

Missing Person
A novella
By R. A. Conti

Chapter 1 Last Day

Betty's difficult argument with her husband last night had worn her out. She felt too tired to make anything more than a quick breakfast for Jerry and the kids. No eggs, bacon, or pancakes. Coffee, cereal, milk, and bananas would have to do. The family didn't display any disappointment. It was merely another breakfast on another ordinary morning. However, for Betty, this day would be anything but ordinary.

As they ate in silence, she recalled the bedtime clash with Jerry. "Betty, I just *don't* understand you," he said, angrily. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm looking out for myself, Jerry."

"But, what about the kids? What about me?"

"This isn't about Doris, Johnny, or you. It's about *me*."

"You're so damn selfish!" Jerry exclaimed. He immediately regretted his accusation.

Betty glared at him. "Selfish? I suppose you think I *wanted* to get cancer?"

Jerry's face fell. "No, I didn't mean that."

"Then what *did* you mean, Jerry?"

"Why won't you do what the doctors tell you?" he pleaded. "What's wrong with that?"

"I don't want to get those treatments. They're worse than the cancer."

Jerry felt exasperated. "But, you could *beat* it!"

"And I might not. I could just be wasting my time and ruining the rest of my life. I can't do that."

"So you *want* to die?" he asked.

Betty didn't reply immediately. She tried to think of a way to tell Jerry how having cancer had changed her. Lately, she *had* been thinking about death. A lot. But she'd been thinking about life, too, and wondering if this life was the right one for her.

Betty looked into his eyes. His concern was genuine but it didn't make any difference. She had already decided what she needed to do. Now that the kids were back in school after their summer break, she was going to carry out her plan.

She sighed. "Everybody dies, Jerry. Even you... someday." She knew it sounded cruel but didn't know what else to say. Betty just wanted this conversation to end.

"I *know*, Betty. But this isn't about me, it's about you."

Betty nodded. "That's right. And, it's my decision. Not anyone else's."

"Not even me?" he asked, meekly. Betty felt sorry for her husband. She felt sorry for Doris and Johnny, too. They didn't yet know that their mother had cancer. But, the person she felt sorriest for was herself.

Jerry fell asleep. Betty stayed awake and reflected on her life. For as far back as she could remember, she had given everything she had to her husband and kids. Betty never held back and never asked anything for herself. Her family had always been first. However, putting them first didn't mean she was second. There was no second. They were all, and she was nothing. Betty felt as if she had been nothing for many years.

Now, in the fall of nineteen-sixty-five, Betty realized she had been sleepwalking through her small-town life. Cancer woke her up. She discovered she didn't know who she really was and desperately wanted to find out.

Betty loved Jerry and the kids. She loved being a mother and housewife. Until now, she had assumed she was happy. However, she could no longer continue living this life. Something- but she didn't know what- was missing.

After they finished breakfast and left for the day, Betty planned to pack some clothes. She would grab the wad of cash the family kept in the cookie jar for emergencies. Then she would take her first step into a different life. It might be the beginning of her final journey. In a way, she was lucky because she knew how it was going to end. Not *when* it would end, exactly; most likely in a year or two when the cancer did its damage. However, she didn't care. Betty just wanted the rest of her life to be free.

She didn't know where she was going but there was no time to waste. From now on, she would only look forward. No matter what happened, she had no plan to come back or even look back, ever. Jerry and the kids would have to get along without her.

Betty dressed and packed a small overnight bag. Then she checked herself in the hall mirror. She saw a short, nondescript middle-aged woman whose dark hair had started to go gray. Betty had a round face, brown eyes, a small mouth, and didn't look like someone who had received a death sentence. Then she realized that she didn't feel as if her cancer meant she was certain to die. In fact, Betty felt eager to live.

She smiled at her reflection. Then she went out the front door. Betty hoped she would never see that door, her family, or Johnsonville ever again. *Betty Suggs is dead*, she thought. She smiled as her next thought buoyed her. *Long live Betty Suggs!*

As Betty walked away from the house, she hoped she wasn't making a stupid mistake and would soon come to regret what she was doing. However, her desperation was stronger than her apprehension. She stopped herself from turning to go back and continued walking away.

Chapter 2 War and Peace

Nineteen-forty-five should have been a good year. World War II ended and Jerry came back from the Army. They married in November and moved in with Betty's sister Ann and her husband Jack until they could afford a place of their own.

Unfortunately, Jerry brought the war home with him. He had nightmares and daytime panic attacks. Jerry found and then lost several jobs because he couldn't concentrate on his work. He often was late because he had trouble sleeping. Betty found a job as a waitress but only made enough money to give her sister Ann something for their room and board. They had nothing left to save for a place of their own.

Betty hoped Jerry's post-war trauma would subside. The longer it lasted, the more distraught he became. He wanted to work and take care of her. They also wanted to start a family, just as their friends and neighbors who had survived the war were doing.

Although they were newlyweds, they didn't have much sex. Jerry worried he might get Betty pregnant and was careful to use condoms when he could buy them. They could not afford to have a baby yet. Betty eagerly gave herself to him whenever he wanted her but worried because he sometimes cried after they made love. She didn't know why and didn't ask. Some things were better not to know.

Although they had no money for amusements such as movies or trips, they found pleasure in each other's company. If it were not for the generosity of Ann and Jack, who shared their home and car, they would have had no enjoyment at all.

Late in 1946, Jerry found a job in a new tire manufacturing plant that opened just outside of Johnsonville. The owner was eager to hire veterans and Jerry got a job without having a resume or prior experience. He felt certain this was the big break he had been hoping for. He and Betty dedicated their effort to making the most of it. Jerry's anxiety subsided and his nightmares became less frequent. He showed up on the job early most days because he had slept well and felt eager to work. The couple started saving money.

Management promoted him twice in the first year and he became a shift supervisor by the end of his second year at the plant. The couple felt secure enough to make a down

payment on a house and start a family. Betty gave birth to Doris early in 1949. Jerry felt disappointed his firstborn was not a son but her cuteness won him over and he fell in love with Doris not long after she and Betty came home from the hospital.

Betty had quit her waitressing job halfway through the pregnancy and hoped never to have to work again. As soon as she came home from the hospital, she set about making the best possible household environment for Jerry and the baby. Betty was an enthusiastic mother and wife. Jerry felt grateful for her attention to him and their infant daughter.

Betty found the happiness that had been eluding her for the first few years of their marriage. Jerry fell in love with her all over again. Her fresh glow of motherhood enchanted him. He wanted to touch her, hold her, undress her, and look at her whenever they were alone. His attention delighted her and she coquettishly encouraged his lust. He never seemed too tired to want sex and she welcomed him regardless of how tired she was from her busy days as a homemaker and new mother.

Johnny came along almost exactly a year after Doris. Betty discovered that being the mother of one young child was almost idyllic compared to caring for two. She gave more attention and energy to the demands of her babies and had less to give to Jerry. He did his best to adjust. Jerry felt grateful for the excellent job she did taking care of his children and keeping a spotless home. He was productive at work and content at home and their life was good.

They settled into the contented bubble of home and job that characterized 1950s American middle-class life. World War II had disrupted everyone's lives. After it ended, people willingly settled into normalcy and routine and did their best to shut out the wider world. Jerry and Betty bought a TV and had friends over for cards. The family visited relatives on Sunday afternoons and everyone slept securely in their row house bedrooms.

The years went by. The quiet, stable '50s became the '60s. Doris and Johnny became teenagers. Betty and Jerry were approaching mid-life. Nothing major happened to disturb their lives until Betty began to have pains she couldn't medicate with aspirin. She saw their family doctor. He sent her to a specialist. He ran some tests and found she had cancer.

The cancer pains didn't affect Betty as much as the knowledge that she had cancer did. She became moody and had good and bad days. She also became aware of time, perhaps because her time was running out. Betty worried her cancer might somehow be her fault and wondered what she had done wrong.

She never thought God might have given her cancer. She didn't think about God much. Betty and Jerry never discussed their religious beliefs (or lack of them.) The children had received basic religious education in after-school and summer church-related activities but didn't regularly attend services.

Betty had never thought much about the future, either. She lived day-to-day and enjoyed the smallness of their lives. Betty liked how events or milestones happened when they were supposed to happen. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, vacations, and the start and end of the school year were the only occasions that concerned her. Unexpected events rarely happened, nor did she want them to. However, when the doctor said the word 'cancer' for the first time, the enormity of life hit her, and its impact knocked her over. It was more than she could bear and she wanted to run away from it. So she did.

Chapter 3 First Night

Betty bought a ticket to Philadelphia because that was where the next bus went and she wanted to get away from Johnsonville as quickly as possible. As she rode, she thought her impulse had been a good one. It would be easier to survive in a big city than another small town.

The Greyhound bus pulled into the Philadelphia terminal around three in the afternoon. Betty grabbed her bag and thanked the driver. Then she got off and walked toward busy Sixteenth Street. There were plenty of cars, local buses, and pedestrians. She walked towards Market Street but didn't recognize it when she got there. It had changed since the last time the family visited downtown Philadelphia. Many of the old two and three-story buildings were gone. There were new skyscrapers on both sides of the street.

The family had visited the city a couple of times on summer vacations. The kids liked the Franklin Institute and she loved the Art Museum. Jerry didn't care much about either place. He joked that he was just the driver but felt happy the family could take pleasant trips together. He liked to sit on a park bench near the Logan Fountain and watch the city folk go about their lives.

As a precaution, Betty had hidden nearly two hundred dollars safely in her bra. It was something small-town folks were advised to do whenever they visited a big city. You never knew if a thief might grab your purse and you could lose everything. She only had a few dollars in her small purse.

She decided to spend her first night in a safe place where she could remove the money so she could take it to a bank. Betty assumed most of the downtown hotels were too expensive and decided to ask someone where she might find cheaper lodging.

An elderly Black woman waited at a bus stop. Hoping she wouldn't startle the woman, Betty approached. "Excuse me, I'm sorry to bother you. I just got into town, and I'm looking for a reasonable hotel. Do you know of any?"

The woman smiled. "No bother, ma'am. So happens, I know of a place not far from here."

"Great. How far is it?"

She pointed northward. "About six or seven blocks that way."

"What's its name?"

"It's Father Divine's place. Ever heard of him?"

Betty and Jerry occasionally read the Sunday Philly newspapers. The kids liked the comics, Betty liked the magazine sections, and Jerry liked the sports pages. "Didn't he just die?" Betty asked. The woman nodded, pleased Betty knew who Father Divine was. "I saw it in the paper."

"Yes. But the hotel's still open. Cheap, too. Nice folks. You can catch the bus on Broad Street."

"I think I'll walk. Thanks."

"God bless you, ma'am. Enjoy your stay."

Betty walked toward City Hall. She turned left when she reached Broad Street and started walking north. When she was still several blocks away, she spotted the building with its huge DIVINE LORRAINE sign. The hotel's size and opulence awed her when she arrived. Fearing it would be far too expensive, she hesitated to go in. A friendly-looking Black man came out and noticed her. He smiled and held open the door. Betty hesitated and he gestured for her to enter. She thanked him, went in, and rented a room for her first night in Philadelphia.

Despite the building's external opulence, her room was affordable. It was furnished simply with a comfortable bed, plain wooden dresser, dark drapes, and a small spotlessly clean bathroom. It almost felt like home. Betty settled in, grateful her day had gone so well.

Back at Betty's house, things hadn't gone well.

"Dad, I found this envelope," Doris said when Jerry came home from work. Betty was usually home when the kids got in from school. They assumed she had forgotten to tell them she had something to do. Jerry opened the envelope and read Betty's note.

He immediately frowned. "Shit!" he said.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” Johnny asked.

“Your mom- she’s left us.”

“No way!” Doris said.

“That’s what the note says. She’s gone.”

Johnny was unable to grasp what had happened. “Where to?”

“She didn’t say. She just said goodbye, and she loves us.”

“Yeah, right!” Johnny said. He angrily left the room.

Doris looked at her father. “You’re serious?” she asked. He handed her the note. She read it, threw it at him, and then stormed out.

Jerry expected Betty to walk through the door any moment and tell them it was just a stupid prank. However, he knew it wasn’t. He started worrying about himself, his kids, and his wife. What were they going to do without her?

Chapter 4 First Day

The next morning, Betty walked out of the bank with a deposit slip and a bankbook. She had no idea what she was going to do next. This was as far as she had planned. What she did now depended on how she felt from day-to-day and how long her money lasted. Her new freedom buoyed her and cancer seemed like a bad dream. She felt like a new person and considered changing her name, just for fun. Betty Suggs was a bland name and she no longer felt bland. She felt newly alive.

For breakfast, she bought a soft pretzel, loaded it with tangy mustard, and sat on a park bench. *Who am I?* she thought. *Wait, a better question is, who do I feel I am? Who do I want to be?* She didn’t get any answers and decided to continue being Betty Suggs for a while longer.

Okay, so what do I want to do? she thought. She would need a job but thought it might be difficult to find one. Betty had few qualifications for work. She had been a waitress after she and Jerry married but assumed no restaurant would hire a frumpy middle-aged woman because there were plenty of attractive younger women willing to be waitresses.

She noticed a sprawling newsstand across the park and decided to buy a newspaper so she could look at the Help Wanted ads. Maybe there would be something she could do that she hadn’t yet thought of. Betty went across to the stand. She bought an *Inquirer* and then walked back toward her park bench.

