

Jill McCorkle

"Like Flannery O'Connor, McCorkle's genius is to give us both philosophical speculation and a riveting narrative with unforgettable characters."

—RON RASH, author of *Serena* and *The Cove*

*Life
After
Life*
a novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF *FERRIS BEACH*

NOVELS

The Cheer Leader

July 7th

Tending to Virginia

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STORIES

Crash Diet

Final Vinyl Days

Creatures of Habit

Going Away Shoes

Life After Life

——— A NOVEL ———

JILL McCORKLE

A Shannon Ravenel Book

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL 2013

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*For my children
and for their grandparents
and their great-grandparents
and so on*

There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.

—THORNTON WILDER

Joanna

NOW JOANNA IS HOLDING the hand of someone waiting for her daughter to arrive. Only months ago, the woman—Lois Flowers—was one of the regulars in Pine Haven’s dining room where the residents often linger long after the meal for some form of entertainment or another. She was a woman who kept her hair dyed black and never left her room without her hair and makeup and outfit just right. She had her color chart done in 1981 and kept the little swatches like paint chips in the zippered section of her purse. She told Joanna that having your colors done was one of the best investments a woman could ever make. “I’m a winter,” she said. “It’s why turquoise looks so good on me.” She loved to sing and some nights she could convince several people to join in; other nights she simply stood in one corner and swayed back and forth like she might have been in Las Vegas singing everything she knew of Doris Day and Rosemary Clooney and Judy Garland. She loved anything Irving Berlin had ever written. Now she has forgotten everything except the face of her daughter, random lyrics, and that your shoes and purse should always match. Joanna has watched the daughter night after night leaning into her mother’s ear to sing—first upbeat (*clang, clang, clang went the trolley*). She always ends with one of her very favorites like “It Could Happen to You” or “Over the Rainbow” or “What’ll I Do?” Joanna—as ordered by Luke’s many rules—keeps a notebook with an entry on each of the people she sits with. She has to do an official one to turn over to the nurse who oversees her work, but this is a different, personal notebook she writes just after someone has died. It’s a notebook she bought and showed Luke to prove to him that she was taking his assignments seriously—a bright yellow college-ruled spiral-bound notebook, which was all she could find at the Thrifty Market there close to Luke’s house. It was near the end for him so she didn’t venture far. “This is my page,” he told her. “Everybody should get at least a page.” She writes what she knows: their names and birthplaces and favorite things. Sometimes she asks questions: What is your first memory? Your favorite time of day or holiday or teacher or article of clothing? How would you describe your marriage? Was there something you learned in your life that surprised you? She records the weather and season and last words if there are any. Luke said that *this* would be her religion, the last words and memories of the dying her litany. She should read and reread the entries regularly like devotionals. *Keep us close*, Luke said. *Keep us alive. Don’t ever let us disappear.*

THE LONGEST AND most expensive journey you will ever make is the one to yourself. Joanna’s life is a blip blip blip like images on an old film projector that keeps sticking and burning. She’s been spliced a lot of times over the years, but finally she feels free—not perfect, not problem free, just free. No one likes to talk about the positive parts of getting older and aging into orphanhood, how with your parents you often bury a lot of things you were never able to confront or fix or let go of.

She has spent long hours discussing this with C.J., a girl most likely *not* to be Joanna’s best friend.

and yet she is. C.J. is half her age, punk and pierced and tattooed with a baby boy whose father she won't discuss—not yet at least. C.J. is beautiful and so unaware of it, long legs and hazel eyes and beautiful dark complexion that leaves people perplexed and wondering about her ethnicity. It seems she might even be perplexed herself and camouflages herself with tattoos and loose clothing and colors of hair dyes that are not natural to any race.

C.J. claims to have lots of secrets, lots of ghosts, and she says she writes down all the bad stuff in her journal, which she calls Pandora's Box, and hides it there in the best security safe of all. She said she made a special trip to Costco to buy her "safe deposit box"—a mega-sized box of Kotex, which she then positioned at the back of her linen closet with "the sentry" placed in front: Monistat and Vagisil and all kinds of douches. She said it was a security system easily tested in the checkout line by the man next to her going from way too warm to icy cold in minutes. She said if there were any doubt, a good scratch in the right place would really get rid of someone you weren't interested in.

"If something ever happens to me," she once told Joanna, "everything you need to know is in the journal in the giant Kotex box at the back of the linen closet and you can have everything I own, even Kurt—especially Kurt." Joanna told her that if anything ever happened to *her*, she had a fake book, *Darwin's Descent of Man*, that opens and holds important papers. She also has a fake can of Campbell's tomato soup. The bottom screws off and someday when she makes lots of money, that's where she plans to keep some for security. "You can have *that* and the Dog House," Joanna told her.

Like Joanna, C.J. has done a lot of different things. She has cleaned houses and read palms and groomed dogs and now grooms the elderly—hair, hands, toes—at Pine Haven and leads them in a few activities and exercises. She rents the little apartment over the Dog House and in exchange for sometimes opening or closing, Joanna babysits her son, Kurt. Joanna's only rule as a landlord is no candles since she herself has had a couple of house fires as a result of purification rituals. "That would do it," C.J. said, and laughed when the rule was explained and adjusted her lip ring, which she always removes before going to work. "I'll come up with another way to *purify*."

