SOUVENIRS

by Kathryn Paulsen

After Brother died, they read his diary, hunting the worst. They didn't find it. He hadn't left a note, and the pains and difficulties they found in the diary were limited to those that seem endurable, open to being written about, thought about, weighed, analyzed, solved. Knowing by this means all they could for sure about his problems was oddly comforting, if only because what they were reading was what he had still been alive to write: "Well, winter will soon be upon us. I hope my pipes don't freeze again." "Snow this morning. So it begins." "I have decided to stay at Provincial. Hope it is the right decision."

Those were among his last entries, and the first, naturally, that they read. That the sisters read. Though wanting to know themselves, they wanted to keep their parents from knowing, fearing for their father's heart and their mother's blood pressure. Not that they didn't fear for themselves, too: after peeks at the end to see whether he'd said anything like, Friday, 10 a.m. Life is hopeless, will kill myself today, they agreed to put the diaries and other papers away, not to look at them again till some time had

passed, not to subject themselves to too much of this written illusion of his still being alive. They found something satisfying in their secret knowledge. After the funeral, when Mother and Father were talking about taking Brother's car back home with them, driving it a thousand miles south pulling a trailer filled with his effects, Oldest Sister, who'd been first to read his last diary, whispered to her sisters: "We've got to talk them out of it. That car could be a mess. I'll bet he'd been having real trouble with it. One of the last things he wrote was, 'Car is not running well at all,' and that might even have been one of the things that--"

High among the other things they learned had weighed upon him was money. In the spring he had been given a good raise, though even by local standards he'd still earned only a modest salary, and had begun to spend a lot and planned to spend more, which worried his parents and Youngest Sister, who wondered whether this burst of extravagance was an acute symptom of his old illness. He'd bought a used pickup from his girlfriend's cousin, a motorcycle, and two horses, one of them a pure-bred Arabian; but he didn't enjoy them for long. After the closing of the Home was announced in early summer, which meant the loss of his job, he sold the horses and began slaughtering his animals, till he'd filled his freezer and had only a few hens and two or three rabbits left.

"I must try to live within my means," he wrote. "Last year I went way overboard spending on animals. Eggs don't pay for the cost of feed."

"Why is it that I can't control what I spend?" he wrote. "Where does it all go? Must stop using credit card for all but

emergency."

Later they would be impressed by the records of his efforts to control his spending: elaborate budgets and for an occasional stretch daily accounts of every outbound penny. Now they told each other that it couldn't have been money alone that drove him to it. He could always have called upon Mom and Dad for financial help, and must have known that he could. Hadn't they lent him money to buy the land and trailer, and other times for other purposes? Bailed him out of debt years ago with not a word of reproach? Brought him out of the corner of his ex-wife's kitchen, taken him up north where they supported him and did for him till he could live and work on his own: teach sign language to a palsied youth at the Home, love women, think about marrying again even, garden organically, collect animals.

Just before the news of the Home's closing, right after Mom and Dad had arrived up north for the summer, Brother took them to see the house he was thinking about renting for the winter. It was a huge old house, drafty and dilapidated, farther out of town than his trailer. They thought it was a weird place to want to live, but said only that it would be a good idea to find out how much it would cost to heat, since it could end up being really expensive. He'd agreed, and that was the last they heard about the place. At the time, Youngest Sister had thought the episode an example of a part of his illness he would always have with him: seizing excitedly on something that attracted him without being capable by himself of considering its drawbacks. Now, knowing that he'd been thinking of getting married in the fall, she

wondered whether the place had appealed to him because it was one of the few houses around big enough for a family that had seemed within his budget.

They all agreed that he couldn't have planned it, he'd just done it on the spur of the moment: "He'd never have hurt us on purpose this way." "If he'd thought for a minute, he wouldn't have done it." Oldest Sister pushed the theory that he was in the midst of a breakdown, hallucinating: "Maybe he really was about to go hunting, and he had the gun in his hand, and suddenly this voice says to him, 'Why don't you shoot yourself instead?', or his hand just turns around, as if with a will of its own, and pulls the trigger."

You could do it as quickly, as thoughtlessly, as breaking a glass, with as little power to stop once you had started. Who, looking down from the edge of a high place, hasn't imagined jumping? Brother's problem was an imagination he couldn't say no to when it was acting up. That took him over, wiped him out. Sprayed his brains onto the face of the television (had it been on or off, they wondered), the top of the clock.

Left the rest of him flopped on the floor at the foot of the bed, feet in the open closet. Where his girlfriend found him three or four days later on Thanksgiving afternoon.

Two days after that, in their hotel, the family asked her when she'd last spoken with him, what had been said, how he'd sounded, what she'd known about his breakdown and illness ten years before. But not what they wanted most to know: How had it been when she'd opened his door. Had the air, though clear and

icy that day, carried the sweetish smell of decay from within? How much of him had been left? How long did she take to recognize the remains? Did she bring herself to touch them? Did the dog bark or whine or whimper? Or cry like crazy.

"It must have been just horrible for Ellie," Middle Sister said.

Awful enough to hear the bare news over the phone: Brother's dead. It appears to be self-inflicted. A gun--

"I can't imagine it," Oldest said. "They'd have had to carry me away."

But they did imagine. Youngest Sister dreamed Brother'd killed himself with a shotgun, a revolver, and a rifle all at once. Which meant she wanted to know which--and more. Her sisters did, too. They decided to go ask the detective one morning alone.

They caught him early, quarter of eight, coffee hardly started. They could tell he'd rather not have had to do this:

"Your brother's death--it really got to me. I've been separated from my wife for a while, and living by myself, and you get pretty lonely what with the holidays, and him being out there in the woods on his own, and how do you know but what you wouldn't someday get to feel--"

Despite his voluptuous mustache and portly, fatherly form, he couldn't have been older than Youngest Sister. He sat across from them, three in a row, as if to be judged or comforted by authorities.

"--but what can I tell you?"

It was Youngest Sister who began as the others nodded:

"We don't really know very much. We'd like you to tell us as much as you can about what you found and how it happened. We don't even know what kind of gun it was, except that it was a gun Dad had sent him to hunt grouse with."

But which gun didn't matter, did it? He'd had other guns.

The detective nodded, as if relieved to be able to give one clean answer: "It was a twelve-gauge, over-and-under shotgun, with number-six birdshot."

"We wondered--" Youngest drew her eyebrows together for a second, a gesture that made her look even more than usual the wise child. "Ellie said some friend of hers is a deputy here, and he asked how they could rule out a hunting accident, since it was such a beautiful day and the dog was in the trailer--"

Brother, after all, had been a friend to animals.

"Okay. The evidence does not point to a hunting accident. But I can't tell you that it was impossible. When you get a death like that, you consider all the possibilities. The first thing you check for is evidence of homicide. We checked for any fingerprints other than your brother's on the weapon, or absence of fingerprints, and for any sign of a struggle or of someone else's presence. And the position of the wound--it was point blank. We could tell because there were--I'm sorry--there were bits of--" His voice fell to a whisper they could barely hear: "flesh and hair--stuck to the muzzle."

They nodded, as if to show they saw, to show they could take it, could take more, and were grateful, but were sorry to be putting him through this. He sat with hands around his coffee

cup, still full and now cold.

"It was most consistent with being intentionally self-inflicted. It would be almost impossible to shoot yourself accidentally in that position. If it had been a hunting accident, he would have, I'm sorry, he would have--blown off--much more."

He looked down at his coffee, as if for other, better words to have used, or to summon his strength before facing them again.

"Um, we can't be very certain about the time of death, but we're pretty sure he'd been dead at least four days by the time Ellie found him. That was Thanksgiving--Thursday--so say early Monday at the latest, although it's hard to tell because of the--it was hot in there, the heat was way up, I guess he'd come home and found it cold and turned it up to warm the place quickly, then--it stayed that way--so, excuse me, the decomposition. . . . "

The word was enough--the word threatening a picture--to turn them away. Later each would turn it over and over, imagine its colors, as if unearthing his body.

"And late Friday at the earliest. We're still looking for other evidence, but so far as we know Ellie was the last to talk to him, about eleven-thirty--Have you talked to her yet?"

They said yes together.

"I hope she doesn't--I guess she was pretty upset about that conversation."

Youngest asked why.

"She didn't tell you? Well, it seems they had sort of an argument, about whether to go to church on Sunday, and I guess he was supposed to call her later that weekend, and when he

didn't she just thought he was being--you know--so she thinks, if only she'd called him right back, or gone over, but--"

Oldest finished: "He was probably dead by then."

At least three swallows followed close.

"Is there anything else I can tell you?"

"I think you've answered most of our questions," said Youngest.

"Um, you're having the trailer cleaned?"

"Yes, my husband got a hold of those people you recommended," she said. "They're supposed to be nearly done."

"Well, be sure it really is done before you go out there."

