

Miracle

Eric Samuelsen

LUCILLE WENTWORTH SAT IN HER RECLINER working on her cross-stitch, watching Judy and Ray hold hands, sitting across from her on the couch. It was late, past one; they'd talked for hours, the conversation flowing around Lucille like the river around rocks that time she'd gone white water rafting with her nephew Verl and his wife. She was content with it, she thought, it was all right with her. She wasn't going to raise any objections.

"When was that, Mom? Do you remember?"

Judy, trying to involve her in the conversation again. That was the worst part of a third-wheel night like this one: their attempts to be mannerly. It wasn't anything more than manners, she knew. Still, Lucille would be civil, too.

"Sometime in July, I expect," she said, trying for a cheerful tone. "Not long after the Fourth."

That was her role tonight and, like as not, forever—to confirm dates and times of day, to stamp approval, to validate. A court recorder still, she thought, as though miracles didn't happen if not verified by the proper authority. The whole thing was really built on miracles, to listen to them.

Miracles, count 'em up—the extra pork chop, Brother Foxworth's lesson, a lawnmower on the fritz, a stick of jerky in a trucker's jacket. Now it was late and they were still at it, listing all the signs and strange wonders in the heavens. Everything that proved it was meant to be. Well, just look

ERIC SAMUELSEN, a native Hoosier, teaches at Brigham Young University's Department of Theater and Media Arts where he heads the playwriting program. He has had sixteen plays produced, and has been honored by the Association for Mormon Letters for three of them. His plays include *Accommodations*, *Gadianton*, *The Way We're Wired*, and *Family*.

at 'em, Judy and Ray on the sofa with the afghan behind him. She wondered if the afghan still stank from when Ray had barfed on it. Another secret they'd kept, Lucille and Ray. One more thing Judy didn't know about her intended. Didn't appear to matter. Couldn't nothing break that feeling they had—blessed, like God had kissed them both on the forehead.

Lucille didn't trust it. She had more than just suspicions, that was for sure. She was willing enough to go along with their exclamations of hardwon belief and amazement, but she didn't feel much sharing in it. Miracles come from faith, and Lucille had no faith in this one. But things had happened and couldn't be easily explained. Their presence, holding hands (holding hands, holding hands!) was proof of something or other; and whatever it was, it wasn't Lucille's job to break the spell. But a real miracle wouldn't be so risky. A real miracle wouldn't feel so wrong.

“When was that, Mom? What was the day?”

She knew right well what the day was they were talking about; she knew it practically to the minute. The first time she ever laid eyes on Ray was about 1:15 in the afternoon of July 8. Her years as a court stenographer gave her a good head for facts. Seven months ago to the day, a Sunday morning and the hottest day of the year, there he'd been, in the lobby of the Twenty-eighth Ward chapel. In he walked, his gray hair plastered against his scalp, tattered corduroys held up by clothesline hanging over his shoulders like suspenders, laces in just one of his battered Adidas, a red kerchief around his neck, a backpack dangling off one shoulder, a thin sleeping bag rolled up and slopping out each end of the pack. Not very tall, stoop shouldered, at least three days' worth of stubble, and reeking of cheap beer and pee. He had a piece of cardboard with “Los Vegas” misspelled on it in magic marker, and he was holding a trucker's cap in front of him, standing uncertainly by the door. A bum, in fact. Just a bum.

Lucille had been raised to value neatness and hard work and independence; and while she was willing enough to write out a check for ten bucks and give it to the deacons every fourth Sunday, that was about as much charity as she had in her. She might look at this sort of vagabond, and wonder how he had come to such a pass, and shudder at the thought. But there were shelters for such people; she was overtaxed to support those shelters, and a bowl of hot stew and a hard bench to sleep on could be found there. She drove past men like him all the time, standing by the K-Mart parking lot or by the interstate on-ramp. She'd toss him the loose change in her purse if she was stopped at a light when she saw him, then

wonder if she'd really helped, or if she'd just given him money to buy cheap booze or drugs, make his problems worse.

Thirty-four years since Mick had died, rolling over his pickup trying to make it home through a snow storm, and she hadn't noticed the world standing in line to give her a hand up. She hadn't missed a day's work 'til she retired four years ago, starting with every lousy job available to respectable women, waitress, teacher's aid, filing and typing, flagging cars on construction sites. Nights, she'd gone back to school, and gotten her stenographer's license, and became recorder of the Third Circuit Court, put in her thirty years on the job. And she'd made the mortgage payment on time every month, kept food on the table and clothes on Judy's back, and every now and then, managed a treat—a trip to Baskin-Robbins or a matinee at the movies, when they could find one that wasn't filth through and through. But she knew how thin the ice had been beneath her, how little it would have taken for her to break through and drown. That was her job—to record human misery and foolishness, the consequences of bad choices, and their final legal disposition.

Recesses, she and the bailiffs used to wonder what would become of the defendants afterwards and speculate regarding what chance they might have to turn their lives around. Often enough, they wouldn't even have to speculate—they saw more than their share of repeat offenders. She hated scandals on TV—Watergate or Clarence Thomas or Oliver North—not for the reasons Judy hated them, not because they showed the decline of the world into Last Days' levels of immorality. No, what she saw were faces of folks about to lose their jobs; what she saw beckoning was homelessness. It was the one thought with the power to keep her awake nights.

