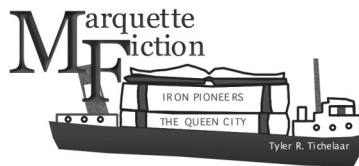


THE BEST PLACE



a novel

Tyler R. Tichelaar



Marquette Fiction
Marquette, Michigan

THE BEST PLACE

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To the memory of Irene Watson

who never ceased to find inspiration in life
and pass it on to others.

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All my readers, who keep asking me, “When’s the next book going to be out?” You make me feel it’s all worthwhile.

“How strange life can be. At seventy-eight, you’d think that you’d stop being surprised, and something like this happens, and it’s as though the world had only just begun.”

— Rosamunde Pilcher, *September* (1990)

Principal Characters In The Best Place

The Hopewell Family

Heiki Toivonen – father who goes to Karelia, Finland during the Great Depression

Elizabeth Hopewell – his wife who takes back her maiden name from shame when people find out her husband has moved to a Communist country

Jessie Hopewell – their oldest daughter, adopted by Thelma Bergmann

Lyla Hopewell – their youngest daughter, who ends up in the Holy Family Orphanage, which marks her for life

Orphanage Inhabitants

Bel Archambeau – a young orphan, later Lyla Hopewell's best friend

Charlie Greenway – an older orphan who likes to pick on Bel

Janet – an orphan

Sister Euphrasia – a nun whose duties include finding employment for orphans who leave orphanage

Sister Perpetua – a nun in charge of dormitories at the orphanage

The Mitchell Family

Roger Mitchell – oldest sibling, deceased at time of the novel

Mary Mitchell – middle sibling, a former schoolteacher, now blind

Florence Mitchell – youngest sibling, a stubborn, ornery woman

The Whitman & Goldman Family

Bill Whitman – Lyla Hopewell’s ex-boyfriend, now very ill

William Whitman III – Bill Whitman’s oldest son

Jason Whitman – Bill Whitman’s middle son

Alan Whitman – Bill Whitman’s youngest son

Gil Whitman – Alan Whitman’s son

Annette – Bill Whitman’s second ex-wife and mother to his children

Eleanor Goldman – Bill Whitman’s sister, age ninety-three and going strong

Lucy Goldman – Eleanor’s oldest daughter

Maud Goldman – Eleanor’s youngest daughter

The Vandelaare Family

John Vandelaare – trustee of the Robert O’Neill historical home (great-nephew to Bill Whitman and Eleanor Goldman)

Wendy Vandelaare – John’s wife, member of the women’s group

Neill Vandelaare – John and Wendy’s son

Tom Vandelaare – John’s father

Ellen Vandelaare – John’s mother (Bill Whitman and Eleanor Goldman’s niece)

The O’Neill Family

Robert O’Neill – famous local novelist, now deceased, Lyla Hopewell’s last employer before she retired

Eliza O’Neill – late wife of Robert O’Neill

The Dalrymple Family

Bea Dalrymple – wife to the late Joseph Dalrymple, who was first cousin to Bill Whitman and Eleanor Goldman

May Dalrymple – Bea’s granddaughter; the child of an American soldier who died in Vietnam and a Vietnamese mother; raised by her paternal grandparents in Marquette; member of the women’s group; owner of May’s Antiques

Josie Dalrymple – May’s teenage daughter

Other Characters

Frank Jarvi – John Vandelaare’s former college roommate

Sybil Shelley – part-time employee of The Pancake House, part-time employee at May's Antiques, member of women's group, writer for *The Mining Journal*

Diana – member of the women's group

Mr. Hampton – the Mitchell sisters' lawyer

Matthew Newman – storeowner who hires Charlie Greenway when he leaves the orphanage

Norma Juntunen – Finnish American involved in the Finn Fest 2005 celebrations

Mike Koski – Finnish descendant from Duluth who attends International Finn Fest in Marquette

Paul Lehtimaki – Finnish descendant at International Finn Fest

Brad – Paul Lehtimaki's cousin who also attends International Finn Fest

Joan – Brad's wife who accompanies him to International Finn Fest

Viola – resident at Snowberry Heights

Gloria – resident at Snowberry Heights

Minnie – resident at Snowberry Heights

HISTORICAL PERSONS REFERENCED IN *THE BEST PLACE*

John Voelker – Upper Michigan author of *Anatomy of a Murder*

Dorothy Maywood Bird – Upper Michigan author of *Granite Harbor*

Carroll Watson Rankin – Marquette author of *Dandelion Cottage*

Phyllis Rankin – Carroll Watson Rankin's daughter, longtime librarian in Marquette

