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Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field

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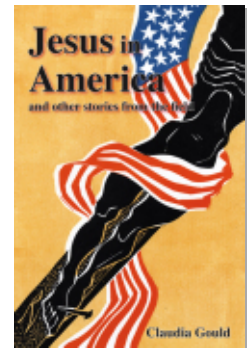
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The Mountains of Spices

*Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from
following after thee.*

—Ruth 1:16

Ruth knew that she had an important name. Almost as early in her life as she had learned to point to herself and say “Ruth!”—or, in those days, Rut’—she knew that her name was in the Bible. Ruth had a book to herself in the Old Testament and she was the grandmother of David, who played on a harp and killed a giant when he was still a little boy and grew up to be king, and she was the great-great-many-greats-grandmother of Jesus. She knew that Ruth had declared, “Whither thou goest I will go. Thy people shall be my people and thy god my god,” but not until they got to Ruth in Sunday School did she find out that she had not said those words to her husband.

“She said that to her daddy’s mommy!” she protested to her mother when they met after the service. She was only five and though she was quite clear on relationships, she did not always have the vocabulary for them.

“Her husband’s mommy,” her mother corrected. “Her mother-in-law. Naomi.”

Ruth nodded. “I know!” she insisted. Then, “Who is a mother-in-law?”

“Your husband’s mom is your mother-in-law. Your baby’s grandma.”

“Like Grandma Rose?”

Penny smiled. “Grandma Rose is *my* mommy, so she’s Daddy’s mother-in-law. Grandma Daisy is my mother-in-law.”

Ruth absorbed this genealogical information without too much difficulty. Grown-ups talked a lot about how people were related, and her two flowery grandmothers often argued, out of vast and ancient knowledge, the minutiae of family connections.

“So why did she?”

“Why did she what, Sweetness?” Penny was always glad to encourage her youngest child’s interest in the Bible, but she was distracted now, with the crowded afternoon to come.

“Why did she say whither thou goest and all to her mother-in-law?” Ruth tried to imagine her mother’s saying such a thing to Grandma Daisy.

“Well. Because she loved her so much, I suppose. And respected her.” Ruth knew about respect. She had a long list of people she was expected to respect. In 1986, Penny was doing her best to reproduce for her own children the values of her own upbringing, thirty years before. “After all,” Penny went on, “if somebody raises up a man good enough to marry you, she must be pretty good, too.”

Ruth thought. “That man was dead that she married.”

“Yes, that’s sad, isn’t it?”

“And you know what?” said Ruth. “His name was Ophir.”

“Was it, Sugar?”

Ruth nodded. “That’s a funny name,” she said. “Mommy...”

Penny was looking back a little irritably toward the church. She had expected Sam and the boys to have caught up with them by now. But no, Sam was standing around talking and Amos and Duncan were tearing through the shrubbery dirtying their clean clothes while Paul, who was old enough to be responsible, was shouting, egging them on.

“Mommy...”

“Yes, Sugar.”

“Do you have to respect your husband’s mommy?”

“Of course. She should be almost like your own mother to you.”

Ruth thought. “But you still have your own mommy.”

“Of course you do,” and she smiled at her very young, so adorable child. Her only girl.

“Mommy, didn’t Ruth have a mother?”

“Well, she might have had one someplace.” Penny knelt and gave Ruth a hug, as though to reassure her that her own mother was present and would be able to look after her for years and years.

“But she loved Naomi so much.”

“Well now, she surely did.”

†

Most of Ruth’s cousins, like her brothers, started life with hair of that almost white blondness that was locally called tow-headed. Her cousins started out fair and darkened to brown as they grew up. Ruth only darkened from tow to gold. The down on her arms

and the back of her neck was gold. Only her eyebrows and lashes changed to a true brown. She had high breasts and a round bottom and long thighs made muscular by summers spent playing outdoors. She was a good soccer player and a strong long distance runner. She was the object of adolescent lust, and probably of more mature longings, but she was treated with respect. Her mother always said that if you act like a lady you'll be treated like one. Besides, she was a girl with three brothers. Despite her beauty, she wasn't the most pursued girl in school. Boys out for mere fun and a feel looked elsewhere, among the less protected.

When she was sixteen, she brought home her first boyfriend. Sam and Penny had discussed when to let her date, but their decision did not, in the end, matter very much. Sam was inclined to be indulgent, and even Penny had finally to accept that Ruth could not be controlled as she had been controlled. Luckily, Will could be accommodated. A few months older and a few inches taller than Ruth, he was an okay student, not impressively bright but not too dumb. Though not husband material, he was an acceptable boyfriend: athletic, polite, a churchgoer. He already knew Ruth's brothers; he played basketball with Duncan.

But whenever she went out, Penny looked after her anxiously. That child, she thought, has no idea how beautiful she is, has no idea how dangerous this world is. Once she said to Sam, "It just hurts my heart to let her go," and he laughed and said, "She's tougher than you think."

She didn't go out with Will for very long. She liked him all right. He was super good looking, and a good kisser. But she never missed him when he wasn't there.

She spent the summer she turned seventeen without a boyfriend, untroubled. She cycled with her friends and they went for picnics and swam in the cold water up in the mountains, where you could get bit by a water moccasin if you didn't look out, and in the pool at the Athletic Center. She and her girlfriends dressed up and went out dancing in the town's one, rather tame club or at the youth center. She didn't drink because it made her sick. She went fishing with her brother Amos. She would be a junior in the coming fall. Two more years of high school and then... the rest of her life.

In the fall she met Roger, and dated him the whole of her junior year. He was a football player and already had an athletic scholarship to State. He was tall, blond like her, blue-eyed like her, and he came from nice people. Whenever they got the chance, they

necked passionately in the back of his father's vintage Chevy, which had plenty of room. They were hungry and thirsty for each other, hurried and hot, but they stopped, each time, before Roger had the occasion to use one of his carried hopefully condoms. Roger was importunate, but respectful, and Ruth was firm. She didn't exactly think that God was watching her at every moment (even when she went to the toilet) as she had when she was small, but she believed there was such a thing as sin, and that having sex with Roger would unarguably be sin. She had a feeling that her baptism and her church membership and her status as Sunday school teacher, all amounted to a promise to be good. And she was determined not to give her virginity up in the back seat of a car—even a vintage Chevy—with somebody she knew, however good he felt, she wouldn't love for long. And besides, her mother would have a fit.

