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Picnic

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The Picnic

Jeri Schelhaas

The day before Hollis Diemer's funeral Mom suggested that I give Connie Meyer a call.

"I know that she's visiting at Pete and Eunice's this week. Eunice told me at church Sunday that Connie and her kids were driving from Cleveland to go to the Meyer reunion with them."

"It's a long shot, Mom. Why do you commit me to these things before you talk to me. It always sounds like a good idea until you try to make it happen. Connie's not going to want to sing at a funeral anymore than I do when I'm just here for a few days."

As though she had not heard a word, Mom refilled my coffee cup, then pulled off a dead blossom from one of the purple African violets catching the morning sun in front of the dinette window.

"You should be able to get a hold of Connie. Don't decide before you even talk to her what she might say. You know, Marianne, we really don't have anyone at church anymore who could do it and I think Clarence and Sophie would like it, if Sophie can pull herself together enough to even get through the funeral. She stills drinks, you know."

"Mom, I hardly knew Hollis. You know how Connie and I made fun of him. I really don't remember ever even talking to him. He was so odd. I feel bad about that now, but I really don't want to do this."

We were beginning to get too loud in the quiet of the early morning, too loud for my sleeping girls curled up in the bed I used to sleep in down the hall. Ron was awake, I knew, in the guest room. When we visited my mom, even though he was the early riser at our house, he let me get up first to talk in the kitchen with my mom for an hour or so. It was the best part of the visit for her. She loved the early morning, the birds singing, little traffic on the highway, a cup of coffee held comfortably in both hands, a bit of gossip and old stories about her and Dad. She was lonely for him and missed the busy farm work now handled by the renter.

"Marianne, they asked you to do it. Just because they are strange, you think you can say no? To be honest, Marianne, Eunice and I would love to hear you two sing again too. And I'm sure Eunice would think it would be a chance to get Connie back into church one time. She never comes to church anymore when they come to visit. Did you know that? Doesn't go to church at all, I guess. Went from Reformed to Baptist to some Congregational thing to Unitarian before Eunice said she claims she lost all use for any of it. Connie says it is 'sweet,' 'sweet,' she calls it, for Pete and Eunice to keep going to the same church they've always gone to, but it doesn't mean a hill of beans to her anymore. Pete and Eunice were here one night last winter, and she talked quite a bit about it, how that doctor husband of Connie's makes them feel backward because they go to church. It's hard for her."

I could hear honest sorrow in her voice, but also I knew there was a bit of relief that it was not her daughter who had upset the joy of children keeping the faith.

I had seen Connie only once in the past twenty years since high school. That had been during college when she and I happened to be back at our parents' church on the same Sunday. After high school, Connie had gone off to nurses' training, I to college, and only that one time did we run into each other. When we did, we were already strangers. We didn't have a lot in common anymore; life at a coed liberal arts college and life at an all female hospital nursing program had brought about different experiences, new friends, and besides that, she had become an outspoken, world-damning fundamentalist, and I had grown critical of evangelistic fervor without a social conscience. So after we started work, she as a surgi-

cal nurse and I as a teacher, we had both married and moved to other parts of the country and had never seen each other again. What we knew of each other we had learned from our parents. So it was through my parents that I had heard that Connie had married a doctor, handsome, wealthy, and still married when he and Connie had taken a keen interest in each other in the operating room. She had two kids; so did I. I had heard, through Mom, that her husband was a very successful cancer specialist, and an unbeliever. And somewhere along the line, Connie had not needed the church anymore either.

"Mom, look, I will give her one call and if she's there, I will ask her, but I'm sure she will say no and then it will be over with, all right? What do they usually do for singing at funerals in your church? Surely someone sings."

Mom's reply came fast as though she were just waiting for an opportunity. "We don't have anyone young enough to sing anymore. We are not like you, you know, big church, lots of talent. We are this little church about to close, and it would be nice once in a while to hear some good music. Those bigwigs at Synod don't give two hoots about us anymore, at least that's the way it feels. We even have to go outside the denomination to find a minister."

