

# Acute Distress, Intensive Care

*Karen Rosenbaum*

Barb's dying, Carma thinks, and she steadies herself against the chest of drawers as Dan, kneeling beside his sister's bed, strokes Barb's face. Barb's head seems to be rocking slightly on the pillow. Her eyes are closed, her mouth open.

"Sis?" Dan asks. "Barb, what's wrong?" He turns and speaks over his shoulder. "She's on fire. Come feel."

But instead, Carma leaves her cane in the hall and brings wet washcloths from the bathroom, ice cubes in a dishtowel from the kitchen downstairs. She steps unsteadily around Barb's awful dachshund Buddy, who whimpers and paces at the foot of the bed.

"I'll call 911," Carma says.

Barb's eyes open wide. For an instant she looks at them in terror, then shuts her eyes and smiles. "Danny," she sighs. "You've come."

Carma brings juice from the refrigerator, a straw from the cupboard. Dan holds Barb's head so she can take little sips. Carma reaches for the phone on the nightstand.

"Wait," Dan says. "Sis? Do you know what's wrong? Can we call your doctor?"

Barb dribbles a little yellow juice down her chin. "I don't want," she has to breathe between words, "you to call anyone." Her voice is barely audible. "Don't."

"How long have you been sick?" Dan asks. "Where do you hurt?"

"Buddy," she pants. "Carma, could you feed him?"

Next to the doggy door between the kitchen and the deck are two empty bowls, orange and blue. Carma puts water in one. While she looks through the cupboard for something to put into the other, she hears Buddy slurping. Barb is very, very sick, Carma thinks, or she would have fallen down the stairs to feed Buddy. She loves that dog more than almost anyone, certainly more than the neighbors

who, last year, circulated a petition about his barking and biting. Carma glances at the ashtray and the pack of cigarettes on the table. But Barb doesn't love him more than cigarettes. Buddy has asthma and wheezes all the time, and the vet has suggested that if Barb didn't smoke around him, maybe he wouldn't need all that medicine. There are two trays of prescription bottles next to the cigarettes, one for Buddy, one for Barb—hers probably for depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, maybe back pain—her usual complaints.

Dan is at the kitchen door. "I'll take care of the dog," he says. "She wants you to help her clean up."

"She needs a hospital," Carma whispers. "Call an ambulance."

Dan shakes his head. "That would just alarm her. She asked specifically that we not call an ambulance."

Carma sighs. "At least call Amy. Maybe she's talked to her mom. She probably knows her doctor at least. Here." She takes her phone from her purse. "Amy. Here."

"Amy lives more than an hour away."

"Call her. Please. And call Grace and tell her we aren't sure now when we'll see them."

Barb is breathing heavily, inhaling with a kind of gulp. It smells bad in here, Carma thinks, and she finds a small plastic tub under the bathroom sink and fills it with warm water. She sets it on a chair next to her sister-in-law's bed and brings in an armload of washcloths and towels.

"Carma," Barb says slowly, "I need a clean gown."

I know how to do this, Carma says to herself. When she could hardly move, the months after Grace's birth and then Sophie's and the surgeries and all those other times, the home nurse would do then what she will do now. She pushes up the sleeves of her pullover and takes a deep breath. She rolls Barb gently towards the center of the bed, pulls off the soiled gown, washes Barb's body and the bottom sheet too, best she can, towels her dry, works a big dry towel under her, and maneuvers arms and head into a fresh kimono she finds in the closet. On Barb's right rump is an astonishing tattoo of a vermillion-throated hummingbird. Who would have guessed?

"Carma," Barb says when she has finished. Her eyes are intent now. Her eyes seem to say, "You know what's going to happen, don't you?"

And Carma does know.

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Carma and Dan had no warning. They drove the rental car straight to Barb's house from the Salt Lake airport, planning to take Dan's sister to lunch before setting off to Provo to see Grace and Ryan and darling Bradley and the new baby. Buddy greeted them with agitated howls when they rang the bell and finally pushed open the unlocked front door. There was no answer to their calls, and Dan had bolted up the stairs to the bedroom.

Two, no, three days ago they'd phoned her from California, set up the lunch date. Barb sounded fine then. Well, as fine as she had sounded in the past five years. Ever since the divorce, she'd been so deflated, as if all her energy were whistling out through a little leak somewhere. But she'd planned to drive down to Provo with Amy for the baby blessing on Sunday.

