

*Missing  
Person*

*A Novella by  
R. A. Conti*

## **Missing Person**

By R. A. Conti

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## 1. Last Day

Betty was too tired to make anything hot. Her difficult argument with Jerry last night had exhausted her. She prepared a quick breakfast for Jerry and the kids. No eggs, bacon, or pancakes; coffee, cereal, milk, and bananas would have to do. The family did not show their disappointment. They ate in silence, while Betty recalled the conversation.

“Betty, I just don’t understand you,” Jerry had argued, in frustration. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Looking out for myself,” she replied, coolly.

“But, what about the kids? What about me?”

“This isn’t about Doris, Johnny, or you. It’s about *me*.”

“You’re so damn selfish!”

“Selfish? I suppose you think I *wanted* to get cancer?”

“No, I didn’t mean that.”

“Then what *did* you mean, Jerry?”

“Why won’t you do what the doctors tell you? What’s wrong with that?” he demanded, angrily.

“I don’t want to get those treatments. They’re worse than the cancer.”

“But, you could beat it!”

“And I might not. I could just be wasting my time, and ruining the rest of my life. I can’t do that.”

“So you *want* to die?”

“Everybody dies, Jerry. Even you, someday.” She knew it sounded cruel, but maybe she could shock him into accepting how desolate she felt.

“I know, Betty, but this isn’t about me, it’s about you,” he replied, contritely.

“That’s right. And it’s my decision, not anyone else’s.”

“Not even me?” he asked, dejectedly. She felt sorry for him. She felt sorry for her kids, too. They did not yet know about her cancer. But the person she felt sorriest for was herself.

She cried for an hour before she fell asleep.

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She gave everything she had to her husband and kids every day for as far back as she could recall. She never held back, never asked anything for herself. They were always first. Putting them first did not mean she was second. There was no second. They were *all*, and she was *nothing*. She had been nothing for many years.

However, now, in the fall of 1965, she was no longer nothing. Her cancer woke her up and Betty realized she had been sleep-walking through her life. Her cancer had made her something, and *someone*, but she did not know who. She wanted to find out.

There was nothing wrong with her family. She loved Jerry and the kids. She loved being a mother, and wife, and thought she was happy. But now she felt she could no longer continue living that life. After they finished breakfast and left for the day, she was going to pack some clothes, get the cash she had been hoarding for months, and leave. She would take the first step into a different life. It might be her final journey. She was lucky, because she knew how it was going to end. Not *when*, exactly; most likely in a year or two, at most.

She did not know where she was going, but there was no time to waste. From now on, she would only look forward. No matter what happened, she had no plan to come back, or even look back, ever.

## *2. Life and Death*

1945 should have been a good year. The war ended, Jerry came back, and they married in November. They moved in with Betty's sister Ann until they could afford a place of their own. However, it seemed Jerry brought the war home with him. He had nightmares and daytime panic attacks. He found and then lost several jobs because he could not concentrate on his work, or was often late because he had trouble sleeping. Betty found work as a waitress but it paid only enough to give her sister something toward their room and board, and they had nothing left to save for a place of their own.

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

Although they were newlyweds, they did not have much sex. They found little pleasure in their love-making. Jerry was afraid he might get her pregnant, although he was careful to use condoms, when he could afford to buy them. They could not afford to have a baby. She eagerly gave herself to him whenever he wanted her, but she worried about him because he sometimes cried after they made love. She did not know why.

They did find pleasure in their companionship. They had little money for amusements such as movies, or trips. If it was not for the generosity of Ann and her husband Sam, who shared their home and car, they would have had no enjoyment at all.

Jerry found a job in a new manufacturing plant that opened, late in 1946, just outside town. The owner was eager to hire veterans and Jerry got the job without having a resume or prior experience. He was certain this was the big break he had been waiting for, and he and Betty dedicated all their effort to making the most of it. His anxiety and nightmares became less frequent, and he showed up on the job early most days because he had slept well and was eager to work.

They promoted him twice in the first year, and became shift foreman by the end of his second year at the plant. They felt secure enough to buy a home and start a family. Doris was born early in 1949. Jerry was disappointed his first-born was not a son, but her cuteness won him over and he fell in love with her not long after she and Betty came home from the hospital.

Betty quit her waitressing job half-way through her pregnancy. She hoped never to have to work again. As soon as she came home from the hospital, she set about making the best possible household environment for Jerry and the baby. Betty was an enthusiastic mother and wife, and Jerry was grateful for her attention to him and their infant daughter. She found the happiness that had been eluding her for the first few years of their marriage.

Jerry fell in love with her all over again. Her fresh glow of motherhood enchanted him. He wanted to touch her, hold her, undress her, and look at her whenever they were alone. His attention delighted her and she coquettishly encouraged his lust. He never seemed too tired to want sex, and she welcomed him regardless of how tired she was from her busy days as a housewife and new mother.

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

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

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

The cancer did not affect her as much as the knowledge that she had cancer did. She became moody and had good and bad days. She became aware of time, perhaps because her time was running out. Also, she thought the cancer might somehow be her fault and she wondered what she had done wrong.

She never thought God might have given her cancer. She did not think about God much. Betty and Jerry never discussed their religious beliefs (or lack of them) with each other. The children received basic religious education in after-school and summer church-related activities, but they did not regularly go to church.

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

### ***3. First Night***

The Greyhound bus pulled into the terminal around three in the afternoon. Betty grabbed her bag, thanked the driver, and walked toward busy Sixteenth Street. There were plenty of cars, local buses and pedestrians. She walked towards Market Street, but did not recognize it when she got there. It had changed since the last time she was in downtown Philadelphia. There were new skyscrapers on both sides of the street.

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

Betty had nearly \$200 hidden safely in her underwear. She had a few dollars in cash in her small purse. She decided to spend her first night in a safe place where she could remove the money so she could take it to a bank tomorrow. She assumed most of the downtown hotels were too expensive for her. She decided to ask someone where she might find less expensive lodging. An elderly black woman waited at a bus stop, and Betty approached her, hoping she would not startle the woman.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry to bother you. I just got into town, and I'm looking for a reasonable hotel. Do you know of any?" she asked, hopefully.

“No bother, ma’am,” the woman replied, smiling. “So happens, I know of a place not far from here.”

“Great. How far is it?”

