

Falling
into Place

A MEMOIR OF
Overcoming

Hattie Kauffman



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Hattie Kauffman, *Falling into Place*

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To the descendants of John and Josephine

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Love to those who have walked on: Mom, Dad, brother John . . . and of course, Aunt Teddy.

Chapter 1

The woman in front of me was in no shape to be on television. Her face was lifeless—her eyes red, swollen, vacant. She met my gaze as if begging to be told what to do, but I had no idea how to help her and felt every bit as lost as she looked. All I could think to do was recite the facts as I knew them. Maybe facts would bring clarity and direction.

You have a shoot this morning. You should take a shower.

My words bounced off her cold image in the mirror. She wasn't listening.

I turned away, but movement felt nearly impossible under the weight of limbs too heavy to lift. My mind felt as though it were slipping in and out of time and I struggled to stay focused on what I was doing. Thirty minutes passed, maybe an hour. I hardly remembered showering, couldn't recall picking out my outfit or applying my camera-ready makeup. Then I was in the middle of the kitchen, staring at everything and nothing in particular—the kitchen belonged to the woman I was yesterday. This morning, the space didn't seem to know me. The instincts born of habit felt foreign and irrelevant.

You should eat breakfast.

But how could I, knowing he was just down the hall?

I tiptoed back past the guest room where he was sleeping and made my way to the master bedroom. Our new bedding looked regal in its gold and burgundy. It was only weeks ago we'd walked around Bloomingdale's and decided which fabric and pattern we liked. The big sleigh bed itself was also new.

We have a brand-new bed.

Our wedding photo sat upon the dresser. We looked impossibly young. The groom didn't have a single grey hair. I touched the picture, tracing my fingers over our faces, landing finally on our wedding kiss. We had awakened to this photo for seventeen years.

I carried the picture, in its marble frame, back to the kitchen and set it on the counter to face him when he got up. Then I walked out of the house to begin a three-hour drive to Lompoc for my shoot.

I was in no state to be behind the wheel of a car. As I headed up Sunset Boulevard and got onto the 405 Freeway, I was struggling to see through tears. By the time I merged onto Highway 101, crying became weeping. As I passed Ventura, my weeping turned to wailing. Tissues littered the front seat. Whatever had held me together was gone.

By Santa Barbara, I was cried out. I glanced at the clock, in a brief lucid moment, and realized I was an hour ahead of schedule. It hadn't occurred to me to check the time when I was still at the house. I had simply needed to go. I pulled off the highway to regroup, gather myself, and reapply my eye makeup. *Maybe I should try again to eat.*

A few minutes later I found myself being seated in the hushed, elegant breakfast garden of the Four Seasons Hotel, overlooking the ocean. A waiter set freshly squeezed orange juice before me and asked if I'd like a *New York Times*.

What?

I stared at him as if he were speaking a foreign language. And then I was angry at his insensitivity. Who reads the *New York Times* on a day like this? Did I *look* like I wanted to read a paper?

Right. I'm a news correspondent. I read the New York Times every day.

I dumbly shook my head. Not this day.

Gazing at the brilliant blue of the ocean, I didn't notice when food was set before me. When the waiter brought the check, I saw an hour had passed and I'd barely touched my plate. I couldn't recall having a single thought during that time. It was as if I'd been clubbed on the head, so stunned that my thoughts had vanished.

Am I falling apart? You can't fall apart, Hattie. You never fall apart.

That thin reassurance sent my mind tumbling back in time, searching for proof of this assertion.

Look Directly into the Camera

"Focus," I tell myself, facing the huge studio camera.

I am twenty-six years old and about to anchor my first news broadcast. And in Seattle, of all places—the same city that couldn't break us but came close, the city that was supposed to be a new beginning for Mom and Dad when they left the reservation—but where we seven kids found ourselves, more than once, huddled in a parked car on First Avenue waiting for them to come out of a tavern.

"Mom, can we go now? Please?"

"Soon," she'd call to us, before disappearing again into the dark doorway of a bar, while we waited in the cold car. She'd emerge some time later, with a pronouncement of, "Soonly."

"Mom, let's go. We want to go home."

"Soonly," she'd sing. "Soonly."

I pull my mind back from thoughts of my family and our history as I shuffle through the script pages and prepare to report Seattle's morning headlines. Yet, who could've predicted that that shivering, skinny, Indian kid would someday be anchoring the news? Does it show? Will they see how far in over my head I am?

