

## A FORTUNE



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BEFORE THE WAR, my mother used to take me to work with her on weekends, to a jewelry kiosk in the mall where she pierced ears. For three Saturdays out of the month, she bought me corndogs from the food court and we pretended the inventory was my private collection. On the fourth Saturday, she went to the Amityville Reserve Base for her drill weekend.

She'd been in the Army Reserves since I was in diapers. Back then, my parents were still living with Nan—my dad's mother—in her Levittown tract house, fifteen minutes from the base. It was a fact of life, dropping Mom off every month, but I clung to her every time, planted my face in her shoulder and stuck my hands into her pockets, feeling for the goodbye Charms lollipop she hid there, saying “One more hug” until she peeled me off and buckled me back into the car.

Only once a year, on Family Day, did I go inside the gates of the base, so in my mind the place was pretty much

a big gym with parading bagpipers. It was unremarkable from the outside—not much different from an elementary school, brick buildings behind a chain-link fence. Much more intriguing was the Dominican Sisters Motherhouse across the street. While my parents kissed their goodbyes, that was where I turned my attention. The Motherhouse, too, was brick, but unlike the base, its fence was graceful iron, with a statue of a woman in white watching over the lawn; I used to stare at the far-off windows, hoping I'd catch sight of a nun. I suppose we could have gone inside and tracked one down. The gates were always open. But we were not church people and we never did go.

THE RESERVES, MOM always said, were like the extra bag of flour in our pantry: just there for backup. She was no great baker, and that flour always expired before we got around to opening it. So I didn't worry. But in 1990, when I was eight, they sent her unit to Saudi Arabia for Desert Shield. Before she left she told me: "It's not a war."

"Will they shoot at you?"

"We're an engineer company. We just build things."

"Things like what?"

"Like roads," she said. "Nothing scary about roads, right?"

Some nights, when my father thought I was sleeping and turned on CNN, I sneaked out into the hallway and watched from around the corner. If I saw the green

flare of missiles leaping across the sky, I went back to bed and, eyes closed, walked step by step through our old goodnight routine: first my mother brushing her teeth after her evening cigarette (she would not kiss me with smoke breath); then chasing me to bed; then singing Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You." *I am as constant as the northern star.* I practiced breathing the way the counselor at school had taught me: *In*, two, three, four. *Hold*, two, three, four. *Out*, two, three, four. *Hold*, two, three, four.

THEY SAY THAT when your loved one is serving overseas, it's best not to make any big changes. Don't even get a new haircut, they say. Let her come back to the home she remembers.

We broke the rules. Soon after she left, Dad got a better-paying job at St. Joan's Hospital in Port Jefferson, forty minutes away. With only Nan to help care for me, there was no time for long commutes. "You *should* move," Mom told us, over a tinny long-distance line. "It's just Port Jeff, it's not a foreign country." I'd been born at St. Joan's; Nan had been volunteering at the hospital thrift shop for years. Dad found us a house south of the train station, where rents were cheaper.

And her homecoming, six months later, was still happy—almost desperately so. Flags and kisses, Springsteen on the boombox, red-white-and-blue cupcakes from Girl Scout Troop #1417. She looked thinner than I remembered,

weather beaten and tired, with a desert tan. But she came home.

HER FIRST NIGHT home, I woke after midnight and she was standing in my doorway.

“Mom,” I said, but she didn’t come to me.

A few miles off, the railroad signals clanged. Her body jerked and she backed away from the door.

“Mom,” I said again.

“Where’s the light switch?” she said. I turned on my bedside lamp. She crept to my bed, scooped me up, and cradled me as if I were two instead of nine.

I felt stiff-backed and gangly, more like a nanny goat than her little girl; I’d had a growth spurt while she was gone. I wriggled away and tried to hug her the normal way. Her body turned hard. She shrugged me off and left me there in the lamplight.

That was the first of many nights I woke to see her in the doorway. But every time afterward, she pretended she was getting something from my room, blew me a quiet kiss, and left.

SHE COULDN’T WORK at the mall anymore. As the crowds swarmed around her, she panicked and couldn’t breathe.

We couldn’t go to Fourth of July fireworks. On a bad day, we couldn’t even drive in the car. She tried. She would

take the keys off the hook but then stop, lean against the wall, sink to the floor. “You can watch cartoons, just for a minute. We’ll go in a minute.” Often she threw up before we left the house, if we left at all.

Nan and Dad began to say: Maybe it was for the best, that we moved so close to St. Joan’s. The psychiatric unit was the best in the region, they said—better than the VA. My mother stayed there for a month.

A week after she was discharged, she drove our Toyota into a tree.

Yes, it’s possible that it was an accident. To this day, fifteen years later, Dad believes it was. I want to believe. But I remember my mother swatting houseflies mid-flight against our kitchen cabinets, hitting carnival targets dead-center with water guns.

While she was still in St. Joan’s, I’d written in my diary: *BAD WORDS BAD WORDS BAD WORDS. All the other moms went to Cookie Day at school. Jessica said “why is your Nan here instead of your mom” and I had to tell her Mom was on a secret army mission. Nan’s cookies were weird with lickish stuff in them. So after school Nan and I got in a fight and she said “Your mother needs to pull it together I can’t take this anymore” Dad said “STOP it’s not Bertie’s fault.” But it is her fault. I told her not to go away and did she listen NO.*

I left it open on my dresser. I wanted her to read it. I’m haunted now by the thought that she probably did.



SOMETIMES GRIEF WANTS silence. Or sugar. Or drink. Or the dark. I was ten when she died, and my grief wanted another world, so I made it. I would lie on my bed with some item of Mom's clothing draped over my pillow, and I'd imagine us together on a bench at the mall, my head on her shoulder. "Thirsty?" she would say, and put a straw to my mouth, strawberry milkshake in a food court cup.

The place we sat in my daydreams wasn't loud or crowded like the real mall. I came to think of it as the middle place: the place between our world and wherever my mother was. "We can sit here as long as you want. There's nothing else I have to do. Forget your homework," she would say. "There's more to life than homework." We didn't talk about the accident. She would stroke my hair and tell me how brave I was, how smart and good; how she'd watched my future like a movie, and it was going to be safe and sweet and full of good fortune.

MY FATHER SCHEDULED his grief. During work hours he set it aside; at home he cared for me as usual; but one night a week—always after my bedtime—he shut himself in their bedroom with a six-pack of my mother's favorite beer and a box of their old cassettes. Through the wall, through the muffled music, I sometimes heard the low rise and fall of his voice, though I could never make out the words.

My grandmother—she organized. Not the kitchen cabinets, not my mother's belongings, nothing as domestic

as that. About six months after my mother's death, we were eating dinner when she looked across the table at my father and said: "Somebody should do something for women like Bertie."

My father didn't look up from the biscuit he was buttering.

She pressed on. "Women just out of the service." He put his knife down. "Something like what." In those days, his questions rarely sounded like questions.

"A newsletter, maybe." Nan was a veteran herself, a WAC glassblower during World War II; she made test tubes for the military's chemical laboratories. These days she was a secretary at the community college. She typed up the newsletter for the career center, and when I was out sick from school and went to work with her, she let me flip through the clip art book. "Put the girls in touch with each other. Little articles on how to get your education benefits. Find counseling. How to . . . you know."

"Local women, you're saying."

"Anywhere."

My father sopped up the last of his stew with the biscuit and took his time chewing it. "Atoning for something?" he said. I didn't know this word, but I knew his tone. I took the knife and began to butter my own biscuit, pressing down into every hollow.

