
The Broken Bottle
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A PHP Short

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I did not see the bottle fly or, even, hit. Of that I am certain. But I did hear it crash and saw the blood gushing from the slice on the young man's forehead. I cannot doubt the sights and sounds of that one violent act which has haunted me through the years. A memory that has played again and again in my mind's eye.

It's like Akira Kurosawa's movie *Rashomon*. But different, too. I don't see a replay of violence through the eyes of various witnesses. Instead, it is my own eyes which have changed, so I see it anew each time. It's as though the young woman I was back on that wet July night stands in the middle of a polygonal mirrored room. Though she is surrounded by the facts of the moment, all she can see are the distorted reflections, refracting through time. In the end, the original has become so lost in the reflections of reflections I cannot know the truth, even of myself.

* * *

A turn in the road. That's all it was. And we ended up in Chinatown for a late Sunday night supper on our way home from visiting family upstate. On such turnings, a life can be changed.

Exhausted from the long day, I slept while Andrew drove, expecting to not awaken until I felt the car slow down for the twisting, picturesque lanes of our suburban neighborhood. The gentle, back and forth rocking of our car squeezing into a tight parking space in Chinatown aroused me from a deep, amorphous dream of being cradled, safe and warm. Seeing where we were, the sense of dreamy sensuality fused with romantic memories of another time. After all, it had been over a late night Chinatown meal that Andrew had proposed, even though he had never actually asked me "the question." He always says that he didn't want to give me an opportunity to say no, but I really think he was that sure of me, even then.

We strolled along Arch Street, huddled together under our one undersized umbrella, with our hands entwined on the handle as much to be close as to avoid a wet shoulder or back. Tired but happy,

we wandered for some time, seeking a culinary adventure. But almost everything was closed.

Finally, we found a tiny corner restaurant. All its signs were in Chinese, except the flickering "Open" that bled red neon onto the wet sidewalk. Through the rain-streaked windows, we saw a narrow, brightly lit linoleum room, empty except for two groups of Asians seated as far from each other as they could get in that small space.

We climbed the two stoop steps, opened the glass door and were assaulted by a dense cloud of cigarette smoke and loud voices. A staunch non-smoker, I wrinkled my nose and turned around to leave.

But then I saw Andrew's face, shining with hunger-inspired hope and window-shopping the colorful, plentiful dishes that the far table of Asians were clearly enjoying. A young waiter stood up from that table and approached us.

"Do you mind smoke?" he asked in heavily accented English that quivered nervously in the upper register of the question.

I looked at Andrew. We both smiled. We'd experienced worse in Hong Kong, where tumult, odors and tobacco smoke had seemed part and parcel of the excitement.

"All that's missing is the constant clatter of mahjong tiles," Andrew said as we sat down on wobbly bentwood chairs at an old-fashioned red Formica-topped table.

With our sides pressed against the long wall of the narrow restaurant, we had two diametrically different views of people and food. Andrew had his back to the diners at the large round table nestled in the front picture window. Behind me was the other full table at the rear of the restaurant. So, we engaged in the game of describing what the other could not see.

My view was of eight Asian men, about our age, in their mid to late twenties. They were raucous, arguing as loudly as their elders might have over mahjong, though I couldn't imagine any of them having the patience to sit long enough to finish such a sedentary game. Yet, they were playing at something. It must have been going on for quite a while, judging by the number of decimated bowls of food and rice, filled with cigarette butts and surrounded by a dead platoon of empty beer bottles.

As Andrew watched the restaurant employees at the other round table in the back, his grey sky eyes sparkled with a delight that crinkled his broad face into an even wider smile. Andrew is not a handsome man... not storybook handsome... but when his face lit up like that, he was beautiful to me. With mischievous mouth-watering relish, he described the food the employees were eating. Mushroom-piled chicken or pork or whatever meat it was, covered with a steaming brown sauce. Vegetable laden fried rice. And a crispy whole fish platter, with its bug-eyed head. He pretended to interpret the employees' friendly, unintelligible banter for me. Of course, he didn't

have the slightest idea what they were saying, but that, too, was part of the fun of being with Andrew.

When I turned to look at the employees behind me, I counted four men and three women in their early twenties, all somewhat smaller than the men at the front table. Smaller, rounder and more concentrated in form and movement, as opposed to tall, angular and bursting with unharnessed energy as the men were.

At any time, one or two of the employees were half out of their seats, eating while standing, running to answer the phone, or in and out of the kitchen. Their voices were not raised, at least not as loudly as the men. But Cantonese conversation does seem to pour out, with everyone talking at once. I wonder if I am being unfair, stereotyping people I don't really know. In fact, I didn't even know if they were Cantonese. Nor could I know if the people at the two tables were not as foreign to each other as they were to me.

Yes, it was all part of the adventure, and we knew from experience we were going to enjoy it. But the waiter handed us two paper takeout-like menus, not the large plastic bound versions, which I supposed must have been in Chinese only. The listed dishes sounded quite ordinary, even boring.

"Order what you want, dear," I told Andrew, as I put the menu down. "I'm not hungry." We both knew that meant I would nibble half of whatever he got.

A young, diminutive woman, with a classic round face surrounded by short, thick, glossy black hair, got up from the back table to take our order. Andrew tried to communicate to her that he didn't want anything on the paper menu, and would rather have what she and her friends were eating. But she didn't seem to understand English. So, he settled for egg drop soup and Kung Pao shrimp, pointing to the dinner special for $5.95.

Andrew and I chatted about the day, the week ahead, everything and nothing. To us, it didn't really matter what we said, but that we were together.

As we talked, my eyes were constantly drawn to the restless noise and reverberating energy of the eight men behind Andrew's back. I tried to fathom what they might be saying to each other, who they were and how they were related. I guess I get it from my mother, who would often entertain us as children with stories she would make up about strangers. Hopeful, happy stories that filled long drives in the car or quiet moments in public places, about families who always loved each other, or children solving puzzles. How is it that Mother never saw anything ugly? Was it her youth or mine? Or that she died so early that life hadn't yet soured her beautiful dreams?

I couldn't weave my mother's kind of stories of triumph or love from the discordant scene behind Andrew's back, though I did start a couple of tales. How else could I share with Andrew how it all

made me feel? But each attempt was stillborn on my tongue when I realized the next sentence out of my mouth would have been twisted into something unpleasant that I did not wish to own as mine. I abandoned storytelling and simply recounted what I saw. After all, the facts which eluded me about those men were probably more interesting than anything I could invent.

One man, dressed all in black, had a presence, maybe even a sense of command, that made the underlying dynamics of the large table appear to gravitate around him, the way iron filings form concentric curves whose lopsided centers are pulled toward the more powerful magnet. He was tall, with a nonchalant grace that was almost menacing in its taut smoothness.

The man in black, however, was not the center of the action. Instead, he hovered and watched his companions, quietly spurring them on in whatever verbal game they were playing. Next to him was a broad-shouldered man, in a white button-down shirt and skinny black trousers, whose loud voice seemed to contribute at least half the decibels in the room. He gestured as he spoke, throwing his long arms outward in jarring, almost chopping motions. His hands were erratic flying fists with the single right index finger jabbing at whoever last spoke. Unlike the man in black, the one wearing the white button-down shirt overflowed, holding nothing in, keeping nothing close.

