Take me out to the ballgame*.

Take me out to the ballgame

Take me out with the crowd

Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack

I don't care if I never get back

Let me root, root, root for the home team

If they don't win it's a shame

'Cause it's one, two, three strikes you're out

At the old ball game

~ ~ ~

Everyone but Buddy liked the fireworks. Uncle Ralph left without any confrontation with Josh. There was a light check around the barn, and people went their separate ways for the night, agreeing to be present for tomorrow's breakfast. Before going to the motor home for the night, Liesel took Josh aside.

"Billy and I talked to your Uncle Ralph about farm business. We want to talk to you and Jack about what he said."

"I think it would be better if the whole family was included, but I'm not looking forward to anything my uncle had to say."

"OK, Josh. What if we wait until the Chicago and Germany visitors have gone? Billy and I will stay another day, and we can have a family talk."

Josh knew he could not escape this "talk." Liesel was Bea's mother after all. So, he agreed. The talk would happen after company went home.

Liesel and Billy told the family they were going to keep the motor home for a few more days and go to Yellowstone Park. The park was on their list, but they didn't have time before the family gathering fixed on July 4th. This was all true, but it also made it easier for the Chicago and Germany crowd to leave on schedule, if everyone was leaving. But the motor home stayed another day. After waving good-byes, Liesel asked the family to come together. What about Joey and Billy? Grandma asked,

"Joey, why don't you take Billy fishing?"

She only had to say it once. Liesel began,

“Your Uncle Ralph told us things we didn’t know, but we don’t know if they are true.”

Jack was quiet. Josh said,

“Probably not.”

Liesel continued,

“He told us that this family farm will not survive – that big Ag is going to make family farms impossible. Is that true?”

Josh was skeptical,

“He wants to scare us into selling. I don’t buy it.”

Grandma responded,

“We are OK right now, but I can see the money getting tighter. It’s possible that a time will come when the money won’t work, and we are left with bills we can’t pay.”

Liesel then asks,

“What would happen then, Mary?”

“We would likely be forced to sell out at bottom dollar.”

“This is exactly what Ralph said.”

Josh thought he could see where this was going.

“Did he make another push to buy us out?”

“No, Josh, he didn’t. He wanted to brainstorm with us a business plan that would allow you to keep the farm.”

“I don’t trust any of Ralph’s business plans.”

Grandma was curious,

“What was he talking about Liesel?”

“He told us about using what you have to create cash. He thinks your family farm can attract public interest that could keep you afloat.”

Josh spoke up,

“We are not turning our farm into a circus for gawkers.”

Grandma asked,

“Did he give any examples?”

“He talked about a short list, but he thought the best ideas would come from here in the family. He talked about U-Picks, apples, berries, strawberries, even Christmas trees.”

Josh was not having any of it.

“We would have people crawling over us like ants on an ant hill.”

Liesel agreed,

“Yes, and Ralph said he knew how to get the public’s interest.”

Maryam siding with Josh,

“Why is he trying to help us instead of buying us out and getting me deported? I agree with Josh. I don’t trust his ideas.”

Bea suggested,

“Our barn cleans up into a nice place for weddings and parties. We could turn our barn into a rural wedding venue.”

Josh had heard enough, and pushed back his chair to leave. Jack put his hand on his brother’s arm and Josh stayed. Jack said,

“Josh, we could try little things. Watch and see how they work before going into anything in a big way.”

Grandma, surprising everyone except Bea, said,

“I want to have a personal talk with Ralph. We go way back.”

So, it was agreed to suspend any more farm talk for today until Grandma brought them back together.

Just then they heard yelling. Mary was closest to the door and when she looked out, she saw Joey and Billy running toward the house with a really big fish. Billy was trying to hold it up, but he needed some help from Joey. Mary yelled,

“What is that?”

Joey yelled back, “It’s a big fish. Billy caught it.”

By now Jack had gotten to the door.

“So, you caught a big catfish. I bet that was fun.”

Bea was now interested.

“How did a big catfish get into our pond?”