“About six or seven blocks that way,” she said, and pointed northward.

“What’s its name?”

“It’s Father Divine’s place. Ever heard of him?”

“Didn’t he just die?” The woman nodded, pleased Betty knew who Father Divine was. “I saw it in the paper.”

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

“I think I’ll walk. Thanks.”

“God bless you, ma’am. Enjoy your stay.” Betty walked toward City Hall, turned north when she reached Broad Street, and enjoyed her walk to the hotel. She spotted the building with its huge DIVINE LORRAINE sign when she was still several blocks away. Its size and opulence struck her when she arrived, and she hesitated to go in, fearing it would be too expensive. A friendly-looking black man came out, saw her, smiled, and deferentially held the door open for her. She hesitated, and he gestured for her to enter. She thanked him, went in, and got a room for her first night in Philadelphia.

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

“Shit,” he said, and grimaced. The kids looked at him.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” Johnny asked, alarmed.

“Your mom - she’s left us.”

“No way!” Doris said.

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

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

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

“Yeah, right,” Johnny said, and then angrily left the room. Doris looked at her father.

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

Jerry tried to understand what happened to his life. He could not believe Betty ran away. He expected her to walk through the door any moment and tell them it was just a stupid prank. However, he knew it was not. He worried about her. He worried about his kids, and he worried about himself. What were they going to do, now?

#### ***4. First Day***

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

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

*Okay, so what do I want to do, then?* She had thought she would need a job, but she did not really want one. She had few qualifications for any jobs, anyway. Betty was a waitress after she and Jerry married. She assumed no restaurant would hire an older woman because there were plenty of young women who wanted to be waitresses.

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

She noticed two men with a movie camera on a tripod, pointed at her. She stopped and glared at the camera, and the cameraman embarrassedly turned it in a different direction. Suspicious, she went over to the men, who turned out to be not much older than her children.

“Were you filming me?” she asked, sharply.

“Um, no, no, of course not,” the young man behind the camera said.

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

“Those people across the park,” the other man lied.

“It’s okay, Jeff, let’s tell her the truth.”

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

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

“What kind of interesting?” she asked, skeptically. The men looked at each other. Neither knew how to answer.

“It’s kind of a documentary about people in the park,” Jeff finally explained. “That’s all.”

“Oh.”

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

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

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

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

“Shoot me?” she asked, teasingly.

“Film you,” Jeff said.

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

“Oh, God, *would* you? That would be so great! Nobody ever wants to act for us,” Gary said. She felt sorry for them.

“Sure. I’m not doing anything else. I got nowhere I’m supposed to be. In fact, I just got into town yesterday.”

“You’re not...like...sleeping on one of these benches, are you?” Jeff asked. He was excited that they might have stumbled on a genuine homeless woman they could follow around with their camera.

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

“Oh. You need some money? We have a couple dollars.”

“No, but I do need a place to sleep. Know of any around here?” They looked at each other. “Look, my name’s Betty Suggs and I just moved here from upstate. I don’t sleep in the park. Two nights ago I slept in a bed in my family’s house.”

“So why are you here?” Jeff asked.

“I ran away from home,” Betty told them, straightforwardly.

“You’re a *runaway*?” Gary asked, suspiciously.

“Yes, but I have money, and I can pay for a place; but I need something cheap until I can find a job.” The men looked at each other.

“Um, we live in an old house near the campus. There’s a few of us already, but you could crash there if you want to.” A house full of college guys? She had no idea what ‘crash’ meant. She was not sure she wanted to know.

“Um, *crash*?”

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

“I could pay you something.”

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

“Oh, okay. That seems fair. What do you want me to play?”

“How about you pretend to be a homeless woman living in the park?” Jeff said, without hesitation. He had been planning shots they could do while the three of them talked. She wondered whether she resembled a homeless woman but did not know it. Life in the city was weird.

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

They discovered there was no food and she felt sorry for them. She asked if there was a food store nearby, got a cheap loaf of white bread, some mayonnaise, a pound of boloney, and made sandwiches. They thought they were eating like kings, and were glad they had found her.

## ***5. Transition***

“You’re taking in homeless women, now?” Carol, Jeff’s sometimes girlfriend, asked.

“That’s Betty. She’s not homeless.”

“Then why is she sleeping on your sofa?”

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

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

“Homeless woman.”

“Wow, she looks pretty believable!” Carol commented, sarcastically.

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Betty kept telling them she would leave. She didn’t want to be a burden to them. She would find someplace cheap to stay. They told her they needed her for their movie. The more film they shot the more ideas they got for new scenes.

Carol dropped by one afternoon when the boys were all in class and Betty was tidying up the house. Carol liked Jeff and was protective of him. He was a sweet, naive guy who got along with everyone. She sometimes spent the night with him, and he sometimes stayed at her place, but neither thought of theirs as an exclusive relationship, although they did not date other people.

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

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

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

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

“Deal?”

“What are you trying to pull?”

“I’m not trying to pull anything.”

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

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

“They finished their movie last week.”

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

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

“You came to talk about *me*?” Betty asked, cautiously. Carol nodded, “So what do you want to know?”

“Where are you from?”

“Upstate. Small town you never heard of.”

“Why are you here instead of there?”

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

“You’re right it’s not any of my business. Why did you leave?” Betty looked at Carol, struck by the boldness of her question. She liked Carol. Her directness was refreshing. The boys were mostly indirect. They had already decided they liked having her around because she did stuff for them. She bought them food, tidied up the place, took their clothes to the laundromat at the corner, and reminded them of their moms.

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

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

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

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

“Nobody mistreated me. Well, let me re-phrase that. Maybe I should say that *life* mistreated me.” Carol was taken aback. She waited for an explanation, but Betty did not continue. Carol started to ask another question but Betty cut her off.

“I appreciate you’re asking, but that’s all I’m going to say.”

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Carol apologized. She wished Betty was someone she could maybe study for a class project. “I was just concerned, that’s all.”

“Well, thanks, I guess. Now it’s my turn. Tell me about yourself.” There was not much to tell. Carol’s father was a professor at a rural college in New Jersey. He wanted her to go to college, but she did not want to study at his college, so she chose a major that was not available there. She liked the university, although she felt the classes were easier than they would have been at her father’s school. She was living in a dorm, now, but was planning to move to a house with some other girls.