Our waitress served Andrew's soup and shrimp platter. Then, she quickly retreated to the back table. I suppose we should have wondered about her sideways glances and trembling hands, but we couldn't have recognized her nervousness as anything other than a discomfort with strangers, with an unfamiliar language. Besides, we were distracted by the food. The steaming soup had a savory, flavorful broth of the kind that comes only from cooking a chicken for hours, with good herbs and tender care. The perfectly done shrimp crunched, then melted in our mouths, while the delicate, savory sauce played on our tongues with a variety of exotic and familiar spices.

Andrew pushed the platter and soup bowl to the center of the table, so I could reach them more easily. Our plastic chopsticks playfully collided in the Kung Pao platter; we fed each other particularly tasty morsels. The rich and varied flavors, the fun of being the only Caucasians in a Chinese restaurant, the pleasure of sharing it all, late on a Sunday night, when we should be home in bed like the respectable suburbanites we were, made us feel just a little bit reckless and free. No candle-lit, velvet-lined French restaurant could have been more romantic or made me happier to have fallen in love all over again with my husband.

More and more, it was reminding me of our trip to Hong Kong two years earlier, down to the unintelligible, always active people who surrounded us. The problem was I didn't feel as though I were *in* that exotic city, a tourist on vacation. Instead, it was like

watching a movie made in Hong Kong, with all the seedy, sordid undercurrents of such films. At least, that was how I felt. Andrew seemed quite at home and content, surrounded as he was by fascinating, lively people, and eating delicious food.

As we ate, we continued to watch and share our two very different perspectives, windows onto another culture. But Andrew's view seemed so much lighter, both in tenor and color, as though the room itself were unbalanced, weighed down toward the front by the boisterous men I watched.

With the fluid grace of a prize fighter, the man in black got up from the front table, ambled to the soda cooler and retrieved several bottles of beer. His jacket molded to his frame with the tailored elegance of an Italian designer, or a darn good copy. Somehow, it conveyed an unexpected sense of readily available money, the aura of, I hate to admit it, of a *film noir* gangster. He thumped the beer bottles, one at a time, onto the table, in front of each of his companions, and sat down without saying a word.

With an exaggerated slurp, Andrew finished the soup and smiled. He knew I hated it when he did that. But he had once read that Asians consider it a compliment to the chef or host, a noisy acknowledgment of pleasure.

Our diminutive waitress came over to our table to clear the soup bowl away. Just as she was about to retreat to the safety of the back corner table, she saw the man in black get up once more and walk toward her. She visibly flinched. She looked at me, directly into my eyes, and I saw a woman seeking another woman, needing answers or comfort or just recognition that she wasn't one of *them*.

The man in black then veered towards the cooler, retrieved more beers and distributed them as before.

The waitress quickly made eye contact with me once more, then backed away.

"Do you think he's related to the owner? A son or something?" I asked Andrew. "He takes whatever he wants."

"He probably brought the beers with him." Andrew glanced around at the grease-stained yellowing walls. "I don't see a liquor license." Andrew started to turn to look at Black Jacket.

"*No, don't!*" I hissed.

"You're being silly, Joanne," he said, but he didn't bother to disagree. Instead, he described the flirtatious teasing our waitress was enduring from the young man seated next to her, and a frivolous moment of mock swordplay-with-chopsticks between two of the boys that made their friends giggle even more.

Black Jacket picked up still more beers, and divided all of them between White Shirt and the man who sat directly opposite, a very small boyish figure, whose metal-rimmed glasses slipped down his nose whenever he knocked the ash from his cigarette toward the

floor. White Shirt guzzled two bottles in two long gulps, never taking his eyes off the eyes behind the glasses. Slamming down each empty bottle, he flailed his arms in rhythm to his loud ranting. Eyeglasses yelled back, in a tinnier voice that cut through the din, almost as counterpoint to White Shirt's booming base. The others at the table became as silent as Black Jacket had been all along.

As hungry as Andrew had been, he finally began to slow down. "I guess we'll have a good lunch tomorrow," he said, gesturing at all the Kung Pao that was still left. He waved the waitress over, to pack it up and bring the bill.

"I don't care!" It was the first English I had heard from either round table. "I don't care!" repeated several times, louder and louder, intermingled with Chinese words, and "Fuck you! Fuck you!" all coming from Eyeglasses.

"Forget about the leftovers," I pleaded with Andrew. "Just leave some money and let's get out of here." The room felt like it was about to implode around me.

"Calm down, Joanne. It has nothing to do with us. Right now, I'm going to the bathroom," Andrew said in that manner I had learned to recognize as *I'm going to do this whether you like it or not.*

"Please, hurry," I whispered, in that tone I hoped he would recognize, too, as *I'm afraid. Forget about rationality or pride. Let's go with instinct. NOW*.

He squeezed my hand, thinking he was reassuring me. I turned to watch him walk away to the far rear, past the employees' table. I saw the men's room door close and then heard the reverberating crash.

White Shirt's head was gushing blood. He staggered, stumbling against the overturned table. Black Jacket caught White Shirt, picked up a capsized chair and sat White Shirt into it. Three screaming, spitting men with clenched fists circled Eyeglasses, as he backed furtively into a corner. Two others crouched defensively on either side, ready to spring. Black Jacket kicked away a blood-stained beer bottle with a jagged base.

Everything moved so fast I couldn't see it as fully real, as anything other than an exaggerated cinematic slow motion that existed outside me, divorced from any possible reality. I ran to the back of the small room, as far from the cacophony of battle cries and as close to Andrew as I could get.

Huddled against the locked men's room door, I surveyed the restaurant. The front door was blocked by the men yelling and gesturing and jockeying for position. The kitchen was down two steps and to my left. Andrew and I could escape through there.

I pounded on the men's room door. "*Andrew!*" My tongue couldn't form words to describe what was happening. All I could do was call his name, as a mantra, a plea, "Andrew!"

Suddenly, four men rushed Eyeglasses. Each grabbing an arm or leg, they lifted him off the floor. He struggled, trying to whip his body out of their stranglehold. But they tossed him out the front door. He flew over the stoop and tumbled onto the wet pavement. Dazed, he lay on the uneven concrete, wiping rain from his face. He started to climb up the stoop, but Black Jacket stood in the doorway, watching him. Eyeglasses spat out a string of Chinese invectives. I didn't need a translator to understand his threats. Then, he staggered down the street and out of sight.

Two things happened at once. Andrew finally emerged from the men's room. And the restaurant became starkly calm and quiet.

The waiter who had seated us so long ago came over to apologize. How embarrassed he was that strangers had witnessed this violence, among and between Chinese, shaming him in his own restaurant. No, he didn't say that. All he said was "Terribly sorry. It safe now."

"Yes, of course," Andrew said, assuring the man that we didn't, for a single moment, consider him a part of all *that*.

White Shirt sat in a chair, among the jumble of fallen furniture, bowls and bottles, holding a blood-soaked towel to his head. Talons of blood streaked his skin and shirt.

"Head wounds always look much worse than they are," Andrew said to me knowingly. "Lots of blood from even small cuts."

I nodded, having taken the same first aid class he had.

Andrew insisted on paying our bill, even though the waiter tried to refuse the money. "We ate the food. We should pay for it." He picked up the paper bag of leftovers from our table, and hooked his hand on my elbow. "Let's go, Joanne," he said to me. "Let's go home."

I looked around the restaurant. Everything was in quiet turmoil. The storm had passed, but not without leaving debris in its wake. Our waitress was sweeping away the glass and food and blood that had spilled all over the floor. For a brief moment, she glanced up and I saw tears in her eyes. But then she saw me and immediately straightened her back and shoulders, shook her head to fling the tears from her face and resumed sweeping.

I let Andrew guide me toward the door, but Black Jacket stood there, blocking our way, and I froze. He locked his eyes on mine, nodded and opened the door for us.