As she walked, she noticed two men with a tripod. There was a movie camera on it and it was pointing at her. Betty scowled. They turned the camera in a different direction. Annoyed, she walked over to the men. They turned out not to be much older than her children.

“Were you filming me?” she asked.

“Um, no, no, of course not,” the young man behind the camera said. He was tall and lanky with light hair, dark glasses, and a guilty look on his face.

“Sure looked like you were. What were you filming?”

“Those people across the park,” the other man lied. He was shorter than his friend, wore a goatee, and seemed nervous.

“It’s okay, Jeff,” the tall one said. “Let’s tell her the truth.”

Betty frowned. “So you *were* filming me! Mind telling me why?”

“Would you believe it if I said you look interesting?” Jeff asked.

“What kind of interesting?”

The boys looked at each other. Neither knew how to answer. “It’s kind of a documentary about people in the park,” Jeff finally explained. “That’s all.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t mind, do you? We didn’t mean any harm.”

“Yeah, we’re film students. See?” He offered a form that had the university name and *Film School* on the letterhead. “He’s Jeff and I’m Gary.”

“So you boys are students?” Betty asked. They nodded. “I never heard of a film school.”

“It’s new,” Gary explained. Jeff nodded. “Look, please help us out. The project’s due in a week and we’re having a hard time finding interesting people. Let us shoot you.”

Betty grinned. “Shoot me?” she asked.

“Film you,” Jeff said.

“Sure, I don’t mind. Do you want me to do anything? You know, like acting?”

Gary’s face lit up. “Oh, God, *would* you? That would be so great! Nobody ever wants to act for us.”

She felt sorry for the boys. “Sure. I’m not doing anything else. I got nowhere I’m supposed to be. In fact, I just got into town yesterday.”

“You’re not... like... *sleeping* on one of these benches, are you?” Jeff asked. He felt they might have stumbled onto a genuine homeless woman they could follow around with their camera. Betty knew immediately what he was implying. She didn’t know much about homeless people and felt surprised they would think she was one.

“Uh, no. I was in a hotel last night. Don’t know where I’m going tonight.”

“Oh. Do you need some money?” Jeff asked. “We have a couple dollars.”

“No, but I do need a place to sleep. Know of any around here?” They looked at each other. “Look, my name’s Betty Suggs, and I just moved here from a town you’ve never heard of and never will. I don’t sleep in the park. Two nights ago I slept in a bed in my family’s house.”

“So why are you here?” Jeff asked.

“I ran away from home,” Betty replied, boldly.

Gary gasped. “You’re a *runaway*?” he said. The students looked at each other. They thought they might have stumbled onto the subject for their documentary.

“Yes, but I have money. And I can pay for a place, but I need something cheap until I find a job.”

“Um, we live in an old house near the campus,” Gary said. “There’s a few of us already, but you could crash there if you want to.”

A house full of college guys? Betty thought. She had no idea what ‘crash’ meant and wasn’t sure she wanted to know. “Um, crash?” she asked, warily.

“Sleep. Probably on one of the couches. But, it’s dry and safe, and won’t cost you anything.”

“I could pay you something.”

“Maybe you could just help us out by acting for us,” Jeff said.

What the heck? Betty thought. *I’ve got nothing better to do. And maybe the new Betty Suggs could be an actress.* “Okay. That seems fair. What do you want me to do?”

Jeff answered without hesitation. “How about you pretend to be a homeless woman living in the park?” While the three of them talked, he had been planning shots they could do. Betty again wondered if she resembled a homeless woman but didn’t know it. Life in the city was weird.

“What do you have in mind?” she asked. They spent the rest of the afternoon filming her doing what they thought homeless women did. She made her clothes look disheveled. Then she rummaged in trashcans for food (but refused to eat what she found.) She asked passers-by for money (Gary and Jeff took turns pretending to be the passers-by.) Finally, Betty stretched out on a park bench pretending to sleep under her newspaper. The footage they shot delighted them.

They took her back to their house and discovered there was no food. She felt sorry for them. Betty asked if there was a grocery store nearby. She bought a cheap loaf of white bread, a jar of mayonnaise, and a pound of baloney. The sandwiches made the students even happier that they'd found her. Betty agreed to stay.

Chapter 5 Transition

“You’re taking in homeless women, now?” Carol, Jeff’s girlfriend, asked when she stopped by to talk to him. She was a plain-looking blonde who had an air of intense seriousness about her.

“That’s Betty. She’s not homeless,” Jeff replied, somewhat defensively.

“Then why is she sleeping on your sofa?”

“She’s a runaway. She’s acting in our movie.”

Carol frowned. “Kinda *old* to be a runaway, isn’t she? What role is she playing in the movie?”

“Homeless woman.”

Carol’s frown changed to a wicked grin. “Wow, she looks pretty believable!” Jeff didn’t react.

Betty told the boys she wanted to leave because she didn’t want to be a burden on them. She planned to find somewhere cheap to stay. They told her they needed her for their movie and begged her not to go. The more film they shot the more ideas they got for new scenes.

Carol dropped by again one afternoon two weeks later when the boys were in class and Betty was tidying up the house. Carol liked Jeff and felt protective of him. He was a sweet, naive guy who got along with everyone. She sometimes spent the night with him, and he sometimes stayed at her place. They didn’t date other people but neither thought of theirs as an exclusive relationship.

“Jeff’s in class, I think,” Betty told Carol.

“Yeah, I know. I just left him. I came to see you.”

“Oh? Is there something I can do for you?”

“Well, don’t take this the wrong way, Betty, but what’s your deal?”

“Deal?” Betty asked.

“What are you trying to pull?”

“I’m not trying to pull anything.”

“It’s obvious you’re living here, now...”

“Yeah, Carol. I’ve tried to leave. The boys won’t let me. They keep saying they still need me for their movie.”

“They finished their movie last week.”

“They did? They didn’t tell me. Have you seen it?”

“No. But I didn’t come to talk about their movie.”

Betty looked at Carol and suspected why she had come to visit. “You came to talk about me?” she asked, cautiously. Carol nodded, “So what do you want to know?”

“Where are you from?”

“Upstate. Small town you never heard of.”

“Why are you here instead of there?”

“Not that’s it any of your business, but I left.”

“You’re right it’s not any of my business. Why did you leave?” Carol asked.

The boldness of her question struck Betty. She liked Carol. Her directness was refreshing. The boys were mostly indirect. They had already decided they liked having her around because she did stuff for them. She bought them food, tidied up the place, took their clothes to the laundromat at the corner, and reminded them of their moms.

Betty stayed because she felt sorry for them. They were college students living away from home. It was obvious they missed their mommies, although they would never admit it. She missed her kids, Doris and Johnny and liked being around young people.

“Were you married?” Carol asked. Betty didn’t answer. Carol took her hesitation as evasion. “I’m only asking because I know there are women who run away because their husbands mistreat them.” Carol was a Social Work major.

“Jerry didn’t mistreat me,” Betty replied, softly.

“Oh. Was it someone else?” Betty shook her head. Carol remained persistent. “Then, why?”

“Nobody mistreated me. Well, let me rephrase that. Maybe I should say that *life* mistreated me.” Carol waited for an explanation but Betty didn’t continue. Carol started to ask another question. Betty cut her off. “I appreciate you asking, but that’s all I’m going to say.”

“I didn’t mean to pry.” Carol was hoping that Betty was someone she could study for a research project. She shrugged. “I was just concerned, that’s all.”

“Well, thanks, I guess. Now it’s my turn. Tell me about yourself.”

There was not much to tell. Carol’s father was a professor at a rural college in New Jersey. He had wanted her to go to his college but she hadn’t wanted to study where he taught so she chose a major that was not available there. She liked the university, although the classes were easier than they would have been at her father’s school. She was living in a dorm but was planning to move to a house with some other girls.

“You could live with us if you wanted to,” Carol said.

Betty immediately felt interested. “Are you offering me a job?”

“Yeah. We could pay you to be a housemother. It wouldn’t be much, but...maybe you wouldn’t be interested.”

“No, no, I might be. I have some savings but I will need a job, eventually. And, I’d feel more comfortable living with women, I think. These guys have been great, but it’s awkward, you know?”

Carol smiled knowingly. “They miss their mommies?” Carol asked. Betty nodded. “Yeah, well me and my house-mates...we *don’t* miss our mommies. We also don’t want to turn into them, if you know what I mean.” Betty didn’t know what she meant. She was not used to being around college students. Most of the people she knew had never gone anywhere near a college. This was a completely new world for her.

Chapter 6 Attic

Carol moved out of the dorm and into a rambling three-story row house just off campus. It was run down but still ornate and imposing. There were four other students already living there. She told them about Betty and they wanted to meet her.

“You won’t get much more than a place to stay and a few dollars, but we won’t expect you to be our servant, either,” Barbara said. The other young women nodded. “We just want to have somebody around to do basic housekeeping. Stuff like buying food and maybe doing some cooking. Some laundry, too, but not everyone’s all the time. Keeping the place looking presentable, and just being around when we’re all out so no one comes in and steals anything.”

“Does that happen?” Betty asked.

“It has,” Alice replied. “Sometimes people crash here and then steal stuff when they leave. You never know it’s happened until they’re gone.”

“Well, I wouldn’t allow that, if I were you.”

“Some of those people are boyfriends, so it gets dicey,” Jane explained.

“You mean guys you bring home?” Betty asked.

“Well, yeah. Sometimes. You got a problem with that?”

“No. But if you’re not careful, I can’t clean up your messes.”

“I see what you mean,” Barb said. “I guess we can be careful.”

“Look, girls, I can take care of those things you mentioned. But, I can’t replace your parents. And, I don’t want to. *Ever*. Is that clear?” They all nodded. “You’re sure?” They nodded more emphatically.

“So, do you want to do it?” Jenny asked.

“Let’s give it a try,” Betty said. “We’ll see how it goes for a few weeks. Then we can talk it over and decide if it’s working or not. How’s that sound?” They all agreed. “Great. Um, where do I sleep?”

They gave her the attic. There was an old bed frame, a spring and a mattress. There was also an undersized radiator that got warm but never hot and could not adequately heat the attic space. She moved the bed close to the radiator after the first chilly night and then bought some blankets at the thrift store. It was not a great living space but it was hers and it was private.

The girls were not quiet but not raucous or rowdy, either. They came and went at all hours of the day and night. She heard people clomping on the stairs and closing doors but got used to the muffled sounds. The smell of marijuana often drifted up to the attic but she ignored it and didn’t try to find out who was smoking it.

Jeff dropped by to visit Carol one afternoon several weeks later.

“I guess it’s better for you to live with a bunch of girls,” he said when he saw Betty.

“I liked it at your place. You guys were nice to me. But, I do have my own space, here, so that’s a plus.”

“Well, if you ever get tired of being here, you would be welcome to come back,” he said, cheerfully. She smiled. *Boys never seem to grow up*, she thought.

Betty wondered how her son Johnny was doing now that his mother was no longer around. He would be growing up without her. If she had stayed she would eventually have died, but she left. Did it make any difference? Either way, he would have lost her. Betty didn’t want to ruin her day and put Johnny and death out of her thoughts.

Chapter 7 Tripping

Betty walked into the dim living room late one afternoon. She saw Carol and Jenny. Betty started to speak aloud but Carol gestured for her to whisper. “What’s going on?” Betty asked in a soft voice. Carol whispered that Jenny was on a trip.

Betty thought she misunderstood. Jenny was not somewhere else. She was sitting there with her eyes closed, gesturing with her hands and mumbling words Betty couldn’t understand. “What trip?” Betty asked. Carol explained about LSD. Betty had never heard of it.

“What’s happening to her?”

“She’s hallucinating,” Carol whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“Hallucinations are like dreams, except you’re not asleep.”

“You’ve done this, too?” Betty asked.

“No, but I’ve seen a few people do it.”

“How long’s she gonna be like that?”

“A few hours, but she’s okay.”

Just then, Jenny opened her eyes wide. “Oh, my God! It really is you,” she shouted, “Who, Jenny?” Carol asked, gently.

“God.”

“She’s seeing God?” Betty whispered.

“Some people do. Some see angels. Others see stars and galaxies.”

“That must be some amazing stuff.”

“Oh, it is, for most people.”

“But, not everyone?” Betty asked.

“Right. She’s having a *good* trip. Some people have bad trips. It happens.”

“What’s a bad trip like?”

“I’d rather not talk about it. She might hear us.”

Betty finally understood why she was in this city, on this campus, in this house, and with these girls. It was because they had a way of finding God, something she had no idea she wanted to do until now. She waited for an opportunity to talk more with Jenny about LSD.

A few afternoons later, Betty and Jenny were in the attic. Betty sat cross-legged on the bed. Jenny was in an old rocker Betty had found in the trash. She was watching Betty and saw when the LSD kicked in. Jenny remained silent. So did Betty, but a lot was happening inside her.

Betty was alone on the largest and most beautiful beach she had ever seen. There was pure white sand, a deep blue ocean, and a bright, cloudless sky.

She didn’t know where she was but it felt right to be there. She sat down on the sand and felt deep inner peace. The ocean waves gently came closer and then receded, wetting the sand and her feet. Betty smiled. She looked down at the wet sand and extended her arms to touch it.