“You could live with us,” she said. Betty was interested.

“You’re offering me a job?”

“Yeah. We could pay you to be house-mother. It wouldn’t be much, but...maybe you wouldn’t be interested.”

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

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

## 6. Attic

Carol moved out of the dorm and into a rambling old house that was run-down but still ornate and imposing. There were five women already living there. She told them about Betty and they wanted to meet her.

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

“Does that happen?” Betty asked.

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

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

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

“You mean guys you bring home to sleep with?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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“I guess it’s better for you living with a bunch of girls,” Jeff said, when he dropped by looking for Carol.

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

“Well, if you ever get tired of being here, you would be welcome to come back,” he said, cheerfully. She smiled. *Boys never seem to grow up*, she thought. She wondered how her son Johnny was doing, now that he would be growing up without his mother around. If she had stayed she would eventually have died, but she left. Did it make any difference? Either way, he would have lost her.

## 7. Trip

Betty thought she misunderstood. Carol had told her Jenny was on a trip. However, Jenny was not somewhere else. She was sitting in the living room with her eyes closed, gesturing with her hands and mumbling words Betty could not make out. *What trip?* Betty thought. Carol explained about LSD. Betty had never heard of it.

“What’s happening to her?”

“She’s hallucinating.”

“What do you mean?”

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

“You’ve done this, too?”

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

“How long’s she gonna be like that?” Betty asked.

“A few hours, but she’s okay.”

Just then Jenny opened her eyes as wide as she could and shouted, “Oh, my God! It really is you.”

“Who, Jenny?” Carol asked, gently.

“God.”

“She’s seeing God?” Betty asked, whispering.

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

“That must be some amazing stuff.”

“Oh, it is, for most people.”

“But not everyone?”

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

“What’s a bad trip like?”

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

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

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

She did not know where she was, but it felt right to be there. This was *her* beach. She sat down on the sand and felt a deep inner peace. The ocean was suddenly right next to her, its waves gently coming closer and receding, wetting the sand and her feet. Betty smiled.

She looked down at the wet sand and extended her arms to touch it, but her hands were not the hands of an adult. They were a child's hands. She looked at her legs and saw they were the skinny legs of a young girl. She could not see her face, but felt her long hair blowing in the breeze and knew she was her six-year-old self.

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

She looked around and spotted someone else down the beach, then stood up and walked toward the other person. It seemed as if it took a long while for her to cover any distance. As she finally got closer she saw a young girl sitting in the sand, looking out at the ocean, crying. She stopped, not wanting to startle the girl, but the girl did not notice her. Betty sat down. She could hear the girl sobbing.

They sat there for some time. The girl looked at the ocean and Betty looked at her. Then she noticed some movement down the beach. There was someone walking toward them. She watched the person slowly approach and wave. She waved back. The crying girl did not. When the new girl got closer Betty saw herself.

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

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

It rapidly got dark. She waited. The other girl sobbed in the darkness. Then the sky began to brighten, far out in the ocean. A bright crescent appeared on the horizon. Betty assumed it was the sun. The horizon brightened as the crescent grew larger. However, it was not the sun that was coming up. It was a huge head and face, Betty's face. *Maybe this is not just my beach*, Betty thought. *Maybe the whole world is mine*.

Betty-sun was shining and smiling down on them. The other girl stopped crying and stood up. She became agitated, turned away from the ocean, and began to run away. But she did not get far. A huge hand came down out of the sky and picked her up. She did not make a sound, but she kicked as the hand raised her into the sky. Then Betty-sun opened its mouth and the huge hand dropped the girl in. It was over in a second.

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

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

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

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

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

There was no way out.

## 8. *Truth*

“So, did you see God?” Jenny asked, expectantly. Betty shook her head. “Well, what did you see?”

“I think I saw myself.”

“*Think* you saw? But you’re not sure? That’s okay. How did you feel?”

“Really confused.”

“But not bad, or frightened, right?”

“No, just confused.”

“Well, did you learn anything?”

“Yeah. I found out I was all alone.”

“No, you weren’t. I was here. So was Carol, for a while.”

“I don’t mean *here*. I mean all alone in this world.”

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

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“Where’s Betty? I haven’t seen her all day. Is she all right?” Barbara asked.

“She’s in her room.” Jenny replied.

“Why hasn’t she come downstairs?”

“She’s recovering from her acid trip, I guess.”

“Her *what*? You gave her acid? Jenny, how could you? She’s an old woman!”

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

“Did she have a bad trip?”

“It didn’t seem that way.”

“But it wasn’t a good trip?”

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

“Did you talk to her afterwards?”

“Yes.”

“What did she say?”

“Not much. She told me she was okay.”

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

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“I have cancer,” Betty blurted out when Barbara went up to the attic to check on her. Barbara was shocked.

“You could go to the hospital right here on campus. I’m sure they would help you,” she said, helpfully.

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

“Is that why you ran away?”

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

“Did you drop acid so you could understand?”

“I hoped I would.”

“Did you?” Barbara asked, sharply. Betty did not reply. Barbara knew she should not ask again.

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

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

“We’ve got to get her to the hospital.”

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

“Well, what does *she* want?”

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

“You’re not, Betty.”

“That’s right!” Jenny shouted.

“We just want to help.”

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

“I apologize for not telling you about my cancer sooner. I wasn’t trying to hide anything. It just wasn’t important. It still isn’t. Can you believe that?”

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

“Yes, you do, and I’m grateful. So, girls, food, laundry, what else can I do?”

“Could you maybe let us give you a hug?” Jenny asked. Betty smiled, spread her arms, the girls crowded around her, hugged her, and said no more.

## ***9. Departure***

Betty was not sure why she felt it was time to leave. Perhaps it was because the girls knew the truth about her, and had started to treat her differently. Maybe she felt exposed and vulnerable. She did not want their pity, or sympathy. She was certain her connection to the girls would never be the same. They were no longer equals.

She did not want to be ‘special’ because of her cancer. She just wanted to be Betty.

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

A policeman approached her as she sat and wondered where she would go next. He was holding a photo, and she almost panicked. She thought it might be a picture of her. He smiled and asked if she could help him by looking at the photo. He assumed she was a frequent visitor to the park and had seen many of the people who passed through. She tried not to hide her face.

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

"She's a runaway. Her parents are looking for her."

