

FICTION

You Can Count on the Fingers of Your One Hand the Reasons

Darrell Spencer

Whether you were driving in from the east or the west you got to our mother's from Canal Street here in southern Ohio. There at the big McDonald's in Nelsonville you took the crossroad at Stoltz's Drugs and bumped over railroad tracks this side of Cristy's Pizza. No time to blink, you pulled a hard right at the intersection onto Tooth and dealt with the tracks a second time where they split into a Y. You followed Tooth, and there was our mother's place, Alice's, fifth house on your right, cedar-sided, three stories and basement, Victorian, complete with gingerbread and a slate roof, so close to the house next door that if you were on the porch and lost your balance, the wall you used to catch yourself would be the neighbor's. Early photographs of the town prove the street wasn't always so crowded.

Wooden stairs at the back took you to the second floor. They about-faced halfway up. Our dad built them to give us kids a way in when we got older. The garage, whose wide doors swung open like a barn, stood to the side and off by itself. Two rows of brick laid in pea gravel led to it. The backyard was narrow and lengthy and ran through the block to within ten feet of Canal, which was part of I-33 and was the main drag through Nelsonville. The yard was chain-linked, a four-footer that kept Alice's poodles in check. You sent the dogs out, though, and they barked like crazy, not at the traffic or people passing by on the sidewalk, but over a shoulder at the house. You had insulted them—poodles would have you think they know how to use a toilet—and you had put them at risk to the pit bull next door.

Tonight, Alice's living room was jam packed with what we called the

Knapp family can of worms, our mother's brothers and some of their wives and children, plus me and my sisters, too many near likenesses in the same room, which was why I had settled in the kitchen. Alice was hospitalized over in Athens. Close enough to dying for all of us to gather.

My sister Karen wandered in where I was, collected two Rolling Rocks from the refrigerator, and sat across from me at the breakfast counter.

"Mine?" I said. I twisted the cap off one of the beers.

She said, "If you want."

She finished hers in three takes and held up her pointer finger. She said, "Number one reason is she's so skinny." Karen faked poking that same finger down her throat and gagging. She said, "The woman's got to be a barfer," then drank from the beer I had opened for myself.

The woman who was so skinny was our sister Jennifer. I wasn't buying barfer and said so.

"Check out her hands," Karen said. "Nicks and cuts. You don't bite yourself writing poetry." Karen made like she was shoving her whole hand into her mouth, down her throat, and then choking on it. Biting the whole time.

She was on a roll big time. What Karen was arguing was why our sister should be shot on television at high noon. Her logic was death by firing squad. She held up two fingers and said, "Number two reason is the woman's clothes. You see her shoes? They cost more than a trip to Europe. The dress she's wearing could feed a nation and lower the national debt as an afterthought."

Karen mouthing off.

Hen talk, dad used to say. Karen, he often said right to her, was all jaw and sit.

Our father was a piece of work.

Ally, my daughter, appeared at the door to the kitchen, wearing a face like she was hunting safe harbor, a place where she could sit and not have to listen or talk. Too much family in this shoebox, and no one she was comfortable with. She spotted Karen, spun on her heel, and retreated. My hunch was she would head upstairs. I might find her in a closet. Maybe she would locate my other sister, Molly. The two of them had the wherewithal to sit together for three days in a rowboat and not say a word. Ally was fifteen. She loved and feared her Aunt Karen, was, whenever they were around each other, always studying on her like she was a pocketknife.

Karen said to me, "The third reason—" She went back to the Rolling Rock, said, "Wait."

After the hospital booted us out, most of the family ended up at the house tonight, not that anyone but me, Ally, Karen, and Molly was staying here, not unless they wanted to sleep in sacks on the hardwood floors or on the screened-in back porch, which wasn't likely to happen, it being December. Our cars and trucks took up most of the block. Everybody but immediate family was sleeping at friends' places or had gotten a room down the road at the Ramada off 691 or ten minutes from here at the Days Inn this side of Athens. There were teenagers moping around, acting like they would die if one more minute had to be spent this lame way—no TV on, no music. Torpor on them like sweat. Cell phones at their ears. Children ran in and out, which was worrying me because I didn't want the poodles disappearing. I had stashed the dogs in Alice's bedroom and taped a note to the door. DON'T OPEN FOR ANY REASON. Not that such adult foolishness could stop a kid from busting in. When is it we learn to read for real? When we turn twenty-five? Or is it forty?

Some Christmas was up, but not much. A Santa who played the saxophone, some garlands, a snowman. No tree. On the mantel, there was a row of cards Alice had received.

Stan was here—next oldest to Alice, her brother, our Vietnam vet who carried that war around like it was a spike in his chest. He had kept his muttonchops through three marriages. Stan's oldest, Douglas, brought along five of his six kids. They all seemed to be about the same age. Seven or so. A bunch of tadpoles. No one was asking where the sixth one was. Doug had broken his good foot and was on crutches. Then there was Art, the youngest of Alice's family, widowed, a St. Christopher's medal and a cross around his neck, each on a separate silver chain and hanging outside his T-shirt for the world to see. He was our mother's little brother by more than ten years.

Ally had asked to come with me. We lived up in Toledo. She was our only child, was a kid who was squared up to the world, who was actually good company in ten or twelve different ways. I was thinking she chose to tag along because our dog was struggling, congestive heart failure, unable to tolerate Lasix, her heart, as the vet put it, unhappy on the drug, her kidneys unhappy off it. Ally didn't want to face the fact of the dog's death.

But I was only guessing at Ally's motivation. She loved her grandmother, and we were all here because the word we got over the phone was

that there was a good chance Alice was not going to make it. She had been taken to Doctors Hospital up on the hill and then transferred to O'Bleness over in Athens. There had been some talk of Life Flight to Columbus.

Karen tapped my forearm to make sure I was listening, and she said, "We're all here because we're afraid we won't be in the poem if we're not present and accounted for."

More of her picking at our sister. Jennifer was a poet. She wrote books, and her poems were in magazines. She traveled to foreign countries to talk about her work

I said, "No one's thinking about poetry."

"Ask them," Karen said. "Go in there and ask them."