There was a lot said in those sentences, lots of regret, disappointment, anger. When she and Dad and a handful of others had started that church in 1942, there had been big dreams, such big dreams. And now if it wasn't God who was blowing out that candle on the lamp stand—and that would be a hard admission to make—and they themselves surely had done all they could, then the fault must be with some establishment somewhere, unseen and sadly silent.

"I'll call, Mom. But I hope you will let this drop if she doesn't want to. And you know this will do nothing about the bigwig problem. That's never going to change."

A bit more noise than necessary in setting down the coffee pot told me that the church issue was still hot and so was the request for singing.

"It's no fun trying to keep a church going with a bunch of old people. Oh sure, we have Carl Hippen yet. Eighty years old. You would not want to hear him sing anymore. His voice wobbles all over the place."

"What about Lawrence Ross? He used to sing a lot."

She looked at me for a moment as though she couldn't believe how I had lost touch with the people who were important in this community. "Lawrence Ross died a couple years ago. Didn't I tell you about that? Sure, I did. I told you about his funeral, didn't I? Remember how we always had to wait for Lawrence? Never knew for sure if he would show up in time to sing? We always said, 'Lawrence will be late for his own funeral.' Well he was. The hearse had a flat on the way from the funeral home, and there we sat, waiting for Lawrence as always."

We both laughed at the picture she had created, I, embarrassed that I remembered none of this, and she, I'm sure, remembering the good times in that little church with Dad by her side, the acceptance they had for the straggly bunch of people who knew each other's faults and let them be. For a moment I remembered loving them all.

And either because of that or because I knew there was no way to get past this determined woman, I headed for the phone.

As I picked up the receiver, I ventured one last alternative. "Don't any of Clarence and Sophie's relatives sing?"

"I doubt that. Anyway, not many of them are coming, Sophie says, especially the ones who moved to North Dakota. They kind of lost touch. Hollis took Clarence and Sophie places sometimes, but never out of state."

"How narrow some lives are," I thought and unfortunately said it, and quickly added,

"Sorry, Mom, but Connie is not going to do this. Isn't she this la-di-da rich woman now? She probably wouldn't even want to set foot in the old building."

"Sounds like you might not want to either, Marianne."

"Okay, I'm dialing. See if Ron wants to get up for breakfast, would you? I think he's probably awake. We have not been exactly quiet out here." As the phone rang, I hoped maybe Pete and Eunice and Connie had taken her kids to the Living History Farm or something like that for the day.

Connie and I had been close, in high school especially. Our parents farmed a couple miles from each other, which meant we went to school together from kindergarten on. And we went to the same church. Connie's dad, Pete, was kind of laid back, and his and Eunice's six kids took more money than they sometimes had. Their red Chevy station wagon lasted them a long time.

Junior year Connie got her driver's license before I did. We both had out-of-town boyfriends that year and would drive in that old red station wagon to football games in Mulford on glorious fall Friday nights to watch Mike and Larry play. After the game and some quality time with Mike and Larry, we'd rendezvous back at the A and W for the trip back home, radio blaring, windows wide open because the heater was on full force. The only way to turn off that heater was to pull some hose under the hood. So once Pete had hooked it up, we were in for heat no matter what the temperature was outside. The loud radio, the heat, and the events of the evening kept us talking non-stop, full of detail about those hunky football players we'd snatched from the Mulford girls.

The church we grew up in was small and seemingly inconsequential in Wattenburg. To get from school to downtown, which was allowed during noon hours, high school kids walked past our little wood frame church and then past the architecturally pleasing Catholic church and then the modern sprawling Methodist church. Most of the kids thought we were some kind of little Christian fundamentalist group and Connie and I never tried to explain otherwise. The membership of the church had always been small and made up of a motley group of a few solid members plus new believers and unclear believers who had joined the church because of the first minister in the 40's whose family brought in seekers by way of accordion, guitar, piano, and three singing children.

