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Merry-Go-Round

A thesis
presented to
The faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
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Master of Arts in English

by
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ABSTRACT

Merry-Go-Round

by
Lydia Carter

Merry-Go-Round is a realistic adolescent novella that looks at true problems young adults can face.

The protagonist, Amy, is ten-year-old girl who meets a boy, Ben, of the same age at the hotel where her mother works. Amy and Ben become fast friends. Amy's mother is involved in an abusive relationship and Ben's mother is dying of cancer. Through the relationship formed between the children, they learn how to survive by sharing their difficulties and working them out.

The realistic, troublesome situations faced by the main characters of Merry-Go-Round will help readers graduate smoothly on the next level of reading.

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INTRODUCTION

A child of around ten years old sits alone in a favorite spot, an open book in hand. As she reads, she begins to forget about her own problems and shut out the difficult reality that surrounds her. She is slowly becoming engrossed in the characters of the book and beginning to live vicariously through these characters.

The main character is strong, and the child wishes she could surmount problems and conflicts in her own life with as much vigor and determination. She knowingly or unknowingly hopes to find a resemblance to herself in the life and actions of the heroine. Whether she realizes it or not, she is hoping to learn ways to deal with emotional challenges that she is facing in her own life, while also fulfilling the need for an escape from daily realities through literature.

Young persons in particular need such an escape route because they are facing many situations for the first time and they need a guide from which to judge their own actions. Merry-Go-Round is a novella that presents young characters faced with such difficult situations. The young reader can experience these problematic circumstances along with the characters, giving him or her realistic examples

of how to handle certain situations that they or someone they know may be faced with.

Merry-Go-Round is directed more towards young females for many reasons. The main reason is that the protagonist is female. The subject matter dealt with in the novella is primarily of female interest. The novella is also narrated from the female protagonist's first-person perspective, though not always from her narrator's ten-year-old point of view. However, throughout the novella, the adult Amy looking back on her experiences as a ten-year-old child does narrate uncondescendingly from time to time.

When discussing adolescent literature's place in American fiction, Frederick Carpenter writes:

...the [adolescent] novels which have achieved genuine maturity, and sometimes greatness, are those which have entered into the confusions of their adolescents at first hand, and have described them through the eyes of their protagonists. ...[not] from the superior point of view of the adult, condescendingly. (60)

Often an adult narration in a young person's writing can seem to have a condescending, superior tone, yet I believe the adult Amy's narration is not condescending to the child Amy's voice at all. The adult Amy remembers exactly how it

felt to be ten and I also envision her telling this story to her own ten-year-old child. Because she is talking to her young child, adult Amy never acts like she is superior at all to her younger self.

Well-known adolescent novel writer, Judy Blume, usually writes her novels in the first person voices of her adolescent protagonists. Critic R. A. Siegal says of Blume's style: " 'Blume's most characteristic technique and the key to her success is the first person narrative... All her books read like diaries or journals and the reader is drawn in by the narrator's self-revelations'" (qtd. in Weidt 88). I hope that Blume's formula of success will apply in Merry-Go-Round as well because the majority of the novella is written in first person narrative.

There is a lesser protagonist—a young male named Ben, the same age as the female protagonist, Amy. The only inner feelings the reader gets are from Amy, but she does speculate about Ben's inner feelings throughout the novella. Amy sees and relates to the reader characteristics about Ben that reveal his inner feelings. For this reason, I refuse to classify my audience as entirely female. Merry-Go-Round is told mostly through the voice of a young girl with a slight interspersing of an

uncondescending adult Amy looking back to appeal directly to the young reader's thoughts and emotions.

Reading is an important exercise for young people. Through reading, they can see how characters handle certain situations, often family situations, that they may have already experienced or may soon experience. Perhaps when young readers are faced with the same issues as the characters they read about, they will have a better idea about how to handle such situations. Adolescent literature critic Geneva Hanna writes:

For many children reading may be one of the chief sources for experimenting with life or for discovering that other people have similar problems that may be met and solved. Children need to learn while still quite young that all families have problems to solve, that each member has something to contribute, and that they are happiest when they are being themselves and accepting themselves as responsible members of a family group. (35)

Merry-Go-Round definitely presents families that are flawed and readers can compare their own familial situations with those of my characters. There are instances of abuse and illness that affect these young characters'

lives, giving the reader a realistic view of the imperfections that may exist in families. Judy Blume's characters are also usually just beginning to become young adults. In Blume's Just As Long As We're Together, twelve-year-old Stephanie is dealing with her parents' separation. Stephanie thinks to herself, "It's not as easy to be an optimist now that I'm almost thirteen because I know a lot more than I used to" (217). My characters Amy and Ben also know a lot more than they used to. They are not young children any more. They are ten years old and are now aware enough that they cannot be kept in the dark about serious issues. They must come face to face with real problems such as abuse and death of loved ones.

There are many different combinations of relationships central to the developments of my young protagonists. Young people around ten are just beginning to form real relationships outside the family. Sometimes such new outside relationships allow adolescents to see how their peers' lives are and compare their own familial relationships and problems to their peers'. Amy and Ben are getting to know each other and are seeing how different each other's home lives are. Amy's family situation is not perfect by any means. According to Reed, "The mother-daughter relationship plays an important role in young

adult books. In the teen years, many girls are just beginning to realize that their mothers are not perfect, that they, too, have problems" (119). I find this especially true in Amy's relationship with her mother. As if parent/child relationships are not strained enough in the adolescent years, Amy's mother is involved in an unhealthy relationship. Throughout her mother's relationship with her abusive boyfriend, Roy, she begins to realize that her mother is flawed and imperfect. It is at this point in her life, as she is beginning to mature into a young adult, that Amy realizes that although her mother may be strong in many ways, she is weak when it comes to her self-esteem. Even though Amy desperately wants to run away from her mother's abusive relationship, Ben, who has matured because of his own life's difficult situations, convinces her to stay and forces her to confront her problems with her mother as a responsible person should, instead of running away from them. The strength and rationality of Ben's handling of the situation is a sign of his maturation into young adulthood. This rational thinking of young adult characters is also clearly shown in Blume's Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. Twelve-year-old Margaret reasonably concludes about her grandmother, "As long as she loves me and I love her, what difference

does religion make?" (141). Blume tackles the issue of religious differences in families through Margaret. Margaret reasons out her family's religious differences and comes up with a rational, mature conclusion just as Ben suggests to Amy that running away from her problems is not a good idea.

Hopefully, a young audience of readers will be able to learn from my characters' experiences and from their abilities to deal with problems and become better equipped at handling problems of their own. Death is a presence in many young person's lives. I think Amy's reaction to Ben's mother, seeing her for the first time since Amy learned Mrs. Salley had cancer, is very realistic and many young readers will be able to identify with Amy's feelings. Ben's reaction to his mother's death is also a realistic portrayal of the emptiness and numbness one feels in a situation such as that. Also, the subject of abuse is dealt with in a way so as to present it truthfully, yet not so vividly that it might be disturbing to a young readership.

All of these portrayals should help young readers by letting them know that they are not the only ones who have experienced such tragedies and perhaps that their own problems are not as tragic or insolvable as they once

thought them to be. Author Hazel Hart contends that, "Literature gives children an insight into human nature. Thus reading contributes a measure of comfort to readers and helps them to feel that their own problems or concerns are less staggering than they might otherwise be" (43). I genuinely hope that Amy and Ben's problems are much worse than those of my audience of young readers. By reading about Ben's and Amy's difficulties, maybe the readers will be able to put their own struggles into perspective.

The primary relationship in the novella is that between Amy and Ben. Both children have, up until meeting each other, been involved in relationships only with the members of their immediate families. In a psychoanalytic approach to adolescent literature, Katherine Dalsimer writes:

...in adolescence, the task is that of emotional disengagement from what are now *inner* mental representations and *inner* relationships, a process that frees the individual ultimately to develop new ties outside the family. (14)

This new outside relationship is what is developing between Amy and Ben. Amy has not had very many, if any, close friends in her life. Neither has Ben. They do, however, find with each other a much needed kinship outside of their

familial ties. Both Amy and Ben are beginning to separate themselves from their mothers to form a bond with one another. They develop, each for the first time, a best friend relationship with each other. Author and teacher Arthea Reed writes:

Relationships are of prime importance to young adults. Seemingly the most important developing relationships are between two young adults. The best friend plays an essential role in the life of the teenager and, consequently, in young adult fiction. (116)

Ben and Amy's friendship is supremely important to the plot and the characters' abilities to deal with the situations that life has presented them. Each finds strength in the other when their lives go in directions they do not think they can ever deal with. Ben's mother dies of cancer, while Amy struggles with the thought of leaving home to escape her mother's maltreatment at the hands of her boyfriend.

Reed continues: "Relationships between fathers and daughters and between sons and mothers also are important in young adult literature" (122). Ben's relationship with his dying mother is a very important part of the novella. Though Amy alone relays our understanding and view of Ben's

relationship with his mother to us, she gives a clear portrait of Ben's struggle and his need for Amy's friendship. Also, Amy's and Ben's absent fathers play an important role in the readers' understanding of Amy and Ben's characters. Because Amy has never known her father, she is especially attached to her mother, her only relative. Since Amy's grandparents died, she and her mother are all each other has. Ben, on the other hand, had a wonderful relationship with his father. He tells many stories to a somewhat jealous Amy about things he and his father did. However, Ben's father is no longer living; so Ben is also extremely attached to his own mother and last relative.

Young people everywhere can relate to Amy's and Ben's relationships with their parents. Hopefully the readers will have both parents present in their lives, but not necessarily; therefore, the difficulties of dealing with the absence of a parent in Amy's and Ben's lives will also be familiar to some young readers.

The last important relationship in Merry-Go-Round is that between the characters and Amy's dog, Candy. My own childhood was interspersed with pets of all sorts. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of time spent with my pets. I think pets offer an outlet for a child to

completely express herself, and give a child unconditional love that the child may not feel she is getting from her parents or friends.