It was silly, she knew—the idea of Haldeman or Nixon or Tenet or Kenneth Lay bumming quarters on the street. Judy had laughed at her once when she had expressed such a sentiment. "Clarence Thomas, homeless," she'd crowed. "He's a big-name attorney. He'll find work if they turn him down." And Lucille had laughed too; she supposed she was just being silly. But she'd seen enough doctors and lawyers and successful businessmen brought low in her time to know what was possible. Drink or drugs or sex scandal or money problems—any life could be wrecked. You had to be on your guard.

All those years, it had just been the two of them, Lucille and Judy, her daughter just nine when Mick died. After Judy's birth, the five miscar-

riages, one right after another, had felt like blows, God down on her for something undefined. After the last miscarriage, she'd stopped going to church entirely. And then Mick had rolled the pickup, and suddenly she'd understood God's infinite mercy, why he'd sent her only the one child, all she could have managed to support by herself. And she hadn't missed church a single Sunday since.

And then Judy had turned sixteen, and her late-night job cleaning the fourplex in Orem, sweeping up popcorn and mopping up sticky Coke syrup after the movie-goers left, had eased things considerably. And Judy had graduated, and Lucille had felt guilty about her grades, low B's and high C's, not good enough for most colleges even if they could have afforded a good one, caused, Lucille thought, by too many late nights working and not enough sleep. Judy had gone two years to Snow and gotten her associate's, and then come back home and gone to secretarial school. Dropped out after two semesters and it turned out she was dyslexic, something the high school or Snow could have discovered if anyone there had cared to look for it. And then Judy had dropped by the Albertson's supermarket to pick up eggs and bread, and seen an ad, and applied, and they'd hired her. And after two years as a bagger, one as a checker, she'd taken advantage of an apprenticeship program they were offering and gotten training as a butcher. And she'd been in the meat department ever since.

And that had been their lives, the years turning mother and daughter into friends, a butcher and a court recorder sharing a home, more roommates than blood relations, companions, sharing bills and chores and conversation, their lives centered on Church callings and their cats and visiting teaching and rented movies and gardening. They'd settled. Lucille turned seventy, Judy forty-three.

And then, that Sunday, there he'd stood, in their chapel. A bum, in their nice chapel. All Lucille's fears (not so irrational: butchers did get fired, pension funds got embezzled, homes were foreclosed) made flesh, her deepest anxieties shuffling uneasily in the foyer. Mostly, Lucille hoped someone would have the guts to make him leave. Not easy to do, but that's why men had the priesthood.

In time, probably someone would have; Twenty-eighth Ward, in those days before Brandon Fisher became bishop, was not a ward noted for its friendliness. Any other Sunday of the year, Ray would have been—very nicely—sent on his way. Maybe given a ride to the shelter in the back of Mark Hughes's pickup. Or maybe just given directions there.

Except that that particular Sunday, Cyril Foxworth had taught the lesson in Sunday School on loving your neighbors and Christian charity. And as always when Brother Foxworth talked, Lucille sat on the front row with all the other widows, paying rapturous attention.

So that was the first miracle, that Brother Foxworth taught that week when he wasn't the regular teacher, that the commonplaces and clichés of the lesson were transmitted, not through the medium of Brother Kerr's wearisome intellectualizing, but through Brother Foxworth's courtly charisma. He was actually a poor teacher, some said—couldn't stick to the subject, much given to long rambling stories, spent three weeks covering five verses. None of that mattered, not to Lucille, nor, she suspected, to Clarice Bowman or Verna Lundquist or any of her other friends in Relief Society. His prophetic white shock of hair, his dancing blue eyes under imposing eyebrows, his impish wit, and above all his richly modulated baritone invested his every word with authority and charm. "Charity never faileth," he'd intoned, savoring every word, "charity suffereth long," and he looked soulfully over them all, walking slowly past the classroom making eye contact right down the front row. And so, an hour later, Lucille Wentworth actually found herself thinking about walking up to the bum in the lobby and inviting him to join them, her and Judy, for dinner.

Thinking about it only, of course. Except, as she stood there thinking, Judy came up to her, a little late as usual; her Primary class always went over. And without Lucille saying a word about anything, Judy had, right out of the blue, asked, "Is there someone we could invite for dinner, do you think?"

Turned out she'd thawed three pork chops by mistake that morning and had been sitting all through church wondering what to do about it. Judy knew well enough that pork doesn't keep in hot weather, and they weren't the kind to let it go to waste, a good pork loin cut. Be best if they shared it with someone, she said. One extra pork chop, then, that was what had prompted her, that and Brother Foxworth's lingering spell. But still, she could hardly believe she had done it, afterwards.

"Be honored if you'd share supper with us," she'd said to the bum in the foyer. His clothes were cleaner than she expected; she remembered that detail.

He'd looked startled by her abruptness. "Preciate it. I really do."

"All right, then," she'd said, and pointed out their blue Impala. And

drove home, saw the curtain flicker over to Springfell's that said Ada had noticed and would be passing the word.

A bum, for dinner, just like that. And that was the second miracle, the extra pork chop, something out of character for them both, Lucille inviting and Judy careless with meat.