Her hands were not the hands of an adult. They were a child’s hands. She looked at her legs and saw they were the skinny legs of a young girl. She could not see her face but felt her long hair blowing in the breeze and knew she was her six-year-old self.

That Betty had never been to a beach. The only sand she had seen was in a sandbox at the local playground. So where was this beach and why was she there, alone?

She looked around and spotted someone else down the beach. Betty stood up and walked toward the other person. It seemed as if it took a long while to cover any distance. As she finally got closer, she saw a young girl sitting in the sand. She was looking out at the ocean. Betty heard her crying. Not wanting to startle the girl, she stopped. The girl didn’t notice her. Betty sat down.

They sat there for some time. The girl looked at the ocean and Betty looked at her. Then she noticed some movement down the beach. Someone was walking toward them. She watched as the person slowly approached. The girl waved. Betty waved back. The crying girl didn’t. When the new girl got closer, Betty saw herself.

She smiled and invited the other Betty to sit down. The other Betty shook her head and kept walking. She passed the two sitting girls and continued down the beach. Betty felt surprised she had not stopped but it didn’t bother her. She assumed the other Betty had somewhere she had to be or something else she had to do.

The seated girl had not moved or reacted to the new Betty. It occurred to Betty that the seated girl was also another Betty but she didn’t think that was extraordinary or unusual. *Maybe this is Betty Beach*, she thought. She was almost right.

It rapidly got dark. She waited. The other girl sobbed in the darkness. Then, far out in the ocean, a glow appeared below the horizon. Betty assumed it was the sun. The horizon brightened as the glow grew brighter. But, it was not the sun that was coming up. It was a huge head and face, Betty’s face. *Maybe this is not just my beach*, Betty thought. *Maybe this whole world is mine*.

Betty-sun was shining and smiling down on them. The other girl stopped crying and stood up. She became agitated and turned away from the ocean. Then she ran. However, she didn’t get far. A huge hand came down out of the sky and picked her up. She didn’t make a

sound and kicked as the hand lifted her. Betty-sun opened its mouth and the huge hand dropped the girl in. It was over in a moment.

Betty didn't know what to do and wondered if she could do anything. She stood up and carefully watched the sky. The hand appeared, far away. Betty turned and started to walk away from the ocean. She moved fast and covered a lot of sand. A shadow appeared over her. She was afraid to look up and knew she couldn't escape no matter how fast she moved. Suddenly, she was lifted into the air. Betty kicked but didn't cry out. She knew what would happen next and calmly waited to be dropped into Betty-sun's mouth.

The mouth was bright inside. She waited to be swallowed down but nothing happened. Then she moved up through Betty-sun's head and looked out through Betty-sun's eyes at the beach she just left. She saw one girl who sat alone. Then another girl walked up. Then a third girl passed by.

It got dark and then light again. A hand reached out. It plucked the sitting girl from the beach and dropped her into Betty-sun's mouth, which was now her mouth. The second girl started running and then got plucked off the beach, too. Betty felt confused. What did all this mean?

The other Bettys arrived to join her but then faded away. She watched as the scenario repeated itself a few more times. She noticed three Bettys appeared on the beach but only two Bettys ever got picked up by the giant hand. The other Betty just passed by. Why? Who was *that* Betty? Where was she going? Betty didn't know but decided to watch the third Betty carefully the next time she appeared and watch her to see where she went.

She suddenly became that Betty walking along the beach. She saw the other two in the distance, approached them, passed them, and kept walking. She did this repeatedly. She discovered that Betty was not going anywhere. There was nothing but the beach and nothing beyond the beach. There was nothing but Betty.

There was no way out.

Chapter 8 Truth

Betty came down a few hours later. "So, did you see God?" Jenny asked, excitedly. Betty shook her head. Jenny frowned. "Well, what *did* you see?"

"I think I saw myself."

"*Think* you saw? But you're not sure? That's okay. How did you feel?"

"Really confused."

"But, not bad, or frightened, right?" Jenny asked.

"No, just confused."

"Did you learn anything?"

"Yeah. I found out I was all alone."

"No, you weren't. I was here. So was Carol, for a while."

"I don't mean *here*. I mean all alone in this world."

Jenny didn't know how to respond. She knew Betty had family somewhere and she was not, strictly speaking, alone. Jenny wondered if she should reach out to Betty and try to help her. Perhaps she could make her understand that all the girls in the house liked her and cared about her but Jenny thought that wouldn't matter. Betty didn't need friends. She needed something else, perhaps something only she could provide.

"Where's Betty?" Barbara asked the next afternoon. "I haven't seen her since yesterday. Is she all right?"

"She's in her room," Jenny replied.

"Why hasn't she come downstairs?" Alice asked.

"She's recovering from her acid trip, I guess."

"Her *what*? Did you give her acid? Jenny, how could you? She's an old woman!"

“She asked me for it. I stayed with her the whole time.”

“Did she have a bad trip?” Alice asked.

“It didn’t seem that way.”

“But, it wasn’t a good trip?” Barbara asked.

“I couldn’t say. She was okay the whole time. That’s all I know.”

“Did you talk to her afterward?”

“Of course,” Jenny replied.

“What did she say?”

“Not much. She told me she was okay.”

“But, she’s obviously not, Jenny. Something’s wrong.”

Barbara went up to the attic to check on Betty. She looked at Barbara but didn’t smile.

“I have cancer,” Betty blurted out.

Barbara felt shocked. “You could go to the hospital right here on campus. I’m sure they would help you,” she argued.

“I’m not sure that would be any real help. The treatment can be worse than the disease.”

“Is that why you ran away?”

“Cancer made me see my life differently, Barbara. I didn’t like what I saw. And, my husband and kids didn’t understand.”

“Did you drop acid so you *could* understand?”

“I hoped I would.”

“Did you?” Barbara asked, sharply. Betty didn’t reply. Barbara knew she shouldn’t ask again.

Barbara left Betty alone and went back downstairs. She told the other young women what she had learned.

“Betty’s *dying*?” Carol asked. “Upstairs... in our attic? What the hell?”

“No, no! She’s not dying, but she does have cancer,” Barbara insisted.

“We’ve got to get her to the hospital,” Jenny urged. She wondered why she hadn’t asked Betty more about herself before she gave her the LSD. If she had known Betty was facing death she would have been more careful. Jenny could have been responsible for launching Betty on a very bad trip, one that could have ended in disaster.

“She doesn’t want to go,” Barbara replied. “She’d probably leave us. Is that what we want?”

“Well, what does *she* want?” Alice asked.

“I don’t want anything from you girls,” Betty said. She had come downstairs and was listening outside the doorway. “But, I don’t want to be a burden on you, either.”

“You’re not, Betty,” Carol said.

“That’s right!” Jenny shouted.

“We just want to help,” Barbara added.

“Great. Let me go back to doing what I was doing.” The four young women looked at her as if it was the first time they saw her. “Anybody hungry?” Betty asked. “Need any laundry done?” The girls looked at each other. How should they respond? Could everything go back to the way it was? Should it?

Betty felt their awkward silence and knew she had to explain. “I apologize for not telling you about my cancer. I wasn’t trying to hide anything. It just wasn’t important. It still isn’t. Can you believe that?”

“But, it *is* important, Betty,” Carol said. “*You’re* important. We care about you.”

“Yes, you do, and I’m grateful,” Betty replied. She paused. No one said anything. She felt she had to prod them. “So, girls...food...laundry...what else can I do? Don’t ask me to help with your homework.” She grinned. “I suck at homework.” No one smiled.

“Could you maybe let us give you a hug?” Jenny asked, timidly. Betty smiled and spread her arms. The girls crowded around her, hugged her, and said no more. Betty understood they weren’t hugging her as much as their absent moms, but that was okay. Betty was hugging her absent children.

Chapter 9 Departure

It was time to leave. Perhaps it was because the girls learned the truth about Betty and had started to treat her differently. Maybe she felt exposed and vulnerable. She didn’t want their pity or sympathy. She felt certain her connection to the girls would never be the same.

They were no longer equals. Betty didn’t want to be ‘special’ because of her cancer. She just wanted to be Betty.

She left a heartfelt note thanking the girls and telling them she had decided to move on. She had picked up a few new possessions while she lived there but everything fit in her travel bag and it was not too heavy or bulky. Betty went back to the park where she had met the boys a few months earlier. She wanted to sit on the same bench and look at the city that was new to her then but was now her hometown. She wondered if it would feel different.

A police officer approached Betty as she sat wondering where to go next. He was holding a photo. She thought it might be a picture of her and she almost panicked. He smiled and asked if she could help him by looking at the photo. He assumed she was a frequent visitor to the park and had seen many of the people who passed through. She tried to hide her face.

It was a photo of a teenage girl. Betty guessed she was around the same age as her daughter Doris. She shook her head and asked, “Is she lost?”

“She’s a runaway,” the officer said. “Her parents are looking for her.”

“That’s terrible. Those poor people must be so worried.” Betty tried to sound sympathetic but knew her comment revealed how she thought her own family reacted when she ran away. They probably went from shock to panic to worry to recrimination to anger to disgust. Betty knew her leaving was not their fault. However, they didn’t know that, and likely never would. Knowing it, wouldn’t have likely changed their feelings. Betty had broken her bond with them and they would never be the same. She hoped they all moved on somehow. Betty stopped herself from imagining what their lives would be like if they had *not* moved on. She still hadn’t acknowledged the full impact of what she had done and probably never would.

“They are, but they probably won’t see her again,” the cop replied. He seemed genuinely concerned. “Kids disappear all the time. They don’t come back unless they want to.”

“Well, I hope, for her parents’ sake that she wants to,” Betty remarked. The cop nodded and walked away.

She almost cried. Her family had likely reported her missing and police might be looking for her right now. Most of the family photos of her were old. After she left, she changed her hair and put on a little weight. However, police were likely more interested in looking for runaway kids than a missing older woman.

Even if they found her, Betty would never go back. Her former life was over. That old Betty was dead, and a new Betty was trying to be born, but it was hard.

She decided the best place to go, for now, was back to the Divine Lorraine, the cheapest and safest hotel she knew of. She still had her original two hundred dollars. The girls had paid her a little and she kept most of it. She could afford to spend something extra on lodging for a few nights before she decided what to do next.

The hotel seemed quieter than when she was there before. The staff told her there was no convention in town and there were many empty rooms. There was a lovely view from her

small room on the tenth floor. She thought she could see the house where she stayed with the girls on the campus north of the hotel.

The desk clerk invited her to join the communion banquet on Sunday afternoon. It was a celebratory gathering for Father Divine's followers. He had hosted it every Sunday during the years he lived in Philadelphia. Betty pointed out, respectfully, that she was not a follower. The clerk told her there was always plenty of food and that everyone was welcome. She decided to attend.

The huge banquet hall was full. She had never seen so many black and white people together in one place. There were hundreds. They all sat together, intermixed. In her town, and most of the United States (as far as she knew), Black and white people sat apart at events. She had heard there were places in the southern states where they labeled public facilities as white only or Negro only. There were no signs like that in Philadelphia but she noticed that when she was in the park Black people and white people had their little areas. The only time the races mixed was when people were walking and then they mostly ignored each other.

These people were not ignoring each other. They were conversing quietly. Several people who sat near her smiled but didn't engage her in conversation. Then the room suddenly quieted and she looked toward the front. A woman walked up to the head table on a raised dais and sat down. Loudspeakers crackled and then popped. A deep male voice filled the hall. She assumed it belonged to the recently deceased Father Divine. No food was visible anywhere. Betty realized there would be a sermon before they could eat. She half-listened to his voice and watched the others as they were listening to see how they reacted. Some of his words seemed meant for her.

“The individual is the personification of that which expresses personification,” he said. “Therefore he comes to be personally the expression of that which was impersonal, and he is the personal expression of it and the personification of the pre-personification of God Almighty! Peace, it's wonderful!”

The words reminded Betty of her LSD trip. All she saw was herself, everywhere. It had left her feeling trapped. Father Divine's words made her see the trip in a new way. Perhaps her LSD dream meant she was not trapped, because she was the personification of God, and God was everywhere.

Chapter 10 Quest

The next morning, Betty bought a newspaper in the hotel lobby and walked to the park. She found a bench in the shade and opened the newspaper to look at the Help Wanted listings. *I need job ideas, she thought.*

Betty didn't think she could do office work. She skipped the secretarial and clerk advertisements but couldn't find any other ads that interested her. *Maybe I'm going about this the wrong way. It might be better to wander around looking for Help Wanted signs in shops or restaurants.*

Then Betty noticed advertisements for employment agencies. *They might be good places to try, she thought.* There was an agency a block from the park. She got up from her pleasant bench and headed toward the office.

Feeling apprehensive, Betty walked into the dingy office. She saw a reception counter and approached it. The perky blonde receptionist didn't look much older than Doris was. She had a pile of folders on her desk and fast fingers that flew over her typewriter keys. Betty assumed the girl was overworked. She expected the receptionist to greet her and waited patiently for the girl to look up from her typing. She didn't. Frustrated, Betty decided to speak. “Excuse me?” The young woman handed her a clipboard without speaking. Betty took the board and looked around. A half-dozen people were sitting in chairs looking at clipboards

like hers. She found a chair, sat down, and looked at the paper clipped to the board. It was an application form.