They were taking so long to speak. They weren't even telling me to go easy on the biscuit.

"Could I draw the pictures?" I said, and my father

turned his face to me. After a moment, he put his hand on my hair.

Nan called the newsletter *Returning Birds*. I did draw the pictures. She got permission to use her office's photocopier machine, so for those first couple of years, our only expense was postage. But Nan began to dream: support groups and counseling, job search assistance and free childcare and volunteers who could help women navigate Veterans Affairs.

Little by little, I came out of my bedroom to help her.

NAN IS EIGHTY NOW. *Returning Birds* is coming up on its thirteenth anniversary. It's won awards. Possibly it's saved lives. And Nan has been dropping hints ever since my college graduation—hints I've consistently ignored—but recently, she came out and said it: "You could run this operation, Keller. And you should."

"Why?" I said.

"You even have to ask?" she said.

I've done enough volunteering to know what my life would look like: I'd work long days and weekends; I'd write a hundred grants for every one we receive; and for every encouraging email from a vet or spouse, there'd be another that begins *Dear Pacifist Bitch* or something like it. None of this fazes Nan; working at *Returning Birds* makes her feel closer to my mother than she did when Mom was alive. Launching an organization was a very Nan thing to



do. But I am not Nan. My mother lost her life pursuing someone else's mission. So—yes. I do have to ask.

These are the things I tell Nan. But there's another reason I can't say aloud.

At my job at the mall, I sometimes run into Birds women with their daughters. They scout the after-Christmas sales; they bicker over prom gowns; they see me through the window of the t-shirt shop where I work and bring me iced coffee. If I were meant to run Returning Birds, wouldn't those moments give me joy?—healthy family, job well done? But as it is, the girls show me their glittered dresses, and deep in my secret self I ache.

If I could imagine myself into the middle place the way I used to, I'd ask my mother what to do.

ONE DAY IN seventh grade I came home from school and found Nan sitting on the front step, leaning back on her hands like a girl, rhinestone earrings flashing in the sun. I could smell lemon cake baking.

“If you were going to name a store after your mom,” she said, “what would you call it?”

Nan had a gift for rallying helpers, but she still needed to eat, and she couldn't do all she wanted with Birds while working full-time at the college. For a while, in the beginning, she ran huge monthly tag sales in the St. Joan's parking lot, splitting the proceeds with the hospital. At the edge of the hospital property was a little old house, which

St. Joan's used to operate as a thrift shop. That thrift shop was where Nan had volunteered, even when my mother was first called up and there was me to care for, dinners to cook and lunches to pack. After a few months it got to be too much and she had to give it up. She had planned to volunteer again when my mother came home and things went back to normal. But of course that didn't happen, and anyway, while she was waiting, the hospital closed the thrift shop and put the lot up for sale.

Buying that shop made it possible for Nan to devote herself to Birds full time. We named it Bertie's Nest. It didn't bring in a fortune, but the profits were enough to pay Nan a salary and help with the volunteers' long-distance phone bills. For the women, it was a sanctuary: a place to come in and talk at leisure, without paperwork or formalities.

It was my sanctuary, too—a clapboard-sided box of wonders, with velvet-red walls, rich with the smell of the coffee Nan kept brewing at the register. The donations came in from attic purges and the unsold remnants of estate sales. There were dead people's diaries, and strange garments like caftans and dickies, and a vintage pinball machine. By the front door, we hung a photo of Mom in her reservist's uniform, sitting cross-legged with me in her lap. I'm three or so, clutching that goodbye lollipop, my mouth sugared apple green and sticky; she's whispering in my ear. (What I'd give to remember what she was saying.) The photo was taken years before the war, and her face is

still round and glowing like a summer moon.

The summer of 1996, when I was fourteen, I asked Nan if I was old enough to work at the thrift shop yet. All that June, we spent days sorting donated clothing while Nan schooled me in her politics. “Don’t let anyone tell you,” she said, “that supporting the troops means supporting the war. Sometimes it means asking a good question. You saw that young lady who came in the other day—the one who said her joint pain was probably worse than mine? The VBA says it’s got nothing to do with her service. Even though it came on when they destroyed the Iraqi chemical weapons. Claim denied. Who’s supporting her?” Nan tossed a t-shirt into the reject pile.

I listened to big-band music on donated record albums, drank coffee that was mostly milk and Equal, and earned \$15 a day from Nan’s own paycheck. I’d become a legitimate teenager, with a righteous cause besides. I bought iron-on patches for my backpack and thought about what flavor of person I’d be when I started high school in September. I began to insist that my family call me Keller, the name on my birth certificate. Kerri, my nickname, now seemed too girlish.

I was young, and I never wondered how Nan paid for it all: the building, the permits, the utilities. I didn’t know how much it matters, where money comes from.



ONE MORNING AFTER a rainstorm, I saw a cloud hovering along the edge of the roof. “More gnats,” I said to Nan. We had seen a bigger cloud in the springtime. She didn’t look long; we were unloading barstools from a pickup. But when she got inside, she made a phone call.

The termite man came that afternoon. He asked if there was attic space behind the walls upstairs. Nan told me to watch the register and led him up. I waited for ten minutes, but when I heard creaking and knocking, I disobeyed and climbed the stairs. He had pried up some linoleum on the second floor, yanked up the plywood, and was pushing his screwdriver into a beam. The wood flaked away.

“These joists,” he said, “that’s structural damage.” He motioned with his flashlight. Nan knelt and peered into the hole. “This and the walls. It’s going to cost a fortune.” I knelt beside Nan. The beam was gnawed to ribs, doused with downy powder. I could hear the record downstairs skipping, and Peggy Lee croaking *why don’t—why don’t* like a pond frog.

“Could it collapse?” Nan asked him.

“Not tonight,” said the termite man. “Not next month. But.”

My grandmother tapped the back of my neck, which meant I should go down and turn the record player off. Each stair creaked beneath my feet. I thought of those tunnels in the floor joists and stepped more gingerly.

After the termite man left, Nan called my father. The two of them sat at a 1950s diner table with ridged chrome

edges and studied the building's insurance policy. Termite damage wasn't covered.

"I'm going to see Marie," Nan said.

"What can she do?" my father said.

"Who's Marie?" I said.

They ignored me. I began to thwack the flippers on the pinball machine to make them think I wasn't listening.

"Who else is going to help us?" Nan said.

"Mom, we knew this place might not work out. I guess you could do a fundraiser."

"To rebuild the shop?"

"Instead of the shop."

"So you do want to close it," Nan said.

"Unless you can find some big donor who thinks it's worth it to make the repairs."

"I'm going to see Marie." Nan stood up and turned the sign on the front door from Open to Closed.

"Right now?" my father said. "Isn't she way upstate? I've got a shift tonight." Friday was Dad's all-nighter in the ER, and Nan and I stayed up late, watching 1970s reruns and eating whatever I felt like eating. If Nan was going somewhere, then I would be spending my first night alone. In my wallet I'd been keeping the phone number of a guy from eighth-grade shop class, Chris McCready. His older brother had an ice cream truck and sold beepers alongside the King Cones and Firecracker popsicles. He let Chris ride along on the route and they stayed out past midnight, cruising wherever they pleased with the plinking tunes

turned off and Nirvana turned up loud. Chris had said I could come sometime if I didn't bother his brother. My father and grandmother never would have let me go, but if Nan was away—I laid a quarter on the glass surface of the pinball machine.