The station's theme music comes on. With the floor director's fingers punching the air just below the camera lens, the count-down begins: five-four-three-two-one—and I'm on . . . live television. Before I'm halfway through reading the second story on the teleprompter, the director's voice crackles through my earpiece, "Drop page six."

My brain works two paths. I am reading, hitting the words with overemphasized inflection, as I try to give them meaning and weight, while simultaneously reaching down to pull page six out of the pile in front of me and sliding it to the side. The teleprompter rolls on.

This chance to anchor is a complete fluke. I'm the rookie in the newsroom, a reporter for only a year. But the early morning newscast has just one anchor and one overnight reporter, and last night they both called in sick.

When my phone rang in the middle of the night, the managing editor asked if I knew how to anchor.

"Of course," I said, although I had never read from a teleprompter and had zero experience.

There's no makeup person in local morning news, so I apply my own powder and lipstick. Too much? Not enough? My long brown hair hangs down my back. I look like what I am, a recent grad student and newly divorced mom of two kids who are depending on me to make it as a news reporter.

They're probably just waking up now to get ready for school.

Now's not the time to think about that. Focus, Hattie. We're going to a commercial break. Look directly into the camera. Smile.



"No, you didn't fall apart," I whispered, as if it was the me of twenty-five years ago that needed a pat on the back. *You bluffed your way onto the air and became an anchorwoman, and then a network correspondent, and now . . .* I glanced about the luxurious

restaurant like I'd just been dropped into the present, noticing the check the waiter had left on the table, a big bill for uneaten food, and remembered that even now a camera crew was waiting for me.

I paid the breakfast bill and continued north on Highway 101. By the time I arrived at the shoot in Lompoc, I appeared so ravaged the producer averted her eyes and inhaled, as if buying time to figure out how to tell me I looked like roadkill.

Our assignment was a feature story on a thriving home business that sold products from Africa. I interviewed the owner, a billowy black woman, who told me God had awakened her one morning with the distinct message that she must help women in Africa.

I gave a routine, disconnected nod—partly in an attempt to mask my annoyance at being dragged all the way up here to talk to a crazy woman who seriously believed God had spoken to her, and partly because no matter what she was saying, I simply could not bring myself to fully engage with her. Her responses sounded like static in my ears. I hardly asked a single follow-up question to anything she said. So she kept speaking and I kept nodding. But as we went on, her dark eyes bored into mine.

“God woke me up,” she repeated.

The Long Road

“Wake up. Hattie, wake up.”

I am seven years old and my little sister Carla is shaking me awake. Blinking against the brightness of the lightbulb overhead, I give her a cranky face, roll over, and close my eyes again.

“Wake up. We’re going to Idaho,” she urges.

I sit up. It is the middle of the night. Every light in the house is on. Bleary eyed, I see Carla has a paper bag in her hand and is looking for clothes to throw into it, while the youngest two girls are still asleep at my feet. The scene doesn’t make sense to my drowsy brain.

“Come on, girls.” Mom’s yell comes from the bottom of the stairs, in the high, nasally pitch that lets me know I’d better jump. It’s another After Closing Time Road Trip.

We never know when one might happen. A year could go by, or we might have two in one month. It could be in the summer or during the school year. We groggily pile into the backseat of the car. She throws a blanket over us and we speed off into the night. Somewhere in the desert, sunrise will jerk us awake. Mom might have pulled over and be asleep, or she might be squinting hard against the light, still driving, a beer bottle between her knees.

I can’t guess what Idaho is for her.

For me, it’s a ton of tough cousins, girls who hit like boys, some who make fun of us for being half white. But it also means Grandma and the smell of pies baking. And cold rivers, tall pine trees, Grandpa’s gentle laugh, and . . .

“Hey, wake up.” My sister shakes me again. “We’re in Idaho. We’re here.”

A Thousand Miles Away

I shook off the memory, returning my attention to the African American woman, who hopefully had no idea my thoughts were in another time and place. She seemed to be waiting for me to respond and so I nodded, feigning understanding, while inwardly wondering at my sudden inability to remain in the here and now.

“I could not ignore God,” she continued, leaning forward and staring at me until my own discomfort made me look down at my notes. After a pause she went on, “Even though I had no idea how to proceed, I couldn’t ignore him.”

The certainty of her words reached into my fog and pulled at me. For the first time, I felt myself leaning forward. Something here felt true and personal. *Does she see? Does she know?* I pushed my

intrigue aside and settled back in my chair again, hurrying through the rest of the interview and just wanting it to be over.