Betty immediately discovered she had a problem. The first items on the form were her name, address, and phone number. The name was no problem, but she had no regular address or phone. She thought she might have to stay at the Divine Lorraine just to use it as her address but doing so would deplete her savings. Perhaps this was not a good idea.

She put down the clipboard and looked around. Betty noticed a large bulletin board on the back wall. It was crammed with 3 by 5 cards. She thought they might be job postings and she could get ideas of jobs she might apply for. Betty got up and walked to the board.

Some cards were typed and others were handwritten. She started reading. The only jobs she felt suitable for were domestic jobs such as cooking, cleaning, and perhaps childcare. She found three that looked interesting and took down the cards. Betty handed them to the young woman at the counter.

“Excuse me, I’m interested in these jobs.”

The girl looked up, expressionless. “Okay. Let me see what you got there.” She read the first one and then flipped through a huge Rolodex. “This one’s already been filled,” she said, without looking at Betty. She tore the card in half and threw it into the wastebasket. Then she looked at the second card. Consulting the Rolodex again, she grunted. “Um, this one, too. I’m sorry.” She ripped that card and dropped it. Then she looked at the third card and frowned. “Well, this one’s still open, but, you might not want it.”

“Which one is it?” Betty asked.

“This woman wants a companion, someone to look after her, do some cooking, and run errands, stuff like that.”

“That sounds okay.”

“Well, she’s a tough old bird, from what I hear, and people don’t stay with her very long.”

“I’d like to give it a try if it’s okay with you.”

“Sure. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, though.”

The receptionist picked up the phone and dialed the woman’s number. “Miz Kelly? It’s Marjorie at the employment agency. Are you still looking for someone? Really? Good. I got somebody for you. Okay. I’ll send her right over.” Marjorie hung up her phone and grabbed a pen. She carefully wrote down the name, address, and phone number and handed the paper to Betty. “Here. Good luck,” she said, and then turned toward her typewriter and started to work. That was it. Betty looked at the address.

“Um, where is this?” she asked.

“Germantown. You know where that is, right?”

Betty shook her head. “I’m new here.”

“Just take the subway to Erie Ave. Get the 53 trolley, and get off at Manheim Street. Her house is right in that block of Wayne Ave. Ask somebody for directions,” Marjorie said. She turned back to the typewriter and Betty knew she had gotten all she was going to get from Marjorie.

Betty turned and walked out. She didn’t even thank Marjorie. As she walked toward the Divine Lorraine to get her suitcase, she wondered if this would turn out to be a wasted day. Maybe it would be the first of many. Suddenly, leaving the houseful of women students didn’t seem like such a good idea. Betty tried not to feel discouraged.

Chapter 11 Miz Kelly

Betty had never taken a subway before but she had seen trains. The station wasn’t busy in the middle of the day. The woman collecting fares looked around Betty’s age. Her face was pale and Betty attributed her pallid skin to the fluorescent lighting. *Or, maybe it’s*

because she works underground, Betty thought. That's not much of a life. I wonder how often she gets to see the sun.

Betty asked how she could get to Germantown. The woman looked at Betty as if her question shocked her. "You'll need to transfer at Erie Avenue," she replied. Betty asked how much the fare was. The woman pointed to a grimy sign next to the window. Betty read the fare and pulled out her cash. The woman grunted and handed Betty her change along with a transfer slip. Betty looked around. She didn't know what to do next. The woman looked at her. Their eyes met. Betty smiled. The woman sighed. She didn't like it when riders made eye contact. It made her feel as if she had to do more than merely take their money and give them tickets. She felt she had to be friendly, cheerful, and maybe even human. "It's through there," she said, pointing to the turnstile. "You're going north."

"Thanks very much. You've been very helpful. Have a nice day!" Betty replied. The woman grunted again. She hadn't had a nice day since before she got that dismal job years ago. Other people had nice days. She just collected subway fares.

Betty found the platform and boarded the train when it arrived. The trip was uneventful. She got off at Erie Avenue, went up the dirty concrete steps to street level, and saw the trolley car island in the middle of the street. She checked the sign to be sure she was at the right place and then watched for a trolley to appear. As she waited, she reminded herself that she was in an unfamiliar part of the largest city she ever visited. She needed to remember how she got here so she could get back to the Divine Lorraine when she was done.

Betty went over her subway trip in her mind and felt ready for the trolley phase. She didn't want to think about what the job interview would be like. Betty had never been interviewed for anything and had no idea what a person was supposed to say or do. She tried to recall interview tips she may have read in a magazine or heard from others but nothing came to mind. *Oh well, I'll just have to trust my instincts*, she thought. *They've gotten me this far.*

She handed the transfer slip to the trolley driver and asked him to tell her when they approached Wayne and Manheim. He grunted and she hoped he had heard her and would do what she asked. Then she sat in the seat right behind him.

Riding the trolley through a residential neighborhood seemed more pleasant than being downtown where everything was larger, busier, and more impersonal. Betty saw pedestrians on the sidewalks. Mothers wheeled babies in strollers. She rode past small one- or two-story buildings with storefronts and read the names of the shops. Pizza, drugstore, bar, TV and radio repair, mechanic, hardware store. Betty understood that this was where people lived. Downtown was only where they worked. She hoped she would do well in the interview so she could live in this neighborhood as well. It felt more like the place she left.

"Manheim!" the driver barked. Betty stood up and walked to the front doors. The trolley glided to a stop and the doors wheezed open. Betty stepped down onto the paving stones. The trolley started up before she stepped on the sidewalk. Betty turned and watched it glide away. She had a sudden feeling she had made a colossal mistake and shouldn't be there. *I might never see the Divine Lorraine again. I bet none of these people ever heard of it.* She was likely correct but would be okay.

Betty crossed Manheim Street and walked along the block. She admired the variety of houses and read the addresses. The one she was looking for was almost at the next corner. The small, picturesque two-story cottage looked out of place. It sat between a large apartment building and a fenced-in empty lot. Betty checked the address- 5147- and then opened the gate in the quaint wrought iron fence. She walked toward the small porch and climbed the steps. Betty looked for a doorbell but the door opened before she could find the button.

A stooped old woman with an angular face frowned at her. She seemed ancient and forbidding. Betty wondered if she had wasted a trip. "About time! I was just gonna call the agency!"

Betty tried not to seem alarmed. "Miz Kelly?"

"I thought you got lost."

"Sorry, I had to go back to the hotel," Betty replied, meekly.

"What were you doing at a hotel?"

"I just moved here and I was staying there until I could find a job."

"So you have no place to live now?" Miz Kelly asked.

"I'll find something in the neighborhood; that is if you hire me."

"You're hired. You'll live here, too. Didn't they tell you?"

"No, ma'am."

"Don't call me ma'am. I hate that word. I'm not a decrepit old lady."

"No, ma-," Betty said. Miz Kelly scowled at her and then smiled.

"Come in...uh."

"Betty Suggs."

"Come in, Betty Suggs. Would you like some tea?"

Betty nodded and then breathed a sigh of relief. *Maybe I passed a test*, she thought.

"Great! Kitchen's back there. You make it, and then we'll drink it and get acquainted."

"I don't much care about your past," Miz Kelly said after they settled at the kitchen table with teacups, saucers, and little cookies on a plate. "But, I'll bore you and tell you about mine just so you know who you're dealing with."

Betty had forgotten to eat lunch. She took a cookie and nibbled it. Miz Kelly watched her. Betty immediately wondered if she had done something wrong. Maybe the cookies were decorative and not meant to be eaten.

"I was a schoolteacher at the Fitler School. It's a couple blocks from here. I spent my whole career there, thank God." She paused and sipped her tea. "I retired sixteen years ago when I started to get sick. Not sick of the kids, mind you. I loved the kids. Some of them still come to visit me from time to time.

"I could have moved somewhere else when I retired but I didn't want to give up my house. But, it's hard for an old woman to live alone. I've had many people taking care of me. Some stayed awhile, others didn't. That's okay. They probably told you I was hard to work for." Betty feigned surprise and shook her head. "It's okay; I know they told you that. I want them to say that so it scares away the people who wouldn't be right for me."

"I think I would be right for you," Betty replied. Her boldness surprised her. She liked Miz Kelly but worried she didn't have much to offer.

Miz Kelly winked. "We'll see, won't we?" Betty didn't feel any more certain. "So tell me about you." Betty began to speak but Miz Kelly interrupted her. "The truth, please. Only the truth, dearie. I'm too old for lies."

"I wouldn't lie to you, Miz Kelly. I...I...left my home a few months back. My kids were grown."

"You have a husband?" Miz Kelly asked. Betty nodded. "Did you leave because of him?" Betty shook her head.

"I left because of *me*. I just didn't want to be there anymore. I loved my family, but I felt trapped in my life." She noticed a tear on Miz Kelly's cheek. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Miz Kelly replied, softly. "Are you, child?"

Betty nodded. "I think I am, now," Betty replied. She was.

Chapter 12 Nightmare

Betty settled in quickly and felt comfortable with Miz Kelly after a few days. Despite her gruff demeanor, Miz Kelly was easy to take care of. Betty liked being with the old woman. Thankfully, Miz Kelly wasn't talkative. Betty had expected her to fill their time with stories of her life but she didn't. They watched TV, read books, and chatted about the neighborhood. Miz Kelly never asked Betty about her past and Betty was grateful.

Late one night, Betty awoke when Miz Kelly cried out. "Come here, now!" she said. Betty put on her robe and hurried to Miz Kelly's bedroom.

"What's wrong? Do you need your medicine?"

"No. I had a nightmare," Miz Kelly seemed uneasy. Betty knew it had been a bad one. "Will you sit with me awhile, if you're not too sleepy?"

"Of course. Shall I make you some tea?"

"No, thanks." They sat quietly for a few moments. Betty felt awkward.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked. Miz Kelly felt distracted and didn't know what she meant.

"Talk about *what*? Oh, you mean the nightmare?"

"Yes, if you think it would help to talk about it, I'm here."

"It was about my husband-," Miz Kelly explained.

Betty tried not to seem shocked. "I didn't know you were married."

"Yes, a long time ago."

"You don't wear the ring."

"I took it off when he died. I decided to pretend I was a spinster schoolmarm for the rest of my life."

"So, tell me about your nightmare."

Huey Kelly went to fight in France in World War I. After he got wounded, the Army sent him back to the States. He was on a troop ship sailing back from Europe that never arrived in New York. (A U-boat probably sank it.) Miz Kelly had waited excitedly at the dock to greet him. They were going to celebrate his homecoming and have a real honeymoon in New York City but he never came back to her.

Her nightmare was always the same. She saw Huey trapped in a ship cabin that was filling with water. He cried out her name, said he would always love her, and then drowned. Then the dream shifted and he showed up at her front door, dripping wet, years later. She screamed when she saw him and woke up.

"I haven't had one of these dreams for a long time. I thought they were over. I thought I finally stopped missing him, but I guess not..." Miz Kelly had held onto her love all these years.

Betty said nothing. The incident made her wonder what she was missing, and whether her family missed her. It had only been six months since she left them and she had not often thought about them. She was no longer part of their lives and wondered if her children had changed much. Kids grow up fast. Their lives go by in a whirlwind. They could be much different young people now.

She wondered if they thought about her and hoped their memories had faded. *That would be good*, she thought. *Absence is better than grief*. It never occurred to Betty that the opposite might be true.

Betty wondered if her family's feelings had changed. Did they still love her? It was more likely they hated her for abandoning them. She also wondered if she still loved them. She suspected it was so easy to run away from them because she had never really loved them. If she had (she reasoned), she would never have run away.

It was too complicated to figure out so she stopped thinking about it. Instead, she thought about Miz Kelly's long-lost love and wondered what that was like. Miz Kelly never

had the life she looked forward to when her husband left to go to war. Betty had a good life when Jerry came back from a different war. However, it somehow wasn't enough for her. She had wanted or needed something else. Her LSD trip had shown her God, but Betty doubted God was what she yearned for. *Then, what do I really want?* she wondered. No answer came.

Chapter 13 Doubt

Miz Kelly smiled. "One of my former pupils is coming to see me, today," she said. "Will you go and pick up some special cookies?" Betty nodded. "The bakery is just two blocks away. The woman knows me." Betty left with a couple of dollars and walked to the little bakery. The place seemed tiny but delicious goodies filled the storefront window. She went inside and an older woman greeted her.

"I'm here for Miz Kelly's order," she told the pleasant woman.

The woman smiled. "Miz Kelly! I haven't seen her in a long time. She used to come in once a week, at least. I think she bought treats for her kids and sometimes for herself."

"Well, these cookies are for one of her former pupils who's coming to visit her today."

"Isn't that nice! Most kids today are too busy to come and see the people who raised them and took care of them." Betty smiled awkwardly and nodded. "I know my kids never come to see me; that's a fact," the woman added.

"Um, that's a shame."

"Well, I guess they won't miss me until it's too late and I'm gone," the woman added.

"Yeah." Betty paid the woman. She took her change, the box of cookies, and left.

As she walked back to Miz Kelly's house, she thought about her kids and her life. What was the real reason that she ran away? She thought it was her cancer and Jerry's insistence that she get the treatments she didn't want. Now she wondered if cancer gave her an excuse to do what she had always wanted to do.