* * *

That night, I dreamed about Black Jacket.

His eyes seared into mine, then he smirked, nodded and soundlessly opened the door. I could feel his eyes even as I walked away. In my dream, Andrew was not there.

Through the years, the dreams have returned. Why does Black Jacket keep invading my nights? Why does that one bloody evening drown out all else I have seen, so that it has become the fulcrum of my years?

I could say that brutality was nothing new to me. All my life, I have been spoon-fed violence by flickering screens large and small. But it would always be tied up neatly into stories that helped me make sense of the violence by the time the last credits rolled. No credits or explanations overlaid a final scene dissolve as we simply walked away from that restaurant and all its ugly, overpowering, non-scripted realities. No answers have come to me since then, despite the many years.

All I really know is what eight men did one summer night, a Sunday night, when most people who have jobs slow down in preparation for the week ahead. I guess I'll always think of them as something of a gang or, at least, a group of footloose men who gathered because they had no other purpose, no other reason to be anywhere on that rainy night.

And I also know of a ninth man, of Andrew. My loving husband saw nothing of that night. Not of my night. The night that changed my life. Yes, he was there, in the same restaurant, at the same table. Our chopsticks even collided in the same Kung Pao platter. But, as we looked across the table over each other's shoulders, it was almost as though we shifted into alternative universes, polar opposites of each other, as light is to dark. Our experiences of that night were so different that we were never again able to find the path back to a fully shared world. I came to realize that Andrew's back was turned, not only to the table of violence, but to me.

At least Black Jacket had known what was happening, saw what I saw.

Sometimes, I feel that Black Jacket was weighing the men at his table, just as he silently weighs me in my dreams. I know that is just my psyche using a man who has become a symbol to me. Black Jacket is certainly more than a symbol. He's a man with a name, a history and a future, an existence beyond my memories. Doubtless, he wears clothes other than a black jacket and has a life outside of a violent wet summer night in a nameless Chinese restaurant. But that reality which exists far beyond anything I can ever know doesn't keep me from trying to unravel the personal mystery I have forged around Black Jacket and the rest of the men at that table.

Having nothing better to build on, I make up stories about them. I try out different scenarios and explanations the way I have tried different hairstyles over the years. But it's much more than a hairdo, these changing tales that twist along the pathways of my personality, altering not my looks, but how I see. Andrew used to try to understand. Sometimes, I think he still does try, but I can't hear

him anymore. The din of all those flying, crashing bottles drown him out.

Black Jacket. Every story I have spun has always come back to him. If it were a movie, I would have cast him as the henchman of an east coast drug lord. Or as the devil come to earth to make mischief and mayhem. Or the once supreme gang leader just paroled from prison. Whatever his role in the movie, it would be one of power, of the puppeteer behind the curtain. The ultimate outsider, who had learned how to gather others to him, creating a cocoon of flesh for protection, to make him his own insider.

* * *

That rainy July night was years ago. When I wonder what has happened to Black Jacket since then, I have a hard time thinking of him as anything other than who he was that night. Grown older, is he a businessman, lawyer, restaurant owner, doctor, policeman, career criminal? Does he now have young sons and daughters he worries about, knowing how sudden violence can erupt anywhere, anytime? Especially around him.

And what of the other men Black Jacket had spurred on, out of boredom or anger, to entertain or enthrall? They have become blurred ghosts of an ever-changing memory, dancing on the periphery of my mind. I cannot see them as anything other than the gang or group of men or victors or instigators they were that night. They, like Black Jacket, are forever young, forever angry, and forever my own personal terror and consternation and fascination.

Of my own story since then, one that had once been so neatly tied up with sensibility and comfort, how was I changed by that one night? I cannot answer even that, because I am now who I am. I do wonder though, if I hadn't stopped Andrew from turning to look at the table of men, or if he had come out of the toilet ten seconds earlier, if somehow he had shared some of what I saw and felt, would things have been different for us? Would we still be a couple rather than two people who happen to sleep in the same bed? Would he have then been able to help me stop the constant replay of that night in my mind?

Reflections of reflections, mirroring my dreams, refracting my life back at me, distorting reality to fit with my memories. I never saw the bottle fly, but its crashing shatter echoes through the years.

END

*Please support this author by reviewing **The Broken Bottle** on your favorite book website(s), and by telling your friends about the story. Thank you.*

To read Sally Wiener Grotta's short essay about the source and germination of this story, please go to her blog post *Haunting Questions*.

MORE FICTION FROM PIXEL HALL PRESS BY SALLY WIENER GROTTA

Jo Joe (excerpt below). As a child, Judith Ormand was the only Black — and the only Jew — in a small insular Pennsylvania mountain village where she was raised by her white Christian grandparents. Now, she must reluctantly break her vow to never return to the town she learned to hate. During her one week visit, she buries and mourns her beloved grandmother, is forced to deal with the white boy who cruelly broke her heart, and is menaced by an old enemy. But with her traumatic discovery of a long buried secret, Judith finds more questions than answers about the prejudice that scarred her childhood.

The Winter Boy will be published in 2014. In a far future society, an elite group of widows (called Alleshi) maintain peace and stability by training the best and brightest boys to be leaders, using sex and storytelling. However, unknown to all but a hidden few, the peace is fracturing from pressures within and beyond. Amidst a violent political maelstrom, Rishana, a young new idealistic Allesha, takes her First Boy, Ryl, for a winter season of training, But Ryl is a "problem boy," who fights Rishana every step of the way. At the same time, Rishana accidently uncovers secrets and conspiracies that could not only destroy Ryl, but threaten to tear their entire society apart. And a winter that should have been a gentle, quiet season becomes one of conflict, anger and danger.

ABOUT SALLY WIENER GROTTA

Sally Wiener Grotta is the consummate storyteller, reflecting her deep humanism and sense of the poignancy of life. An award-winning journalist, she has authored many hundreds of articles, columns and reviews for scores of glossy magazines, newspapers and online publications. She has also co-authored numerous non-fiction books with her husband, Daniel Grotta. Her novel *Jo Joe* was recently published by Pixel Hall Press to rave reviews and has become a Jewish Book Council Network selection.

Sally Wiener Grotta is a frequent speaker at conferences and other events on the business of writing, and on the roots of (and possible solutions to) prejudice and bigotry, as well as on photography and the traditional tradespeople of her *American Hands* narrative portrait project. She welcomes invitations to talk with book clubs and

other book discussion groups (occasionally in person, more often via Skype or phone), and to do readings. You can also connect with her on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and/or Google+. View videos of her talks and various appearances on her YouTube channel.

ABOUT PIXEL HALL PRESS

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If you wish to receive information about Pixel Hall Press books and authors, as well as opportunities for free excerpts and even free books, please use the Contact Form on our Website.

In the meantime, below is an excerpt from Sally Wiener Grotta's novel *Jo Joe*.

Jo Joe (excerpt)

by Sally Wiener Grotta

CHAPTER ONE: MONDAY

"*Welcome to Black Bear, Pennsylvania.*"

The carved wooden sign is new — dark forest green with gold-leaf lettering — the best that the firehouse cake sale could buy, no doubt. But little else seems changed as I drive down Main Street. I've been gone half my lifetime, and this tiny, insular mountain village appears just as threadbare as always.

Seventeen years ago, I fled Black Bear, returning to Paris for university, vowing I'd never come back. If it hadn't been for that anonymous phone call, I never would have set foot in this village again. Does death nullify vows?

