

Sundown

(Early version of Chapter 10 from Thicker Than Blood, originally published by Long Story Short, Literary Journal, September 1, 2013)

Angela walked into her mother's apartment at the Claremont Assisted-Living Facility, and her eyes fell on the sampler that her daughter had cross-stitched when she was ten, which hung just inside the front door. The alphabet marched stiffly along the bottom row, and two figures in profile heralded a message, "To a Friend's House the Road is Never Long." Angela wondered how far from home Pearl actually was, and what kind of trouble she'd found. Accustomed to shielding her mother from Pearl's problems, Angela shoved this fear to the back of her mind and steeled herself for this encounter, not sure what she'd find: a self-pitying decline or a ramped-up snit.

Her mother, Nancy, was in the bedroom, sitting in her recliner. A handsome woman, she'd grown into her features as she aged. Her strong nose, which had once made her look plain, now set off her piercing blue eyes and gave her face character. Today, though, her hair looked slept-on and greasy, and Angela picked up a strong urine smell from the adjacent bathroom. Nancy was wearing her favorite blue pants, an Oxford cloth shirt with a stain on the front, and shearling slippers on her slender feet. A crooked, lipsticked mouth told Angela that her mother had dressed herself this morning, no doubt rebuffing the offer of help from Gabriela, the earnest aide who worked at Claremont.

She glared at Angela. "You're late. Now I'll never get my place at the table."

"Mom, I'm early." She pointed to her watch. "It's only 10:45. I got away from work as soon as I could. You'll get your seat."

"We've got to go down there right now," Nancy said, pushing the handle to lower her footrest and attempting to hoist herself out of the chair. "And we can talk about the restaurant for my birthday dinner with Pearl."

Angela pulled up a chair and sat, facing her. “Mom, I’m so sorry. Pearl called and said she’s got a big project due and won’t be able to get away for your birthday.”

Pearl, let’s talk, okay? I don’t want to leave things the way they were. Please call.

“Oh, dear,” Nancy said. “Couldn’t she just fly in for the day?”

“Mom, it’s too expensive. She’s very busy.”

“Too busy for my birthday? Was that *her* decision?”

Swallowing the gibe, Angela said, “It’s just not possible for her to come home now.”

“Did you remind her that it’s my eighty-fifth? I may not have any more birthdays, you know.” Her voice grew thin and teary. “But I should have expected this. No one takes the time to come see me.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. It’s just too hard for her to leave.”

Nancy slumped into her chair, her hands folded in her lap like broken birds.

“Mom, you can’t expect everyone to drop what they’re doing and fly home for one day. She’ll be here for Easter.”

“That’s too far off. I’m all alone.”

“Mom, *I’m* here,” Angela said, her throat constricting.

Her mother sniffed angrily and shook her head. “You know what I mean.”

Angela walked over to the windowsill, where the crystal dolphin and porcelain horse stood in a face-off. She wiped them with the hem of her skirt, repositioning them to look out at the Chicago skyline and expanse of Lake Michigan. Crouching, she gathered discarded newspapers into a pile and dropped them into the recycling bin and inspected the laundry basket. A wrapped package of linens sat on the bed. Housekeeping had clearly made a recent, if cursory, sweep of the apartment. The family photos on her dresser had been disturbed for dusting. A black-and-white glamour shot of Nancy with pageboy and pearls, her hair tinted blond, her lips pink; the sisters,

Joanne, her mother's clone, and Angela, who favored their brown-haired father, in matching plaid dresses; Joanne on her wedding day wearing a fierce look and lace; school photos of the grandchildren, Gary, Blair, and Pearl. She picked up Pearl's second-grade school photo. Despite Angela's entreaties, Pearl had insisted on wearing her favorite sweatshirt, purple with a unicorn leaping across the front. Wiry curls had escaped from the barrettes Angela had carefully affixed that morning. Pearl's crooked front teeth shone bright against her dark skin. Angela felt a flush roll up her face, and she sucked in her breath, returning the photo to its place on the dresser.

"Come on," Angela said. "Let's go down to lunch now." Angela leaned over and gave her mother a surreptitious sniff. "Are the aides helping you bathe? Graciela could do that for you. It's her job."

"I don't want them touching me. I'm not one of those crazy old women."

"But they have to make sure you're safe in the shower."

"Look what one of them did to me yesterday." She thrust her hands at Angela. Her pale skin was as fragile as a rose petal, and purple splotches bloomed even from gentle touches.

"I'm sorry." Angela took her mother's pinky and rotated her hand gently. The bruises didn't look suspicious. "Well, how are you *today*?"

"I'm in a place where people go to die," she said, shooting Angela a hateful stare.