Betty wondered what her real feelings had been for all the years she and Jerry were married. She thought she loved her family but perhaps she hadn't. However, she didn't think she hated them. Perhaps she had refused the cancer treatments because she wanted to die just to get away from them.

Her cancer had awakened her, but to *what*? Mostly, to questions she couldn't answer.

She got home with the box of cookies and found Miz Kelly's guest had already arrived. She recognized him. It was Carl. He was a friend of Jeff and Gary, the film students.

"Betty?" he asked, puzzled. She nodded.

"Yes. You're Carl, right?"

"You two know each other?" Miz Kelly asked, surprised.

"I stayed on campus with some students when I first came to the city. I was their housekeeper for a while."

"But, you left," Carl said, still puzzled.

"Yes, Carol and her friends asked me to move in with them. I felt more comfortable in a house of women instead of men. I hope the other boys didn't mind."

"I don't think so," Carl said.

"Well, it's nice to see you. How are the other boys?"

"Good. Jeff and Gary's film with you is pretty popular in the Film School."

"You were in a film?" Miz Kelly asked, impressed.

Betty smiled. "Yeah. I played a homeless woman," she said. The three fell silent.

"Look I'm taking up your visit. Why don't I make some tea and put these cookies out?"

She retreated to the kitchen and worried about what would happen now that Carl had found her. Betty had not told Miz Kelly about living with the students. She worried the

students might come looking for her now that they knew where she was. She hoped Carl wouldn't tell anyone he had met her. She might have to ask him to keep her secret.

Chapter 14 Honesty

"You haven't been completely honest with me," Miz Kelly said later. She wasn't angry, just curious, and wanted Betty to open up to her.

"I haven't lied," Betty replied.

"But, you haven't told me your whole story, have you? I want you to tell it, now. I'm listening." It was a command and Betty knew she had to comply. Betty told Miz Kelly about her family, her cancer, and how she ran away. Miz Kelly felt shocked.

"You just *left* them?" Miz Kelly asked. Betty nodded. "That must have been hard."

"Well, not as hard as having cancer," Betty replied.

"But, *why*? Didn't you feel they loved you?"

"I thought they did. But I had decided not to get the cancer treatments and my husband was angry at me. I couldn't take that. He was being completely selfish."

Miz Kelly frowned. "He didn't want you to die. What was wrong with that?"

"He didn't want me to die because he loved me and felt bad for me. He just wanted me to always be there to take care of him and the kids."

Miz Kelly nodded. "Oh, I think I understand. Your death would be an inconvenience."

"Yes!" Betty exclaimed.

"So, you left because you were angry?" Miz Kelly asked. Betty nodded. "And, you wanted to punish them." Miz Kelly's bold statement surprised Betty. She nodded again and then burst into tears. She hadn't realized she had run away to punish them. Miz Kelly let her cry.

"I'm sorry," Betty said.

"Don't be. Let it out. I know it hurts."

"I gave them everything, Miz Kelly. I loved being a wife and mother but it wasn't enough. They wanted *more*. I realized I had emptied myself, lost myself. It happened over time and I didn't see it."

"Yes, I understand." Miz Kelly's voice was soft but firm. She wasn't trying to be a kind teacher responding to a student. She wanted Betty to feel she was her best friend and that she cared.

"I gave them all my love, but when I needed some love, there was none. I couldn't stay."

"So, how do you feel, now?"

"What do you mean?"

"About love?" Miz Kelly asked.

"I don't understand."

"Do you feel loved, now?"

"Well, I don't know. I guess the most I could say is that I don't feel *unloved*. Does that make sense?"

"I think you love yourself, Betty, and that's what's most important."

"You're probably right."

"So, maybe you're whole, now," Miz Kelly suggested. "Maybe you're ready to live the rest of your life and face your death."

"Maybe," Betty replied. She wasn't certain she was ready to face her death yet. Maybe because she hadn't learned all she needed to learn about life. "That's an awful lot to think about."

"You can do it. You seem good at thinking."

“No, I’m not, Miz Kelly-.”

“Please call me Margaret.”

“What I’m good at is running away. You’re good at thinking. Thank you for helping me.”

“You’re welcome.” There was a long pause.

“You must have been a really great teacher,” Betty commented.

Miz Kelly smiled. “I still am,” she replied.

Chapter 15 Phone Call 1

Betty dialed nervously. Part of her hoped no one would answer. “Hello?” a man’s voice said.

“Hi, Jerry,” Betty said.

“Betty?! Is that you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay? Kids! It’s your mom! Where are you?”

“I’m okay. I just wanted to let you know.” Betty planned to avoid telling him where she was.

“Are you coming home?” Jerry asked. His voice seemed pained. Betty didn’t know how to answer. She no longer wanted to hurt them but she didn’t want to go home, either. She just wanted to let them know she was okay. The phone line clicked as someone else came on.

“Mom?” Johnny said. “Why did you leave us? Where are you?” He paused and she waited for him to go on. “What the hell is wrong with you?” Betty hadn’t told her kids about her cancer and they didn’t know what was wrong with her. She wrestled with telling Johnny now but said nothing.

“Hi, Johnny. How are you?”

“When are you coming home?” he asked.

“Not right now. I just called to let you know I’m okay.”

“Maybe you’re okay, but we’re not!” he shouted. “You screwed up our lives.”

Betty didn’t know how to answer. How could she tell him her life was screwed up and that was why she ran away? She didn’t want him to think it was somehow his fault. It was probably not anybody’s fault. That was the sad truth.

“Mom?” Doris said, sobbing.

“Hi, Doris.”

“I miss you. When are you coming back?”

“I don’t know.” She wanted to add that she didn’t know if she would ever come back but knew that would hurt Doris even more.

“Why did you leave, Mom? Was it because of me? Whatever it was, I’m so sorry. Please, *please* come back.”

“Don’t be sorry, Doris. It had nothing to do with you.”

“Then why?”

Betty didn’t reply.

“So where are you?” Jerry asked, after a long silence. “At least tell us that, Betty.” Now he was pleading, too.

“Don’t worry about me, Jerry. I’m okay. I’m safe. Maybe I’ll call you again.” She didn’t want to leave them with false hope but knew they needed something to look forward to. “Bye for now.” Unable to take any more of the conversation, Betty quickly hung up. She had opened old wounds. She should have known that would happen. Their recovery from her call would take days.

“I never had a family of my own,” Miz Kelly said when Betty finished the call. “But, I can imagine that phone call was hard for you, and them.”

“I think I made everything worse,” Betty mumbled. “I was hoping to let them know I was okay but I’m not okay, and neither are they.”

“So now you know how things are.”

“And, I wish they weren’t the way they are.”

“You can’t change the past, Betty. You did what you did- for good reason.”

“But, I abandoned them, and it really, really hurt them.” Betty hoped Miz Kelly would say something sympathetic but she didn’t open her mouth. “And, now I don’t know what to do.”

“What alternatives do you have, dear?”

“I could stay here, or go back to them, or just go somewhere else and wait to die.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Miz Kelly replied. “You’ve come a long way. Don’t let guilt overwhelm you.”

“Do you think my husband will tell the kids I have cancer?”

“They didn’t know?” Miz Kelly asked. Betty shook her head. “He might, just to help them understand why you left them.”

“He wanted me to get the treatments. They would have had to watch me suffer through chemotherapy and radiation. I would have grown weaker and weaker. It could have gone on for months or even years. And, then I would just end up dying, right there in front of them anyway.”

“And you didn’t want them to see you like that?” Miz Kelly asked. Betty nodded.

“I couldn’t do that to them. I couldn’t! It seemed cruel to make them watch me fade away.”

“So you ran away because you loved them?” Miz Kelly asked. Betty nodded, even though she wondered if that was the real reason.

“I guess so.”

“Do you still love them?”

“I don’t know, Miz Kelly. But, I guess so.”

“Do you think they still love you?”

“I don’t see how they could.”

“Maybe, when you’re ready, you could call them back and find out.”

“Maybe... if I’m ever ready.” Betty began to cry again. Miz Kelly let her. The first step toward growth was to let out all the hurt. Perhaps, when it was finally gone, Betty could find her true feelings and figure out what to do next.

Chapter 16 Agony

Jerry went to the police. They had stopped looking for Betty not long after he first reported her missing. Many people went missing and the police seldom found any of them. Anyway, they had more important work to do.

He told them about the call. “I don’t know where she is but she’s somewhere. Can’t you send out her photo or something?” The desk sergeant felt sorry for Jerry but didn’t know what else he could do. “Can’t we get her picture in the papers?” Jerry begged.

“We could send it out but most papers probably wouldn’t run it. I’m sorry. It would help if you knew where the call came from. Do you think she might call back?” the desk sergeant asked. Jerry shrugged. “Well, if she does, try to get her to say something, even if it’s general. Maybe the name of a city, or even just a state. Help us narrow it down.” Jerry thanked him and left.

Jerry hadn't told Johnny and Doris about Betty's cancer. He felt it would only make everything worse if they knew. They might get depressed or hysterical. He didn't want to lose either of them the way he had lost Betty.

Jerry and Betty had gotten along in their marriage. They had shared raising their children and running their household but never talked much about themselves or their feelings. Betty had never told him how she felt about her cancer. He had assumed she would do whatever the doctors told her to do. When she refused, he hadn't understood why. After she left, he realized the woman he lived with for more than twenty years had been a stranger.

But, he felt what she did was wrong. She should have come to him if she had a problem. He didn't care if she hurt him but she should never have hurt the children by running away. Jerry doubted he would ever forgive her, even if by some miracle he ever saw her again, which seemed doubtful.

Meanwhile, it was up to him to keep Johnny and Doris from falling apart. He tried to help them deal with their feelings but no one helped him with his. His best friend, Walt, knew Betty had left but Jerry hadn't told Walt about Betty's cancer. None of their friends or family knew. She had wanted to keep it private.

One night, Jerry had a couple of beers at Walt's house. They were watching the ball game and complaining about work. Walt's wife Louise came home from shopping and noticed Jerry wasn't laughing at Walt's jokes. At first, she didn't say anything but kept an eye on Jerry while she put her groceries away and started dinner. Walt noticed Jerry had finished his beer and went to get another one.

"Something's wrong with Jerry," he told Louise.

"Yeah, I can see. You think I should talk to him?" Louise knew Jerry was unlikely to share his feelings with Walt. Men didn't do that.

They sat down to eat but Jerry didn't touch his food. "What's wrong, Jerry?" Louise asked.

"It's Betty."

"You miss her, don't you?" Walt said. Jerry nodded.

"She called, last week."

"What?" Louise exclaimed. "What did she say? Where is she? When is she coming home?"

Jerry lowered his head. "She isn't," he replied.

Louise knew he needed to cry. She got up and went to his chair. Louise put her arm around his shoulders and pulled his head to her bosom. She hoped he would feel comfort in her motherly embrace and tell them more. He told them the whole story. They felt stunned.

"She never told me anything about cancer," Louise said. Jerry nodded.

"She didn't want anyone- not even the kids- to know."

"But, why did she run away?" Walt asked. "I don't get it."

Jerry sobbed even harder. "Neither do I," he said. It embarrassed him to weep in front of his friend, but Walt felt relieved that Jerry had unburdened himself. He tried to figure out some way he could help. But, what could he do? Betty was gone and it seemed she would never be coming back.

Chapter 17 Neighbor

On a pleasant early spring afternoon, Miz Kelly sat in her rocking chair on the front porch. She noticed a familiar pedestrian approaching the house. "Good afternoon, Emma," she called. Emma was a large, sturdy, friendly Black woman who had been a fixture in the neighborhood for many years. She worked as a maid for the Jewish dentist's family down the block.

Emma smiled as she walked up to the gate. "Miz Kelly! Nice to see you. How have you been?"

"Do you have time for a cup of tea?" Miz Kelly asked.

"Why, yes, thank you," Emma replied. She opened the gate and walked toward the porch.

"Come right in. This is my friend Betty."

"Hello, Betty, nice to meet you."

Betty smiled at Emma. "Same here."

They went into Margaret's living room. Betty went into the kitchen and put on the kettle. She got out cups, sugar, and milk, and arranged them on a tray.

"How are the Cohen boys?" Miz Kelly asked.

"Oh, they're good. Leonard got married a while back and Nathan's just joined the Navy."

The news surprised Miz Kelly. "Oh, my. Because of the war?"

"Yes. He's a printer, you know, and the Navy told him they needed his skills. He's going in next week."

"Well, good luck to him. How's your daughter?"

Emma felt eager to brag. "Katy-Sue is fine. She had another baby, my third grandson, Marcus. I think he's the most adorable one, so far."

Miz Kelly beamed at her. "Where's she living now?"

"South Carolina. I don't get to see her much, but we talk on the phone."

Betty came in with the tray. She sat it down and began pouring. "Emma and I have known each other a long time," Miz Kelly told Betty. "She's worked for the Cohen family for almost twenty years, right?" Emma nodded. "She used to walk the Cohen boys to school. I had both in my classes. Leonard, the oldest, used to write poetry."

"Yeah, and he's a teacher now. I don't think you knew that, did you?"

"No. That's wonderful. He was a bright, thoughtful kid. He loved music, as I recall. I assumed he would be a musician."

"He tried, but he couldn't get much work," Emma said. "But, I heard he loves teaching, probably because of you." Miz Kelly appreciated Emma's compliment. Betty smiled weakly. She didn't like reminders that she, too, had children. Moreover, that their mother had abandoned them.

