

Fiction by Joanna Scott

That place

At first the doctor assured Nora that her mother's complaints – nausea, mouth ulcers, headaches, dizziness – were the inevitable response to the regimen of chemo. But then Bev developed a low-grade fever, indicating the presence of an infection and earning the patient a prescription for erythromycin. Twelve hours later the fever had climbed to 101. By the next day her lips had swelled and turned the pale, pinkish hue of the underside of her tongue. The doctor changed the antibiotic and prescribed a course of antihistamines to relieve the symptoms of the allergic reaction as well as reduce the stiffness in her neck. The next morning, she sat propped up in bed, a coffee mug tucked in the crumpled sheet between her thighs. She felt improved enough to request a breakfast of scrambled eggs.

Returning to Bev's bedside with the plate of eggs in hand, Nora thought that

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her mother's surgical incision across her lower abdomen had begun to bleed. The stain on the sheet, though, didn't have the tint of fresh blood. The stain, Nora realized after a moment, was coffee, which led her to the temporary conclusion that her mother had fallen asleep and the mug had overturned. But the way her mother's head, tilted back against the pillow, moved in a rhythmic twitch indicated either that her sleep was troubled or she was having difficulty breathing. Nora tried nudging her awake. Bev kept twitching. The cracks between her eyelids showed only white.

The seizure lasted less than five minutes, but by then the ambulance was already en route, and Nora agreed to let the medics transport her groggy mother to the hospital. After a wait that extended into the early afternoon, the emergency department physician diagnosed a brain abscess. An anticonvulsant was given to prevent repeated seizures – this, a nurse explained, would act as a sedative, so Nora shouldn't be surprised if her mother remained difficult to rouse for another day or two. By 10 P.M., Bev was resting comfortably, and Nora's husband, Adam, who had driven up to Massachusetts from Philadelphia, took Nora back to her mother's house.

A call from the neurologist early the next morning brought Nora and Adam

back to the hospital. A corticosteroid, administered intravenously to control the swelling in the brain, failed to have the desired effect. The neurologist needed consent to drain the pus, which involved drilling a small hole through Bev's skull. This, or Nora's mother could suffer permanent brain damage.

The procedure took less than half an hour, though Nora imagined that she would have to wait for time to move in reverse before she saw her mother again. While she sat with Adam in the lobby outside of surgery she heard a buzzing sound – the sound, she was convinced, of a hand-held drill grinding through bone. She touched her husband's arm to draw his eyes away from the soccer game on television and told him she was going to be sick. He grabbed a plastic wastebasket and held it in front of her. It was empty, except for a piece of white gum stuck to the black disc at the bottom.

Nothing more than old peppermint gum. Shimmer of a fluorescent light overhead. Colors flickering on the TV. On again, off again. Who's winning? Everything conspiring to remind her of the contest between life and death.

"Do you still feel sick?"

"I'm fine. Thanks."

She leaned back into the curve of his arm and took in the action on the screen, the players' leaping jubilation, a World Cup game, U.S. leading Spain 1 – 0. And then the long exhalation in the aftermath. Bev Knox, formerly Bev Owen, born Beverly Diamond, topped with a turbaned bandage, scrubbed and ruddy and looking younger than she had in years, was wheeled into a private room in the critical care unit.

"Bev? Bev, it's me, Nora." The stupid human need to be oneself. And even stupider – "How are you doing?" As if she expected her mother to lift up on her elbows and say through the airway, I'm fine, dear. And you?

"She looks good, doesn't she?"

"She looks peaceful."

"She looks like photographs of herself when she was in her thirties. Bev? I wonder if she can hear us. Bev? Can you wiggle your finger for me? This finger here, on your right hand. This one. Can you lift it?"

Between the shush-shushing of the ventilator, the heartbeat graph on the monitor, and the flat gray sky outside the window, the room had a contagious serenity. Adam and Nora stayed with Bev through much of the afternoon, passing sections of the newspaper between them. They spoke in whispers. Adam stared out the window for a long while. When he turned back he seemed to be trying to hide his confusion, as though he didn't want to admit that he didn't understand how he'd come to be here.

"We're not doing much good," he finally said, stretching out his arms. "Why don't we go back to the house?"