"Mom, you know that the doctor said you weren't safe living alone. You've had several falls, remember?" Her mother shrugged. "And I can't help it that Pearl can't come home. You and I will have a nice time, the two of us." Why wasn't her mother angry at Joanne, who couldn't seem to tear herself away from Connecticut to visit her? True, her money, well, her husband's money, had provided for this top-tier place on the Gold Coast, but that wasn't the same as showing up in person and dealing with their mother's constant demands. Joanne and Mitchell paid with cash, but Angela was the one who paid with sweat: the doctors' visits, shopping for shampoo, antacids, and tissues, checking to see that her mother was safe, paying her bills, rebuilding good-will fences with the staff after her mother tore them down with her rudeness. It was never Joanne's fault. Their mother always stuck up for her,

accepting her lame excuses for why she couldn't – wouldn't – visit: she had to babysit for Blair's child, Mitchell had a partners' dinner with wives, or there was some Pilates class she couldn't miss. But most of all, it was Pearl Nancy wanted to see, more than any of her biological family. Pearl was her favorite.

Angela cradled her mother's elbow and helped her stand. They headed down the long hallway, decorated with loveseats, lined with handrails and prints of country scenes, and Angela slowed her step to match Nancy's as she crept along behind her walker. By the time they reached the elevator, Nancy was breathing heavily. Posted inside the elevator was that day's schedule of activities – shopping, crafts, bridge, Happy Hour, a movie, trivia, trip to the Art Institute – all the things Nancy refused to do. She mostly stayed in her apartment and read *The New York Times*, cover to cover, deigning to go to meals but not making any effort to fit in.

“Why can't Pearl come home?”

“I told you. She's busy at school.”

I know you're angry, but we have to talk. Come on. I'm starting to get worried.

“You don't have to snap at me. I can't remember everything.”

Right. The woman who could hold her own in any political argument claimed a fuzzy memory. She clearly remembered what she wanted to, and Angela knew that whatever the truth, Pearl's actions would be Angela's fault in Nancy's eyes. Because of that, Angela had carefully shielded her mother from Pearl's worst escapades – the suspension from high school, the bad grades, the cigarette and pot smoking, the low-life boys she hung out with, the obscene tattoo, and now, dropping out of college – knowing that it would crush her mother to see her beloved grandchild go so far off the rails. But it also protected Angela from her mother's judgments. Permissive parenting, her lack of a husband: failures her mother warned would come home to roost. Was it true? Despite her best efforts to create a good home for Pearl, had Angela failed her in some major way? Or had some thread of Pearl's DNA slipped in and erased her upbringing?

In the empty dining room, Nancy scuffed over to her chosen place at table sixteen. Angela scooted her in, snapped the bib around her neck, and laid extra napkins in her lap. Nancy swatted the air around her as if Angela were a pesky no-see-um. "I can do this myself!" The servers were standing near the kitchen talking, and when they saw there was an early arrival, their circle tightened. Angela crossed the dining room and grabbed a menu from the sideboard along with a pitcher of water and walked back to her mother. But Nancy cast the menu aside. "I'm not hungry," she said, sulking.

"You have to eat something."

"Okay, I'll have some chicken broth, if that'll make you happy." She pushed the menu, which crinkled the place mat and made her water glass shudder.

"Come on, Mom. Let's have a nice lunch."

They sat waiting until they could order. The dining room had been decorated for the next holiday, Valentine's Day, a couple of weeks away. Red and pink hearts with silhouetted cupids were taped to the walls, and red garlands stretched along the ceiling.

"Oh," Nancy said. "Did I tell you that Ruby Keeler moved in on the third floor?"

"That tap dancer from the 30's?" Angela asked. "Isn't she dead by now? She'd be very old."

"I'd know those legs anywhere."

"Sure, Mom."

A woman hobbled into the dining room, her pencil-thin legs covered by sagging support hose, her body hunched over a walker, Graciela guiding her from behind. Everything about her was white – hair, skin, clothes – except for her coal-black eyes and drawn-on eyebrows. She looked like a snowy terrier, all jowls and wheezy mouth. Nancy rolled her eyes as Graciela aimed her toward their table. "Hello, Nancy!" Graciela said in a high, chipper voice. "You're going to be eating with Irene today."

"Oh, wonderful," Nancy grumbled as she grabbed her glass, water sloshing over the top.

Graciela lowered the woman into her seat and whisked away the walker. "I want orange juice!" the woman announced. "Oh, dear, oh dear." One of the servers stole a glance over her shoulder, but didn't approach.

"Oh, you be quiet, you old bat," Nancy stage-whispered.

"Mom!"

"She can't hear me. She's deaf."

"I want coffee!" the woman barked, and Angela jumped up to get it.

Nancy stopped her. "They don't want us helping ourselves to anything hot. Afraid of a lawsuit or something. Ridiculous." She patted Angela's place. "And don't encourage her. They'll take care of her in time." The woman continued to ask for coffee, for orange juice, for coffee.

