

# ARUSHA

A scenic landscape photograph of a lake and mountains. The foreground shows a rocky shoreline with several large, dark boulders. The middle ground features a calm, blue lake that reflects the sky. In the background, there are rolling mountains with green and brown vegetation under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds.

J. E. KNOWLES

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Spinsters Ink  
2009

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Attitude Books  
P.O. Box 242  
Midway, Florida 32343

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
First Edition

Editor: Katherine V. Forrest  
Cover designer: Linda Callaghan

ISBN: 10 1-935226-09-6  
ISBN: 13 978-1-935226-09-3

For my mother, Gracie Knowles



## Acknowledgments

To Trish Hindley, thank you. I owe a great debt to a wonderful group of writers: Dan Chalykoff, Carol Lawlor, Sandi Plewis and Andrejs Rosts. They were the first to read substantial portions of this novel, and supported my writing at a time when very little else was going right. Many other writers have helped me, in particular Diana Armstrong, Vincent Lam, Lee Lynch, Kim Moritsugu, David Adams Richards and Marnie Woodrow. To work with Katherine V. Forrest as editor is my honor and pleasure. I am grateful to publisher Linda Hill and her colleagues at Spinsters Ink, and of course you, the readers. Thanks to Paul Gallant, who was my editor at *Xtra!*, and to Matthew Firth for publishing my fiction. Special thanks to my brother Ben, with whom I can always talk about the artistic process. I thank Charma, Jen, Heather, Millie, my grandparents, the other Linda, Pat, Ann, Kathi, Kate, Jodie Manross and the countless musicians who inspire me. I've never been a teacher, but I have the deepest admiration for those who have shared that profession with my fictional characters, including my parents, who have been together for more than forty years; my friend Fritz Bernshausen; and many of the women and men who taught me in the public schools. Finally, eternal gratitude to my companions in Tanzania: Frank, Janet, Bob, Rachel and Penelope. *Solo Deo Gloria.*



# Chapter 1

Advent 1988

Not one of Edith's students was looking forward to Christmas vacation more than she was.

"Billy," she said, "what is Newton's first law?"

"Huh?"

"You do not say 'huh' to me, you may say 'what' or 'ma'am.'" Was she teaching eighth grade or first? "A body in motion tends to remain in motion until something happens to change that motion. Billy?"

"Ma'am?"

"What is Newton's first law?"

"I don't know."

She again recited, "A body in motion tends to remain in motion until something happens to change that motion. Yes, Julie?"

"Or at rest."

"Thank you." Not for the first time this school year, Edith gave up on Billy. And today, the whole class was raring to go home and beat up their little brothers and sisters. That was why

Edith had saved the sodium demonstration until now, as she did every year.

“Now listen, people. We’ve talked about the periodic table and what happens to this column.” She thwacked her finger against the giant, full-color poster on the wall. “Sodium and potassium. Today, I’m going to demonstrate with some pure sodium how the element reacts with water. Watch.”

A tray of water was set up on her desk. When she dropped in the silver-white piece of sodium, there was a bright flash, an explosive sound, and the class was momentarily awed. They were always awed, and even for Edith there was that second of nervousness that her hair, which this year was in a rather large perm to match the perms of other forty-year-old women, would go up with the sodium. But just bits of the element stuck to the ceiling over her desk, already studded with sodium bits from fifteen years of the day-before-Christmas-break.

“Miz Rignaldi, do it again!”

She used to tell students, “I am not Miz Rignaldi,” but now she accepted that they would never pronounce Mrs. as two syllables. Billy Lowry could barely cope with one, and his daddy was just as ignorant, never mind if he too was a so-called teacher. It wasn’t being stupid that was so bad; it was plain ignorance. Edith knew Bill Lowry, Sr. didn’t teach a thing. All his students knew it too, happy though they might be about it. Just because he coached boys’ baseball he thought he didn’t have to know anything, let alone share it with a class.

Edith always thought of it that way, boys’ baseball, though it went without saying as only boys could play. Girls played softball and powder-puff football. None of it made sense. Anyway, with a daddy like Bill no wonder Billy sat in the back of the class saying “I don’t know” like those were the only words he did know, didn’t matter how many times she stood there and handed him the answer. She would have paddled her own kids if they’d been such smart-alecks when they were this age, only a few years ago.

