

The Last Time I Saw You

A Novel

Elizabeth Berg



R A N D O M H O U S E

ALSO BY ELIZABETH BERG

Home Safe

The Day I Ate Whatever I Wanted

Dream When You're Feeling Blue

The Handmaid and the Carpenter

We Are All Welcome Here

The Year of Pleasures

The Art of Mending

Say When

True to Form

Ordinary Life: Stories

Never Change

Open House

Escaping into the Open: The Art of Writing True

Until the Real Thing Comes Along

What We Keep

Joy School

The Pull of the Moon

Range of Motion

Talk Before Sleep

Durable Goods

Family Traditions

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 A NOVEL 

ELIZABETH
BERG



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Reader's Guide

Excerpt from Once Upon a Time, There Was You

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Copyright

*For Phyllis Florin
and
Marianne Quasha*

High school, those are your prime suffering years. You don't get better suffering than that.

—UNCLE FRANK (Steve Carell), *Little Miss Sunshine*

Every parting gives a foretaste of death as every reunion a hint of the resurrection.

—ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

Maybe one day I can have a reunion with myself.

—SEBASTIAN BACH

ONE

DOROTHY SHAUMAN LEDBETTER SHAUMAN IS STANDING IN front of the bathroom mirror in her black half-slip and black push-up bra, auditioning a look. Her fortieth high school reunion, the last one, is one week away, and she's trying to decide whether or not to draw a beauty mark above her lip for the occasion. It wouldn't be entirely false; she does have a mole there, but it's faint, hard to see. She just wants to enhance what already exists, nothing wrong with that; it's *de rigueur* if you're a woman, and it's becoming more common in men, too. Wrong as that is. Dorothy would never have anything to do with a man who wore makeup or dyed his hair or carried a purse or wore support hose or cried or did any of those womanly things men are appropriating as though it's their god-given right. No. She prefers an all-American, red-blooded male who is not a jerk. They're hard to find, but she holds out hope that she will have some sort of meaningful relationship with one before she's six feet under.

She regards herself in the mirror, tilts her head this way and that. Yes, a beauty mark would be fun, kind of playful. She pencils in the mark gingerly, then steps back to regard herself. Not bad. Not bad at all. *Sexy*. Just like she wanted. *Helloooo*, Marilyn. She pictures Pete Decker looking up from his table full of jocks when she walks into the hotel ballroom and saying, *Va va va voom!* And then, *Dorothy?* Dorothy *Shauman?*

"Uh-huh," she will say, lightly, musically, and walk right past him. Though she will walk close enough to him for him to smell her perfume. Also new. One hundred and ten smackeroots. She got perfume, not cologne, even though her personal belief is that there is no difference. She'd asked the counter woman about that. She'd leaned in confidentially and said, "Now, come on. Tell me, *really*. If you were my best friend, would you tell me to get the perfume over the cologne?" And the woman had looked her right in the eye and said, "Yes." Dorothy was a little miffed, because the woman had acted as though Dorothy had affronted her dignity or questioned her ethics or something. Like the time Dr. Strickland was telling Dorothy to get a certain (\$418!!!) blood test and she'd said, "Would you tell your *wife* to get it?" And Dr. Strickland had drawn himself up and quietly said, "I would." Dorothy had been all set to give him an affectionate little punch and say, "Oh, come on, now; don't be so *prissy*," but then Dr. Strickland had added, "If she were still alive," and that had just ruined everything. It wasn't *her* fault the woman had died! Dorothy had been going to refuse the test no matter what, but when he

said his wife was dead, well, then she had to get it. Those dead people had more power than they thought.

Dorothy has never gone to a high school reunion. She'd been married when they had them before, and who wanted to bring *that* to a reunion. Now she is divorced, plus she saw that movie about saying yes to life. She steps closer to the mirror and raises her chin so her turkey neck disappears. She'll hold her head like this when she walks by Pete Decker. Later, when they're making out in his car, it will be dark, and she won't have to be so vigilant. Oh, she hopes he drives to the reunion; she happens to know he lives a mere three and a half hours away. She knows his exact address, in fact; and she Google-Earthed him, which was very exciting.