Imogene Miller – daughter of Carroll Watson Rankin

Monsignor Louis Cappo – pastor of St. Peter's Cathedral

Mary Dwyer – church lady at St. Peter's Cathedral

Pauline Kiltinen – chair of Finn Fest 2005

Mr. Pearce – employee at the Union National Bank

Carl Pellonpaa – TV host of *Finland Calling*

Chapter 1

It's the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, and I've just put my feet up after mopping the floor so I can read *The Mining Journal*—not that there's much in it worth reading when you live in a small city like Marquette, Michigan, but I at least have to check out the obituaries. I've only turned halfway to them when the phone rings.

"Goddamnit!" I shout.

Since I spent my working life on my feet, I still feel guilt whenever I sit down during the day. That guilt grows when the phone rings—it's like it wants to torment me, telling me I don't deserve a rest—you know what they say about the wicked. The jury's still out on whether I qualify, but the way my life seems to go, God must think I am.

But thank God anyways, for the cordless phone. I've got one right beside my chair so I don't have to run to the kitchen like I used to, but I'm still angry that I can't get a minute to relax.

"Hello," I says, wondering who it could be. I know there's that Caller I.D. people have nowadays, but hardly anyone ever calls me other than Bel, so it'd be a waste of money to have it. I can always just hang up if it's a telemarketer.

"Is this Lyla?" asks a frail sounding woman.

"Yeah," I reply, wondering who it is. My first thought is maybe it's my sister, Jessie; I keep hoping she'll call, but I know it's ridiculous to wish for it. I haven't talked to her in more than forty years, and I doubt she'll ever want to talk to me again. Hell, I don't even know for sure if she's still alive—I mean, she would be seventy-nine now. Sometimes I think about getting a computer just so I can do a search for her—I hear there's all kinds of personal

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things you can find out about people that way. Hate to think what's on there about me—hopefully nothing bad, or not any of my personal information like bank numbers or anything, but I guess if there was any of that, I'd have had my bank account wiped out by now—or more likely, whoever looked at my account would just laugh since I hardly have anything in there except for the few days right after my Social Security check comes in.

“Lyla, it's Eleanor—Bill's sister.”

It takes me a second to place the name, but to cover my not knowing it right away, I says extra-friendly, “Hi, Eleanor. How are you?”

I'm almost as surprised to hear from her as I'd be to hear from Jessie. I haven't talked to Eleanor in years, other than to say hello if we bump into each other at Walmart or Econofoods. We sure never talk on the phone.

“Lyla, I have some bad news,” she says. I wait, not knowing what to say. “It's Bill,” she says, confirming my suspicions.

“What's wrong?” I asks when she doesn't say more. He must be dead is all I can think, and she's trying to break it to me softly.

“I'm sorry,” she says, sounding distracted. “It's been a long day, and I've been so worried.”

“What's wrong with him?” I asks again.

“He's in the hospital. He had a heart attack this morning. I suppose it's wrong for me to call you since it's been so long, but I know how much you cared about him, and—”

“It's okay, Eleanor. I'm glad you did,” I says, though I'm not so sure I am. “Is he going to be okay?”

“I don't know. I've been here with him all day. He called me at six this morning. I don't know why he didn't just call the ambulance himself. I had to yell at him to get him to hang up the phone so I could call 911, and then my daughter Lucy drove me over here—we actually beat the ambulance. Lucy stayed with me until she had to go to work—I don't know why after all the years she's put in at that office she still has to work Saturdays, but it was her one Saturday of the month, so she couldn't stay with me. Anyway, they say he's stable now. I was just allowed into his room. He's sleeping but he looks terrible. I don't think he even knows I'm here, though he's opened his eyes a couple of times and looked my way, but not like he recognizes me, so I just keep sitting here and talking to him and holding his hand. I—it's just terrible waiting, and I can't get ahold of anyone else, so I thought maybe—”

“What about his boys?” I asks when I can get a word in. Those boys

never did give their father the attention they should—then again, I don't know that he ever gave them the attention he should.