In the center of the village, at the crossroads where it had all started over a hundred and fifty years ago, are the venerable brick steepled Moravian church and the modern single story Catholic Church across the street. For a Monday afternoon, the Chug-a-Lug beer distributor is busy, with two mud-splattered pickup trucks and an old beat-up Mustang in the lot. As always, Cliff's Tru-Value's inventory spills out onto its cracked asphalt parking lot, trying to convince lake tourists and returning snowbirds to stop and buy as they zoom past, routinely breaking the 25 miles per hour speed limit. Why Cliff doesn't close on Mondays had always been a mystery to Grampa. No one does yard work or barbecues or puttering handiwork on Monday, he would say, not when they have the weekend to rest up from.

And there, next to Engelhardt's sprawling Ford dealership, the vile old school is still a blot on the landscape, boarded up and falling down. How typical.

But no, not everything is the same. Some things — and people — are irretrievably lost. Next to Engelhardt's Auto Supply and across from the old school is Grampa's drug store, now a church-run second-hand clothing shop. I wonder, what they've done with Gramp's soda fountain and snack counter. Or are neatly folded recycled baby jumpers piled on the high chrome and red leatherette stools where I used to love to twirl, while waiting for Grampa to make me a chocolate fudge nut sundae? Black Bear must have been one of the last places on earth where the local pharmacist would greet you by name and know how you liked your milkshake as well as he knew what medicines folks took, when and why. The Rite-Aid in Hamlin put an end to that about fifteen years ago, forcing Gramps out of business, but he had written me that he'd been thinking of retiring anyway. Or had he already known that he was dying and would be gone in a couple of years?

I pull into Dutch's service station, to top up the fuel tank. Ever since I first learned to drive, Gramps had drilled into me that I should never, ever let the gas get below a half tank — just in case. Not that I'd been an overly obedient teenager; I'd often drive until the car was almost empty. But I learned my lesson that horrid night after the homecoming game in my senior year, when I ran out of gas on Drumheller Lane. Fleeing for my life from that dark dirt road had been a suitably wretched finish to a miserable day that changed everything. Now, back in Black Bear, where I vowed I'd never return, I'm determined to heed whatever precautions necessary to make it

through this one week, including filling up my rental car at Dutch's before leaving town for the farm.

Just as I flip open the door to the car's gas cap, a big white man in his mid-thirties yells from the service bay, "Hey, I'll do that for you, miss!" and limps toward me as quickly as his bad right leg lets him.

I remember how Old Man Dutch used to rant at the alleged convenience store gas stations that had sprouted along the interstate. "Where the hell's the service in self-serve?" he'd ask.

But this enormous man, with his unkempt, thinning, dark blonde hair and that beer belly protruding over his low jeans, isn't Dutch. Still, this guy must agree with Dutch because after he starts pumping the gas, he actually squeegees the car's windshield and rear window. All the while, staring at me. Well, I knew that would be part of coming back. They never did get used to my dark skin around here in Wonder White Bread territory. But the way his icy blue eyes bore into me makes my skin crawl. And how his lopsided grin seems to consume his entire face — it's all too disturbing — and familiar.

Even as he replaces the pump nozzle, caps the tank and wipes a spot where the gas splashed on the side panel, he doesn't take his eyes off me. "*Jo*…?" he finally asks, then, catches himself before saying anything else. Now, those pale, searing eyes that he couldn't keep off me just a moment ago are diverted everywhere but on my face. Mostly, he focuses on the oil-splattered, cracked concrete around his feet.

Oh no! It can't be. Not this massive wreck of a man. His puffy face has that grizzled look of a man who's lived and worked hard. Wrinkles punctuate his eyes and mouth, like parentheses cut into his flesh. His nose had obviously been broken, perhaps more than once. And he's hunched over and soft, nothing like the wide-eyed, fair-headed, muscular football hero of our high school days. Once upon a time, nothing could have convinced me that a day would come when I wouldn't instantly recognize Joe Anderson, regardless of how long we'd been apart. Yet, it takes hearing his hesitant, hoarse voice, saying that damned nickname he had given me, before I can be sure it really is Joe Anderson.

Despite myself, I step back, hating that, after all these years, he can still make me flinch. "Hello, Joe," I say, determined to keep my tone even and unemotional.

He's standing so close that the smell of sweat and motor oil permeating his clothes wash over me. Stuffing his large, oil-rimmed hands into his scruffy jeans pockets, he mumbles. "Hell, you really did come back."

"Yes, well, Gramma's dead." To say it still doesn't give it any sense of reality.

"Yeah, I know."

I glance at the numbers on the pump. $37.50 for only a half-tank of regular unleaded. A family of six in the Congo could live on that for a month, if they were lucky enough to have someone earning actual cash. When I hand my credit card to Joe, he looks at it, starts to reach for it, then shakes his head. "Naw, don't bother. I own this place now."

I guess he wants to show me that he's actually made something of himself, after all. But treating me to a few gallons of fuel is a meaningless gesture that isn't worth arguing over. I simply say "Thank you," as I concentrate on putting away my wallet, though gratitude is the furthest thing from my mind. All I want is to get away from him — fast. But I have to force myself to not look in the rear view mirror, as I drive off.

Maudire! Why did I have to run into that bastard the very second I return to Black Bear? *Damn him!* Even after so many years, just seeing Joe still twists me up inside. But then, for nearly two decades, my memories of Joe Anderson have been a scarred-over thorn that jabs painfully whenever anyone else tries to get close.

#

Hungry, and doubting that there would be anything fresh to eat in the house, I stop at Buck's ShurFine. It hadn't been a franchise market seventeen years ago, and certainly not as bright and spacious. But the prices and the produce look as good as ever, even if the new building is more antiseptic and anonymous.

I should know better than to walk into a supermarket only two days out of Africa; it usually takes me at least a week to decompress and readjust to the modern world. After spending even only a short time in one of my impoverished villages, I start to see things through the eyes of the women I work with. How amazed they would be at the variety and quantity of cheap, wholesome food available to everyone, including the poorest.

Buck's is so mannerly and clean, with none of Africa's pungent smells of rotting or overripe produce, but also bland, without the gem-like, almost riotous earthy colors of clothes, food and people under the scintillating, burning African sun. Its white noise Muzak punctuated with announcements, calling for "*Clean up in aisle three*," and "*Don't miss our special on ground round, only $3.29 a pound*," is a far cry from the squeals and cackles of penned animals being bartered for the butcher's knife mixed with the ancient calls of the street sellers who don't hesitate to grab your sleeve to get you to stop and buy their wares. I had long ago learned not to wear long-sleeved light-colored shirts when shopping in an African open-air market, because they always end up grungy and grey from all the dirty hands pushing, poking and grabbing. But, even after all my years of working there, village market day still infuses me with a sense of exotic adventure, of

the possibility of discovering a hidden treasure in the next stall, or the one behind it.

Shopping in Buck's, I feel as though I've been transported overnight to a sterile, futuristic, entirely predictable world, where everything is well organized, neatly packaged and sane. I can't ignore the appeal of the safely refrigerated meat and dairy and the floral attractiveness of the cool-misted produce — with not one mosquito or fly in sight. My cart soon overflows with baby spinach, plump vine-ripened red tomatoes, fat Vidalia onions, enormous strawberries, fresh asparagus stalks, a wedge of double Gloucester cheese, fresh milk, free range eggs, multi-grain sourdough bread and other memory-laced delicacies. Even a locally baked cinnamon raisin cake. I haven't been in a first world supermarket for more than three months; strange that the first one would be Buck's.

