

Reaching

by Chris Bradley

Joan Tucker stood beside the granite-topped island of her kitchen and breathed in the thick cinnamon air. With her daughter Gail back at school, she had spent the last three days doing laundry, sweeping, dusting, and watching DVDs. Now, the kitchen was the only place Joan could think of to pass the time.

Her husband Jeff had bought three new sets of cookware when they had moved in last fall, and much of this was strewn about. Applesauce simmered on the stovetop, and pots dirtied by jam filled the sink. In the oven, a broccoli cheese quiche baked on the newly-discovered convection setting, and Joan did her best to keep an eye on it. She could never tell with quiches. Just as the twenty minutes expired on her applesauce, the oven timer sounded, and then another beep came from the corner—she had forgotten about her loaf of rye. It now puffed to fill the glass dome of the bread machine, a two-year-old and previously unused wedding present. Joan placed her wooden spoon on its crock, extinguished the stove's burner, reached back to silence the bread machine, and opened the oven to save the quiche. She almost grabbed it with her bare hands, then remembered to slip on a mitt. Once everything lay steaming on the counter, Joan leaned against the refrigerator. Several magnets fell to the floor. A whimper slipped from her mouth, and she suddenly and desperately wanted to cry. She moved to the sink and looked out the wide window above.

Through the few swirling snowflakes, scattered chunks of ice bobbed in Upper Peoria Lake a quarter-mile below the house. Often the lake would be frozen in February, but this Illinois winter had become mild. Last night's two-inch snowfall had been the first in weeks, and

every school and road remained open. A nearly physical pain had ignited in Joan's chest when the morning news revealed no closures. Last year, when she had still been teaching at Peoria Heights High, snow had stranded the Tuckers in the hills a half-dozen times, disrupting Joan's literature class and leaving Gail to sled idly. Jeff had somehow managed to time his east coast sales trips to miss most of these snow-ins. Now, when Joan had counted on these flurries to close St. Thomas Elementary and let her keep Gail home, the kitchen thermometer read a benign noon temperature of thirty-six degrees. Joan ground her teeth.

When it was above freezing, the school bus climbed their hill with ease, and Joan couldn't stop Gail from climbing aboard. Joan had asked her twice every morning if she felt too sick, but she'd shaken her head each time. Gail seemed to want to go, as thin and as pale as she was. Jeff and Dr. Benson wanted her to go, too. Ever since Gail had finished her second round of chemotherapy a month before, they had lobbied Joan to let her daughter return to the fourth grade. Gail's blood counts had bounced back, they'd said, so Gail should, too. So, although Joan could still close her thumb and middle finger around Gail's biceps, and Gail still stumbled climbing the stairs, to school she went. Jeff drove and flew around to sell computer servers, and Joan stood amid the remnants of the day's cooking projects, willing the mercury to drop.

At 2:00, the thrush on the kitchen's wall clock sang. Joan's stomach tightened—the bus driver had arrived within five minutes of the hour every day this week. She put away the final cleaned pot and strode to the entryway. She cursed the clouded glass—thousand-dollar panes, and all she could see were fat gray blurs—and opened the door.

The blue school bus sat at the curb. Children smiled along its length, craning forward or backward. The driver's seat was empty. Joan panicked until he rose at the rear of the bus, and

Gail appeared next to him in her orange winter coat. But her relief turned to dismay as her daughter descended, supported by the driver. This morning she had been smiling, and had eaten breakfast without throwing up, but now she looked pallid. She didn't acknowledge Joan, and directed her eyes to the ground. While Joan had been occupying herself in the kitchen, Gail had been struggling through the jostling halls of St. Thomas and standing at the sidelines through two recesses. The playground aide would have comforted Gail, but not like Joan could have if she had been there, or if Gail had stayed home. Joan blinked away tears. The doctor had promised that Gail was ready.

"Gail!" She ran down the front steps and wrapped her arms around her daughter. "I'm so sorry." She ran a hand through Gail's bristly hair. It was growing back faster, into a straighter and a darker brown than before. Gail's face, too, was undergoing a change. During chemo, it had been puffy from all of the steroids, but now her cheeks had become more slender, and her blue eyes seemed to protrude as the skin around them shrank back.

