Street Symphony

Valerie Holladay

"I SAW CORY YESTERDAY," Mom tells me when I meet her downtown for lunch. She used to play her harmonica outside Crossroads Mall, before she moved to the ZCMI Center. She doesn't play her harmonica as much as she used to, though; the lithium she takes evens out her manic mood swings, so she's staying home a lot more. Now other people have taken over her spot, since it's a good place to hold signs or play the guitar. Still, she is the only one downtown who dresses like a clown. She draws a lot of attention, especially when she plays Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" and "Moonlight Sonata." She also shows me some blues numbers she's been learning. There's a trick to harmonica blues, and she's getting the hang of it—breathing in instead of blowing out. Then she puts her harmonica in her bag and picks up the large, white mug for tips on the sidewalk.

"Don't you want to change?" I ask her.

"No, I'm all right," she answers. Her face is painted white with a large, red smile across her cheeks. Sometimes she draws tears down her cheeks with eyebrow pencil. Today she is wearing her fluorescent green wig; her clown suit is shiny orange, red, and yellow. I bought the clown suit for her myself last Halloween at Pik 'n Save when we were buying new dishes for her. Her old suit was getting shabby, she said.

I lead the way through ZCMI, past accessories, shoes, and perfume as Mom tells me about Cory. "He had some people with him from the clinic, you know. His drug-rehab group. I guess he was taking them out on a day trip."

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"How's he doing?" I ask. I don't see my youngest brother often since he married, although I babysit his daughter, Sara, whenever I can. He works full-time at the drug rehab clinic and goes to school full-time. He wants to be a child psychologist. He's very good with people and always has been. At the Orange Julius counter we order two drinks and two California dogs. I open my purse, but Mom wants to pay, so I wait while she counts out the pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters from her mug. I smile at the cashiers who look at Mom, then at me, then back at Mom. With our dogs and drinks, we find a seat at a table that isn't too dirty. Mom sets her bag on the ground while I wipe the table with a napkin. Mom takes a large bite of her hot dog.

"Well," she says as she chews, "he didn't say much. His people were waiting for him, so I just asked about school and work, and he said okay. Then he said, 'I love you, but I can't have you in my life,' and he went back to his group." Mom swallows and takes another bite before asking, "How can he work in a clinic with depressed and crazy people but not be able to talk to his own mother?" She laughs incongruously, and I shrug.

From the time he was a baby, I always knew that Cory was Mom's favorite child. He was a beautiful baby, with large blue eyes and blond curls, even with his hospital dressings from cleft palate surgery. After his operation, Mom took me to see him at Primary Children's Hospital. He lay in a crib with his arms strapped down and tied to the sides to keep his hands from his fresh stitches. The nurse told Mom she could feed him his bottle which, instead of a nipple, had a long skinny tube.

Cory was only eight when Mom and Dad divorced, and he lived with Mom for several years, moving each time she moved. One year he went to three different elementary schools. For a while he had mononucleosis and missed a lot of school. When he was fourteen, he moved in with me since I lived closer to his high school than either Mom or Dad. We had fun together, and I wondered if I should stay and take care of him or go on a mission. When I decided on a mission, Cory reluctantly moved in with Dad. Then he moved back in with Mom, who had rented a small house a block away from his high school. He stayed with her until he graduated and went on a mission himself.

Even though Cory was seldom home, between his job and his girlfriend, he and Mom had many midnight talks, especially when McKenzie refused to "wait" for him when he went on his mission. She wanted to stop dating Cory, she said, so he could go as a missionary to Taiwan without worrying about what she was doing. Cory took a baseball bat out to the field behind the house and slammed it again and again into a tree. But McKenzie did write, and she came to the MTC

when we took Cory. Cory was tall and blond and handsome that day, with Mom's blue eyes. It was a clear morning and the first time I ever saw my mother cry.

Sometime while Cory was in Taiwan, Mom moved in with Mike and stopped sending money to Cory for his mission. Four months after he came home, Cory married McKenzie. Mike was probably the main reason Cory didn't ever let Mom know where he and McKenzie lived. We all knew about Mike's temper, and Cory was afraid that if she knew where they lived Mom might bring Mike to their house. Mike followed Mom everywhere. Once he stood outside my car waiting while Mom and I talked. I didn't want to talk with her in her apartment with Mike listening, and it was too cold for us to stand outside. So we sat in my car and talked while Mike stood next to the car glowering at me.

