

LYDIE TURNS THIRTEEN

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Perched on a rung near the top of the ladder, Lydie examined her face in the window she had just cleaned. She put on an expression she practiced in the mirror at home, eyelids half closed, lips parted, chin raised. Lydie thought the pose made her look mysterious, wise, maybe even sexy. After all, in two days she would be thirteen and that was almost grown up, the thing she most wanted to be.

“You missed a spot in the corner,” Mrs. Hall called from the ground.

“Here?” Lydie asked, leaning out to her left.

“Yes, but do be careful.”

Lydie stretched even further until she was attached to the ladder by only one hand and one foot, her free arm and leg dangling in the second-story air. “Or here?” She peeked down at Mrs. Hall whose white hair fluffed out around her head in the light breeze like a dandelion gone to seed.

“Stop that right now, Lydia MacArthur,” Mrs. Hall shouted. “That window’s clean enough. Come down this minute.”

Lydie laughed. She didn’t want to really upset Mrs. Hall. It was just fun to see her trying to be mad. She could never pull that off for more than a few seconds unlike Lydie’s mother who could stay mad for days when she was drinking. Lydie hung from the side of the ladder for a moment more, half tethered, half floating in space. Over her shoulder she could see the single-story ranch her family had lived in for nearly a year. In another month, once the maples and oaks and birch in the woods between the two houses leafed out, Lydie’s wouldn’t be visible anymore from Mrs. Hall’s. Lydie was not looking forward to summer and being home with her mother for three months. Sighing, she went down the ladder.

Mrs. Hall checked her watch and announced they should call it a day. She was already putting a snack together when Lydie joined her inside. The sweet smell of freshly-baked coconut macaroons filled the house. Mrs. Hall led Lydie to the side porch where they sat enjoying the warm spring weather while eating cheddar cheese on fancy crackers along with cups of tea and the cookies.

“Is your father out of town this week?” Mrs. Hall asked. Lydie nodded. “Where to?”

Lydie had to think for a moment. Her father always told her where he was going, but he was gone so often and for so long now that sometimes she couldn't remember which good-bye had been the most recent. "Chicago, I think," she said.

"Probably too cold there for yardwork," Mrs. Hall said. She took several slow sips from her tea, then asked, "Did I pay you for taking those bundles of branches out to the street last week?" Lydie shook her head. Mrs. Hall laughed. "Oh, my. I am getting forgetful." She told Lydie to go to the hall closet to get the money from her purse. "I believe we agreed on two dollars."

Lydie helped herself to another cookie before going back inside. Mrs. Hall made the best desserts. Lydie's mother couldn't bake at all. Once she'd tried to make brownies from a box and forgot they were in the oven until the kitchen filled with smoke. Luckily Lydie had been home to carry the rock-hard mess outside before any real damage was done.

Mrs. Hall's wallet held ones, fives, and a ten. Lydie counted out her pay. It would have been easy to take more. Mrs. Hall really did seem to have trouble remembering things. The month before she'd forgotten to pay her electric bill, and the power company turned her electricity off. But Lydie would never take

more than she'd earned. Money wasn't the only reason Lydie looked forward to coming to her house.

The moment Lydie walked in Mrs. Hall's front door, a velvety hush hugged Lydie's body like a fur-lined glove. Any sounds in the house were quiet, too. Like the tinkling of the porcelain clock in the kitchen when it struck the hour, and Mrs. Hall's voice, her words so gentle and soft, little butterflies that brushed against Lydie's ears. It was that kind of peace she longed for in her own home.

As Lydie leaned down to pick up a hat that had fallen off the shelf, Lydie noticed a cardboard box on the floor in the back of the closet. There were envelopes inside, all facing the same way. The letter at the front was addressed to *Margaret Hall*—that was Mrs. Hall—from *H. Hall* whose address was in Collierville, about half an hour from Memphis. Lydie thumbed through the letters. They all seemed to have the same information on the envelopes. What was really strange was most of them had never been opened.

“Did you find my purse?” Mrs. Hall called from the kitchen.

“Yes,” Lydie answered. She pulled the box to the front of the closet. Some of the postmarks were recent, from the past year. Others were older, as far back as ten years.

“Lydia. What are you doing?” Mrs. Hall stood outside the closet, her lips in a tight straight line. Lydie shoved the box back into the corner. “Those are none of your business,” Mrs. Hall said.

Lydie’s face burned with shame. What had she been thinking, snooping like that? She wasn’t in her own house where she had to sneak around to find out what was going on. How could she have been so stupid? Just then her eye caught a glimpse of something shiny on the closet shelf and words Lydie hadn’t known were there came out of her mouth. “I thought you said you didn’t have any vases. And here’s one plain as day where anyone could see.”

Mrs. Hall looked to where Lydie pointed. Color rose in her cheeks. “Why, yes, there is. I guess I must have forgotten.”

Lydie’s words gathered speed as she stepped out of the closet, rushing through her lips almost without effort. “Like your electricity bill? Are you sure you paid it this month?” Mrs. Hall’s cheeks flushed. Lydie felt her stomach sink. Still she moved past Mrs. Hall, stuffing the two dollars deep into her pocket. Lydie knew there was no taking back what she’d just said any more than she could take back looking at the letters. She hurried back out to the porch where she waited for Mrs. Hall to finish in the kitchen.