Candy is an extremely influential addition to the plot. It is essentially Candy that breaks the ice between Amy and Ben and helps instigate their friendship. Candy is also a good listener, always ready to listen whenever the young protagonists need to talk about their problems. Not only do Amy and Ben share Candy's closeness, but Amy's mother also shares it. Amy's mother is the one who decided to bring Candy home, saving her from bad owners, and, therefore, also shares a certain bond with the little white dog. I assume that most young people enjoy animals, and many probably have one of their own and can easily relate to the relationship each of the characters shares with Candy.

Sentiment is very appealing to the young reader. Any story that evokes an emotion in a young reader is welcomed. Young readers are easily provoked into feeling emotions and enjoy feeling emotional about someone else's life and problems: "Many young adult novels provide the reader with a good cry" (Reed 113). The touching events and relationships throughout Merry-Go-Round will hopefully bring about an emotional reaction from the reader.

I believe the death of Ben's mother is a very emotional event in the novella. Though the actual death takes place "off stage," the reader gets a strong sense of the emotions involved in the event through Amy and Ben's conversation after his mother's passing. Amy finds Ben outside looking up at a meteor shower after his mother has died. Ben says, " 'She fell asleep tonight before I got a chance to tell her I loved her and now I'll never get another chance again.'" Amy replies, " 'Ben, your mom loved you more than anything in the world. She knows you love her. You didn't have to tell her.'" Amy does not really know how to handle this tragedy in Ben's life, but she can imagine how horrible it would be if she lost her own mother. She knows the experience would be unbearable. Reed asserts:

The ending of relationships, through death, war, departure, or family opposition, is touching to the young adult, who is spending a large amount of energy building relationships. Saying good-bye to a loved one who is about to die is a tear-producing episode in a number of young adult books. (114)

Though Mrs. Salley, Ben's mother, is not a major character in Merry-Go-Round, her death and the days leading up to her death are felt and discussed by the two main protagonists.

Adolescent authors Vera and Bill Cleaver also use such an "off stage" death scene to lead to a better understanding of how their young characters handle the aftermath of their father's death. In Where the Lilies Bloom, fourteen-year-old Mary Call finds her father after he has died. Mary Call then proceeds to move on and break the news to her younger siblings. She describes the scene:

With a corner of his sheet I pressed his eyes closed and turned him to the wall and arranged the covering over him so that it would look like he was merely sleeping and then went out and told the others that they were not to go into his room that day, not for anything. (Cleaver 61)

Mary Call has to deal with the death of her only living parent just as Ben does. I believe the "off stage" death is more appropriate for younger readers. Too realistically described a death would weigh too heavily on young readers and they may get more caught up in the death itself rather than the impact of the death and that is not my purpose. The most important objective of Merry-Go-Round is to show

how these characters deal with the situations with which they are presented, not the situations themselves.

After Amy finds out that Mrs. Salley is going to die, she begins to wonder what will happen to Ben after she is gone. She knows Ben's father is already gone and she really does not want to lose Ben as a friend. Author Arthea Reed claims, "Friendships that endure despite all the reasons for ending them provide many sentimental moments in young adult novels" (114). Ben and Amy discuss their concerns about how their friendship will survive after his mother's death. Will Ben have to move away after his mother dies? Who will take care of him? It seems to these young characters that the odds are stacked against them. This is a huge dilemma in these young characters' lives. Probably many other young persons have also experienced a similar dilemma. Now that they have found each other and built a close friendship, they are facing the possibility that their friendship may be ended due to circumstances beyond their control. This situation happens all too often in many children's lives. Many times children are forced to move with their families away from their best friends; therefore, lots of readers will be able to empathize with Amy's and Ben's concerns about losing their friendship.

Another situation that threatens Ben's and Amy's friendship is Amy's mother's abusive relationship. Amy is ashamed of her mother's relationship and is seriously considering running away from her home situation. She waits into their relationship to tell Ben about Roy, simply because she is embarrassed. Embarrassing home situations provide another popular plot line in adolescent novels. In A Solitary Blue by Cynthia Voigt, her main character, Jeff, a teenage boy whose mother has left him and his father, is very embarrassed by his home situation and avoids discussion of his mother at all costs. When Jeff and his new friend are sailing together, Jeff struggles with his shame: "He thought she might ask about his mother and he was glad she didn't" (Voigt 151). Jeff's nor Amy's home life is perfect. Like most young people, Jeff and Amy have an issue they are ashamed about. Eventually Amy begins to trust Ben and confides in him completely about her shameful situation with Roy's abuse. Ben is very mature for his age and would never consider running away. This would also lead to their separation and an end to their friendship. Amy and Ben offer different thoughts on how to handle situations that they are faced with.

Geneva Hanna believes, "For most people the act of reading almost any type of human experience is a kind of

role playing" (36). I want my young readers to put themselves in Amy's and Ben's situations and think about how they might react in the same circumstances. I am sure many young people have also experienced a situation in which one of their friendships has been threatened, perhaps because of a physically abusive relationship. Even if it is not abuse that threatens the relationship, just the threat of a best friend relationship ending is very traumatic for young adults. Adults sometimes belittle young people's problems. Even the chance their problems may be seen as trivial makes it hard for young people to approach an adult with an issue. Based on my own adolescent experience, I have to agree with Hanna when she says, "These are problems which children are frequently loath to discuss with adults because most adults have long forgotten how very important these 'trivial' matters are to the growing, developing young person" (35-6). It is hard sometimes for young people to confront an adult with a problem that may be viewed as "silly" by the adult such as a new friendship breaking up. Perhaps by living vicariously through my characters, young readers can see how persons of the same age would handle such a difficult situation.

When faced with another abusive encounter between Amy's mother and Roy, Amy decides she is going to change her situation by running away. Amy says to Ben, "I just couldn't take it any more! I had to get out! I wasn't going to watch him treat my mom that way any more!" After refusing to accompany Amy, Ben suggests a better plan: "We can't just run away by ourselves like that. It's dangerous... Just wait here till the sun comes up. I won't let you leave in the middle of the night like this." The reader can see here how the young characters are weighing possible resolutions to the situations they are presented with. After seeing how Amy and Ben handle their problems, young readers will then be better equipped to make decisions about how to handle their own problematic situations.

In young adult literature today, more and more authors are beginning to move toward a more realistic presentation of adolescent issues. Author Robert Cormier writes novels for adolescents, such as The Rag and Bone Shop, printed in 2001, which contain very serious issues such as murder. Cormier takes a realistic look at the choices that shape an individual's character, even if that character turns out to be evil. Emerging adolescent novels such as Cormier's show that it is now being thought that young readers are able to

handle novels that are not all light-hearted and happy. Another popular series of books that present unhappy situations for adolescents is A Series of Unfortunate Events written by Lemony Snicket, which began publication in 1999. This series tells of the unhappy experiences of three unlucky children. The Baudelaire siblings lead lives filled with despair and misfortune. The books in this series involve fantasy and unrealistic events, but they are not tales with upbeat, happy endings. Their popularity shows that adolescent readers are ready to tackle tougher, unhappier issues than previously believed. I have purposely chosen to create my novella in a much less extreme form than Cormier's and Snicket's books. Though I believe young readers are able to handle some realistic issues, they are not ready to be bombarded with total gloom and despair. Issues should be presented realistically, but they should also be balanced with some happy and humorous events much like Judy Blume does in her adolescent writings. Blume is quoted as saying: " 'It's knowing that something is going on but not knowing what; it's that adult secretiveness that makes life so difficult for kids'" (qtd. in Weidt 88). I hope I have this same honest quality in my own novella, Merry-Go-Round. I want to present issues as they are to the young reader by not keeping secrets. If

portions of a serious event are withheld from adolescent readers, I believe they will feel as if the narrator thinks they are not able to understand or handle the situation. I want to be truthful to the reader like Blume, so my narrator will not seem condescending, even though some adult narration does appear in the novella. Sharing experiences openly leads to a good relationship between the narrator and the reader.

The purpose of Merry-Go-Round is to entertain young readers of both sexes by presenting problems and issues that those young readers can relate to and learn from without detailing extreme situations. I want the reader to be able to put himself or herself in the characters' positions and really get involved completely in the novella. Critic Robert Carlsen suggests:

...the general pattern of growth in reading tastes during the adolescent period...[begins with]...young people find[ing] their satisfaction in the adolescent book: the book written especially for [them], to evoke [their] emotions, problems, dreams, and life. (18)

A lot of the issues and situations presented in Merry-Go-Round are autobiographically based and portray important memories and events in my own life. By using some examples

from my own childhood, I believe I am sharing real events that other children have probably also experienced. Carpenter states that, "At his best the modern American novelist of adolescence describes the problems of his protagonists so that they become also the problems of our adolescent civilization, with both its mixed-up confusion and its splendid potentiality," (Carpenter 68). I am sure my childhood experience and feelings are not completely unique, and perhaps the readers will even be familiar with Amy's and Ben's feelings and situations. Because I am so close to many of these representations, I believe I have done them justice and painted a vivid and realistic portrait that young readers can truly envision and relate to. I also believe that because I have used experiences that came from my own childhood, this makes my depiction much more believable and credible for a young audience. Adolescent literature critic Geneva Hanna sums up the adolescent reading experience by saying:

Growth toward maturity is the ultimate aim of reading, especially growth in the ability to understand and accept oneself and others and to face and solve social problems with some effectiveness. As long as growth is evident, as long as insights of greater significance are

developing, as long as the reading undertaken is aiding in the individual's ability to think things through rationally, progress is being made. Then it really matters little whether the growth has occurred as a result of reading Alice in Wonderland or The Red Badge of Courage; what really matters is that personal and social growth can and has taken place through reading. (40)

I hope that my novella Merry-Go-Round does all of these things and fulfills all of these needs and purposes for the young boy or girl who sits in his or her favorite spot with this novella spread open and resting comfortably on his or her young lap.

Merry-Go-Round

I really loved hanging around the Bell Hotel. There was a bright red picnic table out front. I would climb on top of the table and stretch my thin little frame out from fingertips to toes, letting my fingers dangle over the edge of the table. I always did this on purpose, of course, so my only friend in the entire world, Candy, could come rake her paw against my hand and get my attention. I would lie on that table for hours because it was the best place in the world for cloud watching. I used to see so many things in the clouds as a child: animals, airplanes, and monsters. Those clouds always held a fascination for me. They were so free, and high, and comforting to me; the way they swirled around in front and behind one another changing shapes and forms into a great multitude of pictures in my young, imaginative mind. Ahhhh...