"So, how have you been feeling, Miz Kelly?" Emma asked.

"Not bad for an old woman. Betty takes good care of me." She smiled at Betty as if to invite her into the conversation. Then Miz Kelly sipped her tea.

"So, Betty, are you from around here?" Emma asked. Betty shook her head.

Miz Kelly smiled. "She's from upstate but she won't tell me where. She likes to keep secrets."

Emma grinned. "Nothing wrong with secrets. A woman's gotta have some privacy, right?"

"I'm from Johnsonville, a little town you probably never heard of. It's probably not even on a map," Betty explained.

"What's it near?" Emma asked.

"Farms, mostly. A lot of them."

"Farms are good," Emma commented. "I grew up on a farm."

"Really? Me, too!" Miz Kelly exclaimed.

"Where was it?"

"Over in southern New Jersey. My family didn't own it, though. They just worked for the company that owned it. But, we had a good life. I haven't been back there in forty years. How about you?"

“South Carolina. It was my family’s farm. I’m one of twelve kids, and every one of us worked that farm almost from when we could walk.”

“You’re one of twelve kids? But, you only had one of your own?” Miz Kelly said.

“Yeah. I didn’t plan it that way but that’s how it worked out.” Emma’s husband left when Katy-Sue was two, right after they moved to Philadelphia. Emma was alone in a strange city and didn’t know what to do. She met a woman who told her about Father Divine.

“Have you ever heard of him?” Emma asked. Miz Kelly and Betty both nodded, surprising Emma. “Some of his followers worked in his maid and cleaning services. I got a job as a maid and took Katy-Sue with me every day. We lived in one of his apartment houses and went to his Sunday communion banquets.”

There was a lull while they all sipped their tea. “How many kids you got, Betty?” Emma asked.

“Two,” Betty answered, softly. “Just two.” There was another lull.

“How old?” Emma asked.

“Doris is sixteen, and Johnny’s fourteen.”

“Do you see them much?” Emma asked. Betty didn’t reply.

“She hasn’t seen them in a while, have you?” Miz Kelly asked. Betty shook her head.

“Oh. You must really miss them, huh?” Emma said. Betty looked sharply at Miz Kelly and then at Emma. She stood up, excused herself, and rushed out of the room.

Emma looked at Miz Kelly. “Was it something I said?” she whispered.

Margaret shook her head. “It’s not you. She’s going through a lot. She’ll be okay.”

Betty overheard them. She felt grateful for Miz Kelly’s sympathy but doubted she would ever be okay.

Things had worked out well for Betty since she ran away. She had found safe places to live and nice people to live with. She met younger people who liked her and found this job with Miz Kelly, who treated her well. Betty felt at home in Philadelphia and was glad she came. She should have felt proud of the instinct that led her to do what she did but didn’t. Instead, she felt guilty. Miz Kelly was aware of Betty’s feelings. After Emma left, Miz Kelly thought the time had come for her to do something to help.

Chapter 18 Phone Call 2

Miz Kelly dialed the phone. She waited for someone to answer. Then a male voice said, “Hello?”

“Mr. Suggs?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“You don’t know me, but I’m a friend of your wife’s.”

“Betty?” Jerry replied, excitedly. “Where is she?”

“I can’t tell you, but I wanted to let you know she’s okay. She’s safe.”

“Where are you calling from? Please tell me.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry. I know you must be worried...”

“Worried? I stopped worrying a while back,” he barked. “Now, I’m just angry.”

“Angry? Why?”

“Did she tell you what she did?”

“Yes,” Miz Kelly replied. “She told me the whole story.”

“I thought she loved us. But she ran away like we meant nothing to her. I thought I had missed something, like maybe she had been seeing another man.”

“No. From what she’s told me, I’m certain she didn’t leave you for someone else.”

“Then, why did she leave?” Jerry asked plaintively. He had wrestled with the question almost every night before he fell asleep alone in his bed.

“The way I understand it, she left for herself.”

“What does that mean?”

“She was hurting, I guess,” Miz Kelly replied. “She couldn’t take it...the cancer.”

“But, she saw the doctors. They told her what she had to do. I don’t understand why she had a problem.”

“I don’t think she understands, either, Mr. Suggs. Not yet, anyway. But right now she’s okay. She’s safe here with me, and she’s healthy. She isn’t in any pain. She takes care of me.”

“But, what about her family? Why doesn’t she care about us anymore?”

“I think she does care.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Jerry replied, coldly. Miz Kelly felt sorry for him. She also felt sorry for his children and Betty. Life had dealt her a horrible blow and she had responded in the only way that made sense to her. If Miz Kelly had been Betty’s friend back in Johnsonville, she would have tried to talk her out of running away. However, she wasn’t, and Miz Kelly felt she shouldn’t even think about trying to talk Betty into going back. Not yet, anyway.

“Have you ever had a serious illness, Mr. Suggs?”

“No.”

“Well, I have. You don’t know what serious illness does to a person. It changes you. Not just in small ways- like having to take medicine, go to doctors, or get treatments. It doesn’t just change your everyday life, it changes who you are. It changes the way you see life. I think that’s what her cancer did to her.”

“I don’t understand. What you’re saying doesn’t make any sense. I mean, nothing changed when they told us she had cancer. I was still her husband. I still cared about her.”

“But, did you love her?”

“Of course.”

“Did you tell her?” Miz Kelly asked. She hated asking but felt she had to find out what Jerry’s feelings toward his wife had been.

“I didn’t have to,” he declared. “She knew.”

“I’m no expert, but I don’t think she did. I think maybe she felt hurt.”

“But, I never hurt her!”

“Not deliberately.”

“So you’re saying I accidentally hurt her?” Jerry asked. He was starting to feel angry. Why was this strange woman blaming him?

Miz Kelly tried to soften her accusation. “It happens.”

“So it’s my fault she ran away? Is that what you’re saying? Lady, I don’t know who you are, but I don’t think I like you very much. Did you just call me up to attack me? Who are you, anyway? And, *where* are you? And more importantly, where is my wife?”

“I didn’t mean to upset you, Mr. Suggs. I’m sorry. I only called you to tell you she was safe.”

“The police are looking for her,” he said. It sounded like a threat.

“Well, she’s safe with me. I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“But, what about me? What about my kids? What about what’s happened to us? Do you even care about us?”

“Yes, I do. That’s why I called. I’m sorry if I upset you-.”

“Look, lady, if you’re really concerned, you can get her to come home, or, at least, call.”

“I’ll try. Goodbye, Mr. Suggs.”

“Please get her to call,” Jerry pleaded.

“I’ll try.”

“Please!” he demanded.

Miz Kelly hung up.

Chapter 19 Confrontation

Miz Kelly put on her stern schoolteacher face and called to Betty in the kitchen. Betty came in. Miz Kelly pointed to a chair. "Sit down. We need to talk."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Not to me."

"I don't understand," Betty said.

"I think what you did hurt people."

"Who?" Betty asked.

"Your family, obviously. Don't you think so?"

"Well, yeah, of course."

"And, yourself," Miz Kelly added.

"I'm doing okay."

"Are you?"

"Well, I'm here, aren't I? I'm taking care of you. That's okay, isn't it? I mean, you like what I'm doing, don't you?"

"Yes, I like you very much, and I'm grateful for your company and care, but I'm worried about you."

"Why?"

"Let me ask you this. What did you think would happen after you left your family?"

Miz Kelly asked in the same tone of voice she used to confront an unruly pupil who misbehaved at school. She hoped Betty wouldn't notice and feel offended.

Betty didn't know how to answer. She *had* run away. That action consisted of packing a suitcase and buying a bus ticket to Philadelphia. The only choice she made was the destination.

"I didn't plan anything. I just ran," she explained. "Is there something wrong with what I did?"

"Well, I'm not trying to make you feel guilty, but you already know what you did was wrong, don't you?" Betty didn't reply. "Be honest."

"I didn't see any other way....," she replied, defensively. Miz Kelly felt sorry for Betty. She considered her a dear friend and the best of all the caretakers she had since she fell ill.

"I understand, Betty. But, you didn't think it through. You didn't have a plan, right?"

"That's right. But, I didn't need one. I just needed to run."

"Did you think about what would happen to you *after* you ran? Where did you think you would go? What would you do? Who would you be with? What would happen when you got sick? Any of those things?"

"No, I just had to get away. But, things have worked out okay."

"So you're glad you did it?"

Betty didn't reply. She looked at Miz Kelly and wondered why she was asking all these questions. *Why does she need to know about my past? Isn't it enough that I'm here, that I take care of her, and that I'm not going anywhere?* "I'm not sorry I did it. Why are you asking me all this?"

Miz Kelly looked at Betty. Not as her teacher, but as her dearest friend. "Because I feel it's time for you to look at what you did and figure out why you did it."

"I *told* you why. I was facing the worst crisis of my life and my husband didn't care, or understand what was happening to me. He didn't understand what I was feeling, or what I was going through. I needed him to stop thinking of himself, stop thinking of me just as a wife, and start seeing me as a person. He didn't seem capable of doing that."

Miz Kelly nodded. She felt pleased Betty had explained everything so clearly and hoped Betty had been listening to herself. "He probably wasn't, but I don't think you should blame him. I don't think that was unusual."

"It wasn't?"

"Most spouses would probably react the same way."

"I don't know," Betty replied. "Maybe you're right." Betty still felt Miz Kelly was prying into her past instead of letting her live her present life. What did the past matter, anyway?

"I called Jerry," Miz Kelly said.

Betty frowned. "You did *what*? How could you?"

"Don't panic. I only called to tell him you were okay. I didn't tell him where you were."

"Um, how was he?"

"How do you think he was?" Miz Kelly asked. As a teacher, it had been her job to ask questions. The only way people learned was by finding answers. She knew Betty had not yet found her answers.

"I think he probably hates me and is angry with me."

"I don't think he hates you, but you're right. He *is* angry with you. He doesn't understand."

"I know. That was the problem. He didn't understand."

"I also don't think his not understanding is the real problem."

"What do you mean?" Betty asked.

"Do *you* understand why you did what you did? Really understand? It doesn't seem to me that you do, and I think it's time you faced the truth."

"What truth?"

"The real reason you ran away."

"I told you the real reason," Betty almost shouted. "I had cancer." She briefly wondered if her time with Miz Kelly had come to an end.

"That's what you think it is, but I don't believe it. I don't think you know what the real reason is, not yet."

"So, if it's not what I said, then what is it?" Betty asked, angrily.

"When you refuse the cancer treatments you pretty much guaranteed you're going to die sooner rather than later, right?"

"I guess so."

"Without treatments, your cancer's likely to progress unchecked. You'll go into the hospital at some point, and then it will be too late to do anything about the disease, and you'll just die."

"Well, yeah. That's how it happens."

"Betty, your life will be over." Miz Kelly said, gently. She hoped she was getting through but wasn't sure.

"Right. I'll be dead."

"So you're committing suicide, aren't you?"

Betty frowned. "No! I couldn't do that."

"You mean you couldn't do it the way some people do. They shoot themselves, jump off bridges, or overdose on sleeping pills. Am I right?"

"Well, yeah. That's what I've heard people do."

Miz Kelly looked at Betty. "But you decided to do it slowly, didn't you?"

Betty was thunderstruck. "No! How can you say that? That's cruel!" Betty jumped up, ready to run out of the room.

Miz Kelly pointed her bony finger at the chair. “Sit *down*, Betty! You’re not running away this time. I’m not done talking to you.” Betty didn’t want to sit down. She didn’t want to stay in the room or even in the house with Miz Kelly. She wanted to run away, even though she had nowhere else to go. *Maybe back to the Divine Lorraine?* she thought. *But, not back to Jerry and the children.* Was that what Miz Kelly was trying to provoke her into doing?

Betty composed herself. “Look, Margaret. I appreciate your concern, but this is none of your business.”

“I know it’s not my business, Betty. It’s your business. It’s the business of your life and death. Nothing is more important. Not your family, or me, or where you’ve been, or what you’ve done since you ran away, or even before you ran away.” She paused to be certain she had Betty’s full attention. She did. Miz Kelly looked into Betty’s eyes. “I think it’s about your soul. I think you’ve known this all along but maybe you couldn’t see it or didn’t understand it.”

The comment shocked Betty. “My *soul*?” As far as she knew, Miz Kelly wasn’t religious. She never went to church. No clergy came to visit her. She never mentioned God or prayer or Jesus. *Why has she mentioned my soul?* Betty thought. *What does that have to do with any of this?*

Chapter 20 Cage of Suffering

Miz Kelly looked at Betty with her teacher face that meant she was going to say something important and Betty damn well better listen. “I think you have to ask yourself why you really left your family,” Miz Kelly said.

Betty looked away. “I already told you,” she stammered.

“I don’t think those are the real reasons. I think there’s a deeper reason you haven’t looked at yet.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“I think you realized something was missing from your life, Betty.”

“What could have been missing? I had a good husband, two okay kids, and a nice home. We were a normal family and then I went and wrecked it. What I did to them was hurtful and wrong.”

Miz Kelly shook her head. “I don’t think you would have deliberately hurt them unless you had a good reason.”

“Well, I thought I had a good reason but now you seem to feel my reason wasn’t that good. So, what are you getting at?”