At a couple of minutes after eleven, a young Asian man walked over with an order pad. "Whatwouldyouliketodayladies?" Nancy ordered broth, Angela asked for her usual grilled salmon, and the snow-white woman asked where her coffee was.

"Irene, I'll get it in a minute. Do you want your usual? Chowder and orange juice?"

"And coffee."

Nancy sighed deeply. Angela shrugged and rolled her eyes at her mother, who was angrily fishing ice cubes out of her glass.

"Sorry, Mom. I forgot about the ice."

"So you didn't tell me when Pearl *is* coming home."

"Spring break." She cringed at both the lie and the thought that Pearl might still be at large, even then. The dining room was filling up, and the wait staff maneuvered around tables with trays and pitchers of water, avoiding collisions with the teetering residents. Their server arrived with the food and slid the plates in front of them. "Enjoy."

Nancy turned to the woman in white and bellowed, "My granddaughter is smart as a whip. She goes to art school in Boston. I don't know why she's not doing something she can actually use, like the law or medicine." The woman sat there, crumbling crackers into her chowder, then leaning in, her hand trembling, trying with pursed lips to slurp up a viscous spoonful.

“No, Mom,” Angela said. “*You* wanted her to be a doctor. And, okay, at around eleven she kind of wanted to be a doctor, but now, she’s studying art. *She* wants to be an artist. It’s not about what *we* want.”

“I was going to be a doctor,” Nancy said.

That was news to Angela. But it could be one of her mother’s many fantasies. She and Ruby Keeler, rooming together and exchanging organic chemistry notes with each other before going out on a double date with Gene Kelly and Paul Newman.

“I hope I don’t die before I see her again.”

“You won’t. She’s busy now, but she’ll come home when she can.”

“I just don’t know what kind of test she has in art school that’s so important she can’t take a day off. Don’t they just scribble a picture and call it a day?”

Angela didn’t, in fact, know what Pearl had been asked to do in art school. Crits, foundation, color theory—these were terms she gleaned from what little Pearl had told her, but she didn’t really know what Pearl’s life had been like since high school.

The last time Angela talked to Pearl, they’d had a huge argument about her quitting college. “It’s a done deal, Mom.” When Angela had asked her how she’d live, Pearl had said that she and her boyfriend Renny would get jobs, and if they needed to, they’d sit in the park and draw portraits for money.

“Your grandparents didn’t set up your college fund for you to run off like this with some boy.”

“Great, so now you’re going to guilt me about that? I’m not like you, remember?”

“You’re being very foolish. And selfish.”

“I can’t talk to you.” And she’d hung up. Angela had resisted the urge to call right but had forced herself to wait ten minutes. But Pearl hadn’t answered.

Nancy pushed aside her broth and motioned for a package of crackers. “The food here has gone steadily down the tubes. You tell me they can’t make a simple chicken broth?”

“I’ve always kind of liked the food here,” Angela said, biting into a forkful of her salmon.

“Yeah, well, they put on the ritz when family come to visit.” She fumbled with the cellophane, yanking it open, spilling crumbs on her blouse. “I miss my own cooking.”

“I’m sure you do. You’re a terrific cook.”

“You never really took an interest in cooking, did you?”

Despite her mother’s supposed lack of an appetite, she finished her broth and two packs of crackers, then decided to have coffee and a bowl of strawberry ice cream for dessert. She took her time, stirring her coffee just so, adding Sweet and Low, and just a few drops of milk.

Angela checked her watch. She was due back at work but needed to wait for her mother to finish. Finally, they made the excruciatingly long trip back to her mother’s apartment, and Angela was able to leave, her chest tight, her head pounding.

You know, Pearl. Grandma keeps asking about you. What am I supposed to tell her? Think of that.

Wonderful, now *she* was laying on the guilt with a trowel. Of course, she knew where she’d learned to do that. Scary.

Her mother took credit for all of Pearl’s good qualities, as if, because she’d given birth and Angela hadn’t, she could do a better job. “Sometimes a child just needs a grandmother to teach her some manners,” she’d say as she rapped the dinner table sternly, motioning for Pearl to place her napkin in her lap. Yes, of course, table manners really set kids on the straight and narrow path. That’s all it takes: use the right fork and you’ll meet a prince, chew with your mouth closed and you’ll cure cancer.