Connie and I had done a lot of singing in that church, once a month special music, Easter, Christmas, and the funerals of members and members' extended families. We sang some really corny stuff at the request of the bereaved--I remember several, among them, "On the Jericho Road" requested for James Dunlop's mother, who had lived in Kentucky but was buried in Wattenburg.

The last two years of high school Connie and I took turns driving back and forth to Wattenburg: school, play practice at night, marching band practice early in the morning, decorating for dances. In the winter of our senior year, because Denny and Don, the guys we were dating then, were great skaters, we gave up Friday night basketball games and consequently membership in the pep club, and we'd meet them at the Tip-Top Skating Rink two miles from my place. On Wednesday nights we went skating too, at the Palace in Wattenburg, but that was after catechism. Catechism was a pretty boring affair, sitting in the damp basement of our little church with our fellow catechumens Duane Burgess and his sister, Lois, both special ed students from East Side School, listening to Rev. Munsmas deal out theological truths in heavyweight language which I only recently have come to cherish. That had been it, Connie and I, and Duane and Lois. And then there was Hollis Diemer who came now and then, socially inept to the core and not much brighter than Duane and Lois, and Hollis was the reason for my call to Connie at her parents' farm on this particular fall morning years after high school. And I was so hoping no one would answer.

But Eunice did. We had not talked for years, but the voice was so familiar, low and calm, the friendly voice of someone who has not forgotten all the good things that connected us before. After some warm conversation, she called Connie to come to the phone, and a voice I did not recognize said, "Hello."

"Hi, Connie? This is Marianne Lester."

Mom came back from knocking on Ron's door, almost tiptoeing so as not to ruin my chances with Connie.

"Hello, Marianne. What a surprise. It has to have been twenty years since I last saw you."

"I think so. At least. How are you?"

"Very well, thank you. Quite tired after the endless car trip from Cleveland. We drive it so seldom now—we usually fly. I had forgotten how far away this is. But the fall foliage was beautiful."

"Car trip" seemed an odd expression to me. Most of our trips were "car trips." We had never yet taken the girls on a plane or even a train for that matter. Somehow I imagined Connie and her kids in the old red station wagon with the heater that worked best in the summer.

Connie and I chatted for a while about kids and work and the pleasures of where we lived, she in Cleveland and I in Chicago. It was strained, like making small talk with a stranger. In fact, ten minutes into the conversation, I still didn't recognize her voice. And she said twice that she had to remind herself that she was not talking to my mother who, I could see, by this time was whipping cream for her Belgian waffles and with a cough at the stove reminded me that I had not called just to chat. Hollis Diemer had died. The Hollis Diemer of our catechism days, the oddball son of two oddball parents—Clarence and Sophie—Clarence, the jittery, giggly man who my dad said had hardly ever carried on a logical conversation, and Sophie, his equally nervous wife with facial hair and a real problem with alcohol. And, to tell the truth, Connie and I had made fun of all of that many times. They lived in a little house on a large farm where Clarence worked as a hired man. They had gone to the Wattenburg church since their first baby died.

Hollis was their only son, who, after barely making it through high school, worked for years at the junction truck stop. Jim Horner ("Horner's Corners," another joke Connie and I had enjoyed) had hired him, knowing Hollis wouldn't be able to make change but could probably fry a burger. Jim had taken in lots of misfits along the way to help them out, especially during those night hours when he had to go home to sleep even though the misfit-of-the-month might rob him blind. Hollis had behaved himself for Jim, worked there for years. But the combination of drinking and no sense of how to control the diabetes he had inherited from Clarence had now taken his life before he turned thirty-five. And then Clarence and Sophie, at the visitation, had said to my mom how nice it would be if Connie and Marianne were around to sing for the funeral as they used to. And we both happened to be coming and my mom had booked us.