“Kerri can come with me,” Nan said.

“Marie’s going to let you stay overnight?”

“There’s a Motel Express,” Nan said.

I tapped the quarter partway into the coin slot, seeing how far I could slip it in without losing it. Dad would want me home in my own bed, not on some mysterious errand with my grandmother. My father looked over at me, and I let the quarter fall in. I waited for the bells and buzzers, but nothing happened.

“If we pack fast,” Nan said, “we can get the next ferry and be there by dark.”

“Leave a number where I can reach you,” my father said.

WE TOOK THE Port Jefferson ferry across the Long Island Sound. It was a windy day; the Sound was full of toothy waves. I lay across three seats with one of my mother’s old sweatshirts for a pillow and, too nauseated to ask questions, watched the blue horizon plunge and swell. After a while I closed my eyes and tried to conjure up the middle place. I hadn’t done this in a long time; she’d been gone four years now, and her clothes didn’t smell like her anymore. I tried, but every time I started to properly get the scene, someone

walked by with a panting dog or a fussy baby. I gave up and watched the waves again. Nan played solitaire.

Only when we got safely to Connecticut and drove off the boat—only when the seasickness wore off and Nan took off north on Route 8—did I start to wonder where we were going. I was still bummed to miss the ride on the ice cream truck, but at least this was an adventure; we rarely did anything new.

The route was a confusion of forks and exits, overpasses and city billboards, but after a while it settled down into a leafy highway that seemed to shoot straight north.

“Are you going to tell me who Marie is?” I said. Heat writhed off the asphalt and crinkled the road ahead. We might have been driving into a dream.

“I did her a favor once,” Nan said. “She’s sort of a renegade nun.”

I pressed my feet against the glove box and watched trash and wildflowers fly by on the highway median. Renegade Nun. It sounded like a video game. “You’re making that up.”

“She was in the novitiate—nun training,” Nan said. “Her and a few other girls. Before they took their vows, they decided to leave and start their own sisterhood. It was the seventies.”

So I was finally going to see a nun. It had been years since I’d thought of the Motherhouse across from the base.

“What’s she going to do?” I said. “Pray away the termites?”

Nan took one hand off the wheel to massage her jaw. Years ago a doctor had told her she had TMJ, but she had given up her health insurance with her secretary's job.

"What are you hiding?" I said. "What do you think I'll be scared of?"

"It's not that," Nan said. "She just likes her privacy." Ahead on the highway, above the tree line, a bird of prey circled. "Did you know the female bald eagle is larger than the male?" Nan said. "It's called 'reversed sexual dimorphism.' Memorize that and impress somebody."

I wiggled my toes, thinking I might paint my nails Charcoal Black tomorrow, and wishing my grandmother wouldn't say *sexual*.

THE HIGHWAY GAVE way to winding roads through towns that barely seemed to be towns—a cemetery, a pub, a hand-painted sign for fresh honey or firewood. It seemed there was an antique shop every five miles, and Nan pointed out every single one. "Why don't you just stop and look if you want to," I said. She seemed to consider it. Then she glanced at the clock on the dash and shook her head.

The sky was turning a streaky salmon by the time we left the highway for a series of wooded roads. We passed a town sign: Austerlitz. "What state is this?"

"New York," Nan said. "We crossed back over the border." The air smelled wet and green.

The final road was unpaved, a steep hill that would



have been terrifying to sled down. Pebbles clattered in the wheel wells. Occasionally, Nan's headlights lit up a house number on some rusty mailbox. We pulled up to a wrought-iron gate with a guardhouse and Nan cut the engine. All I could hear was a stream running and a whippoorwill sounding off.

We got out of the van. In the guardhouse, a woman in linen pants looked up from the paperback she was highlighting. "Here for the retreat?"

"I need to see Marie," Nan said. "I'm Nancy Shonham. She'll remember me." I looked at the plaque on the gate: *Elisha's Sisters—Community and Retreat Center*. "She knows me through St. Joan's Hospital," Nan said.

The woman glanced up at a wall clock in the booth. "Marie's probably with the women right now—"

An intercom crackled. "Hazel, is that the last guest?" a female voice said.

"No, it's someone named Nancy Sherman—"

"Shonham," Nan said.

"She's here to see Marie," the woman told the intercom. "But she's already in worship, right?"

"No, she's right here." The whippoorwill never stopped. After a minute, the intercom crackled again. "She says to let Nancy in."

We drove on patched asphalt to a large A-frame house, brown-shingled, with a porch on the second floor. Two long wings on either side of the house were lined with doors; the place looked like a vacation cottage mated with

a roadside motel. A woman was waiting outside for us in yellow porch light.

She reminded me a little of my Social Studies teacher, in that she was oldish and roundish, but no teacher wore her hair this way. It hung in long braids like carved pewter past a single mound of uni-breast. She hugged Nan for a long moment and I was afraid she would do the same to me.

“Marie,” Nan said. “My granddaughter Kerri.”

“Keller,” I said.

“Bertie’s daughter,” Marie said, and refrained from touching my face or my hair, which is what women in *Returning Birds* always did when they realized who I was. The hair, in truth, was all Dad’s side—wavy, thick, the color of coarse pumpernickel—not white-blond like my mother’s. But otherwise I shared her features. *You have her apple cheeks*, they’d say, never mentioning the broad jaw, the strong chin. I usually liked the petting, despite my shyness; it made me feel like a celebrity, some cherished relic of my mother. But I was relieved Marie didn’t do it. I didn’t know her.

Marie led us into the kitchen, where a middle-aged woman in jeans was peeling hard-boiled eggs. A younger one in green All-Stars—I admired them—was chopping lettuce at a wooden table. Just under the tabletop were drawers marked with women’s names: Linda, Susan, Carol. Mailboxes for the sisters, maybe.

“We’re starting our midsummer retreat tonight,” Marie said. “We’ve got clergywomen from all over the country.

I have to go and lead worship in a few minutes. Are you hungry?" She offered us pita bread and olives. I took some, but Nan refused, and wouldn't sit.

"So, Nancy," Marie said. She sank into one of the chairs. "What's doing?"

"You can't guess?"

Marie tilted her head, as if Nan were telling a joke.

"The thrift shop's being eaten alive," Nan said.

While my grandmother told the story, I looked around the kitchen. Everything in it looked old enough to be sold at Bertie's Nest. Cast-iron pots hung from the rafters, and the photos in a cookbook open on the counter had the bronzy flatness of 1970-something. A nylon string guitar stood in the corner. The women who had been working finished their tasks and put the food in two refrigerators that stood like columns on opposite ends of the kitchen.

"Look, I realize you like to do things anonymously," Nan was saying. "But I know you bought us the shop. Didn't you know about the termites? You must have had it inspected. Why would you buy us a place we couldn't afford to repair?"

No one had ever told me that someone bought the shop for us. I'd assumed that Nan had done what she always did: got a good deal.

"I didn't buy that building for you," Marie said.

"But you arranged it. Or the Sisters did."

"Nancy, I'm telling you. It wasn't us." Marie looked at my grandmother as if meditating on her. Women's laughter

rang in a distant hallway; a cookie sheet bent in the heat of the oven and clanged against the rack. “Please sit,” she said. “Eat.”

Nan stayed where she was, leaning against the cabinets, so Marie drew her chair back from the table and stood up. She no longer looked like my Social Studies teacher. Her long gray jumper was like the robe of some ancient prophetess, and for all I knew that’s what she was.