After Mom divorced Mike, she shared an apartment with my older sister, Teresa, and Cory started asking us to babysit his new daughter, Sara. Mom became their regular Sunday afternoon babysitter. But she went back to Mike again; and after she left Mike, she moved in with Andrew, so Cory stopped asking her. He knew he couldn't just ask Mom not to bring Andrew along because she pretty much did what she wanted. She had brought Mike to my house, even after he broke in. And she invited Andrew home to the apartment she shared with Teresa even though Andrew had both threatened and propositioned Teresa, who is just his age, thirty-four.

So I don't blame Cory for staying away. He's just trying to have a better life with his family than he had growing up. When he married McKenzie, he cut Mom off completely. At first I thought it was just typical newlywed exclusivity; but when it went on for about three years, I knew Cory was deliberately avoiding Mom. But I understand why he doesn't want Mom around his wife and daughter as long as she's living on the street and seeing men like Mike and Andrew. I've only met Andrew sober once, so I can understand why Cory stays away. But he avoids the rest of the family as well.

When he graduated from the university, he didn't tell anyone in our family; he didn't want any of us there. He didn't tell us when he was accepted to Stanford's MBA program; and then when he changed his mind, he didn't tell us that he had found a job in the area as a teacher in a school for troubled teenagers. I don't know exactly what he said to Dad except that he didn't want him to come to church when Jared was blessed. Dad was so hurt, he wouldn't talk about it. Jared was his first grandson. When I talked to Cory, he said he wouldn't mind if I came, but I had to teach Sunday School that day. I would have found a substitute had I known, I told Cory. "It's not a big deal," he said.

I found out about his new job when I called McKenzie to invite her and Cory to my birthday party. We talked for an hour, and McKenzie told me about Cory's new job. McKenzie actually gets along quite well with Mom and the rest of the family. I can talk to McKenzie like she is my own sister, sometimes even better than I do with Cory. It's Cory who is having a hard time with us.

My party is at Sean's apartment. He is the oldest of the family. Cory and McKenzie apologize for being late and introduce us to Jared, the newest member of the family. Two-year-old Sara entertains us by pulling toys one by one from the cupboards and then putting them back one by one. We laugh and applaud, and she laughs and claps her hands. Cory shows her how to bow, but when she tries to imitate him, she falls forward on her head. She laughs and deliberately falls a second time, enjoying an audience, even though we are strangers to her. Dad and Sean sit on the couch talking about computers, while in the kitchen Sean's wife and Mom talk about dieting. Still, it's the first time I can remember that we've all been together for my birthday. I suppose we must have celebrated it as a family before Mom and Dad divorced, but I don't remember.

This is my happiest birthday ever, I think. My brothers have their own families now, and Mom and Dad have separate lives; but I feel as if we are finally a "real" family. I'm sorry Cory doesn't. He told me once he feels like we're all faking it, pretending to be close, to be a normal family.

I suppose if I had married as he did, I would have exchanged my old family for my new one without regret. As it was, I went to school summers, spent holidays with friends, and never called Mom or Dad. I often forgot that I still had a family, a family that lived only an hour away. It might as well have been five hundred hours away for all that I saw anyone. It wasn't until Sean remarried and bought a house in Salt Lake and started inviting us out for his kids' birthdays and barbecues that we started, uncomfortably at first, getting together. An avid photographer, Sean gathered us together for family pictures, the first ever of our complete family. Only Cory and McKenzie missed those barbecues and parties, even our Thanksgiving dinner. They spent Thanksgiving with her family, as they had since they first married. When Cory married McKenzie, he traded his old family in for a new one and missed the healing. Sometimes I envy him, though; he has put old relationships behind him and created new ones, something I can't do just yet.

Cory tells me I need to get on with my life, to quit trying to salvage the old family and create a new one for myself. He and Sean, both experts on marriage now, tell me this frequently. I need to learn

social skills relating to normal people, or I'll never get married. I laugh since I've dated more than both of them put together, but I wonder if there's some truth to what they say. Still, I think I need this time to learn to love my old family before I look for a new one, to understand my mother before I become one myself.

I didn't love my mother during those difficult years after Dad left. She cried a lot, yelled a lot, and then tried to gather us in family prayer. It took me a long time to forgive her for not being the mother I thought she should have been, and it took an equally long time to forgive Dad as well. Five years ago I felt as Cory does now, stayed away as he is doing. And I didn't even have the excuse that he does of a family in addition to school and work.