As the crew was breaking down the gear and I was gathering my things to leave, the woman approached me. She grabbed hold of my arms and looked at me again with those dark eyes. “Women all over the world will be praying for you,” she said.

Praying for me?

And then, this extraordinary person embraced me, full-on hugged me. Despite my astonishment, part of me wanted to press into her and collapse into those sheltering arms. But I stiffened and pulled back. *Why bother*, I thought. *It’s too late*. I didn’t need her pity. Or her God.

Walk Away Hollow

“I don’t want the white man’s God,” I whisper harshly into the phone, turning my back so my sisters and brother won’t hear me. We are gathered around the phone in the living room, which we do whenever Aunt Teddy calls.

“Oh, Hattie,” Teddy begins, her voice thin and tinny over the long-distance line.

It is 1970. I am fifteen and disgusted that I was ever taken in by her words. No loving God could have created my world.

“It’s not a white man’s God, Hattie. Christ died for *all* people.”

“The missionaries just wanted to steal our land,” I sneer.

“The government needed to tame the Indians, so they sent in the Christians.”

“But—”

“I don’t want to hear anymore. I’m finished with it.”

I drop the receiver dismissively into the hand of the next sister in line waiting to talk to Aunt Teddy. In rejecting her God, I am pushing away the only person who has consistently been kind to me. I walk away hollow.

Unsteady Steps

I practically staggered back to my car, so desperate was I to get away from the camera crew and the intense lady talking about God. It's a wonder I didn't kill anyone that day, driving six hours on freeways, in and out of tears, in and out of focus. Just as I was reaching the outer edge of Los Angeles, my cell phone rang.

"Hi, it's me," he said.

"It's me?" Does he think I've already forgotten his voice?

"Hi," I answered, tempted to add, "It's me."

"Do you want to get dinner?" he asked.

He's back.

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "Do you want to go out? Or shall we eat at home?"

"At home," he said, and added, "I love you."

I relaxed into my seat, exhausted. We'd have dinner and let go of last night's madness.

The kitchen was mine again as I prepared lamb shank, sure that he was on his way home to give me an explanation.

Later, as I set the table, I heard the door handle click. In expectation, I swung around to meet him, only to feel my smile falter at the sight of his stilted posture.

He came through the door but couldn't quite enter the room. My movements slowed as I placed the food on the table. He set down his briefcase.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"Smells good," he offered.

"I made lamb shank."

He could see that.

"I thought lamb shank would be good."

There was no reason to keep repeating it, but I frantically grabbed it like a life raft.

"You always liked lamb shank."

“It smells good,” he repeated, walking like a stick figure to take his seat at the table. Unwilling to give up the ritual, I put salt and pepper before him, and took my seat as well. In silence, we picked up our knives and forks. The enormous quiet pressed against me, forcing my mind to scramble for something to say, as if a pleasantry like, “How was your day?” might save the situation. But before I could begin, he blurted, “I want to be perfectly clear. I want a divorce.”

“Divorce?”

He seemed surprised at my surprise.

“What did you think I meant last night?”

“Well . . .”

Of course, he had meant divorce.

“But you didn’t use the D-word,” I said lamely.

“I didn’t?”

“No. You didn’t.”

We set down our utensils. No one cared about lamb shank.

“I didn’t say the word ‘divorce’?” he asked, incredulously.

He shook his head and muttered to himself, “. . . and I’ve really been trying to work on my honesty.”

Something about the introspective expression on his face made me conscious of the vast expanse between us; me, merely a bystander witnessing a man wonder at his own lack of honesty. Then, as if he remembered I was in the room, he turned to me with a whip of his head and declared, “Yes. I want a divorce.” He said it with the inflection of someone deciding which salad dressing to order in a restaurant. “Yes, I’ll have the bleu cheese. Yes, I want a divorce.”

“But . . . but . . . how come?” I felt as though I was stumbling over my own feet. “Is there someone else?”

“It’s not about that,” he dismissed.

“Well, what is it about?”

He retreated into something from the previous night’s refrain: “I have to live according to my commitments.”

I had no idea what that meant the first time he said it and the repetition of it now seemed robotic—rehearsed, even.

“But our marriage *is* our commitment.”

“Our marriage is a fraud,” he answered.

Since when?

“I have to live in integrity,” he said, through gritted teeth.

What does that mean?

A wallop of fear wouldn’t allow me to ask if integrity meant being true to someone else, if there were another commitment that I was not aware of. Nothing in me felt brave enough to hear the answer, and so, as if covering up the topic, I placed my hand over his.