In high school, Pete had a four-on-the-floor metallic green GTO, and Dorothy always wanted to make out with him in that car. But she never even got to sit in it. She bets he has something like a red Lexus coupe now. And she bets that at the reunion he'll watch her for a while, then come up to her and say, "Hey, Dots. Want to take a walk?" And she'll say, all innocent, "Where?" And he'll get a little flustered and say something like "You know, just a *walk*, get some *air*." She'll hesitate just for a second, just long enough to make him think she might refuse, and then she'll shrug prettily before she agrees to accompany him outside. They'll go right to his car and he'll open the passenger-side door and raise an eyebrow and she'll say, "*Pete!*" like she's offended at the very notion. But then she'll get in, will she ever. She likes this part of the fantasy best: She'll get in, he'll come around and get in on his side, and then, just before he lunges at her, he'll look at her with smoke practically coming out of his eyes. And in her eyes, a soft *Yes, I know. I, too, have wanted this for years.*

Dorothy does plan on being a little mean to Pete at first; she has finally learned it can be a good thing to be mean to men. Apparently they like it; it's supposed to appeal to their hunting instinct. That's why she's going to walk right by him when he first sees her and notices how attractive she is. Considering.

Her daughter, Hilly, is the one who told her about being mean to men. She said you do it just at the beginning and then every so often, just to keep up a level of intrigue, like immunization shots. And it works, too, because when Hilly started doing it, wasn't she *engaged* in what seemed like ten minutes! She's getting married in Costa Rica next month, and Dorothy thinks it's a wonderful idea, the destination wedding. Thank God Dorothy's ex will pay for everything. Poor he was not. She supposes he'll bring his new wife to the wedding, and pander to her every single second. Holding her hand, as though they were teenagers. Bringing her drinks, as though the woman is incapable of doing anything for herself. Staring into her eyes like the secret of the universe is written there. It's nauseating, the way they behave, anyone would say so. Hilly calls them the Magnets, though she might only do that to offer some kind of support to her mother, who lives alone now and must take out

the garbage and figure out whom to call for repairs and check the locks at night and kill centipedes in the basement and everything else. Dorothy suspects the truth is, Hilly actually likes her stepmother. She hasn't said so directly, but she did say that she's happy for her dad, and wasn't that just like nails on a chalkboard. But Dorothy did the noble thing and said yes, she was, too. Uh-huh, yes, he did seem happy now, Dorothy said, and she just wanted to throw up.

Hilly's fiancé is a doctor. A proctologist, specializing in the wonderful world of buttocks and rectums, but still. Dorothy is working up to asking the question that—come on!—must occur to everyone to ask him: What exactly made you choose this line of work? When Dorothy tried to ask her daughter about it, all Hilly did was get mad. It is true Dorothy could have used a more sensitive approach—what she'd asked Hilly was “Why in the wide, wide world would you ever want to look up people's *heinies* all day?” Still, Dorothy doesn't see why Hilly had to take such offense. Her daughter had said something like perhaps Dorothy should consider the fact that preventing and treating cancer is a pretty noble goal. But that still didn't answer the *question*, did it?