Hot tears formed in the corners of Lydie's eyes as she listened to the sounds of cupboards being open and shut and Mrs. Hall's feet moving back and forth across the linoleum floor. Lydie felt the tears overflowing onto her cheeks. Mrs. Hall might never want her to come back. She'd probably say so now that she'd had time to think. Her footsteps were coming closer. Lydie wiped the tears away. The only thing she could think to do was run, and so she did, down the porch steps, across Mrs. Hall's backyard and into the woods, running as fast as she could all the way home.

Lydie was still breathing hard when she came into the living room. Her mother had the TV tuned to black and white reruns of *I Love Lucy*. It was the episode where Lucy accidentally handcuffs herself to Ricky. The two of them stumbled around the apartment as Ricky tried to get ready to go to the club.

Lydie said hello. Her mother waited for Lucy to finish her line before turning to Lydie. "Where have you been? I thought you were supposed to call if you were going over there after school. Isn't that one of the rules you and your father came up with? The old lady has a phone, doesn't she?"

"Sorry," Lydie mumbled.

"So what did she have you doing today?"

Lydie stuck her hand in her pocket. She pressed her fingers against the folded bills. “Windows,” she said.

Her mother snorted. “You never help me do windows.” Lydie had her mouth open to remind her mother that it was Lydie who had done the windows at this house, but her mother had already turned her attention back to Lucy and Ricky. Now they were bumping into each other trying to get out the apartment door.

Lydie slipped down the hall to her room to start her homework. At six she went to the kitchen. Her father had gone to the grocery store before he left town. There were still fresh vegetables in the refrigerator. She could make a salad. And there was always spaghetti and a jar of sauce. When the food was ready, Lydie called her mother. She came to the kitchen but left the television on with the sound turned up. “Smells good,” her mother said as she sat down. “You’re a good cook.” Lydie took the chair across from her mother. She scooted her spaghetti around her plate without eating, still full from the food at Mrs. Hall’s. Lydie knew she wasn’t much of a cook. Not really. She could make things from a box or the freezer, but that was all. Still, Lydie made sure she and her mother ate when her father was gone. After all, wasn’t that part of being grown up? Being responsible for a home and a family? Wasn’t it good

she was finding out what that was really like? Lydie thought so. At least most of the time.

Her mother took only a few bites, which was no surprise to Lydie. When her mother was drinking, she might not eat at all, sometimes for days. Lydie worried then. She didn't want to let her father down or for her mother to get sick.

"Do you have homework?" her mother asked, pushing her plate away. "Because I can't help you." She kneaded the back of her neck with one hand. "I've had a headache all day," she said. So that was what she was calling it now, Lydie thought, taking their dishes to the sink. The only headache her mother ever had came out of the pints of vodka she kept stuffed between the couch cushions. Why did she do that? Lydie wondered. Why not just keep the bottles on the kitchen counter and use a glass? It wasn't like Lydie and her father didn't know she drank all day. How could they not? Lydie's mother stood, taking two wobbly steps toward the hall. "Did you hear me?" she said.

"Yes," Lydie said. "I'll ask Daddy anything I don't know when he calls."

"Good luck with that," her mother said, already halfway to the living room.

When the call came, Lydie stretched the phone cord into the bathroom, shutting the door so she could hear over the TV. “Hi, Daddy,” she said. “Where are you? I might have forgotten.”

“That makes me feel important,” her father teased. “Chicago. The windy city. And, boy, is it. Almost lost my briefcase coming out of the airport.”

“Really?” Lydie asked. Her father was such a joker sometimes.

“Really. So what’s new in Whoville?”

“Not much. I made two dollars.”

“Good. So that’s still working out?”

Lydie lied, telling her father things were okay with Mrs. Hall.

“And how’s school?” he asked.

“Fine.”

“What’s *fine* mean exactly? I don’t want to come home to find out *fine* means Cs because you know Cs are not okay with me. Not from you. You know that, don’t you?” Lydie thought she heard a catch in her father’s voice.

“I know, Daddy,” Lydie said. “I got an A- on my geometry test.”

“Now what’d I tell you? A smart girl. And almost grown up. Can’t anybody say otherwise.” Over the phone, Lydie heard a door opening then the siren

from a passing police car. She had to strain to hear what her father said next.

“Tell your mother I’ll be home on Friday.”

“But that’s the whole week. And my birthday—”

“Got to pay the bills, Lydie. You know that.” Lydie nodded, her throat tightening. She tried to picture her father in his motel room, wearing the suit he’d left the house in, with the paisley tie he and Lydie had picked out together the year before on Father’s Day. But the room itself was all she could see, a room with a bed and a dresser and a small table with a lamp and a phone. An empty room with nobody there. “We’ll do your birthday when I get home,” her father said. “Now don’t forget to tell your mother.” Then he hung up.

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Lydie found a note on the kitchen table when she got home from school the next day. *Call the old lady*. Lydie couldn’t understand what her mother had against Mrs. Hall. She wasn’t sure the two women had ever even met. It wasn’t like their old neighborhood in Little Rock where the mothers stood at the back fence talking every afternoon while their kids played. Here the houses were too far apart. Then there were the woods. But Lydie liked that about this neighborhood, the way each house was an island surrounded by trees. So did her father. He said it reminded him of the Ozarks, the place he’d

grown up. Lydie's mother hated their new house. She hated the location. The yard. The carpet. The way the rooms were laid out. She couldn't understand why Lydie's father had moved them in the first place.