“Why, honey? Why divorce? I don’t understand.”

When he didn’t answer, I continued asking, a third and fourth time. He met these questions by darting his eyes about, to his plate, to the ceiling, out the window. At last, in a rushing exhale, he blurted, “You’re just not suitable at business dinners.”

What?

“You just, you make everyone uncomfortable,” he added. “You’re socially awkward. All my friends say I’m more myself when you’re not around.”

Disbelief turned to a tortured attempt to entertain his premise and argue against it. I reminded him of the couple who’d been trying for weeks to get together with us for dinner. They certainly didn’t seem to be uncomfortable with me. In fact, the wife and I had talked on the phone the other day about scheduling dinner. I recalled suddenly that we’d set the date for next week.

We can’t get a divorce. We’re having dinner with friends.

“Forget it, I already told them.” He shrugged.

My hand shot up to cover my mouth. Had she known when we were on the phone? Humiliation hit me. To avoid absorbing it, I clawed my way back to his suggestion that I make people uncomfortable and, ridiculously, did a mental scan of all the other couples we’d dined with recently, and mentioned one.

“They were *very* uncomfortable at dinner,” he replied.

“You’re divorcing me because your friends were uncomfortable at dinner?”

“No,” he sighed. “That’s not it. It’s . . .”

“What?” I repeated. “What is it?”

Shifting in his seat, his visible distress jolted me with a new possibility.

He’s dying and he doesn’t want to tell me.

That would explain the determined coldness, the hurtful words. He was shutting off debate . . . to protect me from having to go through his death. Like a contortionist, I twisted my thinking so that betrayal could appear as kindness. I invented one diagnosis after another, from a brain tumor to Alzheimer’s.

“Are you sick? Is that it?” I asked, caressing his shoulder.

“No,” he said, looking down at the table as if speaking to the cold, congealing lamb shank.

“Then, why? Just tell me, why?”

In the silence of his non-answers, my mind raced. An image of the trendy pair of jeans I’d noticed a few weeks ago came to mind. It wasn’t just the tight jeans. Everything right down to his underwear was brand-new. In fact, his wardrobe had undergone such a strange overhaul that perhaps . . .

“Are you gay?” I asked.

“No!” he blared, finally turning toward me, indignant. “What makes you think that?”

“I’m just trying to understand,” I answered. “Why would you want to end our marriage? We’re not fighting. We don’t have problems. I just don’t understand.”

Facing me directly, he declared in a flat, staccato voice, punctuating each word, “I don’t enjoy being with you.”

It was such a slap that even my gasp caught in my throat.

Our eyes held each other for a beat before mine dropped; my gaze settled upon my long-married hands limp in my lap. Desperate for

distraction, my brain burrowed in on minute details. I noticed veins visible underneath tan and crackled skin. They were Mom's hands.

"Well . . ." I heard my ghost voice say.

He continued, "I just *settled* for you because I was tired of being alone, and you were pretty then."

I was pretty then.

"Well . . ." I echoed myself.

My eyes wandered from my hands to his. I saw his knuckles were white, and that his right fist clenched something. It was the steak knife.

"Perhaps we should remove the knives from the table?" I suggested, with as much lightness as I could summon, which made it come out like an ill-timed joke.

He dropped the knife with a clatter.

Though my body balked, I willed my muscles to move, to pick up the utensils and dishes of uneaten food and carry them to the kitchen.

"Stick the knives in my back," he choked out. "I deserve it."

He began to sob.

The most I could manage was to swivel halfway around to witness his narrow shoulders heave, see his head drop to his chest, and listen to him weep. I was too stupefied to question whether his crying was for me, whether it held any compassion or shame for what he had just said or what he had just done.

The old me would have rushed to soothe him. The newly discarded me turned vacantly to the domestic duties of cleaning up after supper. Perhaps another woman would have stalked out the door, or grabbed his bright new wardrobe and thrown it on the lawn. A therapist once told me that adult children of alcoholics are often irrationally loyal. I don't know if that was the case, but washing dirty dishes seemed the only thing to do, and so there I was, rinsing silverware, loading the dishwasher, scraping plates into the garbage, throwing away perfectly good food.

Famished

“This child is undernourished,” Teacher says, as she hands me over to the school nurse. “Just look how thin she is.”

They huddle in quiet talk.

I peek about the exam room, excited to be somewhere new. A box of tongue depressors attracts me, the wood smooth and splinter free. I want to spill them onto the counter and build something. Just as I go up on my tiptoes to reach for them, the nurse grips my shoulder and turns me toward her.