“What I said a moment ago- something was missing from your life.”

“Okay! I heard you. But I don’t understand what you mean, so please just tell me.”

“I think what you were missing was yourself.”

Betty looked at Margaret as if she had never seen her before. She wondered if Miz Kelly was insulting or belittling her. Betty had never seen her do anything cruel and doubted she ever had a cruel thought.

“I... I don’t know what to say, Miz Kelly. That makes no sense.”

Margaret ignored her comment. She reached for a book. “I read this many years ago. It helped me understand and accept what happened to my Huey. I think it explains what you are doing and why you are doing it.”

Betty felt skeptical but also curious. *I should listen respectfully to Miz Kelly*, Betty thought. *She’s a teacher. She’s lived a long time, learned many things, and knows a lot more about life than I do.*

Miz Kelly opened the book to a bookmarked page and read aloud. ““The goal of the Hindu Sannyasin is moksha (liberation)’. The idea of what that means varies from tradition to tradition.””

Betty felt confused. “Um, Miz Kelly, I’m not a Hindu. I’m not even sure what it means to be a Hindu.”

“Oh, I know that. But, you are a human being. Sometimes these ancient texts illuminate things about ourselves that no modern books can explain.”

Betty still wasn’t sure she understood. “So how does what you read apply to me?”

Miz Kelly didn’t explain. Instead, she turned back to the page. ““Who am I, and in what really do I consist? What is this cage of suffering?””

The words ‘cage of suffering’ struck Betty deeply. Suddenly, the dilemma of her life came into sharp focus and her deepest feelings became clear. Her cancer was a cage. She was suffering. She had just wanted to escape.

Miz Kelly waited for Betty to speak but Betty remained caught up in her thoughts. Then Miz Kelly spoke in her gentlest most soothing voice. “You were facing your own death, dear, and you realized you didn’t know what everyone should want to know.” Still feeling confused, Betty looked at Miz Kelly. Miz Kelly smiled. “Who am I, and why am I here,” Miz Kelly said, softly.

Betty burst out crying. “Thank you,” she said. “I think I get it now.”

Chapter 21 Sannyasin

Later that night, long after Miz Kelly had gone to bed, Betty sat alone in the living room pondering her life. The book Miz Kelly had read aloud from was still open. Betty wondered if it said anything else that was relevant to her. She reached for it and began to read.

““Sannyasa is a means and an end in itself. It is a means to decreasing and then ultimately ending all ties of any kind. It is a means to the soul and meaning, but not ego nor personalities. Sannyasa does not abandon the society, it abandons the ritual mores of the social world and one’s attachment to all its other manifestations. The end is a liberated, content, free and blissful existence.””

She stopped reading and thought about her life with Jerry and the kids. Her LSD-induced dream had been a straightforward representation of that life. She had been imprisoned in a cage of her own making. Perhaps, deep down, she had hated that life. Maybe the truth had always been there and she had refused to see it. Cancer made her realize there was something wrong with her; not the disease itself, but something *existential*. Perhaps the reason she refused the treatments was because they could not cure her actual *dis-ease*.

Cancer woke her up to the truth that she had not found the answers to the questions she first asked herself in early adolescence. *Who am I? Why am I here?* She had buried those questions deep within for her entire adult life. They were simple questions; many people might say they were stupid. Without knowing it when she ran away, she decided she didn’t want to die without at least *trying* to find her answers.

The text explained what she had done and why. Betty had broken ties with her family, detached from the social world, and embarked on a search to find out who she really was. She had become a pilgrim, a sannyasin. She had not merely run away from something, but gone looking for her soul.

She paused in her thoughts and looked at Miz Kelly’s book. There was a piece of paper stuck between the pages. It looked like a newspaper clipping. She carefully unfolded it so she could read what it said. It was a long quote from Father Divine, dated Jan. 25, 1934. Miz Kelly had underlined some of the words.

Then I say, it is a privilege for you to be living in this Resurrection- not merely the Resurrection of the individual that was called Jesus; the Resurrection of Jesus was a pre-evidence of the great Resurrection of Life in the hearts and lives of all of the people of the earth. Take these thoughts into consideration. The Individual Crucifixion and Individual Resurrection, was but be-speaking the great Resurrection of our present day Salvation that I have brought to humanity's conscious realization, the great Resurrection of Life within all of the children of men. Then I say, this Truth, which was and IS the Christ, has been long since lying dormant in the subconscious mind of men, being crucified by the mortal versions and by their theories and doctrines, and held by the selfsame expression, but behold, the great Resurrection has taken place. Firstly, as a Sample and as an Example, Jesus as an individual brought it to fruition as an outward expression of the universalization of the Truth. But now you can say with ME and also with the writer of old, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth, for He liveth in my soul.' You can say, 'I know He has risen, for He has risen in my soul.'

The words stunned her and went right to the new place of truth that had opened inside her. She now understood she was seeking not only her soul, but also resurrection, only she didn't know it when she had started her journey. Her soul wanted to be certain, regardless of what happened to her in *this* life that she would go on.

Betty could never have found her soul at home. People confused the soul with God, Jesus, churches, and dogmas. There were always pious people who acted as if they understood God and Jesus but knew nothing of the eternal truths. She had known a few of these phonies. They were so self-centered that God would have nothing to do with them.

However, the ancient Hindus knew. Father Divine knew. Now, thanks to Miz Kelly, so did Betty. Everything was clear. She had found her 'liberated, content, free and blissful existence.' She was part of 'the great Resurrection of Life within all of the children of men.' She knew who she was, where she had come from, what she had been seeking, and why she had been seeking it.

Betty was ready to live the rest of her life and face her death. She was free.

Chapter 22 Reconnection

Betty called on Saturday afternoon when she thought everyone would be at home. "I'm ready to come home if you still want me to," she said. Jerry didn't reply. She waited. "Jerry, is it okay if I come back?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Jerry replied, warily. "I'm just shocked. I thought I would never see you again."

"I need you to know I'm not sorry for what I did, and I'm not going to apologize, to you or the kids."

"Betty, I want you back," Jerry replied. "But, you really hurt them."

"Did you tell them about...?"

"Cancer? No."

"So, they don't know I'm sick?" Betty asked.

"No."

"Jerry, if I come back, you know what's gonna happen, don't you?"

"What?"

Betty sighed. *He still doesn't get it*, she thought. "Well, I'm still gonna die."

"You might not if you do what the doctor tells you," Jerry argued.

"I don't think it will work, Jerry."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"So you wanna come back here just so you can die?" Jerry asked. His voice had changed and sounded harsh.

“That’s what’s gonna happen, eventually.”

There was a long silence. Betty thought he might be close to tears. “So, they’re gonna lose you all over again?” Jerry asked. He didn’t add what he was feeling: that *he* was also going to have to go through losing her again.

“That’s right,” Betty replied.

There was another long silence. “Maybe it’s better if you don’t come back,” Jerry said. He had already been through the worst ordeal of his children’s lives. He had tried to help them deal with Betty’s disappearance. Right now, it was only temporary, but it would eventually become permanent when she died.

“Maybe I should ask them if they want me to come back,” Betty suggested

“That might be a good idea, Betty. But first, you have to tell them the truth.”

“Are they around?”

“Johnny’s out. Doris is home.”

“Let me talk to her,” Betty said. Jerry called out. Doris picked up the extension phone. “Doris?”

“Mom! Where are you? Are you coming home?” Betty didn’t reply. “Please come home.”

“I called to talk about coming back, Doris. But there’s something you need to know.”

“Whatever it is, I don’t care. Just come back.” Doris’ pleading nearly broke Betty’s heart. She wondered if it had been a good idea to call and perhaps inflict more pain on Jerry and her children. She also wondered if she should tell Doris the truth.

“Do you want to know why I ran away?”

“Oh, yes, Mom!”

“I’m sick, Doris. I have cancer. I’m going to die.”

Doris didn’t reply. There was static on the phone line. Betty thought she had made a huge mistake and hurt her daughter worse than when she ran away. She waited but Doris didn’t say anything more. Then the line went dead. Betty knew that her relationship with her family had ended. There was no going back. Ever.

Chapter 23 New Family

“You’re not alone, Betty,” Miz Kelly insisted. “You can still live here with me.”

“Thanks. That works for now, but someday I won’t be able to take care of you anymore. Will you take care of *me* then?”

Miz Kelly grinned and shook her head. “No. We’ll find someone else to do it for both of us.”

“I think I should leave now while I can still get around,” Betty replied. “Then you can find someone else to look after you.”

“But, where will you go? You’re not thinking about doing anything drastic, are you?” Miz Kelly shook her head. “I don’t want to be a burden on you. I’ll find somewhere to go.”

“I don’t want you to go, Betty. I want you to stay here where it’s safe.”

Betty desperately wanted to stay with Miz Kelly. Her house was the only place on earth where she felt she belonged. However, she didn’t want to become a burden. “I can’t ask you to put up with me.”

“You *aren’t* asking; I am. Please stay. It would mean a lot to me.”

“You’ve already done so much for me, Margaret. I can’t ask for any more. I’m just going to become a burden.”

Miz Kelly looked straight into Betty’s eyes. Betty didn’t see Miz Kelly’s teacher stare. She saw the compassionate eyes of a dear friend. “Betty, everyone is a burden sometime in their lives. We need each other. It’s what makes us human.”

“Is this more of that philosophy you’ve read in books?” Betty asked. She hadn’t meant to sound cynical and hoped she hadn’t offended Miz Kelly.

She smiled at Betty. “Kind of. It’s also what I learned by living all these years. I think you already know I’m right. You’re a mother and wife. Well, you were. You spent your adult life taking care of other people. Were your children a burden to you when they were infants?”

“No. I loved them. I was happy to care for them.”

There was a long pause. Betty wondered what Miz Kelly was going to say next. “I never had a child, Betty.”

“But, you taught plenty of children.”

“It’s not the same. You are about the same age as my daughter would be if Huey and I had a child.”

Feeling awkward, Betty looked down. “Really? So?”

“You feel like a daughter to me.”

“Margaret, I... I don’t know what to say. My real mom died when I was still in high school. My mother-in-law died a few years after my son was born. I never got to know her well. She was very private. I don’t think she liked me. She thought her son could have done a lot better, if you know what I mean...”

Miz Kelly smiled. “That’s her loss. I would have felt blessed to have a daughter like you.”

“Thanks.”

“So, you’ll stay?”

“For now, but if I reach the point when I don’t feel I’m being fair to you, I’m going to leave.”

“Promise you’ll talk to me first?” Miz Kelly asked. Betty nodded, grudgingly. “You’ve made me very happy. Would you make us some tea, so we can celebrate?”

“Celebrate what?”

“The one thing I missed all these years is that I had no one who could be like a daughter to me, and now I do. You won’t be sorry.”

“I hope you won’t, either.”

“That’s not possible, Betty...” Miz Kelly paused. She waited for Betty to say something. Betty remained silent. There was nothing else left to say. Miz Kelly smiled. “So, how about that tea?”

Betty jumped up. “Coming right up!” she said.

Chapter 24 Endings and Beginnings

Miz Kelly’s final illness lasted only a couple of weeks. She knew she was going to die as soon as it began and knew what she had to do. Miz Kelly immediately changed her will so Betty got the house at 5139 Wayne Avenue along with all her savings.

Margaret felt okay about dying. She wasn’t certain what would happen afterward but hoped to reunite with Huey. He had missed most of her life. She thought it would be fun to tell him everything that happened after he was lost at sea. There were many stories about the world and her life that she was eager to share with him. She imagined herself like Scheherazade, only she wouldn’t be telling her stories to prevent her death, she would be telling them after she died. They would have eternity together.

She wanted to tell him about Betty, who became like a daughter to her in the five years they lived together. She also wanted to tell him about the miracle. Betty came to her with cancer and thought she would die soon, but she didn’t. No one knew why. Betty never told any doctor about her cancer diagnosis.

While Miz Kelly preferred to believe Betty survived because of a miracle, Betty assumed the diagnosis had been a mistake from the beginning and she never had cancer at all.

That mistake led her to change her life. Betty was not sorry about running away. She understood her old life with Jerry and her children had been a lie. She had not been a real person but an automaton. The roles of wife and mother were computer programs that controlled the automaton's actions. Her real personality had been missing all those years.

In her five years with Miz Kelly, Betty had discovered who she really was. She found she liked herself more now that she was her own woman. She was no longer the woman who belonged to Jerry as his wife and Doris and Johnny as their mother. Now Betty belonged to Betty. Her search had brought her home to herself, which was where she had always wanted to be.

Her life without Margaret was mostly quiet. She read many of Miz Kelly's books and then went to the local library to borrow others. The neighborhood began to change from all white people to a mix of Black and white residents. She met several new people her age and formed a few friendships. Betty also volunteered at the nearby St Francis parish but didn't attend mass there. She occasionally worshiped with a few Friends at the Quaker meeting on Germantown Avenue but didn't ask to join.

She met Ben Johnson a year after Miz Kelly died. One afternoon, Emma, the Black maid who still worked for the Jewish dentist's family down the block, stopped by and introduced him to Betty. Ben was Emma's brother and a widower. Emma had mentioned him a few times when she'd visited Miz Kelly. Apparently, she had also mentioned Betty to Ben because he greeted her warmly. As they chatted about the neighborhood, Betty mentioned the library, church, and the Quaker meetinghouse. Ben mentioned his church, the movie theaters, and his favorite parts of the Free Library branch in Vernon Park. Emma had been on her way to work and said goodbye to the pair. They kept chatting long after she left.

