

SEARCHING

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BETH KNEW as soon as Wendy answered the phone that it was a boy on the other end. Wendy's eager young "hello" was followed by silence and then a furtive, whispered, "Just a minute." Wendy hung up the receiver softly and almost imperceptibly slipped out of the kitchen, headed, Beth knew, for the upstairs bedroom with the extension phone.

They had always agreed that there would be no dates until Wendy was sixteen; but it had been almost a year since that mystical threshold to womanhood had been crossed, and Beth had suffered Wendy's disappointment when the expected young swains had not appeared at the door, family car keys in hand, as scheduled. It had been only in the past two or three months, as spring had signaled the approaching end of the school year, that occasional telephone calls had begun to cause Wendy to disappear upstairs, and Beth had learned to recognize the manly quaver in the voice of someone who identified himself as Arthur.

"Arthur who, honey?" Beth had asked cautiously. "Do I know him?"

"Arthur Morris," Wendy had mumbled to the arm of her chair. "No, I don't think so. He's just a boy at school."

A boy at school. There must be a thousand boys in that big school, thought Beth, and I probably know ten of them, the boys at church and Hal up the street.

"Do you know who his parents are?"

Beth winced as she remembered how foolishly irrelevant that very question had sounded coming from her father each time she or one of her sisters had mentioned a new friend. She was mortified to see in Wendy's glance precisely her own reaction of thirty years before. But the question hung insistently in the air between them, needing an answer, needing to define a root, a context for a meaningless name plucked from the unfamiliar sea of names and faces which swallowed Wendy every day as the yellow bus rolled off toward the high school five miles away.

"Mr. and Mrs. Morris, I guess. His dad works at a clothing store somewhere. They live over near Ledgewood Mall, the other side of the school."

Beth had been grateful for this small offering from her daughter's store of private information and had not been deaf to the embarrassed tension in Wendy's voice; but still her need to know and to protect Wendy from something undefined would not let her rest.

"Do you—see Arthur often at school?"

"Mom—he's just a friend." This time Beth had respected the pleading in Wendy's eyes—pleading for trust and for the right to tread alone upon ground still too shaky under her feet to be shared companionably. Beth had left the room with a light stroke to Wendy's straight brown hair.

Arthur had continued to call, though he had never yet appeared at the Bronson home, and Beth felt sure it was he who was talking with Wendy now. What in the world do they talk about? Curiosity nagged at her each time Wendy secluded herself for one of these extended conversations, but Beth knew that the price of lifting the receiver in the kitchen would be too great, and she resisted the impulse firmly.

Rick came home from work and riffled through the evening paper, and Randy appeared in the kitchen with a lean and slightly desperate expression that told Beth his twelve-year-old balance had tipped from the need to pitch baseballs in favor of the need for food. Dinner was ready, and still Wendy did not appear. Half an hour is too long, Beth thought authoritatively. Pointing Randy in the direction of the bathroom sink, she mounted the stairs determinedly and tapped at the closed bedroom door.

"Wendy."

There was no sound from within, either in response or in conversation. After a pause of a few seconds, Beth turned the knob quietly and opened the door an apologetic crack. The room was dark. The level of Beth's annoyance rose by a degree. Had Wendy slipped out, then, without saying where she was going?

"Wendy?"

Beth turned to leave when a small sound reached out from the darkness and held her still, both heart and feet. She was blind in the dark room, but her feet knew the way to the bedside without need for sight or thought.

"Wendy! What is it, honey? Whatever is it?"

Beth's voice seemed to uncork the grief contained there in the darkness, and waves of sobbing poured uncontrolled for several minutes over the pillow while Beth sat helplessly stroking the wet forehead and waiting for them to subside. She spoke softly from the quagmire of pain into which memory was tugging her along with Wendy.

"Oh, Wendy. Oh, love."

One hand found another somewhere among the little hills and hollows of the quilted bed cover.

"Oh, Mom."

"Were you talking to Arthur?"

A deep gulp answered from the pillow.

"What did he say to you?" Tell me what he said so I can strangle him, strangle him not only for your pain but for whatever gave him, an interloper into your life, power to cause you pain.

"I can't tell you."

"Why can't you? Sure you can."