Even so, I call him just before Mother's Day to ask him to call Mom and wish her a happy Mother's Day.

"Stop acting like a big sister," he says. "I don't need you to tell me what I should be doing." But when he doesn't call, I am not really surprised.

For Mother's Day I fix Mom dinner and give her a present—a box of Guatemalan trouble dolls. The dolls are barely a quarter of an inch tall and are dressed in colorful threads. They fit in an egg-sized wooden box. The instructions in the box say to tell each of the six tiny dolls your troubles before you go to bed, and they will work on them while you sleep. We watch the second half of an old Tyrone Power movie, and during commercials I run next door to the laundromat to buy a couple of cans of diet Coke. Then I pop popcorn.

After Tyrone Power, "I Remember Mama" comes on. Although we have never seen the movie, we both know the story that the movie is based on—"Mama's Bank Account." It is a good movie for a mother and daughter to share on Mother's Day, and we watch it and drink our diet Cokes and eat our popcorn.

We've seen a lot of movies together. When I was little Mom introduced me to her favorite musicals—"Man of La Mancha" and "The Sound of Music." She took voice lessons and sang songs like "The Impossible Dream," "Climb Every Mountain" and "My Favorite Things." When she was eighteen, she had memorized "Clair de Lune" and could still play it without sheet music. She insisted that my brother, sister, and I learn to play the piano, and she bought a baby grand piano for us—on credit. My father wasn't pleased when he came home and saw it in our living room, but we thought the piano was perfect. Mom often did things that surprised my father—bought new cars, painted the walls, brought a male boarder into the spare bedroom for $100 a month. My dad didn't like having strangers living in our house, but she didn't listen to him.

I think I loved her when I was little. We all did, even though we didn't understand her. Even though she was never home and no one knew where she was. Even though the house was piled with her collections from secondhand stores and our clothes were never ironed and we fixed ourselves peanut butter sandwiches because she was never home to cook us dinner. And even though she didn't look or act like my friends' mothers and there were no cookies and milk after school, I loved her with a child's unreasoning, protective love.

She took me with her to clean houses or deliver the ironing she did for people all over the valley and paid me a quarter for deliveries. She gave me fifteen cents for ironing shirts or dresses but only ten cents for pillowcases, because they were so easy with the Iron-rite. Just one time through the rollers, and they were smooth and warm. Shirts and dresses took more manipulation to move through the rollers without catching sleeves or buttons. Shirt yokes were more difficult. I had to ease the shirt carefully into the Iron-rite and press down for just a few quick seconds. If I waited a second too long, the shirt rolled too far into the machine and wrinkled the collar.

When Mom ironed, I read aloud to her from whatever books I was reading from the school library. In the morning I lingered at her side, watching her iron until she absent-mindedly told me it was time for school. After I had walked halfway up the street to the school, I would run back to our house. "Mom," I would call back through the door, "I love you." When I heard her reassuring "Bye, love you," I would leave satisfied. Within minutes, however, I was back again to call, "Bye, love you."

"Bye, love you," she would call again patiently, a ritual that repeated itself several times a morning, several times a week, so that I was nearly always late for school.

These days I tell Mom frequently that she was a good mother. She seems to need to hear it. "You must have done something right," I tell her. "I'm not a drug addict or an alcoholic. I'm not in prison. Almost all of your kids have gone on missions and to college, and at least two will have graduate degrees." I think of Cory, who's just beginning a master's social work program—the same one Mom graduated from—and I know from her face that she is thinking of him, too, so I speak rapidly to distract her.

"I spend more time with you than my friends spend with their parents," I say, hoping that she will feel better, and then to make sure I add, "and I do it because I like being with you, not because it's my duty or because I have to."

I don't tell her, though, that I do feel like I have to. Except for Mike and Andrew, she's been alone since her divorce from Dad fifteen

years ago. In the last five years or so, my brothers have all married and started families. Cory works full time and goes to school full time; Sean works two jobs to support his family of six. Even so, Sean meets Mom for lunch downtown once in a while, and Teresa used to before her transfer to Dallas a year ago. Even though Teresa and I call her at least twice a week, Mom is essentially alone.