“Sorry, you all, I can’t do it again,” she said. As if the school would, or could, pay for extra chunks of sodium just to keep her classes entertained. No, leave them wanting more. That’s what

the great entertainers always did and sometimes that's all she thought she was, an entertainer, trying to keep the class on the edge of its collective seat. She wished she did have something else to blow up.

It seemed like an entire day passed before lunch break, and then she would have to entertain three more times. At lunch, except on the days she had lunchroom duty, Edith could snatch half an hour for herself. Well, less than half an hour because her bladder was full and she'd probably been holding it since first period, like today. And not really for herself because the lounge would be full of other teachers, all itching for a cigarette or gossip, or both. When you got right down to it, it was lucky she had time to eat at all.

The toaster oven, the one that worked, was in use, so Edith joined the lineup figuring she'd smoke on the way. Pam Bailiff was right in front of her, all hairspray. Maybe it was just the memory of sodium but Edith was almost afraid to light her own cigarette, for fear of sending Pam's perm up in flames.

"How's it going, Edie?" Pam said.

"All right. Haven't seen you in a while."

Pam dragged on her cigarette and shook that perm. "Lunchroom. I should've only had Monday to Wednesday last week, but I had to cover."

Edith nodded. None of the other teachers called her Edie, but Pam was married to her cousin Charlie and couldn't break the habit. Edith supposed that made them cousins-in-law.

When the bell rang at two thirty no one was more thankful to be out of that building. She'd been up since six o'clock, as she had been most mornings of her working life. Even when Jeremy and Dana were babies, there'd been a feeding at that time, not to mention two a.m. which she didn't even want to remember. And they hadn't grown to sleep in on the weekends, either. As kids they were up by seven, wanting their breakfast, the whole day ahead of them. Not a habit to discourage.

Neither she nor Joe could ever sleep in late. The flip side was getting out of school in the afternoon but only an outsider thought teachers finished working at that time. Lesson planning had just begun. Public school teaching was a full-time-plus,

year-round job, vacations notwithstanding. About the only day of the school year Edith didn't plan when she got home was today, and that was only because she had cooking, baking and wrapping presents ahead of her. Even the decorating she hadn't gotten done the previous weekend.

Joe could've fucked mud. That's what his brother Steve would say. Steve was in the navy and Joe hardly ever saw him, but sometimes these less-than-welcome memories came flooding in. Usually when he was alone, in the bathroom of the house he shared with Edith and their children. All his life, from sharing with his brother to his college roommate to his wife, Joe Rignaldi had never had so much as a room to himself.

He felt bad about spending so much time in the bathroom, but it was the only way he could get through the unbroken days of family togetherness. This was his second time today. Sometimes he would make it through the day with just one quick trip to sexual release; other days, he needed three or even four. Rarely, he would skip a whole day. But it was Christmas and being penned up in the house all day only increased his priapic frustration.

Even the gym would be closed for the holidays. Joe didn't really work out, just used the pool. He found swimming the next best thing to solitude, and enjoyed seeing others without having to talk to them or even make eye contact. It was so different from school where he always had to be talking: to his classes, other teachers, students in the hall.

Sometimes Joe worried about his kids, especially his daughter. Dana was sixteen and seemed never to have a boyfriend, which was fine with him, but he feared she was naïve. He wanted to impart to her how strong the male sex drive could be, to warn her. But Joe knew from television that a father could not talk to his daughter that way, or there'd be some 800 number she could call.

It was a desperate feeling, like being trapped in a smaller and smaller space, the size of this bathroom or a single cubicle in the staff washroom. Joe knew it was a trap of his own construction, and part of the franticness of his desire, as his hand moved up

and down, was that he'd asked for this but could not quit it. He couldn't go back and he didn't see his way forward. Maybe, if he got desperate enough to articulate it, he could get past his wife. But never his mother.

He cleared his throat, zipped up his pants, flushed. He had about a minute to think with the water on, then to dry his hands deliberately on that little purple towel, look in the mirror, ensure his face was not too red, or his nails too dirty. He ought to unscrew this medicine cabinet, put it up a little higher on the wall, now that Edith was the shortest person in the house at five foot six. That would be the handy thing to do, a proper man's job. Give him a little more time in the bathroom, as well.