"We're planning to go this afternoon after the funeral, to start packing up his things."

He looked worried. "Well, just be sure it's really clean before you do. The thing is, there could be--when a dog is shut up--excuse me, with a body--he could carry--um, pieces--so you have to clean everywhere."

"Thanks for telling us." "We'll make sure."

"Is the dog all right?" Middle Sister asked as they stood up.

"Seems to be okay. There's a family has it. They say it's real gentle, and eating well. It's in quarantine now, in a cage, just in case."

* * *

The trailer was judged clean enough to be visited that afternoon.

Ron and Leonard, Youngest Sister's husband and father-in-law, who had seen it, said the cleaners were doing a terrific job. Youngest Sister and Oldest Sister and Father changed out of their funeral clothes into jeans and heavy shoes at the hotel after lunch.

Youngest thought how this would be the real funeral, handling what they could of his abandoned life, having been denied his body. Packing stuff in boxes, however temporary its disposition--some would be stored in a friend's barn, some left to sit through the winter in the trailer, some would be divided among them and taken away now, there had been talk already of what they should take. She would not miss this sorting and putting away, though she felt selfish and guilty about once more letting Middle Sister, who'd agreed to stay at the hotel and keep Mother company, be the good girl to do what no one else wanted to. If only Father had taken their hint that the daughters and in-laws could take care of things without him, and stayed with Mother.

Did he guess how much they worried about him, about how his heart could be taking this? Hadn't her own--and her sisters', too, to hear them tell--bounded around as if wanting out, the night of the news? But he'd survived that night. (What to come could be worse?) And seemed calm now, almost relaxed in his sadness, not about to burst into tears at any minute like his daughters, but not able for even a minute to turn away from grief.

Since they'd arrived he'd been waiting, but not for them; listening, but not for them; nodding at what they'd say while his ears reached to hear something else. What? A message from the dead? An explanation he could accept and believe?

He was moving so smoothly, so purposefully, as he moved the boxes they had taped together last night into her husband's truck. Was this how he'd been at work, at war, preparing for some dangerous mission? Alone. But men were not alone at war. They worked together, knew what to do. Did not need to ask each other what they were feeling, as she longed to ask Father now (let him throw his arms around her and cry on her all he wanted), only what could be crueler?

So instead, as always, they would guess--mightn't a guess be better than an answer? Oldest Sister thought she'd found some evidence: a doodle they all agreed had to be Dad's, in his characteristic exuberant style, on a pad by the telephone in their hotel room.

"This is us," Oldest had said after lunch of the three little red fins on the top side of the diving fish.

"And this" --the black arrowhead made of curlicues coming out of the fish's mouth "--was Brother."

Sure, but what did that tell them?

Oldest had put that doodle into her pocket, so it was hers now. But then only one person could keep it. One person had to keep it for all of them, if it was worth keeping. This was the second time today Youngest had stood and watched, like being a child again, as Oldest Sister did something she wished she'd been the one to do. Kissing the coffin might be a common ritual, but at the time it felt like a gesture Oldest had appropriated, and that Youngest couldn't have repeated without looking like a copycat. They should have all done it--or no one should have. Had it

pained Mom and Dad to watch Oldest, or had they watched? What had their eyes attached to as the coffin passed?

So Oldest Sister had a souvenir. Something Dad, although himself its author, didn't know existed. And where would she keep it? In her jewelry box, to be wrinkled by rings? What other place could she have for valuable things? An envelope for birth certificate, passport, and will, if she had one? If they found the doodle among her papers when she died, would they remember where it came from?

Well, there would be lots of other papers in Brother's trailer. It was the fear of what they might find among them, and preparing to face it, that was keeping them so quiet, here in the car. Youngest Sister imagined little white scraps all over the place, floating in the air, that she and Oldest must quickly spear, gather, and hide from Father. She imagined them building a little white nest of Brother's papers, a portable nest that must be packed up and carried away in a box.

They parked near the road, leaving room for Leonard to park the pickup after dropping his son off at work. Brother's place looked like always, although Oldest Sister had never seen it, or any other place up here, in just this season. Ground brown, no white or green, and soggy from melted snow. Alive with the makings of a dozen projects: old lumber that would have been good for something new if the lean-to had protected it sufficiently from the elements; rusted metal that seemed purposefully bent; barrels, cans, forks, wire; those warm and solid looking dishes for animal food.

But some projects had been impressively finished since Oldest had seen their earlier stages: there was at least one more animal shed now, and the barn--its door swung open--had been raised and roofed. Two summers ago she'd sat on a ladder to hold an upright while Dad marked the right angles with the spirit level. Mistakes had been made, work redone, and Dad called himself a Swedish carpenter. She thought now that her father was really as gentle as her brother had been, both of them too gentle to always know the practical thing to do, or even know what they wanted, however good they were with their hands and their imaginations. Almost as soon as their house up here had been sold that summer, Mom and Dad had wanted it back.

By then they were on their way to Florida, their way to Texas, their way to god knew where. While Brother stayed behind. They left him with all their reject possessions he wanted to take--and some he pretended, teasing, not to want, like the one-eyed cat that Youngest Sister had saved years ago for a long, full life of mousing and birding (Brother'd claimed he feared for his chickens and brand new, beautiful, expensive pheasants), and the gun-shy, touch-hungry dog that had never managed to leave puppyhood, in which quality the whole family might have recognized more than a passing resemblance to themselves.

Both pets had died within the year. Both were buried, probably, somewhere on this property. Back in the woods under one of the flat stones he never made a patio of? Soon another dog had come along, the one that had been in the trailer, too timid a dog to have nibbled at Brother's flesh, whatever the detective

thought.

Father headed for the barn. The sisters climbed onto Brother's new porch. Scraped their shoes. Passed through the door.

The only smell inside was cherry incense. A young woman was washing dishes with lots of suds; a man was vacuuming. There were books in stacks and boxes all over the living room floor. The woman said she was in college and could use a lot of the books if no one wanted them and they'd just be thrown out. Those in the boxes were the ones she'd picked out.

Sure, they said, they'd just give a quick look.

Oldest Sister picked up a book about job hunting for Middle Sister. "And here's that Chinese cookbook I gave him," she said. "You and Ron should have that, it's out of print now, so it's hard to find, and if you see one on herbs, that's another I gave him, you should take that, too." These were books she would like to own herself, but, having bought them as gifts, she wanted them to stay that way.

She thought now about the book she hadn't given him, although she'd kept meaning to, the one on her Christmas list from last year and the year before. She'd been reading it herself the last time she'd seen Brother, up here two summers ago, and had thought the stuff about schizophrenia might be good for him to read, give him a new way of thinking about what had happened to him, so that he might--what? Understand it? Get in control of it? So that it wouldn't happen again? What a joke, what arrogance, to think that anything she might have done, let alone giving him a

book (was that how her family saw her: Miss Know-it-all Big Sister, claiming a cure for anything that ailed you was in a good book somewhere), could have saved his life. What phone call from New York could have fortified him with hope, when his poor lover and her invitation to church got turned down?

So there they had been, together in church this morning: the remains of Brother's family on the right; Ellie with hers across the aisle; a surprising number of friends and strangers behind. The minister's words had amazed her: compassionate, modest, maybe even comforting. He'd said something she would remember all her life, like a gift: "Grief is the price you pay for love."

Or did he say "we"?

No matter, it was a sentiment no one could deny, whatever the conjugation, except maybe a psychopath. It was a test, a measure of value: Is this grief? Was that love?

"Your brother was a peach of a guy," the man from the diner said. The crush of standard funeral flowers looked downright tropical in this northern clime.

For the dead these answers were too late. What a foolish gesture that had been, kissing his coffin, as if he could feel--futile and self-dramatizing. She must have kissed Brother sometime in life--more than sometime, many times, when they were children together--but couldn't remember. As much else as she could remember: his shadow beside hers as they looked for the baby kittens in the straw in the basement by match light, his feet stamping with hers on the fire they'd set, how he used to call himself, "Burr rabbit, born and bred in the briar patch," before

either of them was old enough to know what a Brer, or a burr, or a briar was. Grown-up and raising animals as a hobby, he made friends with other rabbit breeders at the feed store. He told her how nourishing the meat was, lean and tasty and low in cholesterol, how in other countries like France they ate it like chicken; too bad, he said, the American palate was so provincial. She still had some rabbit recipes at home she'd kept meaning to send him. He'd talked a little last summer about his ill-fated marriage, how he'd known on the eve that it was a mistake (after all, hadn't he in childhood always been attracted to independent girls like his sisters?) but couldn't bring himself to back out so late, how it was hard to resist when you were so ripe for the picking. He'd hoped he'd never be so ripe for the picking again.

She hadn't been able to tell from its smooth, sparkly paint whether the coffin was fiberglass, metal, or wood; it looked roomy--cheeky as the fenders of an old-fashioned car. Meant, however vulgar, to be displayed, not buried. She had trouble imagining him inside.