Since I am a student at BYU, Mom decided to take classes too; senior citizens can audit classes for ten dollars a semester. Last semester she took a writing class; for one assignment she wrote about the summer she was ten. She spent it in a nearly full-length body cast that reached from crown to hips, only her face and arms and legs sticking out. She wore it after her neck operation since she had a weak muscle that caused her head to flop over like wrung-neck chicken. She spent three weeks on her back in the hospital; but when she was out, she spent the rest of the summer climbing the cherry tree in her back yard in spite of her body cast.

She used to tell me the story of how her house burned down on Christmas Eve. As her family walked home together from a church activity, they saw the smoke. They spent Christmas farmed out with the neighbors. Fortunately, most of their presents were still on layaway at different stores, so they didn't lose all of them. She tells me stories about her growing up, but there is so much I don't know. I'd like to know about how she wrote plays and conducted them in her back yard, charging safety pins as the price of admission. I'd like to know how she felt when her head was shaved for her neck operation and she went to school with only a thin, pink ribbon tied around her naked scalp. I'd like to know about the books she read, the classes she took at school, and the boys she dated. She's told me about Harley Hedengren, and Bill Peterson, who looked like Danny Kaye, and Paul, the boy who kissed her in the back room of the drugstore where she worked as a teenager. There's so much of her life I don't know.

While I was away at school, she lived with Mike, then Andrew. When she took Teresa's rent money to get an apartment with Andrew, Teresa told her never to even think of coming back. She changed the locks on her doors—mostly to keep Andrew out should he and Mom try to get in—and Teresa and I joked darkly, "The locks may be changed, Mom, but we want you to know the door's always open."

When Mom left Andrew a few months later, Teresa wanted to take her back, but she was still hurt that Mom had left her stranded without rent money. "It's my turn," I told Teresa. "You've taken care of her for the last several years."

Mom and I found an apartment in Springville, and we had a good time. I tried to keep her from missing Andrew, took her to movies and

shopping, but I could see that I couldn't do enough. Somehow she found Andrew again, and together they moved into a run-down duplex. However, because she lived with me at the time she began to receive disability payments, her checks were issued in my name. So I paid her rent and utilities and took her shopping, never giving her much cash, which would just be used to get Andrew something to drink.

After a few months Andrew assaulted another street person with a bottle and was sentenced to a year in jail, so I moved Mom out after reporting the duplex to the Board of Health. The landlady wasn't pleased to lose a tenant and at the same time receive a warning that she couldn't rent the place until the plumbing and heating were fixed.

I moved Mom into a newly remodeled, rent-adjusted senior citizen complex, although at first she complained about being around old people. Even more insulting was being classified as too "disabled" to handle her own money. To tell the truth, I didn't like managing two checking accounts. But I liked knowing I could find Mom when I wanted to see her. I liked knowing she had food in her apartment, enough to last several weeks, and soap and toilet paper and a television set and a bed. I liked knowing that she wasn't going to spend her monthly welfare check the first few days by eating out, living in a nice hotel, and buying good clothes that she wore once or twice and then threw out. I liked knowing she was sleeping in a bed in a clean, nice apartment now instead of in the run-down, poorly heated duplex, or worse, in an abandoned house or car somewhere, in a hospital waiting room, or even in a field with only cardboard to cover her.

But Mom didn't like being considered too incompetent to handle her money, so she agreed to see a counselor in order to get a recommendation to have her disability check reassigned in her own name. Mom talked with June, a social worker, who set up weekly appointments to see her. June also scheduled Mom to see Dr. James, who prescribed lithium for her chemical imbalance. She has a bipolar affective disorder, he says. People used to call it a manic-depressive condition. I don't know why they changed the name. I'm just glad to have a name at last for what it is that makes my mother different. Dr. James says it's a condition that people may not get until their late twenties—about the time Mom stopped working as a social worker. About the time I was born thirty years ago.

I don't know what happened, or when. It was sometime after she married and started having children. My aunts told me she was a very good student at the university. She was the first one in the family to graduate from college. And she held the same job for the first several years of her marriage, taking time off every other year to have a baby. I've seen the early pictures of Mom and Dad together, of my older

brother, sister, and me. We look happy, I think. We don't have any pictures after that for almost thirty years, and no one can tell me what happened to the young woman who dressed stylishly and groomed herself carefully at one time but now dresses like a bag lady so people will give her a dollar out of pity.