"You go on. I'll stick around for a while."

But she needed to eat, Adam pointed out. She said she wasn't hungry. She needed rest, he insisted. She said she'd stretch out on the cushioned alcove bench. She'd stay as long as hospital rules allowed, and then she'd take a taxi and join Adam at Bev's.

"Look," she murmured with her eyes closed. "I'm already asleep." He kissed her on the forehead beneath the peppered arc of her bangs.

She must have some idea that she's not lying in her own bed in her own home. Not working in her garden. Not dancing with Gus. Bev can't have forgotten that Gus is dead. His final whisper of a groan. Who could forget? The man whom others described to her as a shrink with a passion for tofu. His shroud of gray curls. Straw sandals. Remember the evening of his first visit to the Ridgefield

house, Gus chasing a bat around the kitchen with a broom? He finally managed to trap it beneath an overturned pot, and they all relaxed with tall glasses of lemonade and then watched in amazement as the bat flattened itself into a puddle and seeped from under the rim of the pot, unfolded its wings, and flew across the room and out the open door.

Or the time she was pregnant with Nora, and she and Lou stayed in a cheap motel in the Berkshires. Animals crackling through the dry groundcover outside their open window all night. And then when Lou was getting dressed the next morning he discovered a chipmunk asleep inside his boot. Bev, come see!

Lou's ambition to follow the example of the Raytheon executive who at the age of fifty quit his job and took his family to live among the Bushmen in the Kalahari. Bev, out of necessity, adept at pretending that anything is possible.

Making puppets out of rosehips. Making whistles out of acorn shells.

Benny Goodman's thin lips and rimless glasses. Goodnight, my love.

Listening to a bird in the garden while she waited for Nora to bring her breakfast. Chickadee-dee-dee-dee-dee.

It felt good to give into fatigue. But when Nora found herself awake later in the evening, she wasn't certain she'd actually been asleep. How much time had passed since Adam had left the hospital? Since her mother had gone into surgery? Since her mother had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer? Since Nora's birth?

The strange fact of passing time. Acceptance had felt like defeat when she was a young girl and her mother finally convinced her that the Earth was turning beneath her feet. Even now, what she knew to be the truth seemed the opposite of such dependable impressions as these: the day's filmy residue on her

teeth, the steady breathing of the ventilator, the bulge of her mother's eyeballs under the thin skin of her lids, the figure of a man in the doorway, backlit by the recessed ceiling lights.

"Nora, honey..."

It was her father's voice, all right, and her father's bald, freckled head and full beard. Nora half-rose, then settled back onto the bench.

"Lou! You startled me."

"Didn't Adam tell you I was coming?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see your mother."

Why? she wanted to ask – a purely spiteful question that would have put him on the defensive. Instead, she remained silent while he stepped into the room. He stepped forward again with a jerk, as though pushing through an invisible barrier, and stood beside Bev's bed.

Watching him graze his ex-wife's hand with his forefinger and then lift it, tubes and all, to his lips, Nora didn't know whether to feel embarrassed, offended, or impressed. She couldn't muster pity; she couldn't tell whether the gesture was purely for show – an old gentleman's debonair display of affection. A display for whose benefit? Nora suspected that Lou would have done the same whether or not he'd had his daughter for an audience. He even seemed mildly taken aback either by his own impulsive action or by the taste of Bev's skin. Beverly Knox, formerly Owen. This wife Lou had left thirty years ago for another woman and who wouldn't take him back when he came begging.

Lou gently lay Bev's hand back on the mattress and bowed his head with a solemnity that Nora thought both tender and portentous.

"Were you planning to stay with us at Bev's house?" she asked.

"Is that all right?"

"I guess so."

"I appreciate it."

Nora was used to Lou's habit of visiting without invitation. He moved around so frequently he used a PO box for his home address. But she was surprised by how old he looked. She'd seen him last . . . when? Summer a year ago, and he'd been fit enough to dive naked from the dock of the lake house. Shedding his jeans right there in front of his daughter and son-in-law, he'd squeezed together those skinny buttocks of his, pushed off his toes, and with a yelp dove into the water that by then, mid-August, was topped with a thick scum of algae. Right through the green bloom went Lou, and he didn't surface again for so long that Nora had risen to her feet in panic and was about to dive in after him when he finally did bob up ten yards away, on the other side of the dock.