She lifts my shirt and runs her finger over each rib, like a stick slapping against the slats of a fence. I decide she must be counting my ribs. Teacher, watching us, shakes her head, as if she’s saying no. I think that means the nurse is counting wrong. There’s an upside-down U in my chest where the ribs meet in the middle. The nurse hooks her finger under it, like she’s going to lift me. She frowns and shakes her head just like Teacher.

I am a kindergartener.

We live in the housing projects. And usually, we are hungry. At home one day my sister eats Tide soap. It’s in a bowl, on a shelf, looking like sugar. She swallows it before she tastes it.

One afternoon Mom comes home, which alone is a big event. But this time it’s tremendous. She has bags of groceries. We swarm her, all seven kids jumping, talking, laughing, trying to hug her and grab something to eat at the same time. I snatch a loaf of bread and run upstairs to hide it in a closet.

Later, when Mom finishes putting away the canned vegetables, milk, and butter, she notices the bread is missing.

“For Pete’s sake, did the clerk not put it in the bag?”

I don’t say a word. I sit on the couch, staring at my curled up toes. Food is more crucial than honesty. I am learning that my survival is up to me.

Chapter 2

I hungered for an answer, but couldn't find one. A divorce out of the blue didn't make sense. Pacing my room, I wondered if it could be my fault. Stopping mid-stride, I asked myself what in *me* could have led to this? With the thought, I dropped my head to take in my body. Oh yeah, the breast cancer. But the surgery, radiation, and reconstruction took place years ago. It couldn't be that. Yet . . . maybe I'd become too nagging. I'd had a hysterectomy, because of the cancer risk, and surgical menopause can make women irritable. It said so right there in the pamphlet at the doctor's office. I must have gotten so outrageously irritable that I'd irritated myself out of my marriage.

I walked to the mirror to seek clues in my reflection. *You were pretty then.* Was it a lack of prettiness? My reflection showed weariness, but my face was not so horrible that I should be discarded like some old sock.

Flopping onto my bed, I closed my eyes against the obvious. It wasn't that my looks were gone, it was that my eyes and ears were gone. I'd become deaf and blind to the affair that he must have been having. There had to have been warning signs and I had missed them. I was the clichéd middle-aged woman, astonished to find herself . . .

Dumped. I'm being dumped.

It was too much. On top of the rejection, I felt the appalling reality that this would be my *second* divorce. I'd be a twice-divorced woman. It didn't matter that the first had been a teenage marriage . . . two stupid kids acting out their parents' drinking and fighting.

Now it was happening again, only without the alcohol and drama. And bafflingly, this was supposed to be the grown-up marriage, the one that wasn't a reenactment of craziness. Yet, there it was: a different sort of insane, one tediously common. Older guy dumps long-term wife. Feeling so sick I couldn't sit still, I hopped off the bed to pace.

This happens to other people. I've done stories about them. I've interviewed those women. But I'm not supposed to be one of them.

Tinier than a tremble, a slight shaking began in my center and grew until I rattled all the way out to my fingertips. I was being thrown away. There had to be a mistake. Crumpling, I crossed my arms over my belly, unconsciously bending in on myself. We were buying a condo in Hawaii. We were planning our retirements. We . . .

Could it really be that I'm not enjoyable to be around? I popped up straight again and considered the accusation: socially awkward.

I sat down once again upon the bed. *Being married to me must be awful.* As a network correspondent, I was often on the road and could be called away on a moment's notice. I had a suitcase packed at all times, sitting there in the garage ready to toss into a taxi, and another one in my office. My passport was in my purse next to my cell phone, which could ring at any time with instructions to head to the airport. Maybe he couldn't take being married to someone who always had a foot out the door, and "home" was the place I visited.

Poking further into that corner, I recalled the times, years ago, when he'd said, "I feel like I'm last on your list. After your job, after your kids, after your cabin, after your sisters, you finally consider

me.” Yes, he had said that—more than once. I remembered telling people at work, producers and other correspondents, wondering whether their spouses made similar complaints.

It’s because I’m gone all the time on work assignments.

I fell back on the bed, lying sideways across it, thinking. *No, that couldn’t be it. I was a correspondent before we got married.* Why would a spouse accommodate a career for almost two decades, and then suddenly decide it’s the reason to leave? It wasn’t the hours I kept, it was something else.

I stared up at the ceiling, examining it as if an explanation were hidden in it. The bland, creamy surface revealed nothing. I was left with the cliché, comical in its everydayness: aging man, finally feeling financial success, dumps the old ball and chain.

Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that there had to be something lacking in me. Who else was there to blame? I was guilty of marrying someone who would abandon me, so therefore I must have brought it upon myself.

My Fault

Drunk people, that’s what I know. I wake at night to the roar of Mom, Dad, and the occasional others who stumble in with them. Like my parents, the drinking buddies appear and then vanish. Bursts of laughter careen into foul words as they battle or weep, pass out and wake up mean. One of them cuts off my hair.

Smearing orange lipstick colors her frown.

“Lice,” the lips spit at my tangles. “Nits.”

Scissors, in unsteady hands, clip back and forth across my head.

I don’t know who she is.

“There,” the bright lips pronounce. “That’s better.” She drops the scissors and sways out of the mess that is our living room on a morning after.

Some days later—at some point we stop counting—Mom rolls

in. She freezes when she sees me and orders me to come closer. I lower my head in a reflex of shame.

“Who did this?”

My feet dangle in the air as she lifts me to face her.

“Who cut your hair?”

Each word sends a poof of booze smell up my nose as I struggle for an answer to her question, but I don’t know the lady’s name. She had orange lipstick. She was here with Dad.

In the face of Mom’s anger, I cannot find the words to tell her it’s not my fault; I didn’t ask the lady to cut my hair. She just did it. She did it *to* me. I didn’t know I was supposed to stop her. I am so ashamed.

As she begins shaking me, Mom’s fingernails cut into my underarms.

Think, I tell myself, but no name comes to mind, just the smudged lips mouthing, “Rat’s nest of nits.”

Mom twirls me around toward my brother and sisters.

“Who cut Hattie’s hair?”

With my eyes, I beg my siblings to help but they’re too scared to say a word. My choppy locks flip back and forth as Mom tries to shake the truth out of me, bringing only tears from all of us. And then, she’s gone.

Dad’s presence is equally erratic, equally unnerving. He disappears and reappears, without a pattern. Our parents might be gone for a night, or a week. Sometimes they are together, often they are not. We fend for ourselves.

John is the oldest, with Lilly right behind. They trade off the duties of being the Boss, telling us when to come in from playing, when to eat, when to go to bed. If they leave the house, Annie, the next oldest and just finishing first grade, becomes the Boss.

On this day, it’s my turn. I am four years old. John, Lilly, and Annie are outside playing. I’m in charge of the Kids: Carla, Lotta,

and Baby. I don't know why only those three are called the Kids, since none of us are grown up.

We're hungry.

There's nothing to eat.

Three-year-old Carla and two-year-old Lotta trail me into the kitchen, where the linoleum is cold under my feet. I carry Baby on my hip. Pots and pans lie scattered across the floor from the drum game we played earlier. Lotta gets distracted by them and starts pounding on a pan, until I open the fridge.

"I wan' some," she says, toddling over to grab my leg.

There's no milk or cheese in the fridge. It's as empty as the last time I checked. The scraped-out mayonnaise jar is still next to a finished but never tossed out jar of pickled pig's feet, Dad's hangover cure. Sighing, I close the door and turn away.

"I'm hungry," Carla complains when we parade back to the living room.

"Hu-gree," Lotta echoes.

One at a time, the Kids fuss, whimper, and build to a cry, like they're taking turns at it. At last, Baby falls asleep on my lap, signaling Carla and Lotta to drift off, slumped against each other on the couch. The resulting silence is so sudden it scares me. Without the Kids to look after, I'm abruptly aware no one is looking after me. I somehow know that this isn't how things should be, that someone should be taking care of me. But who?

The quiet feels like something's about to pounce. With growing panic, I tell myself not to cry. *You're too big to cry. You're almost five. You're the Boss.*

Afraid to look to the left or right, I focus on the front door that will open to John, Lilly, and Annie. I picture them returning with laughter, and teasing, and . . . bags of food.

Hunger.

The growls in my stomach clutch at my attention and scatter

my fear. There has to be something in the kitchen. I slide Baby off my lap to make another search.

I can't reach the cupboards high above the kitchen counter, so I pull out a low drawer, and another one above it, as a makeshift step ladder so I can climb up onto the counter. The first cupboard is empty. The next holds a saltine cracker tin but I know there's nothing in it but old photos of Mom and Dad when they used to be happy. Still, the cracker printed on the outside of the tin makes my mouth water.