"I can't get ahold of Jason, but William said he'd call and tell him. William didn't want to come until we knew more. He's busy with some big work project he has to get done over the weekend—like that should matter when your father's in the hospital. So I called Alan, who said he'd be here right away, but it's an eight-hour drive from downstate. I was going to call Ellen—you remember her, my niece, but—well, I thought—"

"Eleanor, are you telling me you're there by yourself?" I asks, and while I'm trying to sound concerned, I also start to feel anxious about what I'm thinking of doing, but I know it's what she wants—why she called me.

"Yes, but Alan will be here by supertime, and Lucy will come back to pick me up after she gets off work. I just don't want to leave Bill alone."

"You need your rest too," I says, trying to calculate in my head how old she must be now—at least ninety, if she's a day. "You're not young anymore," I says. "You don't want to wear yourself out."

"What else am I supposed to do?" she asks. "He's my brother, the last one I have, and my baby brother at that, even if he is eighty-five now. When he told me he had chest pains this morning, I hoped it was just indigestion—he ate an awful lot last night when I had him over for supper. He even had two pieces of the cake I made."

"You shouldn't be there alone, Eleanor," I says, still wondering what gave her the idea to call me, but from her broken and frantic tone, I feel sorry for her, so before I even know what I'm saying, I says, "I'll come down and keep you company."

"Oh, I—well, I didn't expect you to do that, Lyla."

Well, why else did she call me then? She obviously thinks I still care about Bill enough that I would want to know that he's sick, even though we broke up so many years ago; it's clear she wants me to come down there and see him.

"Well," I says, wishing I could think of a way to get out of my offer and yet kind of wanting to go, "it might take me an hour or so to get there. I don't drive, so I'll have to ask my friend Bel to give me a ride, but I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Oh, thank you, Lyla. Just an hour or so would help so much, and then Alan or Lucy will be here, and it would be nice to catch up with you again. You know I always thought Bill made a mistake when he broke up with you."

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I didn't know that—which is why I'm surprised she's called me, but it's nice of her to say so after nineteen years.

"Okay. I'll see you soon, Eleanor."

"Thanks, Lyla. Bill might still be asleep when you get here, but then maybe we could go have a snack in the cafeteria or something and have a little chat."

She sounds like she's inviting me to a tea party—Eleanor always did have some class about her—even though she's divorced—not that anybody cares about that kind of thing these days, and she was divorced a long time ago—not long after World War II ended Bill told me—but knowing Eleanor, I'm not sure she ever got over the stigma of it. It always made her seem a bit delicate or even wounded to me, knowing how her husband mistreated her and then abandoned her and her daughters when they were still little girls.

"Sure, what's his room number?" I asks. She gives it to me and then I says, "Okay. I'll see you in a little while, Eleanor. Goodbye," and I hang up the phone.

I set *The Mining Journal* back on my end table, put down my chair's footrest, and then dial Bel for a ride.

"What do you wanna go up to the hospital to see him for?" she asks when I explain what's going on.

"I just feel bad for Eleanor is all," I says.

"She's got all kinds of family. She doesn't need you up there too."

"Are you going to drive me to the hospital, or aren't you?" I asks, not wanting to waste time arguing with her.

"Of course I will," she says. "I just don't know why it's so important to you. I'll be ready in five minutes, but I think you're making a big mistake, Lyla."

I think I am too, but I'm not going to admit it to her. "I'll be waiting down in the lobby for you," I says. "Thanks."

As soon as I hang up the phone, I asks myself, "What the hell are you doing going up to the hospital to see him?" I go in the bathroom to fix my hair, trying not to feel anxious; instead, I try to focus on how Bill must be suffering. "Poor, Bill. He needs comforting now. He needs to know I don't hold any grudges." But the truth is that I'm the one seeking comfort. It's so stupid of me to go at all—like he's even remotely part of my life anymore. I've told myself so many times that I'm over him. It's silly when we only went out for three years, and now something like six times that many years have

passed. Sometimes a whole year can go by without it upsetting me, but then I'll see a sad movie, or someone at Walmart who looks a little bit like him, and it'll all come back to me, making me feel in the dumps again like we just broke up yesterday.

I never have figured out why I feel so bad about it. Probably because it's the only real serious long-term relationship I ever had. All the time we went out, I kept hoping he'd ask me to marry him—I mean, by then I was well into my fifties and him over sixty, though I didn't think he looked it—he was always such a handsome man—I figured at our ages he'd ask me so he didn't have to spend the end of his life alone, but I guess he chose to do that instead 'cause I never heard anything about him dating any other women after me.