Rising again from the murky depths in Bev's hospital room after an absence of eleven months.

"How is Brunswick?" she asked him.

"I moved down to Harpswell for the summer. How is your mother?"

"For a woman with a hole in her head, she's managing."

"What in heaven's name have you let them do to her?"

His expression of indignation was typical. He had a deft way of implying that Nora only ever made the wrong decision. She'd gone to the wrong college, shackled up with the wrong man, and had denied herself the pleasure of having a child of her own. She'd never be more than what she was: an assistant superintendent in a pint-sized suburban school district. She'd never know better than to give consent to a surgeon who wanted to drill a hole through her mother's skull. She was her father's daughter, condemned to repeat his mistakes in judgment, and like Lou, she'd have to wait until old age to recognize that she'd caused more trouble than she was worth.

Nora explained to her father the reasons for the surgery. Lou wanted to know if she'd gotten a second opinion. Yes, she lied. She'd gotten a second and a third opinion, and all the doctors had said the same: surgery or brain damage. Which would you choose, Lou?

Surgery or brain damage? "What about surgery *and* brain damage? What's the point of that?"

As predictable as Lou was in his disapproval, Nora couldn't be sure how best to respond. It always took some time to size him up after a long absence. *Youthful* was the word others used to describe him even into his seventies. The better word, Nora thought, was *incomplete*. Whoever her father had been the last time she'd seen him, he'd be more stubborn, more resigned in his misgivings about his past actions, and more blatantly contradictory when she saw him again.

More Lou than Lou. A man who couldn't see the point of putting a hole in an old woman's head.

Nora might have folded her arms and scowled. Or she might have given Lou a detailed description of traumatized brain tissue. Instead, she decided to challenge him: "What's the point of life?" she asked with a twitch of a grin.

The point of life? he echoed, unexpectedly deflated. Life as he lived it before his split with Bev or after? How about both? Nora had heard him talk on many occasions about his regret. She knew what he would say – how he'd never gotten over Bev and had spent the last three decades longing for reconciliation. What unnerved Nora now was that he was saying it in Bev's presence.

Louis Owen was an old man, and he had come to make a full disclosure. Time was running out. Nora already knew what had happened to her father after Bev refused to take him back. He'd told her the story plenty of times. And now

he wanted to tell the same story over again, for Bev's sake.

He sat on the lower corner of Bev's bed near where the catheter emerged from under the sheet, and he lifted a cigarette out of the pack in his shirt pocket. Nora reminded him that smoking was prohibited in the hospital. He left the cigarette dangling unlit from the corner of his mouth and looked at his daughter with a raised-brow expression clearly intended to challenge her to pay careful attention.

Or the time Bev called Nora into the kitchen to examine a germinating bean. Forget the television show, for god's sake, and come see this. The seed coat disintegrating. The withered cotyledon. Trying to explain the paradox of loss and gain, all that we have to give up in order to move forward, arriving in this place. What place? And who asked Lou to come along?

Deep in thought, running her fingers over the velvety purple sepal of a larkspur. Doesn't that feel nice? Clouds gathering for a late afternoon thunderstorm. Her garden. Her house. 7 Fairport Lane. Built in 1890, the floorboards warped, the chimney crumbling where the vines have grown into the mortar. The place Gus and Bev went to live out their last years together. Sweet Gus. Plucking dead blossoms off a rhododendron. The perfume of lily of the valley hanging in the humid air. The wind picking up. Silver shine of the poplar leaves.

On that terrible night ending with Bev's assurance that she would never again speak his name aloud, Louis Owen drove north. It was summer, between semesters, and he would miss nothing more than a couple of conferences with inconsequential panels about theoretical rubrics and anthropology's hidden bias.

Talk, talk, talk. Lou had always been too eccentric, as he liked to think of himself, or too lazy, as others thought, to have anything productive to say about theory, and he'd lost interest in the social element of the conferences. He'd met the woman for whom he'd left his wife at one of those conferences; he wasn't in the mood to meet another woman right then.