Ben asked when Betty was planning to visit the library again and suggested they go together. She accepted. Soon after, they were spending summer afternoons reading and sipping lemonade on her front porch. They chatted about the books they read and the movies they liked.

There was a small movie theater- the Wayne Ave Playhouse- only a couple of blocks away and they started attending shows together. Neither thought they were dating. One would casually mention a new movie and the other would eagerly say, "Oh, I wanted to see that!" They walked to the theater and sat next to each other. He often treated her to popcorn and she liked to buy him small bags of M & Ms, which he loved. They sometimes felt energetic and walked to the luxurious Orpheum Theater on Chelten Avenue, or to the smaller, plainer Band Box Theater on Armat Street, where they showed unusual foreign and older American films.

When Betty heard Ben's daughter and her husband, with whom he lived, were moving away and Ben would have no place to live, she asked him to move in with her. It was a small house but it had three pleasant bedrooms and Ben could have one if he wanted it. They lived as brother and sister for a year and continued enjoying lemonade on the porch, going to the movies, watching TV, and reading together.

The phone rang early one morning when Betty was still asleep. Ben was already awake and answered it. "Oh, I must have the wrong number," a woman said. She was startled when she heard a man's voice.

"Who are you calling for?" he asked, calmly.

"This used to be Betty Suggs's number."

"Oh, she's here. Um, who's calling?"

"Doris."

"I'll get her for you." Ben put down the phone and called upstairs. The phone had awakened Betty and she was already on her way to answer it.

"Hello?" Betty said.

"Mom?"

“Doris? Is that you?”

“Yes! Mom, I have some bad news. Dad just died. I thought you would want to know.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. How are you and Johnny doing?”

“We’re okay,” Doris replied, and then there was a long pause. “How are you?”

“I’m all right, Doris. It turned out I never had cancer. I don’t know why they told me I did.”

“That’s great, I guess. Why didn’t you come home?”

“You made it pretty clear you didn’t want me to. Don’t you remember?”

“I guess I did. I was really angry at you. I’m sorry, Mom.”

“You don’t need to apologize. What I told you must have been a shock.”

“Yeah, it was. I just couldn’t take anymore, on top of everything else.”

“I understand. When is the funeral?” Betty asked.

“In three days. Will you come?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. I don’t have a car and there’s nobody I can ask to drive me.”

“Oh,” Doris said. She sounded disappointed. Then she had an idea. “Well, Johnny, Ed, or I could come to pick you up.”

“Who’s Ed?” Betty asked.

“Ed’s my husband.”

“Oh. You’re married?” Betty had forgotten her daughter was already old enough to have a husband of her own. “When?”

“Right after high school.”

Betty felt embarrassed. “Well, congratulations, I guess.”

“There’s more. We have two kids, Lacey and Jeff. You’re a grandmother!” Doris must have thought the news would make Betty happy, but she felt conflicted. Betty had never thought about becoming a grandmother and was not certain she wanted to be one now.

“Oh, that’s nice,” she commented.

“I’d love for you to meet them,” Doris said. Betty didn’t know how to reply. Until this phone conversation, her old life had remained safely walled-off in the past. Only Miz Kelly knew everything about her. Betty felt reconnecting with that old life might serve no useful purpose and merely open old, painful wounds. *Why couldn’t they have left me alone?* she thought. *I’m supposed to be dead by now, anyway.* She wanted to be dead to her husband and children.

“So, Mom, should we come and get you?” Doris asked. Betty didn’t answer. She wanted to say ‘no’ and hang up, but she knew that would be the biggest hurt of all the hurts she had inflicted on her children.

“I can’t, Doris. I’m sorry.” She expected Doris to argue with her, or try to persuade her to come to the funeral, but Doris didn’t. She merely hung up.

Chapter 25 Past, Present, and ?

Doris’s phone call had unsettled Betty. Ben didn’t know what to do. He wanted to respect her privacy but felt curious about why she seemed upset. He also wanted to soothe her.

Ben had found Betty attractive the first time they met but would never have told her or even hinted about it. He was shy, respectful, and a couple of years older than she was. Also, she was white and he was Black. Society was changing and mixed-race couples were becoming more common but Ben had no idea if his feelings would shock or offend her if he expressed them.

When she offered to let him live in her house he thought she might be hinting she felt as he did. However, he had seen no evidence of anything other than friendship since he moved in. She seemed pleased to continue a brother-sister companionship, which he was happy to do anyway because they were so compatible.

However, Ben was also lonely. Despite his daughter's gentle encouragement, he had not done anything more than date a few women since he lost his wife Denise ten years earlier. They had both been from churchgoing families that had known each other for decades and married when they were still in their teens. Their marriage had almost seemed fated. Denise was his best friend who became his wife.

Now Betty had become his best friend, something that no other woman he knew after Denise had come close to being. He recalled how enjoyable it was to be married to his best friend. Ben missed Denise and their marriage. He thought he might find the same kind of relationship with Betty if they could become closer but didn't know how to let her know how he felt.

Then Betty got the phone call that disturbed her and Ben asked what was wrong. She hadn't told him much about herself. He hadn't cared to ask. There was always plenty of other stuff to talk about. They enjoyed their conversations. If they became emotional, it was because of their passionate like or dislike of a book, movie, or TV show. They rarely spoke about themselves. However, something from Betty's past life had troubled her and Ben felt concerned.

"Betty, I don't know what's happened, but I'm here if you need to talk to someone."

"Oh, Ben, I don't want to burden you."

"You wouldn't. I care about you. I don't like seeing you so sad. Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"Are you sure you want to know?" she asked, puzzling him. *How bad could it be?* he thought. Then he nodded for her to continue. She explained the woman who called was her daughter. She called to tell Betty her husband Jerry had died.

"You were still married?" Ben asked, surprised. Betty nodded. "I assumed you were a widow or divorced." Betty shook her head. She wondered if she should tell Ben more of her story. How would he react when she told him how she ran away from her family, and why? He might think her a weak, immoral, or bad person. He might even hate her for withholding the truth from him.

She liked their relationship. She liked Ben and wanted him to like her. Their quiet, satisfactory life might end if she told him more. Ben waited. Betty hesitated. He could sense the conflict inside her, felt sorry for her, and wanted to help her feel better. He put his arms around her, intending to cradle her and give her a shoulder to cry on if she needed it. She put her arms around him, held him tight, and began to sob.

"Oh, Ben, please don't hate me."

Surprised by her pleading, he asked, "Why would I hate you?"

"I haven't told you the truth about... myself."

"You don't have to say another word." He meant to soothe her but wanted her to tell him everything. He thought it might make her feel better. However, she didn't owe him an explanation. Ben held her and let her sob.

Then she told him the whole story. His heart broke but he didn't say anything. Afraid that what she confessed disgusted him, she pulled away so she could look at his face. He wasn't scowling. He looked sympathetic and there was a tear in his eye.

"I was supposed to be dead by now, Ben," she explained. It was the most frightening statement he had heard in years. The thought that he might never have met her and they might never have become friends alarmed him. *I might never have moved in and been able to live under the same roof with her*, Ben thought. He realized his feelings for her were deeper than

he had admitted to himself, until now. Ben had to take whatever risk was necessary to let her know.

He needed to make it clear that what she did was not bad, selfish, or wrong. She had followed her own path, one that led, however mysteriously, there, to him. She didn't need to feel guilt or sorrow. Ben wanted to make her feel supported but he also wanted to convey his deepest feelings. He was ready to share her life for the rest of his own, even though she was white and he was Black. He didn't know if she felt the same way but was ready to find out. It would only take a second.

He gently leaned down and kissed her as sweetly as he could. A second later, Betty kissed him back. Then he knew.

26. Amazing Grace

Their relationship changed in subtle ways. They held hands when they sat on the porch, walked to movie theaters, and strolled around the neighborhood in the evenings. Their gentle, sweet affection was obvious to everyone. Other people enjoyed being around them. But, no one knew Betty and Ben were now sleeping in the same bedroom.

A suburban Justice of the Peace married them. His wife was the only witness. The couple didn't give each other wedding rings, just long, tender kisses. The Justice and his wife looked at each other. The older couple who would not stop kissing embarrassed them. After Betty and Ben left the little chapel, the Justice closed for the day. He and his wife went to bed in the middle of the afternoon for the first time in many years.

Betty and Ben never talked about love. If anyone had asked whether she loved him, she would not have known how to reply. She didn't know what he would answer if anyone asked him. It didn't seem important.

One day Ben was singing as he washed the lunch dishes. Betty heard him from the living room. She tiptoed toward the kitchen and listened from the doorway. His task fully absorbed him and he didn't hear her approach.

“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
“That saved a wretch like me!
“I once was lost, but now am found;
“Was blind, but now I see.”

Betty didn't know the song. Ben's first wife Denise had loved it and often sang it spontaneously. She had always sung from her heart and he reconnected with her joy as he sang. It was not his voice he heard, but hers.

The lyrics spoke to Betty as no other song ever had. She felt she could finally see the elemental truth about her life. She once was lost but didn't know it. Then the doctors (mistakenly) told her she had cancer. She broke out of her old life and began her journey toward a new one. She had been blind to it all, until this moment, but now, thanks to Ben, she could see. Grace had guided her journey here, and now she had found herself.

Betty stole up behind Ben and put her arms around him from behind. She laid her head against his back, and whispered, “I love you.” Startled, he stopped singing and dropped the dish he was washing into the soapy water. She clutched him so tightly that he couldn't turn around.

“Don't stop,” she whispered.
Ben cherished her hug and took a deep breath. Then he went on.
“Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
“And mortal life shall cease,
“I shall possess, within the veil,
“A life of joy and peace.”

Betty now possessed a 'life of joy and peace,' and she didn't have to die to achieve it. When death threatened and awoke her, she chose to follow her heart. It had led her to leave her family and come to Philadelphia. She had looked after college boys and girls and then lived with Miz Kelly. It led her to Ben, the wonderful man whose chest her arms now encircled. While he washed the dishes, he sang the unfamiliar song that somehow told her story.

"What's that song?" she whispered.

"Amazing Grace? It's an old hymn. You've never heard it?"

"No. It's beautiful."

"It was Denise's favorite, although we never sang it at church. She used to sing it whenever the spirit moved her."

"Is that why you're singing it now?" Betty asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you feeling moved by the spirit? Or, are you remembering Denise?"

"Both, I guess."

"Oh?"

Ben closed his eyes and thought for a moment. He wanted to explain as carefully as he could. "I'm moved by the spirit because of you. I'm also remembering Denise because the hymn made her so happy when she sang it."

Betty smiled at him. "Well, it makes me happy to hear it, too. I hope you'll sing it a lot."

He did. For all the time they remained together. Betty never tired of hearing it. She came to love the old hymn not because Ben sang it or because it reminded him of his first wife, but because it described her life.

Betty was no longer a 'missing person.' She 'once was lost but now was found.' It wasn't those college film students who met her in the park who found her. Nor was it the coeds to whom she revealed her truth after her LSD trip. It wasn't Miz Kelly, who found a daughter she never had, or Ben who found a companion long after his first wife died. Betty had done what few people do. She had found herself.

Ben arranged what he thought would be a small memorial service a few weeks after he buried Betty. He needed to be consoled but never expected all the people who came to pay their respects. Even Doris and Johnny, both of whom he had called out of courtesy, showed up. They were shocked when they met Ben and discovered their mother had married a Black man. He hugged them as if he had known them all his life and they immediately warmed to him.

After the memorial service, Ben invited Doris and Johnny to his house. They eagerly accepted. "I wanted you to see where your mother lived for the past few years. She was happy here..." Ben noticed the sadness on the children's faces and regretted his comment. "She talked about you two, a lot," he added. "She missed you more than she could say."

"We missed her," Doris mumbled. Until that moment, she hadn't realized how true it was. Despite their mother having abandoned them, they still loved her.

"And she still loved you. She told me often," Ben added.

Johnny spoke up. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ben... but I find that hard to believe. She abandoned us."

Ben looked at Johnny, then at Doris, and then back at Johnny. "I know, son. I know. She had her reasons. I didn't understand them. If I had been her friend back before she left, I would have told her she was crazy to even consider doing what she did... but she did it." Ben looked into Betty's kids' eyes and saw her there. "I'm sorry."

Doris hugged Ben spontaneously. She had lost her mother years ago. Ben had lost his love a month ago. However, they had still each other.

Then Ben got an idea. "Why don't you guys bring your families to stay here when you vacation in Philadelphia? I have plenty of room." The kids nodded.

Doris and Johnny never saw Ben again. He called a few times and they sent Christmas cards, but that was all. When they had been kids, Philadelphia had seemed a magical city whenever they visited. Now, they didn't want to go there because they didn't need to visit the city their mother had run away to. Ben was a nice old man but they had other old people in their lives back home in the small town where they lived. He understood and stopped calling them. Life went on.

In quiet moments alone in his little cottage, Ben remembered everything he and Betty had done while they lived there. As he walked from room to room, sat alone on the porch, or puttered in the kitchen, he couldn't help but feel her presence. *Betty Suggs is dead*, he thought. *Long live Betty Suggs!*

The End