Roger went away to university and they both promised to write, and they did, but when he came home for Thanksgiving they didn't quite pick up where they had left off. They never exactly broke up, but during the Christmas vacation they didn't see much of each other. Their families sent cards.

By then, only one of Ruth's three brothers was living at home, and he was engaged to be married, so Ruth found a boyfriend who was like a brother: funny and smart and easy to be with. Her parents included him in family occasions and felt lucky that their daughter was so sensible.

Then she met Wesley late in the spring of her last year of high school. They had been in the same school all along, only she hadn't noticed him before. Hadn't really seen him. If she had gone on not seeing him for just another month, her life would not have taken the turn it did. She would not have lost her parents, to whom she had been an answered prayer, and her brothers, who had spent most of their youths protecting her. Even three more weeks.

Nobody was going out much, in spite of the beautiful weather, because it was exams, and parents were anxious. Ruth stayed in on Friday evening and on Saturday they all went out to eat with her brother Paul and his fiancée. It had been Ruth's job to find out what Jasmine wanted for her wedding shower without asking her. It was supposed to be a surprise, but of course it wouldn't be. "If she doesn't have a shower, she'll be the first girl in this county not to since the War Between the States," Ruth said to her mother. It turned out that she wanted towels. Poor Paul, Ruth thought. Towels.

She settled down to her history notes as soon as she got home. She had always been a reasonably diligent student, but she wasn't a star. Now there was nothing she could do but work hard. She wasn't exactly worried, but she wasn't exactly confident. "Don't stay up too late," Penny said when she went to bed. "You'll learn more when you're rested."

When she came to wake her daughter up the next morning, Penny found Ruth at her desk. "Mercy, Ruth, you haven't been sitting there all night!"

"No, of course I haven't. I got up early and I thought I'd do some work before church—and I hope I don't die today." Grandma Rose always said "Well, I hope he don't die today," when she saw someone working on the Sabbath and it had entered family folklore. Ruth always thought it sounded more like a curse than a prayer. Familiar though it was, it made Penny smile.

"Well, I'm just putting the coffee on. Come down when you hear it perkin'." She paused at the doorway. "You dressed for church?"

Ruth looked down at the jeans and t-shirt she was wearing as though she had not seen them for a longish time. "No," she said. "I just put any old thing on. I'll get changed."

Her mother brought her a cup of coffee and pulled out the little leaf in her desk to place it on. "I'm not bringing eggs up here," she said. "You'll have to come down if you want breakfast."

Ruth shook her head. "No, that's okay. I don't really want anything. This is nice, though," and she reached for the cup.

"Well, I'm going to get ready. You keep watching the clock now."

When Penny came back, she allowed herself an exasperated sigh. "Honey, you're gonna have to hurry."

"Mom," she turned around and looked up. "You know, I think I won't go. I'm not teachin' the little ones this morning; the congregation can spare me for one Sunday."

"Well, maybe they can, Ruth, but..."

"Mom, I know God understands about this exam; it's taken me a million years to finally get goin' on it and if I stop now I'll never get started again. If He hadn't let all this history happen, I wouldn't be havin' such a hard time."

"You ever heard of blasphemy?"

Ruth laughed. "It's just a little joke."

"Well, it's up to you. We'll miss you."

"I'll see you later, Mom. I could be finished with this part by the time you get back. Only tell Grandma I've got a headache

or something. God can take a joke, but I don't think Grandma Daisy can."

"Don't push your luck, Miss." But she was smiling.

A few minutes later, when the door closed behind Ruth's mother, father, and brother, she was back at work. She was wasting time over the XYZ Affair, in a way. They'd never want her to know as much as she was learning. But it was interesting. The textbook said there had been an undeclared war. She wondered how you knew when it was finished, if it was undeclared. And how did you even notice it had started? Well, she thought, at least nobody got shot. And you could always find a way to work extra knowledge into an answer; there was a chance it would impress, even if it was irrelevant.

She moved her over-elaborate notes on the Adams administration to the back of her folder, got herself back on track and worked through to the end of her outline. Then she stood up and stretched. It was nearly one o'clock and she had hardly moved from her desk since she sat down at six that morning. She was proud of herself for her concentration, the intensity of her attention. She felt like a real student.

"I'll have a walk," she said out loud, and, full of her accomplishment, she added, "for the time of the singing of birds is come."

The pavement under her feet glittered a little with the mica in the concrete. Once Elder Springs had only had hard dirt sidewalks that must have gone to slush in wet weather. "Constructed WPA" was stamped on some of the pavement squares. All those men, she thought, out of work and no social security in those days. Her grandparents remembered the Great Depression. She had interviewed them a couple of years ago for a project. Grandma Daisy said that they were pretty lucky in North Carolina. "Things weren't so bad here." But Granddad was from Tennessee. "There were children on the roads," he had said, shaking his head. "I hope to the Lord you never see anything like it. Children walkin' the roads huntin' work or food or just a place to lay down." Their families couldn't feed them. Their fathers couldn't provide. Granddad traveled in those days. He was a skilled man and he got by. "I got by," he said, "on account of I had just myself. I would a' hated to a' been a family man in those days." He must have been a boy, really, she thought, a skilled boy. But the Works Progress Administration had paid men to build the sidewalks, which glittered now with mica under her white sneakers. Ruth thought how joyfully they must have poured the concrete, knowing that they would get money for groceries at

the end of the week. That was Roosevelt (1932-1945), and it was why Granddad was a Democrat till the day he died. Mr. Oaks, who lived on Catawba Avenue, remembered when even the big road coming into town was laid with half logs that sank into the mud in the early spring rains. He and his father used to haul wood to lay over them. The wood had to be pulled by mules. Mr. Oaks must be pretty old, she thought, older than her grandparents, but even so, that was recent to have had mud roads. He had once pointed to the smart houses across from his place. "In them days," he said, "there warn't nothin' over there but nigger shacks. Yessir, just nothin' but tarpaper shacks." And he shook his head at the progress he had seen.

She walked briskly, as though she had a destination, but really she was going where her feet led her. She passed the black church just as it was letting out. They had longer services, she knew, than most white churches did. And livelier ones. She had visited a black church—not this one—with her friend Annie from school a couple of times. Her family was Holiness. Ruth liked the preaching and the singing there. She told Annie who said, "Don't get too carried away with all that black soul. You try one of the AME churches one time; they're as dull as if they were white." She smiled now, remembering it, pleased to think that Annie could tease her so comfortably, as though being black or white were no more than a dress you put on. Still smiling, she paused to let a woman dressed in a butter-yellow coat hurry three little boys in powder blue suits from the church steps to a car waiting at the curb. Still smiling, she looked up and saw Wesley standing between a man and a woman she supposed were his parents. They were talking across him, arguing amiably. He was looking into Ruth's face.