Pearl was the only one though who could bring out Nancy’s soft side. When she was a young girl, they shared a love of scrapbooks. Nancy would

sit next to Pearl, her slender hands guiding Pearl's pudgy ones as she wielded huge, scary scissors, cutting out pictures from old *Ladies' Home Journals* and *Life* magazines. They loved anything that required a needle – sewing, embroidery, knitting – and gave each other home-made gifts. Couldn't her mother see that this probably spawned Pearl's love for making art? Angela didn't have the patience or skill for close work. Under her tense hands the threads seized up, buckling the cloth beyond repair. She envied Pearl's easy way with her mother – especially after Pearl had become a prickly adolescent – how they managed to slip into a comfortable pattern even after months of separation. Pearl had acquired – obviously it wasn't inherited – Nancy's withering stare that could render Angela mute when it was aimed in her direction. When after the death of Angela's father and several falls landed Nancy in Claremont a year ago, Pearl sent her hand-painted cards for holidays and visited her when she was home. What would happen now?

For two weeks, Angela's calls to Pearl had gone directly into voice mail with no response, and it worried Angela that Pearl's phone could either be out of juice or lost. And if so, what did that mean? She didn't know Pearl's roommate's last name or her cell phone number, so she couldn't call her. Swallowing her pride, Angela called her ex, Mike, to ask if he'd heard from Pearl, afraid of what that would mean if he had, but more afraid if he hadn't. "She'll call when she's ready," he said. "Don't worry." Did that mean they'd spoken? Angela was worried, of course, but she thought, she was pretty sure, that if Pearl were in trouble, she'd have let her know. Pearl couldn't be that angry. Angela welcomed anger over the alternative, that Pearl couldn't get in touch with her for any number of horrible reasons. How could she drop out, just like that, in her sophomore year, to go off with some boy? Pearl had seemed to straighten out after a very rocky adolescence, and Angela had hoped this new, more even-keeled existence would last. But she knew that was naïve, that there were more bumps to come. One of Pearl's psychiatrists had told her it would never be a smooth, straight path for Pearl, who was smart and tough, but also fragile, that adoptees need to test the strength of the family tether by acting out and being welcomed back again.

Angela called the Museum School to see if she could locate the R.A. in Pearl's dorm.

"It says here that Pearl Barton is on an official leave of absence," the woman in the registrar's office reported. "So she's not on campus. The address in Chicago is the one of record."

"Of course, that's her home."

"Have you tried calling her and leaving a message?"

"Well, I've obviously done that or I wouldn't be asking you," Angela said, clicking off the phone, blood roaring in her ears. She set up a new anonymous email account in the hope that Pearl would open the message, thinking it was a friend. She even tried to text, but couldn't make it work, her fingers cramping as she fumbled with the tiny buttons, then either did or didn't send the message.

The following day, Angela met Fraya for their weekly lunch and frustration vent. Fraya was the calm voice that had soothed and guided Angela since college, and she needed some of that guidance now. They were meeting at a café that served good salads, which allowed them to justify wine and dessert. After the Muzak and fluorescent lighting in the Claremont dining room, Angela welcomed this dark place where the lines were softened and no one shouted to be heard or wore a dribble bib.

Angela hugged Fraya. They settled at a booth and ordered their food. "I really need that big glass of wine today," said Angela.

"No word yet?" Fraya asked, unwinding a long striped shawl from her neck, her curly hair a staticky halo around her cold-flushed cheeks. A bit of lipstick had smudged one of her front teeth.

"No, and I'm just so worried," she said, setting her cell phone on the table next to her and giving it a pat as if to coax it to ring. "I just can't imagine why she won't at least send me a message."

"You're imagining the worst, and that's understandable, but I'm sure she's fine and she's holding out until she feels able to get in touch. Kids don't have any idea how much we worry."

"You'd be worried, right?"

“Hysterical. But it doesn’t do any good. You have to slow down and keep your wits about you.” Angela started to cry, and Fraya took her hand. “Pearl will get in touch. She’s off on some lark, and she’s afraid to tell you where she is.”

“What if she can’t get in touch?”

“Don’t even think that.”

“What if she’s strung out somewhere? Or turning tricks?”

“She’s with a boyfriend, right?”

“Who knows? She said she was, but I don’t trust her about anything anymore. Doesn’t she know how worried I am?”

“She may not see it that way. If she’s fine, she might not realize you’re a wreck. I remember Claudio snuck off to be with a girl and had what he thought was an ironclad alibi of spending the night at a friend’s house. However, I called his friend’s house and he wasn’t there. I was a wreck.”

“And when he came home, you weren’t mad?”

“I was furious. But the stakes were lower. He was in town. I knew that much.”

The food arrived on huge plates. Angela picked out the olives and took a bite of lettuce. “I’ve called everyone I can think of, even Mike, if you can believe that.” Fraya winced sympathetically. “At this point, my mother and Joanne are the only ones who don’t know.” She ripped apart a roll and crumbled it to bits. “And to think I went along with art school against my better judgment and now she’s thrown that away too.”

“Would it be better if she were blowing off Yale?”

“Of course not.” Suddenly full, she pushed aside her half-eaten salad and took a deep gulp of her wine.