"I'm fine, Mom." Gail's voice seemed to come from the end of a slack tin can phone. But her eyes gazed into Joan's, and her jaw clenched. She pulled from Joan's embrace. The faces inside the bus looked on.

Joan stood and caught the stare of the bus driver. He was a young man in khakis and an argyle sweater who might have been handsome if he smiled, but whose mouth was drawn down in alignment with his mustache. He spat over his shoulder onto the front lawn. Finally he said, "I don't know what you're thinking, ma'am."

"The doctor told us..."

The driver had turned back to his bus. The children had turned from the window, likely onto new topics of conversation already, but the driver would remember Joan as he finished his route. Joan took a deep breath and guided her daughter inside.

Surely it was just a bad day. Dr. Benson, in the supreme calm of his bedside manner, had said that this would happen. Dips were natural as Gail's condition improved. But whatever the blood counts had said, Joan knew how her daughter acted when healthy. She made snow forts in the back yard with windows that showed the lake, and she used Jeff's Volvo for snowball target practice—he'd always boasted that it was indestructible, and true to his word, Gail could not dent it. When the weather cleared, Gail rollerbladed through the hills with the neighbors. Clumps of pads obscured them, but they still returned with cuts and scrapes. Never anything broken, though, which was all Joan could ask. But now, as had been Gail's routine during the past months, she settled onto the living room couch just off the kitchen. She lay on her side with her legs folded back in a vee, her aluminum throw-up bowl close at hand. A ring was bracketed to its side, and whenever it rang, Joan knew to come. Gail would remain in this spot until dinner, then climb upstairs to bed.

Joan entered the kitchen. Everything was finished and cleaned, and dinner was still four hours away. She returned to the living room and sat in the chair along the wall adjacent to Gail's couch, tapping her fingers atop its cool leather arms. Gail turned on the TV. She struck the remote against her thigh as she channel surfed.

"Gail, no TV until after dinner please."

Gail poked her tongue out, like the head of a turtle peeping from its shell. But she turned off the TV and picked up an issue of *Batgirl*.

The corner of Joan's mouth rose. Better that Gail fidget on the couch and talk back than lie still. When her lethargy first appeared last August, she wouldn't even respond with body language. Joan had ascribed it to moodiness, or fatigue from soccer, and ignored it. A week later, Jeff's mother came from Milwaukee with her giant pink suitcase when he was having back problems, and she and her cigarettes had taken over the house. She prepared special

meals for Jeff, even fluffed his pillows on the couch, and then began to worry over Gail. She asked Joan if she had taken her daughter to the doctor, and when Joan said no, Vi expounded on getting in touch with her "mother's instinct." Joan had taken no offense to Vi's doting on Jeff—he could be coddled by his mother if he wished—but Gail was Joan's responsibility. Then one day Joan drove to Chicago with a coworker, and Vi took Gail to the doctor's office. Gail was not tired—she was hurting. Joan had watched cancer grow in her child and done nothing, and she hadn't been the one to hold her daughter's hand when Gail learned she had leukemia.

Gail was healthier now, but these things could come back—relapse could have begun three weeks ago after the last blood draw. If it had, God forbid, Joan would make certain Gail saw the doctor in time.

The hood of Gail's sweatshirt was down, and Joan could just see through her fledgling hair to the scalp. "How was school?"

Gail's eyes remained on the page. "Fine."

Joan was at a loss for what to say next. Maybe she should have begun by mentioning the applesauce she had made earlier, which Gail loved, or the thawing ice on the lake. Her friend had a boat and took her water skiing when the weather was nice. After a moment, Joan asked, "Did you see Garrett?" Garrett Force had been Gail's best friend at school the previous year. Joan had come to understand their friendship not by anything concrete—Gail had never flat-out told her about it, and Garrett lived across town and hadn't often come over—but by the points of reference in Gail's stories. At recess, Gail would play kickball "on Garrett's team," or "against Garrett."