Some of those guys in the gym were so built. His brother Steve had always lifted weights, kept dumbbells under the bed and such, but they weren't a bulky family, they didn't have that build. One guy in particular was not tall like himself but man, was he built. You couldn't help but notice him, and he knew it, too, spent all his time strutting around in front of the mirrors. Maybe after Christmas Joe would do something about this mirror. He could hear pots and pans out in the kitchen.

To Edith, the house had a totally different aroma at Christmas. It wasn't that hard to explain: there were real pine needles among the decorations, there was always something cooking, a little more fat than usual in the food, an awareness of gravy hanging over the kitchen and every room into which the air of the kitchen wafted. The house was a little warmer than usual. Not that it was ever cold. Joe sealed all the windows and doors, there was never any worry about that.

Joe took care of possible emergencies. He wasn't one of those husbands you couldn't count on in any kind of a situation. There were always flashlights in case the power went out, which it often did even though they were only a couple miles out in the country. Flashlights, and D batteries to go in them. There was a kerosene heater, and extra fuel in the winter. There was even a four-wheel drive in the driveway, though it was a minivan, not the kind of shiny toy men sometimes bought when they had made it while still young, or when having a crisis in middle age.

Not like Joe to have an ordinary midlife crisis.

On this twenty-third of December, he seemed to be spending most of his time in the bathroom. She tried not to wonder what unpalatable compulsion kept him in there, just as she tried not to wonder what Jeremy or Dana were doing when they came and went continually, in and out of the bathroom. There were plenty of mirrors in the house, a huge one over Dana's dresser, but if she ever so much as glanced in it Edith couldn't tell. Most girls pushed their mothers to let them wear makeup at what Edith thought was a ridiculously young age. But, not pushing, she'd bought Dana a small selection, pale blush, no foundation or anything. It sat there, in front of the unused mirror, and though she hadn't checked Edith doubted any of it had been opened.

If only—and this was a feature of modern plumbing whose time she wished had never come—the bathroom had not opened right off the kitchen. So the effluvia and the spray meant to cover it, which only drew one's attention to the fact that a stink was there, kept mingling with the browning onions, the not-yet-scorched flour and milk, whatever else she was preparing on the stove. She wished that, instead of spraying, her family would just strike a match. Flame, at least, was a smell that might reasonably occur in connection with cooking (rather more often than desirable, in Edith's case).

No, Joe was dealing with Christmas stress, or whatever you wanted to call it, in his own way; no one else's way would do, even if he was just backing the minivan out of the driveway. Her way, the way she got through almost every day whether stressful or not, was chopping onions. The smell, for one thing, tended to make her family's eyes water and keep the kitchen clear. Edith was immune, or nearly immune, to the onions. When the tears did indeed need to come for some other reason, they were a good excuse.

Joe emerged from the bathroom, a purple towel in his hands. "Can I throw this in the hamper, or do you want me to take it to the basement?"

That depended what was on it. "Just take it downstairs, please. I'm about to do a load anyway."

Edith went rooting in the most cluttered of her kitchen drawers for the old can opener. It was manual, like everything they had, a thin, rusty implement not easy even to grip. But she wouldn't think of replacing it. It was the only one she'd ever owned, and dated from a time in her life when "What's for dinner?" meant "Where's the can opener?" She'd learned to cook, of course; all the girls of her generation had. Learned to sift flour before baking and break eggs into a separate bowl to make sure they weren't rotten. She'd even taught her children—both of them. Somewhere she had a picture of Dana with a blue kerchief tied around her head, and an apron, earnestly mixing something in a bowl.

Edith opened a can of beans. There was always that smell following the snapping open of the can, like someone had just made gas in the room. A wonder she could tell sometimes, with the bathroom right there. She took a match from the top cupboard, where she still kept matches even though the children were grown, and struck it. That would cut through all smells.

Dana came in, looking like she'd slept in clothes she'd pulled from a pile of other people's discards. "Something burning in here?"

"I struck a match." Edith decided to let her think she'd been in the bathroom; it didn't matter. "I'm heating up these beans for you."

Her daughter crossed the room, examined the empty can. Edith said, "It's tomato sauce, not pork and beans. I read the label."

"I always read the label."

Before Dana could go anywhere, Edith said, "You can get out some dishes to set the table with. We'll be eating in a little while."

"I'll be right back," Dana said, and disappeared into the bathroom.