"That's terrible. Those poor people must be so worried," she said, sympathetically.

"They are, but they probably won't see her again. Kids disappear all the time. They don't come back unless they want to."

"Well, I hope, for her parents' sake that *she* wants to" Betty said. The policeman nodded and walked away.

She almost cried. Her family had probably reported *her* missing and police might be looking for her right now. Most of the family photos of her were old. She had changed her hair and put on a little weight. Plus, police might be more interested in looking for runaway kids than older women.

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

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

There was a lovely view from her small room on the tenth floor. She thought she could see the house where she stayed with the girls on the campus north of the hotel. The hotel seemed quieter than when she was there before. The staff told her there was no convention in town, so there were many empty rooms.

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

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

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

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

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

## ***10. Miz Kelly***

Next morning, Betty bought a newspaper in the hotel lobby, walked to the park, and sat on a bench in the shade. She opened the newspaper and looked at the Help Wanted listings. She was looking for job ideas. It was unlikely she might qualify for any job in the Want Ads. It was more likely she would have to wander around looking for Help Wanted signs in shops or restaurants. She did not think she could do office work, so she skipped the secretarial and clerk advertisements.

She found advertisements for employment agencies and thought they might be good places to try. There was one only a block from the park. She walked over and went in. The woman behind the counter smiled and handed her a clipboard, without speaking. Betty took the board and looked around. There were a half-dozen people sitting in chairs filling out their paperwork on clipboards like hers. She sat down and looked at the forms.

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

She put down the clipboard, looked around, and noticed a large bulletin board on the back wall, crammed with 3 by 5 cards. She thought they might be job postings and thought she could read them and get ideas of jobs she could apply for. Betty got up and walked over to the board. There was an assortment of typed and handwritten cards. The only jobs she felt suitable for were domestic jobs such as cooking, cleaning, and perhaps child-care. She found three that looked interesting, took down the cards, and went to the woman at the counter.

“Excuse me, I was interested in these jobs,” she told the woman.

“Oh, good, let me see what you got there,” she said, as she reached for the cards. She took them, read the first one, and then flipped through a huge Rolodex. “I think this one’s already been filled,” she said, and then tore the card in half and threw it into the wastebasket. She read the second card and flipped through the Rolodex again. “Um, this one, too. I’m sorry,” she said, without looking up. She ripped that card and dropped it as she looked at the third card. “Oh, this one’s still open,” she said, brightly, and then grimaced. “But you might not want it.”

“Which one is it?” Betty asked.

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

“That sounds okay.”

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

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

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

“So what happens now?” Betty asked. Before she finished speaking the receptionist had picked up the phone and dialed the woman’s number.

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

“Um, where is this?” she asked.

“Germantown. You know where that is, right?” Betty shook her head.

“I’m new here.”

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

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The small house looked out of place. It sat between a large apartment building and a fenced-in empty lot. Betty checked the address - 5147 - then opened the gate in the quaint wrought iron fence and walked up the steps to the small porch. She looked for a doorbell, but the door opened before she could ring.

“About time! I was just gonna call the agency!” the old woman said, sharply.

“Miz Kelly?” Betty asked, taken aback.

“I thought you got lost.”

“Sorry, I had to go get my things at the hotel,” Betty replied, meekly.

“What were you doing at a hotel?”

“I just moved here, and I was staying there until I could find a job.”

“So you have no place to live, now?”

“I’ll find something in the neighborhood; that is, if you hire me.”

“You’re hired. You’ll live here, too. Didn’t they tell you?” Miz Kelly asked.

“No, ma’am.”

“Don’t call me ma’am. I hate that word. I’m not a decrepit old lady.”

“No, ma-,” Betty said. Miz Kelly glared at her, and then smiled.

“Come in...uh.”

“Betty Suggs.”

“Come in, Betty Suggs. Would you like some tea?” Betty smiled, breathed a sigh of relief, and then nodded. Maybe she had passed the test. “Great! Kitchen’s back there. You make it, and then we’ll drink it and get acquainted.”

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

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

“I was a schoolteacher at the Fidler School, a couple blocks from here. I spent my whole career there, thank God.” She paused and sipped her tea. “I retired 16 years ago, when I started to

get sick. Not sick of the kids, mind you. I loved the kids. Some of them still come to visit me from time to time.

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

“I think I would be right for you,” Betty said, boldly. She liked Miz Kelly, but worried she had wasted a trip to Germantown. What did she have to offer Miz Kelly? *Not much*, she thought.

“We’ll see, won’t we?” Miz Kelly said, and then winked. Betty did not feel any more certain. “So tell me about *you*,” Miz Kelly said. Betty began to speak, but hesitated. “The truth, please. Only the truth, dearie. I’m too old for lies.”

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

“You have a husband?” Betty nodded. “Did you leave because of him?” Betty shook her head.

“I left because of *me*. I just didn’t want to be there anymore. I loved my family, but I felt trapped in my life,” she said, and noticed a tear on Miz Kelly’s cheek. “You okay?”

“Yes,” Miz Kelly said, softly. “Are *you*, child?” she asked, sympathetically. Betty nodded.

“I think I am, now,” she said.

## ***11. Nightmare***

“Betty! Come here, *now!*” Betty awoke with a start and heard Miz Kelly cry out. She put on her robe and hurried to Miz Kelly’s bedroom.

“What’s wrong? Do you need your medicine?” she asked, breathlessly.

“No. I had a nightmare,” Miz Kelly replied, uneasily. “Will you sit with me awhile, if you’re not too sleepy?”

“Of course. Shall I make some tea?”

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

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, hesitantly. Miz Kelly was distracted and did not seem to know what she meant.

“What? Oh, you mean the nightmare?” she said.

“Yes, if you think it would help to talk about it, I’m here.”

“It was about my husband-,” Miz Kelly explained.

“I didn’t know you were married,” Betty said, surprised.

“Yes, a long time ago.”

“You don’t wear the ring.”

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

“So, tell me about your nightmare.”

Huey Kelly was sent to France in World War One. The Army had to ship him back to the States after he got wounded. He was on a troop ship sailing back from Europe that never arrived in New York. It was probably sunk by a U-boat. She was there at the dock, waiting to greet him.

They were going to celebrate his homecoming, and have a real honeymoon in New York City, but he never came back to her.