Karen tilted the Rolling Rock so she could eyeball how much was left, then spread wide the fingers on her hand, putting all of them and the thumb on display, like she was stopping traffic. She said, "That's reasons three, four, and five. The woman's a control freak." She polished off the beer and said, "You've seen that husband of hers, the man on his tiptoes twenty-four-seven and living the old joke: *how high? how high?* on the way up."

What they said around the university where Jennifer taught was she had a national reputation. She was famous in the way a poet can be. Not like Robert Frost so she would be reading for some president, but known in certain circles. Talked about. Growing up, we called her Jen. Not now. You didn't. No longer. There was a good chance you might lose your tongue. *Jen* is a gum-chewer's name. *Jen* is the name of one of those halfwits she teaches, the ones who pierce their lips and eyelids and noses, who take their parents' money and come to college to sit on their hands or spend class text-messaging each other. Karen called her F-hud, in honor of the Ph.D.

Her greeting when they met every time was "Hey, F-hud."

Like that.

She put the hardest of *d*'s on the word.

Jennifer, when she talked to you, kept bundling her hair up and flinging it back like it was annoying her, like it was whispering in her ear, distracting, like Jennifer was saying to it, *Later. We'll talk about this later. Not here. Not now.*

Jennifer left me out of the poem about our father's dying. Karen's in

it, arriving, cooking. Molly. Dad's two sisters, his one brother. All the husbands, uncles, even children. Not me.

I delayed when I got the call that Dad was in a coma. It came in the way that kind of news is supposed to arrive. The phone rang at 3 A.M. He had been ill about a year. His heart sputtering. Lesions on his lungs. He refused to quit smoking until even he recognized he had become a fire hazard. Last time I saw him on his feet, he was standing by my car, cradling an oxygen tank. His hair was long and tangled, unwashed, pasted in swirls above his ears. White.

He decided to die, and Jennifer assigned her husband, Barry, to telephone me. Jennifer told him to tell me I was to hurry home. I looked around my own house, at my sleeping wife, Julie, at our dog who was doing fine then. I thought about Ally asleep in her room. This was a few months ago. The dog's own turn toward death came one afternoon about a week before I got the call about Alice. I sent Buffy the dog out to do her duty, and she sat down in the backyard and looked around like she'd be damned if she could figure out what it meant to be alive. She blinked once hard and went to her knees. It was already cold, the hard air piercing, and I was standing at the slider waiting to let her in. I hurried out and gathered her up. Packed her to the house. I didn't really know it at the time but I was witness to the shit life can come to in one split second. She had had a stroke. That morning when my dad was dying, Barry, on the phone, 3 A.M., said, "They're thinking he won't last through the night. You'll need to hustle home." In the den off our bedroom, through an archway, dots of light on our two computers shone, fading in and out. I remember thinking, *Hustle? Hustle home? I am home.*

Hurry, or you'll miss your father's death.

My delay was cowardly. I was four, five hours away. Molly flew across the country and made it before he died. She traveled 1700 miles—first took a shuttle from her hometown, then hopped on a plane, then rented a car, and was sitting by our father's bed when he stopped breathing.

I took hours to pack. I ran errands once daylight came. I brewed coffee and sat and drank it. I delayed because I did not want to hear one more thing my father had to say in this world.

Not one more word from him.

Silence, please.

Which, at the time, didn't seem like too much to ask for.

Back then, when I told Karen I came late on purpose—we were sit-

ting on Alice's front porch after the funeral, sharing a cigarette even though both of us had quit, and Alice was inside, healthy then and feeding mourners—so when I told Karen, she said, “Yeah, well, you made an intelligent choice. If anything could have gotten him out of that bed, it would have been him sensing you in the room.” She acted like she was sniffing the air, like she was our dad picking up on my scent. Karen put on the face our father would have put on. She was the spitting image of him. It was a look that let everyone within a mile of him know there was a wrong that needed to be righted. She said, “Had he gotten the smallest whiff of you, he would have rallied, and we'd still be dealing with the old jackass.” She took a pull on our cigarette and said, “He got wind of your being around, and he would have crawled hand over hand out of that coma so he could get in the last word, and then where would we all be?”

Tonight, sitting across from me, Karen shook the empty Rolling Rock, folded her fingers so she left a fist in the air between us, and she said, “The law says you only need five good reasons and I've provided them.” She unleashed one finger at a time, saying, “One, barfer. Two, money like it grows on trees. Three, control. Four, control. Five, control. You loading the pistol or am I?”

* * *

Early afternoon, a Sunday, Ally and I drove over to the hospital. The staff was dressed in Christmas duds. Too soon in the day for costumes. Like putting ice cream on breakfast cereal. Dress-up ought to come at night, if at all. In the entrance, near the information station, there was a Christmas tree, its cloth skirt trying hard to be snow. There were gifts underneath those lights that bubble. Funny how you could tell by looking at them that the boxes were empty. The lady at the front desk was wearing an elf hat. There was a Santa Claus pushing an old man in a wheelchair. We stopped at a table and, for a ten-dollar donation each, had Alice's and our dog's names printed on a ribbon and attached to lights on a Christmas tree in a waiting area. Love Lights—they were shaped like candles, a bulb for the flame.

Flora, a neighbor, was the one who found Alice walking down the middle of Tooth at six in the morning, thirty degrees out, and Alice was wearing a bathrobe. Frost on the lawns, a blue crust. Alice was barefoot. Had left her slippers on the porch. She was floating through a waltz that only she was hearing in her head, kept touching her hair, vamping, like

she was a movie star on the red carpet and the press was taking photographs. Like flashbulbs were popping. All this was the description Jennifer got from Flora. What Jennifer pieced together was that Alice had not eaten for at least three days. Even more of a problem was that she hadn't had anything to drink for long enough that she had a kidney infection. When the paramedics brought her in, her blood pressure was eighty over forty. Her temperature, one hundred and four.

Ally and I ran into Alice's doctor on his way out of her room. He was tall, six-three. Curly gray hair. A mouth like the knot on a necktie. He wore a goatee and half-glasses, the kind you buy off the rack at K-Mart, dime-sized lenses, like he used the glasses only to check his punctuation.