Lydie found out about the move by listening on the phone in her parents' bedroom. A man with a gravelly voice told her father their house would be ready in two weeks. Lydie felt angry she'd had to find out that way. If her father thought she was so grown up, why hadn't he told her they were moving instead of making her snoop? Then she'd had to act surprised when he finally did tell Lydie and her mother a week later. The whole time her father was talking, his eyes kept urging Lydie to help him convince her mother the move was a good thing. But Lydie kept her lips pressed tightly together. He couldn't keep information from her then expect her to pretend he hadn't.

The television was on in the living room, but Lydie's mother wasn't there. Lydie took her books to her room. On her way back to the kitchen, Lydie paused at her parents' bedroom door. Her mother must have been up sometime. She'd answered the phone and written the note. It was too early in the day for her mother to be passed out. Or was it? Lydie decided to call Mrs. Hall first then check on her mother.

It took four tries for Lydie to dial the numbers in the right order. If only she could take back what she had done, Lydie kept thinking. Maybe if she just apologized right away, Mrs. Hall would forgive her, and everything could be the way it was. Lydie tried to think of things she could say, but all she could come up with was *I'm sorry*; she wasn't sure that would be enough. It never was with Lydie's mother.

When Mrs. Hall answered, she sounded out of breath. "Hello, Lydia. Hang on. Let me sit down." Lydie heard her pulling a chair across the kitchen floor. "Okay, now what was it I called you about? Your mother answered. I hope I didn't disturb her. She sounded a bit, well, sleepy?"

Lydie felt the front of her neck growing warm. "What time did you call?" she asked.

"Around two thirty. I thought you'd be home from school. That was the time you said, wasn't it?" Lydie told Mrs. Hall she'd stayed after to help her English teacher staple papers. "I'm sure she appreciated that very much," Mrs. Hall said. There was a long pause. Was she about to tell her not to come anymore? Lydie wondered. She leaned a shoulder against the wall to steady herself. Instead, Mrs. Hall asked if her mother was all right.

Lydie took in a quick breath. It had been a while since she'd had to answer that question. After they moved, her family had stopped going out, not even to church. Her father said the drive to their old church took too long, and he hadn't had time to find a new one with all his traveling. When he said those things, Lydie wanted to tell him he didn't need to lie to her, that she understood why they moved, why they didn't go out anymore. "My mother's not feeling well today," Lydie told Mrs. Hall.

"I see. You tell her I hope she's better soon." Mrs. Hall paused again for what seemed to Lydie like a very long time. When she couldn't stand the silence anymore, Lydie asked if there was some work Mrs. Hall wanted her to do. "Oh, yes. Those pots out front. I had the geraniums delivered this morning. The firecracker red ones this year. Can you come now?"

Lydie hung up the phone then changed into her old shoes. Maybe everything was going to be all right. Maybe Mrs. Hall had forgiven Lydie without her having to say anything. Or maybe she had just forgotten. Either way Lydie felt relieved, almost like the blood running through her arteries had been electrically charged. She was halfway across the yard before she remembered her mother. Lydie angrily kicked at the grass on her way back to the house. Why couldn't her mother be like other mothers? Nobody else Lydie's age had to

cook and clean and do laundry like she did. It wasn't fair. Lydie stopped. Her mother was probably still asleep. Likely she would stay that way until Lydie woke her for dinner. She didn't really need to check on her. Lydie turned back toward Mrs. Hall's house. Then she stopped again. Her father depended on her to look after her mother when he was gone. He said that showed she was growing up. And wasn't that what Lydie wanted to be? Grown up?

After several seconds in the dark of her parents' bedroom, Lydie made out her mother lying on her right side, still in the tan slacks and checked blouse she'd worn the day before. All Lydie had to do was make sure she was breathing. "Mom?" Lydie's mother groaned in her sleep. Lydie smelled something sour. She turned on the lamp to check the floor around the bed first then went into the attached bathroom. Brown vomit spotted the tile floor. Lydie clenched her fists. Couldn't her mother at least throw up in the sink if she couldn't make it to the toilet? Even a kid knew to do that. Lydie thought about leaving the mess for her mother to clean up when she finally came to, but images of her mother slipping and hitting her head made Lydie reconsider. She went to the kitchen for paper towels and the bottle of Lysol.

By the time Lydie got to Mrs. Hall's, she had already assembled the pots on her driveway. "The geraniums are in the garage," she told Lydie. "Grab

some of that peat moss, too. A couple of handfuls for each pot ought to do the trick.”

Lydie hurried to do as Mrs. Hall had asked, thanking her lucky stars as she did. Mrs. Hall really did seem to have forgiven her. Otherwise she wouldn't be letting Lydie go into the garage by herself. But then it occurred to Lydie there was nothing of any real importance kept in the garage. There was the car, of course, a blue Ford sedan. Mrs. Hall did still drive herself on errands every now and then. Yard tools hung on hooks along one wall with a workbench against the other. Cardboard boxes were stacked under the workbench. Lydie kicked one sending a puff of dust up in the air. Curious as she might be, there was no way she was ever going to open those boxes.

“How's your mother?” Mrs. Hall asked when Lydie returned.

“Asleep.”

“Rest is usually the best medicine for whatever ails a person,” Mrs. Hall said. She handed Lydie a geranium. “Plant each one this deep.” She pointed to the line made by the soil from the nursery pot. “No deeper. The stem will rot if you do.” The potting soil felt warm between Lydie's fingers, the ripe, earthy smell reminding her of the woods in summer. “Is your father back yet?” Mrs. Hall said.