I peer across to the far side of the sink where there's one more cupboard. *I can make it*, I tell myself. My tiny feet balance along the narrow edge of the sink to the far counter. There, I open the last cupboard and see a coffee tin, a beer glass on its side, mismatched salt and pepper shakers, some matchbooks Dad is saving, and a little packet of half-burnt birthday candles.

Hopping down to the floor, I return to the fridge and look again at the empty mayonnaise jar, the pickled pig's feet label. I give up and start to close the fridge when I see it: a jam jar on one of the narrow shelves built into the door. Jam! I grab the jar and hold it to my chest to twist off the top. It's empty. But . . . but no—there's a smudge of purple along the bottom rim. I rush for a knife to scrape it into my mouth. As I'm scooping up the bit of jelly, I hear Baby's first whimpers from the living room.

I don't want to share.

I swallow the taste of jam, gulping it down as her cries grow louder. Instantly, I feel a new weight: guilt. I have eaten the only food.

Baby wails.

I tilt the empty jar. I scrape what's already been scraped. The knife comes up empty.

Her cries are an accusation. I could have shared some with her. I should have.

Dropping the knife, I stick my fist into the jar and slide my finger along the bottom. When I pull it out, there's a speckle of jam, tinier than a half kernel of corn, on my fingernail. Concentrating on the purple fleck, I walk carefully back to the living room and put my finger in Baby's mouth.

She is soothed, sucking the speck of jam, but it doesn't take away the shameful feeling inside me.

I can't forget it, even when the older ones come in from playing, red-faced and loud. I fear they will see my greediness, but they don't. Instead, they yell at me and the younger kids for the wet spots on the couch, for not changing Baby's diaper, for being "too old to pee in your pants," for crying or whining. They're right, I'm sure. I must deserve their scolding.

John sends us upstairs to the bathroom, while Lilly goes to the kitchen to look for food. After a while, we hear her shout.

"Mush!"

We stampede back down to find her standing on the counter holding a brown bag over her head like a trophy.

"Mush." She beams.

We gather around to look at the odd bag.

"Us-duh." Annie tries sounding out the lettering.

John grabs it, and reads with authority, "USDA surplus commodity oatmeal."

"Mush!" the big ones exclaim together.

Lilly hops down and picks a pan up off the floor.

"Who made this mess?"

I suck in a breath, certain I'm in trouble, but no one really cares about the pots and pans all over the place, because there is mush. In minutes, it is boiling and releasing an aroma that pulls us to the stove. We're like cats meowing around Lilly's feet, until she orders us out.

"Go sit down. Get the kids out of here. It's almost ready."

Our family gathers at the table, empty cups or bowls before

us. When Lilly carries the pot to the table, there is an awe even the littlest ones sense. They don't whine or fidget, but gape at the steam rising from the mush.

"We should pray," John says quietly.

We are not a religious family and I have no idea how John knows to pray. Families on television do it. Maybe that's where he got the idea. *No, from Aunt Teddy, I think, or from Grandma and Grandpa.* I would like to believe that God will take care of us, but my idea of God is pretty empty. I just copy the bigger kids and do what they do.

We fold our hands before us, and together say, "God is great. God is good. Thank you for this food we eat. Amen."

Lost Appetite

My husband and I ate together just once more after the "divorce dinner," and only because I haplessly wandered into it one morning. We were in that awkward phase, the "D" word spoken but not acted upon. I was still too stunned to do anything, stumbling about in a mist so thick I couldn't see or feel. Meanwhile, his moods appeared to fluctuate, unnerving me with the unexpected.

"Hi." He smiled when I walked into the kitchen, on my way to work. "Did you see the game?"

It took me a moment to decipher the words.

Could he really be talking about football?

I shook my head in silence.

He jumped into a description of passes, tackles, kicks, and punts; a monologue punctuated now and then with the words "Michigan" and "Ohio State."

Maybe it was the mundane normalcy of husband-game-talk that put me on autopilot. I reverted to routine, which meant a bowl of cereal. But the falseness of the situation bore down on me and it took every bit of concentration to do what I'd done a million

times. As if detached from my body, I watched my physical movements, saw my hand reach for the cupboard, grasp the bowl, my movements overly precise.

Open the fridge. Get the milk. Pour the milk.

He sat at the table, rattling on. I saw he'd put a placemat out for me but I couldn't make myself walk over there to sit with him. Despite the outward appearance of a couple's morning ritual, I knew it wasn't real. I stood at the counter and took a bite of my cereal, making myself nod at his football story, before realizing sports wasn't the topic anymore.