"We got lucky," he said. He crossed two fingers and tapped the air near his face, saying, "Thank God she left the house."

We met the night my mother was brought in. He told me then that she was in real danger. The blood pressure scary. The infection deadly. Now, when he said *We got lucky*, I was wondering if something else had come up? The infection was under control. Right? Her pressure was normal. Right? Had something else gone wrong?

He said, "Ten or fifteen minutes the other way, and I'm not sure we could have brought her out of it."

"But not new troubles?" I said.

"No, no," he said. "She's a fighter."

Ally slipped by the doctor—she wanted to get in to see her grandmother—and I shook his hand and said, "She's out of the woods for sure? Clear sailing?"

"We'll watch her a couple more days," he said.

A nurse was standing next to my mother, saying, "Smell the roses. Blow out the candles."

Alice looked right past her at Ally. There was a plastic machine in Alice's lap. It had an orange ball in one of its tubes, a short hose, and mouth-piece. Had to have something to do with breathing.

"Smell the roses," the nurse said to Alice.

My mother waved her off.

The nurse turned, saw Ally, then me, and was not pleased.

"Later," my mother said to the nurse. But then she breathed in deeply—*smell the roses*—and made a show of letting the air go—*blow out the candles*. Alice was being a good girl.

"Once more," the nurse said. She adjusted the plastic machine in

Alice's hands and said, "Smell the roses." Alice breathed in at its mouth-piece. The nurse said, "Blow out the candles," and Alice let her breath go. The orange ball rose and fell.

The nurse, on her way out, said to me, "She hasn't touched her food."

One of those tattletales on planet Earth. Where would we be without them? You got to have your record keepers. Otherwise life would go around and around and nobody would know when to get off.

My mother said directly to me, "Whatever I eat bounces."

Ally took hold of her hand. "Hey, Gram," she said.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," Alice said.

I said, "Doctor tells us you're going to stick around."

Alice said, "All I want is to be in my own house for Christmas."

I said, "I meant you're not getting your wings yet."

"So he says."

Her TV, mounted high up on the wall and in a corner, was showing a Cavalier game. Pro basketball, a replay of last night's loss. The sound off. One of the players stepped to the line for a foul shot. He had spider webs tattooed on his shoulders and biceps and a Chinese-looking letter on his neck. Alice kept one eye on the game. Her hair was combed. It had the swoop I was used to seeing in it. She had recovered enough to put on her make-up.

"You've seen the kid play for real?" Alice said to me.

I told her I had. I had driven over to Cleveland for a couple of games, and on a business trip out West I caught a free night and saw the Cavs in Salt Lake City. They whipped the Jazz. The kid, LeBron James, went for thirty.

She said, "I can't keep his name in my head."

I told her what it was.

"You're right," she said. "So handsome a young man. A smile like that—the ladies. He'll need bodyguards. What can he really know about being grown up?"

I gave her the best hug I could under the circumstances. She couldn't take her eyes off the game. "The tall one," she said, "he looks like one of those foreign players. All his weight in the lower half."

"He's got a wide butt," Ally said.

"For rebounding," Alice said. "And the legs. Beef to the heels, we used to say. Rhino thighs."

"Illgauskus," I said. "He's Russian or Romanian, I think."

She said, "That sounds right." She squirmed in her bed, and I helped slide her toward the headboard and sit up taller. Ally adjusted the pillows. Alice put on her eyeglasses. They had a blue tint to them. She said, "Ill-whatever his name is looks like he should be raising chickens for a living."

"He's good," I said.

She said, "Maybe, but he's not pretty to watch."

I said, "Pretty to watch counts."

"More than dollars and cents," Alice said.

"There's a saying," I said. "They say, 'He plays ugly.'"

"Amen," Alice said.

I said, "It's a compliment."

I positioned a chair so I could sit and see the game, and Ally moved so she didn't have to twist around to watch. She kept Alice's hand in hers. The Cavs were giving away a fifteen-point lead. Taking bad shots. Not rebounding. Not running the floor. Nothing the three of us sitting here in the hospital could do to help.

Alice broke our spell, glanced at me and said, "You could play."

Ally looked from her to me.

"Your father could shoot like it was target practice," Alice said to Ally.

I said, "I played like a fish can deal cards."

"He got offers," my mother said. "People were going to give him money to come to their college."

My daughter had heard all this. It was family history. Ally said, "And he gave it all up to work in a factory fourteen hours a day breaking up steel, seven days a week, giving his wages to Grandpa so there'd be firewood come winter and crops come summer."

Alice's face came alive. My mother appreciated Ally's spunk. She could see Ally had what it took to manufacture a spot for herself in this world. The kid had a sense of humor and trusted the adults to get it. Such a gift you can't teach. Alice said, "The real truth is he gave all that up because he found out he was too slow and he couldn't get his shot off."

"Could he jump?"

"This high." Alice showed about an inch between her thumb and forefinger.

"You two having fun?" I said.

They were.

"Your grandfather," Alice said to Ally, "he hated sports."

This was news to Ally. Not to me. I had had this conversation before. I had lived it.

"I couldn't even watch them on TV," Alice said. "He'd come into the room, stand and gawk at the television, then walk out like I'd offered him slop for dinner. But just leaving wasn't enough. He'd storm out of the house. He'd crash around in the yard, making so much noise I had to turn the TV completely off, not because I couldn't hear but because having it on wasn't worth it."

Ally, I could see, didn't want to say anything against her grandfather.

Alice said, "My father, he was the coach. He was a different man from your grandfather. You walked around town, and people'd call my dad Coach. Not by his name. Never his name. They'd say, Coach." Alice was focused on the game. The Cavs' lead had been cut to two. She said, "He hauled me along to games when I was a girl. When I was no more than a kid you toted around." The Cavs turned the ball over and lost their lead on a fast break. Alice said, "Your great-granddad took the high school team to Chicago to play for the national title."

We watched the game until I thought Alice was asleep. I gave Ally a look that said maybe we should go. Somehow Alice sensed our plan. Her eyes still closed, she said, "William, pitch that, would you?"