I guess I chose to be alone after that too. I mean, I could have gone looking for another man. Living here in Snowberry Heights, I've known a few men who were interested—but they all just looked like shriveled up old raisins. Back in the day, I had quite a few men looking at me. I had a good round figure, the kind that men used to like before the girls started looking like skinny little birds. But I never met a man who wanted to be serious with me so I stayed away from most of them. There were only one or two, like Scofield, who were really decent men, and I couldn't have them. And then when Papa came home and moved in with me, well, I was thirty-five then, and after taking care of him for eleven years until he died, I was so worn out I didn't have much sex drive left in me—not until I met Bill anyways. I thought then I'd found a man mature enough to love me. Should have known better since he'd been divorced twice—but I figured we were each other's last hope at that point, so we'd be stable. Only, he didn't see things that way.

And then it all ended over something stupid I said that I didn't even mean. You would have thought he'd take my side, but he just went ballistic on me, which made me think he'd been looking for an excuse to break up all along.

Though I still think it was that son of his, Alan, who was the real problem. He never did like me. He was still living at home—end of his senior year of high school—when Bill started dating me. Then Alan went to go live with his mother because he didn't like me being around. He was probably just going through a stage, but Bill blamed me anyways—he needed someone to blame, so he didn't have to look at how he'd been a bad father, and I was the scapegoat he picked. I understand all that now, but it still hurts.

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I've always been a tough broad, but hell, I've got feelings too. I want to be loved just as much as the next person. No one's ever understood that or given me a chance to show I can love them. Not my mom, my sister, damn Miss Bergmann, not Scofield, not Bill, not no one. Even Papa, much as I loved him, though I know he was too broken to give it back after what the damn Russians did to him, so at least I can forgive him for that. I suppose the rest of them all had their reasons too, but they could have at least tried. Papa at least tried by going to Karelia to find us a better life—it just didn't work out the way he had hoped—especially when all those years we thought he must be dead. So it was the least I could do to make his life comfortable in the end. I guess I can understand Mama too—she couldn't help it that she died. I know she must have had a hard time of it after Papa left for Karelia and didn't come back. I was too young to understand then, but now that I'm older, I can imagine how embarrassed she must have been to have people think her husband abandoned her when he actually couldn't contact us because of the Russians. I feel bad for both of them. They at least tried to be good parents—Jessie never tried to be a good sister—no one else ever tried to be good to me either, except Bel, of course. She at least tries to be a good friend, though she's a headache to deal with a lot of the time.

It's all so long ago now. Even with Bill, it's so long ago. But I still feel like a little girl wanting someone to love her. I wish to hell I could get over having that feeling.

"Suck it up, Lyla," I tell myself, looking in the mirror to fix my makeup. "You don't want Bill to see you looking like a mess."

I go grab my purse and coat and tell myself, "I'm just going for Eleanor's sake. She was always nice to me, and she shouldn't have to be at the hospital by herself. I'll just stay for an hour, just long enough so she won't feel all alone."



"I can't believe you want anything to do with that man after the way he treated you," says Bel the minute she sees me. She's in the lobby, already waiting for me when I get there. Since we both live in Snowberry—her apartment's on the floor below me—we tend to bump into each other in the elevator a lot when we go somewhere together, but not today. "And after all these years, why would you even care about him anymore?" she asks.

“I don’t,” I says, walking right past her and out the door because I don’t want all the snoopy old ladies in the building to hear my business. “I just feel bad for Eleanor. She’s up there all alone until Alan can get here.”

I march to the car and wait for her to catch up with me.

“I know you, Lyla,” Bel says, coming up behind me to unlock my car door and then hitting the automatic lock button so she can get in on her side. “You better not be thinking about getting involved with him again,” she says as she gets in the seat beside me.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Bel,” I says, putting on my seatbelt. “He’s in his eighties now, and I’m no spring chicken either. Why would I be thinking of that?”

“You must be if you’re ready to run off and take care of him at a moment’s notice,” she says, starting up the car.

“Put on your seatbelt,” I tell her. I always have to remind her about everything.

She snaps together her seatbelt and backs out of the parking lot in a way that makes me just know she’s not going to let it go.

By the time she’s pulled the car onto Fifth Street, I can’t stop myself from saying, “It seems to me that when Charlie was sick at the end, even though you’d left him years before, that you were all set to take care of him.”