Lydie froze. Had Mrs. Hall decided to tell her father? Was that why she'd said nothing to Lydie? "No," she answered. "I'm not sure when he's coming back. Maybe not until next week."

"I see," Mrs. Hall said. She crossed her arms over her chest, watching Lydie work. Lydie's hands shook. Was Mrs. Hall waiting for her to make another mistake? Was this a test of some kind? Lydie's mother did that, watching when she cut potatoes or sorted laundry, waiting for her to make the slightest mistake then sharply correcting her while Lydie had to hold her tongue, knowing full well she had done the task better than her mother ever could.

Lydie centered the geranium in the hole she'd made and looked up at Mrs. Hall for approval before covering the roots. Mrs. Hall nodded. "Two more just like that," she said. Then Mrs. Hall took off her gardening gloves and disappeared into the house.

She returned with a present wrapped in lemon-yellow paper dotted with tiny pink flowers. "Happy birthday. I know it's a day early, but I didn't think you'd be coming over tomorrow." Lydie started to wipe her hands on her jeans. Mrs. Hall stopped her. "Come inside to wash your hands first."

A small homemade layer cake sat on the counter next to the kitchen sink, iced in the same color of yellow as the wrapping paper. *Happy 13th Lydia* was

written across the top in pink icing. Even though that was her given name, only Mrs. Hall called Lydie that. “There’s ice cream, too,” Mrs. Hall said. “Well, sherbet. It’s all my doctor will let me have these days.” Mrs. Hall carried the cake into the dining room where they sat down. “I’m afraid I don’t have any candles.”

Lydie looked at the scene in front of her, wanting to capture the moment in all its beauty before it disappeared, the yellow cake, the lace tablecloth, the old-fashioned ice cream dishes beside the cake. Mrs. Hall, too, the way her curly hair framed her round face, her rimless glasses always halfway down her nose, her flowered housedresses with patch pockets on the front. Tears came to Lydie’s eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Mrs. Hall asked. “Are you all right?” She reached across the table and put her hand on Lydie’s wrist.

Lydie swallowed hard. “It’s wonderful. Thank you.” Too wonderful, she feared. Nothing good in her life ever happened without something bad happening soon after, ruining whatever good there had been before. Why couldn’t life just be one or the other and not so mixed? she always wondered. At least then she wouldn’t be so tired from trying to figure things out all the time.

Mrs. Hall pushed Lydie's present toward her. "Better wait to thank me until you see what it is." Lydie slid a finger under the edge of the paper, carefully breaking the tape so she wouldn't have to tear the lovely paper. There was a gardening book inside, a big one with sections on flowers, vegetables, trees, and lots of color pictures. "Buying that was entirely selfish on my part," Mrs. Hall told her. "I figured the more you know about gardening, the more I can have you do around here." She patted Lydie's hand. "So now what do you think? Do you still like your present?"

"Yes," Lydie said. "Very much." She looked up *geraniums* in the index and turned to the page. Just as Mrs. Hall had said, they shouldn't be planted too deep. "How did you know that about planting geraniums?" she asked.

Mrs. Hall straightened in her chair. "Well, from my son. He studied plants. That's his profession."

"I didn't know you had a son," Lydie said.

"Yes. Our only child."

"What's his name?" Lydie asked.

"Harold." So that was who the letters were from. Lydie hoped Mrs. Hall would say more about her son, but she didn't. Instead she sliced a generous piece of cake for Lydie then a smaller one for herself. And Lydie didn't dare

bring the subject of the letters up. She wasn't about to push her luck by being nosey again. Lydie took slow bites, alternating the sweet chocolate cake with the tangy lemon sherbet, letting the taste of each fill her mouth before she swallowed.

When they were done, it didn't take long to get the rest of the flowers planted. Mrs. Hall walked out into the front yard to admire their work. "Come see," she called to Lydie. The burst of color on each side of the door gave the house a cheerful, welcoming look. "I just love geraniums," Mrs. Hall said. "Of course, it will be your job to cut off the dead blooms. You'll have to do that every couple of days if we want more flowers to grow. Can you do that?" Lydie nodded, relieved to know there would be someplace she could escape to over the summer after all.

"Don't forget your book," Mrs. Hall reminded Lydie as they finished cleaning up. Lydie hesitated. What would her mother say? She wouldn't like that Mrs. Hall had bought her a gift, especially if she had forgotten Lydie's birthday again like she had the year before.

"You can leave the book here, if you like," Mrs. Hall said. "I'll put it on the shelf in the living room. That way it will always be here when we need

to look anything up.” Lydie thanked her, wondering how Mrs. Hall had known what she had been thinking.

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When Lydie got home from school on her birthday, her mother was sitting at the kitchen table, paging through the Sears catalogue. No one at school had known it was Lydie’s birthday. But then how would people know unless she’d been having a party or a sleepover? And how could she have done that? Lydie had stopped inviting friends to her house long before they’d moved. The important thing this year, Lydie kept telling herself, was she wouldn’t be a kid anymore. She was a teenager now, almost grown up. A few more years and she’d be off to college or a job and no longer living at home. That knowledge made Lydie feel like she was glowing, like a Christmas tree all lit up.