“Don’t you remember what you told me?” Nan said. “Outside the hospital, when I was running the tag sale?”

“After you helped Patti?” Marie said. “I know I thanked you, is that what you mean?”

“You said, ‘This time next year, you’ll be running the shop you’ve been hoping for.’ And poof,” said Nan, “a few months later I get a call saying an anonymous donor would like to buy us the old hospital thrift shop.”

“I can’t imagine I would have made a claim like that,” Marie said. “I might have prayed for you.”

“You *said* it. And what did I tell you? I said ‘Don’t get my hopes up.’ And you told me—”

Marie paused with a piece of pita bread halfway to her mouth. I took advantage of this moment to sneak a shortbread cookie from a platter on the counter.

“Yes,” Marie said. “Yes, yes. My God—and that call out of the blue.” She reached out to take Nan’s hand. “Nancy, I forgot I even had a part in it, that I ever said that.”

Nan refused her hand. Through the door behind her I could see a high-ceilinged room with a fieldstone hearth

and ruby-dark lanterns winking in the corners. “I believed you,” Nan said. “Why did you get my hopes up if I was going to lose it a year later?”

The young woman with the All-Stars leaned in through the kitchen door and looked at Marie. “Do you want to start worship right now, or wait another ten? We could serve coffee and cookies.” She saw me licking crumbs off my fingers. She didn’t say a word.

“Two minutes,” Marie said. She picked up the guitar and turned to Nan. “Why don’t you stay with us tonight.” Maybe her sense of hospitality just wouldn’t permit her to send travelers away at this hour, but I thought there was more. She looked pensive, like she was listening for rain, or a knock at the door.

I wished Nan would say yes. The kitchen was fragrant with warm butter, and the house was strange in a way that I was starting to like.

“I’m not here for a church service,” Nan said. “If you can’t help us, then say so.” What did Nan think Marie could do? So Marie had made a prediction; so the prediction had come true. It wasn’t as if she had sold Nan a faulty vacuum.

Marie set her guitar down on the long table, and opened the drawer marked with her name. “I have forty guests in there. But it’s funny you’re here tonight,” she said. She took a piece of paper from the drawer. “I’ve been meaning to mail this to you. I was in an antique shop and they were cutting up books to frame the pages.” She handed it across the table toward Nan, who kept her arms crossed. “You’ll

see why I thought of you.” My grandmother pursed her lips, as if for a reluctant kiss, and took the paper. As Nan stood staring at the page, Marie tuned her guitar. Once, between strings, she looked up and met my eyes.

Nan tore the page in half, crumpled the pieces, and tossed them onto the table.

“I didn’t say we couldn’t help you—” Marie said.

Nan started for the door. I picked up the crumpled papers from the table and read the words as quickly as I could. A drawing of a seated woman, a hand-lettered quotation: “To me a lush carpet of pine needles or spongy grass is more welcome than the most luxurious Persian rug.—Helen Keller.”

“Kerri,” my grandmother called.

Marie slung her guitar strap over her shoulder. “It was nice to meet you, honey.”

“Thanks,” I said, not sure it had been exactly nice, and ran down the darkened hallway after Nan. Out of the high-ceilinged room came the throaty toll of bells, deep bowlfuls of sound rolling all around us.

NAN DIDN’T SPEAK for several miles. We made our way back to the highway, and I expected her to stop at the Motel Express, but she kept going. At one point I looked over and saw tears on her cheeks, glimmering with the pulse of the highway lights.

I didn’t understand what had passed between Nan and

Marie, but I saw that a door had closed. If the shop shut down, and there was no more Returning Birds, then where would I go after school? What would we do with the vintage armchairs, the record player? The photo of Mom by the register?

And what would the women do—the ones whose hunched-up shoulders relaxed as soon as they walked through the door?

I WOKE UP, still in the passenger seat of Nan's cargo van, in the harsh light of a gas station. I watched her finish pumping and go inside to pay.

While she was gone, I pulled the crumpled papers out of my pocket, held them together, and looked at the page again. The paper was the color of weak tea; to me it looked a hundred years old. Why would this make Marie think of Nan? My grandmother would have taken a Persian rug over wet grass any day. Unless this was really for me—did Marie think I was Helen Keller's namesake? I should have told her: I was named after the bar where my parents used to play darts.

Nan opened the driver's side door. She saw what I was looking at, but only handed me a buttered roll, wrapped in plastic, and a carton of orange juice. As we pulled back onto the highway, she said, "Do you want to know about Marie?"



ONE MORNING WHEN Nan was twelve years old, sitting on the front stoop of her family's brownstone in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, she saw a young woman with a fox-collared coat unlocking the front door of a shop. A week before, a man had shown up to gild letters onto the shop's front window: *Antiques and Fine Furnishings*. Nothing like this had ever happened on their street. It was the Depression. And in Nan's neighborhood—all Italian, luncheonette on the corner, Coney Island ten minutes away on the El—everybody knew everybody. Strange young women didn't come in and open fancy shops.

The woman took her time dressing the front window. She draped dummies in bustled Victorian gowns. She filled a silver wash basin with dried rosebuds.

Until now, the richest future Nan could imagine was one where everything was gleaming new from Macy's. When one of her brothers wore a hole in his sock, she sat down with her needle and darning egg. But the old things across the street were not old like that. They kept opulent secrets. She imagined that the crimson kimono, with its embroidered cranes in flight, had been worn by a Japanese empress. Even so, as she watched the window fill, she didn't want to be the empress. Nan wanted to be the keeper of the magic things, the woman in the fox-collared coat.

The antique shop was empty in six months. Rumor was she'd been the girlfriend of an indulgent Mafioso. But Nan never forgot the shop.



Years later Nan was a high school senior, stocking postcards in the drugstore where she worked, when the news of Pearl Harbor came over the radio. She joined the WACS the day she turned twenty-one. On the first anniversary of V-J Day, she married Lenny Shonham, a shy young man from Queens who presented her with his great-aunt's wedding ring. My grandfather was a bus mechanic, and throughout their married life, he brought her unclaimed treasures from the lost-and-found: a filigree cigarette case, a *Complete Works of Shakespeare* with the Bard's portrait on its leather-tooled cover.

They scraped together enough money for a Levitt house and had five children. My father was the middle child. When the youngest started first grade, it was Lenny who encouraged Nan to seek a part-time job at an antique store in Seaford. Together they wrote her resume, polishing her qualifications—maybe a little too vigorously. *Expert at spotting valuables hidden among the everyday*: She had once sifted through a sandbox to recover a prized pair of pearl earrings. She worked at that store for the next ten years, cleaning ivory and mahogany, sorting silk, and, when no one was around, ringing dinner bells from the Revolution.

And then Lenny's back pain got so bad that hot pads didn't help anymore. By the time they realized it was kidney cancer, one of the tumors was as big around as a pocket watch. It came on so fast, Nan said, as if all those years of engine fumes caught up to him at once. He died two weeks after my father's high school graduation.

If she found solace in keeping busy, maybe it was because she didn't have much choice. She still had three of the five at home. Her part-time job wouldn't pay the bills, so she left the antique store and began working full-time at the community college where the two oldest were going. She taped a picture of a hen-eagle on her mirror.

One night in the mid-seventies, a traveling singer came to the Catholic church where Nan used to bring her kids. The concert was sponsored by the women's ministry, and Nan's girlfriend invited her to go; it would be a night out. Besides, it was August, the house was stuffy, and the concert was outdoors.