"Yeah, during lunch," Gail said, "but he was with Jake and Govy." She looked up and flared her nostrils. "He's a punk now."

Joan leaned forward and placed her chin in her palm, then thought that made her look overeager and sat back. "How come?"

"Not him, I guess, but his friends. They rub my head and call me 'Whiskers,' and he doesn't say anything." Her eyes were downcast.

Joan was relieved she had leaned back out of her daughter's sight. She had promised Jeff she would be strong and avoid crying in front of Gail, and each time she broke her word felt like failing herself, and her daughter, anew. She slowed her breathing to compose herself.

She needed an ally. Jeff helped, of course, when he was around. He made sure Gail had everything she needed, and placed all of the calls to the hospital and insurance companies—Joan had once looked at his cell phone statement, and was astonished to see it stretch for eleven pages. But at moments like this, he was of little help.

Joan had left her mother behind in Seattle when she moved to Peoria with Gail. Her mother had come for a month after Gail's diagnosis, but had declared that flight to be her last. Her arthritis had worsened in the two years Joan had been away, and she no longer traveled well. Her parting gift to Joan had been a pouch of medical marijuana, to be used should Joan ever need to "check out for a little while." It waited at the bottom of Joan's purse.

The metal loop on Gail's bowl rang, and Joan returned with a cloth and glass of water by the time the first heaves started. This bout was a quick one. Joan wiped her daughter's mouth with the warm, damp cloth. When Gail was first sick, she had resisted Joan's touch, something she probably considered babying; after a month, she began to apologize. Now she sat back and didn't fuss.

Gail lay in the crevice of the couch and pulled her wool blanket up to her neck. As she pushed the bottom out with her feet, she resembled a plaid sarcophagus. Then she bent her knees and propped her comic book against them.

"Mom, how fast does hair grow back?" Her voice trembled slightly over the last few words.

Joan managed a small smile. Gail's hair did seem to be coming on stronger lately. "As quick as lightning, honey. Why?" She peered at Gail's comic book and saw an illustration of an old bald man. "Who's that?"

Gail tilted the comic for Joan to see. "Doctor Death."

Joan shuddered and looked away. The sarcophagus flashed to her mind, and her eyes verged on tears: her daughter, spending the afternoon with Doctor Death. Gail usually read *Archie* or *Alf*. Joan snatched the comic.

Gail's bottom lip quivered. "Mom!" When she sat up, several other comic books slid to the carpet. On the cover of one was a busty, silver-haired woman.

Undoubtedly Jeff had been Gail's source. How had Joan failed to notice these comics before? She inhaled deeply, and held her breath; if she let it out, she couldn't be responsible for her words. Jeff's role was to work and support the family every way he could, and Joan's was to stay home and care for Gail. She had given up her job to do so, with no guarantee of getting it back. And now Jeff undermined her even while absent.

The issue Joan held was open to a full-page frame of some futuristic scene. Batman and Batgirl wore black batsuits and gas masks to fend off a swirling green poison. Doctor Death, his head disembodied and looming above, was covered in wrinkles and seemed to have no teeth; his mask resembled a respirator. Gail had already faced a death more real.

But Jeff shouldn't have brought death under this roof, whatever its form, not when Gail still spent her afternoons on the couch, and when Joan was still afraid to leave the house in case something happened and the school called.

An acrid smell pressed upon her, and Joan realized she was still holding the throw-up

bowl. She tossed the Batgirl comic on the couch beside Gail, who glared at Joan with the exasperation only a mother could provoke, and took the bowl to the bathroom to clean it for the next time.

Jeff came in the door at seven, just as the hour hand reached the nightingale. Joan was at the island slicing vegetables for a salad, and Gail had already gone up to her room to rest. Jeff's dress shoes clumped along the hardwood floor as he walked toward the kitchen. Joan turned to kiss him hello, and asked about his day.

Jeff sighed and stretched his arms up and out. "I sold the Limeys all they needed, and then some."