Her mother turned to women’s dresses in the catalogue, the kind she wore to church. “Are we going on Easter?” Lydie asked, sitting down across from her mother. They’d never missed church on Easter, even after their move. It was the one Sunday her father had been willing to make the drive back across town.

“Maybe,” her mother said. She turned the pages slowly, her eyes examining each dress. “Everything’s so short now.” She pointed to one model. “You’ve

got to have legs a mile long to wear that.” She turned the catalogue so Lydie could see what she was talking about.

“You’d look pretty in that dress,” Lydie said. The coral color of the fabric matched her mother’s reddish-brown hair. Even uncombed, her mother’s curls caught the light from the window over the sink. “And it’s not so short. You should see the skirts girls wear at my school.”

Lydie’s mother looked up from the catalogue. Her eyes flitted across Lydie’s face. Then she frowned. “Don’t you get any ideas, young lady. I’ve seen those skirts on TV and... well... they’re... *immodest*.”

Lydie stifled a laugh. What a funny word her mother had used. Lydie imagined saying that to a girl at school. *That mini-skirt you’re wearing is immodest*. A giggle escaped from her mouth.

Lydie’s mother closed the catalogue. “Are you laughing at me?” Lydie shook her head, pressing her lips tightly together as she did. “You’d better not be.” Her mother hugged the catalogue to her chest, standing up so quickly the chair she’d been sitting in fell backwards to the floor with a loud crash. The giggles pushed harder at Lydie’s lips. She tried coughing to make them go away, but that didn’t work. Her mother shoved the fallen chair out of the way with her foot and came around to Lydie’s side of the table. She stood glaring

down at her. Still Lydie couldn't make the giggles stop. She opened her mouth to apologize, but that was absolutely the wrong thing to do. The giggles became full laughter. Lydie put both hands up to her face, fighting to at least muffle the sounds coming out of her mouth.

Her mother slammed the catalogue down on the table in front of Lydie. The laughter stopped. Lydie braced herself for what might happen next. Her mother had never hit her, but she had come close. Instead, when Lydie looked up, her mother was smiling. "*Immodest*," she said. "Nobody says that." She burst into laughter. "My mother said *immodest*. Oh, my god. Don't let me turn into her, Lydie. Anything but that. Send me to the old ladies' home first. Promise me?" Lydie smiled. Her mother was laughing so hard she had to put the palms of both hands down on the table to steady herself.

Then Lydie began laughing again, too, picturing her grandmother telling her mother something she wore was *immodest*. Lydie had no idea what that might have been. She'd never seen any pictures of her mother as a girl. Still the thought of her being scolded for something she wore struck Lydie as very funny. Her mother went to lean against the counter beside the sink. Lydie joined her, the two of them laughing until Lydie's ribs began to ache.

Finally, her mother picked up the fallen chair and sat down. Lydie collapsed at her feet, resting against her mother's leg as they both caught their breath. Lydie heard the robins chirp-chirping outside, the wind brushing a branch against the side of the house. She looked up at her mother. Her eyes weren't dark the way they usually were. Lydie raised herself onto her knees, reaching up to touch her mother's face. The skin on her cheek was warm and soft, not as Lydie had imagined it might be after all the years of drinking.

"Don't," her mother said, brushing Lydie's hand away. "Watch out now. I need to get up." Her mother stood, looking around the kitchen as if she wasn't sure where she was. She pushed her hair back from her face and smoothed the front of her blouse. "I'll be in the living room," she told Lydie, stepping past her.

Lydie stayed sitting on the floor. She felt like when she woke in the middle of a dream. Once awake, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember where the dream had been headed though she was sure she had known in the dream. Lydie would hurry to close her eyes again, hoping to return to the same dream to find out where things were going but never could. Even if she did get back to sleep, the dream was always different.

Lydie heard the television come on in the living room then the couch cushions wheezing as her mother sat down. She glanced around the kitchen. There were no dishes in the sink or on the counter. Even on days her mother wasn't drinking, she sometimes forgot to eat. Lydie went to the refrigerator. She found lunchmeat and bread. Lydie took the sandwich with a glass of milk to the living room on a tray. Her mother lay on her side on the couch, propping her head up with one arm. *The Dick Van Dyke Show* had come on. Laura was near tears after burning the dinner she'd cooked for Rob's boss. Lydie set the food on the coffee table. "Not hungry," her mother said, the words running together. "Don't want any of the crap you cook."

"You need to eat something," Lydie said.

"Don't talk to me like that. You're not my mother." She swung her free arm toward the coffee table, sending the glass of milk onto the carpet. "You'd better clean that up," Lydie's mother said, collapsing back against the couch.

Like the giggles earlier, the word *no* pushed at Lydie's lips. Then, like the laughter, words she couldn't stop. "I wish you weren't my mother."

Lydie's mother raised her head. "Don't think I haven't wished the same thing, little girl." The words hit Lydie like rocks thrown at close range. She ran

out the kitchen door and through the woods to Mrs. Hall's. She could say she'd come to look at her gardening book.

When Mrs. Hall didn't answer Lydie's knock, she went to the garage to peek through the window. Mrs. Hall's car was gone. Lydie found the key Mrs. Hall had shown her, hidden in a rusty Sweets tin under a bush at the side of the house. She got her book and went to sit on the porch, feeling strange being inside the house without Mrs. Hall there.