Candy never cared much for cloud watching. She was more of the active type, always wanting to run and play and chase me around the big walnut tree that stood out in front of the Bell.

The Bell Hotel was a quaint hotel owned and run by a lady named Ellen Bell. She was a nice lady, but also one of tradition, and did not like children making a ruckus outside her establishment. The Bell was a quaint hotel.

It was all one story with only twelve rooms to rent. Every room was lined up in a row in line with the office. Since Mr. Bell died, Mrs. Bell had been the sole proprietor and front desk employee there at the hotel. She was a lady of about sixty-five and looked every bit of it as the make-up she used to hide her age never fooled anyone except herself. Mrs. Bell kept the hotel looking nice with the pretty green and white striped awnings over every window and the twelve green doors to match all in a row facing the great walnut tree and just beyond it the playground. Sometimes Mrs. Bell would open her green door, clearly marked "Office" in white, slowly walk to the room where my mother was cleaning, never looking in my and Candy's direction, and ask my mother to quiet Candy and me down. My mom would wait until Mrs. Bell went back inside the office and stick her head out the door of one of the rooms and say, "Amy, you're not running around that tree again are you?"

Candy and I would stop in our tracks and look as innocent as was possible for a little white dog stained with green walnut shells and a little girl with green stain on her new white tennis shoes and answer, "No mom, me and Candy were just walking past it on our way to the playground." She would just shake her head with her long

brown pony tail brushing her shoulders and go back inside to work.

My mother was beautiful. She hardly ever got to go anywhere to fix herself up, but even in the yellow rubber gloves and cut off jeans, she was still beautiful. My mom never got angry or yelled at me as long as I can remember. That was a different story when it came to her boyfriend Roy. He wasn't as nice as my mother; in fact, he wasn't very nice at all.

Just beyond the picnic table was the Bell's playground. I spent hours upon end in that playground waiting for my mother to finish working. You see my mother was a maid at the Bell Hotel. She spent her days walking from room to room at the Bell cleaning up after the people who stayed there. I spent my summers and every day after school there, waiting on my mother to finish. The playground wasn't much, but it was much better than nothing. The swing set only had two swings, but that was okay since I was usually the only one swinging anyway. Candy would sit at the foot of the swing set and bark at my feet as they swung past her.

The best thing about the playground, though, was the merry-go-round. The paint was peeling off and the metal bars were rusting, but I didn't care, it was still my

favorite. Of course, it isn't as much fun when you're the only one pushing and riding. I had tried many times to get Candy to sit on the ride while I pushed, but by the time I would grab hold of the bars to push, I would turn around and Candy would be standing beside me on the ground. I don't think she liked the thought of going around in circles much. Usually, right before my mother and I left for the day, Mom would push me around a few times and then we would go home. Those few minutes when we were really together were the best part of both of our days. We both knew what we had to look forward to when we got home. Roy would be there waiting for us.

My mom would look at Candy and me and ask, "Did you two have fun today?" She would tousle Candy's bangs and mine at the same time.

"Yeah, we had lots of fun today, Mom."

"What did you and Candy do today?"

"Oh, the same thing we do every day. We could watch, swung, and we did NOT run around the tree," I would say, as I winked at the little fuzzy dog at my side.

Some days Candy and I would be dirtier than other days. It just depended on the weather, of course. Nowadays, playgrounds have that mulch on the ground, but the Bell playground didn't. There was just plain old dirt.

When it was dry, the dust would fly around in the air and sting your eyes, especially on a windy day. When I got home there was always an orange dirt ring around the ankle of my white-cuffed socks just above my shoe line. If it wasn't dusty, it was, as you can probably imagine, muddy. Now Candy and I were especially fond of the muddy days. This was the best place in the world for making mud pies. I can still remember how the mud felt as it squished between my fingers and toes. On muddy days I got to take my shoes off and splash around. Candy loved the mud. I think she just liked being dirty more than anything. I can still see her clean white body running toward the deepest mud puddle she could find, usually at the bottom of the slide or under the swings, and lying smack down in it. She would be white from the top down to her belly, which would be dripping with mud as she stood up out of the puddle. Never once did my Mom get angry with us.

"Come on! Let's go home and get you two cleaned up," she would say with a smile as she peeled off the bright yellow rubber gloves, took my hand in hers, and started us on our way down the narrow road home. We lived in my grandparents' house right up past the Bell Hotel. We lived in a small town called Frenchburg, where everyone knew your business. Neither my mother nor my grandparents ever had

very much money, but they did have enough to feed us and clothe us. I never knew my grandfather. He died before I was born, and my grandmother died when I was eight. My mother had gotten Candy from some of Roy's friends when I was two years old. We grew up together. She had gotten her as a puppy, living smelly and flea infested in a basement with ten other dogs, brought her home and cleaned her up. My mother has the kindest heart and chose the most pitiful looking little dog to save. I always thought Candy knew what my mother had done for her, saving her from that horrible place. I thought she and my mother had a unique bond between them.

Even though Candy was a good friend, she couldn't quite cut it when it came to pushing me around the merry-go-round. I always wanted someone my own age to play with. I was never popular in school because I did not have the "cool" clothes that the other kids had, I was too much of a tomboy for the girls, and I was still a "girl" to the boys. I got made fun of a lot because of the clothes I wore and because everyone knew that my mother worked at the Bell Hotel. Kids would say nasty things to me about my mother being a maid and cleaning toilets and stuff, so I pretty much withdrew from the other kids at school and only worried about my schoolwork. I was first in my class, I'll

have you know. However, my wish for a playmate came true when I was ten years old. I know that some people don't believe in fate, but I have to admit I am a strong believer. I believe things happen for a reason and people do not come together simply by chance. Twenty-five years later, I have come to believe that you are predestined to meet certain important people throughout your life no matter what you do. There are many people in my life that I am positive I had to meet, but there is one in particular who I don't think I could have made it where I am today without. His name is Ben. I met Ben when I was sitting at the red picnic table outside the Bell Hotel one day. Not only was that table good for cloud-watching, but it was also great for people-watching. I used to sit there and watch the people check in and out and imagine what they must have seen and what kinds of lives they must have lived outside this small Kentucky town. What would it be like to live somewhere where no one knew my mother was a maid? Where everyone minded his or her own business and I could just blend in with everyone else? I was tired of being "different" and just wished to live in a town where no one knew who I was and where people would accept me for who I was not what I wore or what my mother did for a living. I

was doing just that the day Ben and his mother rolled into my life.

It was the summer before my fifth grade year. I watched as their old blue Dodge pulled up to the office and Mrs. Salley left a boy of about my age I was guessing in the car to go in and get a room. I truly hoped they would be staying because I met the boy's eyes several times while I was lying on the picnic table trying to act disinterested and he looked as curious about me as I was about him. After a few minutes, Mrs. Salley came out of the office carrying a key with the plastic red key ring in her hand and I knew they would be staying.

"Hi. I'm Amy and this is Candy," I said, pointing toward the small muddy and white dog standing by my side. "What's your name?"

"Oh, hello. My name is Mrs. Salley." Mrs. Salley was tall, much taller than my mother, thin, and very pale. She looked like what you would picture a librarian to look like with her dark hair slicked back in a bun and round, wire rimmed glasses. However, even though she did look like a librarian, she did have a certain kindness that I saw plainly in her smiling eyes. Ben remained silent.

"What's his name?" I asked pointing to the skinny little boy I had had my eye on since they pulled in. He

looked much like his mother, tall, thin, and pale. Ben was timidly gathering his luggage on the opposite side of the car, peeking up through the window catching quick glances at me occasionally. "Ben, come over here, please," Mrs. Salley said. "This is my son Ben," pushing him toward me from behind. He stumbled forward with his dark eyes pointed directly at the ground in front of him. Mrs. Salley smiled then reached into the trunk of the car to get out a suitcase. She started unloading the car into the room.

"Nice to meet you, Ben," I said reaching out my brown, suntanned hand to shake his. He reluctantly offered his hand to me and I gave him a robust handshake. His arm jiggled up and down as a large grin spread across his pale, thin face.

"Hey, how old are you? Do you like dogs? Do you want to go swing with me? The playground is right over there. Do you think your mom would mind? I'll ask her for you. Mrs. Salley..." I yelled into the dark hotel room, "can Ben come swing with me right over there at the playground?" Ben stood quietly awaiting his mother's answer.

"I guess he can go right there, just as long as I can see him from here."

Ben smiled and nervously took my outstretched hand. "I'm ten," he said as I dragged him to the swing set, Candy in hot pursuit right behind us.

"Great! You're just the same age as me. Candy's only eight, in human years, that is. You know she is fifty-six years old in dog years? What do you like to do? Do you like to go exploring? Do you like to ride bikes?"

"Well, I've never been exploring and my mom never let me ride a bike where we lived in Chicago because she was too afraid I would get hurt," he said looking at the ground and kicking the grass with his shoe, embarrassed.

"Oh, well, that's okay, Ben. We can do all those things together if you want. My bike is a girl's bike with pink tassels on the handlebars, but I'll teach you to ride it anyway. How long are you staying?"

He looked up and smiled at me, "I like your dog. I always wanted a dog. I think we're staying for a while."

From the first time we met, Ben and I were inseparable. You would never see one of us without the other. We spent hours upon hours playing in the playground outside the Bell. I finally had someone to push me around on the merry-go-round. He wasn't the best pusher in the world because he was pretty scrawny and I could tell he wasn't much of an outdoor type, but you really couldn't

blame him because he had never had much experience at all with other children, nor did he have much experience with a contraption like this one. Ben was much skinnier than I was. His knees were knobby and his feet were big, so he tripped a lot while pushing the merry-go-round. This meant that I usually did most of the pushing, but I really didn't mind. "That's okay, Ben. You can ride," I would say. I was just happy to have some company, any company.