Fraya ordered a piece of chocolate cake with two forks. “You may need to let her go for a while in order to come back of her own accord.”

“I just can’t imagine her running away like this. Did I cause this? Or is this about the adoption? Is this a birth-mother-search thing?”

“I don’t know,” Fraya said, thinking a moment. “Could be.”

“I’ve tried to let her be herself.”

“It doesn’t matter what you did or didn’t do. This is Pearl’s thing. She may not finish college. She may not do what you want her to do.”

“But some things are non-negotiable. Like college.” Angela heard her tone grow angry and shrill. “I just want her to aim higher than where she came from.”

“That’s why you adopted her?”

“No, of course not.”

“Angela, you have to sort out your feelings. It’s hard not to feel hurt by this. I suspect she’s just trying to find herself and needs to do it away from you.”

“She *was* away from me.”

“At a college you approved of.”

“Yes, I forced her to try to have a better life,” she said, feeling tears push their way to the surface.

“Angela...”

The server arrived with the cake and removed their salad plates as Fraya rubbed Angela’s arm, and Angela fought not to break down.

“How can you be so certain she’ll come back?”

“You have to believe she will.”

“What am I going to tell my mother?”

“How is she, by the way?” Fraya took a bite of cake and edged the plate toward Angela.

“Pissed at me because Pearl isn’t coming home for one day for her eighty-fifth birthday. I mean, even if she were still in school, I wouldn’t pay for a one-day trip.”

“I understand your mother is driving you crazy, but she doesn’t even know Pearl is missing.”

“Well, I can’t tell her. I keep hoping Pearl will show up and I won’t have to.” She wiped chocolate from her mouth. “If I tell her, it’ll be my fault.”

“Isn’t that what you’re worried about anyway?”

Angela felt her scalp contract. “Oh, God, *is* this my fault?”

“Angela, I didn’t say that. It’s more complicated, of course. One advantage your mother has is that she can reshape the world to fit her needs. You don’t have that luxury.”

“But this would just kill her.”

“Do you think you need to keep up a fantasy for your mother?”

“I cushion my mother from the harsher realities, but I don’t make stuff up. Mom’s in another league from me on that.”

“Nancy has always been a bit of a fabulist.”

Angela had always hated her mother’s stories and wondered why she needed to embellish life, to exaggerate Angela and Joanne’s accomplishments to her friends. “Wasn’t I enough for her as I was?” Angela asked as she motioned for the cake and ate another bite. “Someone had to decipher Mom’s fantasies for Pearl. I promised I wouldn’t inflict the same skewed view of the world on her.”

“We all inflict something on our kids. And maybe Pearl wouldn’t have minded a bit of fantasy.”

“No, adoptees especially need their parents to give them a firm grounding in fact. I’ve always tried to tell Pearl the truth. If only Pearl would get in touch, I could stop worrying.”

“Kids have a state of grace that takes them through hard times. Maybe she’s holed up in Chicago, blocks away from you, afraid to come home, afraid you’ll be angry at her. Just take her back without a lecturing. There’ll be time for that later.”

“What if she’s trying to find her birth mother?”

“You’re still her mother.”

“I wish I could be as optimistic as you are,” she said, her voice thin, her eyes stinging. She swiped at her face. “At this point, I’d be happy to have her here, pissed as hell, than off doing who knows what.”

At the end of the meal, Fraya led Angela out to the car and tied her scarf as if Angela were her child. Then she gave her a big hug and made her promise to call “any time of night” with news.

As Angela was driving north on Ashland on her way back to work, she saw a young black woman with curly hair tied into a brush on top of her head, like Pearl's. She even walked like her, with long strides, her body bent forward as if struggling against a strong wind. Like Pearl, she was solid, her hips swelling from underneath a short jeans jacket. Angela kept her eye on the woman while she negotiated traffic, cursing at the red light. The woman turned onto Wrightwood. When she got the green, Angela sped to the corner, turned right, and headed down the street, her breath coming in short gasps. A taxi sat in the middle of the street, idling, as a woman got out and reached back in for shopping bags. Angela honked then squeezed past, shooting the cabdriver a dirty look, before continuing down the street. When she saw the young woman up ahead stop to light a cigarette, she slowed down the car, careful not to alarm her in case Pearl made a run for it. Angela edged up alongside her, bracing for the encounter, willing her to turn around. She lowered the passenger window and leaned over. "Pearl?" The woman spun around, and it was a stranger, who frowned, shrugged her backpack higher onto her shoulder, quickening her pace as she ducked into an alley.

Now I'm losing my mind. I thought I saw you on the street today. It made me so sad when I realized it wasn't you. Sorry if that makes you feel bad, but you need to know that this is not just about you.