Lydie looked at the pages on flowers first, petunias and roses then lots of others she'd never heard of. She completely lost track of time until she heard the clock in the kitchen striking five. Her mother would expect her home soon. Or would she? Did she even know Lydie was gone? Then her father would be calling at seven, and Lydie would have to tell him that her mother had forgotten her birthday again. She didn't want to think about any of that.

Lydie carried her book back inside, laying it on the coffee table in the living room. She paused to look at the photograph of Mrs. Hall's husband on the mantle. He had been an airline pilot until he died. He wore his uniform with a tiny pair of wings on one lapel. One other photograph sat on the mantle, a black and white of Mrs. Hall on her wedding day. She looked so young and pretty in her high-collared white dress. Lydie tiptoed around the quiet living

room, pausing to look at the various knick-knacks. Her path took her into the hall, past the closet where the box of letters was.

Mrs. Hall had said the letters were none of Lydie's business. But how would she know if Lydie read just one? She had to find out why Mrs. Hall hadn't opened all the letters. It just didn't make sense. Why wouldn't Mrs. Hall want to read what her son wrote to her?

Lydie pulled the box to the front of the closet. She took out the opened envelope from furthest back. *Dear Mother. Hope this finds you well. Sometimes I think about calling. I worry you may be sick, but since you asked me not to, I won't. I will just keep on writing. Maybe someday you will be able to forgive me. That's what I hope for. Love, Harold.*

What had he done that was so terrible? Lydie wondered. She refolded the letter before returning it to the envelope. The next open letter was postmarked five months later. *Dear Mother. It's spring now. I know that's your favorite time of year. Busy here. Selling flowers and vegetables like crazy. I'd send some to you if you'd let me. There's new tomatoes. Mature in 65 days. Well, that's all for now. I'll write again soon. Please forgive me. Love, Harold.*

It was just as Mrs. Hall had said. Her son was a gardener. Still Lydie didn't know what he had done. There were no more open letters. Lydie went to the

kitchen to check the driveway. It was still empty. She opened Mrs. Hall's knife drawer and found one she could slit the top of an envelope with.

Except for the different dates, all the letters said the same thing, news of Harold's life and asking to be forgiven. Lydie pulled out the envelope from the front of the box. It had been mailed only two weeks before. *Dear Mother. I drove by your house this week. Don't worry. It wasn't during the day. I wouldn't take a chance on upsetting you that way. But it was a full moon, and I hadn't seen the house in so many years. Not much has changed. Please forgive me. Please. Love, Harold.*

Still no hint of what he had done that he needed to be forgiven for. Lydie replaced that last letter then slid the box back and closed the closet door. Where might there be more clues? Not in the bedrooms. Lydie knew because she had helped Mrs. Hall with her spring cleaning. One was Mrs. Hall's room. The other two had become a sewing room and a guest room for when Mrs. Hall's sister came from Nashville. The small closets in each were filled with supplies used for that room.

Lydie remembered the dusty cardboard boxes in the garage. She'd have to hurry. Lydie had no idea how much longer Mrs. Hall would be gone. At the garage door, Lydie paused, asking herself what she was doing. Hadn't she just

avoided losing the one place she felt safe by not minding her own business? Maybe she should just wait. Maybe Mrs. Hall would talk more about her son someday. And why did Lydie want to know what he needed to be forgiven for in the first place? It wasn't like what he had done had anything to do with her. Mrs. Hall was just Lydie's...what? she wondered. The word *friend* came to mind. But she wasn't really a friend because she was older and did things like an aunt or a grandmother would. She'd even bought Lydie a birthday present when her own mother probably hadn't. The truth was Lydie cared about Mrs. Hall; it seemed Mrs. Hall cared about her, too. And people who cared for each other should care about the other person's hurts. If Harold had done something to hurt his mother, Lydie needed to know what and why.

She brushed dust and cobwebs off the first box. Inside Lydie found canning supplies, glass jars and lids of various sizes. The second box held a mix of things. Underneath a pair of plaid curtains, Lydie found a small lamp with no shade, several jigsaw puzzles, some old magazines.

Lydie opened the last box. There were photographs inside, snapshots mostly, all black and white. She pulled the box into the light coming through the garage door window then sat down on the concrete floor. One picture

showed a little boy who had to be Harold with a much younger Mrs. Hall sitting in an upholstered chair. The photograph had caught Harold as he moved away from Mrs. Hall. She reached after him with one hand. In the other, she held a clear glass half full of a dark liquid. Harold's eyes were round with fright, his mouth open as if crying out. What a strange picture, Lydie thought. What had been going on? She looked more closely. Mrs. Hall's eyes were focused on the glass. The look on her face told Lydie everything. It was a look Lydie knew as well as she knew her own name.

But that couldn't be. Mrs. Hall was not like Lydie's mother. She was kind and loving; she took care of herself and her house. Lydie's mother was a mean, sloppy drunk who couldn't even remember her only child's birthday. She had been that way for years now. Lydie dumped the box of pictures out on the garage floor. One picture wasn't proof. It could have been a party. Or some special day.

But there were others. Mrs. Hall sitting on the ground at a picnic, slumped against her husband, a can of Schlitz beer in her hand, the same expression on her face. Then one of Harold's birthdays. He looked to be about five. There were presents on the table and a store-bought cake. Lydie could tell Harold wasn't interested in the gifts. His head was turned, his eyes focused on a figure

in one corner of the picture. It was Mrs. Hall sitting in the same upholstered chair, her head leaning against the back. One of her arms dangled over the side. Then another photograph. Mrs. Hall closer to Lydie's mother's age, in the kitchen, a drink on the counter in front of her, dirty dishes next to the drink. She glared at whoever was behind the camera. Had it been Harold? Lydie wondered. But why would he want a record of his mother drunk? Lydie had memories etched so deep in her brain a hundred years of living might not erase them.