Miracle number three, Lucille learned of in the car on the way home. The bum sat self-consciously in the back, the window rolled down despite the heat (he knew he stank, Lucille thought, impressed that he would think to spare them). He asked where he was, what town; he really didn't know. He was actually heading to Las Vegas, he said, when the trucker who'd picked him up suddenly pulled over and kicked him out of the cab. "No idea why," he said, "but I'm much obliged. Just pure chance I ended up here, in this town, but I thank the Lord for it."

Lucille figured he was lying and it turned out later he was. He told 'em about a week later. He hadn't eaten in two days; and as he sat in the truck, dizzy he was so starved, he'd looked over and seen a stick of beef jerky sticking out of the trucker's denim jacket. He'd sat for thirty miles thinking about it, wondering how he could get his hands on it and get the package open without the trucker noticing. He never stole, never, he told them (which Lucille figured for another lie), but this morning he was getting desperate. And you never knew, did you, what the Lord led you to do, the way temptations could be blessings? He'd finally waited until the trucker was occupied signaling to pass and filched the jerky quick as you please. And the trucker had seen it out of the corner of his eye and had gotten furious, which Ray told them, he didn't blame him for. And kicked him out then and there. Just pulled over and let him out, right off the 800 North exit, not three blocks from the Twenty-eighth Ward chapel.

It had taken three miracles just to get him in the door. It took a fourth to keep him there past dinner. Lucille had no intention of it, none whatever. She was pretty mad at herself just feeding him—a first for her and a bad precedent, she figured. But he washed up before eating and did a thorough job of it; that made an impression. And he stood humbly until asked to sit, and sat politely until asked to say grace, and prayed willingly enough, though to Jesus, like a Protestant. It was at dinner that they learned his name and heard the first of his life history.

Ray Ames was his name, from Biloxi, Mississippi. His father, a journeyman welder, his mother, active Pentecostal. Graduated from high school in 1964, and had been lucky enough with his grades to join the Air

Force right immediately, avoided the draft and the jungles of Vietnam. Instead, had spent the war refueling B-52s from a base in South Korea. Got out of the service with training in aircraft maintenance and a Korean bride, and settled down in Atlanta, airport services.

It had worked out well for him, he said, for nearly ten years. He'd told them about his marriage, his life as a respectable citizen. He and Soon Yi hadn't spoken much, but that had been all right; she'd been a good wife, kept the home neat as a pin and spoke when spoken to. Only his mother couldn't stand her and that had led to some tensions, he'd said. He and Soon Yi had had two children, a boy and a girl—they'd be in their late twenties, he said, but he hadn't heard from them in ages. They were back in Korea with their mother, he'd said. The marriage had broken up on account of his drinking, about the time he'd lost his job. He'd liked to bend an elbow with the boys, back in the service, he said, and got into the habit of hitting a bar on his way home from work. And when he did get home, the lack of conversation would like to drive him crazy. So he'd turn on the TV and pop open a beer, and that became his life. Then they'd gotten a federal contract at the airport, and he'd failed a urine test and gotten fired. And it was about then that Soon Yi had left him.

He'd worked a bunch of jobs, he said, enough to keep the house and send a monthly check to Korea. Asked what kind of work he'd done, Ray said landscaping, and some construction, oil changes at a Jiffy-Lube, some six years at Sears, doing maintenance—sewing machines and lawn mowers and such. (Lawn mower repair, he'd said, without any particular emphasis, but that had led to the fourth miracle, the fourth major coincidence and the one that had led to Lucille offering Ray a night's lodging in the spare room in the back.) And then he'd fallen one month behind on the mortgage, and gone on a bender, and fallen a second month behind, and from then on things just went downhill for him.

He'd moved in with his sister in Knoxville, he said, when he'd finally lost the house. Lived there for three years, until her husband came into his room one night and told him he'd best be moving on. He didn't blame him neither, Ray told 'em, what with four kids in a three-bedroom and a freeloading brother-in-law to boot. Then Ray had started his wanderin', he said. Just hitchin' one coast to the other.

Lucille had seen his kind in her years in the system and could fill in the court record herself. Arrests for vagrancy and public intoxication, petty theft and shoplifting; probably a sheet full of misdemeanors. She

wasn't too far wrong, it turned out later, though that first night he said he'd quit drinking and had never been arrested in his life. But from the way he said it, he clearly didn't expect to be believed; and as he finished his supper, he'd said, with a hang-dog expression, that he thanked them kindly for the meal, but he'd best be moving on.

And Lucille would have let him, except for that lawnmower business. It nagged her all through supper, from the time he first mentioned it. The coincidence of it all. Again. Because, it just happened that week that Lucille's lawnmower—a Sears and Roebuck, sure enough—was on the fritz. Judy'd had to pull the starting cord harder and harder to start it for months, and finally it had given out altogether. And as Ray Ames finished his supper and his life story, mopped up the last of the mushroom gravy with his bread and polished off his lemonade, Lucille had looked him over more carefully, considering it. He was clean now and looked peaceable enough. She'd seen no signs of temper or fury from him and not much spirit either. Just a quiet little man, hair a little thinning, hands a little shaky and couldn't meet your eye, but more beaten looking than dangerous. If he could fix the lawnmower, she thought, she'd offer him a night's lodging.