Dorothy thinks it was a book her daughter read that taught her about being mean to men. Who knows, if Dorothy had been mean to Pete Decker in high school, they might have gotten married. They went out once—well, not a date technically, but they did spend some time together on the class trip to Washington, D.C., and Dorothy was *awfully* nice to Pete and then of course that was that, he never called her. But if they had gotten married, they probably would have gotten divorced, and then she wouldn't be looking forward so much to going to her high school reunion. Apart from her friends Linda Studemann and Judy Holt, she's really only going to see him. And, to be honest, to show off her recent weight loss. That was the one nice thing about her divorce: During the grief part, before she realized how much better off she was without her husband, she lost twenty-three pounds. She bets she'll look better than the cheerleaders, and even better than Candy Sullivan, who had been queen of everything. Not that Candy Sullivan is coming. According to Pam Pottsman, who is the contact person for this year's reunion, Candy came to the five-year reunion and hasn't come to any since. “Is she dead?” Dorothy asked, ready to offer an impromptu eulogy praising Candy's good points, even though Candy never gave Dorothy the time of day. But Pam said no, Candy wasn't dead, apparently she just thought she was too good to come, and then they both started talking about what a snob Candy always was, and she wasn't even really all that hot. “Did you know she stuffed her bra?” Pam said, and Dorothy said, “*Really?*” and felt that delicious rush, and Pam said, “Yup, I sat across from her in Mr. Simon's psychology class and I saw Kleenex coming out of the top of her blouse one day and I whispered to her that it was showing and she got all embarrassed and stuffed it back in and wouldn't look at me.”

“But wait a minute,” Dorothy said. “I saw her naked in gym class, and she

didn't need any Kleenex."

"What year?"

"Senior. And she did not need Kleenex."

"Well, that psychology class was sophomore year," Pam said, and she sounded a little disappointed that Candy Sullivan had outgrown her need for bra stuffing. But then she told Dorothy how a lot more people were coming this year than ever before, probably because it was the last reunion their class was going to have; and she named several of their classmates who had signed up. Dorothy thinks it will be fun to see poor Mary Alice Mayhew, who is coming for her very first reunion, just as Dorothy is. Though there the similarity ends, thank you very much. Such a little mouse Mary Alice was, walking down the hall and looking at the floor, all hunched over her schoolbooks. She wore awful plaid dresses, and she never wore nylons, just thin white ankle socks, not even kneesocks. And loafers that were *not* Weejuns, you could tell. From a mile away, you could tell. Poor thing. And wait, didn't she put *pennies* in them? There's always one of them, and in their school, it was Mary Alice Mayhew.

Oh, and Lester Hessenpfeffer, who was screwed the moment he was christened. Lester's uncle, who was present at his birth, had just changed his own last name to Hess, and he suggested that Lester's father do the same for the sake of his newborn son. Lester's father reportedly screamed, "Change our name! Change our *name*? Why should we change our name? Let the rest of the world change *their* names!" Lester had told that story once when someone teased him about his name. You had to give Lester this: he was always an affable guy who didn't ever seem to take things personally.

Poor Lester. Never dated. He had such a cute face, but he was too much of a brain, and too sensitive. He probably ended up in computers. Maybe he got rich, like that homely Microsoft guy. And if so, you can bet your boots that Dorothy will be saying hello to him, too.

If Mary Alice Mayhew really comes to the reunion, Dorothy will make a point of being nice to her. Yes she will. She'll buy her a drink; oh, what a hoot to think of buying Mary Alice Mayhew a drink. So odd to think that they're *old* enough to drink now. Mary Alice had silver cat-eye glasses with rhinestones on them and her hair always looked like she'd taken the rollers out and not brushed it. Dorothy has heard plenty of stories about how ugly ducklings come to their high school reunions as swans, but she'd bet money that Mary Alice looks much the same, only with wrinkles. She wouldn't be the Botox type. Dorothy's position on Botox is *Thank God*. Who cares if you can't move your eyebrows around like caterpillars on a plate?

"Is Pete Decker coming?" Dorothy asked Pam.

"He is."

"And his wife, too?"

"He only registered himself. You know Pete. Oh, I can hardly wait to see

him again. What a dreamboat he was.”

“Oh, did you think so?” Dorothy studied her nails casually, as though she and Pam were talking in person. If you wanted to sound a certain way, even on the telephone, it was good to act a certain way—the feeling crept into your voice. You were supposed to smile when you were talking on the phone if you wanted to sound friendly. A lot of the people who made recordings for telephone prompts seemed to do that, though such recordings always make Dorothy want to bang the phone against the wall until the wires fall out.