Nothing to pitch. No tissues. No plastic cups. No straws. I thought maybe she was in a dream.

"The food," she said. "I can smell it. It's turning my stomach."

The cart her hospital meal sat on had been pushed away from the bed but was still close to her face. She hadn't touched what I could see of the food. Toast, jello, and milk. The main course was still covered.

"Please, dear," she said.

I took the tray and stepped outside her room. Three women at the nurses' station, two in scrubs, one in an outfit Little Bo-Peep would have worn, saw me and ducked themselves back into their tasks. It wasn't their job to haul food around. I came over and put the tray on the counter. Not one of them looked at me.

I said, "Merry Christmas."

I got back to the room and Ally was leaned in close so that my mother was whispering to her. Then Alice kissed Ally high on the forehead. Ally came around the end of the bed, saying, "We can go now."

Alice said to me, "I fought like tigers." She made a fist in her lap exactly like the one Karen had made back at the house our first night here.

I said, "Your doctor says you did."

Alice said, "Tell Jennifer to put the poem on the back burner. Tell her to wait until I'm in the ground for sure."

I gave Alice a hug and said, "The poem's on hold."

I was wondering what this was all about—her not eating, her not drinking to the point of self-destruction. Her courting death. Was this somehow about my father in a psychological way? His dying? Her missing him?

Ally said to her, "We'll come back later."

In the hallway, we passed three of Santa's helpers and one guy who was wearing cloth antlers, the kind people put on dogs. The elevator we caught started to close its doors and then reopened, and there were two men standing beside a gurney. Everything about them said mortician. They were escorting a body covered with a patchwork quilt. One man was bald and the other one looked like his bird had barbered his hair. He wore a sweater vest under his suit coat. It had reindeer on it. He said, "Do you mind if we ride down with you?"

I said, "No problem."

He said, "The one we're supposed to take is broken and it'll be tomorrow before it's fixed."

Ally said, "Sad." She was studying the quilt like she was trying to figure the stitching out. You could see she wanted to touch it.

The bald guy said, "It is."

* * *

Ally and I were crossing the parking lot, and she said, "I'm beginning to think that HBO and its bizarre TV shows might have its finger on the pulse that is American life. One absurdity follows another only to be followed by another one."

My little girl was smart as a whip and had just floored me. Unlike so many kids she saw through the strange to the other side, which was: The beat goes on. Somebody dies, the elevator breaks down, there's a detour. You think you've left death behind. Next minute—don't hold your breath, you run into death around the corner.

I started the car and said, "What were you and Alice whispering about?"

And Ally said, "If I told you, it would spoil it."

Sounded fair to me.

We got about half way back to Nelsonville, Ally quiet the whole way, and then she said, "I can tell you part of what she told me."

I said, "If you want."

Ally said, "Gram said that Grandpa was a blowhard and that if I was ever to see you putting on your blowhard shoes and socks I was to say the magic word."

I gave her a look, and she said, "Cross my heart."

I said, "What's the magic word?" and she said, "That's the part I can't tell you."

"But I'll know it when I hear it."

"Let's hope so."

A few minutes before midnight, and I was sitting in Alice's front living room when my cell phone rang. Only the television was on, no lights, and I hadn't pulled the curtains. In front of me, stuck to the big window that looked out on Tooth, was a zig-zag of wide clear tape Alice had used to fix a crack that ran from top to bottom. Dad would not have tolerated such a slipshod way of doing things. Frost whitened the tape's edges. Karen was out, hunting coyote for all I could imagine. Molly and Ally were asleep upstairs.

I checked the caller I.D. "Hey," I said to Julie.

She said, "Somehow I imagined you'd be up, a TV on, no sound, sort of and sort of not watching Sports Center."

I said, "The Cavs managed to lose again."

"How'd the twelve-year-old kid do?"

"Good. He did good. He's playing like a pro."

Mostly, I told her, I was listening to the noise the radiators made. The long one under the window sounded like a music box. Each time the boiler kicked in, it chimed.

My wife said, "I'm watching the Weather Channel and I'm on e-Bay."

I said, "Storm Stories?"

She said, "Right now it's Your Local on the Eights. But they're doing a tornado next. They're teasing us with a story about a dog that survived a monster twister and found its way home one hundred years later."

"Was it limping?"

"Of course. One paw up. And it was emotionally damaged."

I said, "You winning anything on e-Bay?"

"I'm bidding on a box and waiting on the snipers to hit at the last minute. It's at seven dollars right now."

"How bad do you want it?"

"Enough to be sitting here," she said. "Some hotshot named Boxed-In is after it, too."

I said, "Boxed-In sounds like serious competition."

I asked her how Toledo was, and she said, "It's snowing. There's that light outside that happens when it snows. You know what I mean, how it brightens the curtains?"

I said, "Like the earth has turned on its footlights."

"That's it," she said.

"One of the good things about life," I said.

I asked how the dog was doing, and my wife said, "She's here by me on a pad. I try not to but I keep counting her respiration, and it's too fast. Her chest is rising and falling a mile a minute."

Julie already knew my mother was going to make it. We had talked about the fact that nobody could figure out what happened. Had she been trying to kill herself? Your body won't let you not eat, will it? Not eating—you could make some kind of explanation for, but not drinking, no water or coffee or a Coke, you had to plan that. You had to do battle to accomplish it. Thirst didn't go away.

You couldn't simply forget.

I told Julie I thought Ally was doing fine, and then I described the erotic dream I had fallen into while I was sitting here half asleep. We—Julie and me—were driving through a town I didn't recognize. It was late, the sun had set. It was a small Ohio place, tunnels of trees, skinny brick streets, and I was driving real slow. Cautious. There was a roundabout, filled with flowers, a statue of a soldier in the middle of it. She climbed over and got between me and the steering wheel so she was facing me and we were making love like that while I drove. I said, "Probably isn't enough room, would you think?"

She said, "Are you calling me fat?"

Had me there. I said, "There's probably only a few inches to fit in."

She said, "It's surprising what people can do when they put their collective minds to it."

I granted her that. I said, "But still."

She said, "Sounds like you might be missing me."