The sky had gone dark, but there was no snow. There was unlikely to be any snow, even up on the Blue Ridge, before the new year. Edith switched on the multicolored lights that hung over the kitchen window. She preferred white lights. Down the road, there were houses decked out in red, green, blue, not to

mention the neighbors who went crazy putting reindeer and Santas all over the yard. Some were tasteful, just a glimpse of a tree through the picture window or, if the right kind of tree grew there, in the front yard. But the roads here lacked sidewalks and there wasn't any opportunity to see these things except from a car.

After supper, Joe reminded Dana to help her mother with the dishes. For someone who could remember all the presidents' names when she was ten, it was remarkable how Dana could forget this daily chore without her father's reminder. As far as Edith knew, Joe himself had never washed or dried a dish in his life.

He was useful in other ways. Their age and generation notwithstanding, both of them brought who they really were into this marriage. If it happened to closely match what was typical for a man's or woman's "role," that was pure coincidence.

"Is there football on this weekend?" Edith asked Joe when he returned to the living room, paper in hand.

"I think there might be a basketball game on Christmas Day. Why?"

It drove her crazy, his habit of asking why about everything. She took it as a challenge, or reproach. She'd never been very good at answering the question when a young child persisted in asking it, and could scarcely tolerate it from her husband. Fortunately, he never seemed to expect an answer.

Neither of them had seen Jeremy much since the vacation began. He would be in his attic room listening to one of his rock bands. She'd rather he turn the music up in his own part of the house than blow his ears out with the headphones. She was grateful that he preferred the bands that purported to talk about something other than hell. Edith was not much of a believer in the Satanic rock argument, but she thought hell was already talked about entirely too much in church.

Now, reassured by the thump from upstairs, Edith joined Joe on the couch in front of the television, which was not on.

Joe finally spoke. "You think he's on drugs?"

"What?"

"Do you think Jeremy is taking drugs?"

“No,” she said, and she didn’t. “What a thing to say.”

“I don’t really either,” Joe said, “but he’s just so pale.”

“We’re white people, Joe. It’s winter and he spends all his time in the attic, or at that bricked-in school.” She reached for the paper, needing to busy her hands. “I wish the high school at least had some windows, like your school. It’s not like kids would be jumping out of them; it’s all on one floor.”

Joe continued to look directly in front of him, at the blank screen. “I don’t recall doing that when I was in high school.”

“What, jumping out the window?”

“No, I mean just listening to the stereo all the time, no friends.”

“It was different. You put on a record and people listened to it, or you played your own music. We liked different music.” She crossed to their old stereo, searching in the stack of Christmas records, stuff she’d grown up with. “What would you like to listen to? Choral or instrumental?”

“Can we just talk for now?” His voice sounded choked, and he held his palms together in front of him, elbows on knees. She saw strain in his face. Joe did not usually want to “just talk.”

“All right.” She sat down, then started up again. “Do you want something to drink?”

He turned to her, visibly agitated. “I need to ask you to consider something with me.” He took a deep breath. “I need to ask you to revisit our arrangement.”

This was not right, not the way Joe talked. He didn’t use clinical phrases; he certainly didn’t sit there, talking, holding his hands still. She got up. “I need you to stop this.”

“Stop what?”

“Talking like this. It’s Christmas, Joe. What can we possibly resolve at Christmas?”

The thunderous music from upstairs continued, but through the ceiling there was a new, very strange percussive noise. What now? Edith ran up the stairs, opened the attic door and was hit by something heavy. A pair of shoes.

“Jeremy? Oh dear Lord.” She advanced on her son, who was pitching around on the floor. “Joe!”

He came quickly. It appeared that Jeremy’s shoes, which

were perpetually untied after the fashion of boys his age, had been kicked free in the course of a fit. "Call the rescue squad," Edith said in her command tone. "I'll take care of him, just call the rescue squad."

The rescue squad was at the house before she thought to tell Dana, who looked disappointed to have missed all the action. In contrast to Jeremy's room, Edith found Dana's silent and the light dim. I need to get her a hundred-watt bulb to replace that sixty-watt.

Edith would have gone to the hospital, but Joe said he'd go instead. She felt as if her home were being invaded by paramedics. They came in, all bundled up in their black uniforms, and surrounded her son. They ascertained that he was having a seizure (yes, she could have told them that). It proved difficult to hold Jeremy down. For a skinny high school boy, he showed remarkable strength.