“That’s because I’m a good person,” she says, “and I was married to him for many years, and being an orphan like us, you know he didn’t have no one else, and besides, I was codependent. That was before I knew about codependency, so I felt all guilty and obligated to take care of him since, after all, I had left him when he was down. So how could I say that I wouldn’t take care of him? I’d do it again today if I had to, and you know he was sick. Of course, if I could do it all again, I’d have never married him. That’s where I went wrong. But you weren’t never married to Bill so don’t go making a fool of yourself by chasing after him now.”

“Hmmp,” I laugh. “I can hardly chase after him if he’s lying in a hospital bed and hooked up to a bunch of tubes. And where you went wrong was letting Charlie get you pregnant when you were hardly more than a kid.”

“Still, Lyla,” Bel says, “we both know how Bill treated you, so don’t act like it don’t matter now just because he’s sick.”

“Well, can’t I at least figure I’m a good person to go and see Bill rather than bearing him a grudge?”

“Not if you’re really trying to worm your way back into his affections,”

says Bel, “and I think that’s what you’re trying to do.”

“Jesus Christ, Bel! I’m not trying to worm my way into anything. I just feel bad for Eleanor being there by herself. She’s all alone at the hospital until Alan can get there from downstate.”

“You’re not going to stay until Alan shows up, are you?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I says. “He’s driving all the way up from downstate. I don’t imagine he’ll get here until suppertime. I’m sure I’ll leave before then.”

“Well, you better leave before he does show up,” says Bel. “I know how you two always butted heads.”

“Yeah, well, Alan is grown up now, Bel. He was just a teenager back then.”

“Whatever,” she mutters, sounding like a teenager herself.

By now we’ve gone all the way up the steep hill of Fifth and turned onto Ridge. After her comment, I don’t feel like talking to her about Bill any more, and I don’t feel much like making small talk either, so I don’t say anything for a minute or two, but by the time we turn off Ridge and onto Fourth, she’s come up with a new topic.

“I’ve been thinking about joining another group,” she says.

“Another group? Isn’t AA enough?” I asks.

“No. I’ve got other problems besides alcohol,” she says, “and anyway, I’ve been going to AA for so long I need to try something different.”

“Haven’t you tried just about everything there is?” I can’t even remember all the groups she’s gone to—Codependents Anonymous, Al-Anon, some sort of grief therapy group, and one I think was called Rainbow Recovery—I thought anything with “rainbow” in it was for gay people but she told me it wasn’t—and then there was something like the “When Life’s a Bitch” group—that probably wasn’t the name of it, but it was something like that. You would think, after all these recovery groups she’s been going to for decades, that by now she would have recovered, but she says that’s not how it works—that you don’t ever recover when you go to recovery—I’ve given up trying to figure out why they call it recovery then—it all sounds like a racket if you ask me. But I know better than to ask her again how it works because she’s explained to me about a gazillion times how alcohol is a disease, and so is everything else wrong with her—codependency, love addiction, and on and on, so she has to keep going to her meetings ’cause they’re like medicine and the disease will take over again if she doesn’t. Honestly, I think these recovery groups are the addiction that just replaced her alcoholism. So,

really, I don't know why I'm even surprised that she wants to join another group.

"It's a new group," she says. "It's for women to get together and talk about their lives. I think it'll be good 'cause sometimes with the other groups, I think having the men there sometimes keeps us women from saying what we need to say."

Not having gone to any of these groups, I wouldn't know, so I don't say anything.

"Since it is a group for women," she goes on, just like I knew she would, "I thought maybe you'd like to come with me."

"What? Are you crazy?" I asks. "Why would I want to do that? I don't have any issues with drinking and stuff like that."

"No, I know, Lyla, but sometimes it's good just to find people you can talk to about things that are bothering you—everyone needs to talk to somebody sometimes."

"Bel, you've known me for over sixty years. When have I ever talked about what's bothering me?"

"That's the problem with you, Lyla," she says. "You can't keep everything bottled up. It's not good for you."

"I'm seventy-seven and healthy as a horse," I says. "So keeping things bottled up sure ain't hurting me. It's no good talking about troubles. You just have to deal with them and move on in life."

"Well, it's like this thing with Bill," she keeps on, making me realize her talking about this group wasn't her changing the subject but her roundabout way to keep telling me how to live my life. "Maybe you have some mixed feelings or guilt or something that's making you want to go see him."

"Yeah, sure I do. Isn't that obvious?"

"Well, then you can go to this group to talk about those feelings and try to make sense of them."