Ben and I would spend hours talking about ourselves and sharing things with each other. I guess we were starving for someone to talk to by this point in our lives. Ben's mother had been extremely overprotective of Ben after his father died, and really never let him play with other kids. I just simply never fit in. Even though we were two very different people, we did seem to have lots of things in common. Ben's mother was a single mother like my mother. Both of our fathers were out of the picture, now. Ben had had a wonderful father, but his father had died when he was six in a car accident. I had never known my father. He had left my mother's life and mine before I was even born. Mom said he just couldn't handle the idea of a family and we were better off without him. I never understood why my mother realized that about my father, but couldn't realize that about Roy. I really enjoyed hearing

Ben tell me about what he and his father used to do together. Even though I was glad Ben had known his father, I must admit I was somewhat jealous. The only thing in my life even close to a father was Roy, and he was the furthest thing from a dad. I wished I had known my father, even if it was for only a short time like Ben did.

"Every day after my dad got home from work, we would do something together. If the weather was bad, we would play cards or board games inside, but if it was nice outside, we would go on a walk or play badminton. Sometimes we would go to the city park in Chicago to feed the ducks. Once we took a giant loaf of bread and the ducks swarmed us. They were coming at us from all sides. The geese were opening their beaks and making a hissing noise at us. I got scared and Dad picked me up and sat me on top of his shoulders where they couldn't get me. We threw the rest of the bread and laughed all the way home."

"Wow, that's really great," I would say.

"My dad used to take me skating, too. He always kept close by, so if I started to fall he could catch me. He kept the bigger kids from running into me, too."

"I've never been skating. My mom doesn't know how, so we never go."

"Maybe we can go together one day. Once, my family had gone to the beach on vacation. My mom never got in the ocean because she doesn't know how to swim, but my dad loved the water. We used to go out in the waves so far that I would have to jump as high as I could to keep my head out of water. One time a giant wave came. Dad saw it in time to lift me up as high as he could reach above his head, but it didn't matter. The wave was so tall it crashed over his head and mine. My mother was terrified, but we both washed up okay, with just a little saltwater in our eyes."

"That's a great story, Ben. I've never been to the ocean. I've never been out of Kentucky. Me and my mom have to stay here so she can take care of Roy."

You see, Roy was one of the meanest men that ever lived. He stood about six feet tall; with the longest, greasiest mullet hair cut you've ever seen. If he had cleaned up, I think he could have been a somewhat handsome man, but Roy didn't care much about his personal hygiene or his appearance. He hardly ever shaved, and even more rarely did he get a haircut. He was a mechanic, so his hands and fingernails were permanently stained with the black of the oil and grease he wallowed in daily. My mom

got up her nerve once and asked, "Roy, why don't you get cleaned up and let's all go do something for once?"

Roy would say, "Ruth, I'm not going any damn where and I'm not getting cleaned up! Why would I want to go waste my Goddamned money like that? The only reason people get cleaned up is to find a woman and I already got you to wait on me right here! I can just stay here and let you take care of me for free!"

Roy was in a good mood the day that happened. Sometimes he wasn't even that nice to Mom. He used to curse at her and throw things. Once when he got mad, he threw one of Grandma's old plates she had passed down to Mom from her mother. It shattered against the wall and Mom started picking up the pieces and crying, of course. That made Roy even madder. He started ranting and raving and jerked my mother up out of the floor by her arm and hit her square across the face. That was the first time I saw Roy hit my mom; it wasn't the last.

Candy hated Roy. Dogs can sense good and evil. She knew Roy was evil and she hated him. When she was allowed to stay inside, she barked and bit at Roy when he was yelling at my mom. This only happened once and Roy said, "If you don't do something with that dog, Ruth, I'm going to kill it!"

Mom calmly said, "Amy, take Candy outside."

That was the last night Candy spent in the house, or at least that's what Roy thought anyway. I used to climb out my window at night and get Candy and bring her into my room to sleep with me. Roy never bothered me. He never even came into my room once. I think he knew that even though my mom might let him abuse her, she would kill him if he ever laid a hand on me.

Why do women let men treat them that way? I always thought my mother was a strong woman, except when it came to Roy. She had been to school many times to see my teachers if I was unhappy or not doing as well as we thought I should have. She wasn't afraid of confrontation, that wasn't it. Now, I have come to realize she was afraid of being alone. Mom found Roy quickly after my grandmother died. At first, he wasn't that bad. They did go out to eat sometimes in the beginning, but after Roy moved in, things went down hill and we saw his true colors. I guess my mom was lonely and Roy was the first thing she found.

Ben never got to meet Roy. That was on purpose. He never told me if he ever wondered why I never invited him to my house. We spent our days at the Bell or out exploring. Ben's mother didn't much like the idea of our exploring, but my mother talked to her and she finally

agreed to let Ben go. Ben and Candy and I would pack a sandwich and set out in the small wood in between my house and the Bell, just behind the backside of the Bell. I loved to spend time there. The trees were so tall that you could just climb up and disappear in them. It was heavenly when the honeysuckle was blooming. The vines were so beautiful and they smelled so sweet. I always brought some home to my mother and sometimes I even dropped a few vines off at the office for Mrs. Bell. There was a small creek that ran between the trees where we could wade.

"What is that thing?" Ben screamed, pointing down in the water to the bug-like creature that darted under a nearby rock.

"You've never seen a crawdad before?"

"No."

"Well, it's a crawdad. It's kind of like a shrimp or a little lobster. You know what those are don't you?" I asked.

"Yes. Does it bite?"

"It doesn't bite, but it can pinch you if you're not careful." I reached down and with a splash quickly grabbed one pretty good-sized crawdad. "See, it has pinchers just like a shrimp or lobster. Tomorrow we'll bring some bacon and fishing line with us. You can put the raw bacon on the

end of the fishing line and drop it in the water and the crawdads will grab on and get their pinchers stuck in the bacon. Neat, huh?" I dropped the crawdad back into the water and we watched it scuttle away.

"Where's Candy?" Ben asked.

"Oh, she's probably just found her a nice scummy pool of water to lay down in. Candy... Here she comes." Sure enough, here she came, with green slime dangling from her once-white fur. "She always manages to find the scummiest water possible to cool off in."

"Candy's a great dog," Ben said as he sat down on the bank beside her. Candy automatically liked Ben, too. She nuzzled her nose into Ben's leg and he bent his face down for her to lick.

"I can tell Candy really likes you." Candy walked over next to me and rolled over onto her back. "She loves to have her belly rubbed," I said as I pulled some of the green slime off Candy and threw it at Ben. Ben reached down into the creek and splashed some water up at me. We laughed.

Ben looked up at the sky. It was getting late in the day. He said, "Do you think we ought to head back now? My mom is probably worried."

"Yeah, you're right. We'd better get you back so you can come out again tomorrow. Anyway, my mom's probably getting finished now and is going to be going home soon."

Ben and I gathered our things and headed back towards the Bell. "Come on, Candy!" Ben called periodically as we walked along. "Come on, girl!" I knew Candy knew her way around and wouldn't get lost, but I let him call her anyway. I thought he wanted to feel like she was sort of his dog, too, since he had never had a dog of his own.

We got back to the Bell and I walked Ben to his door, room number four. We said our good-byes and decided what time to meet the next day. As Ben opened his door, I noticed it was very dark inside the room. His mother usually opened up the curtains and let the light in, especially on a sunny day like today. Sometimes she was even sitting outside waiting to discuss our daily adventure. However, today she wasn't even there to give a friendly wave and smile as usual. "Is your mom okay?" I asked.

"Uh, she's fine. I've got to go. I'll see you tomorrow." Ben hurried inside the dark room and shut the door. I heard him tell his mother he was back and he wouldn't stay gone so long tomorrow. Just then, Mom came out of the utility room.

"Are you ready to go home, sweetie?" she sighed.

"Yeah, Mom. Let's go, I guess."

When my grandmother died, the only thing that she really had of any value, besides the house, was the beautiful mahogany piano that had been sitting in the cramped little living room for as long as I could remember. My grandparents weren't rich by any means, but they did own the house they lived in. My grandfather had worked in the mines for something like twenty years. Grandfather was a very hardworking man, unfortunately with very little education. Working in the mine was really all he was qualified to do. He had been diagnosed with black lung in his early fifties and lasted only a few years after that. My grandmother, as a young girl, had worked for a wealthy family. The lady of the house especially liked her and taught her how to play the piano during her breaks. My grandmother was a natural and when her boss saw how much passion my grandmother had for the piano she gave her the piano.

"I can remember Mom playing Dad's favorite hymns on this old piano...before he died," Mom said. "She could play so beautifully."

"You can play good, too, Mom," I said. I knew how much she missed Granny and my grandfather. My Granny had taught my mother how to play the piano, also.

"Dad was so sick. He would cough and cough all day and all night. There was nothing we could do for him. The only thing he ever asked for was to hear Mom play the piano. He loved to hear her play. She must have played 'Amazing Grace' a thousand times..."

Mom started crying as she sat down on the shiny wooden bench in front of the piano. Sometimes Mom would start thinking about my grandparents and break down crying. I was used to it.

"That was his favorite song..."

"Why don't you play something for me, Mom?" I asked, trying to change the subject a little.

"Oh, look at the time! Roy will be home any minute and I haven't even started supper!" My mother jumped up, wiped the tears from her cheeks, and went into the kitchen to start supper. "You know how mad Roy gets when his supper ain't ready when he gets home."

"I know." My mom hadn't played the piano much since Granny had died. She had given me a few lessons, but Granny was the one who really taught me how to play some. I wasn't really good, but I was okay for my age. I

certainly wasn't as talented as my Granny or my mother, but I tried because I knew they wanted me to play so badly. Since Granny's death, Mom hadn't played the piano very much. Usually when she tried to she would start crying. I think playing reminded her too much of my grandparents and she hadn't dealt well with Granny's death. Plus, she really didn't have much time to play after Roy moved in about a year and a half ago.

My mother loved the piano with all her heart and Roy knew it. The only other thing in the house besides me that Roy knew not to mess with was Mom's piano. Even as stupid as he was, he knew it was off limits. He broke a lot of things in our house, dishes, chairs, windows, but he never touched that piano.