Joan laughed. Jeff had called his customers Limeys ever since a sales trip to the UK a year and a half back. He hung his overcoat and hat on the tall back of a chair at the table, then emptied each pocket of his slacks and blazer into the wicker basket on the counter. He had just turned forty, two years younger than Joan, but his custom suit and graying hair attested to the hard-won successes he'd already achieved. Joan knew only that his job had something to do with mainframe computers, but it had struck her as glamorous ever since she had first seen him on a sales call at her bank in Seattle.

He had sat at the manager's desk and given his pitch in a black pinstriped suit and matching fur felt Homburg. Joan hadn't thought businessmen still wore hats. As he left, he had approached her in line, doffed his hat, and asked for her number. She flushed and fumbled for a pen, then wrote her name and number on a receipt and dropped it in his hat. He replaced his Homburg with the receipt still inside, smiled, and exited without looking back. Jeff was only in town for three days before returning to Illinois, but they met for dinner twice. They saw each other at wide intervals during the months to come, but Jeff called from every city, and

after a year Joan decided she and her daughter ought to move to Peoria. Gail had lacked a father figure since her dad—never Joan's husband—had left before Gail was born.

Joan pulled a tuna casserole from the oven. Her quiche from earlier had come out soggy, and Gail had requested the casserole. Joan had used so much extra tuna, Gail probably could smell it from her room. Every night this week she had gone upstairs before Jeff came home. Joan encouraged her to wait for him. He hardly saw Gail, since he left for work so early in the morning and remained at the office all day, and in a week he would leave on his next trip east. His itinerary included Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston, and he had an open-ended return ticket. But Joan also felt more comfortable with Gail at the dinner table. Nothing of note happened at home, especially with her daughter gone. She couldn't very well drag Gail down for the sake of conversation, however, so Joan would bring her a plate of food when she and Jeff sat down to eat. In this way, the family would eat together.

Jeff came up behind Joan and slipped a cold hand under her sweater to massage her back. Joan shivered. "Smells good," he said.

He was lying. When she had taken Jeff to Pike Place Market on their first date, he had admitted his dislike of the smell of fish. "There's nothing like that in the Midwest," he had said. "I was twenty-eight when I first saw the ocean, and my first thought was I'd stepped into one grand portable toilet."

But Jeff knew tuna was Gail's favorite meal.

"How is she?" he asked.

Joan turned. His light blue eyes glinted under the island's light, and he looked hale. He traveled to other cities with winter sunshine while Joan and Gail remained in Peoria. "Fine, upstairs sleeping," Joan said. She lifted her chin to kiss him. His face was still smooth from his morning shave.

They sat at the table and scooped casserole onto their plates. Joan watched in wonder as Jeff loaded his.

"Hungry?" she asked.

He patted his stomach. "Absolutely. Long day at work."

"But you don't like tuna."

"And yet you keep making it." He smiled. "You're right. It is pretty bad. I guess I'm just in a good mood—with Gail doing so well."

Joan wondered whether she ought to begin with school or the comics. "I don't know if Gail should be back in school yet," she said.

Jeff stabbed at a hunk of tuna, then looked out the window. The glow from the kitchen showed no snow falling, and the thawing lake had disappeared in the darkness. Jeff bit into the tuna, chewed it slowly. "I thought we'd finished that discussion. The doc said she was ready. Besides, she's made it through her first few days okay."

"This afternoon Gail couldn't even make it off the bus. The driver had to help her. I felt like a horrible mother." Joan flushed as she remembered the driver spitting onto their lawn. Perhaps he was now relating the incident to his wife or girlfriend.

"She's bound to have her good days and bad days. As long as her counts are good, her doctor said it's important that we let her work through—"

"And she can—at home. That's why I'm here, remember?"

"You can't expect her to stay home forever."

"Have you felt her body recently? There's nothing there." The fork in her hand trembled against her plate.

"That's why Dr. Benson thinks—"

"Fuck Dr. Benson—what do *you* think?" She edged to the front of her chair.

Jeff rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, then looked back at Joan. His eyes had reddened. "I think Gail's going to be okay. But we'll go see Dr. Benson on Monday. Can this wait till Monday?"