Or that he was outside forever, never again to pass into this carton of a trailer. How could they get it bare enough so that it wouldn't look as if he might any minute walk in?

Only by moving it to another place, where the woods that were its main decoration would not reach right up to the window, as if to say, come out and play. All over the country, the weekend of his death had been a beautiful one. What had that beauty said to Brother?

He hadn't had much money or many valuables, but it was

amazing how many other possessions he had. Like Father, he must not have liked to throw anything out; broken things could be fixed one day. So he had a new stereo and a little old one, a new television and an old one. Duplicates and triplicates of coffee makers and candlesticks.

"We should be sure to take his share of Aunt Jessie's silver plate," said Oldest Sister.

Youngest Sister only nodded, as she stared at his progress charts for the children at the Home and tried to decipher his remarks crowded under the categories Feeding, Dressing, Bathing, Walking, Other Coordination, Talking, Sign Language, Other Communication, Socializing. The poor kids, locked up now in state institutions, most of them, where no one would have the time to care whether or not they learned to tie their shoelaces, and deprived of Brother's tender companionship, deprived now even of his visits, though how heartbreaking those could have been for either side. Would any of them know, who could tell them, how he'd died? Who would inflict such knowledge on their helplessness?

"We should go through the records, too," said Oldest Sister, walking into the little room Brother and Father had built at the end of the living room. "He has some stuff we should keep, some early Beatles, and I'll bet there are things Mom and Dad would like."

Youngest Sister followed and sat down beside her in the middle of the room and took three records off the top of the nearest pile. "Weren't these yours?" she said. Folk albums Brother

adopted after Oldest abandoned them, thinking of them as corny. "You should take them."

"Well, someone should."

It was a good decade since she'd heard most of those songs, even on the radio. She wondered whether Brother ever listened to them. Or to this: the blue-jacketed Coltrane record she had given him years ago, thinking to introduce him to jazz, sparkled like new, dust-free in its crisp paper, probably never played even once. Well, she'd take it; it was beautiful and hard to find, and hers was warped. She lifted another record she'd given him, by a short-lived rock group known for their bawdy lyrics: "What about this? Do you want it? It's probably a collectors' item."

Youngest shrugged, as if it were not a question of wanting or liking, said that maybe Middle Sister would. "And here's 'My Fair Lady'," she added. "Mom and Dad would like that. Why don't we give them all his musicals. I think he has a lot of them."

"That reminds me--Did you read that article in--what was that magazine Dad had?"

"Capitalist Reporter or one of those? Yes."

They both wondered now whether Brother had followed its advice. The article had recommended investing in Original Cast Recordings of musicals, including any old musical that got recorded, because such recordings passed out of print quickly and appreciated at a phenomenal rate. But the trouble with that magazine, they'd agreed, was that if you collected all the things it advised, not only would you be spending all your money on

geegaws and memorabilia but you wouldn't have room in your house left for anything else, and you'd have to spend all your time tending your collections.

Brother's job and his hobby had been tending the living. Maybe that was why there was such disorder in his things.

In mid-afternoon Leonard brought them cokes and hamburgers, for which the cherry incense and the thought of what it replaced allowed no appetite.

"There must be a thousand dollars' worth of tools out in that barn, easy," he said. "It'd be a shame to just leave it all there. I guess maybe your dad'll take some--"

"I could use some tools," said Oldest. "I don't really have many at home, just a couple of screwdrivers."

"Tell you what," Leonard said, "I'll go out there and make you up a little tool kit, an assortment of the basic stuff. What do you think of that?"

"Fine."

"You could take these with you," said Youngest Sister, holding out the box of hamburgers.

"Sure you don't want any?"

"Sure."

"I know he's trying to be helpful," Youngest said after Leonard closed the door. "He is helpful, with the police and the cleaning and stuff. But I wish he wouldn't--like at the funeral when he sat between us instead of in the next row--it wasn't his brother."

They finished the records--most they put aside for Middle

Sister and her family and Mom and Dad--and turned to the papers. In one box were notebooks from college and high school, college yearbooks and souvenirs, and a wedding picture and an invitation. In the file called Crushes were two pictures cut out of newspapers, one of a girl with a ridiculous French name who'd been some sort of club queen in high school. That took guts, Oldest Sister thought, to call a crush a crush and preserve such memories of embarrassed youth. A file like that would have been something to have shown his children, all right, except who but a sister wouldn't be embarrassed on his behalf? Even their mother would see nothing worth saving out of such defeated longings.

But in the next box were souvenirs of a different sort, of his success, and of the most precious of feelings. Oldest hesitated a few seconds before starting to read the letters: Loraine--come to think of it, that was a French name, too--had written for her lover alone, not expecting death to spread her words further. On the other hand, the letters themselves had been Brother's property; in lieu of instructions to the contrary, they fell to the family. So she opened one, unfolded it, read. "My Darling," it began, and what came after that excited her like a good short story. Just think, she might have said to Youngest Sister, only Youngest had left the room, Brother had been loved, well loved, by a woman who knew well how to put her feelings into words. Better than she herself had done that she remembered: Oh, she'd gushed or stammered about love in a few letters, but on paper her words never seemed to rise to the conviction of her feelings. And she'd got love letters, lots of them, from the man she'd loved longest, gushing and

blushing like her own to him, but never so many so full of all his thoughts and feelings as these to Brother from Loraine. She'd written, it seemed, at least three times a week, and rarely just a little; from her references to letters of his, he must have written as much. In the middle of the pile, she found one of his early letters to Loraine (marred by a large stain, which must have been why he kept it). So he could do it, too: put love into words and onto the page, not forced awkwardly up out of inarticulate feeling to fulfill a duty imposed by separation, but direct and urgent, as if everything going on in his imagination for that hour was hers and had to reach her. Awe at this unsuspected wonderfulness, more than grief, raised her tears, though in a few seconds grief would prevail.

These letters should be saved. Loraine would want them, Loraine should have them.

Hearing footsteps from the far end of the trailer, or even outside, made her aware of a new quietness. Those people must have finished their cleaning and left. She went into the next room to show Youngest Sister the letters, only Youngest wasn't there. It was Father in the entrance outside the death room--the bedroom--he must have been in there--carrying a box, headed for the door. He didn't look at her. She didn't speak. When the front door closed behind him, she went into the room herself. At the foot of the bed was a stain on the rug, most of it now probably from cleaning liquids. The closet door was still open, and she could see a few hangers inside, and a couple of towels. Except for those and the chair and the clock, the room had been emptied. For a

moment, she saw the bed as both an open mouth and empty arms, the built-in shelves overhead as eyes, the room as punished, bereft of its holdings, by his death.

How could he have done this in me, it cried. I have nothing left.

Through this window now she didn't notice the trees.

Youngest Sister was outside, carrying a shovel and a hoe to her husband's truck, said she'd just come out to see if Dad needed help--a euphemism, Oldest heard, for keeping an eye on him.

"He was inside."

"I know. He was looking for something."

"What?"

"I should remember," Youngest said, brows furrowing, "but I don't."

"Maybe he found it," said Oldest. "He came out with a box."

"I saw it."

One way or the other, each thought, they would find out what was in it.

"I found some letters," Oldest said. "Loraine's. I read them. She might want them, I think."

They stood together for a moment, not speaking. Relieved of her watch, Youngest returned to the trailer. Oldest went looking for Father. She found him in the barn, turning a small curved metal tool around in his hand.

"What's that?" she asked.

"An auger, one of Grandpa's."

He dropped it into a long wooden box at his feet and took another couple of tools from the pegboard and dropped them in, too.

"Remember this? It was his tool chest."

And a legacy for a son.

"I sort of remember it."

He shut the lid.

This is the time to ask, Oldest thought, and there might not be another. She said, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Father looked puzzled.

"In the trailer."

"The rattlesnake belt," he said, gazing past her down the years. "It's in that box--" He nodded at a box in the corner. "With his clothes. I figured we'd save it for Andrew and Jamie, when they're bigger."

"That's a good idea," Oldest said. The skin came from the snake that bit Brother when he was five--little older than Middle Sister's youngest son was now. Without a car, Mom called their nearest neighbor, who drove her and Brother to the hospital, then took care of Middle Sister and Oldest when she came home from school. The neighbor told a contractor working on their street what had happened; he found the snake--or what was assumed to be the snake--and killed it. Antivenom saved Brother's life, but he was in the hospital for days and his ankle took weeks to heal. After all these years, Oldest could still see the raw wound, and the

rough scar that grew out of it.

Father kept the snakeskin in the garage till Brother was in high school, then made it into a belt and gave it to him for his sixteenth birthday.

Oldest knew Brother had saved the belt for special occasions, but couldn't remember his actually wearing it. Did it feel strange to him when he did? She wondered now whether hearing what had happened to Brother was the cause of Youngest's snake phobia, though she wasn't yet born at the time--and whether the snake phobia, though supposedly cured, was what kept Youngest from remembering what Father was looking for in Brother's bedroom.