"Ruth, quit makin' that damn noise! Caint you see I'm trying to watch the car race?"

"Yeah, but I just thought..."

"Well there's where you went wrong! You aint 'posed to think nothin', Ruth! That's the man's job. It's my job to do all the thinkin' 'round here and you know what I think? I think you need to stop makin' that damn noise while I'm watchin' the race! Now, go get me a beer!"

Mom never played the piano when Roy was home ever again, and Roy was at home most of the time. One night a

week he went over to his friend Wilmer's house to play poker with the guys. The guys were such a disgusting sight. Jake, Steve, and Wilmer were just as greasy, and crude, and mean as Roy, but I always thought Roy was the meanest. Once, when it was Roy's night to be out with the guys, my mom sneaked Candy and me out to the drive-in movie. We didn't even care what was playing that night, we were just going out without Roy. Through the window, Mom watched Roy and his friends drive out of sight down the road.

"Grab Candy and let's go!" Mom said as soon as the coast was clear.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"It's a surprise! Just grab her and c'mon."

I ran outside and picked Candy up out of the nest she had made in Mom's flower garden. "You know better than that. You know you're not supposed to sleep in Mom's flowers," I whispered into her ear as I carried her to the car. Candy loved to ride. We used to take her almost everywhere, but then Roy came and he didn't want that "smelly dog" riding in the car with us. We got in and rolled the windows down so Candy could stick her head out the window and feel the wind. She looked funny with her long floppy ears flying out from both sides of her head.

She would walk back and forth between me and Mom, sticking her head out the driver's and passenger's sides of the car. The air smelled so clean and fresh that warm summer night. We were free, if only for a moment, to completely enjoy ourselves.

"Where are we going, Mom?" I asked again.

"We are going to see a movie at the drive-in."

"What about Roy?"

"Amy, let's not worry about Roy tonight. What do you say? He's not here. We're going to have some fun, just the three of us girls." I knew Mom had to be worried that Roy would find out we went, but if she was she never showed it and neither did I.

"Yeah, who cares about Roy? It's girl's night out!"

I turned the radio on and Mom and I started singing along to "She Loves You" by the Beatles. To this day, every time I hear that song on the radio I remember what a great time we had. I can't even remember what movie we saw, but that wasn't important. What was important was that the three of us were together and Roy wasn't there to bother us.

Still, We hurried home after the movie and got settled in. I had just climbed into bed when I heard Roy and his friends pull up in the driveway. "See ya'll next week, boys!" I heard Roy's loud foot steps stumble as he stomped

up the stairs. The door slammed. Roy was drunk, as usual.

"Ruth! Where you at?"

"I'm right here, Roy. Did you have fun at your poker game?" Mom's voice came from out of the bathroom.

"Hey, Ruth, let's go to bed!"

"I'll be right there. You go on ahead."

I heard Mom's soft footsteps coming down the hall toward my room. She opened the door and whispered, "Looks like we got away with it, darling. Now, you go to sleep. I love you and I'll see you in the morning."

"I love you, too, Mom. See you in the morning."

I have never been so relieved in my whole life.

My mom and Ben's mom had become pretty good friends in the five or six weeks since Ben and his mother had come to stay at the Bell. I had noticed my mom was spending more and more time in Mrs. Salley's room lately. They had been there nearly three weeks when I finally found out what was wrong with Mrs. Salley. Ben and I had gone out exploring, as usual, and I finally worked up the nerve to ask about Mrs. Salley.

"Is your mom okay?"

"Well...some days she's better than others," Ben said looking down at his feet. "She's getting worse."

"What's wrong with her? Does she have a cold? Does she have the flu? Has she been to the doctor? Is she taking any medicine?"

"It's worse than that." I saw a tear trickle down Ben's cheek.

"Ben, are you okay? What is it?"

"My mom's going to die, okay? She's got cancer! She's not ever going to get better! First my dad and now my mom. Amy, what am I going to do without her?"

I was shocked. I didn't know what to say or do. What would I do if my mom died? I couldn't even imagine what I would do without her. I said nothing. All I could do was reach over and give Ben a hug.

"She's been sick for a while. She said she wanted to spend as much time with me as she could before the end. She didn't want to spend it in a hospital. We just took off and ended up here at the Bell. We thought it would be a nice place to..." Ben trailed off into tears.

"Oh, Ben, why didn't you tell me?"

"We were having so much fun together and when I'm with you I can forget for just a little while about what's going to happen and..."

"It's going to be okay, Ben."

"Mom, what's cancer?"

Mom looked at me with a sad look on her face.

"What does it do?"

Mom laid down the towel she was drying the dishes with and sat down in one of the kitchen chairs. She patted the seat beside of her. "Come sit down with me."

"Is Ben's mom going to die?"

"Amy, I know this isn't fair. I know you can't understand why something like this happens, but sometimes it does. Ben's mom is really sick."

"Is that why I haven't really seen her lately? It's always so dark in their room when Ben goes in now."

"Mrs. Salley has been very tired. Mrs. Bell is letting me help her some during the day when I am at work. Also, a nurse who comes to people's houses has been helping her some. Ben has been helping her at night. Bless his heart."

"But is she going to die, Mom?"

"Well, yes, honey. She is. Cancer is a disease that sometimes you don't get better from."

The words struck me like a bat hitting a ball. Now I knew Ben's mother really was going to die. I looked at my mother sitting in front of me, holding my hands as she spoke. I knew I couldn't survive without her. She was

always there to help me with my homework when I didn't think I could do it. She made me cinnamon toast whenever I asked for it for breakfast. She knew exactly how long to leave the bread in the toaster so that it wasn't too brown; it was just right. She even cut the crust off without me having to ask. Who would make me take a bath? Who would give Candy a bath when she got all muddy? Who would take care of me when I was sick? Who would tuck me in every night and tell me that they love me and they'll see me in the morning? If I didn't have my mom I could never have my hair French braided ever again! How sad and scared Ben must be!

"Dianne explained everything to me about a week or so after she and Ben came to the Bell," Mom said. I hadn't told you because I didn't want you to worry, and I figured Ben would tell you when he felt the time was right."

"Is she going to die soon?" I asked with tears in my eyes.

"I don't think it's going to be long now. It's getting worse every day."

"You're not going to die are you, Mom?"

"Oh, no, honey. I'm fine. Don't you worry about me. You just worry about Ben for now."

"Does it hurt?"

"Dianne has been taking some pain medicine so the physical pain isn't bad. What really hurts her is that she will have to leave Ben."

"What's going to happen to Ben?" I sobbed. "Where will he go? What will he do? Who will take care of him? He can't leave. What will I do without him?"

Mom gently pulled me close against her chest and wrapped her arms around my little body. "I don't know, Amy. I just don't know."

Mom held me close as I cried. With my ear pressed against her chest, I could hear her heart beating. I could smell her. It wasn't a particular perfume, because Mom didn't wear perfume. It was a wonderful mixture of lotion, fabric softener, and fruity shampoo. I still remember inhaling that wonderful mom smell. Even now, sometimes I think I get a whiff of her when I pass someone on the street bearing that same fragrance combination. I knew how much I needed my mom and how much Ben needed his. Our moms were all we had in the world, besides each other.

The door slammed. Mom and I jumped. Roy was back. He had gone over to one of his buddy's houses to help him work on his car. "What are you two cry-babies cryin' about in here?"

I knew that tonight of all nights I couldn't stand to be around Roy. I broke free of my Mom's loving embrace and ran toward the door.

"Where are you going, honey? Amy..."

I didn't slow down or even look back. I knew Mom would understand. As the screen slammed behind me, I heard Roy say, "This house is a mess, Ruth!" Then the familiar sound of breaking glass penetrated my ear. "If you don't stop that cryin' I'm gonna give..." I ran even faster.

The noise of my house eventually faded away. I heard the familiar, calming sounds of the woods, the birds, the wind in the trees, and the water trickling in the creek. I reached the creek where Ben and I had gone the first time we went exploring. I finally stopped and sat down on the edge of the creek bank. I thought about how much fun Ben and I had had together. My eyes were so blurry with tears that I couldn't even see the crawdads through the water. I was sad for Ben, but I was sad for myself, too. I was going to lose the best friend I had ever had in my entire life. "It's just not fair!" I yelled.

Crunch - crunch - crunch - crunch...

I heard the sound of dry leaves crunching under foot. I could recognize that familiar short-stepped, quick-paced gait in an instant. I looked in the direction of the

crunching leaves and spotted her. "Candy!" She broke into a run when I came into her view. I reached my hand out towards her. Candy ran up under my hand and put her front paws on my lap. I lowered my face down to hers. Her little black nose was so cold and wet. I swear Candy had the longest tongue in the world. You could be six inches away from her and that tongue could still reach out and grab you.

I couldn't help but giggle, "What are you doing here, Candy?"

Candy licked my face and rolled over beside me, her little body pressed up against my leg, her feet up in the air. She raked her outstretched paws against my hand as I held it just above her belly. "Okay, okay. I'll pet your belly."

I began to stroke Candy's belly. As she relaxed, her right rear leg started to twitch and then to jump. "That feels good doesn't it, girl?" Candy loved to have her belly rubbed more than anything. If you petted her just in the right spot, that leg would start jumping and you just knew she was in ecstasy.

"What are we going to do, Candy? Ben might have to leave soon." Candy didn't seem too upset. She was still busy enjoying having her belly rubbed.

"Amy...Amy, where are you?" I heard Ben's voice. I didn't say anything for a minute. I didn't know what to say. "Amy..."

"I'm over here, Ben."

"There you are! I've been looking all over for you." Ben sat down on the other side of Candy and joined me in rubbing her stomach. "Hi, Candy. Amy, your mom called and told me that you took off and she thought maybe I could try and find you and cheer you up some."

I gave Ben a weak smile. "I just couldn't be at home right now. I needed to be by myself."

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

Ben's words caused me to lose control. I started crying violently. "That's the problem, Ben. I don't want you to leave me alone! I never want you to leave me, ever!" I buried my face in my hands. Ben put his hand on my shoulder. By then he had started crying, too. We sat there on the bank of the creek and cried, together.