“I thought Pete Decker was the most handsome boy in the school!” Pam said. “Didn’t you?”

“I don’t know. I guess a lot of people found him attractive.” Dorothy sniffed then, and changed the subject. No need for Pam to know of Dorothy’s designs on Pete; Pam was quicker than Twitter at spreading things around.

Dorothy turns and views herself from the side: not bad. The bra, bought yesterday on her final stop for putting together a killer outfit, is doing what it promised; her breasts are hiked up and perky, rather than hanging down so low they appear to be engaging in conversation with her belly button. Eighty-five dollars for a bra! At least it’s French. Dorothy always likes it when things are French. In the dressing room, she’d sniffed the bra to see if it smelled like Chanel or something, but no, it smelled like rubber. Not for long. Dorothy will have *everything* perfumed when she goes to that reunion, even her you-know-what. But she’ll have to remember to *pat* it on down there; last time she sprayed, she gave herself a urinary tract infection and, oh, does she hate cranberry juice.

She steps back from the mirror, then leans in to darken the beauty mark. Perfect. She should take a picture of herself to remember to do it just like this on Saturday night. They’re having a Saturday night dinner followed by a dance, complete with a DJ who’s supposed to be really good and not tacky, and then there’s a Sunday brunch. Two times for a final try at glory.

Dorothy’s stomach growls, and she puts her hand over it and says aloud, “No.”

TWO

LESTER HESSENPFEPFER AWAKENS ON A BATH RUG STUFFED into the corner of a gigantic cage and stares into the open eyes of the bull mastiff. The dog wags his tail once, twice, and Lester feels his chest tighten with joy. Just before he fell asleep, he'd been preparing a speech for the dog's owners about how he'd done his best, how he'd tried everything, but...Samson had ingested a few Legos the day before, which the owners' great-grandchildren had left lying about. One had perforated his intestine. By the time he was brought to Lester's clinic, the dog was in shock and the prospects for saving him were almost nil. Lester had slept in the cage with him to provide comfort not so much to the dog as to himself. He'd known Samson since he was a puppy, and he was very fond of the owners, an elderly couple who thought Samson hung the moon. They'd wanted to spend the night at the clinic, but after Lester told them he'd be literally right beside the dog, they reluctantly went home. Lester had hoped they'd get some sleep, so that they could more easily bear the news he was pretty certain he'd have to deliver in the morning. This is always the worst part of his job, telling people their pet has died. Sometimes they know it, at least empirically; on more than one occasion someone has brought a dead animal into the office hoping against hope that Lester can revive it. And when he can't, he must say those awful words: *I'm so sorry*. He's noticed a certain posture many people assume on hearing those words. They step back and cross their arms, as though guarding themselves against any more pain, or as though holding one more time the animal they loved as truly as any other family member, if not more. Oftentimes, they nod, too, their heads saying yes to what their hearts cannot yet accept.

But here Samson is, alive and well enough to give Lester's face a good washing with a tongue the size of a giant oven mitt. "Hey, pal," Lester says. "You made it! Let's have a look at that dressing." He rises to his knees and very gently turns the dog slightly onto his side. Samson whimpers and holds overly still, in the way that dogs often do when they're frightened. There's a lot of drainage, but nothing leaking through. He'll give Samson something for pain and then call Stan and Betty. By the time he's done talking to them—he can anticipate at least a few of the questions they'll have—he'll be able to change the dressing without causing the dog undue distress. He thinks Samson will be able to stand and move about a little this afternoon, and imagines him lifting his leg with great dignity against the portable fireplug his staff uses for cage-bound male dogs (the girls get Astroturf). The portable