"Anything I can do in here?" Oldest said.

Father pointed at two boxes: "This and this can go out to the truck."

"What about this?"

She knelt to lift the tool chest.

He shook his head and didn't quite smile. "It's pretty heavy."

"I can manage."

Just barely. Stiff shouldered, she brought it up and out through the barn door. But if it was too heavy for her, shouldn't it be too heavy for him? She wasn't the one with the heart condition. Father followed her, boxes under each arm, and small chests in each hand. On the way back, they met Leonard, who was carrying a shotgun.

"What about this?" he said.

"Is this--" Father paused.

"Oh, no," said Leonard. "That one's still at the sheriff's office. They'll give it away when they're through, like we told them. This is a sixteen gauge."

"Right. Okay. We'll take it," Dad said. "Put it in the trunk."

"Hey, your tool kit's on the porch," Leonard said to Oldest. "The little green box."

"Thanks."

Back inside the trailer she told Youngest about the gun.

"I just don't understand it," she said, "why he'd have to ask, even knowing the right answer as he must have, as much as he knows about guns--and then hearing the right answer to be able to take it, to take any of his guns--"

Youngest thought for a minute, then said, "I think maybe he's just more practical than we are in some way, more literal minded. I think Mom is, too."

Be sure and take the little television, Mom had told them, and did anyone want Brother's crock pot?

Or maybe it wasn't practicality so much as wanting souvenirs, she thought again. A gun wasn't her idea of something to remember Brother by, but maybe for Dad, despite the circumstances of his death, it was: to remember all the times they'd gone hunting together, times she'd envied Brother for, because surely the point of that was as much the companionship as the game, being father and son and friends together. And weren't there numerous other ways than a gun to have done it?

"Come here a minute," came the messenger's voice, the discoverer's voice from across the room. Beside the box, Oldest Sister whispered, pink faced, when Youngest was close, "I found his diaries."

* * *

On their way to the cemetery the next day, before leaving for Youngest Sister's place several hours south, from where the others would fly away, they stopped at the trailer for one last collection, so that Mother and Middle Sister, too, would have a chance to take what they wanted.

"Now if there's anything you need, you should take it," Mother said. "Anything you don't take we'll just leave for whoever buys the trailer. What about these glasses? There's a whole set of them. And never even used."

They looked through the drawers, the dish drain, the cupboards, and the boxes, and under the sink, where Brother'd stored his cast iron skillets. He had a set of four--beautiful and unusually well cared for, for things in this kitchen. Oldest ended up with the two largest ones, since, besides her, only Middle Sister, who preferred the smaller ones, wanted any. She'd have to carry them in her suitcase, of course--they'd cost as much to mail as they would to buy--but wouldn't it be a shame to just leave them? She couldn't help wondering, though, how it would feel to think about Brother while frying an egg in his pan. Or chopping on his boards, one of which Dad had made from some old butcher block

salvaged from a bowling alley, stewing in his crock pot, or toasting in his toaster, all of which she would take or have sent.

Youngest Sister, who would be moving in a few months and didn't want to take on any more cumbersome possessions for a while, accepted only her share of Brother's share of their aunt's silver, and some spatulas and slotted spoons, of which one could always use extras. Somehow she ended up with all the slotted spoons, but Middle Sister, who'd have liked one, too, didn't want to ask for it.

Just before they carried the last box out the door, Oldest Sister remembered the clock in the bedroom--she needed a clock with an alarm that worked--and went after it. Bending over it to unplug it, she knew in an instant what that dainty web of dots on its top was made of.

That night at Youngest Sister's, she wiped the spatter marks off--most of them, anyway; some were stubborn, as were the few she found, scarcely visible, in one corner of the screen of Brother's portable television. She took a long time with her damp rag, but quietly; none of the others seemed to notice. Would they envy her the task if they knew? Or did they know? And agree, without speaking, to let her have it.

The clock worked all right, rang loud and often, after she got back, to rouse the new lover on time for work. She kept wanting to tell him--didn't, of course--and felt embarrassed at the thought as if she'd actually spoken it: This was my brother's clock, and these (the spatters) are most of what is left of him above ground.

She was surprised at how many friends would praise the new cast iron pans. She, wanting both to disown them and to claim them for Brother, would just say thanks, and think that for the rest of her life every few months another person would say what nice pans those were, and she would remember him. Would the time have to come that she didn't remember him every day? Or even every other day? Or week.

Perhaps it was good for them, since it would bring them together again (all but Middle Sister, whose children were promised to her husband's family this holiday) that Christmas came so soon after the funeral, but the time between was hard. Hard to hear carols and look at evergreens and pick out gifts; impossible to send season's greetings. Oldest lost her appetite for dinner one night after five minutes of smelling cherry incense and listening to "A Partridge in a Pear Tree" in an Oriental store, where she'd gone looking for Christmas-colored crepe paper.

Winter was corning in softly this year, and even up where Brother had lived, snow was still sparse. Youngest thought of snow a lot--though without her usual eagerness and impatience--and when she thought of snow, she thought of Brother: saw the thick drifts he used to track across in snow shoes or skis; saw the thin sheet of new snow that would cover his grave, and more snow blowing above it, obscuring the trees (not that there were many trees in the cemetery anyhow). She felt relieved to get away from snow for a while, even for the gray-brown of Texas.

She and her husband and Oldest were spending Christmas with Mom and Dad in a house the family had left more than

twenty years ago. Just before that move, Middle Sister and Youngest, then six and five years old, had planted a time capsule in the weedy fields behind their backyard. Only now did Oldest hear about it. And what had been in it? Just things they'd considered their treasures: all Youngest could remember was her Soap-on-a-Rope. They'd been inspired by seeing something on one of those early morning TV news shows about the real time capsule, whatever that was. Years later, when the family were back for a weekend to paint the house for new renters, they'd gone to dig it up but hadn't found it.

"Why don't you try again?" said Oldest.

Youngest said she wouldn't have any idea where it could be.

"I'll just lead you around out there with your eyes closed till your ears get itchy."

"You'll have to dig pretty deep," Father said. "About six feet or so. There are quite a few more tons of dirt out there than when you were little."

Sure enough, they saw when they walked out into the field, you couldn't look past it for miles any more. Now there was a wide and shallow hill, like an overturned soup bowl, where the concavity used to be.

"It probably isn't even there anymore," said Youngest Sister. "I'll bet some dog smelled the soap and dug it up."

When they talked with Middle Sister on Christmas afternoon, they told her how the landfill had kept them from hunting for the time capsule. That made her laugh, in spite of her

sadness at not being with them, being instead two states away with her husband's family, who, as much as she acknowledged were owed even more than this turn at the grandchildren, she wished would have relinquished them to her parents for another year.

Except that if she'd gone home this Christmas, she'd rather have gone alone, without husband and children, who couldn't understand about Brother's death (not that she would want them to) and what it had done to her other family: destroyed it. She knew she was being a baby to feel this way--she had friends who'd lost their parents when they were kids, and obviously life had in store for them many more deaths than Brother's--but she couldn't help thinking of her first family, her birth family, as an idea, an entity, a beautiful, beautiful thing that had been irrevocably damaged, however they might try to mend it.

And the worst of this sadness, as she was telling her sisters and parents how she wished she were there, was that secretly part of her didn't want to see them, didn't want to spend Christmas in that wounded family, didn't want to count them in the car or at the table and think: Now there are only five of us, and it won't ever again be enough. Even though she and her husband and sons were only four. And did not plan to be more.

Everyone praised the wind chimes she'd sent, made of slices of onyx strung from driftwood limbs. She'd bought lots of them in late summer, because they were such a bargain. This was the most efficient Christmas shopping she'd ever done, and the first time she'd decided to give everyone in her family the same thing. Including Brother. So now she had an extra set.

The day after Christmas a letter came from the lawyer in Michigan who was handling Brother's estate; and, looking in Brother's papers for whatever the lawyer had asked for, Mother and Father found something none of them had noticed before--an old wallet. Father recognized its beadwork as the product of inmates of the prison in Oklahoma where he and Brother had had cowboy boots made when Brother was still in high school. Prison boots had been popular--where else could you get them custom-made for the price of inexpensive ready-made?--and had been a common gift from fathers to sons coming of age. Oldest Sister imagined that she could remember Brother's sober expression as he showed off the new boots, and could read what it had meant: that he had been impressed by the implicit warning of the place (here's where you'll end up if you don't hew to the straight and narrow), felt sorry for the men, guessed they were paid slave wages and might not be treated well, but had been proud of his fancy new boots.