Barb needs more than a winter job, Dan often says, though he doesn't consider renting out skis at Alta a real job. Summers, she's on call for vacation replacement and sales weekends at a Salt Lake sporting goods store. That jerk she was married to did agree to a handsome enough settlement so she can work when she wants to, and the house, with its crumbling basement floors and unreliable air conditioner, is in her name.

"Left a message for Amy," Dan says when Carma returns to the kitchen. "And Grace says to let her know what's happening."

"Dan," she says. "Your sister is really sick. We have to get her to a hospital. You and I can't carry her out to the car. She can't sit in a waiting room. We have to call an ambulance."

"I don't want to," Dan says. "Not when she doesn't want it."

"We'll have to stay with her every minute," Carma urges. "We'll have to take care of her and we don't know how."

Dan squeezes his temples with his left hand. "Okay," he says at last. "But tell them no sirens."

Carma tells them no sirens, and the ambulance comes quietly, but two fire trucks spot and join the action, and the blare might resurrect the dead. Out the window, Carma can see the cul-de-sac crammed with vehicles, and several big uniformed men are suddenly at the door. She scoops up Buddy, oddly subdued, and shuts him in the laundry room. He immediately starts to yelp.

Barb looks betrayed, but a little relieved, too. The paramedics

have her propped up and are doing an oxygen thumb test and taking her temperature. “How old are you?” the one with a laptop asks.

“Forty-five,” Barb says. Add three years, thinks Carma.

“Do you smoke?”

Barb has to catch her breath. “Used to,” she says.

“How long ago did you stop?”

Barb shrugs. “A couple of weeks?” presses the paramedic.

Barb closes her eyes and nods.

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In the curtained-off cubby at the ER, the only thing to sit on is the doctor’s wheeled stool, so Carma pushes it close to the bed and takes hold of Barb’s limp hand. Dan is in the hall, talking to Amy on the phone. Barb’s bed has been raised to a half-sitting position, and she looks pretty in the clean kimono. She is connected to a black box and a transparent bag and oxygen. Every few seconds something beeps, and numbers change on the black box. A fan pulses somewhere.

“I’m keeping you,” Barb’s voice quavers, “from seeing the baby.”

“Don’t worry,” Carma says. “We’ll get there.”

“I forgot,” Barb pauses to breathe, “her name.”

“Camilla. They call her Cammy.”

Barb closes her eyes, exhales as if through mud. “Like Carma.”

“Kind of.”

Dan touches his sister’s arm. “Amy is on her way,” he says.

A doctor hustles in, stands at the foot of the bed. “You, my lady,” he announces to Barb, “have full-blown pneumonia. We’re finding you a room.”

Barb makes a face. “What,” she whispers, “about Buddy?”

“That magnet on the fridge,” Dan says, “that’s the kennel you used when you went on that cruise?”

“He liked it there,” Barb murmurs.

“We’ll take him after they have you settled.”

“You,” a weak cough, “don’t have to stay.”

“We’ll stay until Amy comes.” Dan squeezes Barb’s shoulder.

Carma nods. Suddenly she feels very hungry. It has been a long time since breakfast. And a hymn is pounding in her head—one they used to sing in church. “Master, the Tempest Is Raging.” She doesn’t know if they still sing it. “Whether the wrath of the storm-

tossed sea,” BUM bum bum, BUM bum bum, “demons or men or whatever it be . . .” a sort of bass chant underlining the beeping machines and the wheeled whooshes in the hallway and Dan’s soft words to his sister.

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Camilla is silky and pink and smells like talc. Grace places her into Carma’s arms, and Carma kisses the reddish fuzz on her granddaughter’s scalp. Bradley is opening the presents they brought him, board books and a quilted birdhouse filled with small stuffed birds. Pushed forward by his mother, he takes hold of Carma’s knee. “Thank you, Gamma,” he says. “Can I play with this?” He has appropriated Carma’s flowered purple cane, which is taller than he is. He clearly prefers it to the birdhouse.

His other grandmother, who lives just a few miles away, is Nana, the number one grandma. It is she who has been spoiling Bradley and helping with laundry and filling up the fridge with food. Knowing of the arrival of the less robust grandmother today, the church ladies have brought over dinner, and Ryan has stuck it into the oven to reheat. Lasagna, by the smell of it. Carma and Dan are ravenous, having eaten nothing all day but a couple of breakfast bars Carma had stowed in her purse.

“So Aunt Barb has pneumonia.” Grace moves Ryan’s books and laptop to the couch and sets forks and knives on the table. She is wearing black capris and, Carma notices, has already lost most of her baby fat.