At the same time I see traces of the too-caring heart in her angry loyalty to Mike, the schizophrenic boyfriend she met at the Plasma Donor Center, and to Andrew, her boyfriend, and her sporadic loyalty to her children. Sometimes when we talk I see the competent, thoughtful social worker who listens and offers wise counsel. At other times I see the mother I grew up with—never still, never predictable, always running here and there, coming, going. Dr. James says that being manic feels like being on drugs. Mom has been on a constant "high" for the last thirty years. She's never taken problems seriously because they didn't seem real to her. Now she is calmer most of the time; her medication evens out her moods. At first Mom didn't like feeling like "a zombie"; she missed feeling energetic and ready to take on the world. Since the lithium pulls her out of her fantasy world and makes her drowsy and a bit nauseous, she stays home and reads or watches TV most of the time.

Her books are stacked all over the floor, against the wall, on a chair, on the television. She has a book on AIDS and one on ventriloquism, plus two on writing. I am glad the city library is only two blocks away. She likes to read, especially diet books (as if by reading them she can burn off calories). She's also starting to read romance novels, hoping to learn how to write them herself. She's heard that romance writers make several thousand dollars per book. Danielle Steel is a multi-millionaire with about twenty-seven books in about that many languages. Mom is going to read all twenty-seven, absorb Danielle Steel's style, and then start writing romances herself.

Mom and I are slowly furnishing her apartment. She didn't have any furniture at all when she came here. A friend of mine gave her a bed. I found a table at a secondhand store for five dollars. I keep a list of things she needs and buy them when her monthly disability check comes—dishtowels, rugs, hangers, a frying pan, bookshelves.

When we find some bookshelves on sale, the jigsaw kind you put together—$8.99 each—I buy two of them and set them up in her apartment. By the time I am finished, it is late and I have a long drive home, so I gather up my coat and purse. As I start to leave, she tells me suddenly, "I have this urge to hug you." I am startled; she often turns away when I hug or kiss her cheek. As I feel her arms around me, I hear her say softly, "Thank you for being so nice to me." I recall the words of my patriarchal blessing, "You willingly will help your

family, and they will see your good example and call your name blessed." I feel like I am doing what I am supposed to be doing right now, even though my brothers tell me over and over that I can't keep this up forever.

Leaving Mom's apartment, I see an Indian girl in a wheelchair and an older man riding a motorized cart, but most people in the complex don't appear to be physically disabled. Pete opens the door for me. He used to be Andrew's friend. Pete is a handsome man in his late fifties, tanned, with thick blond hair, a good body, and a mustache. He lost his wife and kids because of his drinking and now goes to AA meetings. Pete won't have anything to do with Andrew anymore, but he'll drink herb tea with Mom and talk about Andrew.

When she and Andrew lived together, he wouldn't let her leave him by himself. His drinking made him paranoid, and Mom liked taking care of him, even cleaning up after him when he threw up. Now that she's living alone, Mom gets tired of staying home reading or watching TV, so she's started playing her harmonica downtown again. She used to be the only woman "entertainer" downtown, and she liked the distinction. A few women hold signs, and Mom saw them making more money than she did, so she tried holding a sign that said, "I will work for food." A veteran signholder came over to her. "Ya gotta say 'Will work for food,' " he said. "No *I*. It don't work the other way." But she got bored just holding a sign. So she plays her harmonica—everything from cowboy to classical. Once she even gave a signholder a harmonica and told him to learn how to play it. But he got more money just holding his sign. Mom likes to entertain people and see them smile. Sometimes she wears her clown suit, sometimes regular clothes, although she wears her oldest ones for playing downtown.

One man has taped rumpled pictures of his children on his sign. He makes five hundred dollars a night. He'll work Trolley Square during the day and Temple Square at night. He's in the spot she likes because you can make a lot of money right there by the gate. Then he'll go over and hold his sign by the Capitol Theatre to get the opera crowd. Mom saw a woman in a Jaguar stop once and give him a hundred-dollar bill.

"He does have a wife on welfare and a couple of kids," Mom tells me, "but a lot of signholders just use the money to pay for their drug habit." She hears people stop and offer them work, but they don't want it. One girl holds a sign—"Pregnant, Homeless, Hungry." Her boyfriend holds it once in a while, but he turns it over to the other side that says, "Man for Hire."