Father went through the wallet and threw out its contents, except for a couple of duck stamps from hunting licenses, which he said would be valuable because so few had been issued--something else to hand down, to a grandson now. Among the discards was Brother's draft card. Oldest retrieved it from the garbage can when no one was looking. She wondered whether the others thought what she thought: that if Brother had managed to stay sane that summer during basic, not had a breakdown and been discharged, he'd have had it in Vietnam instead, and died there. So this card represented ten years of life he might not have

had--two or three of them wretched, to be sure, but the others happy, loving. Miraculous even, after what he'd been through.

She put the card in her pocket for now, would move it later to her own wallet, then to some safe place. Safe enough for her to forget it was there and never see it again? Every few days since the funeral she'd thought about the boxes of his belongings, the diaries and notebooks in particular, packed away in such haste: would they ever be able to find in them what they wanted? She imagined the friends' barn that covered them as more ramshackle than his own had been. Water pouring in, surrounding the boxes on the ground. Papers, too, decayed. Though slower than some other things.

Their last night together, Dad told a war story Oldest Sister hadn't heard before, about his Samurai sword, which she didn't remember, although surely it had hung for years on walls or lain in chests that she had looked at over and over. Such swords were the most desired souvenirs from the Pacific theater, Dad said, and guys would offer lots of money for them, or other valuables. One soldier offered Dad a revolver plus a hundred dollars for his sword; but Dad said, no, he didn't want to sell it for anything. So the soldier upped his offer. Come here, he said, I've got something to show you; and, after waiting till no one else was looking, he took out a little chamois-skin pouch, and let Dad look inside. What Dad saw was a heap of twisted bits of gold, most of them still imbedded in their teeth. And, nope, he still wouldn't sell. So the soldier made one last try. From out of his bedroll he took a greasy, crumpled paper bag, and out of the bag he took a

bloody rag, and out of the bloody rag he took a string of ears. About twenty of them. Dad could still remember how they looked, although he didn't look long, said his last no quickly, and got away as fast as he could, to avoid losing his breakfast. I may have lost it anyway, he said.

So he and Mom were going to take the sword and the Japanese flag--that Oldest Sister did remember, had thought its red sun beautiful, despite the blots of old brown blood--with them when they visited Middle Sister in San Diego in the spring. They would give the sword and the flag to the Japanese consulate to give to the families of the soldiers they'd belonged to. Samurai swords were passed down from generation to generation; each had been named, and could be recognized. And all those writings on the flag were names and well wishes of family and friends, by which its owner would likely be identified.

That gave Oldest Sister an idea for a gift for Mother: a kimono. For Mother's Day, maybe, which she usually forgot or let pass by with only a late card. She'd admired some, imported from Japan, at a store in her neighborhood. They were beautifully made, all cotton, and looked comfortable--just the thing for summers in the Southwest, for a robe, or even to wear to a party. Mom would look so cute in one, although there was a risk that she would consider such a garment too exotic for her and never wear it. Well, then, she could just pass it on to one of her daughters.

She tried the idea out on Youngest, who liked it, and mentioned one of her own: that they and Middle Sister sometimes pool their resources and get big gifts for their parents rather than

the usual three little ones. Youngest had been admiring those Irish lead-crystal lamps and wanted to get Mom one--she loved crystal so much--and since it would be so expensive they could have it be for both birthday and Christmas.

Oldest said sure, thinking that was an idea that would never have occurred to her for Mom. She'd never realized that Mom was especially fond of crystal, and wondered now why she hadn't, and indeed hadn't much idea of what other things pleased Mom. Well, there were flowers, Jordan almonds, nightgowns--what about a fancy silk nightgown for her, something one would wear for a lover? Something Dad would not know existed to look for or buy.

Oldest Sister spent a lot of time thinking about what she would wear for her new lover on New Year's Eve. This would be a chance to dress up more flamboyantly than she would if alone, maybe wear the yellow silk nightgown that had sat in her drawer since she found it. As usual she decided not to, but she chose different jewelry than usual: for the first time in as long as she could remember, she wore the pearls Dad had brought her years ago from the Far East.

It was a lovely New Year's Eve, her happiest since the man who'd loved her had moved out. It felt impossible, this happiness; she enjoyed it like someone else's. She felt beautiful, at least in the eyes of her lover, and not in need of showing herself off to anyone but him; so they never got to the party, but stayed home and did what she always wanted to do most on New Year's Eve. They did it by candlelight. One of the candles--she had only

two--had been a late Christmas present from Brother the year before. She'd been surprised at it: squat and heavy, decorated with tiny dried flowers around its milky sides. An odd thing to send: it had taken a lot of time and postage to get to her. Brother's letter said it was handmade in Canada and would last a long time. Maybe years, at the rate she was using it. Longer, she felt sure, than this lover would last, as sweet and attentive as he was being now. Only till spring, she thought, when he would go back to school or get a job in another city, or she would be smitten by someone older and more appropriate.

The funny thing about Brother's candle--almost a dumb joke--was that she that same Christmas had sent him an old spool from a textile mill, the biggest she'd seen, intended as a candleholder, but for a tall candle, not a heavy one like this. She wondered now where it was and whether anyone else had packed it. She hadn't noticed it in the trailer.

Her lover left sooner than she'd expected, before Valentine's Day. Well, the sooner the loss, the smaller the sadness, which anyway was as nothing, a mere distraction, as loving him had been, next to the daily, persistent sadness over Brother. But this was turning out to be a good year, financially anyway. She was earning a lot more money than ever before, partly because she was working harder and longer--although not at painting--but also because more people were coming to her with more diverse work, especially in textiles, for such stuff as fabrics for baby clothes and sheets.

During those months she seemed to happen upon an

interesting gift just in time for each family birthday. And in April she found her parents an anniversary gift--the first she remembered giving them--a pale pink frosted vase shaped like a long-mouthed flower. Oldest would have been delighted to be given such a charming, romantic-looking thing herself; but since any present for them was a risk, she was surprised at how much they--Mom, at least--liked it.

"Oh, it's so pretty," Mom said over the phone. "Our roses are blooming now, and I just cut one to put in it, and it's right here on the coffee table." And she could just see Mom beaming over her new bud vase, letting its grace speak to her, of whatever such things say.

Once again Mom and Dad had put off the trip to Europe they'd been talking about ever since Dad had retired, this time till their fortieth wedding anniversary, in two years. The sisters had begun to fear they'd never go, or put it off until one of them couldn't anymore, so they began to plan the trip as if it were their own. Middle Sister had read about castles in Spain you could stay in for not as little as Mom and Dad would usually spend on lodging but for much less than you'd think a night in a castle would cost, and she'd sent for the literature, determined that they should have this pleasure, even if she had to route their trip and make their reservations herself. Meanwhile Oldest was tearing articles out of the travel section of the *New York Times* nearly every week: fishing on the Isle of Skye, monasteries you could stay in in Italy, vineries in France. Mom and Dad had such capacity for enjoyment, took such pleasure even in boring, silly, tacky sights in

this country that they were bound to have a good time in Europe. But she hoped for more for them: that they'd have the time of their lives there; that Europe would fill them to bursting with memories they would continue to wonder at long after the event. (It was too bad Brother'd never got to Europe, had never even come to visit her in New York as he'd kept saying he would.) Mom and Dad were beginning to get excited about the trip, as far off as it was, allowed as how they might even have a hundred dollar meal somewhere in France, "Just so we could say we did it." She hoped they would, and that it would be out of this world and into the next, something they would not value in mere money.

This year, as usual, their vacation would be a few weeks in Michigan in the summer, where they would fish, swim, pick berries, visit friends, and sell the trailer and take care of the rest of Brother's stuff. They told Oldest over the telephone that they planned to rent a cabin somewhere near the water for July and part of August, and if they couldn't find one right away or cheap enough, they could always stay in Brother's trailer.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Oldest said, after rejecting the stronger words that leapt to her tongue. "I just think --if it were me--it might be fine staying there, but it might be pretty depressing. So I'd say, why do something that might make you feel bad? When you don't have to."

"Maybe you're right," Dad said after a pause.

And Mom: "Oh, I'm sure we'll be able to find a place."

They did: a little cabin right on the river, where they could watch the ore boats go by. (Brother had worked on the ore boats

one summer. Youngest Sister wondered whether he'd kept a diary from those days.) The cabin had two bedrooms and a good-sized couch in the living room--plenty of room for visitors; so in August Oldest and Youngest visited, as Mom's and Dad's treat. Or as Brother's. Mom and Dad said the proceeds from the sale of his land and trailer would more than pay for all their trips to the funeral and for the sisters' flights home for Christmas and up north for August. Again, though, Middle Sister said she couldn't come, as much as her sisters tried to persuade her to.

The sisters had interpreted the invitation to mean they were needed, but Mom and Dad didn't wait for them before beginning work on Brother's place. By the time the daughters got there, their parents had cleaned the trailer from stem to stern, waxed the floors, painted the walls, and taken up the rug in the bedroom. Now the room sparkled; the bedstead seemed to grin, denying what had taken place beside it, of which there were no reminders left. The closet was spotless inside, as if prepared for formal inspection. Even though they had agreed not to sleep in it, Mom and Dad had spent a lot of time in that room.