To distract herself, Angela tried cleaning up the apartment and ended up in the hall closet digging through the box of Pearl's baby clothes—overalls, onesies, corduroy tie-on shoes, all a bit shabby and stained. At the bottom of the pile, she found the quilt, which had been Pearl's constant companion until the age of four when Angela convinced her that big girls in pre-K didn't take blankets to school. Pearl bravely gave it up, but continued to suck her thumb at school. Now she wished she'd let Pearl hang onto it. What harm would a blanket have done anyway? A baby block quilt of gingham squares, its reds and blues were faded now, and bits of batting poked through the tattered fabric. A rust-colored stain in the corner came from a nosebleed Pearl had one night. Barely hanging together now, it was the ghost of a quilt. Angela held it

to her nose and inhaled deeply, but it had been washed and packed away, smelling of dust and old cotton. All traces of Pearl, gone.

Pearl, I'm sorry I've been so harsh on the phone. I'm just worried. I love you. I don't care where you are or what you've done. Just get in touch. Let me know you're okay. Please.

Three weeks after Pearl's disappearance, Angela's cell phone rang and she jumped on it. Deflated, she saw that it was her mother's number and nearly let it go to voice mail, but she braced herself and answered. Instead of her mother, the accented voice of Graciela reported that her mother had fallen and was going to the hospital.

"How did she fall? Can I talk to her?"

"The paramedics just left with her."

Angela raced to Northwestern Hospital and headed right to the expensive parking garage instead of looking for a metered spot. Arriving at the Emergency Room, she asked where they'd taken her mother. A woman in fuchsia-colored scrubs led her to a curtained area where she found her mother in bed, wearing a hospital gown, her hair wispy and thin, her skin ghostly. Angela gingerly laid a hand on Nancy's bare arm. "Mom, how are you? I'm sorry you fell."

"Damn desk," she said, licking her dry lips, pale without lipstick. "It got in the way. I brushed by it, and the next thing I knew, I was on the floor. I couldn't move."

"Did you get out of bed by yourself?"

She looked around as if someone else had asked the question.

"Mom? Why didn't you call the aide to help you?"

"I had to go. I'm almost eighty-five. I should be able to go to the toilet without company."

"I wish you could, but you see what happened. Now you've really hurt yourself." Nancy's head was bowed. "Mom, look at me." Nancy raised pitiful, watery eyes. No, she wouldn't give in to her mother's ploy.

Angela ran through the scenario in her head. Nancy's hip would be broken, and she wouldn't be able to walk, so Angela wouldn't be able to take her out because she couldn't lift her mother, and she'd have to call a medi-car every time Nancy had a doctor's appointment, even though the hospital was just a few blocks away. And there'd be no birthday dinner.

When they took Nancy into x-ray, Angela stepped outside the hospital and dialed Pearl's number. As usual, it went right to her message: "Hey there. This is Pearl." Her voice, throaty.

Pearl, Grandma fell and is in the hospital. At Northwestern. They're doing X-rays now, and we hope it's not a hip break. It's her birthday in three days, and she keeps asking for you. Please call her. Even if you don't call me, just... Her voice cracked, so she hung up.

Angela remembered the excruciating pain from when she dislocated her kneecap during a performance of a high-school play. She was helpless until the paramedics arrived, and she screamed when they lifted her, embarrassed that dozens of people were still sitting there, staring. Angela remembered Nancy sitting in the ambulance and how she'd tried not to cry anymore so her mother wouldn't be angry at her. What would happen to Angela when she herself was old if Pearl never came home?

She dialed Joanne's number.

"How did this happen?" Joanne asked, annoyed. "Aren't they supposed to keep an eye on her?" Meaning, Angela supposed, how did Angela fail to protect her?

"They can't watch her every second, and she won't let them help her anyway."

"Well, you have to make her see that she needs help."

"Yeah, that'll be easy." Her head was throbbing; it was hard to think straight. "I really could use your help right now. Can you come here? Maybe for Mom's birthday?"

“But if she’s being taken care of, wouldn’t it make more sense to wait a while? I can come when she’s out of the hospital and spell you a bit. I mean, what would I do except sit in the hospital?”

“Which is what I’m going to be doing.”

“And I appreciate it, Angela. You know that.”

Couldn’t Joanne see that Angela needed her as much as Nancy did?

Joanne continued, “How are you holding up?”

Angela felt herself start to cry, “I’m just worried about what this means.” She hadn’t told Joanne about Pearl and couldn’t now. How much more could she take?

“Keep me posted. I want to help.”

“Do I have that option? To *help*?”

“Angela...”

“This. Is. Hard.”

“You think I don’t know that? But as you said, she’s in there for a while. I’ll come in a couple of weeks.”

Angela struggled to keep her composure. “I guess that’ll have to do. Bye.” She hung up, face burning, and burst into tears. Massaging her stiff neck, she smoothed her skirt and pushed the revolving door back into the stale air of the E.R., feeling a vice clamp over her chest, squeezing tight.