bathrooms had been Jeanine's idea; she was always coming up with good ideas. She had the idea for Pet Airways before they came up with Pet Airways, although her suggestion was that pets and owners fly together—cages would be installed next to seats so that an owner could reach down and scratch behind an ear, or speak reassuringly, or offer a snack. This was a much better idea for alleviating the stress caused to animals when they fly, and Lester advised Jeanine to write to Pet Airways suggesting it. She said she'd rather keep the idea for herself because she wanted to start Dog Airways, as it is her belief that only dogs *really* care when their owners are gone. She is by her own admission a dog chauvinist, but she's good to all the animals who come to the clinic, even the hamster whose hysterical owner brought her in because she was gobbling up her babies as soon as she gave birth to them.

Jeanine also had the idea that Lester should attend his high school reunion. When the invitation had come to the clinic, Jeanine had opened it, and then immediately begun a campaign to get her boss to go. Lester knew what she had in mind—she wanted him to find a woman.

When he was twenty-nine years old and had been married for only a year, Lester's four-months-pregnant wife, Kathleen, had been killed in a car accident. Since that time, not only has he not remarried but he has not dated. Oh, he has some women friends, and he's pretty sure some of them have had little crushes on him. But despite the charms of this woman or that, there's never been anyone who moved him the way his wife did. He had just opened the clinic when she was killed; Kathleen had worked as the receptionist for the grand total of four days before he lost her. It doesn't hurt the way it did at first—how could anyone survive such a thing?—but there is a place for Kathleen in his heart that leaves no room for anyone else. He is at peace with the idea of living the rest of his life alone, even if Jeanine isn't.

But he did finally agree to go to the reunion. It might be interesting to see all those people again, even though he'd never really been close to any of them. He'd pretty much kept to himself, for many reasons. He wonders if any of his classmates look anything like they used to, or if at the reunion they'll all walk around squinting at name tags, then looking up with ill-disguised disbelief into a person's face. He feels *he* still somewhat resembles the boy he used to be, but then he guesses that everyone does that, sees in the mirror a mercifully edited version of themselves different from what everyone else sees.

Lester was very pleased to see that, on check-in at the reunion, he would be given a box lunch. He feels about the words "box lunch" the way Henry James felt about the words "summer afternoon"—that they are the most beautiful words in the English language.

But mostly Lester agreed to go to the reunion so that he could get Jeanine off his back. He'd even asked her if she'd like to accompany him. Jeanine is married, seemingly happily so, but Lester thought she might get a kick out of going. He'd told her her husband could come, too; they'd find a way to sneak

him in. Or maybe they wouldn't have to sneak him at all—anyone who looked to be in their late fifties would probably be able to walk right in, once people deserted their posts at the registration table. “That’s true,” Jeanine had said. “I used to think sometimes about crashing high school reunions, walking around asking people, ‘Do you remember me? You remember *me*, don’t you?’ just to see what they’d say. But no, you need to go alone or you’ll never meet someone. Not a wife, just someone to go to the movies with. It’s your *last reunion!*” What she had not said, but what Lester heard, is, “You’re getting old, now. It’s not funny. You’re going to *need* someone.”

“All *right*,” he’d finally said. “I’ll go.” And Jeanine had clapped her hands together and asked if she could pick out what he should wear and he’d said no, thank you. She’d asked if she could refer him to a good hairstylist, and he’d said all right because he actually did need to find someone new to cut his hair—his barber’s cataracts had gotten so bad, Lester always came out of the shop looking a little electrocuted.

As soon as Lester agreed to go to the reunion, he’d actually started looking forward to it. Not because he was thinking of meeting someone he could go to the movies with, no. He doesn’t need anyone to go to the movies with, he likes going alone, in fact. He likes sitting there with his popcorn and small Coke (“small” being roughly the size of a silo) and watching movies and thinking about them on his walk home. He likes putting in a garden every spring, nourishing it every summer, and putting it to bed every fall. He likes traveling to Europe every October. He loves reading, mostly history or biography, but classics, too; he never tires of rereading Proust or Dickens or Tolstoy or Flaubert. He also likes sitting in the living room of his small, well-tended two-bedroom house, listening to jazz while he enjoys a little scotch. He likes the way Rosaria changes his sheets every Thursday, the way the bed always smells so good then. He’d asked her once what she did to make the sheets smell so good and she’d put her hand up over her mouth, over her gold-filled teeth, and giggled. “Nothing especial; is detergent only, Doctor,” she’d said. And he’d said no, it was something more, it must be that she had magical powers, yes, that must be it, and she had giggled again.