Joanna wasn't there for her mother, but she was there for her dad and seeing him through those last days allowed her to let go herself. Being there may prove to be the greatest gift of her life. And of course none of that would have happened without Luke and Tammy.

In her work, Joanna has learned the importance of making peace. She sees it all the time, the stubborn child who won't come to the bedside and so the parent lasts far longer than should be asked of anyone. It is painful to watch, and for this reason she feels lucky to have journeyed her way back to this place. Her dad wanted her to promise to keep the the Dog House running and now she is doing her best, opening and closing and hiring responsible people to work the place, so she can devote herself to the volunteer hospice hours she gives over in Pine Haven's nursing wing.

"Make their exits as gentle and loving as possible," Luke had said. "Tell them how good it will be, even if you don't believe it yourself. You're southern, you know how to do that." And now family members greet and embrace her like she is one of them. Lung. Brain. Breast. Uterus. Pancreas. Bone.

The families discuss and explain the symptoms and diagnoses for her as if they have never been heard of before, have never happened to anyone else, and she listens. Mistakes are made in the telling and she does not correct them. It is important to remain separate, to allow them to claim the disease, claim their grief. It is important not to get too attached or personally involved. Sometimes, when family members are naming the tests and the symptoms and prognosis, she allows herself to imagine her mother, getting the news and then driving home. Actively deciding what to do next but *not* calling her. But Joanna can go only so far with that or she'll undermine her purpose in the present. She is there, compassionate and listening, guiding the patients to talk and tell their stories if inclined but knowing when to step back into the shadows of the drapes or a closet door so family members get their time. She knows how to disappear.

Relatives show her all the old photos and letters; they tell her of accomplishments and regrets and then afterward, they drift away, her presence like something from an old dream, a reminder of the grief and loss. Sometimes they see her in the grocery or hardware store or when they drive up to the Dog House, and they can't help themselves, their eyes well up and words get choked. Like Pavlov's dogs, they react to her presence. It makes her think of poor Harley, the docile old orange cat at Pine Haven with enough poundage to warm even the coldest circulation-free feet, only now all of the residents are terrified of him because of the story in a recent news broadcast about a cat who chose to curl up beside whoever was most likely to die. The reports speculated how the cat knew. Did he sense something? Did he smell some chemical release of a body shutting down? His track record was convincing enough that the people who worked in that particular place paid attention to where he spent his time and the story told was convincing enough to ruin poor Harley's life there at Pine Haven. Once he was the most beloved and coveted creature in the place, and now he is greeted by shrieks and screams—slippers and plastic cups tossed his way. He is just a reminder of what is coming, a feline representation of Joanna herself, the one who appears bedside at the end and massages their cooling, darkening feet.

Now Lois Flowers's daughter, Kathryn, comes rushing into the room, a look of relief to find her mother still there. She is wearing her name tag from Bank of America where she is a teller. She nods at Joanna, no need for words. Joanna has already told her there isn't much time. Lois Flowers has not opened her eyes in eighteen hours, but her breathing does change when Kathryn's cheek is pressed against hers. "She's listening," Joanna says. "She knows you're here."

Before Lois stopped talking, she always asked Kathryn how school was and did she have homework. Joanna offers her seat and goes to stand by the window. It is important to be present and also allow people space and privacy. Outside the sun is shining and the roses are in full bloom. Mr. Stanley Stone and his son, Ned, are sitting on a bench talking. They were the first family Joanna worked with when she moved back. Mrs. Stone was dying and everyone in the family remained separate and distant. They lived up to the family name, though these days, the son, Ned, always says hello and acts like he wants to say more to her. Ned was several years ahead of her in school and the

went to military school so she never really knew him. She's heard all the sad stories people think of when they see him, though, and now add his father's dementia on top of everything else. Mr. Stone walks the halls of Pine Haven, often insulting those who make eye contact. Now Ned Stone is leaning forward, his head in his hands while his dad stands in front of him shaking his fist.

"Mama? Mama, it's me," Kathryn says. "It's Kathryn."

Kathryn strokes the hair back from her mother's face and leans in close. She tells her mother how much she loves her and what a good mother she has been. She tells her about a new pair of shoes she just bought and how she got them for half price and what a beautiful June day it is. "Clang, clang, clang went the trolley," she sings, and then stops, closes her eyes, and presses her cheek against her mother's. She sits smoothing her mother's hair, shaking her head in disbelief that she is *here* in this moment. *How can it be?* her expression seems to ask. It's an ordinary Friday morning and Joan cannot help but imagine what it would have been like if she had had the chance to be with her own mother, to lean in close and whisper good-bye, and in that moment there is a change in the air, and in that moment, they all come back to her, all the last days and last words and last breaths. Kathryn whispers the words, *What'll I do—when—you . . .* and then it is time; without a word, everything changes and they know that it is time.