They put him up in the back bedroom, Judy staring wonderingly at her mother as she got the clean sheets from the closet. Lucille couldn't quite believe it either. Making the bed, she kept seeing the newspaper headlines: "Mother-Daughter Murdered by Vagrant." Kicking herself for being so trusting of a total stranger. And no sooner had she finished with the guest room, but she'd talked herself out of it, and went into the living room to tell Ray she'd changed her mind, and he'd have to be going. Figuring she'd soften the blow with a twenty.

But then she saw him there, sitting on the sofa so peaceable, sitting right next to Judy. And Lucille took a good hard look at the both of them, at him sittin' there by her daughter. Her first thought was that she and Judy probably weren't in much physical danger; Judy was half a head taller than Ray and had broader shoulders. But that really wasn't why Lucille changed her mind again, not why she couldn't bring herself to get rid of him. There he was, a man, sitting on the sofa with Judy. Judy, with her thick ankles and thinning hair, Judy with that moustache that electrolysis just hadn't done much to get rid of, Judy with the constant skin problems they just hadn't been able to afford a dermatologist for, made worse now from working around meat fat all day. Judy, who'd had maybe one date

her whole entire life. The stack of Harlequins under her bed that she didn't think Lucille knew about. The Single Adult dances she'd gone to with Cassie Paine, up until Cassie met Hank Sauer, and then Judy had quit completely. There Judy was, sitting, comfortably chatting, with a man, on the sofa, in her living room. Lucille had thought at that moment that maybe, just maybe, there were such things as miracles, the way she felt at that moment, watching her daughter on the sofa with a man. Or at least a feeling she was willing, at that moment, to trust enough to take a chance on getting raped and murdered.

Not that Lucille didn't lock her bedroom door pretty carefully that night and insist that Judy do the same. Or wake up with a start at every little noise in the house. She had a fitful night of it, knowing he was just down the hall, a complete stranger and a bum to boot. She'd given in to impulse one time too many, she told herself. It ends today. She'd tell him after lunch; get him to fix the lawnmower in the morning and overpay him for the job. And then, finally, send him on his way.

She could have sworn she hadn't slept all night but then was startled awake by the sound of water running. Her first thought was panicky—he was in her shower!—but then she realized it was Judy, and that too was surprising. Working with meat, Judy usually showered after work. Lucille got up to see about breakfast—oatmeal or cream of wheat, she figured. But Judy had gotten sausage out to thaw the night before and had set a package of Pillsbury biscuits on the counter. She couldn't have made it plainer, what she wanted to eat; and so Lucille went along, made the good sausage gravy, and a pitcher of orange juice and added a fresh grapefruit each. And watched carefully as Ray and Judy ate together in companionable silence. Judy looked good, for her, clean and fresh—she'd even gone to some trouble over her makeup, usually something she didn't bother with most days. And Ray had spruced himself up a bit, had shaved, and brushed his teeth and washed his face, and slicked back his hair.

If anything, Lucille probably scrutinized him too closely. He caught her looking at him, and stared down at his food, embarrassed. "I'da showered," he said. "Shoulda. Prolly a bit on the ripe side, I know. Smelled the sausage cooking, and couldn't help wantin' to eat first."

"It's okay," said Judy. "You don't smell bad."

"I prolly do," said Ray. "Been awhile for me."

"You can shower after you fix the lawnmower," said Lucille. "Be all sweaty anyhow."

"That's right," said Ray. "It can wait." He looked over at the biscuit pan. "Do you mind if I . . ."

"Help yourself," said Lucille.

Ray took another biscuit, added a ladleful of gravy. "I can't tell you how good this tastes."

After breakfast, he helped clear the table, and he loaded his own dishes into the dishwasher. Judy left for work; and Lucille, against her better judgment, found herself making small talk with the man while she washed the skillet—chit-chat about the weather, and what sorts of flowers should go in the planter on the front porch. Wondering all the while if she was out of her mind, measuring how quick she could get to the meat cleaver on the counter, if it came to that. And just when the conversation ran out of steam, Ray stood up and came over to the kitchen window.

"Let's take a look at that lawnmower," he said. "It's in that shed out back?"

While he worked on the mower, Lucille found herself at odds and ends. There was always housework to be done, of course, but she'd done the major house cleaning on Saturday, habit from her working years, and now just had a bit of vacuuming, was all. She knew the neighborhood gossips would be clacking over him; she was half-tempted to dial Ada Springfell's number, just to hear the busy signal. She wanted to keep an eye on him herself and kept busy looking for chores in the kitchen. But she also didn't want to spy (or be seen spying, which was much the same thing) and so spent her time flitting back and forth between the kitchen and the living room, unable to settle on any project. It was positively a relief when he came to the door, wiping his hands on his slacks.

"Looks like you've got a bad spark-plug wire," he said. "I've cleaned her good, and lubed her, and sharpened the blade, but she still won't start without the part. If you got a Sears in town, I could get her running good."

"Just let me get my purse," said Lucille, and hurried into her room to change.