Rosaria had worked for him for many years, and occasionally he accepted one of her frequent invitations to have dinner at her house—both she and her husband, Ernesto, were inspired cooks, and Lester also enjoyed the company of their ever-expanding family, especially the black-eyed grandchildren who crawled all over him and brought him their stuffed animals to examine and treat. Rosaria had tried for a while to fix him up with various single women she knew—she would invite women to dinner on the nights he came, all kinds of women—but he never felt drawn to pursuing a relationship.

Over and over, it seems, he has to explain that his life is fine. He has his work and his friends and the beauty of the rotating earth. He does not feel he lacks anything, and he certainly does not think going to a high school reunion will put him on the path for finding a replacement for Kathleen. No, he’s

going to the reunion because there is something about it being the last one; and he also wants to go because, after he spoke to Pam Pottsman, he learned that Don Summers had become a vet, too. He wants to talk shop in a way he feels he couldn't do otherwise—surely a high school reunion permits a kind of honesty one does not often encounter in one's adult life. A high school classmate might be the equivalent of family in terms of offering an intimate access, as well as a lowering of the usual defenses. Lester imagines leaning against a makeshift bar and talking to Don about a lot of things: The ethics of chemo for extending the lives of suffering animals. The increase in aggressive behavior in dogs—is it from them being put in cages and left alone for so long? How many immunizations are now proven to be carcinogenic? Lester also wants to ask Don if he doesn't feel a little like a bullshit artist when he advocates brushing pets' teeth. Especially under anesthesia. Lester himself can't recommend it. Give a dog a marrow bone, give a cat a break.

If he were going to be completely truthful, Lester would have to admit that there is one other person he is interested in seeing at the reunion, one he's not thought about since he left high school, but now that he has been reminded of her, he wants very much to see what kind of woman she became. He hopes she shows up, but he'll keep it to himself, that kind of hope.

In his office, Lester dials the number for Stan and Betty Kruger. It rings several times and then Betty answers in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

"Betty?"

"Oh, God," she says.

"No, it's *good* news," Lester says, and Betty begins to cry.

"STAN!" she yells. "He MADE it! Samson's OKAY!" To Lester, she says, "We're coming right now. I'm in my robe and pajamas. Don't look."

After Lester hangs up, he sits back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head. He thinks about a man he met on a train in France last year. The man, Hugo, asked him what the saddest experience he ever had as a vet was, and Lester said it was the day he had to tell someone whose son had died of cancer that the son's dog, whom the father had adopted, had developed the exact same disease. It happened more often than people knew, that dogs developed the same illnesses as their owners: diabetes, adrenal diseases, cancers. It was one of those mysterious things.

"And the happiest experience?" Hugo asked, and Lester said the happiest came after one of the saddest: he'd made a house call to put down a fourteen-year-old tricolor collie named Mike whom Lester had often seen standing with the family's kids at the end of the driveway while they waited for the school bus. Their mother had told Lester that Mike would go to the same spot and wait for the kids to come home in the afternoon, always at precisely the right time. "We never tell him the kids are coming," she'd said. "He just knows. He'll go to the door and bark to be let out, and the kids will arrive right afterward, without fail." One Easter, the family had gotten a duckling, and he

and the dog had become best friends—they'd slept together every night until the duck died, and Mike often visited the duck's grave, his tail wagging on the way there, hanging low on the way back. On the day Lester came to put the dog down, the family had Mike lying on a quilt and had just offered him beef tips, which the dog had refused. Four months later, the owners had returned to Lester's clinic with a new puppy, a beautiful female tricolor.