“I’m sure it’s worse,” says Ryan, “for someone who has smoked so long.” He talks out of one side of his mouth; in the other he chomps on a baby carrot as if it were a cigar.

“If she lived in the Bay Area,” Dan says, “she wouldn’t still smoke. You should see the smokers on their break when it rains. They have to be so many yards from the doorways of buildings. They skulk around trying to find a place to keep dry.”

Carma wiggles Cammy’s tiny toes. “I can picture Barb smoking and skulking,” she says.

“Barb only smokes to show Utahns that she isn’t a Mormon anymore.” Dan is on the floor now, teasing Bradley, who is still wound around Carma’s cane. “Amy has been after her for years to stop.”

Carma catches Grace’s sidelong glance at Ryan. Carma, too,

isn't a Mormon anymore. But she's about as likely to start smoking as she is to take up glacier-scrambling.

"Sophie calls you often?" Carma makes it a question and an answer. She suddenly thinks—and my younger daughter isn't a Mormon anymore either. And maybe that's my doing.

"She calls Wednesday afternoons," Grace says. "She doesn't have classes then. I think she's a little lonely. But she's pretty absorbed in school. She has a small part in a play, I forget its name. And Manhattan, well, she says there's always more to do than there's time."

"It's *The Cherry Orchard*," Dan says. "She usually calls us Saturday mornings while she's doing her laundry. Or we call her. Let's call her now." He extracts the cane from Bradley's grasp and tousles his hair. "We can give her a first-hand account of her new niece." He winks at Bradley. "And, of course, her old nephew."

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They are staying at a motel. Carma insisted. Everyone will sleep better. Otherwise Grace and Ryan would be on an air mattress in the living room, next to the baby's crib, and she and Dan would be in their bed, and everyone would be using one bathroom, and to take a shower, you'd have to take all the rubber toys out of the tub. Besides, she gets up a couple of times in the night, and on their last trip she stumbled and cried out and woke everyone, even Bradley in his tiny bedroom.

But Carma and Dan don't sleep well at the motel either. About five a.m., Amy telephones. "Mom's taken a turn for the worse," she says. "She's in ICU. Her fever spiked to 105. They have this bipap mask on her to give her more oxygen." Amy has spent the whole night there, catching naps on a couch in a small waiting room.

"We'll make it there in an hour and a half," says Dan, and they almost do.

Barb can't talk because of the plastic mask. She seems to be dozing, but she looks up when Dan presses her arm, the arm that isn't connected to the IVs. She seems somewhat lost, scared. Instead of the pretty kimono, she is wearing an ugly white-with-blue-diamonds hospital gown.

"Why don't you go back to your mom's?" Carma says to Amy. "Get some sleep. We'll be here." Amy nods. "And eat something," Carma adds.

“Would you like me to give you a blessing?” Dan asks Barb. She seems to bob her head. “There’s probably someone who can help me,” he whispers to Carma. “I saw a chaplain’s office on the first floor, next to all that St. Whosits stuff. Even in an Episcopalian Hospital, there must be Mormons around. This is Utah, after all.”

Carma takes his chair when he leaves it. She holds Barb’s hand. “The baby looks like Sophie, I think,” she says. “Sophie with reddish hair.” Will Cammy be docile and tranquil like Grace? Or uninhibited, impatient like Sophie? Sophie’s a dotting aunt though, makes a big fuss over Bradley when they’re all together. Carma smiles at Barb, whose gaze drifts around the room. Then Barb lifts her other hand, the one attached to the arm encumbered by tubes, raises her hand to her face. Her fingers are separated, and she moves her hand back and forth. She is smoking, Carma realizes, an imaginary cigarette.

Dan returns with a short, bearded man in Levis and a sweat-shirt. “My wife Carma,” he says, “and,” motioning to the bed, “my sister Barbara. This is Ray. He’s the chaplain. Mormon chaplain.” Dan takes a small vial of oil from Ray and puts a drop on Barb’s head. Barb looks a little alarmed, so Carma squeezes her hand harder and tries to look reassuring. The two men cover the oil with their crossed hands and close their eyes. Carma realizes Barb might be wondering what they are doing to her hair, to her head. The last time men put their hands on Barb’s head like that, she was probably eight years old, after she’d been baptized. Sometimes, like when she has surgery, Carma lets Dan put oil and his hands on her own head. It makes him feel better.

“If it be thy will,” Dan is saying, “restore sweet Barbara to health.”

If there is a God, Carma thinks, whom does He will to health, to life? How does He decide?