"Bel, if I ain't made sense of them after all these years, some women's group isn't going to help me, and besides, I don't think my relationship problems are anyone else's damn business."

"Well, but I've shared mine with you," she says, "and you know it helped me a lot, especially after I left Charlie, and then later when he got sick and I had to take care of him in the end."

"Yeah," I mumble, remembering how she drove me crazy back then, even more than she does now—my phone was ringing off the hook at all

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hours back then 'cause Charlie was dying and she was feeling all kinds of guilt for having left him. Thank God she was never dumb enough to get married a second time 'cause I don't think I would have survived it.

We turn onto College Avenue now, and in another minute, she's driven me up to the hospital entrance.

"Just think about going to the meeting, Lyla. It won't hurt you," she says as I undo my seatbelt.

"Okay, I will," I says just so she doesn't keep nagging me in the emergency drop off lane when another car might need to let someone out.

"When do you want me to come back for you?" she asks.

I look at my watch. It's nearly three o'clock and Alan'll probably show up around five, and Bel is right—I don't want to be around when he gets here.

"How about four-thirty?" I says.

"Okay. I'll be here then," she says.

"Thanks," I says and get out of the car.

After I go through the sliding glass doors, I take the escalator up to the next floor, walk across the skywalk to the next elevator, and finally go up to the room. They sure don't build these hospitals for old people; they're so big and inconvenient—it's almost like they design them purposely to send us old people into cardiac arrest from all the walking we need to do—probably their way to make some extra bucks—thousands of bucks, 'cause God knows healthcare costs have gone through the roof.

And all that walking only gives me more time to get nervous about seeing Bill. I'm kind of hoping he's still asleep, but doing better of course, and I wonder what I'll say to Eleanor when I see her. Why'd she have to call me? What was she even thinking? And what am I thinking to be going to see him?

After I find the room, I slowly peer around the half-closed door, and the first thing I see is a young couple I don't know standing over the bed, but then I see Eleanor sitting next to it, and Bill, who looks awful—all pale and wrinkly and gaunt—lying there with oxygen tubes up his nose. Since the other patient's bed is empty, there's nothing to block their view of me, so they all—except Bill whose eyes stay closed—see me right away. For a minute, the young man and woman and I exchange glances, and then Eleanor, like the sight of me has finally registered in her brain, says, "Lyla, you came. Thank you." She stands up, carefully unwrapping her hand from around Bill's, and comes up to hug me as I take another step toward the bed.

“Hi, Eleanor,” I says, allowing her to lead me toward the bed. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s not very responsive, but the doctor says he’s stable,” she replies.

“I thought you were here by yourself,” I says, not knowing what else to say and wishing she was.

“Oh, this is my great-nephew, John—my niece Ellen’s son—and his wife, Wendy.”

“Hello,” I says.

“It’s nice to meet you,” says the girl.

“Hello,” says the guy. “We met years ago, although you probably don’t remember me. I was still a kid then.”

I just nod. I don’t remember him, and I think it strange he would remember me. If he was a kid back then, I must have made some impression on him, or else he’s heard stories about me. I can just imagine how Bill’s family talks about me.

“Do you want to sit down?” Eleanor asks me. There’s a chair next to hers so I go ahead and take it since John and whatever the girl’s name is were already standing anyways when I got there, and I am a lot older than them—I’d guess neither one is much over thirty.

“Aunt Eleanor,” says the young woman, “John and I are going to go get something to drink. Can we bring you some coffee or something?”

Eleanor looks at them for a moment like she can’t seem to grasp what the girl just said. She turns back to Bill before it registers and then she says, “I’m sorry. It’s been such a long day and I’m tired. Coffee might perk me up some.”

“Okay. Do you want cream or sugar?”

“Oh no, I drink it black. And make sure it’s decaf,” she says.

I don’t know how decaf is going to perk her up. John must agree with me since he makes a face at the word “decaf.”

“Can I get you anything?” the girl asks, looking at me. I think she’s forgotten my name too.

“Coffee’s good,” I says, “only I do want cream and sugar.”

“That’s my kind of answer,” says John, smiling.

“We’ll be back in a few minutes,” says John’s wife, and then they leave the room.

“I’m so glad they came,” says Eleanor. “Do you remember John?”

“No,” I says. “He must have just been a little kid when I was going out

with Bill. How is he?”