Mom likes to tell me about the different people who hang around Main Street. "That guy always sees God and Jesus in long black coats," she tells me, pointing to a man across the street. Or, "That guy is really sick. He won't even take money. I tried to give him a quarter one day, and he just yelled, 'Get out of here.' " Another man wears a brassiere under his clothing, and another is the alcoholic brother of her schizophrenic second husband. "He's a lot nicer than Mike," she tells me, "but he's weird, too." Mike, her ex, is paranoid. He thinks that the clips showing Neil Armstrong walking on the moon are a government plot to deceive people.

Mom likes the little Irish man who has a thick brogue and plays the guitar. "If you say the magic word, *fabulous*, he'll give you a wish," Mom says, "but he sings terrible. But at least he's not loud." If Mom is playing her harmonica and someone nearby is playing or preaching loud enough to compete with her, she'll play as loud as she can right back.

Sometimes the cashier at the Yogurt Station brings her a cup of frozen yogurt, or the young girls at Becky Sue's Buns bring her a free cinnamon roll. Mom likes it when people offer her free food, though she likes money better. She especially likes it when children give her money. "Thanks, honey," she tells them. She says that to anyone who puts money in the little mug she sets on the sidewalk. She doesn't call anyone in our family "honey." It's her street voice, a costume like her clown suit or mismatched clothes. "The worse you look, the more money you make," she says.

She makes less money these days. "It's the recession," she tells me. I wonder. She's been seeing June, her counselor, for over a year now and has been taking lithium and Prozac, an antidepressant, for about that long. She combs her hair and wears make-up more these days. Her clothes are clean, if not ironed. The last time I took her shopping, she decided to buy some razor blades to shave her legs. "I need to start taking care of myself," she said. She also bought some antiperspirant. When we went to *Giselle* a few weeks ago, she wore a nice dress, made up her face carefully, and combed her hair. She looked like she could be anyone's mother.

As I watched the full white skirts, I asked if Renoir was the artist who painted ballet dancers. "No, Degas," she said. At *Anna Karenina* last year she recognized the composer as Tchaikovsky without even looking at the program. I'm always amazed how much she knows about music until I remind myself that she studied music and art at the University of Utah before she graduated in social work. Even when she worked full time as a social worker for the state, Mom used to find time to take her small children to the symphony dress rehearsals since we could get in free.

I give Mom symphony tickets for a Christmas present, although I draw Sean's name and give his family *The Little Mermaid* video. With all the children and grandchildren in the family, we decided several years ago to draw names for Christmas and set a fifteen dollar limit. Mom drew Cory and McKenzie, and I told her they needed a new telephone; the old one has a lot of static. She was excited to find a Mickey Mouse telephone on sale for nineteen dollars.

McKenzie and Cory drop by Dad's to exchange presents and hugs and hurry home. They apologize for missing the Christmas Eve get-together, but they had already invited a friend who would be alone to spend the evening with them.

After they are gone, Mom and I slice French bread, and I pour glasses half full of grape juice, then add 7-Up while everyone talks and laughs in the front room. Sean's six children all crowd around the table to help fix smoked turkey and creamy Danish haverti cheese sandwiches.

After we eat, we exchange gifts. Even though we are supposed to buy only one present, Sean and his wife give a small package to everyone. I get Oil of Olay, and everyone else gets mixed nuts. Because I don't have a second family to buy for, as my brothers do, I give everyone a food basket, with chili, cocoa mix, marshmallows, and dinner mints. "For a chilly evening sometime when you don't feel like cooking," I tell everyone. While everyone is putting on coats and picking up crumpled wrapping paper, I call Cory at home to thank him for my present, a steel-blue T-shirt. He thanks me for the food basket.

"McKenzie probably doesn't feel like cooking much these days," I say. McKenzie is pregnant again. "How do you like your new phone?" I ask.

"It's great," he says, "I'm talking to you on it. Tell Mom thanks and give her a hug and tell her I love her."

"Do you want to tell Mom thanks yourself?" I ask.

I hear him pause before he answers easily, "Sure, I'll talk to her."

Their conversation isn't long. Mom says she would be happy to help clean their apartment after the holidays. She remembers what it's like to have morning sickness. She laughs, "They should call it 'all-day,' not 'morning,' sickness." She is quiet for a moment, listening. "Love you too," she says quickly and hangs up. I pretend to be busy cleaning up in the kitchen until Sean and his wife say good-bye and we all hug and kiss and wish each other a Merry Christmas.