Someone had set up folding chairs in the pines outside the church, with kerosene lanterns for light. A few dozen women were scattered there, fanning themselves with pamphlets, talking, laughing. Nan and her friend sat in the back row, the raindrops from that afternoon's storm slipping from the pine needles down into their hair. She watched the other women. They looked languid, dewy—sleeveless smock dresses in explosive color, shag haircuts frizzing in the humidity, long hair twisted into topknots. Nan, who had lapsed in her churchgoing, had tried to look presentable—a neat blue tunic, hair curled and sprayed. She excused herself and went inside the church to peel off her pantyhose.

When she came back out, all those laughing, chatting ladies had grown silent. Standing before them was a wide-hipped singer, finger-picking a guitar. She wore two long

braids and patch-pocket jeans, and as she sang she rocked foot to foot, as if lulling a baby.

AT THIS POINT in the story, Nan stopped and turned her head to look at me. The skin around her eyes was lax and puckered in the chemical light of the highway, and she looked all of her seventy years. The road droned beneath us.

“I’m not going to say God spoke to me,” Nan said. “But it was a strange night. I had—you know who Joni Mitchell is?” Obviously I did: Mom’s song. “Well, this girl—this woman, rather—she sang like that. She was singing hymns she wrote herself. Between songs—really she was preaching, when you get down to it, but not like our pastor. I wrote one of her lines down: ‘God is like a breastfeeding mother.’”

I looked out the window at the fat cloudy sky, hiding all its stars, and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Heaven help us, I thought, if Father Thomas heard that. I mean, Mary and all—but a breastfeeding God? But it wasn’t her idea, she said. ‘Look it up in Isaiah,’ she said. So I sat there with my shoes soaking wet, waiting to hear what else this woman would say. I wish I had a record I could play for you. She got all worked up. She was a house afire. And then she asked us to sing along on her last number, and it was just one word: *Magnificat*. *Magnificat*, *magnificat*. . . .

“I don’t know how a couple of dozen women from the suburbs made such a beautiful noise. We sang it for—I don’t know, could have been five minutes or an hour, like when you’re awake in the night with a baby and you’re kind of—outside time.” Nan cleared her throat. “You know I’m no holy roller.”

“What happened?” I said.

“I’m going to tell you,” Nan said. “And you’re not going to understand.” She glanced at me and saw I was insulted. “I don’t mean because you’re fourteen.”

I know now it was brave of her even to try.

“I saw a thing in my head,” Nan said, “like a movie. I was in my kitchen, and someone was bringing me this Persian oil lamp, hand painted—a very pricey antique, this would be. They were putting this thing right in the middle of my dining-room table, and I said, Are you *crazy*? I can’t keep this for you. My kids will break it before dinnertime. But they were trying to give it to me. *Give* it to me. And laughing.”

“Who was it?” I said.

Nan kept talking as if she hadn’t heard me. “I don’t pray. But sometimes if you’re tired enough—well, I said—*What do you want me to do?*” Nan took one hand off the wheel and cracked open the tab on her coffee lid. She took a long drink.

“Did you hear anything back?”

“*Be good to your kids’ boyfriends and girlfriends,*” she said. “*Love them like they were your own kids.*”

That was all God had to say?

“I had a feeling,” Nan said, “like a pipe breaking open inside me and flooding the kitchen.”

Nan levered her seat a little straighter. She nursed the coffee. I sat there breathing in the van’s old-clothes and varnish smell, waiting for her to explain what that meant—a pipe breaking open inside you. But she just sipped the coffee and then flicked her hand as if waving off a gnat: “I knew I wouldn’t tell it right.”

THE LONG-HAIRED SINGER, of course, had been Marie. At the time, she was getting over her second failed attempt to found a community and retreat center, traveling around singing at churches and dive bars, and telling people to live out their God-given dreams—which, so far, she had been unable to do herself. When the concert was over, Nan headed toward her friend’s car, dizzy and nauseated, and Marie came up to her. “Would you help me fold some chairs?”

Nan leaned one hand against a pine tree. “Not tonight, hon.”

All the heat of Marie’s singing had gone inside her, dwindled to a low burn like a pilot light. Marie offered Nan a drink of her water. Nan, shaking, took it.

“Did God call you to do something?” Marie said.

Could she even call it a “call”? Really, now: *Be good to your kids’ boyfriends and girlfriends?* Their current love interests

included a dope-dealing batik artist; a college professor ten years too old for her daughter; a tanning salon junkie who was clearly out to bask in her son's paycheck; and a Dungeons & Dragons freak who was so shy that he lit up crimson whenever Nan offered him a Coke. And then—Dan's new girl. The scrappy one. Some tough little chick named Bertie who'd come up through foster care and spent time in juvie.

Marie was waiting.

"Come again?" Nan said.

"Did you have a vision for your life?"

Whatever had just happened to her was not the kind of thing you talked about. Was it a sin to lie if you couldn't find words for the truth?

"When I was a kid," Nan said, "I wanted to open an antique shop."

Marie's face flickered in the lamplight. "Maybe the proceeds could feed the hungry."

"Maybe," Nan said. But what could they possibly have in common—this night and glass doorknobs, this night and Hepplewhite dining chairs?

SHE TRIED TO TALK to Pastor Thomas about what had happened to her, but he didn't understand. He said that someone had left a kerosene lamp burning in the pines that night, and they were lucky it hadn't started a fire, and they wouldn't be having concerts again anytime soon. This

confirmed Nan's suspicion that God did not inform Pastor Thomas of all his doings but preferred to keep him busy with small administrative things. "Pray for direction," was the last bit of advice Marie had given her, and—awkwardly, and only once or twice—she did.

Direction did not appear. Two years passed. Her kids moved out, one by one. She made a strained effort to invite their weirdo sweethearts to dinner, still not quite seeing the point. She kept working at the community college, and an antiques appraiser gave a talk there once, but he didn't have any advice she hadn't already thought of. One day, though, she found herself out in Port Jefferson, browsing in the St. Joan's Hospital thrift shop, and saw a flier by the register: *Volunteers Wanted*. If her love of old things could benefit someone else in any way, maybe this was it.

She volunteered there for twelve years. Then, of course, came the war, and the closing of the thrift shop, and then *Returning Birds*.

One November, at the monthly tag sale, she noticed a woman with long braids fingering baby quilts in the cold. The brown had gone gray, she had put on weight, the tassels and bells were gone, but Nan went up to her and said, "Do you play guitar?"

MARIE HAD FINALLY managed it. Fourteen women lived at Elisha's Sisters. Some grew the vegetables. Some worked full-time jobs to help with expenses. One was a trained

carpenter and, when not maintaining the house, did free repairs for neighboring families. Patti, the sister who oversaw the kitchen, had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. St. Joan's is three hours from Austerlitz, but it's a Mecca for breast cancer treatment. Every few weeks, Marie and Patti were making the chemo pilgrimage.

Nan could guess what their health insurance was like. The tag sale proceeds were small, but they were all that Nan had. "For medical bills," Nan said. "Or travel expenses. Whatever you need." She handed Marie an envelope with \$740.

After refusing several times, then going inside to talk with Patti, Marie came back out. In the last light of that November afternoon, they had the conversation Nan would remind her of in the kitchen of Elisha's Sisters. And three months after that conversation, the phone call came. An anonymous donor was offering to buy the thrift shop on behalf of Returning Birds, on the condition that my grandmother would run it.