"Every day last week we came here first thing," Mom said. "I'd pack us a lunch, and we'd eat it on the porch. It looks good, doesn't it?"

It might have been her own house, from her tone, prideful but unmixed with regret at letting it go. Thanks to her labors, it looked as close to beautiful as a trailer with typical shoddy trailer furniture could look, and far spiffier than it needed to look to get the price they were asking.

Mom ran a cloth over the night table, looked almost regretful at seeing it come up dustless.

All there was left to do around Brother's was straighten up the grounds and the barn and the animal house. After that they'd go through the rest of his belongings. Each afternoon when they'd finished at the trailer, Dad had brought back some more boxes of stuff that had been left in it, and cans of night crawlers he'd dug up, which sat on the porch and in the living room of the cabin, along with what they'd picked up from what had been stored at the neighbor's farm.

Certain things were missing, perhaps had been lost or taken from the trailer or misplaced somewhere in the friend's barn. No one had seen the spool-candlestick.

"So that's what that was," said Youngest Sister. "I remember it. He thought it was neat looking, but no one could figure out what it was for." What she didn't add was what a laugh they'd had over how typical that was of Oldest Sister's gifts: odd-looking objects of uncertain purpose from foreign parts.

But the diaries were safe. Oldest didn't have to ask or hunt for them; found them in the front seat of her parents' car, hours before Mom told her about them, said she might want to read them, they were interesting. Mom and Dad had read them before the sisters arrived--at the trailer, Oldest guessed.

Still, as if she'd sneaked them and had to hide them, she took them to the cabin and read them by herself, and would shut them and put them away as soon as she noticed one of the others approaching. Even Youngest Sister. Even though she found

nothing to arouse horror or pity, nothing to scar her heart that had passed over Mom's and Dad's. On the contrary, Brother's diaries, even in moments of sadness, were genuinely entertaining. They told a good story, modest though it was, and she read it eagerly (was it her eagerness she wanted to hide?) but rationing it from night to night to make it last, leaving herself, as in the middle of a thriller, wondering what would happen next, what Brother would say next to dazzle her. It disturbed her a little, the pleasure she was taking in his story, despite knowing how it would end, and how soon. Still, her pleasure continued, and the sense of discovery, of understanding a little better someone who, had life allowed, might have understood her.

Most of what he wrote about was love and like, recording and speculating about encounters with women and the progress of attractions and doubts. Every couple of days, it seemed, some new romantic possibility would appear, more often than not in gentle pursuit of him. So her little brother, as much of a social failure in high school as she had been, had turned out to be much sought after by women, more, maybe, than she had been sought after by men. And he said right out on paper, worrying about it, that he had a wandering eye. Well, so did she, so did she. So did all the world maybe. He, who'd been married and who'd had at least three other long, strong relationships, had kept wondering in the midst of them about his capacity to be faithful for much longer, let alone for life. As she still wondered.

And, like her, in his early thirties he'd begun to find that those who were attracted to him tended to be quite a bit younger,

even mere twenty and twenty-two year olds. Well, of course, that's who's around and unspoken for in the greatest abundance, she thought, convinced that, thanks to Brother, she'd hit upon the real cause for the sudden presence of all these youths in her life.

Only their attitudes toward the problem were quite a bit different.

"Why don't I meet any women my own age?" he'd written. "Damn! Makes me feel so old."

Whereas she couldn't make herself feel as much older as she was than these boys. Her last lover had seemed more grown-up at twenty than she remembered herself having been at thirty, in certain ways maybe more than she was yet. She could well imagine him meeting the right girl in a couple of years, maybe even another older woman, and having a whole family by the time he was twenty-five, whereas she…

She wondered how old Ellie was--almost surely at least Brother's age, maybe even a couple of years older. She had two children from a former marriage, one of them an adolescent son, who was said to be quite a handful. Brother'd wondered in his diary how he would handle being a stepfather and how without making a lot more money he would support this ready-made family. He had been so close to risking it--

But if he had risked it, if he'd lived to, he wouldn't have told them about these fears, would he? Wouldn't have told them any of the stuff he wrote in his diaries. What he'd written seemed still so alive, more alive, no doubt, than any journal of hers might be, more alive than a lot of the vacuous pleasantries that made up

so much of their family's discourse. You couldn't remember him dead while reading his words.

They do live, she thought. Then cried, because though his words might live, he didn't. Brother was gone for good, no shadow left, except for his words and his goods. Not even a ghost, to fear but to believe in.

Some friends of Mom's and Dad's had lost their only child, then got religion in the hopes of getting him back. Even Mom and Dad had no such illusions, she guessed, any more than she did. Only the illusion, thanks to the diaries, that they knew him better than before. That he told them from his grave how to remember him.

Over the next few days Morn ventured a few remarks that sounded based on her reading of the diaries: "Maybe he shouldn't have gone to work at that nursing home. It was probably pretty depressing. Especially after working with children." "It's too bad he never had a girlfriend who was really independent. I guess even Loraine expected that he'd support her if they got married."

And the sisters would agree or reply with other opinions about his life. Over and over they would use words like "too bad," but no one would mention her own sorrow, not even to say she missed Brother.

Sure, the sisters had talked and cried together plenty at the funeral. And worried together about whether their parents would be able to express their own feelings enough, and how to help them do so. But they'd managed during their seven-hour drive north from Youngest Sister's and for many hours since, not to

breach the jovial family front. Till finally on their way back to the cabin after running errands one afternoon, Youngest stopped the car under some trees at the side of a quiet dirt road, and said, "I've been meaning to show you this," as she handed Oldest several sheets of paper folded together, bent and softened from spending days in a pocket of her jeans. It was a letter from Middle Sister, saying how much she wanted to be with them, how she wished they could have a chance to talk about Brother together, she still thought about him a lot and felt so sad, couldn't help thinking about how things might have been different, if only they had been more alert to possible signs of his condition last summer, if only they had tried to draw him out more, if only they had encouraged him to rent a house for the winter so that he wouldn't have had to worry--

She didn't get far in the letter before she began sniffling, and Youngest Sister in the driver's seat sniffled along.

The sniffles turned into tears when she reached these words: "Maybe I shouldn't say this, it's not anyone's fault but mine, but sometimes I feel so alone, and left out."

She dropped the letter, wiping her eyes. Youngest threw her arms around her, and they sobbed together till each felt drained of tears.

"I feel bad," said Oldest finally, "I should have written to her, or at least called--but I just thought maybe I was still thinking about it so much because I'm alone now, and everyone else would be pretty much over it by now, and even when I call Mom and Dad, and I ask how they are and he says, 'Just great,' and I do still

wonder, but then I think, that's just me because I don't feel as good as I'd like, and I'd just make Dad feel bad if I told him that, and I always want to say something about my brother, but I don't. I just figured all of you have someone to talk to."

"It's not the same," Youngest said, still facing the steering wheel. "It's not the same as talking to you."

They squeezed hands.

"But listen," Oldest said, and hesitated, hearing the quiver in her voice that warned of a lecture to follow, "It wasn't the winter that killed him. There wasn't anything we could have done. I know that intellectually, but it's hard to accept it. It's hard for us not to blame ourselves, but we shouldn't, and it sounds like that's what she's doing. Have you talked to her?"

"Yes, after I got the letter. I told her that."

"I should call her when I get back. And write to her now, from here."

"You know what's helped me a lot?" Youngest Sister said. "I was surprised--those diaries. Have you looked at them again?"

"Yes." Oldest stopped herself from adding, They're wonderful, as if recommending a good book.

"I realized that I'd been idealizing my brother, making him into some sort of saint, helping all the handicapped children, sacrificing himself, so that I could almost somehow feel proud of his being dead, maybe even of how he died--"

"I guess I think a lot--how much he must have suffered," Oldest said, "even if it was only just a few minutes before, to have done that--" At that thought, she choked up again.

Youngest continued softly: "We'll just never know what was going on in his mind then. But in the diaries, well--they brought him back down to earth for me--you can't help seeing him like the person he was. He had a rough time, but he was dealing with his problems, and he had a lot of happy times, too. He wasn't just some victim."

"I've been enjoying his diaries," Oldest said. "I almost feel guilty about how much I enjoy them, as if they were just a good suspense story about some fictional character. It's funny, I've been admiring him for having written so well in them, for revealing this talent I never suspected, and I guess idealizing him, too, imagining that he could have turned into a great novelist--"

She had to stop. Neither spoke for a minute. Then Youngest Sister whispered, "I dreamt about him last night."

Oldest felt passingly cold in the heat.

"It was strange, it was practically the first time since--I'd sort of expected that I'd have nightmares about him afterwards. But I didn't. And I pretty much stopped remembering my dreams for a while."