"Connie, I've got a strange request. Without thinking, my mom got you and me into a corner. Your mom probably told you that Hollis Diemer died? The funeral is tomorrow, and Clarence and Sophie, remember them? They want us to sing. Apparently there is no one in that church anymore who sings special music. I think it would be either the two or us or no one. I don't remember that we ever paid much attention to Hollis, only to make fun of him, which I feel bad about now, but do you think this is maybe something we could do for them?"

I stopped, wanting to hear her "no," but, at the same time, convincing myself that this was a good thing to do, so I kept going.

"Connie, it's been a long time ago that we sang these songs and I know that things change and we change, but maybe it could be something for old times' sake. Do you have time for this?"

A louder cough from the area of the stove made me stop. The whipped cream surely by now was butter.

There was a slight pause on the phone line from Pete and Eunice's farm where their wealthy daughter from Cleveland was considering a request to sing religious songs she didn't believe in at the funeral of the son of simple country folk in a church that was nearly falling apart.

"My husband is not going to believe this, Marianne, and maybe that's why I should do this. Okay, yes, let's. Could we get together maybe an hour before the funeral? Why don't you bring some of the things we used to sing that you think we could pick up easily. We should be able to prepare something." That part of Connie I remembered, someone who made things happen fast, someone who thought the event was much more fun than wondering why we shouldn't do it.

And so it was done. Mom seemed pleased with herself that morning, took to humming, and served the Belgian waffles to me and Ron and the girls, her left hand cocked at the wrist shoulder high and the platter placed ceremonially before us.

Seeing Connie that next afternoon before the funeral was a lesson in change. The red hair was a little less vibrant, the eyes that slanted down at the outside corners still a bit short of attractive, but the skin on her freckled face was firm and her figure trim as ever. The farm girl had been buried by what I guessed to be the right exercise classes in the right shoes, the right cosmetics, right conversations with cultured, affluent people, tickets to the Cleveland symphony followed by dinner in the right restaurant, ordering the entrée with just the right amount of fat. Ron would say I was paranoid about all this since our teachers' salaries did not allow for those things. But she was polished. And I thought she looked at me that afternoon as though I were not. She was reserved, noncommittal, a stranger. A stranger who had driven up in a Lexus, a car I would not at all have minded taking on a "car trip."

As we walked into the small vestibule of the church, her next lines were right out of a play: "This part of my life just does not fit, like a blank slide in the travelogue of my life. If this were not so unbelievably strange, I'd probably not do this."

"Feels like home to me," I honestly told her.

"It's a wonder we amounted to anything, coming from here." Apparently she had not heard my last comment as we opened the double doors into the sanctuary.

Connie seemed to catch her breath. "I'm glad my children don't have to watch this."

"Your kids." I wanted to change the subject before I hit her. This woman I did not know, nor did I like. "I would like to meet your family, Connie. Do your kids look like you?"

"Monica does. Red hair, poor kid. Michael looks like his father." Connie had walked up to the communion table at the end of the center aisle.

"Bob, right? or some long name I remember Mom telling me once." I urged the conversation ahead.

"Yes, Robert Conrad Collins, the III. Long line of doctors." She picked up the offering basket.

"I don't think Mom has even mentioned meeting him. Does he get out here much?" I couldn't imagine Dr. Longname spending much time with Pete in the barn.

"No, he hasn't been here for years. Right now he's on St. Thomas, some conference.

You know doctors.” Connie turned around to look at the back of the church but avoided looking at me, still halfway down the aisle, picking up a bulletin from the previous Sunday.

No, I didn’t know doctors—not many. But I remembered the story of how this one had been married when he met Connie and I wondered how vacations apart actually worked for them.