He'd intended to keep driving up through Canada into the wilderness of the Northwest Territories, but his car broke down in Niagara just before he'd cleared the border. So he booked himself the cheapest room he could find in a motel across from a Nabisco factory. How many times had he told Nora about this motel? Seventy dollars a week, morning coffee included, the smell of burnt sugar clinging to the sheets and towels.

Finishing this first part of the account, he paused and through his unlit cigarette drew in a long breath that was synchronized with Bev's respirator.

"So you hung out in Niagara Falls for a while."

"Feeling sorry for myself, I admit. Having lost the love of a good woman, I'd lost my future."

You and your sentimental clichés, she wanted to say. Instead – "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know how many people throw themselves over the Falls each year? You don't want to know. Every morning I'd walk from my motel room to the park and spend the day there. What a wreck I was, destined for the junkyard. And yet somehow I found ways to make myself useful – snapping photographs for tourists, pointing them in the right direction. I got friendly with the grounds staff and when one of the guys quit I was offered his job. Did you know that your dad had a job picking up trash?"

"You've always kept yourself busy."

That place

“Collecting soda cans and hot dog wraps, newspaper, old socks, and lost hats. I wish you could have seen me.”

“I can imagine.”

“I was missing you like crazy, Nora. Believe me, I never wanted to stop being your father. You know, I wrote to you. More than once.” *How come you never answered me?* he would say next. “How come you never – forget it.” He gave a dull shrug. “Your mother forwarded the bills. Of course she did. I’m not complaining. And wouldn’t you know, she sent along the certificate confirming our plots at White Oak Cemetery.”

“Where?”

“Crazy business, eh? We bought our little patch of land on sale. And she’d sent a copy of the certificate to remind me of our commitment.”

“Where did you say?”

At first he’d thought it was a nasty joke designed to remind him that his life would add up to no more than dates carved in stone. But the more he’d thought about it, the more he’d studied the paper and traced his fingers across the numbers, the more he’d been comforted by the idea. He and Bev would be together in the end.

Where?

She’d heard correctly. *Cemetery*, he’d said. And *White Oak*. It had to be White Oak. He’d never mentioned this before, and neither had Bev. They had purchased plots there. That place. The same place. Crazy business.

“A pact made long ago,” he said, his irony tinged with pride, though he admitted it must be disturbing for Nora to imagine her parents together in the end, given their years of estrangement, planted side by side.

Or the time Nora stepped on the spiny husk of a chestnut, and to stop her from crying Bev split open the nut

and showed her the shadow of the seed leaf inside. Then they went inside and Nora dressed up in Bev’s old belted blue dress with padded shoulders. Bev painted Nora’s eyelashes blue and dusted her cheeks with cyclamen rouge, and Nora went clacking around the house in her mother’s high heels. Hey gorgeous!

Or the time, the last time, Lou came to dinner. Asking for Bev’s forgiveness. Begging for Bev’s forgiveness. Demanding Bev’s forgiveness. Don’t you dare threaten me, Lou! Get out! No. Yes. And snap, she’s an old woman pulling out a maple sapling by its roots and trying to recall a song she once knew about mandrakes. Her back aching, her head throbbing, only wisps of hair left after the chemo, her ears ringing, and Nora’s at the kitchen door calling –

Bev! Bev! Telephone.

Did someone say something? Voices swishing, or is that the dry leaves moving in the breeze? Sky darkening. All the work she wants to finish before the rain.

It didn’t have to be that way, he reminded Nora. She thought he meant it didn’t have to be White Oak Cemetery – he and Bev could have chosen a different place. But he meant that Bev didn’t have to refuse him. She could have forgiven him and taken him back. That they were never a family again was her decision.

He spent that whole summer hanging out in Niagara Falls, having decided that he could never love anyone else but the woman he’d betrayed. What a mess he’d made of his life. Had he ever told Nora about the bar in Niagara? That dingy saloon, where he could drink away his sorrows. A white man adrift. The linoleum floor was sticky with beer. Cigarette smoke hung so thickly he could hold it in fistfuls. Two men were singing with the jukebox. A drunk old woman

laughed in delight, her wrinkles like a fine net pressed against her face. Her joy was infectious.

“Did I ever tell you about that woman in the bar?”

“No,” Nora said, though she was thinking *yes*.