Luckily, the hip had a tiny crack, and her mother would heal, but the doctor said she needed to use a wheel chair until her strength came back, and she’d have to be a regular visitor to the physical therapy room at the Claremont.

The day after the fall, Angela visited Nancy in the hospital, but she looked odd, distant, as if she were looking through Angela at someone on the other side of the room. She kept peeling off the elastic stockings the nurses had put on her legs to prevent clots from extended bed rest.

“Get these things off me!”

Angela pulled them up, but her mother kicked her feet. “Mom, stop it.” They struggled. “Now!” Nancy looked startled, then gave another kick.

After Angela finally calmed her mother down, Nancy said, “The woman next to me has Ebola. I’m going to be contaminated. Get me another room.”

“Mom, I think you mean *E. coli*.”

“I know what I heard,” she said, her eyes flashing bright.

Angela turned on the TV as a buffer, then placed the untouched tray of food in the hall and poured her mother a glass of water, making sure to strain out the ice cubes.

“Angela, what’s that dog doing in here?”

“What?” She looked up at the TV, which was showing *The View*. No animals on the show.

“A dog, under my bed.” She teetered on her side, swiping at the air beneath her bed. “Here, puppy.”

“Mom, be careful.” Grabbing Nancy’s bony shoulder, Angela lowered her back onto the pillows. “There’s no dog here.” Could her mother have hit her head in the fall? “Mom? Are you okay? Do you know where you are?”

“Of course I do,” she said, craning her neck to look out the window.

“Listen, I’ll be back in a minute. Don’t move. Hear me?” Angela ran down the hall to the nurses’ station and found the young doctor chatting with another doctor, sipping a Starbucks.

“She’s sun-downing,” he said. “It’s a very common disorientation for older people when they’re in the hospital, particularly at night. It should subside.”

“But this is morning.”

“Well, she’s at an age where some dementia could be setting in.”

“Dementia? No, she has a razor-sharp mind. She molds the world to fit her fantasies, but she knows what’s real.”

“That may be so.” He stood, staring at a computer screen. Did he even know what patient she was talking about? “You’ll just have to wait.” He dropped his cup into the trash and headed down the hall away from Nancy’s room.

At home that evening, Angela called Joanne to report on their mother’s confusion. Joanne thought it must have been trauma from the fall. “You had to see it, Joanne. It was scary. Her eyes were vacant.” Then she called Fraya who didn’t answer her cell phone, so she left a message. Sitting at the window

in the dark, she looked out at traffic along Sheridan, then walked through the apartment, lit only by the light from street, waiting for hearing to kick in and guide her by sonar.

Pearl. I'm worried that something awful has happened, and I can't face that right now. Just leave a message. I won't even pick up. Please.

The open freezer gleamed bright, and she grabbed a pint of chocolate ice cream, dug in with a spoon, and stared at the cell phone photo of Pearl taken at her high-school graduation. One bite turned into the whole carton as she counted out fifteen more minutes. She dumped the empty into the trash and sat down, her head swimming, her stomach bloated, then dialed again.

Pearl. Grandma is dying. Come home.

From the refrigerator, she grabbed a cold chicken leg, gnawed on it, swigged some milk with an Ambien, and staggered off to bed.

The phone woke her up, and she answered it, breathless, "Pearl?"

"No, Fraya. You sounded awful in your message. What's happening with your mother?"

Angela's mouth was sticky, and she found it hard to string words together.

"Do you want me to come over?" Fraya asked.

"No, I just need to get some sleep. Thanks."

The morning of her mother's birthday marked a month since Pearl's disappearance. Angela showed up at the hospital with gifts—a sky-blue pashmina, lemon verbena shower gel, a Jade plant. As Angela walked into the shared room, she saw her mother's roommate lying in bed, snoring raggedly. Beyond the dividing curtain, an aide was rubbing lotion into Nancy's feet. Angela expected to see Nancy push her away, but clearly, she enjoyed it. Her eyes closed, she was almost cooing. A pile of diapers sat on the windowsill next to a large bouquet of freesia sent by Joanne.

Angela stepped forward. “Happy Birthday, Mom.” She leaned over and kissed the air near her mother’s head. Nancy smelled like almonds. “How are you today? I brought your gifts.”

Nancy’s face brightened. “I’m so glad you’re here.” She pointed to the chair, and Angela slipped into the narrow space between the bed and the wall, lifting a pile of blue absorbent pads and placing them on the floor. “Sit down. I had the most wonderful thing happen last night.”

“Tell me.”

Nancy’s hands drew a dramatic arc above her head. She still wore her rings, despite Angela’s offer to take them back to her apartment for safekeeping. “Pearl came to see me.”

Angela’s eyes blurred. “What?”