Connie ran her hand over the top of a pew. “We decided long ago that our parents are not part of our marriage. The children love their grandparents, and Mom and Daddy are so real with them. I am committed to filling out the children’s lives and as long as the religion stuff doesn’t come up, everyone is happy. Well, maybe not my parents, but they love the children.” She checked her hand for the dust she seemed surprised not to find.

“What about your children?” she politely reciprocated. Woman of class, that she was.

“Well, neither looks like me; the Lester genes are really pretty dominant—brown eyes, dark hair, but they like music and what they like to do better than anything is in-line skating. Now what does that remind you of?”

That seemed to break the ice.

“Well, roller skating of course. Mine love skating too. We must have had something to do with that, Marianne.” There was a pause in her criticism as she walked over to the piano.

She plunked a few notes. “Look at this place, Marianne. It cannot take itself seriously. The wicker of those baskets is snapped. Listen to this piano. It never was in tune. And it still isn’t. And it looks like a bird flew through the stained glass window and they repaired it, would you believe, with ordinary glass.”

She was right. Where there had once been orange and green and purple prisms configuring a loaf of bread and a stem of grapes, there was now clear glass through which you could see the sky outside.

She wasn’t finished. “And those silly looking rods holding the walls in place. That always embarrassed me when I brought friends here. They should really tear this place down.”

Connie was seeing all the things that the Wattenburg church folk could no longer afford replacing and paying no attention to what they couldn’t afford losing: the Bible open on the pulpit; the communion table right below the pulpit set with a Bible in the middle, the silver vessels of the Lord’s Supper to one side, and the silver chalice for Baptism to the other. Hymnal numbers were still posted on the display boards, and that bulletin I picked up still announced up-coming Daily Vacation Bible School and the fact that Hollis Diemer’s funeral would be on Tuesday. And that’s why we were here.

“Connie, would you believe my mom still had this music in her piano bench, like she never moved them. I really like some of these. We always sang a capella, remember? Never trusted Donna or Twyla to accompany us, the way they created their own rhythms.” I remembered this, but I had no idea if Connie remembered much at all.

As we began to rehearse some of the old songs, our voices gained back the blend that we had relied on in the past. “Shall We Gather at the River” and “Mansion over the Hilltop” came back to us quite easily though neither of us had sung them for many years.

The funeral was simple, as expected. Before the funeral Clarence and Sophie and a handful of relatives had quietly buried Hollis in a little country cemetery not far from where they lived. Not many people came to the funeral. The church membership was small, Hollis had had few friends, and, as Mom had predicted, few family were able to make it from North Dakota. In the little wooden church unchanged since Connie and I had sung there in high school, we sang two of the songs that had gone well earlier. Everyone behaved as they always had. Lucile Walbalm sang along softly with her prelude of hymns. Sophie had had

something to drink before she came and had sort of giggled as the funeral director ushered her and Clarence in to the front row. The minister talked about salvation alone through Jesus Christ, as I had hoped he would. He also talked about the Lord's love for the humble and the meek, and his distaste for the proud. Connie and I sang as though we had practiced for weeks and as though she meant every word.

Lunch followed the service, on chairs in circles in the church basement. I watched Sophie. The effect of whatever alcohol she had had was wearing off by then, and she and Clarence sat a bit apart with their coffee, potato chips, and bologna sandwiches on lap trays, not eating, talking shyly to well-meaning people who expressed their condolences. Now and then I would see them alone, Clarence looking at something way off in the distance out the basement window and Sophie hanging her head and arranging the potato chips on the tray.

Connie and I talked to many people whom we had once known so much about but whose names had not crossed our lips in years. I was surprised that Connie seemed to enjoy them. Carl Hippen, at eighty, may not have had much voice left, but his memory was fine and he recalled vividly the Sunday morning he had put a pair of lady's nylons in the back seat of Connie's dad's car and Eunice found them as she loaded in the six kids. By the time we had finished lunch, it really seemed more like a Sunday School picnic than a funeral. Clarence and Sophie had left without either Connie's or my noticing.