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

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

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

She wondered if they thought about her and hoped their memories had faded. That would be good. She thought absence was better than grief. It never occurred to her the opposite might be true.

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

## ***12. Doubt***

“One of my former pupils is coming to see me, today. Will you go and pick up some special cookies?” Miz Kelly asked. “The bakery is just down in the next block. The woman knows me.” Betty left with a couple dollars and walked two blocks to the little bakery. The place seemed tiny but delicious goodies filled storefront windows. She went inside and an older woman greeted her.

“I’m here for Miz Kelly’s order,” she told the pleasant woman.

“Miz Kelly! I haven’t seen her in a long time. She used to come in once a week, at least. I think she bought treats for her kids, and sometimes for herself.”

“Well, these cookies are for one of her pupils who’s coming to visit her today.”

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

“Um, that’s a shame.”

“Well, I guess they won’t miss me until it’s too late and I’m gone,” the woman added, chagrined.

“Yeah.” Betty paid the woman, got her change, and left.

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

She wondered what her real feelings had been for all the years she and Jerry were married. She thought she loved her family, but perhaps she actually hated them. Perhaps she had refused the cancer treatments because she wanted to die, just to get away from them.

Her cancer had awakened her, but to what? Mostly, to questions she could not answer.

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

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

"Yes. You're Carl, right?"

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

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

"But you left," Carl said, puzzled.

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah. I played a homeless woman," Betty said, smiling. The three fell silent. "Look I'm taking up your visit. Why don't I make some tea and put these cookies out?"

She retreated to the kitchen and worried what would happen now that Carl found her. She had not told Miz Kelly about living with the students. She worried the students might come looking for her, now that they knew where she was. She hoped Carl would not tell anyone he had met her. She might have to ask him to keep her secret.

### ***13. Honesty***

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

"I haven't lied," Betty replied, defensively.

"But, you haven't told me your whole story, have you? I want you to tell it, *now*. I'm listening," Miz Kelly said, firmly. Betty told her about her family, cancer, and how she ran away. Miz Kelly was shocked.

"You just *left* them?" she asked, aghast. Betty nodded. "That must have been hard."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," Betty agreed, woefully.

“So, you left because you were angry?” Miz Kelly asked. Betty nodded. “And you wanted to punish them.” Miz Kelly’s bold statement surprised Betty, she nodded again, and then burst into tears. She had not realized that she ran away to punish them. Miz Kelly let her cry.

“I’m sorry,” Betty apologized.

“Don’t be. Let it out. I know it hurts.”

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

“Yes,” Miz Kelly agreed, solemnly.

“I gave them all my love, but when *I* needed some love, there was none. I couldn’t stay.”

“So, how do you feel, now?”

“What do you mean?”

“About love?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you feel loved, *now*?”

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

“I think you love yourself, and that’s what’s most important.”

“You’re probably right.”

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

“Maybe,” Betty replied, hesitantly. “That’s an awful lot to think about.”

“You can do it. You seem good at thinking.”

“No, I’m not, Miz Kelly-.”

“Please call me Margaret.”

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

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

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

“I still am,” Miz Kelly said, smiling.

## ***14. Phone Call 1***

“Hello?”

“Hi, Jerry,” Betty said.

“Betty?! Is that you?”

“Yes.”

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

“I’m okay. I just wanted to let you know,” Betty said. She avoided telling him where she was.

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

“Mom?” Johnny said. “Why did you leave us? Where are you?” He paused and she waited for him to go on. “What the hell is wrong with you?” he asked, angrily. She had not told her kids about her cancer, so they did not know what was wrong with her. She wrestled with telling Johnny now, but said nothing.

“Hi, Johnny. How are you?” she asked, banally.

“When are you coming home?” he asked.

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

“Maybe *you’re* okay, but *we’re* not!” he protested. “You screwed up our lives.” She did not know how to answer. How could she tell him it was her life that was screwed up, and that was why she ran away? She did not want him to think it was somehow his fault. It was probably not anybody’s fault. That was the sad truth.

“Mom?” Doris said, sobbing.

“Hi, Doris.”

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

“I don’t know.” She wanted to add that she did not know if she would ever come back, but felt that would hurt Doris too much.

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

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

“Then *why?*” Doris begged for a reason. Betty did not reply.

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

“Don’t worry about me, Jerry. I’m okay. I’m safe. Maybe I’ll call you again,” she said. “Bye for now,” she added, and quickly hung up, unable to take any more of the conversation. Their recovery from her call would take days. She knew she had dropped an emotional bomb on them and had opened old wounds. She should have known that would happen.

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“I never had a family of my own,” Miz Kelly said, sympathetically, “but I can imagine that phone call was really hard for you, and them.”

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

“So now you know how things really are.”

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

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

“But I abandoned them, and it really, really hurt them,” Betty said, sadly. She hoped Miz Kelly would say something sympathetic, but she did not reply. “And now I don’t know what to do.”

“What alternatives do you have, dear?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I guess so.”

“Do you still love them?”

“I don’t know, but I guess so.”

“Do you think they still love you?”

“I don’t see how they could.”

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

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

## ***15. Search***

Jerry went to the police. They had stopped looking for Betty not long after he first reported her missing. Many people went missing, and the police almost never found any of them.

He told them about the call. “I don’t know where she is, but she’s *somewhere*. Can’t you send out her photo, or something?” he begged. The desk sergeant felt sorry for Jerry, and told him he would look into it.

“Can’t we get her picture in the papers?” Jerry begged.

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

He had not told Johnny and Doris about Betty’s cancer. He felt it would only make everything worse if they knew. They might panic or get hysterical. He did not want to lose either of them the way he had lost her.

Jerry and Betty never had any real intimacy. They got along in their marriage. They shared raising their children and running their house-hold, but never talked much about themselves or their feelings. Betty had never told him how she felt about her cancer. He had assumed she would do whatever the doctors told her to do, but she did not, and he did not understand why. He had come to realize the woman he lived with for more than twenty years had been a stranger, and he regretted it.

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

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

He had a couple beers at Walt’s house one night. They were watching the ball game and talking about incidents at work. Walt’s wife Louise came home from shopping and noticed Jerry was not laughing at Walt’s jokes. She did not say anything, at first, but kept an eye on Jerry while she put her groceries away and started dinner. Walt noticed Jerry had finished his beer and went to get another one.