“And give her peace,” Dan is saying. Barb seems to have slid into sleep. Peace, repeats Carma. A-men.

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It’s dark when they get back to Grace’s apartment. Ryan and Bradley have had their dinner—Ryan is off at the library to study for an exam, but Grace puts a different lasagna on the table and eats with her parents. Bradley is allowed to stay up an extra hour so Dan can give him camel rides on his back and so Carma can read

to him and calm him down. Carma holds the baby, changes her diaper, hums a Primary song to her. “‘Give,’ says the little stream,” she remembers, “as it hurries down the hill.”

There is another unsettling phone call in the early morning at the motel. Amy has spent a second night at the hospital. The bipap wasn’t giving Barb enough oxygen; in order to get tubes down her, the doctors put her into a coma. “So there’s no need for you to rush up,” Amy says. “She’s stable and she isn’t really conscious. Every hour they wake her just a little, to prove they can, I guess.” Her voice trembles.

At her daughter’s apartment, Carma makes oatmeal for breakfast. “We’re not much help to you,” she tells Grace, who is nursing the baby.

“You’re a help to Aunt Barb—or anyway Amy. Think how hard it would be for Amy if she had to deal with this by herself.”

“I don’t know. I guess we have to be there. At least your dad has to be there. Maybe I should let him go alone.”

“Mom,” Grace says, “you are a help to Dad.”

This time they don’t hurry so much. They pack sandwiches and fruit. As Dan drives, no faster than the speed limit, Carma finds a classical music station on the radio. She practices her breathing exercises, then rubs Dan’s neck and touches his cheek.

“She’s my little sister,” Dan says. “I should have tried to stay closer to her.”

Carma thinks about, but doesn’t mention, the hummingbird tattoo.

After sending Amy to Barb’s house to sleep, they settle themselves in the hospital room. Barb seems restless, as if she were having bad dreams, as if she hurts. Maybe she does—the tubes must feel awful. That’s why they put her into a coma, isn’t it?

Dan sits, holds Barb’s hand, then stands, then paces. A young Indian doctor appears at the door.

“What’s happening?” Dan asks. The doctor motions them outside. “I am Dr. Gill,” he says, and shakes their hands. He looks at Carma’s cane.

“R.A.,” she answers the question his eyes ask. “Can she hear us?”

“Perhaps on some level,” the doctor says in precisely enunciated English. “She is agitated.”

“Maybe it’s nicotine withdrawal,” Carma offers. “She smokes a



pack or two a day.”

“Ah,” says the doctor. “We can give her a nicotine patch. Her lungs are like paper.” He clears his throat. “It is more than pneumonia now. It is acute respiratory distress syndrome. We call it ARDS.”

Dan catches his breath. “And the prognosis?”

Dr. Gill raises his thick eyebrows. “About two-thirds of patients with ARDS survive. We will know more in a day or two.” He speaks very softly. “She may have some brain damage. Her blood and her brain have been starved for oxygen. You and her daughter need to talk about the different alternatives.”

“If she pulls through, could she live on her own?” Carma asks. “Could she go back to her home?” She looks over at Dan, whose eyes seem unfocused. “Her house has stairs.”

The doctor sighs. “If she recovers enough to leave here, I would guess she would have to stay several months at a rehabilitation center or an assisted living facility, maybe even a nursing home. I cannot imagine her living alone.”

“No cigarettes,” Carma says. “No Buddy. Her dog,” she explains to the doctor, “her dreadful little dog.”

Amy returns to the hospital in the middle of the afternoon. She has washed her hair and put on one of Barb’s bright blue sweaters. She’s older than Sophie, younger than Grace, not as pretty as either one, Carma thinks, but she has luminous skin and a sensual awareness that her cousins lack. She has a will to do well that she didn’t seem to inherit from her mom or dad. She was raised in a religion-free home, one of the few things her parents came to agree on. She’s a court reporter in Ogden, types on those little machines, makes a much better salary than Carma, even if Carma were still a full-time social worker.

While Amy and Dan go to the chaplain’s office, Carma stays with Barb, whose mouth is stretched out of shape by the cruel tube. She seems calmer now that she is sporting a nicotine patch. If they could have got her to wear one of those before—Carma takes a motel bottle of lotion out of her purse, pours some into her palm, and massages it into Barb’s hands and feet. “There is a balm,” Carma hums, then sings, “in Gilead, to make the wounded whole.”