While the store isn't crowded, no aisle is empty. As I would expect in Black Bear, not one shopper or employee is black or brown, except for one platinum blonde woman in tight red Capri pants, obviously an Outsider, who is far too thin and whose skin was tanned to a parched, wrinkled *café au lait*. Most people ignore me, concentrating more on their shopping lists, on the labels and prices of food, or on their children riding in the baskets surrounded by cartons, cans and packages. But a few stare at me, and two even nod. I don't recognize anyone, though several look vaguely familiar, as mountain folk tend to be. Perhaps, it has to do with the limited gene pool, at least among the locals as opposed to the New York commuters. No, that's unfair of me to stereotype like that. But then, this is Black Bear, and fair is not a concept that has much traction here.

In the dairy department, a chubby, twenty-something woman wearing a white cable sweater and black Levis approaches me. "You're Judith Ormand, aren't you?" she asks hesitantly. She's too young for me to have known her.

"Yes," I respond, somewhat warily.

"I knew it! I saw your picture in *The Gazette*. People talked about it for weeks, about the important work you're doing." Then, she pauses. "Hey, sorry about your grandmother."

I say, "Thank you," as I roll my cart away.

The cashier is of a type that seems frozen in time. Dry, over-processed bleached hair with visible dark roots, pendulous breasts sagging to a waist that had disappeared long ago, nicotine stains on her fissured fingers and cracked nails. She has the hardened look of a woman who has too many children and too little hope. I read the name tag under the faded artificial orchid. *Maybeth?* No, it couldn't be! This woman has to be years older than I. Still, the more I watch her ring up my overly large order, her arms moving with the speed of an automaton who has probably been performing these identical motions every day for years, the more I'm certain this is the same girl who had

been prom queen and head cheerleader. Maybeth. The most popular girl in town. Every boy's fantasy. And my personal nemesis from my first day in seventh grade until the day I graduated.

Gramma wouldn't be proud of me right now, not if she could read my mind, as I often felt she could. But seeing Maybeth the way she is now and remembering how she once was. Well… How far the mighty have fallen.

Maybeth stops briefly in the middle of scanning the bag of Granny Smith apples and stares at me. "Hey, I know you," she says, not quite belligerent, but not friendly either.

I'm not sure how to respond, and I'm relieved when my cell phone chooses that moment to ring.

"Allo!" I answer in French, as I usually do.

"Hello, Judith." I instantly recognize Nigel's voice, calling from London. "How is everything?"

"Hello," I say, quickly switching to English.

Maybeth appears to have completely forgotten about me. Her head is down, following her hands from the food on the conveyer belt, to the buttons on the register, then to the bags at her side. Such concentrated attention to details, focusing on accomplishing this one job that probably keeps her and her family going.

"Look, Judith, you don't have to go through this alone," Nigel repeats the same sentiment in different words that he said to me yesterday. "I can be on a plane to the States this evening. Let me do this for you."

I should know better by now than to get involved with an unmarried man. Not that Nigel isn't a dear person and a generous lover. But he's too readily available and wants more from me that I'm able to give. "That's sweet, Nigel, but I've far too much to do this week to pay attention to anyone else." I hand Maybeth my credit card.

"I'm not asking for attention," Nigel insists. "Quite the opposite."

"I know Nigel, and thank you." I sign the credit card screen. Then, I tuck the phone between my cheek and shoulder and start to put the bags into my shopping cart, but the damned device keeps slipping. Seeing my difficulty, Maybeth takes over loading the cart. "I'll see you in about a month," I promise Nigel. "After I get settled back in Paris."

"Promise me you'll call, if you need anything. Or just to talk."

It's a kind, guileless offer, but I'm not about to make any promises to a man, especially not to a lover. "Good bye, Nigel." He really deserves better than me.

"Goodbye, Judith. I love you."

I slip the phone into my jeans pocket. With a nod, I say "Thank you" to Maybeth.

She holds out my credit card, but doesn't quite hand it back, staring intently at the name embossed on the plastic instead. After an awkward moment, she says, "I'm right. I *do* know you. You're Martha Schmoyer's girl."

"Yes," I admit, but I really don't want to have this conversation with her.

Continuing to gawk, she smirks. "Well, I'll be… never thought I'd see you again. You actually came back. Guess folks were wrong. Welcome home, Judy."

"Judith," I correct her.

"Yeah. Sorry about your grandma."

"Thank you." I reach over and take my credit card from her unresisting hand.

The man in line behind me loudly clears his throat, reminding Maybeth to get back to work. I nod to him apologetically and wheel my cart out of Buck's, chagrined at the amount of food I've purchased, knowing what wealth and potential waste it represents. At least, none of it's rice or beans or cassava.

#

Everywhere else in the northern hemisphere, April reclaims the earth with colors and fragrances. But here in the Pennsylvanian Pocono Mountains, it's the season of mud, floods, and the usual surprise springtime snowstorms. Still, the stark, promising beauty around me is so gentle and benign compared to Africa's exotic and often dangerous extremes of scorching red dust deserts, lush steamy jungles and forever-sky savannahs.

When I turn onto Mountainview Road, each tree and bend pulls at yet another memory — of the weekend trips with Mom from Manhattan after we left Papa and Paris, the walks with Gramps when he'd try to teach me the names of the many different birds we saw and heard, Mom's funeral when Gramma had told me I would have to return to Paris, to live with Papa. But I didn't get along with Bridget and the twins and the new life Papa had made with them. So, Papa had shipped me back once more to Black Bear, to live with Gramma and Grampa and the birds whose names I never did get straight. I hadn't even had my *bat mitzvah* yet, and Papa had forsaken me to my white Moravian grandparents and their insular village of sanctimonious, so-called Christians. How homeless I felt, leaving Paris for exile in Black Bear, not really believing I belonged in either place.

I pull into the driveway, turn off the engine and drink it all in. The generations-old three-story stone house with its wrap-around wood porch, slate roof and white shuttered windows. Gramma should be standing there at the door, looking at me, wondering why I didn't get out and get moving, waiting for her hug and kiss. Over to the left, the unpainted, weather-beaten barn, that hadn't been used as a barn

since Grampa's father's time, had been Grampa's workshop and garage. I used to think he could make or fix anything. But that was before I learned how much hurt there was in a small village like Black Bear. Hurt that could break something inside a young girl that even Grampa couldn't fix.

The bare fruit trees and budding bushes seem much taller, but the evergreens surrounding the property are the same towering sentinels they had always been, enclosing and protecting me from whatever lay beyond. How strange to be here at the farm once more — the one place that I had once considered my only real home — the one place I had solemnly vowed never to return.

I get out of the car, close my eyes and take a deep breath. Yes, there in the taste of clean, crisp mountain air are the deepest and sweetest memories, the ones that no words could describe or encompass, of loving refuge in Gramma's kitchen or Grampa's workshop or my bedroom under the eaves. When I open my eyes again, however, everything is as cold and empty as before. Without the two of them, the farm is nothing more than a commodity, a piece of property, an unwanted responsibility that I need to dispose of before I can get on with my own life.

I've never understood why I've always carried the key to this house wherever I've traveled. What makes it even stranger is that I've never used it, not even when I lived here. Had this house ever been locked up before now?

Before turning the key, I gaze at the right doorpost. It's still there, the *mezuzah* Grampa installed that first day I had come here to live with them.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked him as he bent down to screw it in at just the right angle, making sure it wasn't too high for me to reach. "You're not Jewish, Grampa."

"You are, Judith," he answered in his gentle voice. "And this is your home, too."