That I was.

I said, "Can I, at times, be a blowhard?"

Nothing from her end. I did hear her tapping at the computer. Then she said, "You can be." She put some kindness in her voice.

I said, "Ally tells me there's a magic word that will stop me when I get headed down that road. Do you know what that word would be?"

Some more silence. Her thinking. Then: "Probably."

I said, "Something you women keep to yourselves?"

Julie said, "That and a lot of other stuff."

I said, "But you know the word?"

She said, "If I don't, I'll make it up."

* * *

I was checking the doors before I hit the sack and noticed, on the dining room table, a pile of Christmas cards Alice must have been writing on before she got sick. There were a couple of sheets of holly stamps. The cards didn't seem like the kind she would buy. These looked like they came from Dollar General. One had a cartoon reindeer on it, standing up on its hind legs and pointing at Santa and saying, "Hold it, Muffin Man! One more of those and your sleigh ain't going nowhere." Santa was eyeing a muffin on a plate that was balanced on his belly. Inside, my mother had written a note in red ink: "A joyous Advent season and a healthy, happy New Year 2004—and peace for our world, please grant, O Lord." There was an asterisk next to the A of Advent. At the bottom was the matching asterisk and she had handwritten an explanation: "Advent begins the Christian Church calendar as the secular one ends its year—then comes Epiphany Jan 6 (Magi visit) till 40 days of Lent to Easter, Pentecost, then Ordinary time." And under her signature, she added, "Kinda zany Christmas cards but our Jennifer bought them for us to use. Ol' dad loves his muffins, alas . . ."

Us didn't surprise me. Seemed a natural mistake. Normal. *Ol' dad loves his muffins, alas . . .* did.

Ol'? Ol' dad loves muffins, alas . . .

Alas?

Whose language was this? Not Alice's. Her handwriting but not how she expressed herself.

I thought, *Ordinary time?*

I knew if I asked what to do with the cards Karen's vote would be *toss*

them, every single one. Out with the whole lot. Trash each and every one. Christmas was as good as over. Move on was how she would put it. Molly would vote to store them until Alice could think about it.

* * *

Ally and I took Karen to lunch at the Dairy Queen.

We ordered at a counter inside, got our drinks and a number, then found a booth. Karen looked around and said, "I invited Jennifer, but her halo was in the dryer and she couldn't leave it unattended." Karen had pulled her hair into a ponytail. Her face looked like it was about to bloom.

Across from us in a section where large groups could sit and party was Doug and his truckload of children. It was a double-wide booth. Uncle Art was at one end. Doug, at the other, his broken foot in the aisle. Kids were crawling up and around and over the seats and the table, the floor. Made you think of bees at a hive.

Karen said, "You know why the wife's not with him?"

I said, "She's probably looking after number six. You have that many children, at least one of them has to be sick every day of the week."

"Sick doesn't stop her. She'd haul a sick kid along," Karen said. "She's pregnant out to here." She showed us where here was. "The goal seems to be one a year."

Our order came up, and I sent Ally for the food.

"For God's sake," Karen said. "He ought to tie it off, and she ought to put a cork in it." She studied me hard, then said, "Don't say it."

"What?"

"You were going to say 'In all fairness.'"

"I don't say things like that."

"Yup. You do."

Not even an hour ago, out on the back porch of Alice's, Karen had climbed into Jennifer's face and was saying, "Fuck you. Fuck you." I came late to the argument and still didn't know what it was about. Jennifer opened her mouth to speak, and Karen occupied it and all the space between them, saying, "Fuck you." She wouldn't let Jennifer get one word out. It was like Karen had wadded up a wool blanket and was hell bent on smothering Jennifer with it.

Ally returned, handing me and Karen fries. She had a burger for herself.

Karen said, "Your dad says things like 'in all fairness,' doesn't he?"

Ally said, "You do, Dad. You say 'in all fairness' and 'on the other hand.' It's like what you're saying has been written out before you put words to it. You say—"

"And this is bad?" I said. "'In all fairness.' This is a bad thing to say?"

"Fuck, yes," Karen said. She held a fry in the air and said, "The man—Doug, not you—doesn't even have a job. Six kids, no job—you do the math. Fairness is not an issue."

"You're working too hard to be the outlaw," Ally said to Karen. We looked at Ally—where was this coming from?—and she said, "Jennifer's poetry is powerful." What had Ally brought down on herself? She was deliberately stepping out from under a rock to take on the enemy when she could have remained hidden. "We need poetry," Ally said. "The arts cancel the facts that wear us down."

Karen said, "Stubborn facts, they say."

"Beauty doesn't need fact," Ally said.

"Beauty? Jesus," Karen said. "Give me a break."

My daughter—*Hold your own* was my quick and tidy prayer for her.

Karen said, "Please don't start chanting at me. I have a headache." She sipped her Coke and said, "You're not going to talk in haiku and you're not going to twist yourself into yoga right here, are you?"

Ally didn't need me or my prayer. She said, "Haiku, mantra, poem. Rhythm and sound. Hymns, the Psalms. Lyric and form. It's how we stand up and be counted. It's making something in the world as much as building a house is. It's what little we have left of grace."

"Beauty, now grace?"

"Grace."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Jennifer and grace, this is what you're saying? You lumping the two of them together?"

"Jennifer and grace."

"Whose party line are you feeding us?" Karen said. "Let me guess. AP English. Am I right? All the goody two-shoes sitting in a circle and *sharing* their big ideas." She made one of her hands talk. Managed to make it angry above the table, hanging in the air. She said, "Some school teacher preaching about the real world like she's part of it. Yak. Yak. Yak. A bill of goods. Claptrap."

"All else is stupor," Ally said.

"Stupor?"

"Stupor."

Karen said, "She Fed-Exs her books to me. Fed-Ex? Give me a break. Like I'm standing at the front window, ants in my pants, waiting on the delivery of her poems."

Ally quoted what sounded like poetry.

"Jennifer's?" I said.

"It is," Ally said.

"What are you?" Karen said. "You're made up to look fifteen, to look like a teenager, but you're so smart and full of deep-water b.s. you can't keep it to yourself?" She folded her arms in front of her. She said, "If the next word I hear is anything like transcendence, I'm gone."