"It's really changed my digestive system," he said, half-turned in his chair to face me. I forced myself to pay attention to his words.

He's talking about the inner workings of his gut.

Contemplation of his intestinal health was more than my own stomach could take. Carrying my cereal bowl as though it might disintegrate at any moment, I walked cautiously to the sink and slowly poured its contents down the drain.

"These supplements changed my whole system. If you want to try some, the powder's right there." He gestured toward the counter while looking at me expectantly.

I stifled an urge to laugh, then had to clamp down an impulse to scream. It was my first true inkling of anger. Why had it taken me so long to feel the one emotion I *deserved* to feel? Any anger I'd allowed had been turned toward myself, not him. And even now, the edge of rage dissipated as quickly as it had come, washed over by unexpected pity for the aging man turned in his chair, awaiting my acknowledgment. His was the simplest of requests: one human being who just wanted another to listen to him. Yet I'd been fired from the listening job. In sharp relief I saw the sadness of the moment. We no longer knew how to interact. In a paralysis of not knowing what I was supposed to feel, what I was allowed to feel, I backed away.

"Thanks," I muttered. "I've got to get to work."

“OK.” He smiled. As I walked out the door, he called out a compliment, “Nice dress!”

Unsettling, unpredictable, and as yet unavoidable, these sporadic encounters continued. At times you’d think the word *divorce* had never been uttered. Yet one day he handed me a list of realtors with the briskness one might use at the office.

“Choose one, so we can put the house up for sale,” he said. “It’s the only thing we own together. We’ll just sell it, split the money and be done.”

He’d already added up our separate assets, he said, and they remarkably came out exactly even, so neither would owe the other anything in the divorce. He presented his tally: a piece of paper with handwritten columns, one with his name at the top, the other with mine. There were the checking accounts, retirement funds, even the dollar value of our two cars. Seventeen years of marriage reduced to scribbles on a page that proved, he said, we didn’t need to spend a bunch of money on lawyers. To go our separate ways, all we had to do was sell the house and split the money from the sale.

Cash Me In

“Money, we need money,” John whispers intensely.

He is pressed flat on his belly, peering under the couch. Lilly, on her knees in a pile of clothes on the floor, digs through pockets. So far, they have two pennies and a nickel.

“Help out,” Lilly growls at Annie, who stands, stretches, and ambles over to the table to look under the dirty dishes.

“Not there.” Lilly sighs. “Get over here and help me lift up the rug.”

I sit with the Kids on the couch, unsure what the hunt for money means. Carla hugs her knees. Lotta picks a scab. Baby sucks her thumb, and wiggles her way onto my lap. I’m about to ask how

come they're looking for money, when Lilly springs to her feet in a little dance.

"A dime!"

John jumps up to check.

"We're rich," Annie marvels, which makes Lilly elbow her.

John counts the money: one dime, one nickel, and two pennies. John and Lilly look at each other and nod. In their silent language, they've come to a conclusion. Without saying anything to the rest of us, they walk out the front door.

"What's going on?" I ask Annie.

"Baby's first birthday, stupid," she says, squeezing me off the couch, while at the same time lifting Baby from my lap. "Put the dirty dishes in the sink. Get this place ready. We're having a party."

After a while, John and Lilly return, carrying a small paper bag and hustling into the kitchen. I'm excited, pondering how a party could fit in that little bag.

"Close the shades to make it dark," Lilly orders.

Annie pulls a chair to the window, climbs up on it, and reaches above her head for the string that pulls the shade down.

"OK, ready," she calls back.

John and Lilly emerge with flickering light on their faces from a used birthday candle burning in the middle of a Hostess chocolate cupcake.

"Happy birthday dear B-a-a-a B-e-e-e, happy birthday to you," we sing quickly because the stub of candle is almost down to the frosting.

Baby doesn't know she's supposed to blow it out, so we do it for her.

"Since it's her very first birthday," John decrees, "she gets the cupcake all to herself."

"Oh . . ." The rest of us deflate.

"Don't worry," he smiles. "Two came in a pack. We'll split the other one."

Lilly brings the other Hostess chocolate cupcake to the table and, with a butter knife, cuts it precisely in half. Hungrily, we watch the movement of her hand as she divides each half into three more slices. When all six of us have a sliver, we begin, each savoring the taste and texture for as long as we can.

Licking my lips and each one of my fingers, I turn toward Baby, take in her chocolate-smearred chin and feel a bubbling joy. Until I realize that no one told Baby to make a wish. She's too young to know on her own and no one told her. I fret at a lost chance to wish.