Jack thought about it.

“Probably that high water we had a couple of years ago. It could have made it into the pond from the river.”

The fish gave a big flop, and Billy couldn't hold on to it. Jack said,

“Why don't you put it back in the pond. If you did, it would get even bigger and you could catch it again.”

That sounded like a great idea to Billy, and they headed back to the pond on a run with Joey carrying the big fish. Bea's mind flashed back to the family conversation.

“If we had some big fish in the pond, people with kids could fish for them, take pictures, and put them back.”

Jack said,

“That's a possibility, Bea, but let's wait for my mother's talk with Ralph before we do any more family farm talk.”

~ ~ ~

It was Ralph's idea for them to meet for lunch at the local all-you-can-eat buffet. Mary filled her plate and sat down waiting. Ralph came to the table with two plates.

“No reason to go back again for more, Mary.”

Mary poked at her food, not sure how to start, but Ralph wanted to talk.

“Liesel is a financial advisor to global companies. Did you know that?”

“I knew she worked in banking.”

“Mary, she asked hard direct questions. I have never been around a woman like that

before, and that daughter of hers, Bea, is just like her mother – pushed me to play cornhole, Mary. I never knew such aggressive women.”

“They’re German, Ralph.”

Mary pushed her piece of ham into her mashed potatoes and found herself thinking like the German women she knew. What she wanted to hear from Ralph just popped out.

“What happened, Ralph?”

Ralph had expected chit-chat, but instead he got harpooned. He looked down at his two plates.

“I lost my dream, Mary.”

Mary continued pushing her food around on her plate.

“You were very popular, Ralph. You were the star of our state title team. I remember going to the games to watch you pitch. What happened, Ralph?”

“Big league scouts came to watch too, Mary. I was going to be in the big league.”

Ralph looked at his two plates like they must have been put there by someone else.

“I lost my dream, Mary, when I blew out my elbow. I was never able to pitch again. I was not going to be a big-time pitcher. I wasn’t going to be anything. I was going to be a nothing person, Mary.”

Mary put down her fork and put her hand on top of his.

“I don’t think anyone knew how you felt, Ralph.”

“No way to share a lost dream, Mary.”

“Well, now you have. I want you to come to the farm and talk to the family about some of your ideas.”

“Are you sure? It’s one thing to talk to a foreign woman about business ideas, but talking to your family is not the same. They don’t like me, Mary.”

“Maybe they have good reason, Ralph, but talking business is something you can do. Come talk to us and keep it all business.”

“O.K., Mary. You haven’t eaten anything.”

“Neither have you.”

“Everything is cold now. They have good pie and coffee.”

“Then let’s get pie and coffee. People said to me that they had never seen a car like the one you drove to the farm. Tell me about it so I can tell them what it is.”

The apple pie and coffee were as good as Ralph said it was.

~ ~ ~

That afternoon Mary heard the growl and crunch of Donnie’s truck and saw Joey run out the door. She had seen them talking, but didn’t know a friendship was developing. She grabbed a brush and ran it through her hair, and straightened her clothes waiting in the house for Donnie to come to the door. She was practicing not running to Donnie and being more in charge like Liesel told her.

That’s when she heard Donnie’s truck crunch its way out the driveway. She turned to Grandma,

“Did Joey just leave with Donnie?”

“I guess so. Joey told me that Donnie was going to take him to the junk yard to see if they had an engine for his old four-wheeler.”

“Nice for Joey, Grandma, but I thought Donnie was coming to see me.”

“He’ll be back. I’m sure about that.”

“How can you be so sure about things, Grandma.”

“I learned about boys and men the hard way. Donnie will be back. Don’t forget to bring in the eggs. Oh, your dad said to watch out for the rooster. He is being particularly nasty today.”

“Thanks, Grandma. I’ll watch out for boys and roosters.”

They both laughed as Bea walked in.

“What’s so funny?”

“Boys and roosters.”

“You got that right. Where’s Joey? Billy’s looking for him to go fishing.”