“Something’s wrong with Jerry,” he told Louise.

“Yeah, I can see. You think I should talk to him?” She knew Jerry was unlikely to share his feelings with Walt. Men did not do that.

They sat down to eat but Jerry did not want his food. “What’s wrong, Jerry?” Louise asked.

“It’s Betty.”

“You miss her, don’t you?” Walt said. Jerry nodded.

“She called, last week.”

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

“She isn’t,” Jerry said, and then lowered his head. Louise knew he needed to cry. She got up, went to his chair, put her arm around his shoulders, and pulled his head to her bosom. She hoped he would feel safe in her motherly embrace, and tell them more. He told them the whole story. They were stunned.

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

“She didn’t want anyone - not even the kids - to know.”

“But why did she run away? I don’t get it,” Walt asked.

“Neither do I,” Jerry said and sobbed even harder. It embarrassed him to weep in front of his friend, but Walt was glad Jerry had unburdened himself. He tried to figure out a way he could help.

## ***16. Neighbor***

“Good afternoon, Emma,” Miz Kelly said. Emma was the black maid who worked for the Jewish dentist’s family down the block.

“Miz Kelly! Nice to see you. How have you been?”

“Do you have time for a cup of tea?”

“Why, yes, thank-you.” Emma walked toward the house.

“Come right in. This is my friend Betty.”

“Hello, Betty, nice to meet you.”

“Same here.” Betty smiled at Emma.

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

They sat in the living room. “How are the Cohen boys?” Miz Kelly asked.

“Oh, they’re good. Leonard got married a while back, and Nathan’s just joined the Navy.” The news surprised Miz Kelly.

“Oh, my. Because of the war?” she asked.

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

“Well, good luck to him. How’s your daughter?”

“Katy-Sue is fine. She had another baby, my third grandson, Marcus. I think he’s the most adorable one, so far,” Emma said, proudly.

“Where’s she living now?”

“South Carolina. I don’t get to see her much, but we talk on the phone.”

Betty came in with the tray, set it down, and began pouring. “Emma and I have known each other a long time,” Miz Kelly told Betty. “She’s worked for the Cohen family for almost

thirty years, right?" Emma nodded. "She used to walk the Cohen boys to school when they were very young. Then, I had both boys in my classes. Leonard, the oldest, used to write poetry."

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

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

"He tried, but he couldn't get much work. But, I heard he loves teaching. Probably because of you," Emma complimented Miz Kelly. Betty sat quietly and listened.

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

"Not bad, for an old woman. Betty takes good care of me," she said, and then smiled at Betty as if to invite her into the conversation. She sipped her tea.

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

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

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

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

"What's it near?" Emma asked.

"Farms, mostly. A lot of them."

"I grew up on a farm," Emma said, brightly.

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

"Where was it?"

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

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

"You're one of *twelve* kids? But you only had one of your own?" Miz Kelly asked.

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

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

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

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

"How old?" Emma asked.

"Doris is sixteen, and Johnny's fourteen."

"Do you see them much?" Emma asked. Betty did not reply.

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

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

"Was it something I said?" she whispered. Margaret shook her head.

“It’s not you. She’s going through a lot. She’ll be okay.”  
Betty overheard them. She was grateful for Miz Kelly’s sympathy, but knew she was not okay.

## ***17. Phone Call 2***

“Mr. Suggs?” Miz Kelly said.

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Angry? Why?”

“Did she tell you what she did?”

“Yes. She told me the whole story.”

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

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

“Then, why did she leave?”

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

“What does that mean?”

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

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

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

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

“I think she does care.”

“I just don’t understand.”

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

“No.”

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

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

“But did you love her?”

“Of course.”

“Did you tell her?”

“I didn’t have to. She knew.”

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

“But I never hurt her!”

“Not deliberately.”

“So you’re saying I *accidentally* hurt her?” Jerry asked, exasperated.

“It happens.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ll try. Good-bye Mr. Suggs.”

“*Please* get her to call,” he begged.

“I’ll try.”

“*Please...*” he insisted, and then she hung up.

## ***18. Confrontation***

“Sit down, Betty. We need to talk,” Miz Kelly said, sternly.

“Did I do something wrong?” Betty asked.

“Not to me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I think what you did hurt people.”

“Who?”

“Your family, obviously. Don’t you think so?”

“Well, yeah, of course.”

“And yourself,” Miz Kelly added. Betty agreed.

“I’m doing okay.”

“Are you?”

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

“Yes, I like you very much, and I’m grateful for your company and care, but I’m worried about you.”

“Why?”

“Let me ask you this. What did you think would happen after you left your family?” Miz Kelly asked, seriously. Betty did not know how to answer. She had run away. That action consisted of buying a bus ticket to Philadelphia. The only choice she made was the destination.

“I didn’t plan anything. I just ran,” she answered. “Is there something wrong with what I did?”

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

“I didn’t see any other way...,” she explained.

“I understand. But you didn’t think it through. You didn’t have a *plan*, right?”

“That’s right. But I didn’t *need* one. I just needed to run.”

“Did you think about what would happen to you after you ran away?” she asked, pointedly. “Where did you think you would go? What would you do? Who would you be with? What would happen when you got sick? Any of those things?”

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

“So you’re glad you did it?”

“I’m not sorry I did it. Why are you asking me all this?”

“Because I feel it’s time for you to look at what you did and figure out *why* you did it.”

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

“He probably wasn’t, but I don’t think you should blame him. I don’t think that was unusual.”

“Really?”

“Most spouses would probably react the same way.”

“I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. What does it matter, now?”

“I called him,” Miz Kelly said, straightforwardly.

“You did *what*? How *could* you?”

“Don’t panic. I only called to tell him you were okay. I didn’t tell him where you are.”

“Um, how was he?”

“How do you think?”

“I think he probably hates me, and is angry with me.”

“I don’t think he hates you, but he is angry with you. He doesn’t understand.”

“I know. That was the problem. He didn’t understand.”

“I also don’t think *his* not understanding is the real problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Betty, do *you* understand why you did what you did? Really understand? It doesn’t seem to me that you do, and I think it’s time you faced the truth.”

“What truth?”

“The *real* reason you ran away.”

“I told you the real reason.”

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

“So, if it’s not what I said, then what is it?” Betty asked, angrily.