I was about to say "In all fairness"—as a joke, to lighten things up, but bit off the words.

Karen said, "Fed-Exing poetry. What is that? Poems she writes like columns in a newspaper." Karen acted like she was squeezing space together in front of her, and she said, "Squished together words, and they go on and on. Four pages. Five pages. What can you say in a column of words that you can't say in a normal way? What can you say that would matter or count because you've changed the way it's printed?"

Jennifer had also sent her books to me. Fed-Exed them. And I had not read even one all the way through. I tried. I would start at the front. Read a few lines. I'd skip pages. Dip in. Read lines. And give up. My wife read all of them cover to cover. I would be eating, and Julie would come in and read a poem to me. She told me the poetry was funny in ways Jennifer wasn't in real life.

Karen said, "And nature, like it's our pal. Scares the bejesus out of me that someone is writing like trees give a hoot who we are. Elms, and maples, and hyacinths. What you just quoted, for example. Fucking apple blossoms. Buttercups. Sagebrush. Give me a fucking break. She spends her entire life in Ohio and then one week out in Nevada and comes back like she's an expert on the desert. The desert is a fucking killer, if you want usable information. If you want a word to the wise." Karen tapped her nose. She said, "The desert is not our consort. It has no feelings. Or if it does, it hates us. It is not transcendent. It isn't there to teach us a lesson unless you think death is worth your time."

Art and Doug were looking over. The kids had stopped crawling in

and out of the booth. One of Doug's boys came limping around a corner, using Doug's crutches as best he could.

Karen said to them, "It's all in the family. Go back to feeding your faces." She lowered her voice for us, said, "She talks about the desert like it's a breast. A breast? What is that? How do you come up with crap like that?"

"She's the family's real outlaw," Ally said.

"Because she can't write a complete sentence? Because she thinks four words side by side account for this world?" Karen got to her feet. Ready to leave. I started collecting our trash. She said, "What proofed you,/your debut? The button,/the stock you married./Welt? Peach? Ash?"

I recognized the words. They opened the poem Jennifer wrote about our father's dying. I didn't, when I first read it, pretend to understand the words in the way you're supposed to go deeper into poems. Not now either. But what Jennifer had written was clearly and in a precise and exact way about my father. It was him in a nutshell.

Karen said, "She got that right. Score one for Jennifer."

Karen understood. Ally understood. I didn't. I thought about what Alice had written: "Ol' dad loves his muffins, alas . . ."

There was some poetry in that.

Jennifer put everyone in the poem but me. I remember these lines: "Molly flew coach/and arrived/like ice."

Jennifer left me out.

It was her job to punish me. It was her job to make sure I paid for my—

My what? My negligence. My stubbornness. My absence.

My anger.

My disrespect.

Carelessness.

Karen, Ally, and I walked out of the DQ single file, Ally two steps ahead of us, Karen talking to my back, saying, "Your daughter sounding like this, her talking about grace and beauty, that's reason enough to shoot F-hud."

We reached the parking lot, and Karen said, "Here's some poetry for you." She was talking loudly. She said, "Line one, *Fuck you*. Line two, *Fuck you*. Line three, *Fuck you*." She opened the back door to the car and said, "Repeat for five pages."

We were pulling onto 33, and she said, "Title it Jennifer."

* * *

Alice said, "Your sister can be a real pill." She had been home for a couple of days, and we were walking up Tooth toward the Y in the railroad tracks, Alice dressed like she was going to lunch with pals. We bundled her up in a coat. It came to her ankles, was cranberry, and her scarf was purple. Her dress, blue. She spent an hour dressing. Her friend Bobbie had come by and done her hair. Alice wore gym shoes for the footing they gave her.

"Which one?" I said.

"True," she said. "You're right."

"Not Molly," I said.

"No, not Molly. Heavens no," she said. "Is she talking yet?"

It was the family joke. Molly said so little we kept at her about it, kept testing to see if she could speak. Her nickname at one time was *Littlesaid*.

Alice said, "But those other two. Oil and water."

"Dynamite and a match," I said.

"Who's dynamite?" she said. "Who's the match?"

I didn't know.

I had the poodles on leashes. Alice left the hospital with a walker but put it in the closet by the front door and hadn't touched it since. Yesterday we made it halfway to the old depot. Our goal today was the corner where *Cristy's* stood.

Alice said, "I guess it depends on which pill you want to take."

Art cruised by in his truck and tooted his so-long. He was headed home to *Circleville*. Earlier I walked in on him and Alice in the room she used for an office. She was handing Art a check.

Now, here on the street, I said, "It's none of my business, but what's up with Art?"

"Like you said," Alice said, "it's none of your business."

She was, of course, right.

Alice said, "Let the devil dance in his pocket was what your father used to say. He wouldn't give his own mother a dollar on her death bed."

I said, "Who's next, Doug?" Couldn't help myself.

She touched her nose, which—our entire family understood this—meant that I was to keep mine out of her business. It meant, Not one more word on the subject.

Karen and Jennifer were back at the house, Karen packing to leave, Jennifer cleaning the kitchen. Ally was with them. Molly had driven over to Parkersburg, but she was going to stay with Alice for a couple of weeks.

We u-turned slowly at the corner, and Alice came to a halt before we started back. Part of Cristy's parking lot had been used to sell Christmas trees. There was ragged lettering on a piece of plywood. Red letters and a white background. TREES CUT & DUG. The old loading dock was to our left. You could imagine what the town had been like early on. Think about an old 1930s movie. Travelers coming and going, everybody dressed in their finest duds, the women in hats, men in three-piece suits and fedoras no matter how hot it was. People from all over arriving for a night at Stuart's Opera House. Coming to see a minstrel show or hear a lecture. A play. Roosevelt once spoke on the steps of Dew Hotel.

Alice and I were walking and talking about the Cavaliers when we saw Jennifer's husband coming up Tooth from the other direction. It was clear he was in a hurry. The man drove an El Camino he had paid a stranger to restore. It was mint and none of his doing. You've got to wonder where pride figures in that kind of an equation. He parked against the traffic and was up Alice's stoop in two strides.