I press my fingertips to the *mezuzah*, not so much in ritual, but more to touch something that was Grampa's and mine. When I sell this place, I'll have to take it with me, even though I have no other doorpost where it could go. The apartment in Paris is nothing more than a rest stop, an oversized *pied à terre* that Papa and I both use but never share, with him in Brussels or London or wherever his politics take him, and me running around Africa, trying to stop the hurt, one woman at a time. It's been a few years since we were last in the same city at the same time. No, this *mezuzah* doesn't belong there. Besides, the Paris apartment has its own, placed by *Grand-père* when he first purchased the building just after The War.

The farmhouse is almost completely silent, other than the usual floorboard creaks. If it weren't bereft of all who should be here and aren't, I might have considered it peaceful. I head right for the

kitchen. There, I put away the groceries, wash the fruit and vegetables, and busy myself with what needs to be done to settle in, trying not to see or feel too much. But the kitchen works its way into me despite my best efforts.

Gramma's kitchen, with its large windows overlooking her vegetable garden and the path to the barn. The old, handmade walnut cabinets are full of canned goods and the same china and glassware that we had used day in and day out. In the cupboard is what must be a five-year supply of homemade jams and preserves, though the fancy paper labels have a stranger's cursive handwriting very unlike the hurried scrawl of Gramma's usual black marker. How long was she ill? Why didn't she let me know?

I boil a couple of eggs, tear a handful of lettuce and sliced up some strawberries along with all the other fixings for my salad. Gramma stored the numerous bottles of wine I'd sent them over the years, not in the aluminum wine rack we had picked out together (which is nowhere to be found), but upright in the cabinet over the sink. I almost give up looking for the corkscrew, finally finding it buried deep in a jumbled bottom drawer among other seldom used utensils. I open a *Pinot noir*, putting a *Pouillez-Fuisse* in the fridge for later.

I take my old place at the old plank table. Perhaps, out of habit, or simply because I can't bring myself to sit in Grampa's chair at the head of the table or Gramma's next to him, nearest the sink and oven. Fingering the unfamiliar blue and white linen placemat, I look for the telltale signs of Gramma's tiny, almost even stitches. No doubt the old yellow mats had frayed with use and age. Did Gramma sew these, too, or had she purchased them at one of the church craft sales?

Never one to pray before a meal, at least not since I left Black Bear, unless it's out of respect for local customs, the *Motzi* comes to my lips, for the first time in years. Somehow, here, at the farm, it's appropriate, where at every meal Grampa would say grace in the name of Jesus and then ask me to give the Jewish blessing over our bread.

"*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Haolam, hamotzi lechem min haaretz.*" How easily the Hebrew flows, dredged up from a time when I still believed, flavoring my meal in Gramma's kitchen with a sense of the sacredness of memory and the grace of their love.

#

After supper, I retreat outside to the porch swing that Gramp's dad had built. Wrapped in one of Gramma's colorful hand-knit lap Afghans, I watch the twilight fade to a moonless darkness that soon softens as my eyes adjust to the barely visible light. The trees and barn are deep featureless shadows against the sky; only a handful of stars cut through the low clouds. Soon, the air chills, promising a typical April frost. On evenings such as this, Gramps would

sometimes come out, bringing my parka and his pipe that Gramma wouldn't let him smoke inside the house. And we'd talk, or we'd just let the quiet seep into us.

I can't recall when I last allowed myself to sit silently, with no purpose other than to be fully where I am. As much as I long fantasized about slowing down, taking time for myself, I never thought it would be here, of all places, where I had sworn I'd never return. Yet, here I am, where my body remembers the comfortable fit of the swing, the touch of the afghan's age-soft wool and the taste of the evergreen-laden air.

How bizarre life can be, turning around on itself in the blink of an eye. Thirty-six hours ago, I was in Dakar, where every breath coated my mouth, throat and lungs with cloying dust. Three days ago, I was so deep in the Senegalese interior that nothing seemed to exist other than our overworked field facilitators, the bone-weary women who are our clients, and the ossified, obstructive all-male tribal bureaucracy.

Les Femmes has proven to be a better antidote for me than years of self-absorbed introspection. After all, what are my personal problems and private demons compared to those of our impoverished clients, who struggle daily to feed their families, and whose greatest dream is that someday, somehow, they might be able to afford school fees for all their children? I can lose myself in my work in the bush; I like it that way. How much more alive — and relevant — it makes me feel than the Parisian social whirl of inane dinner parties and extravagant, profligate fund-raisers. In the primitive isolation of our village outposts, I can almost forget that the outside world exists — that Black Bear ever had any power over me, or that Paris has so little.

That is, until that anonymous phone call.

The first thing I do whenever I emerge from one of our client villages into a town or city — or, at least, somewhere I can get a phone or Internet connection — is call Catherine, my admirably efficient secretary at *Les Femmes* headquarters in Paris. Instead of rattling off the usual list of business messages, status reports, funding challenges, or requests for appointments and interviews, Catherine quickly told me about the anonymous phone call, alerting me, "*Break your promise. Return to Black Bear immediately. Your Grandmother needs you.*" The message had come through the international donations line rather than directly to our Paris headquarters, so it had probably passed through a multilingual whispering-down-the-lane, before it reached my office. Catherine couldn't even say if it had been left by a man or a woman, or precisely when. All she knew for certain was that it had been routed to her desk three weeks ago. Since then, Catherine had been prepared with a schedule of flights to the States, anticipating my immediate return to Black Bear, before I could even conceive of such a thing. I told her to book me on the first flight available out of Dakar.

Then, I called the farm, and a stranger answered, a woman named Anita, who told me that Gramma had died that morning.

Although I left Africa that afternoon, it took me two more days and a tortuous series of connecting flights before I finally landed at JFK.

I shiver. Without Gramps and my parka, it's too cold and lonely to stay out on the porch. I retreat inside, grab my suitcase and head toward the stairs and my childhood bedroom on the second floor.

#

Before going upstairs to bed, I pause to stand in the doorway to Grampa and Gramma's room, as I so often did back when the three of us still lived here. My night-adjusted eyes take everything in. The four-poster bed and highboy bureau, the windows with their heavy damask curtains drawn open, the mirrored vanity that Gramma seldom used. I say my usual "Good night," but it's a hollow gesture that I regret as soon as the words leave my lips. The room is dark and empty. More than that, it's sterile, with no life, no odors.

All my memories of Gramma and Grampa have smells. His cherry tobacco. Her rosewater and Pond's cream. And their other indefinable personal fragrances that told me they were in a room even if I didn't see them. Someone has scoured their bedroom thoroughly, erasing any hint of them. All that's left are cold artifacts and a disturbing hint of antiseptics.

Since the mid-1800s, the eldest in every generation of Schmoyers had moved into the master bedroom. It is by tradition and heritage my rightful place, as the last surviving member of the family. Not tonight. Perhaps tomorrow.

Back when I moved in with Gramma and Grampa, I could have chosen any of the empty bedrooms. Certainly, Mom's in the new wing is more spacious and convenient. Uncle Robby's has that lovely view of the small garden pond. Or, I could have settled into either of the guestrooms where Grampa's two spinster sisters had lived out their lives before I had a chance to know them. Instead, I claimed and fixed up the attic storage room in the old wing, for the romance of its isolation from the rest of the house and the way the eaves carved all those interesting angles in the ceiling — and because it would be entirely mine, not Mom's or Robby's or Grampa's sisters'.