"Is it drugs?" she asked, for Joe more than for herself.

"No, ma'am." The older paramedic had curly hair and a red face. "He's having a seizure." They'd just told her this, and he repeated it patiently, as if explaining the same thing over again to a slow child.

"I know that." Her voice must have been rising in pitch more than she thought, because Joe looked over at her, his eyes heavy with meaning. She hoped he could read hers: Not now, Giuseppe. Now is not the time to talk about our arrangement.

The paramedics managed to sedate Jeremy, and off they went in the ambulance, Joe riding along. He did have first-aid training from the school. Edith hated to think of him as the strong man, taking over while the mother of his children fell apart in the driveway.

She stood for several minutes after they'd left, before realizing she was wearing nothing over her clothes. But she didn't feel cold. She didn't feel hot either, as with anger. Numb.

She'd make a fresh pot of coffee. There was very little in life that could not be endured more tolerably with a good cup of coffee. She used to say "and a cigarette," but she'd stopped smoking in the house when the kids were born (ahead of her time in one way). Now she didn't have any cigarettes when she

wanted them.

The door of the little house next door opened and out came her mother-in-law, wrapped in a housedress. Isabella was the only person Edith knew of, outside of movies or TV, who either wore housedresses or would call them that. This one was a pale pink-and-green checked thing, not warm enough to be worn outside in December, even in Tennessee. But Isabella produced a cigarette, and offered it to her, and Edith didn't send her back inside.

"Jeremy had to go to the hospital," Edith said. "Some kind of fit he's having."

"I saw the whole thing from my window, honey." Isabella, though a Northerner, had perfect pitch, and after twenty years "honey" flowed through her speech like milk in the Promised Land.

"I'm sorry I didn't come over and tell you."

"It's all right, honey. Joe went with him."

"Yes."

"How is Joe?"

This struck Edith as an odd question, since Isabella saw her son every day, and ate most meals with them. "He's okay," she said. "I mean, he's probably concerned about Jeremy right now. It's not drugs."

"Of course not."

The two women stood for a moment, smoking companionably. Edith looked at Isabella's hair, which in texture resembled tinsel before it was taken out of the box of decorations, and was thankful her own hair was just beginning to gray. She finished her cigarette. "Come on inside, Mom. It's too cold to stand out here without a coat or anything."

The lights in the window of the big house were a foggy glow in the dark evening. Once inside, Isabella began rummaging around the kitchen. She was several inches shorter than Edith, and for this reason claimed the drawers closest to the floor as her own. Edith could not imagine why anyone would ever need so many sizes and types of wooden spoons.

"You want me to cook tomorrow?" Isabella didn't wait for an answer. "Christmas dinner, you're going to be too busy with

that, honey. I'll cook for tomorrow."

Isabella was a wonderful cook, but many of her recipes depended on mysterious stocks and pot liquor that she sealed away in margarine containers in the back of the refrigerator. Sometimes it was impossible to find margarine. "If you're cooking with meat stock," Edith said, "remember Dana won't eat it. We'll have to give her cottage cheese and seeds or something."

Isabella tapped the side of her own head, as if trying to rid it of any notion so silly. "It's that girl you ought to worry about, honey," she said. "The boy is fine. That girl, she's too skinny. You know they have a disease for that now, honey. Nervous disease."

"Dana runs, Mom. She runs, that's why she's skinny. She's not anorexic."

"I'll make chili," Isabella said. She continued to putter and hum, leaving Edith feeling superfluous in her own kitchen. Who started Christmas Eve dinner on the twenty-third? The dishes from supper were still draining in the rack, but Isabella paid no attention to them.

Edith wondered, for no longer than a second, whether she should confide in her mother-in-law that something was going on with Joe. There was nothing much to tell her, and though Edith regarded Isabella as a friend and mother, the details of her marriage were not something she often discussed with anyone. How strange that it should be by her daughter-in-law, not her son, that Isabella was kept abreast of next-door's intrigues.

Now the big house was filling with the smell of browning onions and hot chili peppers. Isabella believed in cooking extra and saving the leftovers, and clearly she'd decided to prepare tomorrow's chili tonight, in quantities that Edith couldn't believe were necessary, even if Jeremy came home and was able to eat. She forced calm breaths, remembering that this was an emergency and she could not afford to lose control. Jeremy was a senior, he would be applying to colleges soon. Well, he should be. That was another thing she had to deal with in the new year. There was a lot.