Notes about: Lois Elizabeth Malcolm Flowers

Born: July 14, 1929 **Died:** Friday, June 7, 2010, at approximately 10:35 a.m. Pine Haven Retirement Facility Fulton, North Carolina

It was a warm sunny day, drapes fully opened to let all the light in, just as Lois Flowers always requested. The room was comfortable somehow in spite of all the stark nursing apparatus, the room was as warm and welcoming as Lois herself. On the very first day, she invited me in and told me how lovely it was to have me there. *Not the ideal situation*, she said, *but still lovely to see you*. She said she had not known my parents well but sure did like those hot dogs my dad made, especially the Chihuahua because whoever heard of putting hot salsa on a plain old hot dog? Lois Flowers loved music and she loved fashion. She had a subscription to *Vogue* that had never lapsed in over forty years. “You could never get away with outfits like that here in Fulton,” she said. “But it is important to know what folks are wearing elsewhere.” She loved turquoise and the way people complimented her when she wore it. “I’m in winter,” she liked to say, and referred often to a folder labeled “Personal Color Harmony” and all the little color samples within. She never went shopping for clothes or lipstick without it. Her favorite holiday was Halloween because she loved to see children having so much fun, but mainly because she liked a good excuse to wear orange even though her chart said that winters *do not wear orange well*. She decided that even if she looked horrid, *so what? It was Halloween, but*, she said, *I looked quite striking in an orange alpaca sweater and black gabardine slacks. It’s the one time the chart got it wrong*. She still had the orange sweater and insisted that I take it and promise to wear it every October 31. She gave her daughter, Kathryn, the newer Halloween sweater, a honey-colored cashmere with black cat and witch hat buttons. *Kathryn is a true autumn and that sweater is perfect for her*, she said. *You can see why I wear everything perfect for her*. She suggested I rethink the way I wear my hair and then put a hand to her mouth and apologized for such a rude remark. “This is all new,” she told me. “This way I say things I don’t mean to say,” and I was able to assure her that I completely understood and that I am reconsidering what to do with my hair. She smiled and blew me a kiss. She said, how about some golden highlights and something layered to give body?

She had matchbooks from every nice restaurant she had ever gone to. Her favorites were Tavern on the Green and Windows of the World. She said she loved eating in New York City. She said her husband teased her that all it took for her to love a restaurant was for it to be in New York City and have lots of windows and a preposition in the name. She told Kathryn she needed to get back there, that they should take a trip and see a show. When told that both restaurants were gone, she held a firm position that she still needed to go there. “And so do you!” she said, always pulling me into the conversation. “And if there’s not a young man in your life” (she asked me often if I had met anyone interesting), she said that I should just go alone. “Women do that now,” she said. “A woman can go wherever she wants right by herself.”

Once, while her husband and Kathryn were out at the County Fair, Lois Flowers burned her Maidenform bra in a hibachi in the backyard. When her husband asked *what’s that smell?* she said she had no earthly idea. She said it made her feel connected to something big and important, that she stood there in the backyard and pretended she was at a rally in New York City. She never told him what she had done, even when she saw him studying the ashes and what looked like a scrap of nylon. She had never even told anyone about it until that day; she said, *I have always felt liberated*.

Her last words were to Kathryn, spoken two days before she died. “Honey, do you have homework?” She had asked that question hundreds of times over the years and if Kathryn did *not* have homework, the two of them went shopping. Lois Flowers loved her daughter and she loved to shop. Kathryn said that all of their important conversations took place during those little shopping trips. What to expect when you start your period. Why you got that bad grade. Why a sassy mouth is not a good thing. How your reputation is your most prized possession. Why you should always do your best. Why good hygiene is a must. What boys do and do not have good sense about or control over. These topics were often whispered over the lunch counter at Wood’s Dimestore where Kathryn got a cherry Coke or a milkshake and Lois got a cup of black coffee, her red lipstick staining the fat lip of the heavy white mug. Sometimes they ate pie or got a hot dog and always they were flanked with a bag or two of things they had found to buy over at Belk or the Fashion Bar or Smart Shop. “I can’t wait to get home and see what all we got,” Lois would say many times, and Kathryn said that once home, her mother kept the excitement going for many more hours with a fashion show and then talk of all the places Kathryn would go to wear the new things and all the wonderful things that would happen as a result. “Her predictions were not often

right,” Kathryn said. “But she was sincere.”

~~I hugged my orange alpaca sweater close as I waited there with Kathryn. I wanted to tell her how lucky she was to have had such a relationship with her mother, but it was clear that she knew this. She held firmly to her mother’s hand for as long as she was able and then when the men came to take her mother away, she reached for my hand as we followed them out. I will miss them both very much.~~

[from Joanna’s notebook]

Lois Flowers

The best table is over by the window, a big glass window and you can see the whole city just like a bird soaring in the sky. White linen and candles and yes, just a little champagne. Knives and forks and ice in crystal and a crystal ash tray, too, the filter smudged with her latest color—Claret, a perfect color, one of her reds. All of the colors on the chart (every chip!) may be taken a little darker or a little lighter. You can match clothing, makeup, accessories, and interior decor to colors on your chart. Don't ever remove the tags until you check your purchase in natural daylight as well as artificial light. Daylight. She can feel the daylight, and even this high up and behind all that glass she can hear the birds and some music. There is lovely music and a bathroom attendant, too, they shake hands and brush cheeks, what'll I do when you, oh thank you ever so much, thank you for your assistance. A palette should always have at least two of your colors. The second eye color catches the glints, streaks, and flecks in your eyes. Her daughter has green flecks like her father; she is an autumn. Beautiful russets and greens and golds and new shoes and homework. Do you have homework, honey? Daylight and Chanel No. 5, cheek to cheek, so lovely, too, and there is music and there are lots of little goodies over there on a big silver tray, over there by the big window, all shapes and sizes of beautiful and delicious canapés and the light fixtures are exquisite and there's music, always there is music, and colors and colors and beautiful colors. Just the right colors for a busy woman on the go, high heels click click on that polished marble floor, and if she stands perfectly still, she can feel the building sway, the whole city below her is so bright and beautiful it leaves her light-headed and she feels the building sway, back and forth like a song, like a slow and easy swaying song.