Part of Joan wanted to take Gail for a blood test right now. But she needed to believe Jeff, to trust that the concern on his face matched her own. Joan sat back in her chair and nodded. It was Thursday. Gail could get through one more day of school.

Jeff's hand reached across the table. Joan clasped it for a moment, then stood and went to the stove. "I forgot Gail's casserole."

Joan came downstairs in her sweats the next morning at six-thirty. Jeff had risen an hour before, and read *The Peoria Journal Star* at the counter. He took a final bite of oatmeal, then set the bowl in the sink to soak.

He turned. "All righty, I'm off."

"To sell the Limeys all they need?"

"You bet." He filled his coat from the counter basket. "What's your plan?"

Joan put her hands in her pockets and shrugged. "I don't have one."

"What do you do all day?"

"Chores. Cooking, cleaning."

Jeff wagged his Cross pen at her. "My dear, I think you need a hobby."

"You don't have any hobbies."

"I don't have time for any."

"Neither did I, when Gail was here." Joan pulled a chair from the table and sat. The kitchen thermometer read thirty-four degrees, and the horizon was tinted orange. Somewhere across town, the school bus was gassing up.

"Maybe you'd like some company? I could have Mom fly over."

"I don't need another set of hands around."

"Just for company."

"I'm doing fine, Jeff."

"Okay." He put on his hat. "Make sure Gail goes to school, all right? Unless she throws up."

"What if she doesn't look good—"

"She *wants* to go, Joan. You'll see." He kissed her goodbye, and left.

The kitchen thermometer read thirty-four degrees, and sun would soon shine through the windows. Joan selected a few DVDs from the living room shelf, in case Gail didn't want to go to school; if she did, Joan would find something new to bake and sit through *Love Actually* one more time.

A half-hour later, as Joan read the paper, she saw Gail out of the corner of her eye and called to her. Gail froze on the cusp of the entryway, her face obscured by the hood of her puffy coat. "I was thinking I'd just drive you to school today."

Gail was silent for several seconds. "How come?" She turned to face Joan, her hood shadowing her thin cheeks. "I like riding the bus with everyone else."

"Because I have an appointment in the area," Joan lied. The prospect of a sunny morning drive cheered her.

"Are you going to pick me up, too?"

"Sure." Joan knelt to snap Gail's coat. Her daughter's face seemed to have more color this morning. "Maybe we can go get ice cream."

Gail's eyes narrowed slightly. "Isn't it too cold for that?"

"What would you rather have?"

"Hot dogs."

"All right then. We'll have hot dogs."

Gail hoisted her backpack higher, and Joan noticed the flap hanging open. "Hold on." As she zipped it closed, she saw copies of *Batgirl* and *Alf*. "Going to do a little extra reading?"

Gail turned and swung her backpack out of Joan's reach. "I'm bringing them to show Garrett. He likes Batman. Please don't take them."

"I won't. But don't read them during class, or your teacher will."

Joan played the greatest hits of Chicago during the fifteen-minute drive to school. Gail stayed silent, though the CD was her favorite. She used to love to hear her voice. Before chemo, she would sing along to "25 or 6 to 4" every time. Just last spring, too, in what Gail called her "twinkling moment," she had played Constanze Mozart in her class's production of *Of Mice and Mozart*. But now the most noise she made was with her bowl's clanging ring.

St. Thomas Elementary was a two-story cement building surrounded by tall rows of poplars. The building had initially been designed as a minimum-security prison, until the city changed course at the last minute. When she'd attended a parent-teacher conference the year before, Joan had seen holes in the window sills designed for metal bars.

She kissed her daughter, and barely resisted holding onto Gail's book bag as she clambered out. Joan slumped as she watched Gail disappear into the school. She could hardly distinguish Gail's reedy body beneath her baggy jeans and coat. Joan pictured her daughter inside the building, fighting through the hallway in search of the cell block that held her homeroom class. Would she still sit in the front row, as her past teachers said she'd always done, and be the first to answer every question? Or would she fade into the back, noiseless?