McKenzie seems happy to see us, and Mom and I quickly clean her kitchen and fold her laundry as we talk about Cory's job, McKenzie's arthritis, and Mom getting her check back in her own name. I signed the papers finally because she is doing so well.

McKenzie tells me that it will be nice not to have to worry about it anymore. I tell her that Mom and I are going to have a bill-paying party every month when her check comes, and I will help her write out her checks.

Yes, Mom announces proudly, she has her own checking account now. I shrug when McKenzie looks at me. The bank asked her if she wanted to open an account, and she said yes. It was that easy. I didn't say much when Mom showed me her new checks. I guess if the bank doesn't mind, it's their business.

McKenzie compliments Mom on how she looks, her pretty earrings. Andrew bought them for me, she says proudly. When they were living together, he took her shopping with some money he earned in a hospital experimentation program—watching TV and staying sober for two weeks while some orderly gave him some new drug and watched his reaction. He earned about $800 and took Mom shopping for a watch and some earrings. McKenzie just nods her head, and I turn the subject to school. I should be graduating soon, and what I am going to do next always offers fruitful conversation.

I do not realize that Mom is thinking about Andrew from the way she talks to McKenzie, that he is being released from jail early and has already telephoned her to ask for a place to stay. So I am taken by surprise when Mom tells me he is back. She is content to have him quietly drunk in the next room while she watches TV. But she calls me later to say he is gone again. She left him alone to go shopping and came home to an empty apartment. She learned from Pete that Andrew left her apartment on the third floor—without any clothes on—and found his way to the downstairs front lobby, which has a large front window facing a busy street. The manager called the police. Mom says Andrew has already called her from jail to apologize. He wants to come back when he gets out of jail again, but Mom told him she has a nice apartment now and doesn't want him to ruin it for her by getting her thrown out. She asks me to change her phone number.

I don't ask Cory to call Mom on Mother's Day, but he tells me he has a card for her. "Why don't they make cards that say, 'Thanks for not doing more damage than you did'?" he asks me, and we both laugh.

Mom doesn't say anything about Cory not calling. I try to keep her busy by taking her shopping. I buy her a new dress, panties, bra, slip, and a large, pink T-shirt that says "World's Greatest Mother." It's a maternity shirt, but Mom says it's perfect; people always ask her if she is pregnant because of her big stomach. She likes it that people think she still looks young enough to be pregnant.

It is nearly a month before Cory gives Mom her card. She reads it and thanks him, then gives it to me to read. The card has a simple

message: "I wish there were words to say how happy I'd like this day to be for you. Love always." Cory has written:

> Dear Mom,
>
> I have a really hard time choosing cards for you and Dad, but this one fit me. You don't fit society's stereotype of motherhood, but that doesn't matter. I appreciate you for who you are. I learned many valuable things from you. I learned how to work by cleaning, to love and associate with those some would rather not, to find humor in painful situations, and most of all to be flexible and adaptable. To compare you to other mothers would be to compare apples and helicopters. You must have your regrets and sadness, but I hope you don't beat yourself about it. You are where you are. You're worthwhile whether or not you do what others expect.
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> I hope you're happy. I hope you like being a mother. I'm grateful for what you went through to get me here and your effort to get me to the point where I could make it alone. I'm sorry for anything I did growing up that made your job harder than it needed to be. If I have hurt you by anything I've done, please forgive me.
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> You are one in a million. I love you. Be careful and be happy.

"This is beautiful, Cory," I tell him.

"What does it say?" Cory asks, surprised. "It's been a while since I wrote it, and I've forgotten." I hand it to him, and he reads and then laughs, "Yeah, this is pretty good stuff." Mom says that's what she gets for having a bunch of children who are writers.

Before Cory leaves, he asks if we will watch Sara and Jared Friday night so he and McKenzie can see a movie. He hugs me goodnight, then turns to Mom and puts his arms around her. "I want my children to know their grandmother," he says, and then he is gone.

Later that week Mom leaves a message on my answering machine telling me that she doesn't feel well enough to go to her class, that I don't need to meet her on campus. Her voice sounds peculiar, but I want to believe her. I call her to see how she is, and the phone rings and rings. For three days she doesn't answer the phone, and I don't drive up to Salt Lake to her apartment because I am afraid that she will not be alone. She finally answers the phone on the third day. Yes, she says, Andrew is back. She hasn't been picking up the phone because Andrew's old girlfriend keeps calling. "Please don't lie to me anymore," I tell her.