C.J.

(Carolina Jessamine)

SPEAKING OF THINGS NEVER to tell your kids: How about where you were fucking at the time conception? How about *that*? Or how about what everything costs? It costs this to feed you and that to clothe you. I wish I could send you to summer camp, but it costs too much and so does a bike and so does a house that looks worth a shit. Even the best intentions (the shitty day camp through the recreation department and the jeans that are the copy of what everybody else is wearing) still leave you feeling like an undesirable—an unwanted thing to be put in the next room while all the Mr. Wrongs come and go, like anybody even believes there is a Mr. Right. Her mom once had a date with a Mr. Wright and what a joke that was. Yeah, whatever. Fuck your brains out. She didn't say it but that's what she was thinking.

Her name is Carolina Jessamine, named for a native vine—close kin to Confederate jasmine, both hardy thriving plants that will take over a structure in no time at all. You want to hide something ugly, just plant jasmine and then watch the ugly thing disappear. Her name is beautiful or so people say but maybe they wouldn't say that or think it if they knew how she got it—one of those things she shouldn't know, but her mother was too stupid or too unaware or something to know better. Her mother was fucking in the arboretum, right over there where C.J. goes out to smoke every day on her break. Her mother is buried just beyond the very spot—talk about never going anywhere, talk about a really small and limited life. Her mother told her that the whole time she was making love in the arboretum, she was staring up at that beautiful lush vine and the little silver tag that named Carolina Jessamine.

Wow, thanks, Mom. If her father—unknown creature that he is—had only flipped her over and fucked her from behind, C.J. might be named Splitbeard Bluestem or Hairgrass or Common Phlox. Talk about too much information. And did her mother even tell her about the plants beyond that? The purpose the splitbeard bluestem serves to control erosion, the silvery seed heads bursting to hold on and take root and never leave or the brackish-loving hairgrass on underground runners, popping up unexpectedly like a bad nosy neighbor. It made her think of what it must look like down below, the moles and voles tunneling along; it made her think of learning all about the Underground Railroad, people escaping, disappearing, resurfacing into a whole new place and life. It makes her inhale a long deep breath just to even imagine it. Now the crossvine is in bloom, orange and red trumpets straining for sunlight. She takes one of those good cleansing breaths Toby talks about when they try to get people to do yoga and it is peaceful, a whole roomful of old folks breathing deeply and chanting—once sounding like a sewing machine and another a squirrel.

One billion angels could come and save her soul. She loves that song and might have it tattooed around her wrist when she saves some money. Then later she could add: *Please, don't leave me here*

around her ankle.

But her mother did leave her. She didn't give a shit. And the longer C.J. lives, the more amazed she is at how little of a shit so many people really give beyond their own little orbits. It makes her laugh to think of Stanley Stone who just the other day suggested to Marge Walker that she give everybody a break and come stare into his navel for a while instead of her own. These old guys are crazy, but there are some good ones. Better than what she had in a mother.

And Joanna is a good friend for sure. There's somebody who lived to tell the tale, turned it around. Her mother could have done that, too, but of course she didn't. She didn't have the courage. It is hard to even think about her mother, to picture her. Once upon a time she was beautiful and the pictures of her as a young girl would have surpassed anyone in this town, but it doesn't take long to age when you're poor and abuse your body. You can go from young and beautiful to looking like shit like that dried-up potato chip Toby is always talking about. That was C.J.'s mom, the dried-up undesirable chip at the bottom of the bag, and by killing herself she made sure C.J. wouldn't have any better or would have to work like hell to even get a chance. And now here she is, twenty-six years old, and she has done just about everything there is you can do without any college education. She has waited tables and scrubbed houses and washed the old flaky, filthy hair of the elderly. She cuts the old hard nails and doesn't say a word about skin so dry and hard it could cut you and old yellowed nails you need a chainsaw to get through. "Does that feel good, sweetie?" she will ask while rubbing lotion into their old worn-out feet. Some call them Pat and Mike. Some call them the old dogs. Or she calls them her little tootsies.

"Does that feel good?" She has asked that question often enough. An easy thing to do, and there was a time when she did it to get what she needed and wanted. Some people might call it prostitution or whoring, but she figured it was no different from what a lot of women are doing right there in the little married houses. Hmmmm, I really want to go on that trip, so let's fuck him good and hard tomorrow night between *Lost* and the late news. That'll be good for something. She has worked as an assistant to a local caterer and so she has heard plenty. The girls in the black pants and white tops are invisible as they reach and fill the glasses, especially a girl like her whose skin color is questionable. *What are you?* people want to ask. *Are you part Indian? Are you Hispanic?* Her tattoos don't show under the long sleeves and she wore no earrings or bracelets to those events, her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. After a few passes of the glasses on silver trays, she was totally invisible, nothing more than a hand there to serve.

"What did you have to do to get him to buy you that?" one woman asked, her voice shrill and girlish and they all leaned in close.

"He gets a blow job on his birthday and that's it." *Giggles. Acknowledgment. Amen.*

"What about Valentine's? I do birthday and Valentine's Day."

And what they don't know is how the men *do* notice when you fill the glasses. Some mumble when you have to step close, but take note. They don't mumble with other men. They don't mumble with

their wives. One followed her to the kitchen and down the basement stairs where the wine was kept. “I’ve never made love in a wine cellar to a beautiful young woman,” he slurred, and she told him that today wasn’t looking so fucking good either and she pushed him aside and got herself back into daylight and fresh air as quickly as possible.

Sometimes at cleaning jobs, she turned on the TV for company. This was before she got pregnant with Kurt and she was all alone. She liked the Spanish channel. She doesn’t know a word of Spanish other than *hola*, but it was easy to know what was happening. You’d be an idiot not to get it. She was taking a break and watching that Spanish soap opera, the man meeting his mistress while the wife was in a coma in the hospital. And then the *real* man was right there in the *real* house looking at her, and his wife was not in a coma at the hospital but shopping for their upcoming tropical vacation. And she could see right through *that* window. She had felt him watching her before and finally she ended up saying, *I don’t do windows, but I can do you*. The beginning. And actually it was a good beginning, and it seemed good. It felt good, and she even let herself imagine such a life, to imagine the safe drapery warmth of someone who gives a shit, a suitcase packed for a tropical vacation.

She worked for a living. She worked to live. And what scrutiny of her performance. Her performance was discussed openly, her name and number passed along from hand to hand, the same hands holding their glasses out for a refill from the faceless no name with the bottle. She’s real good, they say. Who’s your girl? they ask. Who do you use? The key word is *use*, isn’t it? So often that’s the key word. But once they decide a girl is good, then she is invisible and she can scrutinize them. They sit at their computers or in front of their mirrors and leave little notes before dashing off to the next stop.

And then the girl is left to look and plunder their things. How open their lives are. The box of condoms that never gets touched, week after week after week there in his top drawer, which is always left open for you to close. The thousands of tubes of things that promise to make her look better. The shoes heaped in the closet and invitations crowding the fridge—so many addresses she recognized where she had also knelt before the great porcelain altar and scrubbed their shit and piss and vomit swept free all those loose hairs.

Real clean people are often overcompensating for some really bad shit and really dirty people just don’t care. Which is worse? Flip a coin.

One thing she learned is that there are a lot of men who made it a point to swing by the house while she was there. Some of them remembered her mother. Some of them complimented her. They said how she knew their houses better than their wives did. One said how she knew his body much better than his wife did. She knew their secrets. It wasn’t hard. On that soap opera, the mistress was scorned. That was not hard to do at all and it was also not smart to do. Now that man was scared. He was thinking: I can’t win. *Ding, ding, ding—you are absolutely correct, Bob, you can’t fucking win*. He won when his wife hired her. He won the first time he ever ripped her clothes off and threw her there on the master bedroom bed and fucked the living daylights out of her. *Oh yes, does that feel*

good? He never had it so good. She was a tool—his favorite tool—right in there with his putter and Weed Eater and espresso maker, the high-tech blender for the margaritas she never got offered. *Sure, go ahead, bring your scrawny white ass on and fuck me; it won't mean one goddamned thing.*

The perfect affair is kind of like the perfect murder. Unlikely. There are always telltale signs. There are always bread crumbs—even the most minuscule—leading to the main event. Sometimes she cleaned everything up and sometimes she didn't. Or *doesn't*. Sometimes she doesn't.

Nothing is free. That's what she likes to say and truth is she is a real good deal compared to what they've got and are paying for. She watched one woman coming and going, so curious as to how she could be so unaware, slinking about in leggings designed for a teenager—a woman way too old to be sporting camel toe—but there she was doing it and maybe that was what first hooked him, cheap pussy, though not cheap for long. Get that ring and slip of paper and then nothing is free, is it? It costs later. It costs a big-ass house somebody else needs to clean and two snotty kids, an expensive car and a trip to wherever and that's just the beginning. This was why C.J. wanted out of the business; she didn't want the life of a trumped-up whore, call it whatever you please. She was never standing on street corners or in clubs over near the military base. She was in a motel waiting for some very well respected white-collar big deal about town. She was known for her discretion and for a period of time her trademark costumes. She could do a schoolgirl because she was young and she could do dominatrix—in fact she liked that one because if their old clammy hands were tied, they couldn't put them on her. She could look like a young boy, slick her hair back, no makeup, a thin cotton tank hanging loosely, small breasts bound in a tight tube top so they weren't even noticeable. One man, the one people would rise up shocked to hear, brought her grapes from his garden in the summer and liked to watch her put them in a galvanized tub and step and mash them, just enough to fill a pewter goblet and raise it to his thin gray lips. He fancied himself a man of God, and in the eyes of the town he was a man of God—but he was also a man of kink, which she sometimes whispered just as he came, eyes rolled back in whatever part of the deal he found ecstatic. He had once read about a priest in Boston who had offered his hardened self as a sacrament, demanding the young man at his mercy to swallow away his sins. *Eat, drink*, that kind of shit, and he said that kind of shit, too, his big beefy hands clutching the sides of her face. There, too, it was like she was invisible, a helpless tool. How foolish to think he might offer up his salty unleavened cock and get away with it, but he did, and she took his offering and paid her bills and enrolled herself in a course at the community college, and she wrote down everything that happened. Every night she ever performed—schoolgirl and bad girl and time boy and black girl and Indian girl—such a repertoire; she recorded it all. The who, the when, and the where. It was her security. It was that simple. And if she ever needed to use it, she would. She would open Pandora's Box and let loose the varmints and vile diseases. She will do whatever she has to do to give Kurt a better life than the one she was given.

“How wet can you get for a trip to Myrtle Beach?” that same asshole who had followed her in the basement asked at a different event. Myrtle Beach. Get real. Even if she thought there was

anything that might make him worthwhile, Myrtle Beach?

“For you?” she cooed back in his stinking face. “I am nothing but the Sahara Desert.” So many of them just assume you might want it, that you can easily be bought and rung up for this or that. If someone had and-so fucked you, then I have to as well. But that’s their own ugly reflection, isn’t it? Never satisfied. Staring up at the sun and blinding themselves while they step in shit and on land mines. She believed in watching her feet step by step by step—see the snake before it sees you. See the cliff face, the hole in the man with the knife or crazy wife or misguided dick.

Parental law: *do unto others what was done to you*. That’s just fucking wrong. In this way, C.J. had thought maybe her orphanhood was a blessing. With her mother’s death, she knew that she never wanted to do anything to Kurt like what was done to her.

Her mother did leave a note: *Please forgive me. I can’t take it anymore*.

The only thing interesting her mother ever told her was about how long ago when people gave up their babies, they often sewed little trinkets of things into the clothes they wore or the blanket they wrapped them so that someday, if the parents changed their minds, they could find and reclaim their children. Her mother said she had learned this from a nun who once filled in as a substitute teacher, a kind woman who tried to teach the children manners. C.J.’s mom got a good glimpse of Catholicism while she herself got a creepy pervert. No wonder people can’t agree on religion. But still, stupidly, after her mother died, C.J. had sat and felt the pockets and hemline of everything her mother owned, looking for a message or something she might find hopeful there in the worn musty heap of her belongings.

Once when she really wanted camp, the money suddenly appeared. One day it was impossible, her mother’s shoulders slumped forward as she delivered the news without making eye contact, and the next day there was laughter and excitement and she had an ink stamp with her name on it, a footlocker, and directions to Camp Ton-A-Wandah.

Weren’t you ashamed? she asked her mother later when she figured out what was going on. Good things always coinciding with the smells and sounds of sex.

“Yes,” her mother said. “I was ashamed. But I have always been ashamed so what’s the difference? I don’t want that to be your story.”

Her mom said it was impossible to cross lines, to have people see you and accept you in a whole new light. She said that the one girl who was nice to her growing up had lived in the house by the cemetery; she was a plain simple girl with a huge birthmark that made her very shy.

Her mom had told her that it does get easier. Eventually they see you with a look of recognition but then it’s too late. You’ve got a bad husband or two and kids and an addiction or all of the above. The simple rule: some get saved, but most don’t. The choices are important before the years begin to go so very fast.

Who was her father? It was a mystery. And the only thing her mother left her was a pile of worthless shit and a lot of broken promises. C.J. likes to think she will keep her promises to Kurt and

that she'll be smart enough not to promise things that will never come true. She wants to be a good mother. She wants him to be proud of her.

Lately—because of all of Joanna's questions—she has been trying to think of some things she could appreciate about her mom. It was hard at first, but then she was able to get a few. She had a beautiful singing voice and C.J. remembers sitting outside the bathroom door with her ear pressed against the wood to hear. The Supremes and the Jackson 5 were her favorites and sometimes at bedtime her mother would sing "I'll Be There" or "Can't Hurry Love." Kurt's big brown eyes are shaped like her mother's eyes and her mother had beautiful handwriting, small and delicate cursive scraps of which C.J. has saved. Sometimes she writes her mother notes and tells her things. Asks her things. Didn't anyone ever try to help you? Was there anyone you really loved? In this great big world did anyone ever give a shit about Perri Loomis? Black chicks and poor white girls go missing or get raped and murdered all the time, but let them be white and blond and beautiful or rich and see where they go. Once upon a time her mother was beautiful, but that was all. And that was not enough to save her life.

Sadie

SADIE RANDOLPH HAS ALWAYS seen the sunnier side of life and she's not sure why that is, just that it is. People criticize it. A lot of people don't like looking at a half-full glass, but she has spent her life doing just that and feels now that she is eighty-five and bound to a wheelchair, she wouldn't have chosen to live any other way. Even now, there are things to be happy about. She was born to good people. She got to go to school and become a schoolteacher when many of the people she grew up with were not so fortunate. She married a nice boy from right there in the county she had known her whole life and he continued to run the hardware store and feed and grain sales, just like his father and grandfather before him. They had three fine children, all college educated and now with families of their own, lived in a two-story brick house across the street from the Methodist church they attended and she taught the third grade for forty years. Horace died young, a sudden heart attack while playing football on Thanksgiving afternoon. It was what he and their sons did every Thanksgiving, a town pickup game known for years as the Giblet Gravy Bowl. He dropped dead and he could not help that. He looked to be in great shape and there was no warning whatsoever. And of course she was angry and scared at first and then so heartbroken and disappointed, but he couldn't help it; she had to keep going. At the funeral she told people she felt lucky and blessed to have ever had him at all. She feels the same about her mother who also died young; she would never trade a minute she had with them. The pain of losing people you love is the price of the ticket for getting to know them at all. Horace once told her that if something ever happened to him, she should *go, find somebody*, but she was sure he didn't really mean that, especially when he added, *But they better be every bit as good as I am*.

"Well, then that's impossible, isn't it?" she had said. It was eight years before he died, a plain old night in the winter of 1963, the whole world so focused on the young Jackie Kennedy and what on earth she would do now. Sadie almost asked what he would do if she were the one to die young, but she didn't want to go there. She doesn't even like to go there now with her eighty-five and him dead nearly forty years. Of course he would have found someone else, but ultimately it was she left behind and she didn't want to think about any of it. When she doesn't want to think about something sad and hurtful, she does what she instructed her own children and those she taught to do: Close your eyes and go somewhere safe and good. Picture something good. One child even made up a big sign with what he thought were the rules to being happy: *PRETEND YOU AIN'T DIRTY FROM PLAYING EVEN IF YOU ARE, THINK ABOUT GOOD THOUGHTS, THINK ABOUT AN ANIMAL YOU WOULD LIKE TO HAVE*. She hung the rules in the front of her classroom and they stayed there for years. Now the boy who wrote them is very rich and owns a horse farm in Montana. Sadie has gotten a Christmas card from him every single year except the one time he was getting a divorce. He always says his work keeps him very dirty, but it never gets in the way of his happiness. He always tells her thank you.

Sadie herself had always wanted a little dog that would follow her from room to room like a shadow and that is exactly what she got after Horace died. She loved the big yellow Labradors that she had always had as a family: Honey and Goldie and Spitz, after the swimmer who won all those gold medals, but Rudy was all hers, a little Pekingese she misses to this day, but sometimes if she lays her sweater just right at the foot of her bed, it looks just like him, and sometimes she can even get to a place in her mind where she can hear him snore. She loves when Harley comes meowing at her door and spends some time purring on her lap. Bless poor Harley, the way he is treated these days. She wants to tell those who are so mean to him that the one they should really fear coming and sitting beside them is little Joanna Lamb; she's the one who comes to usher out those ready to go. She is the real sweet angel of death and, Sadie suspects, is very good at what she does. She was always a fine student even though she had some trouble finding her way. She liked to do jobs like beat the erasers and straighten up the cloakroom and Sadie assigned her these things often in hopes it would build some confidence. Her parents were fine hardworking people, but they were hard on her to succeed, maybe a little too hard. Some children just can't take that; some just don't have the makeup and they need to be handled in a gentler way. Joanna was one of those who always looked like she needed a hug and Sadie was big on hugging. Now they have all kinds of rules about hugging and touching. What on earth would you do with the boys like Bennie Palmer who wanted to hug and kiss everybody? Children used to baaaa when Joanna came in the classroom and there were some who wanted to make her always sit beside Bo Henderson, a tiny boy with a terrible stutter, who some of the children who had not grown out of being mean called Bbbbo Ppppeep. He turned out fine, too—went to a school that broke down and rebuilt his voice, grew to be over six feet tall, started selling high end real estate and now could buy and sell most every one of those who were cruel to him. People say Joanna has been married to many times to count, but Sadie does not like idle gossip and never has, besides, what does it really matter. She knows how Joanna treats her and that is all the business of hers it is. Some people struggle harder than others and that has always been true. Take a classroom of eight-year-olds. Some will be good readers and not mind a bit standing and performing. Others cannot put any expression into what they are saying because they are having to concentrate so hard on the pronunciation of each and every word. There are some *could* be fine readers but are so frightened to be looked at and on and on. "Each child moves at his own way," she often told parents. "My job is to help that child find his natural speed and not to push him against another."

She tried to teach her children to be positive—to dream but to also do it with their feet on the ground. If you let loose that balloon, you will lose sight of it, she said. The best way to enjoy it is to hold tight to the string and plant your feet on a good solid path. She thinks now that maybe part of why she was so happy and positive is because she saw so much that was not good. She got to be quite good at figuring out which children were neglected at home, but then she was never sure what to do with that information except to love them a little more, hold them close whenever the opportunity allowed. Sometimes it was hard to be cordial to parents she suspected of misdeeds, and it was hard not to qu-

the children a little too much. People think it's a problem of economics, but that is not always true all. There can be just as much neglect and abuse in a big fine house with professional parents as out the trailer park. Alcohol is alcohol and meanness is meanness. An eight-year-old heart is just a innocent eight-year-old heart—fragile and wanting.

In the classroom, she often told stories about her own household and she painted pictures of a that *should* happen in a home, the good things people should strive to possess. Eight is a good age for this. They are bright-eyed and know so much, but they are still such babies in so many ways. She told how she apologized to her son after falsely accusing him of eating the last cookie. It was eaten by the plumber, who happened to mention it, or she might have forever thought her son was lying and he would have thought she falsely accused him, teaching him a terrible lesson way too young in life. Old-fashioned stories with little morals were great in the classroom. She got tired of all the young teachers coming through and saying how old-fashioned she was because she still believed in dictionaries and manners. And she didn't like the shift away from just good old pencils and paper and regular spelling tests. She hated this creative spelling mess. She loved cursive and phonics. For years her favorite thing was the lessons in cursive—taking children from a world of boxy print letters to a beautiful script. It was like teaching a language and suddenly notes home and envelopes in the mailboxes didn't seem so foreign and foreboding. Learning and facing language teaches children to learn and face other things as well, and no, she didn't learn the computer with only one more year before her retirement. The typewriter and overhead projector were just fine to get her to the finish line of a long and lovely race.

Of course, who writes anymore? She has a whole box of letters from her husband, each a little masterpiece, at least to her it is. She taught her own children the importance of a handwritten note and tried to. And she loved spending time on manners. Those boys busting to be first in line. *Slow down* she would say. *There's no fire!* But it was like they couldn't help themselves, like those jumping-bean bodies were on fire and she was constantly needing to remind them to use their indoor voices as opposed to the outdoor voices. She said that all the time and still does. There are people here at Pine Haven who constantly need to be told to use their indoor voices, not to touch or invade the space of their neighbors and to please slow down. *Where is the fire?* she asks Stanley Stone all the time when he goes tearing down the hall to be first at the cafeteria. *Please, just tell me where's the fire.* Of course, poor Stanley is not the best example since his mind is so far gone. But at least he is on foot. It's those in wheelchairs, like herself, who are so dangerous when they pick up speed. *Please use your manners,* she often says. *Were you raised in a barn?*

There was a time when a child who squirmed too much in class was thought to have worms, but now they call it ADD.

“Worms?” little Abby asked one day when Sadie told this, and Toby had to tell the full tale of how childrens' bottoms had to get checked at night with a flashlight to see if they had the pinworms.

“Not in Boston, they didn't,” Rachel Silverman said, and that tickled everybody good. Someone

Sadie worked with in the schools used to say to children right there before the others, *You need to have your bottom checked*, and you know that child was likely embarrassed to death. Even an overconfident child would have to find that humiliating. Sadie told the woman that she thought that was a very unkind way to handle the problem. She was the same woman who taught what an improper fraction was by first making the smallest boy in the class, Edward Tyner, sit on her lap, and she would say “proper” and then she’d turn and sit on top of him and say “improper.” The children, of course, thought it was hilarious, yet Edward never did do very well in life and Sadie has always thought that was likely a factor in that. Sadie has always tried to observe a code of ethics and manners.

Mom, her youngest son, Paul, had said years ago, *please fart just once so we know you aren’t an alien*. They were in the kitchen; he was working on homework and she was frying country-style steaks. He was so full of himself and got away with so much because he was the baby. Horace would have been home any minute and she would have heard his car and seen Honey go running. Oh, she would love to see his face and feel him beside her; that is the most wonderful thing that could happen. Sometimes, she *can* feel him there. Sometimes when she is almost asleep she will feel his head heavy on her shoulder and his breath on her neck.

Who said aliens don’t also break wind? she asked, and Paul screamed with laughter. They called her Ann Landers because she often referred to some bit of good common sense of advice she had read there. “Wonder if Ann Landers farts,” Paul said. It is hard to believe a boy so obsessed with bodily sounds and what he could mine in his nose has grown up to be an ophthalmologist, but he has, and she has his picture right there on her dresser with his wife, Phoebe, and their beautiful babies. They live on the West Coast, which is where Phoebe is from, and they always send her lots and lots of pictures. One time they sent a package that got wet, and when she opened it one picture had stuck to another, and when she carefully pulled them apart it was like a double exposure. The picture of her youngest grandson had somehow wound up there in a picture of Paul and Phoebe on their anniversary trip to Europe. He had stayed with her right there in Fulton, North Carolina, but the picture said he was in Paris, France. And there is such power in what you see that way. She said, *Look, he’s in Paris with his mom and dad* and that is what—all these years later—gave her the whole idea for her business, which she calls Exposure. It was so hard not to believe what she saw right there before her eyes.

The business was suggested to her by Joanna, who sometimes comes to visit after she has left the nursing wing where she has helped someone cross over. She has told Sadie that some days—especially with those she has grown close to—she has to reenter life slowly, like someone coming up from a deep dive slowly so she won’t get the bends. “I get it,” Sadie was able to say. “I know what you mean.” Lord, the bends. She has learned so much from that crazy Paul that she wouldn’t know otherwise. He loves to scuba dive and he has jumped from a plane, too, which scares her to this minute to imagine so she never thinks about that, and if her mind tries to, she conjures up little Rudy with his scruffy flat face and maybe sings a song in her head. Lots of times all she can think is those instrumental songs from that album Stanley Stone plays all day long each and every day, an album

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