Or this same dream that returns to her when she’s ill: she is in a waiting room. There are strangers sitting in seats against the opposite wall. They are reading books they had the foresight to bring with them. Bev brought nothing with her, so she sits there bored with her thoughts. Idly, she scratches her shoulder and feels an odd patch like hardened syrup stuck to her skin. She finds another patch on her elbow. She is spotted with this hard, transparent substance – tiny crystals on her arms, her legs, and at the base of her throat.

Beverly Diamond Owen Knox is becoming the woman she’d been named to be. At first she’s not sure whether to resist or give in. There are patches on the back of her hands. Brilliant crystals picking up the buttery tint from the surface of her skin. The ache in her joints is worse than arthritis. The discomforting bristle of crystals between her toes and behind her ears. The sensation of being buried alive inside precious stone. Help me, Nora. I’m not ready yet. Her lips tearing at the corners. Help me. The taste of blood. Help me.

“Bev!”

“She said something. What did she say?”

“Bev, it’s me, Nora. Lou’s here as well. Can you open your eyes? Do you think she can hear us? Bev? Maybe we should call the nurse. Bev, are you OK?”

The nurse, summoned by Lou, listened with a stethoscope to Bev’s chest and checked fluid levels in the IV bag. Any sounds she made, the nurse ex-

plained, were the body’s normal effort to clear the lungs of mucus. Bev wasn’t in any pain, and she wouldn’t wake up from sedation anytime soon. But it would be best not to disturb her.

After the nurse left the room, Lou needed to be reminded: “Where were we?”

He’d finished one bourbon. Two. Three. And then, oh shit, he’d realized he didn’t have enough money to pay for his drinks. A new crisis to follow the last. What could he do? Stiff the bartender? Admit that he had only spare change in his pocket? Then his eyes settled on the drunk old lady with the fish-net face. She represented life and hope, and she would surely have compassion on a man who had no family anymore.

“What did I know? I was an idiot.”

There was so much he didn’t know. For instance, Nora considered telling him right then and there about what happened in White Oak Cemetery when she was a girl. But now the thought of all the necessary explanation she’d have to offer Lou exhausted her, like the work that would go into renovating an old house that had been shut up for years. It would be better to build a new house on the property.

Lou was talking about the old lady in the bar in Niagara Falls: her head tipped back in laughter, skin a toffee brown, darker in the creases, with lips painted a fiery red, and dark, leathery pouches beneath the rims of her eyeglasses. She wore a red saucer hat to match her red shoes, and her summery dress was a loose black-and-white polka-dot wrap. She looked like a charitable person who would lend a few dollars to a man in need.

“I called to her – Ma’am! – but she couldn’t hear me above the music. I called louder. Excuse me, Ma’am, par-

That place

don – but she still didn't hear me. So I went ahead and tapped her on the shoulder. She tipped her head to look at me over the top of her spectacles. She switched off her smile. And at the same time the music stopped. I don't know whether someone pulled the jukebox plug or, by coincidence, the song had ended."

This was the scene in the story that Lou liked to label *a situation*. An old woman who happened to be the mother of one of the singing men. And it sure looked like the bartender was her grandson, while Louis Owen was a white nobody who stupidly decided to call attention to himself.

He spoke in the direction of the window facing the hospital parking lot, as though his intended audience were the ghost of his reflection. He didn't seem to care anymore whether Nora was paying attention. And he might as well have forgotten about Bev. He was talking to himself, refining the patterns of experience that had made him who he was. His tendency, as he would say, to put his foot in it.

"Next thing I knew, one man was holding me by the collar, and another had a knife at my throat."

Nearly had his throat sliced because he'd been bold enough to tap an old woman on the shoulder. And yet he was alive because of that same old woman's dispensation. All she had to do was give a slight, severe nod in the direction of the door, and the two men threw Lou out on the sidewalk.

That was Nora's father: savvy only in the aftermath.

His conclusion, always the same, invited dramatic comment. Nora imagined Bev sitting up and uttering a good, verifying insult. She thought of the fight they'd had in the kitchen when she was thirteen years old, the night Lou re-

turned to apologize. She remembered lying in her bed pretending to sleep and listening for the shrill explosions in Lou's voice when his pleading turned into threats. She thought about how wrong it was that Bev and Lou should be buried side by side in White Oak Cemetery, though she didn't say this. The truth was, though she sometimes needed him with her rebuttals, she never meant to say anything that would cause her father pain.