Driving into town, she found herself again looking at him, lights and intersections. He sat quietly, hands folded in his lap, looking out the window at the town. It was the closest look she'd gotten at him yet, the sun as bright as it was in the car, and him sitting so near. She could see a jagged scar on the side of his neck, a couple of inches long. His arm was covered with bug bites and the pinky finger on his left hand looked broken. He was so quiet, just sitting there, and she didn't want to intrude. But it

seemed unnatural not to talk, somehow, unneighborly and borderline rude.

"What's it like?" she asked finally.

He looked quickly back at her, a bit twitchy still, a kind of nervous politeness. "How do you mean?"

"Your life, I mean. On the streets and all. Movin' around. What's it like?"

"It's not very comfortable," he replied, "not for someone my age." He shifted in his seat—she could see his hands were still a bit trembly. "Feel like I've been stiff and sore my whole life long."

She left it at that. She knew what he meant; at seventy-one, even a good night in her own bed left her back stiff half the time. He was younger by some twenty years, but she could see the same stiffness, the careful way he got out of the car, the slow, ambling walk, just a touch of a limp. They went into the store together; he found the part quickly and waited politely for her to make the purchase. And even had the courtesy to hold the door for her back at the car.

Still, she absolutely would send him away after lunch; she'd decided, she'd made up her mind. She could feel bad for him, she could see signs of a hard life and feel pity, she could see him with Judy and feel stirrings of hope, she could think that there but for the grace of God and so on, but it still didn't matter. He wasn't her problem. She'd put him up for two days and didn't regret it. Bad things could have happened and hadn't, and for that she was grateful. But she could still see him on his way. And she would. After lunch.

But then, the whole afternoon, after he got the mower running again, he didn't come back in. First he mowed the lawn, and did a good thorough job of it, raked up the mulch and bagged it. He edged by the driveway and trimmed by the fence. He found a couple of dry patches and watered them carefully. Spent a good hour in the shed before putting away the mower, cleaning and organizing; and when he came back in, it was to ask her what to do with some of the junk he'd found out there. And then, an hour later, when he came back in, it was to ask if she had a hedge trimmer. She couldn't hardly send him away while he was working. It could even be, she thought, that he knew that, and knew, or sensed maybe, that it was best to keep occupied, but it also didn't matter. She didn't have it in her to send him on while he was working on her lawn. Her resolve remained unchanged, of course. Anyway, I'll tell him before supper. Or at

least afterwards. Or, so he wouldn't have to travel at night, the next morning. But then he was gone. She was not backing down, no matter what. He was leaving, that was certain.

He came back in around four. His shirt had come unbuttoned, and his undershirt was sticking to him from sweat, she noticed. She noticed again the air of skittish politeness, the difficulty he had looking at her, as he asked if she would mind if he took that shower now. She showed him where they kept the towels, assured him they wouldn't mind if he used the shampoo. Then, acting on impulse yet again—she seemed almost governed by impulse these days—she said abruptly, "Why don't you leave your clothes out in the hall? I'll put in a load."

"I've got a change in my backpack."

"I'll give them a wash too, while I'm at it," Lucille said.

"It ain't necessary," he said. "I just got to the laundry a week ago, place outside Laramie."

"It's no trouble," said Lucille. "I'd just as soon run a full load. Never know when you'll next be at a laundromat with spare change."

"It's an unpleasant job," he said, "washing a man's dirty underwear."

"I don't mind it," replied Lucille, wondering just how bad it could be. "Meanwhile, Judy's got these overalls she uses for painting should fit you. I'll toss 'em in."

"I'm grateful," he said, and went into the spare room, came out with an armful of laundry.

As she washed it, she couldn't help but check it over. Sure enough, the laundry was filthy, showed all the signs of a man with bowel problems who sometimes lacked the means to wipe properly. Something else, too, looked like dried blood mixed with the stool. She soaked it all good with Spray n' Wash, and once she heard the shower stop, got the load started. He came out of the shower, looking suitably abashed in Judy's overalls, which practically hung off his hips, looking so thin and worn-out, Lucille again took pity.

"Take a rest on the sofa," she said. "You've worked hard all day. Judy'll be home soon, and we'll have supper in an hour or so."

By the time Judy came home, he was curled up on the sofa, snoring softly. Judy came in real quiet and handed Lucille the meat wrapped in white paper she brought home every night from work.

"T-bones," she said. "Figured we could get some potatoes baking, maybe barbecue."

"I'll get going on the potatoes," said Lucille, astonished. Judy didn't bring home steak more'n four times a year.

"And I got French-fried onions," said Judy. "Thought we could do that green bean casserole you like."

Lucille looked at her daughter's impassive face. There was something going on, it was getting obvious, and she figured it could only be the one thing. It worried her, made her wish she'd sent Ray packing right after lunch. There was no place for Ray in their lives, she thought. She was not about to make a home for him. And yet the house was as much Judy's as hers.

"He's a bum," she said quietly. "A bum off the streets, who we took pity on. We know nothing about him beyond that."

"I know that," said Judy. "I know what he is."

That was better. That was more like it. Lucille hadn't known quite what answer to expect—that's how thrown off she was by all this. The T-bones for supper, Judy in makeup that morning at the breakfast table—it was all out of character. But now, Judy's reasonableness was reassuring. She still had her feet on the ground.