"I don't want to lie to you," she says. "I won't lie to you anymore."

"We still have symphony tickets for this weekend," I remind her. "Will Andrew let you go?" She won't leave him alone when he's drunk.

"Yes," she says, "he's back, but I'm going to have my own life this time. I'm not going to miss any more classes because of him."

I pick her up from her spot outside ZCMI mall and take her home. I wait in the loading zone while she goes up to change into a

dress and put on make-up and comb her hair. I was looking forward to our balcony seats under the chandeliers at Symphony Hall, but now I have a headache, and it is difficult to enjoy the music. I try to listen, my eyes closed, concentrating, but finally at the intermission I ask Mom if we can leave early. "Bartok *is* pretty dissonant," Mom agrees. She consoles me by saying she can listen to the rest of the symphony when it is broadcast on KBYU Sunday night. Even so, I am sorry to end the evening this way.

As we leave Symphony Hall, we are not protected by the crowds. I consider walking down Main Street, which is better lit, but it is out of our way. So we walk down West Temple to where my car is parked. Salt Lake isn't dangerous, but we are on the west side of the city, which is darker and poorer than the east side. We see the shadow of a man ahead, and I consider jaywalking across the street; but I see he is getting ready to cross. As we approach, he seems to change his mind, because he stands there waiting for us. I wonder if Mom knows him. His nose is red and running, and his cheeks are covered with stubby white bristles.

"My partner is sleeping out," he tells us, "and I just need a little money to buy some food for us. Just fifty cents for a hamburger. My friend and I could split it." I picture myself opening my purse and pulling out money and him grabbing my purse. The smell of beer is strong.

"I'm sorry," I say, as Mom and I keep walking. When he is far enough behind not to hear, I ask Mom, "Should I have given him a dollar?"

"No," she tells me. "He had all day to earn money." Street people share their earnings, Mom has often told me, so I am surprised at her response. But she doesn't know this man, and she is impatient with beggars who, unlike entertainers, do nothing to earn the money they get.

No one else approaches us as we walk, although not far away I hear the lonely sound of a guitar—someone playing the blues, though I don't recognize the tune. When we get to my car, I open the door for Mom, then walk around to my side. I start the car and see that my gas tank is nearly empty, so I drive to the Top-Stop on the corner. I hate to pay nearly double for aspirin there, but it will be an hour before I get home.

"There's that guy I told you about," Mom says suddenly. "He goes up to cars and just asks them for money. He brags he's the best paid panhandler in Salt Lake."

I see a man weaving toward the door and consider driving on, but the nearest gas station is several blocks away. I pull up to the gas

pumps but wait in my car and watch him for a minute before getting out. He goes inside the store and stands, talking to the man at the cash register. I quickly get out and set up the pump, adjust the handle to automatic, and get back in my car. I pull out just enough cash from my wallet for gas.

I see the cashier wave the man outside, and now he shambles toward my car. He is very tall and very thin, with baggy, shapeless clothes. Despite the winter night, he wears no coat and dirty tennis shoes with holes. I am afraid if I stay in the car he will knock the gas nozzle on the ground or bang on my window or something. So I get out of my car and close the door, prepared to tell him what I have already said once tonight.

He smells of liquor and sweat. His skin is covered with a sheen of dirt. He looks at me and holds out something. It is a half-eaten sandwich still in its plastic. He holds it so close to my face that I can see the damp lettuce, the teeth marks in the bread.

"I found this in the garbage," he says.

"I have to buy gas to get home," I tell him.

He starts to speak, but the cashier runs toward us, yelling, "Stop bothering the customers. Get off this property and don't come back." The man limps off holding his sandwich. Mom sits silent in the car. I fill up my tank.

When my tank is full, I put the gas nozzle back in its nook and tighten the gas cap. When I pay for the gas the cashier apologizes, but I thank him for his help anyway.

"My mom warned me about him," I tell the cashier. "She sees him downtown, and she warned me."

I pay for the gas and say goodnight to the cashier. I am almost to my car when I realize that my headache is back, so I go back for the aspirin. "I almost forgot what I came for," I tell the cashier. As he rings it up I open the bottle and swallow three aspirin. He smiles sympathetically, and I wish him a quiet evening.

"It is most of the time," he says with a salute of his hand. As I step outside it is quiet underneath the sky, the air is cool, and I can still hear faraway blues in the night.