Wendy breathed deeply as if storing air for a plunge into deep water.

"There's going to be—this dance, you know. At school."

Wendy's words came in little, tortured measures, separated by gasps for air as if something in her were struggling for survival.

"Oh. Yes." Oh, Wendy, don't remind me. All those dances. All those evenings at Mutual, all those afternoons in the junior high gym, all the corners I stood in watching athletes with acne twirling girls in felt skirts and saddle oxfords between the basketball hoops while I ached to be out there doing what I didn't have the skill or confidence to do had any of them given me the chance. All those Saturday nights at home in my room after glimpses of crepe paper streamers and flowery bandstands. Some things are never laughable, no matter how long it's been. A dance. I know.

Beth waited. Wendy had never been to a school dance. You had to have a date. No progress in twenty years. Wendy's voice suddenly leveled out and flowed with a grim smoothness through the shadows.

"I was going to go with Arthur to the dance."

"You—were?"

"He asked me last Saturday." Wendy's voice trailed off into a little squeak, and the tears began again. "But—"

"But—?"

"I'm not going now."

"Not going? Why not, honey? Why didn't you tell me, Wendy? What fun to be going to a dance, why—" Why were you ashamed to tell me, Wendy? Why am I asking? I know so well. If he would ask me, he's not worth bragging about. Oh, I know. "But now—you're not going? Why not?"

"Mom, I just can't tell you."

"Sure you can. Honey, I understand. I've been there so often. Maybe it was long ago, but—"

"Mom." The sudden address was to her, but Beth knew Wendy was not looking at her. The grim, careful tones had returned and were aimed at the wall on the opposite side of the bed.

"Yes?"

"He said his parents don't want him getting involved with me. They don't want him to even call me any more because—"

"They—what?" All the protective instinct Beth had harbored since her first view of Wendy through a hospital nursery window gathered itself into a tight ball, ready to spring and kill.

"—because I'm adopted."

The force inside of Beth sprang with a ferocity of which she had never suspected herself capable, only to find its object immaterial and elusive, and she was left clawing murderously at empty air. Wendy's words poured out now as if, having once inflicted the wound, it mattered little how deeply she drove the blade.

"They say how does he know who he's getting mixed up with? What does he know about me? You're always so interested to know who everybody's parents are! Well, Arthur's parents want to know that, too, and I don't even know! I don't even know myself! Oh, somebody tell me, oh please!"

Beth clutched at her as if to prevent her from drowning, feeling as she did so that they might both go down together. Wendy fought her efforts as Beth struggled to gather her against her breast, to comfort her as she had years ago, a band-aid offered as a remedy for arterial bleeding.

I'm very sorry, Mrs. Bronson. We ran the test several times, with several different donors. There were no living sperm left in the sample after an hour. It's an unusual condition, and one of the least subject to remedy. I would encourage you and your husband to go ahead with your adoption plans.

Wendy yielded to her at last, and Beth sat, blinder than before, cradling Wendy's head where there had once been room for her entire small body.

Oh, Rick, look at her. Look at her. If I could hold her this way forever—

At last Beth felt herself capable of speaking.

"Honey—it's been a long time, hasn't it, since we talked about it? I guess I'd fooled myself into thinking it didn't bother you anymore. Oh, if I could have prevented this—anything, anything—except not having you."

She rocked Wendy like the child of eight she had been on another night when Beth had found her crying in her bed and heard her confession that the tears were for her "real mother," that shadowy presence to whom Beth felt she owed everything and of whom she knew almost nothing.

I knew she would wonder, Beth had thought. Of course she would wonder. But is childhood over so soon? They had talked long past bedtime, and Beth had gone to sleep satisfied that Wendy felt unburdened and that she herself had handled the situation with fortitude. She had maintained her composure and, she believed, concealed from Wendy her own pain while offering reassurance and love, if little information.

What does it mean, *real*? She had put to Wendy at eight the question she had once had to resolve for herself while rocking Wendy back to sleep after a pre-dawn feeding.

She must know the facts of biology and law. It would be wrong, an outrage, to try to keep them from her. But we must find the right words, other words. 'Real' is for us, for Rick and me. The pains that brought her into the world were real enough, I don't doubt; but from now on, we are reality, the three of us.