"So you won't mind," said Lucille, "when I send him on his way in the morning?"

Judy looked at her sharply. "Why?" she asked.

"Why?" The question seemed preposterous. "On account of we have to. He can't stay here."

"Why not?" asked Judy again. "How come we can't just leave things the way they are? Him in the spare room and all."

It was literally a new thought to Lucille Wentworth that late afternoon, staggering, new. There were things you didn't do, that was all, not park in handicapped or use expired coupons to shop with or wear patterned tops with plaid slacks or not keep your lawn mowed or turn away costumed kids at Halloween. Automatic things you did or didn't do, that the Ada Springfells of the world kept track of and required an accounting for if you were neglectful, not that Lucille minded much what that crabby old gossip thought. Two single women of a certain age didn't invite a bum to live with them. It just didn't happen.

And yet, as they talked about it in whispers out there in the kitchen, Judy's point of view came to seem almost reasonable. It wasn't costing

them much to keep Ray there. They could hardly call him dangerous—a skinny old fellow like him. They had the spare room handy for him; and he'd shown, for at least one day, willingness to help out around the house. They could help a fellow down on his luck, help him get back on his feet, and without much fuss for them. There was no particular reason to send him away, and lots of good that could come from keeping him. Explained that way, it began to seem almost Christian, almost like a right kind of thing, however much wrongness it felt all wrapped up with.

"Plus," said Lucille, not wanting to be pushy but thinking it ought to get brought up, "he's a fellow. A man."

"That's so," said Judy impassively. "It likely doesn't mean a lot. Right now, it means nothing at all." And then she looked her mother straight in the face, and Lucille would never forget that look, a look on her daughter's face she'd never seen before, loneliness and pride, shyness and fierceness combined. "But I like him. He seems nice. I don't want him called a bum any more."

"Well, homeless, anyway," said Lucille. Her own stubbornness wouldn't allow her to back down completely.

"Not any longer," said Judy, and it was settled.

They explained it to Ray that night at the supper table. They told him they wanted to have a talk, and Lucille noted his reaction, like all the perps she'd seen in court about to have judgment passed, a "nothing good could come of this" look, grayness and sweaty resignation. But he did perk right up when the news turned out good.

"Well," he said, pleased as punch to look at him. "Well. I'll try to make myself useful."

"You'll want to be looking for work," Lucille said, it coming out sharper than she'd intended. "We won't charge you rent for that back room there right off. When you've got a job, we'll talk terms."

"That's fair," said Ray solemnly. "That's only right."

"Meanwhile, you're welcome," said Judy, reproachfully friendly. "Let's not spoil things right off, talking money when we've just made friends." And with that it was settled.

They settled into a routine right off, like he'd been living there for years. Every morning, they'd share breakfast, and then Judy would head off to work. Ray would do some fix-it chores in the morning, then Lucille would drive him in to the employment office. He figured out the bus system pretty quick and was able to make it to job interviews, grab himself

some lunch with the five Judy gave him before she left. Lucille would stay home, catch up on housework and the ongoing cases on *Court TV*—she couldn't abide soaps or game shows, though she did have a lingering weakness for Sally Jessy Raphael. Evenings, they'd sit in the living room and chat, maybe watch some TV or rent a movie or pass the time playing Scrabble or Yahtzee.

The rest of the week passed like that. Sunday, Ray put on the suit Judy'd found for him at DI, and sat solemnly with them through the whole block of meetings, all three hours. In Sunday School, when Brother Kerr asked newcomers to stand up and introduce themselves, Lucille kept it simple: "This is our friend, Ray Ames, who's staying with us for the time being." That was all that needed saying, she figured; and when Clarice Bowman and Verna Lundquist came up to her after Relief Society full of questions, she put 'em off, saying "Ray's an old friend. We're just helping him through a rough patch." Ada Springfell, she avoided altogether.

By Wednesday of the next week, Ray had a job. LaRue's, a new place in town that sold reconditioned vacuum cleaners and sewing machines and blenders, needed a part-time repairman. They gave Ray a week's trial. Ten to two, five days a week was all, and they didn't pay much above minimum wage, but it was enough, a start, and a job that had the promise of working into full-time down the road. Ray insisted that he pay for his keep, and Judy and Lucille, after some negotiating between them, agreed to charge him fifty bucks a week.

Not all at once, never one whole evening devoted to it, but a story or a detail or an off-hand remark at a time, Ray told them about being homeless, what it was like. Always kept pretty calm, too, no big sobbing scenes like you'd see folks do in movies, weeping on a psychiatrist's couch, but also not quite conversational. There'd be a kind of tension in him; you could see it in his shoulders. Or he'd look at his hands, play with the rubber band from the evening paper. Telling them what his life had been before.

He told them how you could call a pizza place and order a delivery for some address picked at random from the phone book; the restaurant would call before attempting delivery, and often as not, the pizza would end up in their dumpster at the end of the night in pretty good shape, sometimes even still in the box. McDonald's was bad that way; you hardly ever could find a decent meal from their dumpster. He told how to hitch a ride. Off-ramps were okay for panhandling, but on-ramps were useless for

travel or charity. And you were better off thumbing rides from crummy looking cars or pickups with a single driver, male. Semis wouldn't pull over for you, but you could sometimes get a ride if you approached the driver just right at a truck stop. He talked about the whole alphabet soup of agencies you could get help from—local, state, and federal—and how you could tell just looking at your case worker how much you were likely to get from her, just the way she'd part her hair sometimes, or how she'd wear her glasses.