When her way was clearer, she moved through the family groups and the circling children. Her path took her to Wesley. "Hey," he said, when she was within speaking distance. The woman had taken a few steps away and she looked back as he spoke. "Mama," he said, "this is Ruth McBride. She's a friend from school." Ruth turned toward Wesley's mother. She was a tall, very dark woman wearing a navy blue dress and a white hat trimmed in blue. "Ruth," Wesley went on, "I'd like you to meet my mother and..." he gestured to the round-faced man who was walking back toward them, "my dad."

"How do you do," she said, feeling constrained to an unfamiliar formality by Wesley's demonstration of good manners.

"Well, hello Ruth," said Wesley's mother. She extended her hand and grasped Ruth's, "It's a pleasure. My name's Margaret."

“Oh, that’s my middle name. Or nearly. It’s Marguerite—it’s like a daisy. It’s kind of after my grandma Daisy.”

“Well, that’s a pretty idea, Ruth. But Margaret means pearl, too, you know. The kingdom of God is the pearl of great price.”

The man laughed as he reached for her hand. “Well, this is a very godly conversation to be havin’ on a Sunday morning I’d say. I’m James Middlewright.”

She took his hand and smiled, grateful. She knew that Wesley was Wesley, but she had been trying to remember what his last name was. Middlewright. How could she have forgotten a name like that? Besides, they always used to be named together at roll call. Alphabetically united.

“Now, Ruth, are you goin’ somewhere in particular?” asked Mrs. Middlewright.

It struck her that she was the worst-dressed person on the Sunday street. It seemed to require some explanation. “Not really,” she said. “I’ve been studyin’ all morning and I just came out for a walk to... sort of clear my head out.”

The older woman nodded. “We’re walkin’ this way home,” she said, nodding toward the direction from which Ruth had come. “If your walk takes you our way, perhaps you’d like to stop for a glass of tea as you pass.”

Ruth hesitated for a moment, reflecting that she didn’t even know Wesley. He had called her his friend, but that was just politeness, really. She had needed reminding of his last name. But she had turned as they talked and they were all facing the same way. It was only a glass of tea and a walk on a spring day. “All right,” she said. “Yes, I will, thank you.”

Wesley and his father had begun to walk along together and she and Mrs. Middlewright followed them. She walked pretty fast, Ruth thought. “Now,” she said, “what is it you’re studying?”

“Oh.” She was a little surprised. It was the season of exams; everybody was studying one thing after another. What they were studying was exams. “Well, this morning I was studying history.”

“Do you like history?”

“Yes,” she answered, “I guess I do, really.”

Mrs. Middlewright nodded. “You won’t be able to get into it until after the exam,” she said.

Ruth laughed. “That’s right. I never thought about that. You haven’t got time to get interested in anything. Not really interested.”

The woman agreed, “I found it so, even at the University.”

"You went to college?" She realized how rude her surprise must sound. Would apologizing make it worse?

"I surely did," Mrs. Middlewright said, with no sign that she was offended. "For a little while. It was going to take a long time to finish. I went to study law."

"I see." There were black lawyers and women lawyers on television, but she didn't think she'd ever met one of either, much less the two together. "You had to give it up?" It must be all right to ask. She wouldn't have mentioned it if she'd flunked out.

"Well, it got to be hard." Money, probably, Ruth thought. "Life takes its own path sometimes. I trained as a legal secretary instead. That's been interesting over the years."

By the time they got to the Middlewrights' ochre-yellow house, Ruth was ready to forget she was a stranger. They didn't go in. Ruth and the men sat on the front porch, Ruth on the long swing. James Middlewright asked questions, told little stories, laughed at everything she said. He was paler than his wife and had green-gray eyes, lighter than his skin. Wesley took after him more than his mother, Ruth decided, although Wesley was tall, like her. Mrs. Middlewright brought a pitcher of tea, misted with cold, and tall glasses on a tray. Ruth accepted hers gladly, but she did not linger. She could smell their Sunday dinner. The smell drifted out the front door, mixing with the cut-grass scent from next door where a Sabbath-breaking neighbor was mowing his lawn. She mustn't keep them. Besides, her own dinner would be waiting. She and Wesley had hardly exchanged a word. She looked over at him as she prepared to rise and say goodbye, and she found that he was looking into her face. That was the second time that had happened.

She told her mother and father and brother over dinner about her walk, about meeting the Middlewrights, about stopping for tea. She mentioned where it was they lived; she even repeated one of Wesley's father's jokes. There was nothing she did not tell them, and yet she felt there was something undisclosed.

Perhaps that was why she went on talking about him. He was in her history class. She wondered aloud whether they were in the same exam set. They had English together, too. He hadn't liked *Catcher in the Rye*. She had forgotten that, but now it came back to her. It must be hard to write an essay on a book you didn't like, didn't they think? She had liked *Catcher in the Rye*, but Wesley said that Holden Caulfield sounded like a spoiled rich kid to him and

he couldn't get interested. Besides, Wesley said why weren't they reading something contemporary, something relevant?

"It sounds like your friend Wesley holds strong opinions," said Sam.

"Oh. I guess. I don't know really. I never paid much attention. It was just meeting him this morning. And exams coming up. That reminded me."

She glanced across the table at her brother. There was something unexpected in his face. She couldn't read it.

"What?" she asked him.

He shrugged and did not answer.

There was no reason for it, but she decided not to say anything more that brought Wesley's name into her mouth. Only then she couldn't think of anything to say. She waited for someone else to speak instead.

†

Later, she was to say that she had fallen in love with Wesley that day, that moment when she met his eyes across the bright pavement outside his church, but that she hadn't known it for another ten days. Wesley had known it all along.

They exchanged smiles and brief greetings in the corridors as they walked to and from exams. There was no occasion to touch. Nothing of significance was said. But always she felt the force of his dark gold eyes. Looking at him now, it astonished her that she had not noticed before how beautiful he was. She was drawn into the space around him; when they passed one another, it was an effort to maintain her direction, as though there were something in her body that wished not to walk away from him but to fall into an orbit of which he was the center. She was conscious of him all week and at the weekend she was conscious of his absence. On Wednesday, they kissed each other. They were walking side by side between buildings. Exams were over; everyone felt untethered at last. He said something—about a test question, about his plans for the summer, some little thing—and she turned her face to his, to answer, and their lips came together. Instantly she was drowned with love. They came apart, still looking into each other's eyes, laughing, relieved and frightened.