Wendy had probed the subject several times after that, but now it had been a long time, and the woman whose body had been the vehicle for Wendy's birth seemed to have become the remote outsider Beth unconsciously wanted her to be.

The storm had calmed now, leaving only a terrible ache where it had torn away the complacency Beth had been cultivating so long. When Wendy spoke again out of the shadows, it was not with the questioning voice of a child but the determination of a woman who has made up her mind.

"Mom."

"Yes?"

"I have to find out. I'm going to. Do you remember, you told me once that if I really wanted to when I was old enough, you'd help me? I want to know now."

But why did she leave me in the hospital? Didn't she want me?

She wanted you, I'm sure, but she knew she couldn't take good care of you all by herself, so she trusted us to take care of you instead. We took you home right after you were born, and it was the most wonderful day we had ever had.

Did you know her?

No, we didn't know her, but we were very grateful to her.

Well, how did you know about me if you didn't know her?

There was a doctor—

It was easy enough to say it then, Wendy, thought Beth; easy enough when it seemed you would never be old enough.

"Mom, remember, you said there was a doctor who delivered me and who knew my real mother?"

Beth had to resist the impulse to pull away physically as she cringed inwardly, shocked at Wendy's unhesitating use of the dreaded words and at the realization that Wendy's memory of that long ago conversation was as clear as her own. Wendy persisted relentlessly.

"Will you tell me his name now? He lives in Robertstown, doesn't he, where I was born? I want to know his name and where he is. I want to talk to him."

"Wendy, I don't know—He was getting quite old even then. We haven't had any contact with him all this time. Grandma's friend worked with him, but she hasn't for years. I don't think he even knew your—your first mother very well. I really don't think—"

"Mom—if you won't, I will."

Beth's whole body had trembled when the phone call had come.

Mrs. Bronson? Good news. We have a beautiful baby girl for you. Are you superstitious? She was born yesterday, Friday the thirteenth.

It trembled in the same way now as she spoke into the receiver a name she had not spoken for sixteen years.

"Can you hold, please? I'm looking."

I'm holding, Beth thought as the long distance minutes passed. That's what I've been doing all this time, holding off, thinking I'd never really have to do this. Randy doesn't seem to care, he's always been able to accept things as they are. Oh, Wendy, why—?

"Hello? I'm sorry, ma'm. Our records show that Dr. Dandridge passed away in 1972. He had no one else in practice with him. Could we refer you to another doctor?"

"No—no, thank you."

Wendy was devastated by the news.

"Well, who else would know, Mom? Surely someone else in the world must know?"

Why don't I know? Beth asked herself. Because at the time I didn't want to know—as though the less I knew, the more she would be mine.

"The county court—But the records are sealed, honey. We couldn't see them without a special order from a judge. I don't know on what grounds—"

Wendy's eyes were full of dismay.

"It's my life! My life, my parents—do you really mean it's all down there

at the courthouse on a piece of paper, and they aren't going to let me see it? I can't believe that!"

Beth tried to catch her as she passed, but she was gone. Beth stood staring at the door Wendy had slammed behind her, then slowly sat down.

Rick, I had a dream that won't leave me alone —about the baby. I dreamed that I got onto a bus carrying her in my arms. While we were riding, she grew into a big girl, almost a woman. And when the bus stopped, she got off and walked away.

Beth sat for a long time, staring at the rack of the old upright piano. She had not been conscious of choosing this particular seat, but now she found herself leafing mindlessly through a hymn book, then stopping as her eye caught the name of a pioneer lyricist and poet.

She was a feisty lady, she thought through a dark haze. To have known her would have been an experience. I feel something for her, and not just because she wrote poetry in the desert. She never had children. Mothered all of Brigham's clan, did her best to see that his daughters became properly austere young ladies prepared to live The Principle uncomplainingly—but never had any of her own.

She began to pick out the melody with her right hand, until words buried in the third stanza stood out and moved her to repeat the phrase.

In the heavens, are parents single?
No, the thought makes reason stare.
Truth is reason; truth eternal
Tells me I've a mother there.

But Mama, why is it only Heavenly Father? Wouldn't there have to be a mother, too?