When they got to know him a little better, the stories became shabbier—truer, Lucille thought, and a good thing, showing he trusts us. He told about how you could get a Coke machine to give you a free pop sometimes, if you kicked it just right, and about how you always wanted to take a shower and get your clothes washed first if you planned to shoplift, otherwise they'd watch you too close. He told about getting busted for vagrancy, and how it wasn't so bad, getting your three squares and a bed with a mattress, and how some places they'd fine you for it, which made all kinds of sense, fining homeless beggars for vagrancy. You never paid the fine, he said, even when the alternative was a road crew. He didn't mind chopping weeds or picking up litter, when at the end of it was a hot meal. And one evening, they watched a movie set in a prison, one about an innocent banker who escaped out through the sewage system.

It was Ray's choice; he must have had a need to talk about things that night, Lucille figured. And afterwards in the semi-dark, Ray told them about jail. It was true, he said, how you had to be careful in the lock-up shower. You had to try to stay away from groups of two or three showering together. They'd gang up, one to hold you face down on the shower floor and one to spread your butt cheeks apart and one to take his pleasure. All the while, Ray's voice a soft buzz in the semi-darkness from back in the corner of the couch with the floor lamp turned off. And Lucille remembered the blood she'd seen on his underwear, and something else too; how Judy had caught him buying Kotex at the store and thought it was weird, kind of an unbelievably personal sort of thing to give a girl you really hardly knew.

A tough evening for all of them, that night Ray told about the guys in the shower. As far as Judy knew, that was the turning point; it was that evening she kept referring to as the time it all started to happen, when he trusted them enough to tell something so awful. It made sense to her that after that night, he would begin to look around him more, start to really

listen to Judy's attempts to explain the Church to him, and be willing to take the missionary lessons. Began to look at her differently as well, begin to appreciate her better qualities. After that night Judy noted a kind of courtliness in his behavior, an extra politeness and courtesy, quite the Southern gentleman in fact, though really he was always polite. The evening threesomes became more of a twosome, with Lucille not exactly shut out, but definitely moving out toward the conversational outskirts. Ray and Judy took in a movie now and again, and some evenings they'd leave Lucille to her TV and go out for ice cream. And Ray always paid, said Judy, insisted on it, though Judy made eight times the money he took home from LaRue's.

One night, Lucille came home from homemaking meeting—she still couldn't bring herself to call it "enrichment"—Judy hadn't wanted to go, Lucille noted sourly—and coming up the walk, looking in the window, saw the two of them kissing on the sofa. She stood outside and watched for a moment. There it was, Ray and Judy kissing. Lucille stood there, knowing what was going to happen. It wouldn't be long, she thought. There'd be a proposal from Ray, and a wedding to plan. Forty-three years old, Judy was still just young enough that grandchildren weren't completely impossible.

If I could be sure, Lucille thought, if I could be sure that this was really what it looked like, what Judy certainly thought it was, I'd be easy in my mind. She'd deed the house over to them, move out and get a condo, or move in with Verna Lundquist the way Verna'd been hinting at. Lucille and Judy were comfortable together; it would hurt to lose her. Ray and Judy's increasing closeness already hurt, the third-wheel evenings and conversations and games. But she was seventy-one. Judy deserved better than a spinster life alone with her mom. If only Ray was for real, Lucille could take him supplanting her. But Lucille knew things that Judy didn't.

Two days before the breakthrough, two days before he'd told them the shower story, he hadn't gotten up in the morning. He was probably just under the weather, Lucille had told Judy at breakfast. He had the sniffles last night, you recall. Judy had nodded, accepted it, told her mom to call her if Ray needed for her to bring home some Sudafed from work. "He doesn't go to work before ten," Lucille had said. "I'll get him up in time, drive him in if I need to. Let the poor man have his rest."

She'd gone down the hall to his room. She could smell it, acrid sweet—she remembered it so well from the times she'd done night

court—coming through the door. Heard some thrashing around and knew what it was.

She'd opened the door, and there he was, the room a shambles, vomit all over the bed and the floor and in his hair and down his chest. An empty bottle of Absolut vodka on the floor. Ray half off the bed, legs tangled up in the sheets, trying, half-conscious, to get his foot free.

She'd called him in sick at LaRue's; that was the first thing. She'd saved his job for him, wondering all the time if it was worth it. She'd gotten him up, standing, weaving, on his feet, stupid rictus smile on his face, eyes shifting around. She'd gotten him into the shower and turned it on cold, stood by the tub and gave him a shove every time he tried to get out, even knocked him off his feet a couple times, he was so far gone, stripped him naked while he stood there cussing at her, using words she'd figured she'd never hear again when she retired from the court system. She took his clothes, dripping wet but with the worst of the vomit off, and got the sheets and pillow case and started a load in the washing machine. She made him stand naked in the shower while she took care of the room, went in once and saw he'd barfed in there too and she'd had to clean that up. She got in the car and drove down to Smith's, avoiding Albertson's where she might run into Judy, wondering if he'd still be there when she got back but figuring he probably wasn't in shape to go anywhere else. She'd bought some instant coffee for the first time in her life, and rented one of their carpet cleaning machines, and bought some strong Lysol spray and a bottle of Pinesol.