They were young, they said to each other, and they had their educations to get. They would wait, but one day they would marry. They would not wait to tell their parents; they would tell them right away. They wouldn't understand at first. They would probably

oppose them. There would be problems, but they were young and smart and brave. And love is as strong as death.

Ruth was worried, but she was excited. She would say everything at once: Wesley and love and—not right away, but when they could—marriage. They would be surprised she had chosen someone black, even shocked. They would probably try to talk her out of it, but finally they would understand that it was no use, that she would not be moved. She would explain that she and Wesley were prepared for bigotry and abuse from ignorant people, that they could withstand it. That it would only make them stronger. In the end, they would accept it. And once they met Wesley, they would see. Finally they would be glad, happy because she was happy.

Mother cried. She had tears all over her face. She said, “Oh my God, have you...? Please tell me you haven’t had sex with him.”

“Well of course we haven’t. What do you think I...?” Slightly guilty. Her mother didn’t know how close she had come with Roger. She was glad now that she hadn’t. Those True Love Waits people were fanatics, but there was something in what they said. She would be feeling terrible now if Wesley were not to be the first.

Her mother telephoned her father at work and told him, her voice choked and urgent, that he had to come home right away. He didn’t even ask why; he was on his way. “It’s not an emergency,” Ruth said. “You’re acting as if I was in the hospital or something!”

“I wish you were,” said Penny.

It went on for days. Amos came home to join in.

Ruth said, “But, Daddy, you’ll like him when you meet him. He comes from a nice family. He’s a Christian.”

“I don’t care if he’s Jesus Christ himself,” said her father, “he’s not screwing my daughter.”

No one spoke; what he had said was so shocking, in so many ways.

Finally, into the electric silence, Grandma Rose said, “Now there’s no need for language like that.”

It was as though someone were dying. It was as though a storm had taken the roof off, as though they were refugees from a war, from a flood.

“We love each other,” Ruth said.

“Love!” said her mother. Her voice was contemptuous, as though love were not worth mentioning.

Amos and Paul sat together in Paul’s room with the door shut, talking. On the first day, Sam didn’t go to work. Penny telephoned

and told them he was sick. Ruth couldn't remember when her father had taken a sick day, not even when he really was sick.

"You're just going to have to give him up, Darling," said her mother.

"I won't," she said. "I can't."

"What if...just imagine he found another girl. Or died," she added quickly, before Ruth could speak. "You'd have to live without him, then. You'd have to get over it. Life would just go on, wouldn't it? Well..."

She paused, but Ruth did not speak.

"Well, it's just the same. You can just put him out of your mind. Oh, honey"—she reached out and put an arm around Ruth's rigid shoulders—"I know it won't be easy, but just think of him as...gone. Just grit your teeth and be strong. Just think of all those women who lost their fiancés in the war. In all the wars. Think how brave they had to be."

"I will be brave," said Ruth.

"Oh, I just know you will!"

"Not like you mean. I mean I'll stick by him forever. Whatever you do to me."

"Give him up," went on endlessly, from all of them. And then Sam said, "Don't get engaged right away. Wait a while. You're so young. You're both so young."

They were beginning to give way. "That's all right," she said. "We didn't expect to have a ring. Or an announcement in the paper. Only we'll still know we're engaged. We wouldn't want to keep it a secret."

"No, let's say you don't have anything to do with each other until you finish college."

She thought that she could not have understood. "Don't have anything...what do you mean? Not see each other?"

"And not write. Just until you finish college. If your feelings are as strong as you say, you can easy wait four years. If it doesn't last, then it just wasn't meant to be."

So there was no hope after all.

Sam overheard two of the men talking at work. At first he thought they had somehow found out about his Ruth, but it was just something in the paper. Some white actress was marrying a black man. The kind of thing they don't mind in Hollywood. The newspaper was lying between the men while they ate their sandwiches, a photograph uppermost. He nodded to them and walked by. They nodded

back. "How can a woman like that...?" one of them asked. "Oh," said the other, "some women can't get enough of that ol' brown peter." They laughed. The first one sobered first. "If a daughter of mine was to take up with a jigaboo, I'd have to kill her," he said. But his friend disagreed. "Oh no," he said. "I could never harm a child of my own." He paused as long as a breath would take. "But I'd sure as hell have me one dead nigger!" and the two laughed together again.

Sam couldn't forget it. Than evening he said to Ruth, "You know I'd never let anybody harm a hair on your precious head."

"I know."

"But if I ever catch that nigger of yours, I swear I'll kill him."

Ruth could have cried real tears for her father. The threat was nothing. She knew he wouldn't murder anybody. It was the words. She felt bad for him, having said those things, and bad for herself, hearing them. Nothing like that had ever passed between them before.

They refused to meet Wesley, but he came to the door anyway, and Penny stood inside the screen door and spoke to him. Duncan, who had come home the night before, stood behind her with his arms folded across his chest, watching. Wesley stood firm on both feet, not shifting or fidgeting, but his face was anxious. Ruth hesitated on the upstairs landing, afraid she would make things worse if she tried to help.

"Ma'am," Wesley said. This was old fashioned of him. She had never heard him call anyone that before. "I just want you to know I love Ruth and I'll be good to her."

Penny said, "I'm sure you mean well. But it isn't up to you to be good to my daughter or otherwise. She has a family to do that."

"I just wanted to introduce myself to you," Wesley said.

"Well, you've done that now. I'll say goodbye," and she turned away from the door.

Duncan stepped forward and put his arm around his mother's shoulders. Wesley, on the other side of the screen door, stood looking at their united backs for a moment and then turned and went down the front steps. Ruth had started down the stairs, but Duncan and Penny were in the way and she could not have attracted his attention without shouting.

Even if they had wanted to, they couldn't watch her all the time. For one thing, Ruth had a job that summer; it had been arranged for months. She was to help out at the office of a friend of her uncle, moving jobs to cover regular staff as they took their vacations.