Joan turned into the residential neighborhood behind the school, wondering how she would manage to wait for the bird clock at home to announce 2:00. She hadn't the patience for

a movie, and she'd run out of projects. She stopped the car on a deserted street she didn't recognize. It had the same tall poplars, but more tightly packed; their branches rose higher, reaching into the blue sky. The sidewalks undulated, bent and cracked by the trees' stretching, thirsty roots.

Joan rolled down the window and felt the nip of the cold air. She reclined her seat, and her hand went into her purse. Maybe Gail would draw Garrett's interest with the Batgirl comic. They could laugh at Doctor Death together, and the walls between them, whatever kind they were, would fall away. They could play on the same kickball team again, maybe not today, or next week, but soon. Joan could suggest that Gail invite Garrett over for snacks after school. She could spend the whole day making them. She'd have to.

She extracted the nylon pouch her mother had given her. Inside the Navajo-patterned bag was a quarter-ounce of marijuana. Joan rolled a joint, took a long hit, and sank deeper into the leather upholstery. She brought the joint to her lips two more times, three, four, then flicked it out the window. She turned off her cell phone, and its thump on the floor mat was the last thing she heard before she fell asleep.

Gail's brown hair is long again—See, honey, quick as lightning!—down beyond her knees now. Tie it up, Gail, don't let it touch the floor—but Gail doesn't listen, smiling and sitting with Garret in a tree house, thirty years old and picnicking with their two redheaded children. The planks of the treehouse extend across the window as Joan watches from below, and all she can see is Gail's lustrous hair, still growing, pushing through the gaps—she reaches for it as it snakes to the ground, grasps it. Heaping tufts of hair come loose and turn gray and rough. She looks up, finds the window open again, and watches every last strand pull free from Gail's head. A faint green fog issues from the treehouse, Gail's silhouette sinks from

sight, and Joan hears a distant metal rattle. She sits on the ground and cries into her daughter's hair.

Joan woke to a horn blaring. She studied her empty arms, not sure what she sought. Tears dripped down her cheeks and cooled in the wind. Another honk came, and a rusted yellow van sped by. Joan turned. The back of her car stuck several feet into the street.

Joan could barely start the car with her chilled fingers, but cranked the cold air for a minute to rouse herself and ventilate the interior. She had been asleep for an hour. She raised her face to the rearview mirror. The red lines in her eyes were so numerous that the whites appeared shaded in. She hadn't smoked pot in fifteen years. She tucked her hair behind her ears, then quickly brought her hand down. She was relieved to see it held no hair.

Joan pulled the car away, and after two turns found a street she recognized. Maybe she would spend some time in the backyard shed and inventory her gardening supplies. She had promised to let Gail help with the planters when the weather warmed. Gail had requested butternut squash.

As she passed the school she saw a bright figure slip into the bushes to her right. Joan eased the accelerator as her mind processed what she had seen, then she slammed on the brakes and got out of the car.

Gail's orange coat blazed amid the patchy brown hedge. Joan called her daughter's name. The coat remained motionless. "Gail!" Joan's muscles tensed.

She reached in the hedge and grasped a handful of orange. As she pulled, the nylon slipped through her fingers and Gail tumbled onto the sidewalk. She knelt and sat her daughter up. Joan's breath came in heaves. "Are you okay?"

Gail trembled and looked everywhere but at Joan. Her hood was down, and bits of the

hedge stuck to her hair. Her hair had been so much longer in Joan's dream—until it fell out.

"What do you think you're doing?" Joan's breath fogged in the crisp air, but her skin was hot along the length of her body. "Why aren't you in school?"

Gail cried in halting sobs. Joan moved her hands up to Gail's short, coarse hair, then stroked her daughter's face. Her lips close to Gail's ear, she said, "My job is to take care of you, honey. I can't do that if you run away."

"Garrett was calling me 'Frail Gail,' " Gail said. "When I tried to show him the comics. I just want to go home."

Joan helped her daughter to her feet, and hugged Gail to her middle. "Yes. I'll take you home."

When Jeff came home, the nightingale's call had just trailed away. Joan lay on the couch alongside a sleeping Gail, reading through a stack of her daughter's comics. A nearly full moon had risen beyond the living room window. The lake reflected its white glow.