“Oh, yes. She came and we sat and talked.”

Angela’s fingers started to tingle. “Mom, that’s not possible.”

“Now, why would you question me on that?”

“Pearl called you on the phone?”

“No, of course not. She was right here.” She pointed to the foot of her bed. Angela looked in that direction, seeing only the plastic box for used syringes.

Could it be true? “Mom, she must have called.”

Nancy turned her steely-eyed gaze on Angela. “Are you telling me I don’t know when my Pearl is here?”

Angela’s heart leapt in her throat. “Mom, I know for a fact that Pearl isn’t in town. I didn’t want to upset—”

“She was here!” Nancy jabbed her finger toward the foot of the bed. “I saw her, right in front of me.” Ruddy patches had sprung up on her cheeks.

Was it possible that Pearl slipped into town without telling Angela? That she’d been here all along? Would she go to that much trouble to avoid Angela? “Mom, you know I can check with the nurses to see if she did come. I’m going to do that.” As she stood, a wave of dizziness forced her back into the chair.

“She told me she’s working and has an apartment.”

“Here? No, that can’t be. Come on, Mom. I don’t want your stories now.” This had to be a fantasy. “Please, I need you to be truthful.”

“Well, we mostly reminisced. She told me about her school play, when she played the lead in *South Pacific*. She did that dance while washing her hair.” Nancy’s fingers wagged at the sides of her head.

“Okay, Mom,” Angela said, hearing her voice thin and grow weak. “Clearly, you’re confused. That was *me*. *I* was in that play. You remember that.” Of course, she’d think that anything good had been Pearl’s doing. Couldn’t her mother give Angela credit for once? “You’re not making any sense.”

“Well, it was Pearl this time. Last night. I was there. She’s so talented.” Nancy shut her eyes. “I can see her now, wearing that towel on her head, belting out a tune. And that night she hurt her knee on stage. I raced backstage because I knew she needed me and held her hand all the way to the hospital.”

“Sure, Mom,” Angela said, although this wasn’t the way she remembered it at all, more that her mother was tense and irritated. “Whatever.” But what did happen? She wasn’t sure of anything anymore.

“Pearl was just fine though. Bounced back by the next performance with an ace bandage on her knee. What a trouper.”

“That she is.”

“You’d have been proud of her.”

Angela fixed Nancy with a dead-on stare. “*I* was there too.”

“Then you know what I mean, how proud a mother can feel about her daughter.” Nancy smiled at Angela, who felt her eyes well up, her throat catch.

Angela sighed. “Mom, can we talk about something else? I know you want Pearl to be here. I want her to be here. But she isn’t. I can’t help that.” Angela stood up, feeling flushed, and cleared the bean-shaped plastic bowl and tissue box from her table. “But it’s your birthday. So why don’t you open your gifts?” She forced herself to breathe slowly as she helped her mother tear off the paper, running the soft pashmina along her mother’s cheek, opening the gel bottle so she could smell it. Then she placed the Jade plant on the

windowsill, moving Joanne's bouquet just out of her mother's sight line. There, she thought. *I'm* here, Mom. I'm always the one. Not Joanne, not Pearl.

Nancy's hands stroked the cloth as she laid her head back on the pillow. "I told her I was sorry to have let her down. I wish I could have raised her but they wouldn't let me." She was shaking her head, her eyes watery.

"Mom, you didn't let her down. And what's that supposed to mean, raise her?"

"I was just too young, and I let them tell me what to do."

"What are you talking about?"

"I never should have let her go."

"But she wanted to go to college."

"No, it was my fault. I buckled under. I always do that."

"Mom, you're a terrific grandmother."

"I think about her every day."

"Of course you do."

"Do you know how hard it's been?" What did her mother know?

"But you have to understand. I had no choice. I had to let her go."

"Mom, you're tired. Take a rest."

Angela could see the effort her mother was expending to cling to scraps of memory and re-form them into whole cloth, but none of this made sense. She'd talk to the doctor to find out if this was, indeed, sun-downing or if it was more serious, wondering what was ahead for all of them.

Nancy worked her hands over and over as if she were scrubbing for surgery. Her cuticles were dry and cracked, her knuckles red. Angela was afraid the rough skin would snag the strands of the scarf so she reached for her mother's hands, which were surprisingly cool. She studied the blue veins and the valleys of ruined skin, which lay slack between the raised hills of bones. Picking up the tube of lotion, she squirted some into her palm. "Here, Mom. Let me," and started rubbing the lotion into the papery skin. "Okay, so what else did Pearl tell you?"

Nancy continued, and for once, Angela encouraged her to spin out her fantasies, content to lend her own life to Nancy's version of Pearl, whatever

her mother wanted, knowing that all they could have, the three of them, was this moment together. And for the time being, that was enough.