“When you refused the cancer treatments you pretty much guaranteed you’re going to die sooner rather than later, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Your cancer’s likely to progress unchecked. You’ll go into the hospital at some point, and then it will be too late to do anything about the disease, and you’ll just die.”

“Well, yeah. That’s how it happens.”

“Betty, your *life* will be over.”

“Right. I’ll be dead.”

“So you’re committing suicide, aren’t you?”

“No! I *couldn’t* do that.”

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

“Well, yeah. That’s what I’ve heard people do.”

“But you decided to do it *slowly*, didn’t you?”

“No! How can you say that! That’s cruel!” Betty shrieked, and then stood up, ready to run out of the room.

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

“Look, Margaret. I appreciate your concern, but this is really none of your business,” Betty said, sharply.

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

“My soul?” Betty asked, astonished. As far as she knew, Miz Kelly was not religious. She never went to church. No clergy came to visit her. She never mentioned God or Jesus. Why was she suddenly interested in Betty’s soul? Why did she think Betty’s soul ought to concern her?

## ***19. Cage of Suffering***

“I think you have to ask yourself *why* you really left your family,” Miz Kelly advised.

“I already told you.”

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

“Okay, what is it?”

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

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

“I don’t think you would have deliberately hurt them unless you had a good reason.”

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

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

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

“I think what you were missing was *yourself*.” Betty looked at Margaret as if she had never seen her before. She wondered if Miz Kelly was insulting or belittling her. She had never seen her do anything cruel, and doubted she could even have a cruel thought.

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

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

“What does it say?” Betty asked, skeptical but curious. She thought she should listen, respectfully, to what Miz Kelly had to say. Miz Kelly was a teacher. She had lived a long time, learned many things, and knew a lot more about life than Betty did.

“The goal of the Hindu Sannyasin is moksha (liberation),” Miz Kelly read from the book “The idea of what that means varies from tradition to tradition.” Betty felt confused.

“Um, Miz Kelly, I’m not a Hindu,” she protested. “I’m not even sure what it *means* to be a Hindu.”

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

“So how does what you read actually apply to me?”

Miz Kelly did not explain. Instead, she read from the page. “Who am I, and in what really do I consist? What is this cage of suffering?”

The words ‘cage of suffering.’ struck Betty deep in her heart. The dilemma of her life came into sharp focus. Her deepest feelings suddenly became clear. Her cancer was a cage. She was suffering. She had just wanted to escape.

Miz Kelly waited for Betty to speak, but Betty seemed caught up in her own thoughts. “You were facing your own death, and you realized you did not know what everyone should want to know: *who am I, and why am I here?*” she said, gently. Betty burst out crying.

“Thank-you,” she said, softly. “I think I get it now.”

## ***20. Sannyasin***

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## ***21. Re-connection***

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

"Yes, yes, of course," Jerry replied, as if he was dazed. "I'm just shocked. I thought I would never see you again."

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

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

"Did you tell them about...?"

"About you? No."

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

"No."

“Jerry, if I come back, you know what’s gonna happen, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Well, I’m still gonna die.”

“You might not, if you do what the doctor tells you,” Jerry reminded her.

“I don’t think it will work, Jerry.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

“So you wanna come back here just so you can die?” he asked, harshly.

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

“They’re gonna lose you all over again?” What he did not add was that he was also going to lose her again.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe it’s better if you don’t come home,” Jerry remarked, grimly. He had already been through the worst six months of his children’s lives. He had tried to help them deal with Betty’s disappearance. Right now, it was only temporary, but would eventually become permanent when she died.

“Maybe I should ask them if they want me to come back?” she suggested, uneasily.

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

“Are they around?”

“Johnny’s out. Doris is home.”

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

“*Mom!* Where are you? Are you coming home?” she asked, excitedly. “*Please* come home.”

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

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

“Do you want to know why I ran away?”

“Oh, *yes*, Mom!”

“I’m sick, Doris. I have cancer. I’m going to die.” Doris did not reply. There was static and silence on the phone line. Betty thought she had made a huge mistake and hurt her daughter worse than when she left. Then the line went dead. The weak connection with her husband and children was now broken, irrevocably. Her relationship with her family was over. There was no going back.

Betty was all alone.

## ***22. Family***

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

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

“No. We’ll find someone else to do it for both of us.”

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

“But where will you go? You’re not thinking about doing anything drastic, are you?” Miz Kelly asked. Betty shook her head.

“I don’t want to be a burden on you. I’ll find somewhere to go.”

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

“I can’t ask you to put up with me.”

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

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

“Everybody is a burden, Betty, sometime in their lives. We need each other. It’s what makes us human.”

“Is this more of that philosophy you’ve read in books?”

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

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

“I never had a child, Betty.”

“But you taught plenty of them.”

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

“Really? Why did you say that?”

“You feel like a daughter to me.”

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

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

“Thanks.”

“So, you’ll stay?”

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

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

“Celebrate what?”

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

“I hope you won’t, either.”

“That’s not possible. Now, how about some tea?”

### ***23. Survival***

Miz Kelly’s final illness lasted only a couple of weeks, and she knew she was going to die as soon it began. She immediately changed her will so Betty got the house at 5147 Wayne Ave., as well as all her savings.

Miz Kelly was okay with dying. She was not certain what would happen afterwards, but hoped to re-unite with Huey. He had missed most of her life. She thought it would fun to tell him

all the stories about what happened after he was lost at sea. There were many stories about the world, and stories about her, that she was eager to share with him.

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

While Miz Kelly preferred to believe Betty survived because of a miracle, Betty assumed the diagnosis had been a mistake from the beginning, and she never had cancer at all. That mistake had led her to change her life, and she was not sorry it happened.

She understood her old life with Jerry and her children had been a lie. She had not been a real person, but an automaton. The roles of wife and mother were computer programs that controlled the automaton's actions. Her real personality had been missing all those years.

In the two years since she came to live with Miz Kelly, Betty had discovered who she really was. She found she liked herself more now that she was her own woman than she did when she was someone else's woman - when she belonged to Jerry as his wife, and Doris and Johnny as their mother. Now Betty belonged to Betty. Her search had brought her home to herself, which was where she belonged.