“Oh, he’s very happy,” says Eleanor. “I’m so glad he married Wendy. She’s such a sweet girl, and it’s so funny how they met—she’s actually a distant cousin of some sort, though I can never remember exactly how—somewhere back on my father’s side of the family I guess. Don’t they make a sweet couple? They already have a little boy and are expecting another child in a few months.”

“That’s nice,” I says, not having noticed the girl was pregnant, and not really caring since I’d meant, “How is Bill?” So I asks instead, “Has Bill woken up at all?”

“Just opened his eyes a few times,” Eleanor says. “I don’t think he’s really aware of what’s going on. Oh, he scared me so badly. He called at six o’clock this morning, and when you hear the phone ring at that hour, you just know something is wrong. I’m often up by then, though, and the girls are usually up by six-thirty or seven to get ready for work—even though it’s Saturday, Lucy went to work this morning, so it didn’t make any difference. I usually try to go use the bathroom before them, just so I don’t have to hold it while they’re in there. At my age, I have a hard time sleeping. Although Bill knows I’m usually up early, he’s not a very early riser. He never calls me before eight o’clock so when the phone rang so early, I knew something was wrong.”

“Why did he call? Did he know he was having a heart attack?”

“Oh, yes, his voice was all panicky, and he said he was sweating really bad. He wanted one of the girls to drive him to the hospital, so I yelled for Lucy, but then when he said he was having chest pains, I told him to go take an aspirin and sit down and that I would call the ambulance. Then once I got ahold of 911 and they said the ambulance was on the way, I had Lucy drive me to the emergency room. The ambulance hadn’t even gotten to the hospital yet when we got there. That had me really worried, but I guess they wanted to make sure he was stable at home first. Oh, I’ve never been so scared in my life. Not even when my brother Henry had his accident or anyone else in the family died. I think it just shocked me so much because, poor Bill, he really has no one else but me. His boys are all far away, downstate and in Wisconsin, and—well, there’s the Dalrymples across the street—do you remember them? My cousin Joseph’s wife and her granddaughter and great-granddaughter, but they’re not the same as close family like a child or a sister, so I know I’m the one he depends on—he’s still my baby brother, no matter how old we are.”

I'm losing track of who she's talking about and starting to wonder what good it's doing me to be here. I don't remember Eleanor running her mouth like this before, but of course, she's a lot older now—so are we all—and she is worried. And so am I, but I still don't see what good it's doing me to be here. It's not like Bill knows I'm here or anything. I should have waited until he was better—a day or two at least.

And then just as I'm thinking I shouldn't have come and Eleanor starts fretting over whether Bill's house is clean enough for Alan to stay there, Bill's eyes open. At first, I barely notice it until I find he's staring at me, and then before I know it, I'm looking him straight in the eye, and thinking how strange it is that Eleanor's more caught up in talking than in paying attention to her brother. But I stop thinking when Bill's eyes start getting wider and wider like he's surprised to see me, and I know my fate has come as a low rumbling, grumbling sound rises up from his throat.

Like everything's in slow motion, Eleanor turns at the sound of Bill trying to speak. She adjusts herself in her seat when she sees his eyes are open, and then she squeezes his hand and says, "Bill? Bill, can you hear me? Oh, please, Bill, say something."

He looks at her for a moment, and then his eyes come back to meet mine. He raises his eyebrows and lifts his head to get a better look at me. When I give him a smile, his eyes get even bigger. "Hello, Bill," I says, trying to sound friendly because I don't know what else to do.

Suddenly, his head snaps back toward Eleanor, and then, in words that sound like a wounded animal shrieking, he shouts, "Jesus Christ, Eleanor! What the hell is she doing here?"

He's so loud that I jump back in my seat. And Eleanor gets all tongue-tied and starts stumbling over her words. "Bill, it's Lyla. She came to see how you are. She was worried about you."

Before I can say anything, the nurse comes into the room. I think she must have heard Bill shout.

I want to crawl into a corner. I just can't believe that the first thing he says to me after all these years is so cruel.

Eleanor says something to the nurse and Bill grunts a little and mumbles something. Then as the nurse checks Bill's vitals, Eleanor says to me, "Oh, Lyla, don't take it personally. He's doped up on all kinds of drugs and not thinking straight. People aren't in their right minds when they wake up like this in the hospital; isn't that right?"

She turns to the nurse, looking for reassurance, but the nurse only says, “He seems okay. I’ll go get the doctor to check on him. He doesn’t seem to be in any pain.”