"Me, too," Oldest said. "That must have been our minds protecting us. If we'd been remembering our dreams like usual, they probably would have been awful. It's funny, it was just a few days ago, the day before we came up here, that I dreamt about him for the first time."

And what a relief that had been. Whatever the price, it was so good to have your dreams back.

"What did you dream?"

"That I saw him, that it was Christmas. It was as if we were at Mom and Dad's, only they live up in Michigan still, and he lives in Wisconsin, and he's going back tomorrow. We're out at a diner talking, and I ask him if he's dating anyone out there. He says, no, because he can't take cheese breath, and I say but your breath is the cheesiest of all.

"I woke up smiling. For a second I was thinking, what a funny dream. Till I remembered what had been funny about it--and what wasn't. And how without breath, you have death."

Youngest Sister wiped her eyes and nose.

"And what was your dream?" Oldest asked, conscious that she had usurped the first turn, and wondering whether her sister noticed or minded.

"I dreamt that there was a group of people who believe he's really alive, and one of them was talking with me, and I said that I hadn't actually seen the body but I'd been to the funeral and I was sure he was really dead."

Her voice was trembly but clear, close to how it had sounded talking to the detective. It made Oldest Sister think of something you could see through, something you ordinarily wouldn't, like a tree, a ghost tree, covered with an intricate network of lines that stand for bark. She thought how beautiful her sister's voice sounded, wished she could be around to hear it every day, but now was not the time to praise it, or the directness and clarity of her dream.

"I wish I'd seen it," Youngest said, and as if her sister'd asked what, added, "His body. I wish I'd seen it. It must have

been horrible, and maybe if I had, I'd wish I hadn't, maybe it would be a nightmare we'd never get rid of, but I wish I knew."

Like watching a dream return, Oldest knew she felt that way, too. Wanted to paint Brother, even. She could get some idea--ask a doctor, describe the wounds--of the decay. The decomposition. But she wouldn't. Any picture now would be, at best, a guess.

All she said, shaking her head, was, "Me, too."

Youngest Sister and her husband had found teaching jobs for the fall in an area about two hours southwest of the cabin. They began house-hunting at the end of August, and within a month had found their dream farm--forty acres, house and barn (dilapidated but structurally sound), creek, swimming hole, and beaver pond. And the price was good, so good that their nest-egg would have covered two-thirds of it, though of course they wouldn't tie up all their savings in the farm. Ever since college, they had saved easily without half trying: their pleasures were modest and economical, mostly having to do with being out in the woods, and they usually preferred to spend at least part of the summer working. But during the last year they'd been especially good, as they began to think about buying land, and Youngest had taken more and more pleasure in seeing their bank accounts increase.

This was by far the biggest house she'd lived in, the biggest any of the sisters had, and the first with more than one story: two, plus attic and cellar. Plenty of room for the whole family to come for Christmas. They had all promised to come.

And the house would be ready. She had already begun planning an old-fashioned storybook Christmas, the kind Middle Sister's children, reared in Southern California, would not have had, even the couple of times they'd spent the holidays up north with Mom and Dad. They would cut a tall, tall tree from their land, and a little one for the kids, and decorate them with homemade cookies and cranberry and popcorn chains. They would build snowmen and ice skate on the pond and toboggan down the sides of their beautiful valley. Maybe there was even a farmer around whose horses could pull something that could pass for a sleigh. Whose family would join theirs in caroling. For Christmas Eve, they would have Grandma's heart soup and, in honor of Brother, rabbit, maybe hasenpfeffer, which he and Oldest Sister had talked about making and looked at recipes for but never got around to because it took so long. Before eating, they would drink a toast to his memory. Last year they had failed to, though she was sure all the others had thought about it, too, but just couldn't bear to say the words, didn't want to hurt the rest by saying them. She hoped things would be different this year.

As the anniversary of Brother's death approached, Youngest Sister kept expecting to dream about him, but didn't, although during the last half of November she thought about him every night before falling asleep. What she did dream about on Thanksgiving Eve, after finishing painting the trim on the last bedroom, was something beautiful: an elaborate, finely made book, with luminous cover embossed with a jewel-colored love-knot, each page of it multicolored and decorated with complex,

subtle designs. And, oh, what creatures captured her eyes: little birds trilling and beating their wings and leaping to flight; fishes pursuing their tails, schools of them dancing like a chorus line in a musical comedy, while butterflies, as intricate and changing as miniature kaleidoscopes, applauded. With breath and pulse, animate flowers seemed to swell and to shrink, to lift and to fall. Here a slice of chartreuse moon; there a willow, a bugle, a bell. In odd contrast were a few black and white full-page illustrations of things she didn't remember but thought of as abstractions; but there was no writing or print in the book, which was apparently intended as some sort of notebook or journal.

She dreamed that she found it in a dark little bookstore. She looked for its price, and found it marked on the inside of the cover--thirty or thirty-five dollars, quite reasonable but more than she wanted to pay. Then Oldest Sister, who was there, too, asked the shop-keeper the price, and he said twenty-one dollars; and wishing she'd been the one to ask, she said beggingly that she wanted it and should be the one to get it, having noticed it first. So Oldest Sister let her buy it, but she had trouble paying: first her checkbook turned out to be empty, then she took a long time to assemble the right amount of cash.

She woke on Thanksgiving morning disturbed by the end of the dream, and the conflict with Oldest. But that feeling was overcome by delight, once she remembered the dream notebook. However much she had lost of the contours of its designs, they kept her smiling and hopping around the kitchen throughout breakfast, and her husband laughing at her extravagant display of

happiness.

"You'd have to have seen it," she told him. Later she sketched what she remembered of the images and made a list of the colors and mulled over the meaning of the dream. It appeared to have something to do with feelings about Big Sister; literally it seemed to be saying that she had to pay more for things than Oldest and had to beg for them because Oldest got first choice, and that when she did get them she had a hard time paying. It didn't make much sense, though, considering that she was in much better financial shape than Big Sister, who had hardly any savings. So why should she balk at paying thirty-five dollars for something so beautiful and obviously worth so much more? When in real life she'd be willing to pay more.

But couldn't that be what the dream was trying to tell her: she could have such a marvelous object if she was willing to pay the price. Have it, and give it--to her sisters. Should give it, couldn't do better. Oh, what a present! The dream image might have faded, but what she had imagined she could make again. Or have made.

Now she remembered the window of the bookbinder in Ann Arbor, whose wares she'd stared at years ago when she was in college and wouldn't have expected ever to have a use for them. She found out that he was still there, but forced herself to wait till after Thanksgiving to call him.

Lucky for her, he had time, said, sure, she could come down over the weekend and look at his stuff and show him what she had in mind, and he'd start right away. She hadn't told him

over the phone that she had in mind to work with him, but once she'd told him about her dream and he'd seen her sketches of the book, being the sort who believe in karma bringing people together, he was willing. They started that afternoon, choosing papers and bindings and doing more sketches and colorings for the decorations. By the end of the day, they had a couple of pages so close to the quality of what she'd seen in the dream as to make her feel for a moment that she'd just awakened from it.

Each notebook would be made of twenty-five folded sheets, amounting to a hundred pages. Whenever they were filled, she could make more. Perhaps these little books, appearing every third Christmas, say, would become a family tradition. She had wanted to make them for Mom and Dad, too, but guessed they would find the books intimidating and never write in them. Better to wait and see their reactions: Mom tended to admire and want things others had been given. Anyway, three were about the most she'd have time for before Christmas. The bookbinder said it would take the two of them working every weekend till then to get them done.

They did. Just. And all the family arrived over the last weekend or on Monday morning while she was driving back. The finished books (no, not finished, because not yet filled with words) were worthy of her dream. Better than the dream in one way: sweet, their many textures, to the touch. She felt proud and excited as she put them under the tree, one for herself as well, wrapped simply in white tissue paper and red and green yarn. Could hardly wait for Christmas morning. Noticing how much her

older nephew had grown since she'd seen him last, she wondered if he might not be old enough for a diary, and whether she should make him one for his birthday.

Everyone praised their house and tree. The kids were delighted with attic and cellar and snow. Middle Sister envied her little sister the house with all its room and, even more, this spot, which was like their parents' old place, and at least as beautiful. It was such a relief to be here, let her children be fed and amused by their aunts and grandparents. Somehow she could never abandon responsibility to her husband's family as she could to her own. Here, despite all the wrapping and baking and talking and tree decorating and cleaning up that kept them busy much of the day, she felt on holiday for the first time in two years, since her last Christmas with the family. This house, so different from any she'd stayed in that she remembered, felt like some cozy old hotel, and her family, like someone else's, from another time. All the familiar gestures and expressions looked fresh against this strange background, and she would catch herself staring or listening, trying to find words for the difference. With her own sisters she felt shy at the kitchen table.