I don't need to switch on the lights to navigate the dark narrow stairs to my small bedroom. My feet know their way, know the shape and sensation of the worn wooden planks, even the creak of the step just before the halfway landing. A creak that I now welcome, remembering how it used to alert Gramma and Grampa that I was moving about. If it were in the middle of the night, Gramps often would come out from their bedroom just below the stairs to check on

me, to make sure everything was all right. As I had grown older, I had learned to avoid that one step. But not now, I want the sound. I want Gramps to come and ask his questions that I had once thought so intrusive.

Tonight, all the creak does is remind me how quiet everything else was. Quiet and dead. Not even a dog or cat underfoot. Is it the deep shadows of the stairway that bring that memory forward? The feeling of having to watch my step wherever I went, because Rascal, my foundling kitten, used to try to keep pace with me. And Maverick, Grampa's old mongrel hunting hound, had considered it his personal duty to keep an eye on me, when he wasn't trailing Gramps. I'd come home from school, and there they'd be, side-by-side, sitting patiently on the porch, waiting for me — Rascal and Maverick. My constant companions, my two truest friends regardless of what happened in the outside world of school and village. Even when I tried to hide away in the woods, in the treehouse that Gramps had helped Joe and me build that first summer, Rascal would climb up after me, and Maverick would stand guard at the base of the tree.

Maverick died of old age the year after I had fled Black Bear. Rascal was run over by the heating oil delivery truck the following winter. Neither death felt very real to me, when Gramma wrote me about them. Whenever I pictured the farm, it was always with Gramma in the kitchen, her garden or talking with me in her bedroom, Grampa in his workshop or study or sitting with me on the porch, and Maverick and Rascal nearby, playing or sleeping on top of each other, watching me, filling empty rooms and empty days with warmth and life.

Gramma and Grampa kept other dogs and cats since then. After Grampa died, they became even more central to Gramma, filling her letters and, more recently, her emails, with their antics and personalities. The latest were Martin, Tedda and Acey. I assume that Gramma arranged for good homes for them, before she died. I certainly can't take them with me, not the way I travel.

Here I am, back at my grandparents' home, and I'm still essentially homeless, no place where I belong, nowhere I can keep a pet and look forward to it greeting me welcome whenever I return. But what was my sad fate as a child has become my choice as an adult. I prefer the constant rootless travel of my work, sometimes a different country every week, unencumbered by personal attachments, and free to achieve something meaningful.

When I get too old to travel, then I might find a place in the woods to live, tend a garden and have a dog and cat who would love me regardless of what the outside world thinks or does.

#

"Ouch!" I bang my shin on something just inside my bedroom, where there should be only empty space delineated by the old hook rug. Dropping my suitcase, I reach for the wall light switch, roll up my pants' leg and gently touch a new red welt. No real damage, though it'll probably turn into an ugly purple bruise. Much more bothersome is the malformed chair that caused it. I threw that thing away years ago. And on my bureau and book shelves, among my various school awards and family pictures, are other photos that Gramma must have retrieved from the same rubbish heap.

Sitting on my old narrow bed, I stare at the relics of my life in Black Bear, wondering what it was that made Gramma restore the room to reflect my early years here rather than how I had left it. But there he was, everywhere I looked, even in that grotesque chair we had made together in Grampa's workshop.

Joe Anderson.

It makes absolutely no sense. Gramma distrusted Joe and was clearly relieved when I decided to excise him from my life. After all her machinations to break us apart, why would she do this — find and save all the Joe-and-Judith crap that I had tossed out, and put them back in place?

First thing tomorrow, I'm going to burn that misshapen chair and those stupid photos once and for all, just as I'll have to dispose of so much in this house.

I throw my suitcase onto my old desk. Why bother unpacking? I'll live out of my suitcase here, as I often do in other transitory abodes around the world.

As exhausted and jet-lagged as I am, when I huddle under the covers, my mind refuses to close down, and I replay the stories of each of those damned photos of Joe and me, and Joe and Gramps, and Joe and Gramma and me, and Joe.

#

Joe Anderson, my knight in shining armor. That's how I thought of him from that very first day at Wallenpaupack Junior High. All the stares and taunts that had been mounting since Grampa had dropped me off that morning, erupted after school, just outside the playground where everyone waited for the buses.

Maybeth Peters and Janice Wilson and Tracy Rauff sauntered over to the high chain link fence and draped themselves on it. Mini-skirted cheerleader decorations, meant to be admired and oogled. Only thirteen years old, and those girls already knew how to use sex to attract attention and instigate trouble. Especially pert, blonde, bosomy Maybeth.

I watched them. But then, everyone in the yard had been watching them. That was the whole point and purpose of their act,

wasn't it? So why did my stare deserve that curled lip and daggered look from Maybeth?

All it took was Maybeth's sneer to ignite the boys.

Billy Thompson, Maybeth's current favorite, swaggered toward me in a slow threatening manner that made my stomach knot. "Hey, nigger," he snarled in his high-pitched voice, a lanky red-headed juggernaut. I'll never know why I didn't back away, but something rooted my feet to the asphalt. Perhaps, I was too dumbfounded or frightened to move. He stood so close to me, his scrawny freckled face only inches away from mine, I could smell the peanut butter cracker he'd just eaten. "Whatcha think you"re looking at?" he demanded.

"Yeah, nigger," George Amack was at my right shoulder. "Whatcha looking at?"

And Jason Haupt on my left.

"*Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!*" they chanted over and over again, in syncopated rhythms that sprayed my face and ears with their wet breaths.

I didn't know what to do, how to react. It was all so unreal, nothing that could ever happen to *me*. I clutched my books to my chest, clamping down on the tears that burned my throat, not letting them spill, not giving these boys and their silent cheerleaders the satisfaction of knowing how much they were hurting and frightening me.

Billy was the first to push my shoulder, with a flat-handed jab. The other two followed with progressively harder shoves and pokes. Not punches. Not yet. But enough so my center of balance tilted backward, forcing me to step away with each blow, until my back was against the chain link fence, and I could go no further.

Then Joe showed up.

Bigger in all dimensions than the largest of the boys who surrounded me, Joe didn't really have to say or do anything. Just "Hey!", which got their immediate attention. The mob of kids parted to either side of him, as he walked toward me, but they reassembled as soon as he passed, continuing to block my escape. The closer Joe approached, the smaller I felt. Small and vulnerable, knowing that this blonde giant could cream me without breaking into a sweat.

But Joe didn't lay a finger on me. Instead, he turned his back to me, blocking my view so I couldn't see the other kids' faces. And he told them, "Leave her alone now. She's okay." Then, he looked over his shoulder at me and said, "Let's go."

The Black Bear bus — number 11 — had rolled up, and Joe and I were the first to board. I sat against the window in the front row, while Joe wedged himself into the seat beside me. Everyone piled in after us, glaring at me or purposely averting their eyes as they walked past. But, because of Joe, no one dared say anything to me.

Those few horrifying moments in the school yard lasted no more than the time it took a bus to drive up the short, steep hill from Route 507 to its slot on the other side of the chain link fence. But they've echoed through the years, defining Black Bear for me. Until that day, I had thought of myself as half-American, half-French and thoroughly Jewish, with a proud, varied heritage that included African forebears. But those mean-spirited, bigoted bullies, especially Maybeth and Billy, showed me that none of that mattered in Black Bear. I looked different from everyone else and that was reason enough for them to behave like a pack of wild dogs.

I'll never know why Joe had come to my rescue that afternoon, or how it was that he went against everyone he'd grown up with to become my protector and my friend, staying by my side in school, whenever possible. Unfortunately, we didn't share many classes, so Billy, Maybeth and their gang had plenty of opportunities to bait and threaten me when they knew Joe wouldn't be anywhere near. I quickly learned to avoid certain lunchroom tables, empty corners where I could be trapped, or being found alone in the girls room.