Bill’s hand reaches up like he’s going to pull the oxygen tubes out of his nose, but Eleanor stops him by grabbing his hand. “Bill, honey, you have to leave those in. You’re in the hospital. You had a heart attack, remember? Just try to relax.”

“How can I relax when I’m in the hospital?” he growls.

“I know you’re not comfortable, but they’re going to take good care of you,” Eleanor replies. “The doctor says you’re lucky that the ambulance brought you when it did. And the nurses have been so nice. And everyone is praying for you. John and Wendy are here—they went to get coffee, but they’ll be back in a minute, and Lyla’s here to see you, and Alan is on his way.”

“What did you go call him for?” Bill barks.

“Well, he’s your son. He cares about you.”

“What about Jason and William?”

“Well, they told me to stay in touch with them to see if they need to come.”

“I’m in the fucking hospital,” Bill says. “What do you mean, ‘if they need to come’?”

“Don’t upset yourself, Bill,” Eleanor says. “They love you. Now just try to rest.”

“I wish you hadn’t called Alan. He’s almost the last person I want to see right now,” he says, staring back at me.

I’m not stupid. I know he’s not happy to see me. I figure I had better leave than keep upsetting him with my presence, but still, I stay in my chair—probably because I’m also feeling a little angry at him—even if he is sick. I can understand if he doesn’t want to see me, but he doesn’t need to be so blunt. You would think he’d soften a little toward me considering I cared enough to come see him.

“Here you are, Aunt Eleanor,” says the young lady, reentering the room. “Oh, Uncle Bill, you’re awake!”

“How are you feeling, Uncle Bill?” John asks, stepping into the room behind his wife.

Bill just stares at them.

“He’s tired,” Eleanor tells them, taking the coffee from the girl. “Thank you, dear.”

“Thanks,” I says as John hands me a cup.

“Are you feeling any pain, Bill?” Eleanor asks.

He shakes his head. Then he closes his eyes.

“Are you just tired?” asks Eleanor.

He tilts his head an inch and then breathes deeply.

“We should let him rest,” says Eleanor.

The nurse returns now and says, “The doctor will be here in a couple of minutes. The hospital’s visitor policy is only two patients to a room, and he really does need to rest.”

“I can go sit in the waiting room,” John offers.

“No, I should go anyways,” I says, quickly getting up.

There’s no point in my being here. I’m not wanted and I don’t know why I even came. It was just plain stupid of me. I should have listened to Bel, not that I’ll tell her she was right ’cause then I’ll never hear the end of it.

“Oh, Lyla,” Eleanor says. “I’m sorry you came all this way, but I guess he should be left to rest now.”

“Thanks for coming, Lyla,” says the girl to me, having picked up my name from Eleanor using it. “It was nice to meet you.”

“You too,” I says. I still can’t remember her name, though I know Eleanor told me more than once. It’s something weird. I think it’s Windy, like that old ’60s song, but I’m not sure so I better not venture to say it.

“I’ll call you later, Lyla,” says Eleanor, “to let you know how he is.” She sets her coffee on the bedside table and stands up. Before I know it, she’s hugging me again. “Don’t pay any attention to what Bill said. He’s not himself right now, you know. You come back in a day or two and he’ll be happy to see you.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you all later,” I says, hoping I never see any of them again.

Still clutching my coffee cup, I walk out of the room, nearly bumping into the doctor as I step into the hallway.

“Excuse me,” I says. The doctor thinks he’s too important to apologize, or else he’s really just concerned about going to see Bill. Funny—I’ll bet the old coot outlives me. He’s stubborn enough.

I walk to the elevator, wishing I’d never come. I look at my watch and see it’s only been half an hour since Bel dropped me off. I could call her to come

pick me up early, but then she'll just say, "I told you so." I'll sit in the lobby or check out the gift shop—and think up what to tell her in the meantime—maybe just that Bill was asleep all the time I was there.

What a wasted afternoon this has turned out to be. And what an ignorant man Bill is. I don't care what Eleanor said about him not being in his right mind. He never was one to mince words. I knew he wouldn't want to see me, so why the hell did I come in the first place? If he had wanted to see me, he would have contacted me sometime in the last nineteen years. Who did I think I was kidding?

And why the hell do I have to be so damn stupid as to let it matter so much to me after all these years? Here I am, seventy-seven years old. You'd think I'd have learned something about men by now. When am I ever going to get smart?