That was the story.

I sat there in the van, rubbing my arms, watching the headlights of passing cars. "So you didn't start the shop for Mom," I said. "You started it for yourself."

"I don't know why I started it." Nan coughed. "I shouldn't have."

"And Dad knew it." I thought of all the times Dad had pestered Nan about things I'd found boring—budgets and fundraising and expenses—and I'd resented him for



dampening her spirits, worrying over nothing. But the newsletter *had* gone out less frequently since Nan had started the shop; the support group leaders left messages that did not always get returned. And we did what? We sang along with Bing Crosby, tried on cloche hats. All the while, maybe in our own town, some other girl and her mother were living through it all again. A mother perches on a kitchen stool, smoking a pack of cigarettes in one long sitting. The daughter: *It's parent-teacher night*. The father: *She needs you there*. The father persists, the mother fidgets, their voices rise until the mother grabs the jar of change on the kitchen table and hurls it against the wall. While that woman's daughter cleaned up glass and coins, my grandmother and I were polishing crystal, rolling quarters, neglecting the mission for the means.

And yet—at that moment I wanted Nan to fight back. I wanted her to accuse me in return. How much did *I* care? How did *I* honor her memory? And what had I wanted to do tonight, really?

Nan didn't accuse me. I heard the rush of the highway, and a whippoorwill, and nothing else. She returned to her driving trance. Every once in a while she took a sharp breath, as if she were going to speak, but didn't. It was too late for ferries; she drove home through the city, and I slept.



OUR ROUTE HOME took us past the hospital and the thrift shop in the gray time before dawn. I was just waking up again, and when I saw blue-and-red flashing, I thought it was an ambulance pulling into the hospital. Then I saw the police cars and the back of a white truck sticking out of my grandmother's shop.

Nan pulled up as close as she could get with all the caution tape. We jumped out, and as my grandmother ran to talk to the police, I saw a boy my age standing and staring. The boy was Chris McCready. I walked toward him, running fingers under my eyes to rub away the mascara rings I was sure had formed there, and then I took another look at the vehicle that had plowed into Bertie's Nest.

"Oh my God," I said. "You drove the ice cream truck into my Nan's shop?"

"Are you tripping?" he said. "We're over there." He cocked his thumb over his shoulder, at the ice cream truck parked in the hospital lot. All its lights were off, but two men in scrubs were still loitering hopefully around it. I turned back to the wreckage: It was some other truck.

"You go out in the middle of the night?"

Chris shook his head, greasy black hair swinging over his eyes. He pushed it behind his ears. "My brother has some girl out in Long Beach. Made me sit in that stupid truck for three hours while they fooled around, and then her dad comes home and chases us off. Shit-for-brains. . . ." He gestured at his brother, who now was taking pictures

of the crash site with a disposable camera.

“Why’d you stop?”

Chris jerked his chin at the wreckage. “Don’t you live here? Upstairs?”

“No,” I said. “This is just the shop.”

“Oh. Well. I wanted to see if you were—”

Say *okay*, I thought. *See if you were okay.*

“—bugging out,” he said.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was my father, in his scrubs. He spun me around, searched my face, looked me over head to foot. “Dad, I’m okay,” I said. He yanked me in and hugged me so hard it scared me. He was supposed to be the calm one. I wriggled away, but it was too late. Chris was walking back to the ice cream truck, flashing me a peace sign.

The crash had seemed make-believe, like a fire drill at school. My father’s presence made it real. Siding splintered around the edges where the truck crashed through; the building was crumpled on one side, and part of the roof sat atop the truck like a knocked-over book. A fire engine pulled up, bleating and honking. Neither of us wanted to think of Mom, but I did, and I’m sure my father did too.

“They brought the driver into the ER,” Dad said. “He was drunk. He’s a mess. When they told me it was the shop. . . .” Bits of debris from the wreck were floating on the night breeze. A tuft of insulation landed in my hair and he picked it out. “What are you doing here? Didn’t you go to see Marie?”

“We didn’t stay,” I said, and looked at the shop. “This is the end, right?”

He rested his hand on my head. He smelled like latex and disinfectant soap. “Well,” he said. “This is the kind of thing insurance covers.”

I could never convince my father of it, but with all the certainty of fourteen, I knew what had happened. Marie was no Professor Marvel. She had power, and she had used it. She had prophesied a shop for Nan, and Nan had gotten it; Nan had come for help, and Marie had thrown the weight of her prayer into securing it. And now, disastrous salvation: All our repairs paid for, Nan’s selfish wish granted, a driver near death. All the more terrible because it was so clear to me, yet so thoroughly unprovable.

I was clinging to my father’s sleeve. My grandmother was still talking to the police. Every few moments, like the rest of us, she turned and stared at the truck jutting out of the shop.

“Will the insurance money be enough to rebuild it?” I asked.

“Probably.”

“Does she have to use it for that?”

My father pulled me closer. “She could keep it for Birds. She could sell the piece of land. She can do what she wants.”

“So this could be it,” I said.

“Do you want it to be?” he asked.

I looked again at where the truck had hit the shop. The

front door was gone. What had happened to the picture of my mother? Was it crushed under a tire? Splattered with engine oil? Thrown across the room, frame splintered? I took a step toward the shop. My father grabbed my arm.

“Keller?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Daniel,” Nan called out. My father told me to wait where I was and walked toward her.

I stood with eyes closed, smelling gas and exhaust. Then, breathing deeper, I found it—the familiar smell of wood and mothballs and coffee—Bertie’s Nest, broken open like a bottle and seeping out into the night. Was this a moment like Nan’s, in the pines? I didn’t know any prayers except the first few lines of the Our Father. At that moment, I could remember only a scrap: *Who art in Heaven*. But I didn’t hear it as a descriptor, I heard it as a question, spacious as the fireplace room at Elisha’s Sisters: *Who art in Heaven?*

A mother? A warrior? Both? Or neither?

Someone took my hand.

I startled and jerked my hand back on reflex. I opened my eyes. It was Chris, black eyes wide and shining with siren lights. “Sorry,” he muttered. He hooked his thumbs through the belt loops in his jeans, hiked them up from mid-thigh to crotch level. (The boys I liked wore their jeans seven sizes too big.)

“It’s okay,” I said. Too embarrassed to look him in the eye now, I focused on his jawline instead, downy with the

start of a teenage beard, and then noticed his necklace. It was a Celtic cross, pewter, strung on a black leather cord.

“You, um . . .” he said, “want to go to the mall sometime?”

I felt nothing. What had happened to me? I didn’t want to mill around the novelty store shaking Magic 8-Balls with Chris McCready. I didn’t even want to make out in the mall movie theater. It was four-thirty in the morning; our shop was destroyed, and therefore maybe saved, and I wanted to know why. “Do you believe that?” I said, and pointed to his necklace. “Do you think God answers prayers?”

Poor kid. He was only fifteen. All year in shop class, I’d given him googly eyes. He’d walked away for ten minutes and come back to this.

WE HAD LITTLE religion in my house, but the accident at Bertie’s Nest shocked me into reverence for years. To Nan’s dismay, I subscribed to the Elisha’s Sisters mailing list. I’m older now, and the reverence has ebbed and flowed, but I can’t get rid of the picture: the truck thrust into the shop.