“Joey went with Donnie to the junk yard. Lord only knows what they might bring back.”

Mary adds,

“Grandma knows boys and men, Aunt Bea.”

Grandma said,

“Junk yards are like Disney Land to boys and men, but they always come back.”

The junk yard didn't have a four-wheeler engine, but the man said he would put out the word that they were looking for one. Mary collected eggs, keeping an eye out for the rooster. Bea took Billy fishing. Grandma started thinking about dinner. Donnie stayed for dinner. Joey was waiting for a call from the junk yard. Life was near normal.

After dinner Grandma informed the others that she had invited Uncle Ralph over to talk business. Only business.

“He really wants to help.”

Josh had his reservations, but said nothing. The table was cleared when Uncle Ralph pulled up. Joey and Billy went out to look at the car. Uncle Ralph invited them to sit in it. But to everyone's surprise, a young woman got out of the car and came with Uncle Ralph into the house. Grandma raised her eyebrows sending a strong business only Ralph message. When Uncle Ralph introduced the woman, Grandma began to relax.

“This is Mrs. Simmons. She runs a catering service. When Mary told me that one of your business ideas were barn weddings, I called Mrs. Simmons to see if she would like to work something out with you. People often want receptions after their weddings.”

Josh thought this is happening too fast, but said nothing. The others gathered around the table to share ideas and listen.

The conversation went on until Bea had to excuse herself to put Billy to bed. They didn't catch any big catfish today, but fishing with Billy confirmed that she needed to do serious planning so that her children would grow up knowing their grandparents and what their German side was like. Billy had seen village life, but there was a lot more to see and know. Christmas visit, she thought, as she was putting Billy's clothes out for morning.

~ ~ ~

Jack and Josh almost knew each other's thoughts. When they were working together there was only a minimum of talk. But it was the quiet Jack who had to say,

“Josh, I don't like this.”

“You mean all the talk about U-Picks and weddings.”

“Yes, I want to sit down with you and Mom. This talk is all too different. I'm a farmer, not a businessman. Don't want to be a businessman. Don't even like most businessmen.”

Jack stopped. That was more than he had said at the “all family” meeting. Josh confided,
“I feel the same way, Jack. Let’s talk to Mom before all this goes any further.”

They knew that their mother was always last to bed so they conspired to linger in the kitchen until it was only the three of them left. Grandma had to ask,
“When are you two going to bed?”

Jack hesitated, and then Josh spoke up.

“We need to talk. We are not business people, Mom.”

“Josh, I know we are going to need some help with setting up a system to keep track of money in and money out. We may need a bookkeeper, or get one to teach us how to do it. I even thought that Maryam may like to do it.”

“That’s nice, Mom, but that’s not what Jack and I are talking about.”

“Speak up, Jack. Don’t let your brother do your talking for you.”

Jack looked at his hands. How many times had he heard his mother say those words? He liked being the quiet one. Now he had to say what was on his mind.

“Bea and I are going to have two boys to raise, Mom. I want to teach them how to be farmers – real farmers, like us. I don’t want them to go get a business degree or whatever. I will never understand those things. All this business talk really bothers me.”

“Say something, Josh. How do you feel about this?”

“I was an electrician in the Army. Then I had a chance to be a rich businessman, but Maryam talked me out of it, and I am glad she did. I’m a farmer, Mom. That’s how I feel about all this business talk. I don’t want to be anything else.”

The two boys could see their mother sag against the table top. They knew she understood exactly what they were feeling because they were exactly like her, farmers. She straightened up and tried to lay it out for them.

“It may take two years or five years, but big Ag can out-compete us. They control the market in soy beans and corn. Our hay contracts won’t keep us above water. Your uncle is trying to show us a way out.”

Bea had wondered why Jack hadn't come to bed and was about to go find him when Maryam met her in the upstairs hall on her way to look for Josh. They went down the steps toward the kitchen, but stopped before they got to the bottom. As they stood there on the third step, they heard their husbands and their mother-in-law speak in hushed but understandable tones. They hadn't intended to eavesdrop, but that's the way it turned out. Finally, Bea had heard all she thought she needed to hear, and took Maryam by the elbow the final two steps and into the kitchen. Bea asked,

“Can we join you?” as she pulled up two chairs, and went right to the point.