Joan heard the clinking of Jeff's keys as he placed them on the counter, and she imagined his frown as he looked at the empty dinner table. Joan and Gail had eaten three hours earlier.

Joan had wanted to somehow salvage the day, so she had opened the pantry and told Gail to point to whatever she wanted. Gail sat on the kitchen's island, her chin on her palms, and considered the shelves for a minute or two. "Rice-a-Roni," Gail whispered. Joan selected it. "Macaroni and cheese," a bit louder. Joan pulled it down. "Brownies." Gail's eyes widened as Joan grabbed the box.

"How's Gail?" Jeff asked.

Joan turned. Jeff stood against the island, his Homburg tipped down over his forehead

and his arms crossed. His shoulders seemed more slumped than usual. Joan arched her eyebrows and affected a smile. "She made it through the week. She's been out off and on for a few hours." She had come to see this morning as a private moment of understanding between mother and daughter. Some burdens she needed to bear alone.

"Listen—" Jeff leaned forward to remove his suit coat.

Joan tensed.

"I got a call from Gail's teacher earlier."

Joan shifted her daughter off her chest, and Gail looked up with half-open eyes. Joan sat up to face her husband. "Yeah, Gail had some trouble this morning."

"'Trouble'?" He folded his coat in half and laid it on the kitchen table. "Her teacher said she was missing, so I tried to call you, but your phone was off. I had left the office and was about to call the police when the principal called and said you had found her."

Gail sat up now, too. She stretched her arms and looked from Jeff to Joan.

"Yes," Joan said. "I called the school to let them know she was safe."

"I suppose it would have been too much to ask for you to call me, too?" Jeff swept his arms wide, palms upturned, but kept his voice level.

"I had Gail to deal with!" She hugged her daughter to her chest. Gail reached for her hand, and they interlocked their fingers.

"Your hands are full. I get that." Jeff emptied his pockets in the wicker basket. "That's why Mom's flying in from Madison on Sunday night. She'll stay until you—until we can get a handle on things."

Immediately Joan smelled cigarette smoke. "What's she going to do? She's in worse shape than Gail—"

Jeff slowly shook his head, and Joan felt Gail's eyes on her. Gail squeezed her hand

tight.

"I'm going to be okay now, right Mom?" Her eyes were dry, but wide and bright as the moon behind her.

"Of course you are." She stroked Gail's hair. It seemed slightly longer and softer than she remembered. Or maybe she only imagined it.

Gail leaned into Joan's chest, and Joan dropped her hand to her daughter's back. "I don't mind Grandma coming," Gail said. "We had fun playing games when she was here before, when Dad was hurt."

"Joan?" Jeff said from the island. He removed his hat and cradled the crown in his hand. "What do you think?"

Vi would arrive Sunday night toting her pink suitcase and handbag full of Virginia Slims, grinning and showing off her yellowed teeth. She would sit next to Gail in the backseat of the car on the way back from the airport, and they would share stories and make plans for the coming week, or weeks. Vi would take Gail shopping, and maybe drive her into Chicago. They would stop first at North Clark Street for the caramel corn at "Nuts on Clark"—where Joan had twice taken Gail since moving here—and then maybe go ice skating, if Gail felt up to it. Vi would watch from outside the rink, leaning on the railing and eating caramel corn, cheering on Gail every time she skated by. Gail would smile widely, and the hair on her head would be just an eighth-inch longer than it was now. Joan would be at home. She would dust a few things after Jeff left for work, try her hand at another quiche, and then stand over the sink to watch the shifting waters of Upper Peoria Lake. The ice would be melted. Before too long, it would be warm enough to water ski and plant the garden. Joan would then remember that she needed to get seeds at the store for Gail's butternut squash. Hours later, Gail and Vi would return to find her there by the sink, and her daughter would still have the same wide smile.

Gail wrapped her arms tighter around Joan's middle, and breathed in deeply. When the exhale came, Joan felt its strength against her chest.

"We'll need to ready the guest room, then."