For a while I told no one what I’d concluded, but then I began telling the story over and over until it became something separate from me. The first time I told it was at a basement sleepover party in ninth grade. Word got around, and kids asked for it at every sleepover afterward. As I approached senior year and made friends who wore midnight velvet and metal studs and hung out in

cemeteries, I pressed my back against gravestones and told the story over bottles of wine cooler. I told it in college, sitting in circles on dorm room floors, and twice I told it to boys as we lay naked in bed.

When I turned twenty, I took a survey course in world religions. One day when the professor was late, someone who'd heard bits and pieces asked me to tell the whole thing. Compared to the stories of martyrs and bodhisattvas, what had happened to me looked like superstition. I'd taken my intro-level psychology and biology, learned about the human mind's gift for pattern-making and storytelling, the way we note two events and put a *therefore* between them. I changed the subject. My story just seemed so adolescent and dramatic. All of it. Even Nan's renewed sense of calling after the accident, her rededication to the Returning Birds mission—*especially* that.

I steer clear of grand visions and life missions. I spend a lot of nights drawing, but I don't write artist statements and I don't need a gallery opening. I'm suspicious of ambition: I designed a few t-shirts for Returning Birds, which sell well at Bertie's Nest. And that's enough for me. But now, ten years after that ride to Elisha's Sisters, that night with Marie in the kitchen, that truck crashing into the shop, the story keeps coming back to me—the way Bertie's Nest was saved. It won't leave me alone, and I can guess at its reasons.



AFTER THE ACCIDENT, Nan talked about abandoning the thrift shop, but within a few days she was on the phone to contractors. She and Dad also decided that it was time to get serious about the board of directors.

So then—can I manage to tell this next part through my fourteen-year-old eyes? Can I forget my adult knowledge, peel away my cynicism? I'd have to invent memories, because I stopped paying attention then; I was bored by the very word "board." But this is what I know now, at twenty-four.

The board used to be made up of core volunteers: the counselors, the babysitting coordinator, the thrift shop managers. But now Nan needed fundraisers and strategizers, and she found them. If you were a politician running for office, or a corporate bigwig looking to build community cred, the Returning Birds board was a great place to be. Support the military *and* women—charm the right and the left in one easy step.

So Birds found out what it was like to have money. Nan stepped down into an Associate Director position; she mostly oversaw Bertie's Nest and edited the newsletter. She asked the board to make Willie Pryor the Executive Director, and thank God they listened. Willie was a charismatic young woman who had served with my mother in the Gulf. She was sick, on and off—nausea, migraines—but kept her car on the road, finished school, got happily married. She was both smart and wise, and she was probably the main reason Returning Birds stayed on



course for most of a decade.

Until it didn't.

I was away finishing my senior year at college when it happened. Nan and Willie thought they'd won the grand prize: Dan Chase, a businessman from Westchester, who made his millions picking up animal carcasses from farms to turn into dog food. Except Dan Chase wasn't interested in Willie's dream projects—like subsidized summer vacations, a chance for young vets and their families to bond. "That's not your main concern," he said. What worried him was that the wars were losing popularity in the polls. So now *Returning Birds* is about to spend thirty thousand dollars of his money on bunting and sparklers and Port-a-Johns for our first-ever Support the Troops rally. Chase's goal: a bigger crowd than Don Henley got for his outdoor concert here last year.

My mother could not have gone, with a crowd like that.

LAST WEEK WILLIE, Nan, and I took the ferry to Connecticut and drove up to the Lime Kiln Wildlife Sanctuary in Sheffield, Massachusetts. The trees were a haze of red buds; little gold flags were breaking out on the forsythias. Nan leaned on my arm as we made our way to the picnic table that Willie calls their "executive retreat center."

A couple of times a year they do this, just the two of them—bring sandwiches, a thermos of coffee, about five pounds of chocolate—and watch birds while they

strategize. It was while bird-watching, after all, that Nan first named her newsletter. There's no good reason they need to come all the way up here to spot sparrows and shoot the breeze. But the sanctuary is off Route 8, which is the way to Elisha's Sisters, and I suspect that some magnet in Nan always pulls her toward Marie.

This time they convinced me to come along, and it took us an hour to get down to business. While we ate, we read the bird checklist from the visitor center and decided what kind of birds we'd be. Nan said she'd be an American kestrel. Willie picked barn swallow. "I *feel* like I swallowed a barn," she said.

"No," Nan said. "You're an ovenbird."

Everyone wants me to step up when Willie goes on her maternity leave. Chase and the board are looking for someone just like me: I will look beautiful on podiums, and my picture can go on fundraising letters. Willie and Nan have other motives. They think I can be the counterweight to Chase—steer Birds back to its real work before he rewrites the mission statement, which he's already pushing to do. But what counterweight can I offer? He has more money than God. I sell t-shirts at the mall.

You have the authority, Nan and Willie say, of being Bertie's daughter. The power of your ideals. Youthful energy. They are sure I have these things, deep down—reserves that just need tapping.

I looked over the bird list. "Least flycatcher" sounded about right for me. Instead I said "bobolink" and tore

open the bar of toffee almond.

“You know the next thing he’ll do,” Nan said. “He’ll get them to close the thrift shop. They’re just waiting for me to die.”

I looked at Willie, who knows how to make Nan laugh when she gets melodramatic. But she only looked back at me. “I wish you’d been at the last board meeting,” she said.

“I’ve told them what the shop is for,” I said. “A dozen times.” The argument has been going on ever since Chase joined us: Bertie’s Nest is a drag on the budget; the profits only pay for the building, so the staff is costing Birds money. But here, again, he misses the point. The shop was never just a fundraiser. So many women come in and start talking to us that Nan has put armchairs in the back.

“We need another big donor,” Nan said. “Someone who’s on our side.”

“The leads are pretty thin.” Willie pulled a file folder from her bag. She and Nan began to go over a list, but I was watching the birds darting around the picnic area. Those fluffy gray-and-white ones—were they phoebes? Willie’s thinking of naming the baby Phoebe, and I brought my camera, hoping to get a good picture of one for her nursery—a surprise for the baby shower. The maybe-phoebes perched and dove; I shot and zoomed in to see what I’d caught. Fierce little thing: the bird had a bee in its mouth.

Willie leaned her head on her hand. Nan crossed off another name. And then, before I could stop myself, I was

talking. “We should find whoever gave you the shop.”

The air began that unpleasant vibrating it does when I’ve said something I shouldn’t. This never happened when I was fourteen. Now, I can’t even look at Nan sometimes. I feel her sizing up everything I say, checking to see if I’m amounting to anything yet. Sometimes I’m convinced she can see right through me, just like when I was a kid. She knew exactly why I wanted to locate that donor: Maybe *they’d* be the counterweight to Chase, and I wouldn’t have to step up.

“What if I wrote an open letter in the newsletter,” I said, “and asked them to come forward. Just said I wanted to thank them—”

Willie put her hand on mine. “What if we just asked our lawyer to pass a note along to theirs?”

IT’S AMAZING HOW quickly a thing can spring open.

She was in a nursing home now. Alzheimer’s. Her husband didn’t think it mattered at this point, our knowing. But all the same, out of respect: Let’s call her Georgia.

She had money, she liked to give it away, and in the old days—before she’d given Nan the shop, before *Returning Birds* existed—she didn’t do it with such secrecy. I’m not revealing too much, I think, if I say that her name is engraved on a brick in the lobby of St. Joan’s Hospital, since she shares that honor with 512 other people. But she was the kind of donor who is often invited to lunch by the

VP of development.