“So. This is life, eh?” Hugo said. “We lose something here, we get something there. The trick is to stop looking in the old place to find the new thing.”

Lester nodded, and then he stared out the window of the train at the countryside as they traveled through it. Sometimes it was hilly; sometimes it was flat; always, in one way or another, it was beautiful.

THREE

MARY ALICE MAYHEW PUTS THE SOFT-BOILED EGG INTO the bright blue porcelain holder she bought at the thrift shop yesterday. Presentation is all. If Einer Olson finds his breakfast good-looking, maybe he'll eat it. She adds a bud vase with a half-opened yellow rose, though this is more for her benefit than for his. Einer is indifferent to flowers. He says all they do is die.

She carries the breakfast tray into his fusty-smelling bedroom. He insists on eating in his bedroom, sitting in an armchair next to the window where he can look out onto the street below. She places his meal on the TV tray before him, and cracks open the window. "It's beautiful out there today," she says.

"Is it?"

"Seventy-six degrees, no humidity. None. Perfect September day."

"Huh." He picks up his spoon, taps it against the egg. "I don't think I can eat this. Why don't you have it?"

"I already had an egg for breakfast. It was delicious. That one's for you." She moves over to his bed to make it. It appears he had a restless night: the sheets are twisted, the pillows flung onto the floor.

"I can't get it out of the shell."

She smiles over at him. "Sure you can."

He sits staring at the egg. Then, after a few tries, he slices off the top, dips the spoon in, and takes a bite. "That's enough." He pushes the tray away.

Mary Alice comes over to stand before him. "One more bite, and a half slice of the toast. It's Swedish rye, from Uppman's Bakery. You love their bread."

He looks up at her, his eyes magnified hugely by his glasses. It seems hard for him to breathe today: through the thin fabric of his shirt, she can see the muscles in his shoulders moving to help him. And has he gotten paler overnight? She feels a rush of anxiety, and it comes to her that Einer is her best friend. She doesn't want to think about what life will be like without him. She pushes his tray closer to him and speaks gently. "Eat just a little more. Then we can go out on the porch and read the newspaper and you can gripe."

He looks out the window, considering. "No more egg. A bite of toast. One bite."

"Two bites of toast, and a big drink of orange juice."

“You drive a hard bargain,” he says. But then he mutters, “Deal.”

Einer is ninety-two years old and Mary Alice’s next-door neighbor. Two years ago, when Mary Alice moved back to town and into her parents’ vacant house, he’d hired her for caregiving services, though he claimed he didn’t really need help with anything except weeding the garden. She’d worked for him for a few weeks, then moved on to another job. Einer has a full-time caregiver named Rita Essinger now, but Mary Alice still comes over at least once a week to help out. While she takes care of Einer, Rita runs errands or just takes some time for herself. She always thanks Mary Alice profusely, but the truth is, Mary Alice offers relief for a selfish reason. She doesn’t want Rita to burn out and quit. It’s important that Einer have the right kind of person caring for him, and Mary Alice doesn’t want to have to go through another round of seemingly endless interviews on his behalf anytime soon.

Mary Alice had been working as a research assistant in a laboratory in Cincinnati when the economy went bonkers in 2008. After a few months of trying unsuccessfully to find another job in that city, she had moved back to Clear Springs. It only made sense—she could live in her parents’ house rent free, and besides, someone needed to take care of the place. Mary Alice’s mother had died only a few weeks after Einer’s wife had—Einer said it was because the two of them just *had* to have their coffee klatch every day, and if it meant Mary Alice’s mother dying in order to continue that, well, so be it. “They’re up there in heaven, sitting with their mugs and stollen and not letting God get a word in edgewise,” he’d told her.