The sound of a car pulling into the drive stopped Lydie's breath. Her body froze, too. She couldn't let go of the pictures in her hands. Lydie looked up in horror as the garage door swung open. Mrs. Hall gasped when she saw Lydie sitting there on the concrete floor. She didn't move for a moment. Then Mrs. Hall walked back to her car, reached inside and turned the engine off. Lydie still couldn't get her body to work. The only thing moving was her eyes as she followed Mrs. Hall's feet returning to stand in front of Lydie and the empty box.

"So your curiosity got the best of you again," Mrs. Hall said. She reached down to take the picture of her standing in the kitchen out of Lydie's hand.

Lydie wanted Mrs. Hall to tell her what she had seen wasn't true, that she hadn't been like Lydie's mother. She couldn't understand how a person like Mrs. Hall could have once been like her mother. She wanted to ask but couldn't find her voice.

"That's a good one," Mrs. Hall said, looking at the photograph. "Someone else would have to tell me when it was." She bent down and picked up another picture. "Pretty much any of these I'd need someone to tell me that. But they're all good shots of what I was. A drunk."

Hearing the word come out of Mrs. Hall's mouth brought Lydie's eyes to her face. "I don't understand," she said.

"No, I guess you wouldn't," Mrs. Hall said. "Not yet, anyway."

"Understand what?"

Mrs. Hall dropped the picture back in the box. "Come on. Let's put all this away and go in the house. We can talk inside." She took the other pictures from Lydie's hands. Finally, Lydie could move. She helped gather the rest of the pictures then replaced the cover on the box. Mrs. Hall slid the box back under the workbench. "There's groceries in the car you can help me carry."

Mrs. Hall placed bags in Lydie's arms. She closed the trunk and led Lydie in through the kitchen door. "Right there on the counter," she said. Lydie

obeyed. Neither spoke as Mrs. Hall put the eggs and milk in the refrigerator. “Now come sit down,” she said, taking Lydie by the arm.

Lydie jerked her arm away. It had just occurred to her that Mrs. Hall had been lying to her. Maybe not directly, but she had been pretending to be someone she wasn't. Lydie had believed that's who she was, not this other woman, the one in the pictures doing the same thing to her son that Lydie's mother was doing to her. “No,” Lydie said. “I don't want to hear what you have to say.”

“Lydia, I'm so sorry,” Mrs. Hall said. “It was all so long ago. I don't even think about those times that often anymore.”

“Well, maybe you should,” Lydie said. “Your son thinks about them.”

Mrs. Hall walked out of the kitchen. Lydie heard her open the closet. Then she came back. “Lydia, you read my letters.”

“Yes, and I'm not sorry I did. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have been trying to find out about your son and looked at those pictures. I wouldn't have known about you.”

“No, you wouldn't have.” Mrs. Hall pulled a chair out from under the kitchen table to sit down. “I probably wouldn't have told you. I thought about it. Just this week. When I called. As soon as I heard your mother's voice...”

Lydie waited for her to go on. "I need some water." Mrs. Hall stood and retrieved a glass from the counter, filled it, took a long drink, then brought the glass with her when she sat back down.

"What about hearing my mother's voice?" Lydie said, still angry.

"I knew from the way she spoke she wasn't sick," Mrs. Hall said. "Not really sick. But sick the way I used to be. Sick from drinking. Then I wanted to tell you. I wanted you to know that I understand what your life is like, how hard it must be and you only thirteen."

"Your son was a lot younger than me in those pictures."

Mrs. Hall looked at Lydie. "Yes, he was. You are right about that." She hesitated. "Can you remember what your mother was like before?"

The question caught Lydie off guard. Could she remember? Most of the time, no. But there were moments, like earlier when she and her mother had been laughing together, that Lydie felt like she was being tugged back toward something pleasant she had once known.

"That's what you want to remember about your mother," Mrs. Hall said. "Not the way she is today. She doesn't want to be who she is now. You can take my word on that."

"Can I?" Lydie asked. "Why should I believe what you say?"

“Lydia, I’ve never told you anything that wasn’t true.”

“You didn’t tell me who you really are. I thought you were, well, who you are now, and you’re not. You can’t be.”

“Why can’t I?” Mrs. Hall said. “People can change, you know.”

“If you changed, then why don’t you read his letters? Why won’t you forgive him for whatever it is he’s done? Which of you is it that’s doing that?”

Mrs. Hall’s mouth opened then closed. Her eyes went from her lap to the open window. “That’s the kind of question I would expect a smart girl like you to ask, Lydia. I knew you were smart the first time we met. Remember? That day your father and you were walking in the woods? He was telling you the names of the trees. You were repeating them back. I suppose that’s the way Harold must have been at that age.”

Lydie started to speak, but Mrs. Hall went on. “No. You don’t need to remind me that I wouldn’t have known one way or the other how Harold would have been. I know that.” She smacked her hand down on the table, startling Lydie. “Don’t you see? A mother knows that better than anybody and can never forget. Never.” She brought her hand down again, harder this time, making the water in her glass jump. “That’s why I couldn’t see him once he was

grown up. Because every time I did, every single time, there were those frightened little boy eyes looking back at me. The way I felt then..." She stopped to look at Lydie. "I wanted to take a drink, Lydie. And not just one. I wanted to drink and drink and drink so I didn't have to see those eyes ever again."