"You're the best friend I've ever had, Ben."

"I know, Amy, I know. I've got to go back now. I told my mom I wouldn't be gone too long. Why don't you and Candy come back with me? I'm sure my mom would like to see you two."

"Okay. I'm so sorry, Ben. I know I'm acting like a big baby. All this has to be way harder on you and your mom. I don't even know what you must feel like right now."

"It's okay, Amy. It's really hard on all of us."

Ben and I got up and headed back to the Bell. The whole walk back, I was trying to think of some way Ben could stay. What could I do to keep my friend here with me? I needed him, he needed me, and we needed each other. I had to think of something.

"Here we are," Ben said when we approached his room. "Let me go in first and see if Mom's awake. You wait here."

"Okay." The room looked dark when Ben pushed open the door. I waited trying to think of things to say when I did see Mrs. Salley. *How are you doing? It's so good to see you. You look so good.* What do you say to someone who is dying with cancer?

Ben returned to the door and pulled it open from the inside. I looked up from the spot on the ground I was concentrating on and smiled in question to Ben. He smiled back at me and motioned me to come on in with his hand. I looked back to see where Candy had gone. I saw her lying down in the wide shade of the walnut tree. Then, I turned back around to face Ben and placed my right foot slowly

into the dark room. I didn't know what to expect. I hoped that Mrs. Salley didn't look scary or anything. I hoped I wouldn't just stand and stare at her like she had three heads. I hoped I would be able to think of something to say to her. Ben gently closed the door behind me, and as my eyes began to adjust to the dimness of the room, Mrs. Salley's motionless form came into view. She looked so thin and frail, even more so than the day I met her. She had dark rings around both of her eyes. She was wearing only her nightclothes and her hair was undone. She was lying on the bed with her head and shoulders propped up with the pillows. She didn't even have the television on. She was just sitting there in the dimness looking at some old pictures.

"Come here you two, and sit down beside me," Mrs. Salley said in a weak voice.

I said nothing. Ben and I just walked over to the edge of her bed and sat next to her limp body; Ben was on one side and I was on the other.

"Are you looking at pictures of me and you and Dad again, Mom?" Ben asked.

Mrs. Salley smiled at Ben and said, "Yes, honey. I was just remembering how much fun we used to have together."

Mrs. Salley chuckled as she looked at one of the photographs and then handed it to me.

I laughed as I said, "Is that Ben?"

"Oh, Mom. You're not showing her baby pictures of me are you? Please don't show her..." Ben stopped, "That better not be the picture of me in my clown suit on Halloween."

I busted out laughing. I looked at the picture and looked back at Ben. It was a funny picture. He looked like he was about three years old wearing a wig and a red nose. "It's cute Ben," I said. Then we all laughed. Mrs. Salley was just like she was before I found out she was sick. She was just in the bed now. She handed me another picture.

"Is that you, Mrs. Salley?" I asked surprised.

"Yes, Amy, that's me. Believe it or not, I did look better than this at one time. Even though it was years ago."

"Hey Ben, is this your dad?"

"Let me see." I handed Ben the picture. "Yeah, that's him."

"You look just like him."

"Doesn't he, though," Mrs. Salley said. "He's the spitting image of his father. He didn't take any of his

looks after me." Mrs. Salley handed me another picture.
"Here they are together at the beach."

I reached for the picture. "Is this the day you were telling me about, Ben? The day you and your Dad got knocked down by that big wave?"

"Yeah, that's that very same day." Mrs. Salley answered. "I was sitting in the sun on the beach and I just happened to look up right when that giant wave came right over top of both of their heads. I was worried at first, but when I jumped up I saw their heads pop up out of the water and knew they were okay. That's when I started laughing." Ben and I chimed in with Mrs. Salley's laughter. "I thought I would die..." She trailed off. "Don't let Ben forget about how much fun we had together, Amy. Make him always tell you about me and his dad."

Mrs. Salley was going to die. We all hushed, and the room got silent.

I finally said, "I guess I better go home now. My mom is probably wondering where I am. I did leave home in a hurry earlier."

"I'm sure she is worried. She called here upset right after you left to send Ben looking for you. Amy, your mother loves you very much. You know that don't you?" Mrs. Salley said.

"I know, Mrs. Salley. I didn't leave because of her, I left because of..." I stopped because I didn't know if Mom wanted me to tell anyone how Roy acted. I had seen how embarrassed she had been when Mrs. Bell, the owner of the Bell Hotel, had asked her about Roy and if it was him who had been leaving those awful bruises on my mom's arms. Even though Mrs. Bell didn't like Candy and me running around the tree, she really did have a good heart and I knew she cared about my mother and me.

"It's okay, Amy. You can tell me. You left because of Roy, didn't you?" said Mrs. Salley.

"How did you know?"

"Your mother has told me all about him. He is a horrible man. I hope that soon your mother will be getting rid of Roy and living life for herself and you."

"I hope so, too, Mrs. Salley, but I really don't think my mom will ever get rid of Roy."

"You may be surprised, Amy. Just you hang in there. Okay?"

"Okay, Mrs. Salley."

"You go on home now. Tell your mother I said, 'Hello.'"

"All right. I'll tell her." I got up off of the bed and walked toward the door. Just before I stepped outside, I turned to say, "Good-bye, Mrs. Salley."

That was the last time I got to see Mrs. Salley before she died.

I looked for Candy when I got outside, but she must have already gone home. As I headed in that direction myself, I looked around at the little town I had lived in my whole life. Everyone knew who you were here in Frenchburg. There was an old restaurant on the corner that had the greasiest hamburgers you could ever eat. There was one three-way stop in town. I stood there at that stop many times wondering where those roads could take me and where they would take the people who were stopping and then disappearing in the distance. I loved my little Kentucky town. I loved the old stone courthouse and the barber's pole standing outside the barbershop. I loved the barber, Gene. He always had a piece of gum for me when he saw me pass by his window on my way home from school, alone. Even though I did love Frenchburg, I always knew I wanted more. I had to see more and be more, and I knew one day I would travel and see everything I possibly could. I always wanted to see the Statue of Liberty and Mt. Rushmore. I just wished my mom could travel with me. We could travel

together and see the United States, my mom, Candy, and me. It would be so fun! I knew that would never happen, though, at least not as long as Roy was around.

"So, you decided to come home, did ya?" Roy said, never taking his eyes off the television.

I completely ignored Roy, as usual. My mom followed me into my bedroom. "I'm sorry, Mom. Ben found me and we went to visit Mrs. Salley."

"How is she?"

"I don't know. She was looking at some pictures of their family when they were all together. She was okay until she started thinking about Ben forgetting her and his dad."

"Poor thing."

"She told me I couldn't let Ben forget them. I'm supposed to make him tell me about them so he'll remember."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Yeah. She said to tell you, 'Hi.'"

"Okay, sweetie. Come in your room with me."

"Why? What is it, Mom?"

"Just come in here," Mom said as she gave me a wink.

I followed Mom down the hall toward my bedroom. The door was shut. Mom carefully opened the door and stuck her head inside like she was trying to keep something from

getting out past her. We slipped in the room and quickly shut the door behind us. Then I saw her, "Candy."

"I sneaked her in for you. I figured she would be good company for you tonight."

"Thanks, Mom." I reached down and patted Candy's head.

"Ruth," we both jumped, "come in here a minute." Roy's voice boomed through the house.

"Let me go in here and see what Roy wants now."

"I don't want you to go, Mom. Who cares what he wants? He's no good, Mom. I can't stand him anymore. You have to get rid of him." I knew if Roy didn't leave soon, I was going to find a way to leave him.

"I know, honey. I know. Don't you worry, okay? I'll take care of everything."

I picked Candy up and put her on my bed. Mom had already turned the covers down. I climbed in beside Candy, scooting right up next to her so I could cradle her and rub her belly until we fell asleep. Mom covered us up and handed me the book I was reading.

"Why don't you read for a while and then go to bed, sweetie?"

"All right, Mom."

"Ruth!" boomed again from the living room.

"Coming, Roy!" Mom yelled as she headed toward the door. "Good night, Amy. Try to get some rest. I love you and I'll see you in the morning."

"I love you, too, Mom. See you in the morning."

As I watched my mother close my bedroom door behind her, I knew it was time for Roy to go. I couldn't stand to see him treat my mother that way any more. If he didn't go, I would.

As I lied in bed, the familiar sounds of the crickets and tree frogs drifted in through my cracked window. The smell of the wet, night air filled my small room. My arms, not covered by the quilt that my grandmother had made for me, were sticky with the outside humidity. Even though it was summer, I always liked to be covered up with Granny's quilt. I flipped off the light and lied still, listening to Candy's slight snoring until I drifted off.

Crash!

I jumped in my sleep. I lay still with my eyes still closed and listened. The voices of Mom and Roy were muffled, but they were obviously fighting. This wasn't the first time I had been awakened by the sounds of crashing and fighting in the middle of the night. I had seen Roy do horrible things to my mother, like the time he backhanded her for not having dinner ready, or the time he hit her

with the book she was reading because he thought she was wasting her time, or the time he knocked her off the seat of the piano where she was already upset because he didn't want to "hear that racket." There was nothing I could do. Many times I had wanted to help my mother, but she always told me to stay as far away as I could when Roy was in one of his moods. I looked at my clock, "One o'clock." I felt Candy's paws stumbling over my legs as she walked up from the bottom of the bed. I hugged her close and her long warm tongue swiped up my cheek.

"Did they wake you up, too? What are we going to do, Candy?" I rubbed her ears. She pressed her head against my fingers and made her little grunting sounds. "Those ears are itchy, aren't they?"

Slam!

I felt Candy jump this time. I stopped rubbing her ears and she shook her head like she always did. "We've got to get out of here, Candy." I knew I couldn't helplessly watch my mother suffer again. I didn't even want to see what was going on in there.

Candy jumped down off my bed, walked over, and pressed her nose against the door where the line of light was beaming through the crack. "You can't go in there. I'm not staying to watch this time! We're leaving right now!"