She started by helping Myrna in reception, filing and answering the phone. On the first day they invited her to have lunch with them but she said no and went to Wesley's house instead. She stood at the door long after she was sure no one was home. She leaned her head against the glass storm door, cooling her forehead. She had been running, and it was very warm. Then she fished around in the front pocket of her rucksack for her little spiral notebook. "Dear Wesley," she wrote. "I came to see you, but you were out." There seemed to be nothing else to write. Why write even that? At last she added, "I'm working at Wilkins Electrics, next to the Post Office." and then she signed her name. She longed to put "love" as she would on a note to the merest acquaintance, but she did not dare. She wrote just "Ruth" and left it in the letter slot. She had to hurry to get back by the end of lunch hour.

When he came to see her at work—not that day, but the next—she had been thinking about his lips. Lips were one of the features that got exaggerated in the ugly drawings you sometimes saw on leaflets from the white supremacists. "Just ignore it," her mother used to say, "those people are ignorant and full of hate." Fat lips. Wesley's were swollen like leaf buds, the color of a rose in his dark face, edged as sharply as though sculpted with a tool.

Myrna, who was showing her the ropes, was sitting at the counter saying how she'd thought they'd never have to hire another file clerk again once they got rid of the old typewriters ("Finally! We must a' been the last outfit in town to have those things!") but how they seemed to have more paper now than they ever did. "And you know some of that stuff never gets read again. Some of that stuff you're puttin' away right now won't ever get read again. I tell 'em but they don't listen. I thought we'd have got rid of those big old filin' cabinets by now but no, we have more paper now than we ever did have." It was Ruth's second day and she had heard this before; that was why she was able to think so intently about Wesley's mouth.

Myrna said, in a changed voice, "Hey there, how can I help you?" and Ruth turned, knowing that she would see Wesley standing in the doorway.

"Could I speak to Ruth, please?" he said, looking at Myrna and not at Ruth. "Just for a minute."

"I guess you don't want any electrical supplies," she said.

"No ma'am."

Myrna looked at Ruth and then at her watch. "Well, I guess we can afford that," she said. "A minute."

Ruth wondered if Myrna knew. If she did, it was kind of her, and dangerous, to give them their minute.

"I got your note," he said. It seemed a revealing remark. Myrna was looking at a sheaf of orders, but Ruth was pretty sure her attention was not on the papers.

She nodded, speechless with longing. The counter was between them.

"How are your parents?" he asked.

She shook her head. "They're pretty mad."

"Mine too," he said.

"Really?" That surprised her. She had been wrong, then, to expect them to be her allies. She had thought all the anger would come from her side. The white side. To think that they were not glad to get her...

He was smiling.

"I'll come over, shall I?" she said.

"Not right away." They were constrained, knowing they were overheard. "You quit at five?"

"Five fifteen."

"I'll see you then."

"Well. Okay."

He said, "Bye, now," and turned away.

"Friend of yours?" Myrna asked.

"Oh." She shrugged. "Just somebody I know from school. Sort of." She was ashamed of the "sort of." She was ashamed of the "just."

He met her as she walked home. She had been first disappointed, then bereft, when he hadn't been waiting for her. He joined her as she was crossing Appleyard Street. He had been waiting there. He was more wily than she.

This became the pattern of their meetings. They talked as they went along, laughing, lifted over their fear. But they did not touch, or only fleeting fingertips as they parted and he took the turning toward his parents' house. They did not kiss goodbye. Once Ruth saw her brother Duncan across the street. He was not looking at them and he went into the motorcycle showroom as they approached, but she knew he had seen them.

Margaret and James came home one lunchtime especially to meet with Ruth again. Wesley was not there. They did not seem angry. They were kind and wouldn't let her call them Mr. and Mrs. But James asked her if she had thought what a relationship with "a boy like ours" would mean, and when she said that yes, she had

and that she could face anything, give up everything, he asked her if she had thought what it would mean to him. Had she thought of the responsibility he would have to take on, had she thought of the danger she would be putting him in?

"I'll be responsible for myself. And I won't let anybody do him harm."

Margaret shook her head and looked at her husband. "Ruth," he said. His voice was kind, he was being patient. "Ruth, you can't let them or not let them. Don't you know that in our own time a black boy was killed just for talking to a white woman? Dragged from his home and lynched?"

"That was a long time ago, though." She knew the Emmett Till story. Everyone did. "And it didn't happen here. It was Mississippi." Things were different down there.

"When they dragged him out of the river, his eyes were gouged out."

"Don't!"

Margaret said, "Now, James..."

"You ever hear of Brautus Miller? Where did that happen?"

"That was the Kincaid rape. I know about that, but..."

"Now that's it, Ruth. I say Brautus Miller killing, you say Kincaid rape."

"I didn't mean it! I didn't mean that. And it was years and years ago."

"1934. There are people alive now who remember it."

"They were little children then." But Grandma Rose would not have been a child.

"They might have been children, but they remember it. You think the children didn't run along with the mob that tracked him through the woods and beat him to death? Why, Ruth, that was community entertainment."

"They shot him, though, not..."

"Oh yeah, they got around to shooting him. They say they couldn't even carry his body back to town it was so mashed."

"Oh, don't..."

"And there never was a trial. No trial for them and no trial for him. Nobody ever knew if he was the man that did it."

"The girl...the Kincaid girl."

"You think she could tell one nigger from another that night?"

"Don't!" It was the horror but it was the word, too, that she could not bear to hear. "But nothing like that could happen to Wesley. I'll be...We'll be together, we'll be a couple."

“Honey,” said Margaret. “That’s just the kind of thing that doesn’t make any difference to a mob.”

“But that was history!” Ruth cried. “We’ve had civil rights since then, and Martin Luther King and we’re almost in another century. Things will never be that bad again!”

James Middlewright laughed at her. It was the same warm laugh she had heard that first day when they sat on the porch and drank tea. He shook his head. “Yes, and we had the Fourteenth Amendment, too. Ruth, don’t you think they thought they were right up to date, those killers? And Ruth,” he said, “you remember what they did to Martin Luther King?”

Then Wesley came in, hot from running, already speaking as he came through the door, “Sorry. Sorry, I couldn’t get away, I meant to be here when...” Then he saw her damp face, engorged with crying and he turned to his parents and said, “You made her cry.”

“We should all be cryin’ now,” said Margaret.

It seemed to go on forever, but Ruth was not even late for work that afternoon. The Middlewrights did not want her, they would not treasure her, and she had always been treasured. But at last they gave up trying to prise her from Wesley. “I think they’re hoping one of us will get over it soon,” Wesley said. They laughed at the idea that their love was something you could get over. “It’s not measles,” Ruth said.