When she got home, he was still in the bathroom, wet and naked, shaking and pale, sitting on the edge of the tub. She got him some clean clothes from his room, and told him to get dressed, wait for her in the kitchen, got him some coffee. She cleaned up his room best she could, made one pile for the washing machine and another pile to throw out, and ran the carpet cleaner over the carpet. Scrubbed the walls with the Pinesol. He'd wet the bed too, and it took her awhile to wrestle the mattress off the bed, scrubbed the wet spots with the Pinesol, propped it up against the wall to dry off. Sprayed the room with Lysol, the bathroom too. Then went out to the kitchen. Ray sat at the table, sick and pale and shaky, couldn't meet her eyes. It took both hands to hold the coffee mug. She sat across the table from him, smacked the vodka bottle on the table between them.

"Ray," she said to him, "we need to have us a talk."

"I know," he said, so low she could hardly hear it. "I know." He couldn't finish, bowed his head, tears dripping down, the very picture of drunken self-pity, and how often had she seen that in her days?

"We don't have time for that," she said impatiently. "I don't want to hear it. I don't feel sorry for you. Why should you get to feel sorry for yourself?"

"You don't know," he said. "You don't know what I've been through."

She shook her head. "I'm not interested in excuses, Ray," she told him. "Don't have time for 'em."

He didn't seem to know what to say. He shook his head, kept making these little sideways glances at the bottle, took another sip of coffee. "I don't know," he said.

She bored in. "I want to know what you're going to do. Head back down the highway? Like you want to?"

"I want to stay here," he said.

"Which do you want more?" she asked, knowing he'd tell her what she wanted to hear, wondering if he even knew.

And so he said all the right things that morning in her kitchen, made all the right promises. They agreed not to tell Judy, keep the whole thing their secret. He made the most solemn oaths that he'd never drink again, not even a beer, not even Nyquil for a cold. He was done with it, he said, totally, completely, once and for all. She picked up the phone and made a couple of phone calls to old friends in the system, found out where AA met and when. Turned out they had an afternoon meeting, and she drove him down to it, picked him up after. Got his room back in shape by the time Judy came home, and listened while Ray told her at dinner all about his nasty cold, but how he felt a lot better now, thanks. And then watched Ray at the bus stop as he went to work the next morning.

And now it had been four months, and now Ray and Judy were engaged, and now they sat in the living room, making plans and recounting miracles. A couple. Ray's baptism was scheduled for a week from then, the wedding the week following. The bishop was thrilled for them and would do the wedding in the chapel and let them have the cultural hall for a reception afterwards, and Verna Lundquist was making a wedding dress for Judy and only charging her for the material, and Clarice Bowman said she'd bake and decorate the cake—she'd taken a class. And even Ada Springfell had said she was happy for them, forcing pleasantries through

tight lips like it hurt. Judy was even talking about kids—she'd been to the doctor and he'd said it was risky, but she still could, if they hurried. Ray was full-time now at LaRue's, and with a nice raise. Lucille sat, and watched them, and did her needlepoint and wondered. Judy knew by now that Ray was an alcoholic—she went with him to AA meetings and had gotten involved in Al-Anon, though his complete sobriety since meeting her was part of their shared story, myth shaping into legend. And, for now, at least, the plan was that Lucille would continue to be with them, that they'd remain a threesome in the house. Lucille agreed to give them the master bedroom; she'd take Ray's old room, she said. It was comfortable enough for her.

It had happened twice more, two more falls off the wagon, two more bouts of six-pack flu Judy didn't know about. All the amusing terms for it—"getting a buzz on, two sheets to the wind, hair of the dog that bit me"—humorous terms for episodes of betrayal and weakness and defeat. And promises, and vows to do better. Promises that were sincere enough at the time he made them, Lucille thought. Basically, Ray was doing okay. Only three times in three months—it was real progress, basically, considering where he'd come from and what he'd been. And Judy still didn't know—there's a real miracle for you, Lucille thought sourly. What Judy figured was that Ray was susceptible to sudden bouts of illness, hardly surprising considering his years on the street, and that a day's rest made him much better. Lucille was not about to tell her different. Though it was gonna be hard to hide when the two of them shared a bedroom.

But he'd quit for good by then; he'd told her so himself. And maybe that was true, too, like all the other miracles. Maybe this is what salvation looked like, small steps forward and back, not a sudden leap to some place new. Maybe it's like God giving you a jump-start every now and then, when you need one, knowing your battery's still faulty, but getting you away from there to a place where you can take care of it.

She was willing to believe that anyway, she thought. Willing to help shape the story the way Judy believed it. She could take being supplanted, if what replaced her was real and good. She was content with it, she thought. It was all right with her. Maybe it was possible. Maybe Judy's belief in the whole Ray story and the whole Ray miracle would be enough to sustain it. But looking at Judy, her daughter, sitting there with Ray, her fiancé, reminded Lucille once again just how high the stakes were, and just how much she was gambling.