Surprisingly, for us, it had been a good day. Sure, it was sad to see the Diemers confused by their own sorrow and loss. But, sad to say, Hollis had even in life been a kind of throwaway person, and not many others would feel a loss. Including myself, I regret saying. What was good about the day was that eventually I was seeing glimpses of the old Connie, and she seemed to look at me too with more familiarity than we had started with. I thought I could even see again the slump shoulders of the girl who had grown faster than the boys her age.

Since Mom was on the committee cleaning up after the funeral lunch, I left her the car and enlisted Connie to take me back to the farm.

The good feeling of turning back the years encouraged me to suggest that we visit some of the old haunts before she took me home. As was true of most of these small Iowa towns, Wattenburg hadn't changed much in the twenty years we had been gone, and we found our way around very easily.

We parked by the swinging bridge over the Iowa river and walked on it to look at the initials carved there, long ago crossing out the ones we and whatever guy we walked with there some summer evening had scratched in.

We drove past the high school, into the parking lot where we had learned to parallel park, and by the football field where we had learned to park. Some of Connie's sophistication was being dulled by returning memory and a past that was there, simply was there.

A mile out of town north, we pulled in by what looked like a vacant lot, a hill of dirt in the middle, overgrown with brush and weeds.

"The old Palace Rollerina. Marianne, I can't believe it."

"Yes, Connie, buried, six feet down."

"How could they tear that down?"

"I guess kids don't skate much anymore."

"But why not keep the building? I can't believe it. They should have checked with us, Annie. Who more than *we* came to life in that place?"

"Ya, I know."

More of the old Connie came suddenly to the surface, red like her hair and that old station wagon and the nickname she used to hate. "You can bury a wood floor, brick walls and a pile of decrepit shoe skates, but you can not bury what went on in this place, the people we

became right there. We were good, Annie. Remember how we outshone the other kids from church league on those yearly skating parties? They maybe had a young people's group with twenty kids, while we sat there with, what were their names?"

"Duane and Lois Burgess."

"Ya, Duane and Lois. Those First Mulford kids could go to each other's houses after catechism to sing with guitars or whatever. But put on the music for the schottische, the Congo, the moonlight waltz, and you and I knew we had not wasted our Wednesday nights either—you and Tommy Daniels were so cool. We couldn't stand him otherwise, big shot owner's son pawing around on us in the dark corners, but we loved to have him move us around that floor when we had those league skating parties."

Here was the old feisty Connie—not letting anyone slaughter what had been good without hearing from her. And there was truth in what she said. There was a power that place had had in our lives. And there was no sign anymore of the place. What happens to the life of a place, we asked each other—where does its vitality reside when the place is buried or just rots away? Can you ever do away with a place?

Like the old church, just an old, run-down building now. Not a place we ever thought much about. The little wooden children's chairs we had sat on in the furnace room for Sunday school were long gone. The four-shelf cabinet we called the church library, which contained the books I checked out on Sunday morning, read Sunday afternoon, and brought back Sunday night, was now stuck behind the folding chairs. And the old copies of the catechism had been tossed away with old versions of the hymnbooks.

We sat a long time by the heap of what was once the Palace and talked about old times. We laughed. We opened the windows and breathed the clean fall air. I still liked this old friend or at least the memory of an old friendship. And I was sorry there was no longer much in our current lives to connect us.

"You want to stop at the cemetery where they buried Hollis?" I asked Connie. "Chuck Birdsell's grave is there too. If I remember right, he died in Vietnam." In some way the suggestion was still about visiting memories, but I suppose I was hoping too that something would touch Connie who, in the ebb and flow of what looked like the good life, had repressed any notion of inadequacy but who might recollect some sort of need on a cemetery. "My dad's buried there too. I stop there with Mom every time we come to visit. Lots of the old neighbors are already there."