She sighed as Isabella piled ground chuck into a skillet

and began browning that too. No point in trying to explain vegetarian to her, Isabella was convinced her granddaughter was too skinny and needed meat on her bones.

Edith knocked on Dana's door and it opened at once. Dana was chewing gum, but not the bubble type, thank the Lord. "What's wrong with Jeremy?"

"I don't know yet," Edith said. "Dad went in the ambulance."

They stood there a moment, regarding each other, very close in height now that Dana had stopped growing. The wood of the door shone softly in the light of the desk lamp. That reminded Edith. "Let me get you a brighter bulb for that lamp."

"I tried a hundred-watt, it got too hot."

The desk was veneered with a darker wood. It was a sturdy, if old piece of furniture, and had a leg that had to be held straight if you ever attempted to move it. Like the Royal standard typewriter sitting on one end of it, the desk had belonged to Isabella in her school days. In fact Isabella, not Edith, had taught the girl to type. "J, H, J, space," Isabella had drilled her granddaughter, and the manual keys clattered across the page.

Joe came home later, but they didn't talk much. He assured her that Jeremy was fine, that the staff was monitoring him overnight and would have a much better idea what was going on tomorrow. Then he shut himself in the bathroom for what must have been the billionth time that day.

In bed, Joe went to sleep right away, and Edith was left lying there. This was a reversal of their usual pattern. She tended to fall asleep quickly, from sheer exhaustion. They often slept in an embrace, or at least touching, which she suspected was not common for couples in their nineteenth year of marriage, but she never read those articles in the women's magazines so couldn't be sure. Some nights, though, like this one, she would lie in his arms and still feel like the loneliest person in the world.

Edith wasn't stupid. She was a teacher herself; she'd been to college too. She had not been one hundred percent surprised at Joe's little announcement, only at its timing. It was a measure of his integrity, or of her trust in it which wasn't exactly the same

thing, that he had spoken to her first, rather than going off and rearranging on his own. Most husbands would not bother to mention it first.

She knew she would not be going to sleep for a while, so got up, felt for her slippers and padded out into the living room. She was always more comfortable in rooms lit by lamps; overhead lights didn't flatter anybody, and she hated them, especially the fluorescent kind that lit her classroom all day.

The *Poudre Valley Crier* lay scattered around the floor. She found herself wanting a cigarette again. Isabella's fault, though she didn't care much for her mother-in-law's brand. Those sweet-smelling, old-lady cigarettes. Edith thought of them and the craving subsided.

She picked up the section of the paper that wasn't news, since she wasn't in an intifada mood. The cartoons—all black and white—were in the back, but she found her eyes drawn to Dear Abby. The letter today was from a woman whose marriage could not, in Abby's opinion, be saved. Abby said that in all such cases “the woman loses” and advised her correspondent to seek counseling.

And for this she got paid. Well, Edith wasn't going to lose. She was not, by nature, a confrontational person, but she had not gotten through the last two decades, with the family she had, by listening to Dear Abby. She had a quiet confidence in her family that other wives and mothers could not afford (she did read those articles in the women's magazines and discussed them with her friends, at church or elsewhere). She knew, for example, as well as Isabella did that her son was not on drugs, knew it even if Joe, confused as he was, did not. She knew that Joe, confused as he was, was honest with her, and had always been honest with her as far as he could be. Sitting down together each evening for supper was an achievement these days. She knew there were families with no such thing as a dinner table or a regular gathering round it. If people didn't grow up together, she wondered, not for the first time, what did they have to miss once they left home?

She barely slept that night. She just lay there, listening to Joe breathe. She was awake again some time before six. On

weekdays she always got up at six, shuffled out before any of them, washed her face, and turned on the heaters and the stove. With one bathroom everybody could not get up at exactly the same time.