"Sometimes," she said to Lou, who sat waiting for her response, "it's better just to keep your mouth shut."

Or just the other day, wasn't it, when a storm blew in. The smell of fresh-cut grass. Screeching of red-wing blackbirds in the marsh. The first drops of rain. Growl of thunder. Flicker of lightning. On again, off again. Crash, bang, run for cover in the shed!

Dripping beneath the cloth hat she uses to hide her thinning hair. The chill of damp clothes. It's not the same kind of chill as the chill in her bones. This despite the doctor's optimism. But she can still notice things. There in the corner, for instance, a nest made of dry grass and shredded paper from a fertilizer bag, crowded with four baby mice. And there's the mama retreating with the fifth baby in her mouth to the safe shelter behind an old wheelbarrow that had been overturned and left to rust by the previous owner. Back again, to fetch the rest of her offspring, carrying them one by one while Bev watches.

Nora, come see!

Bev, you're soaked.

Watch now. The mother carrying them to safety one right after the other, failing none of them.

Or the time Gus and Bev threw a party for themselves one year after they'd gone off to City Hall to get mar-

ried. The two of them dancing to “This Year’s Kisses” in the center of the crowd of guests while Nora watched from the ballroom’s balcony.

Or the day after Lou left for good and Bev hired a locksmith to change the locks. She sipped her coffee and chatted with the man while he worked on the kitchen door. Nora came into the kitchen to pour herself some milk and over-filled the glass.

Nora!

Or watching Nora watching *Jeopardy*, her one leg thrown over the back of the couch. Bev gave her big toe a tug.

You OK?

Yeah.

Want to talk?

Nope.

The one thing they needed to talk about kept Nora from wanting to talk at all. She couldn’t be budged. Bev had better luck guessing the answers to the questions on *Jeopardy*: Dale Carnegie’s number one best-seller. What is *How To Win Friends & Influence People*?

X-shaped stigma, reflexed yellow sepals. What is an evening primrose? What are ragged robins and corn cockles? Did you know that a fly must beat its wings two hundred times a second to stay airborne? Look: you can tell from the white dots and the red-barred forewings that it’s a red admiral butterfly. Nora, take out the garbage please! Nora, did you hear me?

“**T**hrown out on my ass,” Lou was saying. “First by your mother. And then by two toughs in a bar.” His tone was wryer than earlier, his eyes narrowed in a slightly mischievous squint.

“It’s true I learned from you,” Nora said, “how to get into trouble. But also how to get out of it.”

“And remember that there’s rest at the end.” He leaned forward and patted

Bev’s hand, the same hand he’d kissed. “The peace of our eternal sleep together on some shady slope in White Oak.”

“You did say White Oak.”

Their own private property. Two names, two stones. They didn’t even have to let on that they’d once been married. Just as long as they were together in the end.

“Lou – ”

“The only home I’ll never lose to foreclosure.”

“Lou – ”

“Thirty years I’ve been waiting to hold her in my arms again.”

“Lou!”

“What? You think I’m not sincere?”

“If you’d be quiet and listen, for once.”

“You have something you want to tell me?”

He looked at her with a smile she interpreted as smug, as if he were satisfied that the setup had worked and he’d trapped her, making it impossible for her not to match his disclosures with some of her own – and yet because of this expression of expectation he made it necessary for her to resist. This was an unfamiliar predicament. Usually she was adept at closing the conversation with a decisive comment. But she thought she’d had something else she’d wanted to say. What? She wasn’t sure.

There was no way she’d tell Lou about what happened thirty years ago in White Oak Cemetery. That place she and her girlfriends used to go to smoke in secret. The same place where a troubled teenager named Jonathan Baggley strangled little Larry Groton and left the body lying on a bed of pine needles for Nora to find as she was walking home alone. Climbing the hill, seeing first his sneaker turned at an odd angle, then the mud-caked fingers of his left hand resting on his knee.