Mrs. Hall stood, clasping her hands in front of her so tightly they shook. "But I can't. I can't drink. I won't drink. Not anymore. Don't you see? The only thing I knew to do then is the only thing I know to do now. It's best for both of us."

"So Harold never did anything?"

"No. All he did was to be my son."

"And you won't ever see him?" Lydie said. "Not ever?" The very idea seemed so cruel.

"How can I?" Mrs. Hall said, sitting back down. "If it might mean doing to him what I did before, letting him down over and over. I can't put him through that again. He deserves better."

Lydie thought about the letters she had read. "He would understand." she said. "If you told him." Then Lydie thought of the mess she'd left her mother with, the spilled milk in the carpet probably already beginning to smell.

“You’ve got to tell him,” Lydie said. “He thinks he’s done something wrong. It’s not fair he doesn’t know it’s not his fault.”

Mrs. Hall’s eyes went to the window again. The leaves on the silver maple outside moved with the breeze, painting the countertop with shifting patches of shadow and light. “No, it’s not,” she said. “I know that now. You’ve helped me see how selfish I’ve been.” Then Mrs. Hall turned to look at Lydie. “But I’m so afraid.”

“Of what?”

“I want to see him. I’ve always wanted to see him. He’s my son. But if I started drinking...” Mrs. Hall reached across the table to take Lydie’s hands between hers. “That’s how your mother is, too, Lydia. She can’t stop. Believe me, she wants to. Every morning when she wakes up she says to herself she’s going to. But it’s just so hard.”

“Why is it hard?” Lydie said. How was it not enough to be somebody’s mother, to want to be a good mother, to do the things a mother was supposed to do?

“Oh, Lydia, if only I could help you know how very hard it is, maybe then you could understand, so the two of you don’t end up like me and Harold.”

Lydie felt her head spinning. The quiet of the house wasn't soothing anymore; it was like a deep dark hole she had fallen into and couldn't climb out of. "She forgot my birthday," Lydie said. "Last year, she forgot my birthday. Christmas, too. Most of the time she doesn't even know if it's a school day or not."

"And now your father's gone so much," Mrs. Hall said. "Growing up is so hard. That's why you've got to forgive your mother, Lydia, before you start hating her."

"What if it's too late?" Lydie asked. She told Mrs. Hall what she had said to her mother. And what her mother had said to her.

Mrs. Hall let go of Lydie's hands. She was silent for several minutes. Then she stood and opened a drawer next to the sink, taking out a framed picture of a young man Lydie realized was Harold in high school. The picture had been there all along with Mrs. Hall probably seeing it several times every day when she worked in the kitchen. She brought the picture to Lydie. "This was the only way I could look at him," Mrs. Hall said, shaking her head. "In a picture taken by a stranger."

She sat the picture down on the table then went to the living room, returning with a sheet of paper, an envelope, and a pen. "Bring me the most

recent letter, Lydia,” Mrs. Hall said. “I want to get the address right. Maybe if it’s not too late for me and Harold, it won’t be for you and your mother.”

“What will you say?” Lydie asked, returning with the letter

Mrs. Hall’s hand paused above the paper. “All these years it seems I’ve only considered myself.” She looked up at Lydie. “What would he want me to say?”

Lydie thought more about the letters she had read. She pictured Harold writing them. “Ask him to bring you something from his garden. And ask him to help you plant what he brings.”

Mrs. Hall started to write then stopped. She looked at Lydie again, fear coming into her eyes. “But what will I do when he comes? When he looks at me?”

“He won’t see you the same way,” Lydie said. “Not if he knows you never blamed him.”

Mrs. Hall wrote for several minutes, finally handing the letter to Lydie to read. *Dear Harold. I’m wondering if you might be able to bring me some tomato plants. I have a helper, Lydia, a young neighbor friend, and we’d both like you to show us how to plant them the right way. Come as soon as you can. Love, Mother.*

“You will be here, too, won’t you?” Mrs. Hall said. “When he comes? I don’t know that I could see him the first time alone.”

Lydie nodded. “Yes, I’ll be there.” She needed to meet Harold, to see Mrs. Hall with him, to see for sure that she could be both the woman she had been and the woman she was now, to see if such a thing was possible. Mrs. Hall sealed the envelope then gave it to Lydie to put in the mailbox on her way home.

When Lydie got there, the kitchen door was open. She stopped at the screen to look in. Her mother sat slumped over the table with her back to the door, her forehead resting on her folded arms. A store-bought birthday cake sat on the table next to a wrapped present the size and shape of a dress box. Lydie stepped inside, catching the door to keep it from slamming. The cake must have been delivered while she had been at Mrs. Hall’s. Maybe the present, too. But from the way the box was wrapped, with too many pieces of tape on the seams, the bow not quite in the center, it was clear her mother’s own hands had done the wrapping. Lydie went down the hall to take the phone off the hook. Then she returned to the kitchen and sat down beside her mother. Lydie listened to her mother’s breathing, the kitchen quiet except for the

short, irregular breaths. Even if her mother didn't wake for hours, Lydie would wait until then to open her present.

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