They did not give up at home. Ruth knew that they thought they would wear her down if they just kept on. Her mother thought about it all the time and Ruth could tell when she had thought of a new argument; she would say it the first chance she got.

Once she said, “Just suppose you did get married. Just suppose you had a child together. Who would want it? It wouldn’t be one thing or the other. Whites wouldn’t accept it and Coloreds wouldn’t want it either. It would be nobody to anybody.”

“It would be beautiful,” Ruth said, “and we’d want it.” But she guessed that Penny wouldn’t. That was what she meant. Ruth thought about the big backyard where she played when she was little, and the tire swing her daddy had tied for her in a tree. That her baby would never swing on. And she wouldn’t have cousins to play with. Or he. He wouldn’t. She was overwhelmed with grief for the losses her unconceived child was going to have to endure.

Once Penny said, “You know, this is going to kill your Grandma Rose.”

Ruth thought it wouldn't. In fact, if it made any difference at all, the crisis seemed to have livened her up a bit. Grandma Rose was an old lady and maybe she hated change, but she liked excitement.

But they were all old. Even her parents were old. They didn't understand the young world and they had forgotten about love and justice both.

Penny was born in the war. They all seemed to be born during wars, her forefathers and foremothers. When Penny was a little girl, there had still been black drinking fountains and white drinking fountains. The bus station still had two fountains. They didn't have the signs on them saying Whites Only and Colored, but you could still see where the signs had been.

Maybe Ruth should have seen it, this stomach-turning race hate they had. She tried to remember when they had shown it, but she could only remember their telling her how bad things used to be and how much better they were now. They didn't have black friends exactly, but they knew black people at work and got along fine with them. They always made the children's black friends welcome. They believed in positive discrimination. They thought people who said "nigger" were low rent. Grandma Rose said it sometimes, casually, as though it were a thing anybody might say. But she had been born before the First World War started in Europe. You couldn't expect more of Grandma Rose. Her parents had been born in the nineteenth century and *their* parents lived in slavery times. Grandma Rose said her grandfather remembered the ragged troops coming home from the Civil War. She was four when America came into what she called the Great War and her father went away to fight and came home safely from Europe and then died of the terrible flu. She was part of the Old South and she thought that Negroes (which she thought was the polite word) had a place and ought to stay in it. And Grandma Daisy, though she was always saying how much younger she was than Rose ("practically another generation!"), was still from that time when white people thought there was something special about being white. Maybe black people did too, Ruth thought, but not anymore. It occurred to her that this was something she and Wesley had never talked about yet.

Once she heard her mother say to her father, "I feel like this is all my fault. I raised her to know no difference." Ruth came into the room then, and Sam didn't answer, but he put his hand over Penny's gently, as though he were forgiving her.

Once her mother said, “You know it says in Deuteronomy, ‘Thou shalt not plough with an ass and an ox yoked together...’”

“Well, Mom, which one do you reckon I am?”

“Nor wear garments of divers sorts, as woolen and linen.”

“Woolen and linen!”

“And it says in 2 Corinthians, ‘Be ye not yoked unequally with unbelievers’.”

“But Mom! Wesley *is* a believer!”

“Oh, I know, Ruthie, but you can’t take everything literally.”

†

She did not feel at home in Wesley’s house, but his parents tolerated her presence there and now that school was finished it was almost the only place they could meet. That was how she happened to be there the night they burnt the cross.

In the beginning, it didn’t really look like a cross. It was just a whoosh! of flame, sudden and violent against the night sky. They hadn’t heard it being lit or constructed. How could they have missed that? Were they so quick, so practiced? So quiet? James started to run toward it, the way you would toward a fire you saw burning near your house. The way anybody would respond to a fire. And then he stopped and walked back to the house and they all came out and stood together on the porch, watching. It burned for a long time, the way a log fire will in the grate. Somebody crossed the lawn and joined them and Ruth looked up to see people standing on all the neighboring porches. A few more came over and all of them were black people. Somebody said, “Have you called the fire department?” and when James said, “No. Let it burn,” it confirmed Ruth’s feeling that this was not the kind of fire you call the fire department to. Somebody did, though. The engines arrived when the fire was nearly out and the men didn’t even unwind the hoses. They could see, she guessed, that they weren’t needed now. Or did they like to see it burn? There were eight men, two of them black. Once the flames had stopped shooting upward, you could see the cross shape very clearly, orange against the black sky. Ruth thought of the neon crosses over storefront churches. Jesus Saves, they usually said.

The cross lost its yellow light; its color deepened to red and then to darker red. When it was black, they could see that it was not very tall. Now it looked fragile, burnt through to filigree. Wesley was the first to walk up to it—it was still hot, you could feel the heat of it on your face—and he stood before it for a silent moment, then punched it hard and his knuckles went into the charcoal of it. A

chunk fell off. Then somebody else started to hit it. Ruth hardly noticed herself joining them. It was quieter than you would expect. They did not speak and it was silent all around them, except for the glassy sound of the pieces of burnt cross falling on one another. One of the firemen brought a hatchet and they made way for him. When it was nearly leveled, Wesley pulled at the piece that was left in the ground. He had to dig to get a grip on unburnt wood. It had not been planted deep. People stamped on crisp chunks and slivers, reducing them to smaller and smaller pieces. She thought it was like a dance, with the sound of stamping feet for music, and their hard breath. Margaret came with plastic trash sacks and they began to clear up, the way you would after a picnic. When they were done, James shuffled his foot across the ash. "You're gonna have to seed that patch," somebody said to him.

Ruth was shaking, cold to her bones, and Wesley put both his arms around her. She leaned into him, smelling his sweat mixed with the scent of burning. For once they were embracing where they could be seen.

They went indoors, neighbors as well, and the firemen. Half of them had driven away in their engine, but the others came in. Two of the firemen and Ruth were the only white people there. Perhaps there were ten people, or a dozen. Margaret poured out all the coffee in the pot and put more on. The Middlewrights were tee-total, so there was no liquor in the house, but somebody had a fifth of whiskey in his back pocket, and he added it to the cups of those who wanted it. Somebody else went out and came back with a six-pack. It didn't amount to much alcohol, but it seemed like everybody who wanted some had it. Margaret wasn't going to say no tonight.

One of the women looked at Ruth. "Girl, look at your dress!" she said.

Ruth looked down at herself; everyone seemed to be looking at her pale blue summer dress, now covered in soot. "That won't come out," said another woman, her voice sage with knowledge of laundry. Ruth held up her hands. Her knuckles were grained with the stuff and when she licked her lips she could feel grit.