But today was a vacation day, and though she couldn't stay in bed, there was no reason to wake the household either. She went into the kitchen, wrapped in a terrycloth robe, her slippers soft on the linoleum and her hair defiantly ugly. The floor was scarred from a thousand dropped knives, worn from scrubbing out splatterings from cans. It was difficult for her to draw a line of propriety in that kitchen. Domestic or war room, in Edith's mind the kitchen was a theatre of almost all human existence. This was where Jeremy had fallen off the counter, having gotten up there she didn't know how, and busted open his mouth and needed stitches, and she'd had to call the rescue squad then too because Joe wasn't home. That was where Joe had stood when he last told her, several years ago, of his ongoing struggle with feelings that weren't going away, but that he still wanted to control them and needed her help. She had stood there, with the rangehood light on, stirring something continuously (the secret to not burning anything, she'd learned too late from Isabella). Then she'd spoken, and that too, in its way, had left blood on the floor.

Now she started the coffeepot—opening the fresh can of grounds, she just loved that fresh coffee smell—and took her own few minutes in the bathroom, studying the lines around her eyes and her untamable perm. There were more lines than there had once been, and she supposed she could attribute them all to her husband, but where was the originality in that? She peered more closely, plucked a few stray hairs from between her eyebrows.

She hadn't bothered to close the bathroom door. Intimacy meant not caring what someone saw you doing, though she'd had more of a sense of privacy than the rest of her family in the early years. For most of the children's lives, they and their father would use the bathroom or bathe or dress with the door wide open, it didn't matter who was there.

Joe was in the shower when the ancient percolator finished

its business and Edith poured her first cup. If she had had cigarettes in the house, she'd have gone out on the porch and had one right then, with her coffee. This was why she'd started keeping them in the car.

The phone call came and Jeremy was all right, but he had epilepsy. She wanted to go to the hospital right then, before eating, but she also wanted to avoid the appearance of panic. Then Joe came into the kitchen, wrapped in his robe, his full head of hair still wet. "Let's eat first," he said. "They won't be ready anyway, we'll just be sitting there. Bacon, you want some bacon?"

She didn't think she did, but if she smelled it frying she knew she'd want some, as with coffee or tobacco. Joe never cooked, but Isabella was there before Edith even dressed, the scent of those cigarettes still clinging to her housedress and curlers. Isabella peeled off a slab of bacon strips and threw them in the skillet. They sizzled and sweetened the air.

Dana appeared, looking pale, but maybe that was Edith's imagination. She made no acknowledgment of the bacon smell. Edith set cereal boxes and a glass of juice down in front of her. "Jeremy's all right, we're going to pick him up after breakfast."

"How are you, Mom?"

"All right." She paused before returning to the subject of Jeremy. "He has epilepsy."

Dana looked up. "So he's going to keep having fits?"

"I don't know." Edith gulped at her coffee. Did epileptics necessarily keep having seizures? Her instinct was to look this up at once, but the library was closed. She was a science teacher. That was the first step of the scientific method, to find out everything that was already known about a disease, before you set about experimenting. On real people and real lives.

"Jeremy will be fine, honey," Isabella said. She placed the crisply fried bacon on a pewter tray kept for that purpose. She never lined it with paper towels, as Edith did, and the resulting mess drove Edith crazy, although Isabella was conscientious enough to drain bacon fat away into a container, to save for what? Mardi Gras?

Isabella set the tray down in front of Dana, who continued

to munch on flakes of some kind. Edith poured coffee for Dana and Joe. “You want some coffee, Mom?” she said to Isabella.

“Honey, I’ve had two cups already.”

What did Isabella do so early? Did she lie awake all night too, worrying about her son, her grandson, her skinny pale granddaughter? She didn’t seem like a worrier. More of a putterer. If she ever relaxed it must have been at her own house, because she always seemed to be busy over here. Edith didn’t object. She didn’t want to fry bacon.

Eventually they all sat down, after Isabella had fried some eggs, which Dana wouldn’t eat because they had touched bacon grease.

Breakfast was a peaceful grazing. Normally, on Christmas Eve, Edith would have put on some music. She rarely was up and awake without at least a radio on; she enjoyed the clamor. But under the circumstances, quiet was welcome.

She and Joe barely exchanged a word on the drive to the hospital. Early in their marriage she had not found silence comfortable; she was not used to it. When someone else was present, she felt the need to fill silence with words. She used to talk and talk, growing more and more agitated, while Joe stared at the road or at his plate or into space, and she would wonder whether he was listening to her or even knew she was talking. It didn’t matter what it was about, she just needed to have a conversation. They were more used to each other now, but she was secretly convinced she’d done most of the accommodating and letting go. And she was sure he felt the same way.

*We hope you enjoyed this  
Bella Appetizer.*