I got out from under my covers and took off my gown. I grabbed the clothes I wore that day and put them on. I opened my window and inhaled a deep breath of damp night air. I could smell the wet grass and dirt, I could feel the cool night breeze blowing against my face, and I could hear the croaking of the frogs and crickets that live down at the creek. The breeze felt a little cool, so I went back to grab my jacket out of my closet. When I was closing my closet door I heard another even louder crash.

"Roy! Mother's piano!"

I whisked Candy up off the floor and hurried toward my open window. This was my big escape. I was finally running away. I was leaving Roy, but I was leaving my mom, too.

I carefully set Candy down outside the window and watched her take off towards the edge of the yard. I climbed out the window into the dark. "My flashlight!" I reached back inside my window to the nightstand beside my bed and felt my way over to the flashlight Mom kept there for me in case the lights went off and I needed it. I shined the light around the yard to find where Candy was.

"There you are." Her little white body was circling round and round finding just the right spot and getting in just the right position to do her business. "Hurry up and

come on, Candy!" Candy squatted and I looked the other way to give her some privacy. Then I heard her coming in my direction. "Let's go."

Candy and I set out in the dark with my little flashlight to guide us through the wood. I think some kids would have been scared of being in the woods in the dark, but I wasn't, and neither was Candy. She traipsed along as happy as could be because to her it was just another walk in the woods, and she loved to go for walks. Her little dog mind couldn't know how important this walk was for me.

These woods were a welcoming place where I felt safe, not scared. I trusted everything that was around me here. I trusted the woods more than I trusted my own home. The smell of the wet trees and soggy leaves was comforting. The sound of the water in the creek jumping over the pebbles worn smooth from years of tumbling was such a beautiful sound. Much nicer than the sound of crashing dishes and loud mean voices. At home, I could escape Roy's sight by going in my room, but I could never escape his terrible voice. I think it could penetrate through concrete. The moon was bright that night. I turned my flashlight off when we got next to the creek, because the moonlight reflecting off the creek was bright enough for us

to see by. Candy and I sat there in silence for a while, just enjoying the cool summer night.

"What are we going to do now?" I waited for Candy's reply, but she had none. "I know, let's go see if we can wake Ben up. Maybe he'll know what to do."

I turned my flashlight back on so we could find our way through the thick woods to the Bell Hotel. I knew the bed Ben slept in was next to the window. "Maybe I can tap on the window next to his bed and he will hear it, but it won't wake Mrs. Salley." Candy kept quiet in what I assumed was agreement. She always kept about four steps in front of me at all times. She knew the way to the Bell by heart. She didn't even need the flashlight.

Candy's life was perfect. People loved her and petted her constantly. I know she never felt unloved. She was fed whenever she was hungry. She didn't ever have any chores to do. All she had to do all day was whatever dogs do, like chase butterflies, get burs in her hair, lie down in mud puddles, and dig up the mulch in Mom's flowerbeds into just the right pile to comfortably take a nap on. The worst she ever had to do is take a bath and go to the vet. She never had to see anyone hurt her mother like I did. She never had to hear anyone call her mother ugly names and break things. Yeah, Candy had it made.

Whenever Candy got too far ahead, she always stopped and looked back to see where I was. I saw her stop ahead of me and I knew she was waiting for me to catch up with her. She knew we were almost at the Bell. I knew we were almost at the Bell, too. I didn't really know what I thought Ben could do for me, but I did know I needed to talk to him right now.

"I hope Mrs. Salley isn't sick tonight so Ben can sneak out and talk to me, don't you, Candy?"

I didn't need my flashlight any more because now the lights of the Bell were illuminating Candy's path and mine. I walked past the office, careful not to let Mrs. Bell see me. She was a nice lady but entirely too nosy. Mrs. Bell had the back room of the office set up as her apartment where she spent twenty-four hours a day, almost. Often times she slept there in the office in case someone needed a room. She certainly didn't want to miss out on any money, and she was always on the look out for the kid who had toilette papered the walnut tree, just in case he came back she'd be ready. I knew if she saw me, she would definitely call my mother and tell her where I was. Candy walked on ahead, unaware of my sneaking, and went straight to Ben's door. I stood outside the door and listened to see if I could hear Ben or his Mother inside. I heard

nothing but the sounds of the summer night. I decided to try the window. I walked over to the one closest to where I knew Ben slept and lightly knocked.

Nothing.

I knocked again, still lightly so I wouldn't disturb Mrs. Salley. I waited.

Nothing.

I knocked one last time just to make sure.

Nothing.

"Ben must be sleeping very soundly tonight," I said to myself. I knew he could hear me, because his bed was right under that window. I decided to go sit on the merry-go-round and think about what I was going to do next. I walked myself around in a circle a few times. Each time I went around I thought of some wonderful place I would like to go and see. I knew now I would have to find a way to do it, all on my own. My mother wasn't ever going to leave Roy and I couldn't live with him any more. I got up and decided to go around to the back window of Ben's room, the bathroom window, and see if I could see a light on or hear anything. I thought maybe Ben could have been in the bathroom when I knocked earlier. It was worth a try, anyway, I decided.

I patted my leg for Candy to come with me around to the back of the Bell. I looked up at the moon and thought about how beautiful it was tonight. I don't know if it really was as beautiful as I thought, or if it was just that beautiful because I had finally left Roy. As we rounded the corner of the Hotel, I saw him. There was Ben just standing outside in the dark, by himself, looking up. Ben's thin frame was illuminated by the brightness of the moon. It almost looked like Ben was glowing, or like he had a ring of light around him. He looked almost as bright as the moon did to me. I wanted to wait a minute and see what Ben was doing before I disturbed him, but that was impossible because I had Candy with me. Before I knew it, she was running over to Ben, wagging her tail, excited to see him. Ben didn't even notice us for several seconds. Candy had to actually jump up on his leg before he even looked our way. When he turned to face us, I saw the tears in his eyes.

I stopped walking forward and stood still. I knew something horrible had happened. I had never seen Ben look so upset, even though he had so much to be upset about. I was almost afraid to ask him what was wrong. I almost

didn't want to know the answer. Was it Mrs. Salley? What had happened? Ben didn't even reach down to pet Candy. I knew something really bad had happened.

"Ben?"

Ben didn't answer me. I began to walk toward him again.

"Ben, what's wrong?"

He still didn't answer me. He was staring up at the moon again and acting like he couldn't even hear me. It was like I was invisible. It was only then that I noticed Ben was still wearing his pajamas. I got right up in front of him and asked him again, "Ben." His eyes met mine.

"What happened?" I could see the pain in Ben's eyes. I knew it must be Mrs. Salley.

"Is your mom okay?"

Ben just shook his head and looked back up to the sky. The tears were dripping off his chin, making sparkling streaks one by one on his pale cheeks. I wrapped my arm around his shoulder. It looked like there were a million stars in the sky that night.

"Did you see that," I said pointing up to the sky. I had just seen the brightest falling star I had ever seen.

"Hey, there's another one."

"Yeah, I saw it," Ben whispered, "It must be a meteor shower. I think I heard on the news today that there was going to be a meteor shower tonight."

"Ben," I said, "are you okay?"

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it sure is."

I didn't want to make Ben talk to me. I knew he would tell me whenever he got ready to and not a moment sooner. We just stood there with our faces pointed toward the sky in awe.

"She's finally gone," he whispered.

"What?" I asked. "I didn't hear you."

"She's gone," he said a little louder.

I looked at him. "Your mom is gone?"

"Yeah. I got up to get a drink of water and realized she hadn't asked for anything tonight. She had felt really bad earlier today, so I went over to check on her to see if she needed anything and she didn't move. I knew she was gone."

The reality of everything didn't set in until I heard Ben say it. Tears began pouring down my cheeks, too. How could Ben's mom be gone? I just saw her a few hours ago. She seemed so good. She was laughing and talking. How

could it happen so quickly? I wrapped my other arm around Ben's neck. "I'm so sorry, Ben."

"I know. Me too."

The stars were falling all around us. Ben and I stood quietly beside one another, neither of us talking, as the raining stars streaked light across the dark sky.

"It couldn't have been a more beautiful night."

"Yeah. I can't help but to think that Mom is up there looking down on us and throwing the brightest, biggest stars down just for us. Mom loved stargazing. She knew all kinds of constellations."

"I can never find any of the constellations. All the stars look the same to me."

Ben pointed up toward the sky, "There's the Big Dipper. Can you see it?"

I squinted in the direction he was pointing, "I think I see it."

"It's right there. It has seven stars. Four of them make a square and the other three make the handle."

"Yeah, I see it! Is that another Big Dipper over there?" I pointed.

"That's the Little Dipper. It's just like the Big Dipper, only smaller. Mom showed me so many constellations

I don't think I'll ever be able to remember them all. She was a really smart lady. I miss her!"

"I know you do, Ben."

"Mom would take me to school and pick me up from school every day. She walked me to my classroom every day until I thought I was too old for my mom to walk me to class. How could I ever have been embarrassed of my mom? She was the most wonderful person in the world and I wouldn't let her kiss me before I got out of the car at school." Ben started crying again.

"It's okay, Ben. I think she understood. She knew it wasn't because you didn't love her. She knew how much you loved her."

"I *don't* know, Amy. I hope so."

"Of course she did."

"She fell asleep tonight before I got a chance to tell her I loved her and now I'll never get another chance again."

"Ben, your mom loved you more than anything in the world. She knows you love her. You didn't have to tell her."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Hey, what are you doing out here, anyway? Come here, Candy," Ben said as he patted his thigh.

"Well...", I didn't know whether or not to tell Ben about Roy and how I was running away. He had enough problems of his own. I had a feeling Ben knew anyway, though.

"What happened at home? Did Roy do something to you?" Ben scratched Candy's back down next to her tail, her favorite spot, "Did Roy do something to Amy, Candy?"

"Don't you wish you could be a dog, Ben? You'd never have to worry about anything ever. Roy and my mom were fighting again."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No, I didn't stick around and give him time to do anything to me. I just couldn't take it anymore! I had to get out! I wasn't going to watch him treat my mom that way any more!" I started crying.

"What about your Mom?"

"I hope my mom's okay. I was really scared, but Mom told me that if it ever sounded really bad to just get out of the house as fast as I could and she would take care of everything."