Alice took my arm so we would stop, and she said, "Let's watch the fireworks from here."

Out of the house came Jennifer. She was wearing what looked like a cloak the way it flew out behind her. She was tossing around that hair of hers. Barry was next but got stuck holding the screen door open because Karen was standing so he couldn't shut it. The sunlight on Jennifer, the pillars that held the roof up, the way Jennifer was stomping across the length of the porch—it was all a kind of flickering. She took the stairs in choppy steps. Karen was yelling. Jennifer was yelling. From where we stood, they sounded like an old gramophone. We couldn't make out what they were shouting about. Ally came from around the side of the house where the garage was and stopped in the yard.

In the street, Jennifer fumbled in her purse and came up with a cell phone.

It was like we were watching a skit called anger.

I said, "I better—" and Alice shushed me. She held my arm tighter. We were to stay right where we were. The neighbors across from Alice's wandered out onto their porch. People were drifting into their yards. A dog did start to bark, probably that pit bull. Barry hadn't moved. He was

holding the screen open, and Jennifer was punching numbers into her phone. Then Karen was down the steps, rushing at Jennifer, and Barry was doing a two-step and the tango and skipping rope trying to get between them.

They all stopped, and they looked over at Ally. She raised her arms high as if she might bring the heavens down on them, as if she might shake the sky like a rug and drop it over the scene. Jennifer, Karen, Barry—they stared at her.

Karen retreated to the house, and Jennifer shoved past her husband and climbed into the El Camino. He seemed baffled, glued to the ground. He was wearing white tennis shoes. In the car, Jennifer had the cell phone to her ear. Barry glanced at Ally, and then he got in and drove toward us. They didn't even hesitate. They sailed past, Jennifer on the phone, Barry staring straight ahead.

Ally came walking up the street. Behind her, Karen hustled down the front steps, threw her suitcase into the back seat of her Camry, and backed out of the driveway. She came in our direction. Did stop. She lowered the passenger's side window and said to Alice, "I'll call you later." She rolled her eyes at me, letting me know how pissed she was.

Later, when she phoned, she told me that, at one point, she and Jennifer passed through the pantry, and Jennifer bumped her shoulder. Junior high stuff. In the end, Karen heard one word more than she could take, and she trapped Jennifer in a corner in the kitchen. Not more than a foot away, she flipped Jennifer off, put the big finger in her mug, and said, "Write a poem about that."

Alice and me and Ally, we watched Karen turn toward Canal Street, and then we got ourselves in gear. We were about to the house, and Alice again took my arm. The three of us stopped. My count was at least ten neighbors still rubbernecking from their windows. Alice was looking between houses and toward Knoter's Hill and its ridge east of town. There, winter having stripped the trees, was Betty's cross. You could see it rising out of the woods. Sixty, seventy feet high and thirty or so across, it was made of steel and aluminum and painted white. Everyone in Nelsonville knew its history. At night, the cross was lit from underneath. You couldn't miss it. Mr. Walter Schwartz erected it as a memorial to his wife, Elizabeth Smith.

We could see the top third of it from where we stood on Tooth. Alice said, "You know what your dad said about the cross?"

I'd heard him on it. He threatened to blow it up.

Alice mimicked my dad. Dead-on perfect. She said, "You got to show off like that means you got something up your sleeves you don't want the people to be asking about."

I said, "At least he didn't blow it up."

"Not that he didn't try," Alice said.

I studied her. I said, "I know he talked about it. Did he try?"

"He got drunk one night, him and Martin Daws."

"You're kidding."

"Cross my fingers and—"

I said, "Don't say it."

She said, "His friend Jack Staff talked the two of them out of it."

Ally said, "There's a part of me wishes he'd done it."

Delight lit Alice up. She looked better than she had since coming out of the hospital. She said, "Me, too."

We had reached the driveway. The pit bull had quit barking, and the neighbors had retreated. Alice said, "I'm thinking I'm going to sell the house."

I said, "You're serious?"

"I think so. Yes. I am."

"You'd sell your house?"

"And never look back."

"You're welcome to come live with us," I said.

Ally said, "You could, Gram. We'd love it."

Alice said, "In Toledo, Ohio? Isn't that like trading a lump of coal for a lump of coal?"

I told her there were worse places, but the three of us knew better.

She said, "You remember Nadine from number 16?"

I did. If Nadine wasn't pregnant, one of her six daughters was, and it was hard to tell them apart. Seemed like there were always at least three women sitting on the glider on their front porch, each one holding a baby, each one wearing the same dress as the other ones.

Alice said, "She's got a condo on Johnson Road, and she tells me there is one available. You pay a fee, and they take care of the yard and anything else that goes wrong. I think I'm going to jump at the chance."

We were standing right in front of the house appraising it when Alice said, "I hear the fire department buys homes and burns them to the ground for the practice."

Later, I asked Ally what she had said to break up the fight, and she told me she couldn't remember exactly. Mostly it amounted to her being louder than they were and saying, "Look at yourselves."

I asked her what started it.

And Ally said, "It was a given, wasn't it? You leave those two alone and you're lucky one isn't at the mortuary right now."

Like I said, my daughter, for her, puzzles fell into place easier than for most.

* * *

Next morning, Alice and I were sitting at her dining room table. She was shuffling through the Christmas cards she hadn't mailed and the ones she hadn't finished writing in. She said, "I ought to send them anyway. Belated holiday wishes."

I showed her the card I had read, fat Santa, the reindeer, the muffin. I said, "This isn't like you."

She said, "What isn't?"

"The cheap card," I said. "What you wrote."

She reread the note. She said, "It was a question on *Jeopardy!* The category had to do with religion, and I got interested, so I did some reading." She handed me another card she had written, the same reindeer and Santa, this one to the Comptons who lived in Chauncey. Her note was about Hanukkah. She wrote *Chanukah* in parentheses. Her message was about the miracle of the flask of olive oil and the lighting of the Great Menorah in the Temple. "Once the Jews defeated the Greeks," she wrote, "they had to purify the Temple. But they found only one flask of oil with the seal of the High Priest; it was enough to light the Menorah for only one day, but the light burned for the eight days needed to cleanse the Temple." Alice had placed an asterisk next to the word Menorah, and in a corner of the card she explained what one was, the eight branches, the eight candles, the lighting of one each night of Hanukkah. A double asterisk next to the word "lighting" noted that you start at the far right and move to the left, but you light left to right as the days go along.