That place

The coincidence of White Oak Cemetery. Lou had been living in Thailand at the time, and as far as Nora knew, Bev never told him what had happened. It was important to Nora not to tell him. She hadn't wanted to tell anyone, except her mother – she'd told her mother right away, as soon as she'd raced home from the cemetery. When Bev called the police, Nora couldn't help but feel betrayed. She felt tainted and newly vulnerable in a way her mother didn't understand. She had cooperated with the police and led them up the cemetery hill, but only out of necessity. And afterward, she'd shut up. Even when her friends gathered around her and demanded to know what she'd seen, she'd kept her mouth closed.

But thirty years had passed, and she was ready to talk to Bev about it now. She needed to know why Bev hadn't found somewhere else to spend eternity. Why White Oak, the place where children died horrible deaths and were left to rot? Why did Bev want to be buried there – and next to Lou, no less? Why hadn't she ever mentioned this to Nora?

They'd talk as soon as Bev's condition improved. They'd begin with the story of finding Larry Groton, and from there, wherever. The past or the present. It would depend upon Bev. Nora could only guess what her mother would tell her. But she didn't want to guess. She wanted to know what Bev would say, if she could say anything. That and more. Her mother being far less predictable than her father, complete, though partially hidden from view. Lou, much as he liked to talk, would never adequately answer the one question Nora wanted to ask:

“Why White Oak, of all places?”

“What?”

“Why did you choose White Oak Cemetery?”

“Why?”

“Yes.”

“Don't you remember? We lived down the street. We used to take you sledding there, and walk the dog.”

“And you really thought you'd stay in that town forever? You, who couldn't settle down?”

“I don't know . . .”

“Why White Oak?”

“What's the big deal? Why White Oak, why that place, why any place? We just wanted to be together, if you can believe it. Doesn't seem possible, does it? Hey, Bev? Can you hear me, Bev? I wonder if she's been listening? Why there? Why us? Why did we spend thirty years apart if we planned to be together in the end? Why did we do anything?”

Both Lou and Nora watched Bev for some indication that she had an opinion she wanted to share. She just lay there, unblinking, unsmiling, her chest swelling and flattening with the action of the respirator, but Lou and Nora would have gone on watching her forever if the nurse hadn't come in to tell them that visiting hours were over, which seemed strange to Nora, whose fatigue had led her to believe that it was the middle of the night. She'd call a taxi, she said. Lou reminded her that he had his car. They could stop at a diner for a bite to eat, she suggested, and they could talk some more. They'd have a good night's rest and come back to visit Bev the next morning. She would probably be awake by then. Lou said he'd bet she had heard everything and would give them an earful!

The voice of her own father. The red circles on his cheeks. He was telling her about Joe Louis KO'ing Natie Brown in the 4th round. One cigar after another.

Bev, phone's for you!

What?

The whirl of a fan. The roll of a carousel horse. The swoop of a swallow.

Or the time she found her husband's lover's name and number written on a slip of paper in his wallet. See how it is, Nora, when we have to make do with suspicion? Sometimes it's best to tell.

Two cups of flour. Cream the butter with the sugar. Crack of an egg against the rim of a bowl. The satisfaction of catching the yolk whole.

The time Gus came out to the garden, where Bev was trying to screw the nozzle of the hose on a spigot, and she could see from the look on his face that something terrible had happened. More precisely, somehow she knew that his son was gone. She didn't yet know the details – that he'd been killed in a bus accident while traveling in Mexico. But in that flash of a glance, she felt as though she knew everything.

Or the days following the day Nora ran home to tell her mother she'd found something in the cemetery. Nora wore her softball cap around the house to hide her eyes in shadow.

Or the time Bev was about to remind her again how much she loved Adam and was grateful for Nora's happiness, and the next thing she knew.

What?

She's not sure she weeded the garden before she left. Those stubborn little maple saplings, as tough as mandrakes. The songs she used to sing. Gus, according to his wishes, reduced to ashes and scattered over the North Atlantic. Lou, come closer so I can look at your face. The wiry white curls of your beard. The wide pores of your tanned skin. And you, Nora. Sitting in the garden cradling cups of coffee. We must do something about the potato vine tangled in the pachysandra. Is that what she wanted to say? Also, the thicket of loosestrife at the top of the front walk.