Her life was mostly quiet. She read many of Miz Kelly's books, and then went to the local library to borrow others. The neighborhood began to change from all white to a mix of black and white residents and she met several new people her own age and formed a few friendships. She volunteered at the nearby St Francis parish, but did not attend mass there. She occasionally worshiped with a few Friends at the Quaker meeting on Germantown Ave.

She met Ben Johnson a year after Miz Kelly died. He was a widower introduced to her by Emma, the black maid who still worked for the Jewish dentist's family down the block. Ben was Emma's brother. Betty and Ben spent a pleasant summer sipping lemonade on her front porch and talking about the books they had read and movies they had seen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Doris."

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

“Hello?”  
“Mom?” the woman asked, haltingly.  
“Doris? Is that you?”  
“Yes! Mom, I have some bad news. Dad just died. I thought you would want to know.”  
“Oh, I’m sorry. How are you and Johnny doing?”  
“We’re okay,” Doris answered, and then there was a long pause. “How are *you*?”  
“I’m all right, Doris. It turned out I never had cancer. I don’t know why they told me I did.”  
“That’s great, I guess. Why didn’t you come home?”  
“You made it pretty clear you didn’t want me to. Don’t you remember?”  
“I guess I did. I was really angry at you. I’m sorry.”  
“You don’t need to apologize. What I told you must have been a shock.”  
“Yeah, it was. I just couldn’t take anymore, on top of everything else.”  
“I understand. When is the funeral?”  
“In three days. Will you come?”  
“I don’t know. Probably not. I don’t have a car and there’s nobody I can ask to drive me.”  
“Oh.” Doris said, disappointed. Then she had an idea. “Well, Johnny, Ed, or I could come pick you up.”  
“Who’s Ed?” Betty asked.  
“Ed’s my husband.”  
“Oh. You’re married? When?” Betty had forgotten her daughter was already old enough to have a husband of her own.  
“Right after high school.”  
“Well, congratulations, I guess,” Betty said, embarrassedly.  
“There’s more. We have two kids, Lacey and Jeff. You’re a grandmother!” Doris must have thought the news would make Betty happy, but she became conflicted. She had never thought about becoming a grandmother, and was not certain she wanted to be one, now.  
“Oh, that’s nice,” She said, hesitantly.  
“I’d *love* for you to meet them,” Doris said. Betty did not know how to reply. Until this phone conversation, her old life had been walled-off in the distant past. Only Miz Kelly knew everything about it. Betty felt re-connecting with that old life might open old wounds, and serve no useful purpose. *Why couldn’t they have left me alone?* she thought. *I’m supposed to be dead by now, anyway.* She *wanted* to be dead to her husband and children.  
“So, Mom, should we come get you?” Doris persisted. Betty did not answer. She wanted to say ‘no’ and hang up, but she knew that would be the biggest hurt of all the hurts she had inflicted on her children.  
“I can’t, Doris. I’m sorry.” She expected Doris to argue with her, or try to persuade her to come to the funeral, but Doris just hung up.

## ***24. Past, Present, and ?***

She was distraught after Doris’ phone call, and Ben did not know what to do. He wanted to respect her privacy, but was curious about why she seemed upset. He also wanted to help soothe her.

Ben found Betty attractive the first time they met, but would never have told her or hinted about it. He was shy, respectful, and several years older. She was white and he was black.

Society was changing and mixed-race couples were becoming more common, but he had no idea whether his feelings would shock, or scandalize her if he expressed them.

He thought when she offered to let him live in her house she might be hinting she felt as he did, but he had seen no evidence of anything other than friendship since he moved in. He was not expecting her to take him to her bed. She seemed pleased to continue a brother-sister companionship, which he was happy to do, anyway, because they were so compatible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I haven't told you the truth about myself...", she admitted, sobbing.

"You don't have to say another word," he said to soothe her, but he actually wanted her to tell him everything. He thought it might make her feel better, but he did not want her to feel she owed him an explanation. He held her and let her sob.

Then she told him about herself. His heart broke, but he did not say anything. She pulled away so she could look at his face, afraid what she confessed disgusted him, and he would scowl at her. However, he looked sympathetic, and there was a tear in his eye.

“I was supposed to be dead by now, Ben,” she said. It was the most frightening statement he had heard in years. The thought that he might never have met her, they might never have become friends, he might never have moved in, and been able to live under the same roof with her, terrified him. Ben realized his feelings for her were deeper than he had admitted to himself, until now. He was certain he had to take whatever risk was necessary to let her know.

He needed to make it clear to her what she did was not bad, or selfish, or wrong. She had followed her own path, one that led, however mysteriously, here, to *him*. She need feel no guilt or sorrow. He wanted to make her feel supported, but he also wanted to convey his deepest feeling. He was ready to share her life for the rest of his own, regardless of the fact that she was white and he was black. He did not know whether she felt the same way, but was certain he would find out. It would only take a second.

He gently leaned down and kissed her, as sweetly as he could.

## ***25. Amazing Grace***

Their relationship changed in subtle ways. They held hands when they sat on the porch, walked to (and sat in) movie theaters, and strolled around the neighborhood in the evening. Their feelings of affection and camaraderie were obvious to everyone. Other people enjoyed being around them. No one knew they were now sleeping the same bedroom.

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

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

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

“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,

“That saved a wretch like me!

“I once was lost, but now am found;

“Was blind, but now I see.”

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

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

Betty stole up behind Ben and put her arms around him from behind. She laid her head against his back, and whispered, "I love you," startling him. He stopped singing and dropped the dish he was washing into the soapy water. She clutched him so tightly that he could not turn around.

"Don't stop," she said, and he went on.

"Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,

"And mortal life shall cease,

"I shall possess, within the veil,

"A life of joy and peace."

She now possessed a 'life of joy and peace,' and she did not have to die to achieve it. When death threatened and awakened her, she chose to follow her own heart. It had led her to leave her family, come to Philadelphia, look after the college boys and girls, and then Miz Kelly. It led her to Ben, the wonderful man whose chest her arms now encircled; who sang the song that told her story while he washed the dishes.

"What's that song?" she asked, when he finished.

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

"No. It's beautiful."

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

"Both, I guess."

"Oh?"

"I'm moved by the spirit because of *you*. I'm also remembering Denise because the hymn made her so happy when she sang it."

"Well, it makes me happy to hear it. I hope you'll sing it a lot."

He did, and she never tired of it, for all the years they were together.