I said, "Is there a reason you sent this to the Comptons?"

"I didn't plan it," she said. "I wrote the cards and then later added who they went to."

One, this to a family I didn't know, explained Kawanzaa, its roots in African harvest festivals, its use of candles, and the seven principles, the

Nguzo Saba—listed under another asterisk—celebrated during the seven days of Kawanzaa. Other cards explained Ramadan, St. Patrick's Day, All Souls Day. She showed me her list of other religious holidays. Each had a personal note written underneath it. She said, "I learned all this curious information and I wanted to pass it along."

I said, "Why?"

She said, "Because I didn't know it before and maybe they didn't know it. Understanding never hurt anybody."

That made sense to me. None of it sounded like what a woman who wanted to die would be doing. I said, "Does this have anything to do with what happened to you?"

"With 'the incident'?" Alice said. She put imaginary sarcastic quotes in the air around the words.

I said, "Jennifer's name for it, the incident?"

Alice said, "Be sure to add 'What happened to Mother.'" She hung more quotes up like those stick-on hooks you put on a wall.

I told her she hadn't answered my question.

She said, "I can't answer your question. I don't know why there was 'the incident.'" More quotes. These tired ones. She got up and walked into the kitchen.

I was reading about Ramadan, and Alice returned and said, "All's well with you?"

"You can see Ally's flying right," I said.

She said, "And you and Julie?"

I told her about me and my wife. We were doing fine. I brought up the dog. Alice's poodles were on their pads here in the room. "The dog could be dead for all I know," I said. "She might have died during the night." I hadn't phoned Julie yet today.

My mother looked at her poodles. She said, "The condo takes dogs. That's no problem."

"You're really selling?"

Alice picked up one of the Christmas cards. Looked at it. She collected all of them into a stack and placed the cards inside a box, fit the lid to it. A sadness settled on her.

I opened the box, removed the cards, and said, "Let's send these." Delight again.

She was addressing envelopes, and I was stamping them, when she looked around the house and said, "Your father will kill me."

"If you sell the place?"

"If I do."

I waited for her to say "alas." From where we sat, we could see into the living room. My father's chair, the one he spent his life riding, was facing the TV. We hadn't pulled the curtains, and a Christmas tree from across the street was reflected in Alice's front window. Its lights were blinking.

She said, "He will barehanded dig himself out of his grave and kill me."

I didn't reach Julie until about one in the morning. She was on e-Bay. The dog had died early in the afternoon, and she had taken her out to be cremated. It was the weekend, and we would have to wait until Monday to pick up her ashes. Julie bought a ceramic pot for the remains. She wondered if I would be back by then, and I told her that I thought Ally and I would leave in the morning. "Which is today," I said. "In a few hours."

"Your mother's doing all right?"

"She's giving money to anyone who needs it, and she's talking rationally."

"So she's her feisty self again?"

"I think so."

"But can she make do alone?"

"Molly is staying a couple of weeks."

"Good. Molly's a rock."

There was the first line for Jennifer's poem. I thought I'd write it out. Leave it behind. *Molly's a rock.*

I said to Julie, "Karen might kill Jennifer or Jennifer might kill Karen. It depends on who gets the draw on the other one."

Julie said, "Same old story, then. Since the beginning of time."

"You mean Cain and Abel?"

"Men. Women. It's all the same."

I said, "Alice is talking about selling the house. There's a condo available."

"It's about time."

"She's afraid Dad will kill her if she does."

"He'll try. He'll try real hard."

I listened to the radiators play their tunes. If anyone could rise from

the dead, it would be my father. If anybody could resurrect himself, it would be Dad.

I said to Julie, "Is there a magic word I could give Alice?"

She stopped typing on the computer keys. An hour, or a day, or a year passed, and she said, "I can't think of one."

I said, "Our daughter's going to need one too. For the dog."

"She'll eventually need one for more than that, but you're right."

I said, "We all will, I guess. That's what I hear."

She said, "True enough."

I said, "I got it wrong about my father."

"You got what wrong?"

"About coming here," I said. "Whatever it took to get here before he died, I owed him that. Instead, I fiddled around. Who knows what could have happened?"

"You think you two might have found your own magic words to say to each other?"

"If I had been here," I said. "If I'd gotten my act together."

She said, "Time for one of those reality checks. He was in a coma."

I said, "They say people in comas understand what you say."

Julie said, "Here's what I want you to do right now." I could tell she had gotten up and was walking with the cordless. She said, "Stand on your feet like I am. Go on. Wipe that look from your face and get off your duff."

I did.

She said, "Are you up?"

I told her I was standing tall, and she said, "Go outside to where the car is."

I said, "It's freezing out there," and she told me not to be hard-headed. She teased me about being a wimp. So I stepped outside.

She said, "Let me hear that screen squeak." So I held the phone next to it and opened and closed the screen. She said, "You're going to get in the car." I told her I was walking down the porch steps, that I was seeing my breath every step of the way, and she said, "Poor baby."

I said, "What if the car's frozen shut?"

She said, "It won't be."

I got the door open, and I climbed in. I told her I was in, was sitting behind the steering wheel, and she said, "Turn the engine on and don't talk until the inside is toasty."

I obeyed.

Complete silence. Up the street was the Christmas Tree sign and its ugly lettering. Too far away to see, but I knew what it said. TREES CUT & DUG.

“Don’t talk,” Julie said.

I waited until the car was warm. The windows began to fog up. I said, “Okay. It’s like an oven in here.”

She said, “You know me. Is it warm enough for me?”

It was.

She said, “Now, what you’ve got to figure out is if there is enough room for that fantasy of yours to come true.”

Made me laugh out loud.

“There’s the key,” Julie said. “There’s your answer.”