Beth raised her head, startled. The six-year-old voice speaking to her mind out of memory came from many years back, she knew, more years than Wendy had lived. It was her own. It was the same young voice which had whispered with sudden indignation to her best friend in the next seat what she could not bring herself to say aloud to Brother Freebairn, the seminary teacher.

Judy! This doesn't make sense—look: 'So God created man in His own image; male and female created He them.' Whoever wrote that hadn't had Mrs. Brock's physiology class!

There had been furtive jottings, too, in the margins of college notebooks.

Is God like the men who wrote the Book of Mormon? Our only evidence of women in their lives is that they had sons.

Beth smiled a little, but it was a smile crimped with a pain from which twenty years had only pared the raw edge. Her lips moved unconsciously in a prayer uttered one night that long ago as she had lain in bed with a familiar pain and heaviness in her lower abdomen, her body plugged with the wad of cotton that she prayed each month she would not need to wear for some time. How long had it been by then, she wondered, since she had begun to whisper that way at night?

Are you really there? Please—can you hear me? I need you. I need a baby so much. How can He really understand? It's you I need. Please—

And then the falling of the darkness, the sudden realization—

You can't understand either, can you? You're like all those women at church, sitting complacently with their six children beside them. Only you have millions of children. Even if you're there—you don't understand.

Since that night, Beth knew, something had been lacking in her prayers. But the pain had been salved, not by the enigma in the dark cosmos but by a very mortal little girl and boy.

Wendy! Beth looked at the clock and at the window beyond. She was alarmed to see that Wendy had been gone for over two hours and that the daylight was fading quickly. Numbly, Beth walked to the telephone and called Wendy's closest friends, one by one. None of them had seen her since school. Tensely and with some hesitation, she dialed the number of Wendy's Mutual teacher and then the bishop. Both sounded surprised and puzzled. Beth thanked them tersely and hung up, offering no explanation. Grateful that Randy had gone home from school with a friend to spend the night, Beth left a note for Rick, groped inside her purse for her car keys, and slid behind the steering wheel.

This is foolish, she thought, useless, even as she pulled into the almost empty parking lot across from the county courthouse. They must have been closed since five. Even if she really came here, she'd be gone.

But two lights still shone from the darkened building, and Beth found herself climbing the steps and pulling at the heavy front door. She jumped when it opened. An arrow painted on the pale wall in front of her pointed in the direction of one of the lighted windows. Underneath the arrow was stenciled, "County Clerk — Vital Statistics."

Beth found the lighted doorway, which framed the bent back of a woman poring over something on a desk in front of her.

"Excuse me—"

"Oh!" The woman whirled around like a marionette propelled by a sudden, sharp twist of the strings. "Oh, you took ten years off my life!"

"I'm sorry," Beth ventured meekly, "But I have to find out—Do you happen to know whether a young girl came in here late this afternoon—a sixteen-year-old girl with long, straight, brown hair? She—may have asked to see some old court records."

"Well, let's see." The woman's hand still rested on her chest as if to suppress her heartbeat. "Yes, there was a young girl came in here a while ago; asked to see Mr. Dixon. She wasn't in there very long. Left after a few minutes. She seemed upset about something, I remember."

"Do you know where—did she say anything—oh, I don't suppose she would." Beth leaned heavily against the door jamb.

"She didn't say anything to me, sorry. I've got to close up now. I'm two hours overtime already on these files." The woman rose stiffly and removed her glasses.

"Of course. Thank you. I'm very sorry to have disturbed you."

Beth walked slowly down the granite stairs to the sidewalk, where she turned to watch the last lights go out in the stodgy gray building. She wanted to drive home quickly and find Wendy waiting there, but fear that she would

not be there held her back. The growing darkness seemed to be within as well as around her, bringing with it an enticement somehow to sink deeper and deeper into its void until the terrible ache would be extinguished in nothingness.

As the yellow rectangles vanished into blackness, Beth's eye was caught by a softer light falling through the open door of the next building. It was a tiny chapel, much older than the houses of government and commerce which had grown up around it. Its facade was of dark brick, and above the narrow double doors hung a plain white cross. It had remained standing there like some inconspicuous monument to a more contemplative age, as if modernity had thought it not worth bothering about. Yet someone still tended the flame on the small altar inside and had parted the doors in a gesture of welcome.