"Well, you surely are a black woman now!" somebody cried, and everybody started to laugh. It wasn't that funny, but they didn't seem to be able to stop. The exhausted little gathering felt like a party, united for a moment in more than fear.

Nobody stayed very long and nobody had much to say. One of the white firemen stood up and thanked Margaret for the coffee,

formally, as though she had invited him to a dinner party, and then said to James, "Sir, I sure am sorry this happened." James shook his head and said, "Not your fault."

"I'll take you home," Wesley's father said to her when everybody had left except Margaret's friend from almost next door, who was picking up cups and ferrying them to the sink.

"Oh, it's so late!" she said. With so much to be afraid of, she was suddenly afraid of getting home late.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll say a word." He didn't seem to think there was anything incongruous about his entering Penny and Sam's house and saying a word to them. When she said goodbye to Margaret, Margaret hugged her. That was the first time.

She and Wesley stood beside the car and James said, "Get in. You can ride up front with me." Why was that, she wondered. Maybe he thought it was safer for her to be seen sitting next to a middle-aged black man in the front seat than to a young one in the back.

They drove through familiar streets, which looked strange to her now. The moon had risen and black leaves were warmed in yellow streetlights, chilled in the white light of the moon.

She turned in her seat to look at Wesley. His eyes were bright in the dark. "How did they know?" she asked. "Was it about us?" Neither Wesley nor James answered and she said, "Of course it was."

"I'm afraid it was," James said.

"Oh dear." Who would do it? Who would care? "Was it the Klan?" she asked at last.

James shrugged. "Could have been any stupid cracker," he said. Wesley did not speak.

"I saw them once," she said, "the KKK. They made us laugh, back then." She spoke as though her memory encompassed vanishing decades. It was a parade put on by people, so it was said, from out of state. There had been black people and white standing together on the sidewalk to make fun of the marchers. Nobody had cheered them. They didn't wear white sheets, but brightly colored satin robes—purple, forest green, royal blue, gold—and matching pointed hats that flopped over. They looked like clowns. "We thought they were just stupid," she said. "Ridiculous."

Was it outsiders like them who lit the cross she wondered? It could have been anybody. It could have been people they knew, met every day. Friends. You didn't have to have one of those outfits to do it. But you had to know how, didn't you? How to make a cross?

How to make sure it would stand up? Did they learn it in their Sunday schools when they learned about Easter? They must have painted it all over in kerosene before they put it up. Had it smelled of kerosene? She remembered only the woodfire smell. It could have been a campfire. If she'd been blind, and only felt the heat and smelled the wood, she could have toasted marshmallows on it. Emmett Till had his eyes gouged out of his head.

"Please could I get out a minute," she said.

James looked at her and pulled over to the side of the road at once. She ran to the nearest tree and bent over and retched. Nothing came up, but she stayed bent, coughing and retching and crying. The men stood by the car, leaving her alone. When she came back, she felt as weakened as though she really had thrown up everything that was in her. James handed her a handkerchief. It was huge. She could have used it for a scarf. She wiped her face with it as she got back inside. "Thank you," she said. She half extended it toward him, then thought that it might be better to give it to him washed and ironed. Who would do that? Would Penny wash her daughter's snot and tears out of a black man's handkerchief? She balled it up in her lap.

"Keep that window open," said James. "You're nearly home."

All the lights were on when they pulled up at the McBrides' house, including the porch light. She hesitated. Should she say goodnight now? Thank you for the lift? Wesley still did not speak. She had a sudden tight feeling in her middle, as though all the tubes and hoses that made up her complicated insides were being whipped into hard knots through which nothing could pass, not even breath. Maybe it was going to be too tough for him. Maybe he was deciding whether he dared go on loving her. She was climbing out of the car and looking around at him at the same time, dizzy from twisting and from nearly throwing up.

Sam and Penny must have been waiting just inside the door because they opened it just as James put his foot on the first step. Ruth and Wesley walked behind him. Ruth had her hands clasped in front of her, holding her own hand tight. Wesley reached to her, untangled her fingers, smoothed her palm, brushed her wrist with his fingertips. "Don't you worry," he said. "It's gonna be fine." Her parents were watching James's face for whatever bad news it held.

James began to speak as soon as they were indoors, before anybody would have had a chance to welcome him or to ask him to sit

down. If anyone were going to do that. "Good evenin'," he said, and he told them his name and nodded toward Wesley, who stood back a little.

Ruth had begun to step forward without letting him go, so that their clasped hands between their extended arms were like a knot in a string.

"I believe you've met my boy Wesley Adam before." Ruth looked at Wesley's face as she moved back toward him. She hadn't known his middle name.

Penny nodded quickly. Ruth thought that she looked a little ashamed. Well, she ought to, she thought.

"I'm sorry to bring your Ruth home so late," James went on. "Only we've had a little trouble at our place and it was hard to get away."

"Trouble!" Her mother cried out that terrible word as though it might mean anything and Ruth ran to her.

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm absolutely fine."

"Mr. Middlewright," her father said, "Please do sit down. Can I get you some coffee? Or somethin' cold?" A little pause. "And Wesley?"

James sat on the sofa. "Thank you," he said, "but I think I'm about coffee-ed out," and he smiled.

Everyone sat down. The two fathers were on the sofa and Wesley and Penny in the chairs. Ruth pulled out the piano stool.

It was Wesley who began. "Somebody burned a cross in our front yard tonight," he said.

"Oh, my God!"

"They sneaked up in the dark..." He was going on, but his voice was shaking. He faltered and stopped.

James told the story of the evening. There wasn't much to tell, but he told them all of it so that there was nothing they were left not knowing: the sudden discovery, the fireman, the neighbors coming, the gathering afterward in the kitchen. He told them that there had been no damage. "Nothin' worse than a patch on my lawn," he said, "and that's a mess most years anyway."

Ruth's parents, who had been silent while James spoke, now seemed to be saying everything at once. "I'm sorry you had that happen," and "How is your wife taking it?" and "Somebody could have been killed." "Who would do such a thing?" and "Do you have any idea who it was?" but finally Ruth's mother said to her, "This is the kind of thing that happens when you..." She trailed off and

Ruth didn't know if it was because she thought the rest of her sentence was obvious or because she got embarrassed by it.

"It surely is," said James, "and I don't know who it was, but I am afraid our children have been noticed."

"Who...?" escaped Ruth.