After Mary Alice’s mother’s death, the house had sat empty for months. It was only partly because of the real estate crisis that had accompanied the country’s economic collapse. The house had problems. Not structural ones—it was a beautiful American foursquare, built at a time when there was a lot of integrity in both materials and contractors, and it had been well maintained. But it was reportedly haunted, and in a small town like this, word had spread; even the realtor had said she had a legal obligation to disclose this odd fact to potential buyers who hadn’t already heard the rumor. In addition to that, the interior had not been remodeled since it was built in the thirties; the one bathroom had a chain used for flushing the toilet, its tank up high against the wall. The kitchen had no dishwasher, no fancy stove and refrigerator, no granite counters. Mary Alice liked it that way. She especially liked the large walk-in pantry with the cabbage-rose-flowered drape that she and her sister used to make into a theater curtain when they put on shows. And she liked the ghost. All it did was occasionally make walking sounds on the creaky floors—it was like a roommate who kept you company but didn’t run up the grocery bill. So she came back to live in this house she’d grown up in, a place full of memories.

Sometimes when Mary Alice lies in bed in what used to be her parents’ bedroom, she thinks about the day her father died. It happened on a cold winter day, when she was a junior in high school. She’d gone to the

auditorium for band practice after school. The sky had been dark and menacing all day, and she'd been watching through the high, dirty windows for the predicted snow to start falling. She'd been worrying about her mother having to come to school to pick her up—her mother was a terrible driver under the best of circumstances. But then the office secretary had come and spoken quietly to the music teacher, who told Mary Alice she needed to go to the principal's office for a message. She remembers the other kids in the band falling silent to watch her walk off the stage and then across the polished floor, her footsteps echoing, her clarinet case bumping into her knee. Someone had whispered, "*What's her name?*" and she had felt a shameful blip of hope that now she might finally be known for something.

She had suspected that the principal was going to deliver bad news, but she'd never anticipated how bad. Mr. Spurry told her there'd been an emergency involving her father and he'd been asked to give her a ride home. "Okay," she'd said immediately, and then immediately regretted it, as though her easy acceptance of the fact made it more true than she wanted it to be.

Mr. Spurry had accompanied Mary Alice to her locker to get her coat and her books. Then he'd walked with her out to the teachers' parking lot. He'd opened his car's passenger door for her, which had embarrassed her. She'd sat stiffly upright in the front seat, her hands folded on her knees, her knees pressed tightly together, afraid that anything more casual might be seen as rude, or inappropriate; or that it might bring bad luck. She'd kept silent, and so had he. She'd listened to the music that played low on the radio, thinking that she didn't want to know this much about Mr. Spurry: what he drove, what station he listened to, how his car smelled slightly of something like hamburger grease.

When she'd come into the house, her older sister, Sarah Jane, and her mother had been sitting at the kitchen table. Her sister wouldn't stop crying and her mother was starkly dry-eyed, and each had seemed to Mary Alice to be equally bad. After Mary Alice found out what had happened to her father—an aortic aneurysm had burst; he'd never had a chance—she'd gone into her parents' bedroom and sat for a while on her father's side of the bed. She'd held his pillow and sat looking out the window as the sky abruptly lightened—the storm had never come. Later, she'd made fried egg sandwiches for the three of them for dinner. It was when her mother was washing the dishes from that dinner that she'd finally started to cry. She'd stood in her apron, her head bowed over the sink, her hands dripping at her sides, and she'd said, "Oh, *Gerald*," as though her husband had grievously disappointed her, and then she'd cried and cried. Mary Alice had put her arms around her mother and rocked her in place. Her sister had sat bent over in her kitchen chair watching them, her hands shoved between her knees, and she was rocking, too, moving in that same universal rhythm. Mary Alice had looked at the bent heads of her mother and her sister and a thought had come to her: *You'll have to be the father, now*. So she had not cried. Not then, not that night, and not for many days afterward. The day after the funeral, her mother had gotten a