"Sure, why not?" Connie sounded as though she too was not eager for this day to end.

We parked the car at the end of the driveway of the cemetery. I showed her my dad's grave, the usual spray of wheat I brought each year leaning against the cold gray stone. And then we walked quietly and carefully across the surrounding graves to get to the new section where Hollis was buried. The sun was setting behind the pine trees, and the meadowlarks were singing from fence posts. And then from over a little knoll, near the gravesites we could not see, we heard voices. And we stopped where we were.

I hesitated to move on, not frightened, but conscious of some sort of trespassing. Connie touched my elbow and whispered, "Snoopers like us. Keep going."

As we came over the knoll, we could make out, not far from us, in the twilight, two people sitting near a new grave, talking. We stopped right where we were, not wanting to disturb them by coming closer or walking away. And in the still of the evening we could understand them and we could watch what they did.

Sophie and Clarence were sitting by the heap of dirt that was their son's grave, chatting comfortably to each other and eating the sandwiches that they had apparently taken from the funeral. Now and then they would say something to each other.

Neither Connie nor I made a move to leave. We just stood and listened.

"There a lot of sandwiches left over, Sophie?"

"Yup, Hilda said we could probably freeze some of 'em. I think every sandwich I ever made for Hollis was bologna."

"Or Braun swagger. He liked that too. With pickles."

"You and your pickles, Clarence."

Some move by either Connie or me or maybe just a change in the air made Clarence turn around and see us. He stood up, his head tilted shyly toward his right shoulder and his hands playing with his bread. We had little choice but to walk over to Clarence and Sophie and for a moment just let them look at us until they recognized us. Connie held back a little, silently passing the need for an explanation to me.

Awkwardly I knelt by Sophie and said, "We were looking at my dad's grave and then saw you here. We don't mean to interrupt. But now that we see you, and since we didn't see you leave the church, we just want to say goodbye."

Sophie looked at me blankly and then at Connie who stood to the side.

"You sang nice. That was nice that you could sing. We always used to like to hear you girls sing. Hollis had such a crush on you girls. But I don't think you ever paid him much attention."

That was all she said for a while. Connie made no move to leave, and I could think of no response.

Eventually Sophie said, "Life was no picnic these last years. He was so sick. And now he isn't. And even if he did wrong things, now he doesn't. And I think he feels at home there."

"Where?" Connie's quick question broke into Sophie's reflection.

"In heaven." Sophie seemed as dumbfounded by the question as my mom had been about my not knowing Lawrence Ross had died.

Clarence said nothing, just giggled a bit and sat down again next to Sophie.

"Do you girls want a sandwich? They're left over from the funeral." Sophie asked me, but looked at Connie, seeming to sense that she was the one who should make the decision.

"Um, sure," I answered for us and sat down. Clarence and Sophie looked younger in the light of the early evening. And in their soft voices was a sort of grace. Connie stayed standing. I could see the moon behind her, as though it were sitting on her shoulder, the little silver outline of a cup hanging low in the west, catching brightly the rays of the sun that had just disappeared below the horizon.

For a long time nothing was said. It felt like there was time enough for just about anything. I guess we were waiting for Connie to sit down. Clarence quietly finished his sandwich. Sophie took out another and broke it in two and passed one half to Clarence.

"I'm so glad that Jesus loved my boy." Clarence said it plain as day, no giggle, no stutter.

And then Connie turned, and on the north side of the heap that was Hollis's grave, she slowly sat down with us on grass beginning to dampen with dew. Sophie passed us each a bologna sandwich from the brown bag she had been given at church. I took a bite of mine, and even though it was not dry, I had to chew a long time to swallow it, like there was just no more room.

I looked at Connie, the wealthy woman from Cleveland who drove a Lexis. There were tears in her eyes as she took a bite, I'm sure, of the first bologna sandwich she had had in years. And a breeze lifted the bangs of her shiny red hair.