"Where were you going, Amy?"

"I don't know. Just anywhere away from Roy. I hate him! I know you're not supposed to hate people, but I *hate* him!"

"You have good reason to hate him, Amy. He's a bad man."

"I came here to talk to you. Do you want to come with me, Ben? I don't think I can make it without you."

"Amy, I wish I could. Where would we go? What would we do? We don't even have any money. How would we eat? How would we feed Candy? We can't just run away by ourselves like that. It's dangerous. What about your mom? She needs you."

"My mom has Roy," I said sarcastically. "I can't live with Roy any more."

"I don't want you to leave, Amy. Just wait here till the sun comes up. I won't let you leave in the middle of the night like this."

"Why is it going to be any better in the morning? Everything will be just the same as it is tonight. I might as well go now."

"Just wait, please. My mom called and spoke to your mom earlier tonight, you know, before..."

"What do you say we drag some chairs around here from the front and sit out here and enjoy the stars till then? You don't think Candy will mind do you?"

"Okay."

Candy followed us around to the front of the Bell. We each grabbed a chair and dragged it around back. We sat them next to each other and settled in to watch the meteor shower. Candy lay in between our chairs as if she knew we both needed her the same that night. Ben picked the wet leaves out of her hair on his side and I picked them out on my side. Though we didn't know exactly what would happen tomorrow, we did know all of our lives were going to change. All we could do was be together this night enjoying each other's company and hope for the best tomorrow. The three of us sat there until the bright pinks and oranges of the sun came peeking up over the hillside. It must have been about six o'clock. Daylight made Candy restless, so she headed off to see what sorts of things she could get into. I knew that such a glorious sunrise had to bring some good luck.

Ben and I were sitting in silence, enjoying the warming sun, when I felt it. I jumped, startled. I felt Ben jump, too. A hand, larger than Ben's or mine was resting on my shoulder!

"Oh, Mom, it's you!"

"I was so worried about you, Amy! Where have you been?"

"I've been here with Ben all night."

"I guess you heard me and Roy fighting last night?"

"Yeah, I heard," I said.

Mom lowered her eyes to the ground. I could see the visible signs of last night's struggle in bright blue and purple colors on my mother's face and neck. I was determined this would be the last time I ever saw my mother look this way. I know those bruises hurt, but my mother never acted like they hurt at all. She would just act like nothing happened the next day. Sometimes the bruises were in places that could be hidden the next day with long sleeves or turtlenecks, but today there was no hiding them.

"When I got up this morning and went in to check on you and you were gone, I panicked. All I could think to do was to call Ben and his mom to see if they had heard from you. When no one answered the phone, I decided to come straight over here to see if I could find you and see why no one answered."

Ben looked at my mother, "I guess you know now."

My mom grabbed Ben and gave him a big hug. "Yes, honey. I went on in your room when no one answered the door and I saw her."

"Yeah, she doesn't have to be in pain anymore, ever," Ben said in between sobs.

I think Mom knew there was nothing she could say, so she held Ben in her arms until he quit sobbing. I sat beside them wondering what was going to happen to Ben and me. Where were we going to go? I wasn't going to stay here and Ben couldn't stay here without his mother. I didn't know how to tell my mom I was leaving. I knew if I told her she would try and stop me. Mom let go of Ben and came around in front of Ben and me. She squatted down to our eye level and said she had something very important to tell us both.

"I had spoken to Ben's mother weeks ago and she helped me to see that I had to do something about Roy. I couldn't go on letting him treat me the way he had been treating me. I also couldn't go on letting my perfect little girl see someone treat her mother that way. Amy, I know how much it has hurt you to see what's been going on. I'm so sorry it took as long as it did for me to do something about it."

"What did you do, Mom?"

"Last night I told Roy it was time for him to go. I told him to leave and that I never wanted to see him again."

"Is that what started the fight?"

"Yeah. I told him I couldn't let you see him treat me this way any more."

"Mom, did he break Granny's piano?"

"He pushed me into it and broke a piece off of it. I am hoping it can be fixed. How did you know?"

"That was the last thing I heard before Candy and I left last night."

"I'm so sorry I put you through all this, Amy. Do you forgive me?"

I smiled at Mom, "Of course I forgive you. Is Roy gone for good?"

"I'm pretty sure he's gone for good. He was the worst he's ever been last night. When he wouldn't stop, I started to get really scared that he was actually going to kill me." Mom started to cry.

"What happened, Mom?"

"I didn't know what else to do! I didn't know how else to make him stop hurting me!"

"Mom, what did you do? You didn't..."

"I didn't kill him if that's what you're thinking, but as soon as I wriggled free of his grasp I ran into the kitchen and grabbed the biggest, sharpest knife I could find."

"Then what?"

"I tried to warn Roy to stay away from me. I told him I wasn't afraid to use the knife. He actually had the

nerve to laugh at me. He said, 'You wouldn't hurt me, would you, Ruth?' I said, 'I'm warning you, don't touch me, Roy!' Then he rushed foreword at me and I stabbed him!"

"You stabbed Roy!"

"Yeah, I did. I'm ashamed to say it, but it felt sort of good."

"He deserved it!" Ben said.

"What happened to him?" I said.

"Well, after I stabbed him, he knew I meant business. He staggered out the front door and down the road. As soon as he was gone, I called the police and told them everything that had happened that night and how he had been treating me all along. I told them he couldn't have gone far because he was drunk and bleeding. They said they would find him and take care of everything. They said he would never be able to hurt me again."

"I can't say I'm sorry Roy got stabbed either, Mom. I can't believe he's actually gone for good."

"Good riddance!" Ben said.

I gave my mom a big hug. I was so happy that Roy was finally gone. No more yelling, no more fighting, and no more greasy mullet. Yet, no amount of happiness could make me forget about Ben. His mother had left him and now he might have to leave me.

"The news I have involves you both," Mom continued. Ben, you know your mother and I became really good friends in the few months you two were staying here."

"Yeah, I know."

"Well, we had been discussing what was going to happen to you, Ben, when she passed away. I'm sure you know that neither of your parents had any brothers or sisters, so there was no one who could take care of you family-wise. We finally came to the decision that if I successfully left Roy, you could live with us. Your mother and I took care of the custody paperwork already. We decided together that tonight was the night to tell Roy. Your mother helped me realize that I didn't need Roy and that I deserved better. Amy deserved better. Dianne thought that since there was a meteor shower tonight that that must bring some good luck with it."

Ben and I looked at each other in disbelief. We were going to get to stay together after all. I couldn't believe it. Roy was gone for good and Ben was coming to live with us. I smiled at Ben and gave him a big hug. Ben grinned a little, but I knew it was hard to be happy about anything, even this, when his mother had just died. I knew this was what he wanted as much as I wanted it.

"I can't believe it!" I said. "This is the best news in the whole wide world!"

"It's true. Ben is going to live with us, if that's okay with you, Ben." Mom looked at Ben questioningly.

"There's no place else I'd rather live than with you and Amy."

That was one of the happiest and saddest days of my life. Mrs. Salley had died, but Ben was coming to live with us. It's funny how things turn out. How can such a sad situation lead to such a happy one? Just minutes earlier I was thinking about running away from home and now my home was going to be the only place I would ever want to be.

We walked back around to the front of the Bell and Mom went in the office and told Mrs. Bell that Mrs. Salley had died. Ben and I sat outside on the picnic table and waited for them to take Mrs. Salley away. Ben went into the room to say good-bye one last time before they took her. Then we gathered what we could carry of Ben's things. Ben took his mother's perfume and the last clothes she had worn.

"What do you three say we go home now?" Mom said as she took the things Ben had gathered out of his arms to carry for him.

Ben and I nodded.

"Candy," Ben called.

"Here she comes," I said.

"Oh, no. She's covered with mud," Ben said as he reached down to pet her. Right as he got close she did the dog shake. It looked almost like slow motion. Her muddy hair flapped back and forth around her body. She shook muddy water all over Ben. Little spots of mud covered Ben's face and pajamas. Even he couldn't help but to chuckle a little. "Oh, Candy! C'mon, let's go home and get you a bath."

I decided not to tell Mom that I was going to run away that day. I figured it would only hurt her feelings, and now that everything had changed it didn't matter anyway. We all walked home that day, together. Candy kept her usual distance ahead, and we followed. This was the first time we would all be together as the family we would eventually become.

Those next few weeks were a hard time for all of us. We were all still getting used to Mrs. Salley not being around anymore. In the beginning, Ben was quiet a lot of the time, but it just took some time for him to come out of it and get back to his regular old self. Also, I guess Ben was getting used to living with us. He wasn't used to living with three girls. We all had a lot of fun getting

rid of all of Roy's stuff out of the house. Ben and I decided to take turns every other night letting Candy sleep with us. Even Candy knew Roy was gone. She was much happier now that she had free reign of the house and could come and go as she pleased.

Mom had to stay in jail until Roy's trial. Mrs. Bell took care of Ben and me while my mother wasn't there. Mrs. Bell isn't so bad after all. She made us chocolate chip cookies and even let Ben and I stay up past ten o'clock. At the trial, the jury decided that my mother had acted in self-defense. I was even a witness at the trial. I told the jury everything Roy had done to my mother. After the trial, none of us ever spoke about Roy again. Maybe we thought we would jinx our good fortune if we brought his ugly name up.

Mom took care of all of Mrs. Salley's "arrangements," whatever that meant. Mom and Ben and I talked about his mom and dad every day. Mom and I knew how important it was to keep Ben's memories of his parents vivid in his mind. Mrs. Salley had left all of her savings with my mother to take care of Ben. Mom decided it would be best to look for a new place to live, because of the trial and all. I think she knew as long as we stayed Roy would always be a threat. She hated to say good-bye to her childhood home, but she

knew it was time to move on. Frenchburg just wasn't the right place for us anymore. Things had changed. It looked like now we might be able to do some of that traveling I had always wanted to do, only now it would be even better because there was one more person to share it with. Up until this point in my life, I felt like everything was spinning, like the merry-go-round and I could never run fast enough to catch a ride, but just like the merry-go-round, the spinning eventually came to an end and my life took a spin for the better.

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