Georgia had taken personal offense at the trustees' decision to shut down the St. Joan's thrift shop. She'd believed in it. At the end of each season, she'd brought her children's, and then her grandchildren's, outgrown clothing, washed and folded, to be tagged with colored dots. God knows she could have afforded new furniture for her screened-in porch, but she found a set of deep wicker chairs at the thrift shop, paid three times the sticker price, and refinished them herself. She knew the volunteers by name—Frank, Polly, Wendy. And Nan, of course.

The decision to shut down the thrift shop wasn't the only reason she stopped giving to St. Joan's. The new hospital president irked her: His policy changes, she believed, led to the nurses' strike. Besides, her grandchildren's private school had launched a capital campaign. By the time Nan started her parking-lot tag sales for *Returning Birds*, Georgia had stopped coming around to St. Joan's. She had her endoscopy done at the Mayo Clinic.

For years, she'd been attending an annual philanthropy conference in Boston, and in 1995, the sessions included a seminar called "Spirituality of Giving," led by a woman named Marie. Marie began her session with a story. She told this roomful of professional givers about a woman named Nancy, who was scraping together the money for her nonprofit organization with tag sales, but had given an entire month's proceeds to help a stranger with medical expenses. Then Marie told them about *Returning Birds*.

When I spoke to Georgia's husband on the phone more than a decade later, he said his wife was never the airy-fairy type and had probably attended the seminar because a friend was going. At any rate, she was startled to hear St. Joan's mentioned, and she remembered Nan. It was a shame, she thought, that Nan had to resort to outdoor tag sales with the thrift shop standing empty so nearby. She remembered Nancy Shonham as motivated, responsible—a good person to turn the place over to.

Georgia's husband didn't get into the homework she'd done, but it must have been considerable. Besides putting Nan in charge, she made other stipulations: That Returning Birds become a real 501(c)(3). Form a board. Write a mission statement. She'd expected it to become a real, self-sustaining, grownup organization.

For the first time in her life, Georgia kept her giving a secret. Her husband couldn't tell me why. Perhaps Marie's seminar had made her game for an experiment: See what happens if you don't let your left hand know what your right is doing. Or maybe she'd had enough of the entanglements of giving.

He called me "love" and said he had to go. He didn't ask why I'd called. Instead, he said he'd heard that Birds was doing well, and that his family was now fully committed to a small, set number of charitable causes.

It's amazing how quickly a thing can snap shut.



I HAVEN'T TOLD Nan that shortly after that phone call, I ran into Marie outside St. Joan's. Now she's the one in the passenger seat, being driven there for treatments. We've started having coffee every few weeks, before her appointments.

Marie argues that this is how God takes action: Through people willing to walk through an open door.

I say: And sending trucks to crash through buildings?

Or, she says, following a drunk as he climbs into the driver's seat, and making an act of mercy out of the stupid thing he was going to do anyway.

And what if God doesn't exist at all?, I say. I might as well stay at the t-shirt shop, then, because Willie and Nan are wrong about me. I don't have deep reserves of energy and idealism. *This* is the flavor of person I turned out to be. Quiet. Tired. And I'm going to be the lookout for a thousand returning birds? Who's looking out for *me*?

Says Marie: Tell me again how you loved going to work at the piercing booth with Bertie.

Says Marie: Was it really the *mall* you loved so much? There's more than one way to go to work with your Mother.

And, says Marie: Magnificat.

I WALKED INTO Bertie's Nest today with a hanging lantern, a castoff from a coworker. No one was at the register, and the record player was silent, but I heard the teakettle

whistling in the kitchen and then I heard it stop. I put on Peggy Lee's *Black Coffee* and waited for Nan to come out. When she did—holding her mug in two hands, walking close to the wall—I took the tea from her and pointed to the lantern. “My friend's aunt died and left her this,” I said, “and she offered it to us.”

Nan pushed her glasses from the top of her head down to her nose and looked at the lantern. It was a foot high, clear glass, with a thin metal collar. “Bell jar-style lantern, like they used in colonial houses, eighteenth century,” she said. “Pretty.”

“Original?” I said.

“Just a replica.” She pointed to the collar, engraved all around with birds. “This motif on the bezel band is modern.”

“I thought we might've won the lottery with this one,” I said.

Nan got a price sticker from under the counter and marked it in a shaky hand, \$25—.

“The lawyer called me,” I said. “He gave me a phone number. And a name.”

When I'd told her the story, she said: “I *knew* Marie arranged it.”

“No. That's not what the man said.” But the phone rang, and I knew we were done talking. Nan answered it and I stood watching her, thinking I should offer to help her dye her hair later. Her roots are an inch long. She's still doing it herself, and stubbornly hanging on to black.





I'VE SAVED THAT torn and crumpled page that Nan threw on the table in Marie's kitchen. A portrait of a seated woman in profile, drawn in that Art Nouveau-revival style that was popular in the 1960s. The grass around her bare feet springs up into a psychedelic border that frames the whole page. "To me a lush carpet of pine needles or spongy grass is more welcome than the most luxurious Persian rug."

Why did it make her so angry? This is what I think: When Marie said she had something for her, Nan was hoping for one more prediction, one more instruction: *Do this, and your shop will be saved*. She wanted to have her fortune told one more time—to believe, after all, that Marie was somehow magic. But Marie wasn't magic. She just had love at a low burn. She saw the page and it reminded her of the concert in the pines. I wonder if she was telling Nan, too: Forget the thousand-dollar kimonos, the lanterns worth a fortune. Forget the thrift shop, even, if you have to. You were offered an assignment to love.

But who can say? If I asked Marie now, I'm not even sure she'd remember that paper. And anyway, how can I blame Nan? I want the impossible, too. I want to meet my mother for lunch at the food court. I want to press my face into her shoulder and smell her smoky hair and feel her arms wrapped so hard around me that I can hardly breathe. Then I want her to look at me the way she did before the war—as if everything about me, even my problems, called

up her love in waves—and I want her to tell me what to do. Because I have a decision to make. Willie’s baby is coming soon.

Instead, I tell Nan that I’m going to hang out at Bertie’s Nest for a while after she closes up. When she leaves, I climb the stairs and go over to the shelf between the windows. I installed that shelf on my own, the summer I turned fifteen and the new Bertie’s Nest opened, and there I built an altar for my mother: A Joni Mitchell record. A pair of piercing studs from the kiosk in the mall. A letter she sent me from Saudi Arabia. The battered photograph from the old shop—re-framed, touched up—but another one too. She and my father are sitting in their apartment, the day they brought me home from the hospital. She’s nursing me.

I sit on the velveteen couch and look up at this photo for a long time. A long time.

On a hook next to the shelf hangs my mother’s uniform jacket. I open my purse and take out a Charms lollipop, apple-green, and put it in her jacket pocket. Then I go down the stairs—sturdy, new, not a creak—and lock up the shop.

I know what I’ll do. I’m afraid. And I wonder: When I watch Willie feeding her baby, will I find it any easier to be brave? To imagine the God Marie talks about—the mother who never loses track of us? ☺☹



JEN HINST-WHITE recently completed her first novel, *Inklings*, the story of a young woman aspiring to become a tattoo artist at a time when few women were tattooing. Her stories and essays have appeared in *The Common*, *Good Letters* (the *Image Journal* blog), *Print Oriented Bastards*, *Cactus Heart*, *HoldADoor.com*, *Tight*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars.