

Years ago, in Georgia

-1-

The day my mother got stuck with a needle at work, I'd stayed after school for a student government meeting. A neighbor girl, Patsy, offered me a ride home. Patsy was a senior like my brother Ben, a year older than I was, and she had a car. While she drove, she told me there was a rumor the driver's ed teacher was having an affair with the principal's secretary. Patsy was a student aide in the front office so she heard all the gossip. She swore our school was full of fooling around like you would not believe.

At home, my mother's car was in the driveway though it was only four o'clock. Parked on the street was another car I didn't recognize, but it had an MD license plate.

I went in through the side door. The living room was dark, the plaid drapes behind the sofa drawn closed, which made me stop short. Mama loved the light. She always opened the curtains, even when Daddy complained it made the air conditioner run too much.

I stopped in the living room doorway. Mama was sitting on the sofa. Beside her was her boss, Dr. Kleinpeter, with his arm around her shoulders. Mama had worked as a nurse in his office for as long as I could remember, but I didn't ever recall Dr. Kleinpeter coming to our

house, and I sure as heck had never seen him put his arm around her. For one second, I thought of Patsy's fooling around comment.

They had not heard me come in. I stood in the doorway feeling like an intruder in my own house.

“Mama?”

They jarred at my voice. A throw pillow fell on the floor as they stood up.

“Celeste, honey,” Mama said, her soft Georgia accent sounding oddly tremulous. Her white uniform was like a light bulb in the room. “I didn't know you were home.”

Was she crying? I squinted back and forth at them. “What's going on? Is something wrong?”

She sniffled and tried to smile. “I had a little accident at work today. Dr. Kleinpeter was kind enough to stop by and check on me.”

I started to ask what kind of accident, but Dr. Kleinpeter said he should be going now. He took my mother's hand and said, “Janelle, I'm sure it'll be fine, but why don't you take some time off until we know more.”

Until we know more. I had never heard of a dirty stick, though Mama explained it to me, and again later, when my father and Ben came home. The way she described how it happened—that she was drawing blood from a patient and jabbed her own finger with the needle—it didn't sound all that serious.

The next week was spring break. Every year at Easter we went to Pawley Island, a tradition Mama and Daddy started when my oldest brother Julian was a baby. That year, Julian met us there from law school. We stayed in a little family-run hotel with swinging saloon doors like in old western movies. During the day, Mama and I poked around the ticky-tacky shops,

collected shells on the beach, or read on the creaky wooden deck under an enormous blue and white beach umbrella while the boys disappeared all day for golf and speed boat cruises. Easter was early that spring, and in the mornings, fog hovered over the water. I let the waves splash over my feet once, but that was all. That's what I remember most about our last family trip to Pawley Island, that the water was too cold for swimming.

She didn't get sick, the first time, for a couple of weeks. One Saturday morning, she stretched out on the sofa and stayed there all day. Dr. Kleinpeter came by the following evening, and I eavesdropped on him and my father murmuring in the kitchen.

"How long will she be sick?" Daddy had asked. "You won't fire her, will you?"

I couldn't hear how Dr. Kleinpeter answered him, but Mama never went back to work. All spring and summer, she was off and on the sofa; by fall, she'd started going in and out of the hospital. We knew by then she'd contracted hepatitis, but that didn't sound so serious at first either. A boy down the street had come down with hepatitis after drinking creek water on a Boy Scout trip. He'd gotten sick and turned yellow, and then he was fine. I thought it would be the same with Mama. It turned out she had a different, more serious, kind.

Word she had taken sick got around the neighborhood; people began to visit and deliver meals. I heated up casseroles and did a lot of runs to the pharmacy. Somewhere in the jumble of drop-ins and doctor appointments, I overheard the name of the person whose infected blood Mama had stuck herself with: Mavis Frank. Dr. Kleinpeter came to our house more times than I could count when Mama was sick, and time after time Mama asked after Mrs. Frank.

Mavis Frank got better. My mother did not.

A few days after Mama's funeral, a dark December morning that was colder than normal, I lifted the car keys from the hook by the kitchen door and drove to Mavis Frank's house. I'd

found her address in the phone book.

Mavis Frank was a widow. She lived with a grown son. Maybe that's why I didn't go to the door and knock on it; instead, I stood in their front yard in my bare feet, not realizing I'd forgotten to put on shoes until I felt the prickles of near-frozen grass under me.

The house was small and tidy, yellow with blue awnings, on a quiet street full of Chinese elms and chain-link fences. Next to the front stoop, a dwarf fir tree was planted under a picture window strung with Christmas lights. Beside it was a Nativity scene, the Wise Men glistening with a coat of ice.

A line of decorative rocks—blues, grays, pinks--lined the walkway to the house. I picked up a pink oval-shaped one, tugging a little because it stuck to the cold ground. When I straightened up, I threw the rock through the window above the fir tree.

The sound was as loud as a crack of thunder. There was a commotion inside the house and then the front door opened, part way. A man peeked out. I didn't move. The door opened all the way, and the man came out to the stoop.

"Did you do that?" he called to me. He was wearing plaid flannel pajamas and brown slippers. He twisted around to the window and back at me. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"This is Mavis Frank's house, right?"

The man's expression changed from incredulous to protective. He came down the steps. "Who are you? Why are you asking about my mother?"

I bent to pick up another rock, a small flat one that, if we'd been near the ocean, Julian could have skimmed off the top of the waves.

"Hey!" the man cried, rushing toward me. "Don't you dare throw that! Are you crazy?"

"It's her fault," I said. "My mama's dead because of Mavis Frank."

The man stopped in place. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw another man come out of the house next door.

“Mitchell?” the neighbor called. “You need help? You want me to call the police?”

The man—Mitchell—held out his hand, palm out. “No,” he said. “No, we’re okay.”

I stood holding the rock, not throwing it, but not letting go either. Mavis Frank’s son stayed on the sidewalk a few feet in front of me.

“Young lady, I’m sorry. My mother is sorry too. We never...I don’t know what to say to you, except we are both so sorry about your mother.”

I looked at him. He appeared older than my daddy, which meant his mother had to be elderly. I wondered if she was inside, watching us from behind a set of heavy plaid curtains. Or maybe she was on the sofa, too weak to get up or eat without assistance. This man, Mitchell...I wondered if he took care of her and helped her to the bathroom or listened to her gasp for air, and felt as helpless and scared as I had felt.

I let the rock slide out of my hand and bounce on the ground near my feet.

Mitchell took a step closer to me. “My Lord, you are not even wearing shoes. Let me call somebody for you. Does your father know you’re here?”

I turned away. From behind I heard Mavis Frank’s son say some other words, that they would think of us and pray for us, but I didn’t acknowledge them. I crunched across the grass, got in the car, and drove off. At my house, I went inside and sat in front of the dark television. After a while the phone rang. I heard my father on the extension in his bedroom.

“She did what?” he said, his voice loud with disbelief. We were alone. Ben and Julian had gone back to college. It made no sense, everyone had decided, for them to drop out for the semester. We all should go back to our normal routines, as best we could.