About two months after that first playground encounter, Billy went too far. I was late for history class, and the halls were deserted. When I saw Billy leaning against the wall, I sped up, trying not to run, but needing to get past him as fast as possible. I thought I had made it free and clear, when he seized my arm with such force that my books sprayed across the floor. Twisting my hands behind me, he pushed me up against a locker, with a sickly sounding thwack. His full body pressed against me, pinning my chest and pelvis with his, crushing my hands between the metal of the locker and my body. His hate-twisted face was inches from mine, smelling of tobacco and orange juice.

"You got no respect, nigger, treating me like…*ugh*!" Billy fell backward, clutching his crotch with both hands where I had kneed him.

I ran, stopping only to scoop up my books, but not looking back until I reached the door to my classroom. I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to slow down my racing heart, hoping I could walk into the room calmly, as though nothing had happened. When I opened the door, all eyes turned to stare at me, because I was late and disrupting the class. Then, Janie Yoder yelled, "*Eeyew! She's bleeding!*" I hadn't even realized that my left hand had been cut against the locker. I tried to wipe away the blood with a Kleenex, but Mrs. Gauger insisted on sending me to the nurse, which meant navigating the empty halls again, all alone. Luckily, this time they were truly empty.

Until I walked into the infirmary that afternoon, I had seen Ms. Ellert, the school nurse, only from afar, in the hallways or on the auditorium stage during Assembly. Up close, I realized that she was a lot younger than I had thought — probably in her late twenties or early thirties. But she seemed older, softer, with a gentle roundness

that hasn't been fashionable since long before my great-grandparents were born. She was so very white — white skin, white uniform, and even a starched white nurse's cap — even her skin had a slight blue tinge, and her eyes were an almost colorless blue. Her light brown hair was pinned into an old-fashioned bun under her cap. While she cleaned and wrapped my gash with a pressure bandage to stop the bleeding, she stared at me, as though, if she looked long and hard enough, she would burn the truth out of me.

"Who did this to you?" she demanded.

I shook my head and clamped my mouth tightly shut, afraid that if I opened it, even a tiny bit, only sobs would come out. I didn't want to cry in front of this stranger.

But she wouldn't leave it alone, and kept repeating, "Who did this?"

Eventually, I mumbled, "I fell."

She arched her left eyebrow in disbelief, but gave up trying to wrangle the story out of me.

Blood seeped through the bandage regardless of how much gauze she wrapped around it, so she insisted on calling Gramma.

I waited for Gramma in the tiny infirmary, the silence as palpable as the heavy ticking of the old-fashioned wall clock. Whenever I looked up from the grey speckled linoleum floor, Ms. Ellert was staring at me, but I couldn't meet her gaze. I burned with shame, with the memory of Billy's body pressed against mine, the invasive, ruthless strength of him, making me feel so powerless, so humiliated.

Gramma stomped into the office, without knocking on the frosted glass-paned door. One glance at the bloody bandage on my hand, and she glared at Ms. Ellert. "What happened to my child?"

"Ask her," Ms. Ellert said, pointing at me.

"Well, Judith?" Gramma demanded in that tone that was more a command than a question.

"I fell and cut myself," I replied, forcing myself to look her right in the eyes when I said it.

"I'll get to the bottom of this, believe you me," Gramma said to Ms. Ellert, before rushing me off to old Doc Tallman, who closed up the gash with six stitches. I still bear that scar, a small crescent paler than the rest of my hand, a touchstone of violence permanently etched into my flesh.

What was strange was that Gramma never talked to me about the incident, never probed with her typically impossible-to-evade questions. Perhaps, she understood how mortified I was about it and, in her own stoic manner, was trying to help me forget.

Gramma kept me home the rest of the day.

Joe was at the Mountainview Road bus stop the next morning, waiting for me. "Hi Judy," he said as though it were normal

for him to be standing there. But it wasn't. His stop was nearly two miles away, at Small Brook Road.

"Hi Joe," I replied. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to make sure you're okay. How's the hand?"

I showed him the bandage and flexed my fingers. "Everything still works. No permanent damage."

Joe's face burned beet red, but he didn't say anything. What was even queerer was that when the bus came, he didn't get on it with me. Instead, he waved me goodbye, as it pulled away.

I didn't hear about the fight until later that morning. Though, given how much larger and stronger Joe was than Billy, it had to have been more a beating than a fight. The story, as I heard it, was that Billy stupidly bragged about cornering me against the locker and "feeling me up." When Joe found out later that afternoon about me being hurt, he became a raging terror, and it took several grown men to pull him off Billy. Both boys were suspended for a week for fighting on school grounds.

Joe was waiting for me at the bus stop again that afternoon. And the next morning, too. In fact, for the entire week that he was suspended, Joe was there at the bus stop every morning and afternoon. The other kids couldn't fail to understand the message he was sending them. "Hurt my girl, and I'll be here, waiting for you, too."

Joe made me feel safe. The biggest, strongest boy in school, and he was ready to go to any length to protect me. Not that I wasn't horrified by his quick brutality and afraid of the damage he was capable of inflicting. But I was naïve enough to believe that he would use it only to protect, never to harm.

I wanted to be as good a friend to Joe as he was to me. Academically, Joe couldn't afford to be suspended for an entire week; he was barely passing as it was. Not that he was dumb — far from it. He just couldn't function with the way school was structured; the logic behind test questions and homework simply didn't fit in with the way his mind worked. So, I went to all his teachers and got the assignments for the week. When he met the bus in the afternoons, we'd go back to the farm, where we did our homework together.

Gramma didn't say anything about Joe coming home with me. I think she had heard from one of her friends what Joe had done, and why, and while she didn't approve of his fighting, she seemed satisfied that I had someone to stand up for me at school.

After Joe returned to school, he continued to come back to the farm with me.

A couple of weeks after the incident with Billy, Gramma took Joe aside for a talk. When they came out of her bedroom, Joe was subdued and solemn, but Gramma was smiling like a Cheshire cat. I tried to persuade Joe to tell me what she had said to him, but

regardless of how much I wheedled and teased, he refused to answer and quickly changed the subject. All he said was, "She's something, your Gramma. One heck of a lady."

Soon, Joe was spending more time at our farm than at the weatherbeaten rented trailer he shared with his father. I didn't understand then that it was a refuge for him to be with people who liked kids, who would never think of hitting a boy, for any reason, regardless of how hard things got. He began calling me Jo, because he liked that the initials of my name — Judith Ormand — sounded the same as his name. And it felt good to have someone who had a special nickname for me, a special place for me in his life. We even had a secret name for the two of us — Jo Joe — as though it applied to a third person whom we created just by being together.

Gramma and Grampa made Joe welcome at the farm— for a while. Then we grew up, and things changed. Or maybe nothing changed. His skin remained just as white as ever, and mine just as dark. Gramma had tried to warn me, how different he was from us, how his family was not our kind of people, but I wouldn't listen to her. After all, this was Joe, my best friend, my other self. Nothing she could say would convince me that wouldn't always be true.

Of course, she was right about him and his family, about their inborn brutality and treachery. The problem was I didn't understand who my kind of people were. When I had lived with Papa and Mom, all I knew was that I was a combination of the two of them. Brown skin with a flat nose and high cheeks like him; hazel eyes and long legs like hers. In Black Bear, all everyone ever saw when they looked at me was my dark skin. Everyone except Gramma and Grampa, and, for a few years, Joe.