“I didn't marry a businessman, and I know Maryam doesn't want one. We married farmers. We love this farm, and no one is going to ever buy us out.”

Maryam was remembering when Bea saved her life, and how forceful Bea could be so she fell easily into Bea's thoughts and expressed her agreement by taking both Bea and Grandma's hands.

Bea laid it out in simple farm language, spoken in her German style.

“You three, Josh, Jack and Grandma will always be farmers. Maryam and I will be the business people. Together we will save this farm from big Ag.”

~ ~ ~

When Billy and Liesel returned from visiting Yellowstone Park, they told stories of traffic jams on narrow roads, made worse by foolish tourists who insisted on getting out of their cars to photograph dangerous wildlife. But they soon realized that their Yellowstone stories did not compare with the change they saw taking place at the farm.

Billy had started an electrical contracting business doing the work by himself. Then over the space of years hiring the right team leaders, eventually risking big dollar contracts. Liesel had helped many rich men investing with careful risk analysis. Hers and their calculations were made with sharp detail written in complex language. What they saw happening at this farm did not fit their experience of slow careful growth and detailed risk analysis. The farm was clearly operating at all hands-on-deck, save the farm mode.

There were no titles yet, but Bea was operations, Maryam was finance, Grandma planning, Josh and Jack were consulted work force, and the young people helped where needed and were really the driving force behind giving this business farming operation its internal dynamic. Billy and Liesel were amazed at the energy level and competence, and they said so.

Grandma shared with them,

“Uncle Ralph convinced us that big Ag was going to out-compete us so we had to make changes. Josh and Jack, and I include myself, only want to be farmers. When we began to think U-Pick, we saw it was all about planning, and planting, and cultivating.

That’s farming, and we know how to do that. The use of the barn for other things requires coordination with all the farming. That’s my job. Josh and Jack wanted to ease into all this, but if you are going to U-Pick, all the planning and planting needs to be done now, not next year. Now we know we can be farmers and business people too.”

Billy advised,

“You will need to have someone set up your bookkeeping system. Deeba did that for me. She can be good help for you, at least to get you started.”

Liesel suggested,

“Mary, you may need Uncle Ralph to help you make connections, and with publicity.”

“I can work with Ralph. He likes food, and so do I.”

Billy and Liesel left for home telling the new business farmers that they wanted to be kept informed of the progress.

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Mary made four picture albums, one for the farm and three requested by others. Joey wanted one, and Grandma Sue wanted a copy to show all her Chicago friends. The third one was requested by, you guessed right, Uncle Ralph. He also asked for copies of some of the pictures from the old album Mary showed him.

Joey began counting down the days when he would need to go home and back to school. The better engine for his four-wheeler hadn’t been found yet. He made a deal with Donnie that if he ever found one, he would get it for him. There was no doubt in Joey’s mind that he would spend next summer at the farm. That evening Joey saw a corn maze on TV, and asked Jack,

“Could we do that too?”

So, the idea was talked about as something that could be done this year.

Mary was trying to help wherever she could. Then one day Grandma told her,

“I need to spend the afternoon with Uncle Ralph going over publicity. I would like you to make dinner.”

“You mean I can cook whatever I want?”

“Yes, and you can get Joey to help.”

“Joey has been spending a lot of time with Billy and his dog.”

“He can still do that, but Billy is old enough to start collecting the eggs once a day and feeding the chickens. I even think he may enjoy having a grown-up job to do.”

~ ~ ~

Dinner that evening was personally decorated hot dogs, baked beans, chips, and sugar cookies that Mary’s Aunt Bea taught her how to make. On the table was a display of bowls with the trimmings for the hot dogs: chili, shredded cheese, hot sauce, pickle relish, onions, and sauerkraut. Josh was about to comment when Maryam gave him an elbow in the ribs as she filled in the blanks for her husband and daughter.