Before breakfast the second day, while they were the only ones yet in the kitchen, Youngest Sister said, "I thought you'd want to look at these," and handed her Brother's diaries.

She sat with them all morning beside the Christmas tree. Even her husband and children left her alone. Her sisters and parents said no more than to offer her more coffee. At least they knew what she was reading, had read it themselves, she had

nothing to hide from them; but still she held Brother's words as if to protect them, as if they were her own, and still secret.

Whatever she might have expected of them on the basis of the last few entries she'd read last year, it wasn't this: this natural sounding thinking out loud, talking to himself on paper, not a word to anyone else, not even to a magical friend in the diary, nothing said to make himself look good to imagined others.

When she was about ten or so, she had started keeping a diary of her early passions. She could see it now, decorated with full-breasted hearts and giant exclamation marks, the words Dear Diary sometimes taking up half a page when she was about to introduce a new heart throb. She had imagined the diary as a friend, more understanding than any real one, maybe like the perfect big sister, unlike Oldest who at sixteen had been too busy playing grown-up to consider little sisters anything but a nuisance. The diary had had a lock and key, and she had locked it; only one day she didn't and Brother found it and read it. Then greeted her quoting from it, with exaggerated guffaws.

It looked so theatrical, but probably typical, in memory: her furious shrieks, trying to grab the diary away from the invader and pounding at him, who, still laughing, attempted little resistance. Much anger but not much embarrassment. At heart, had she wanted her feelings revealed, had she had some underground intuition that if her family knew how she was swooning over Jimmy whojamacallit, he'd magically know it, too? Certainly in those days discovery hadn't discouraged her diary keeping; she'd kept it up for at least another few months.

Since then--from late teens to right now--there hadn't been much she'd have liked to confide in a diary that she wouldn't be afraid of someone's discovering, except for maybe certain feelings in the early stages of love, during pregnancy, and about her sons. No, she would not be as brave as Brother had been. But then he had been discovered only when he couldn't be embarrassed any more. Though why should he have been, even still alive, at what he'd written, when it was so honest and so moving, made her think how wonderful to know him this little more. Just at the time she'd been thinking how often these days she felt like a stranger in her family, he now seemed much less a stranger than ever before. She would like to have all his diaries and other things he'd written in a big box in her closet, as maybe Youngest Sister did now, to get down and read for comfort in times of distress. Or of bored unease.

Not only Brother's diaries had Youngest Sister ended up with: his tape recorder, a small plastic one, probably not very good, was in one of her closets. But there was nothing interesting on it, she told Oldest Sister the next day, who naturally wondered once more about last words.

"It's one of Dad's old tapes, some business school lectures on salesmanship."

"But did you listen to all of it?" asked Oldest. "Did you turn it over?"

"No."

The sisters shuddered over this remaining, although remote, possibility. Then Youngest turned on the machine.

Up close in nature the voice must have been booming; the tape muffled it, like a tunnel or a half-closed door. Youngest Sister pushed the fast-forward button, and all they heard the times she stopped to check the tape on its way to the end was "riches in the world," "effective planning," "do this every day," and "satisfied clients."

The other side might have been the tunnel itself. In the beginning was just tinkle and roar. But soon the noise of the distant motors began to sound human: a muddle of voices too far from the microphone. And footsteps, dishes, glasses, or cutlery, objects being shaken, rattled, dropped, even hints of music--a party perhaps? Now and then a phrase, a name, emerged from the horde, and the names--Howie, Jamie, Lynn, Donnie, Chris--they knew those names. And part of the reason for the mangled sound: some of those kids didn't really talk, just made noises.

"It's the Home," one of them said, what all were thinking as all listened for one name.

They didn't hear it, but a couple of noises might have been its syllables. The tape never got clearer. After a few minutes the sounds of the Home stopped, and the sales talk resumed. Brother must have listened and realized how little he was getting. And what had he wanted: a record of a particularly fun event, to surprise the kids with their own voices, play, Whose is this? Or was this near the closing, the end, and what he wanted, something to remember them by?

"I wonder if he made other tapes," said Oldest.

"Maybe we'll find some," said Middle Sister. "One of

these days."

"If either of you wants the recorder, you should take it," said Youngest, and to Oldest, "Weren't you thinking about doing oral history with Mom and Dad? You could use it to do that while they're here."

"That's okay," said Oldest. "I'll do it some other time, get a machine of my own."

She wondered whether she ever would, although she wanted to, thought it was a good idea, had been meaning for a long time to try to get her parents to talk about their lives into a recorder, ever since a friend of hers had done it. They won't be around forever, her friend had said, and so much of our family's history, not just our family's, but what they know of the history of their times, will be lost when they die.

Right, Oldest thought now. But then they'll be lost, and what comfort will there be in the sound of their voices? Well, there might be some, and she still did want their stories. But somehow it seemed unlucky to get them right now. As if taking their stories and voices for the tape would be to deprive them of a little life, by making them think of their lives, for however short a moment, as being in the past, over enough to be consigned to the family archives. Along with Grandpa's tool chest and Brother's diaries.

The others didn't argue.

Except for stuffed cabbage to eat instead of heart and rabbit, which she hadn't been able to find, Christmas Eve went just as Youngest had planned. And with no need of her control. It

was Oldest who said, "Let's drink to--"

She didn't say "the memory of," she just said Brother's name, and the rest said it, too, even the children.

The next morning, Youngest was down at the tree by dawn, as excited as she had ever been on her own behalf during childhood over what the others were going to find under it. Prettiest little tree I ever did see, she kept saying to herself (her poor husband was probably going to think she'd turned back into a five-year-old for good and all). But she felt a little sad in advance, as she always did, about the tree having to lose all its presents, and the presents, their wrappings. Although in a sense her presents to her sisters carried their wrapping with them. She imagined her sisters at their desks in quiet moments, writing in their new notebooks--but what? She tried to imagine, but couldn't: hearts full of pain or joy, or what the weather was, or the breakfast?

The rest of them trooped down together. The kids lit into Santa's bounty, while the grown-ups pretended at first to be content to watch, as if this were just like any other year, and the children's pleasure all that mattered. But though parents and sisters received their gifts slowly, and would stop in the middle of opening their own to watch others--Mom try on the amber bracelet, Dad squint through the little binoculars, Youngest parade around the room in white marabou (given by her sisters in memory of the time when, not quite five, she'd gone to a restaurant draped in a white towel, her make-believe mink)--within a few minutes only the notebooks remained unopened amid the

tissue and tinsel.

Oldest passed them out, thinking, at first, candy from Grandma.

Youngest played with her wrappings until she saw those on her sisters' books open, before opening her own. She watched each one's lips move apart and together, apart and together--amazing, the similarities of their movements, different as were the shapes of their mouths--their eyes stare, then blink from bewilderment to enchantment, their fingers stroke the covers, their faces lift as Mother said, from the couch behind the coffee table, "What are those?"

"They're journals, or notebooks, for writing in. I got a bookbinder to make them, and I helped him."

She would save for later (if ever) the story of her dream.

"Wow, it's so beautiful," said Oldest. "Thank you." There was something disturbing and demanding about the joyfulness of these images, but something she would not say no to.

"All these designs," said Middle Sister. "Did you make them up?" The little fishes went right to her heart, and the birds--you could almost hear their songs bursting their throats; her own swelled in sympathy. "The roses--"

She passed hers to Mother.

Youngest Sister wondered whether it was premature to ask her parents if they'd like some, too. Wait for some other time, she thought. There would be, she knew so--there had to be--some other time.

Oldest Sister lifted hers toward Dad. He had on his

contented look, she thought, the softest, sleepiest of smiles. And wasn't it a lot like Brother's smile? Funny, she used to hear an imitation of Father in Brother's voice, a fake heartiness that irritated her. Now in Dad's these days, she'd hear the calm dreaminess of Brother. She could swear it was just since his death that Father had started letting his sentences trail off at the end with a "so," as Brother used to.

So relaxed he was--maybe he would live to be a hundred as he kept saying he would, in spite of his heart.

He'd better, Oldest thought. They'd both better. She could not bear another death in her family sooner than that. Bad enough to miss Brother. What would life be worth without Mom and Dad?

There is no lock, Middle Sister thought, as her husband and children gathered around her book at the coffee table. But a lock would have spoiled it. She could always put it in something else that locked.

As she looked around the room at her family, they felt somehow complete again, and she remembered the dream last night that had escaped her till now: Mom had just had a child.

Was that child their brother, as they would remember him always?

Now that these objects she had dreamed up and worked over were here, brilliant as in her vision, Youngest Sister had trouble believing they were real—real possessions of those she loved, to be looked at and touched, again and again, and handed down. She wondered whether her sisters would really write in the

notebooks, and how long it would take them to fill them. Years, maybe? Did they think that her giving one to herself was a little strange?

Or would they understand how her notebook, too, might one day be a gift to them?

She was the youngest, and should live longest, but you never know.

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