I must pass that little church at least once a week, Beth thought, and yet I haven't really noticed it for years. She had been inside only once, but that occasion was a memorable one. It had been the year before Wendy was born, and Beth had been on her way home from work. At the bus stop, people had been talking excitedly, some of them crying openly. Peering over a shoulder at a newspaper headline four inches high, Beth had learned that the handsome young president was dead, shot through the head while riding in an open parade car. Stunned, she had wandered slowly through the town square, not anxious now to board the bus with that crush of chattering, weeping humanity. Passing the courthouse, she had come upon the open door of the little chapel, through which candlelight flickered in the November dusk. The small church was scarcely noticeable on other days, but that night it was full of people, many of them kneeling and weeping quietly. Beth was not accustomed to kneeling in church, but these were the dead president's people, and it seemed entirely fitting to slip into one of the wooden pews, sink to her knees against the padded railing in front of her, and softly give vent to her own shock and grief among the tiny flames and veiled women.

Tonight the carpet of gentle light extending from the doorway seemed to offer solace as it had before. Hardly conscious of her movement, but aware of the sensation of re-living a segment of the past, Beth walked toward the lighted doorway and stopped at the threshold. The softly lit interior, with its wooden benches, its lace-covered altar and its circle of stained glass, had not changed in the eighteen years since Beth had last entered; but she took no notice of these details. Her eyes immediately brought her only one message, and she caught her breath in wonder and relief. There were two other people in the chapel. One was an old woman who knelt at a small side altar, lighting a candle. The other was a young girl who sat near the front with her head bowed, her long brown hair falling over her shoulders, revealing the nape of her neck.

As swiftly and silently as one of the shadows flickering on the rafter beams overhead, Beth was beside the narrow pew, kneeling as if to genuflect and pray.

"Wendy!" she barely breathed.

Wendy looked up, as startled and unprepared as someone who has been awakened suddenly from a deep sleep.

"Mom! How did you know I was here?"

"I don't know." Beth rose halfway and paused tenuously. "I don't know. But may I sit down?"

"Okay." Wendy shifted slightly sideways to make room. They sat silently, Beth's eyes on Wendy's face, Wendy's directed downward. Whether Wendy was lost again in the thoughts with which she had come here or was simply embarrassed, Beth was not sure. She felt no urgency now to speak or even to understand. What mattered was that she had found Wendy here, and the door open.

She began to glance about the chapel, vaguely recalling the wooden beams, the lace, the shape of the colored glass. Directly ahead, just behind the altar, stood a smaller than life-size statue of a woman. She was draped in a robe of lustrous blue and dark red—a garment which would surely have been unfamiliar to the image's inspiration, Beth mused, and yet gave a pleasing impression that someone had cared what she wore. The little statue's upturned palms were outstretched in a gesture of supplication as befitted her mission of intercession, and her head supported a tiny gilt crown. The wooden face, painted smoothly in delicate colors, conveyed serenity, and the enameled eyes, though fixed in their expression, seemed to communicate compassion toward whatever reverent or troubled human soul might choose to present itself there.

Beth's eyes moved from the placid little face to the living one beside her. Wendy was looking at the statue now with an expression that was thoughtful and almost beseeching, and Beth realized that her daughter must have been drawn purposefully to this place at the front of the chapel, directly beneath that calm, unseeing gaze. For the first time, she noticed that Wendy held in one hand, bowed as if it had been pressed there for some time, a printed prayer card which she had taken from a rack in the bench in front of them. A familiar melody rose in Beth's mind as she read the words which the music had taught her.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
Now and at the hour of our death.

The melody ended and died before Beth spoke in a voice almost as quiet as the unheard music.

"Does it help, Wendy?"

Slowly, Wendy raised her face and looked at Beth.

"Not really. She isn't our mother, is she?"

Very cautiously, Beth let her arm come to rest on the back of the bench behind Wendy's shoulders.

"You see," she murmured, "it's the same for all of us. But we can't let it spoil everything."

Beth sat very still and very near, not quite daring to let her arm come to rest about Wendy's shoulders until the brown head suddenly pressed itself against her, and a muffled voice whispered, "Mother. Let's go home."