“Thanks, Mary, for fixing dinner by yourself at the last minute.”

“Joey helped. I asked him what was his favorite dinner, and he said hot dogs and baked beans so that’s what you got.”

Joey said,

“I like to put all kinds of things on my hot dog. It’s fun eating, I think.”

Joey had also gone with Billy to collect eggs and feed the chickens. That went well until the rooster took offense that Buddy was in his kingdom. Buddy escaped with only his puppy pride hurt, but now it knew to stay away from the hen house. Billy had been holding his question because he didn’t want to look dumb. Finally, he asked his mother, “What’s a Cracker Jack?” On a farm something new is learned every day; even boys and dogs get smarter over time.

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Maryam began talking to Deeba every day about how to set up her bookkeeping system. Finally, Deeba decided she needed to come for a few days to help. Josh was not particularly happy that Deeba was going to visit, but said nothing and hoped for the best.

Grandma invited Uncle Ralph to dinner saying that she needed to talk with him, and it saved her time to have him come to the farm for dinner. Josh was not happy, but his opinion of his uncle changed a little when Uncle Ralph said at dinner that someone from the farm needed to go to the

County Board meetings to represent the family farm interests, and that he thought Maryam would be a good choice. Maryam questioned, why me? And Ralph said,

“You will be noticed in the crowd, and the Board will know there is someone watching out for family farm interests.”

Uncle Ralph added that he would take Maryam to a Board meeting and introduce her to important people. So, Maryam agreed, and Josh softened a little. It wasn't an apology, but close enough.

~ ~ ~

A week before Joey was to leave to go home to Chicago and school, he told everyone that his birthday was going to be the week after he left for home.

“I will turn thirteen next week,” he announced.

It was immediately decided that Joey would have a week early birthday party. Billy wanted to make the ice cream all by himself this time. Mary knew that chocolate cake with white icing was Joey's favorite. At the party, Mary told the story of how Joey saved her life, and how good things always happened when Joey was around. Joey was king for a day. Then Mary, remembering what her mother told her not to do, she waited until no one was looking and kissed him. But that's another story.

~ ~ ~

Epilogue

Like all families, our story family will change every year, and sometimes, one or more will no longer be with them, while children will be added and celebrated. Bea may not want to stop at two. Maryam was sure one was enough, but at forty, no one knows for sure. Joey would never have a little brother. His mother, Jennifer, was sure of that. Liesel's twins would be her first and last. What about Mary? Yes, what about Mary? Several people, two in particular, would like to know. But Mary herself is the only one likely to decide, and she isn't telling anyone what her plans may be. In this story family, we can be certain of two things. They will find reasons to celebrate loud and often, and there are some decisions that the women will reserve to themselves. Families are like that.

The family as an economic unit is disappearing. One may say the same about the family being the basic social unit. Economic or social family decline is real, but not inevitable even with the family spread out like the family in this story. Families can economically support one another at a distance and maintain their social connections. These things remain possible if we chose to live as families rather than as isolated individuals. Today family living is a choice we can make.

In 2024 when this story was written, there is an infusion of family living brought in, with the present class of people who want to come here to live with us. Family units have always been the norm with each new immigrant group, from the families on the Mayflower, to the Irish, the Italian, the Eastern European, the Asian. We became a nation based on immigrant families, and that is what is continuing to happen today. One can hope that this latest influx of families will slow the loss, or even, who knows, reignite the disappearing American family. It's a choice we can make.

The Story Family

Megan and Nick Allen and Sue
Sam Jennifer Billy
 Jennifer and Joseph Billy and Liesel
 Joey Bea Thea and Carl
 Ralph Mary and Charles
 Josh Jack
Maryam Deeba Maryam and Josh Jack and Bea
 Little Mary Little Billy Baby Charlie
 Buddy
Miguel Luis Donnie Old Doctor Miller



Houk Family

Nak Min, Maureen, Teresa, John, Joan, Sharon

Jonathan, Aaron

July 1981