"Have you been goin' around together in town?" Penny asked.

"But I've never heard of anything like this around here," said Sam. "Not in my time."

"Maybe nobody provoked them before," Penny said.

"It's not our fault," said Wesley. "It's their fault, whoever they are."

He was going to say more, but James spoke first. "I guess we all need to decide what's to be done next," he said, "and maybe," rising from the settee, "the middle of the night isn't the time to do it."

"Of course, you'll want to get back to Mrs. Middlewright," said Penny, who seemed, Ruth thought, not able to settle on an attitude. She suddenly thought of Margaret alone in the house with the burnt-black grass outside.

When the door had closed behind them, Ruth reflected that James had been the only one who acted like he knew how to behave.

"I don't think it's so smart for you two to be all over each other like you do in public," Penny said.

"We were just holding hands!" Ruth was outraged at the injustice. "Barely!"

"Well, it sure was enough for somebody," Penny answered.

"Oh, and you think they were right," Ruth said, ready for the fight now.

"I'm goin' to bed," Sam told them, and started turning off lights.

"But don't you want to talk about this?"

"No baby, I surely do not. Your friend JM said it right. This ain't for the middle of the night."

"Why do you call him that?" Penny asked. "You don't know him, do you?"

"Oh, hell no. I don't know him to talk to, but I know who he is. He works down at the Manglefords plant. He's some kind of a chemist. I'm goin' to bed."

Ruth expected to lie awake all night arguing in her head with her parents, but she fell asleep right away. She had just time to wonder whether it might not turn out to have been a good thing, that cross. JM had said "our children."

†

Ruth was ready for a big conference with all the parents and all the brothers—except maybe for Wesley’s little brother, who was only ten. But there never was one. They talked on the phone or had meetings she didn’t know were happening. No one told her when they finally gave up, when they stopped deciding how to pull them apart and started deciding how to send them away, but one evening her brother Amos telephoned from Ohio where he was working and said, “So, I hear you’re moving to California.” It was the first she had heard of it.

She and Wesley had both gone on as though they were entering university in the fall. A part of her, that part which wasn’t longing to explode the world she had grown up in, wished that she could go to college like anybody else and have a boyfriend that she saw some weekends and over the holidays, and wrote love letters to and saved money with and got married to when they both had degrees. It might be better at college. Students were more sophisticated, more daring.

But somebody in Elder Springs wanted to kill her. Or wanted to kill Wesley and save her from him and his blackness, which was worse. A woman she hardly knew came up to her in Bumgartners, where she was trying out pens, and said, “I don’t care how much you think you love him, I don’t see how anybody could do such a thing to her mother.”

“I...” She had so much to say that she couldn’t get anything out and she just watched as the woman walked off, unanswered, swaggering, Ruth thought, as though she had done something clever.

She tried to be comfortable in her home, feeling as though her family were in its end times. But it was too hard. It was as though she had not just done a bad thing, but become a bad person. The people who had always loved her best could not even bear to look at her now.

“Mom,” she said one evening, capturing her mother as she walked past Ruth’s open bedroom door. “You know I haven’t ever done anything so bad. I never smoked dope (hardly, she reserved to herself) and I never smuggled liquor into a party and I never...” she hesitated, trying to think how she might decently assert her decency. “Mom, do you know I’m a virgin? I’m practically the only virgin I know. Except for Miranda.” Miranda was Penny’s great-niece. She was only ten months old. Mentioning her was a kind of desperate joke and had probably been a mistake. “Mom, I’ve always

done right, as much as I could. You know I've tried. This is the first thing I've ever done you really didn't like."

"Well, you saved up for a good 'un."

Ruth never found out exactly why her brothers had California in their minds before they dropped it into hers, but as the summer weeks passed, California came to be accepted as their inevitable destination. "It's about as far as they could send us," Wesley said. "Next stop, Japan."

They didn't have to go; they could stay and tough it out. They could overcome. But in the end they decided to take their banishment as a blessing. They would leave the Garden, like Adam and Eve, and eat their bread by the sweat of their brow like grown-ups. They might move on to Japan one day, who knows? No one would burn any more crosses on their parents' lawns, anyway.

Paul and Jasmine were married on Labor Day Weekend. "Maybe it would be better if I'm not a bridesmaid, after all," Ruth told Jasmine.

Jasmine said, "Oh, Ruth, of course you have to be in my wedding. Of course you do!"

Besides, Ruth thought, the pale yellow dresses had been made to measure. "Is Wesley invited?" she asked. It was hard, but whoever said yes to her had to say yes to them both.

Jasmine's good manners allowed only a breath before she answered. "You bring any guest you like."

When Ruth asked him, Wesley said, "Maybe best if I don't," and she looked away from him, ashamed.

Ruth and Wesley were going to get married in California. The parents all agreed that it would just be asking for trouble to have a wedding like theirs in Elder Springs. Margaret had known the pastor of the Baptist church of Bitterwater before he went out there.

"We're going to a place called Bitterwater?" But Margaret said, "It's only a name. They say it's a pretty place."

Bitterwater wasn't far away from San Francisco, near Salinas. It was close to the sea, to Berkley, to universities, places to work, places where an interracial couple could live. There was that name for what they were.

Ruth didn't envy Jasmine her beautiful wedding. When she was a little girl she had imagined layers of petticoats and piles of presents, but she didn't care about any of that now. She hadn't known what she thought a wedding was, but now she thought it ought to be like being lifted up in loving hands and handed into a little boat,

and tenderly urged from the bank until the stream took you and you moved into your new life like a leaf on the water. Well, she was going to have to scramble in on her own. She and Wesley would just shove each other in, that was all there was to it.

Ruth wanted to travel on a train, but Amtrak was too expensive, so they went to Charlotte and caught a plane. The two sets of parents drove their children separately to the airport, where they caught the same plane. The black parents and the white parents stood beside each other at the departure gate and waved goodbye to them. Loving hands waving, each to its own child.

They were married on the seventeenth of September, which was a Thursday. Margaret flew out to be there; she brought Wesley's brother Matthew with her. Matthew loved California and said he was going to live there when he grew up and could he visit at Christmas? James wished he could come. He couldn't get away but he sent his love and a camera "for your memories to come." Penny wrote a long letter that she folded into the silver and white wedding card she sent, and she and Sam sent a check. On the card, under the printed message, she had written, "Love you forever," and they had both signed it.

That night Ruth telephoned Penny and told her all about the day. She has phoned her mother every Thursday night since then.