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“I don’t know what to do, Aunt Carma,” Amy says. They lean

back on a couch in the little waiting room. Carma has taken off her rocker-bottom shoes and put her feet up on the coffee table. In the ICU room, Dan is reading to his unconscious sister. He found a copy of Winnie the Pooh in the gift shop. It was once her favorite book.

“That chaplain made me feel as if I were a murderer just thinking about disconnecting Mom from all that crap.” Amy shakes her head. “How she’d hate being tied down with tubes.”

“She would,” Carma agrees.

“And even if she gets so she can breathe on her own, with just one of those tanks—I know she’d rather die.”

She didn’t seem too fond of life before, Carma thinks, but doesn’t say.

“She wouldn’t have hesitated to pull the plug on her mother.” Amy stops. “But she didn’t have to. Even if Grandma hadn’t died in the ambulance, Grandpa would’ve had to make the decision.” She closes her eyes and breathes in. “Did Uncle Dan tell you we’ve decided not to tell Grandpa?”

“That’s wise. He probably wouldn’t remember ten minutes after. And if he did remember, he’d cry.”

“They hardly even talked,” Amy says. “What did he do to her anyway, to make her dislike him so much?”

Carma resettles herself on the couch. “I don’t know that he did anything. But he wanted for her to come back to church.”

“To be saved,” Amy says.

“Well—to have a better life than she was having.”

“What do you think about this being saved business?” Amy looks at her narrowly. “You aren’t going to be saved, are you?”

“Guess not,” says Carma.

“But you live like a Mormon,” says Amy. “You don’t drink alcohol, you don’t even drink coffee, do you?”

“Oh,” says Carma wryly, “is that what being a Mormon is?”

“Well—more than that. I guess you’re supposed to go to church and to the temple.”

“And believe,” Carma adds softly.

“Ah, yes,” Amy says, “and believe. Sometimes I think Mom believes—at least a little. Not the Joseph Smith thing, but at least God and Jesus and heaven. And I think she thought she was a sinner.” Amy puts her feet up on the coffee table next to Carma’s. “Do you think she was? And why did I just use the past tense?”

“She’s not a sinner,” Carma says. “I think if I believed, though, I would try to follow all the rules. I’ve always been in awe of people who have faith but don’t follow the rules.”

“If only she hadn’t smoked,” Amy says. “I used to tell her, ‘Look, I know you won’t quit for me, but how about for Buddy?’ She wouldn’t even quit for Buddy.”

“That’s the definition of addiction.”

“Some addicts quit. She just gave up, caved in. Look at you—you have that awful rheumatoid arthritis, and you don’t give up.”

“It comes and goes, you know. Sometimes I want to give up.”

“But you don’t.”

“No. I guess not.” But I’ve got a husband, Carma thinks, who really did marry me for a bit better and a lot worse. She pats Amy’s hand. “Do you ever see your dad?”

Amy harrumphs. “More than she sees her dad. Couple times of year, something sparks his guilt, and he calls and comes up to take me out to lunch.”

“He still lives here then, in Salt Lake?”

Amy nods. “Want another kid?” she asks. “I’m up for adoption.”

Carma reaches over and hugs her. “We’ll take you,” she says.

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Because Barb is no better the next day, the prognosis is worse. The machines are keeping her alive—not exactly alive, Carma thinks, but they are breathing for her and keeping her heart beating. Carma takes the elevator down and knocks on the chaplain’s open door. “What right do you have,” she says evenly, “to make our niece feel guilty about stopping life support?”

The chaplain looks dazed. “We just want them to see all sides,” he says at last. “Her mother didn’t leave very clear instructions.”

“That girl,” Carma says, “has been the most responsible adult in her family since she was fourteen.” She punctuates her sentences with her cane, which seems to intimidate him. “Don’t you think she knows what her mother would want? Don’t you think she knows what her mother is capable of?”

He says nothing. “You talk to her again,” Carma says. “You tell her you’re sorry you have made her even more miserable. You tell her that you know she loves her mother and knows what is best for her.”

He apparently does it. The following day, Dan and Amy sign

some papers, and Dan and the chaplain, both wearing Levis and golf shirts, give Barb another blessing, one that thanks her for her love and her generous spirit and gives her permission to go. A few seconds after the nurse detaches the oxygen, Barb gasps and is gone. “Goodbye, Sis,” Dan says, and he breaks down and weeps. Then he remembers Amy and he holds her as she sobs. Carma watches them and swallows her own tears. And Barb—she doesn’t look peaceful exactly, but at least her mouth isn’t all distended and sad. It didn’t seem that her spirit left the second she died—it seemed to leave before that. It had been leaving for years maybe. Carma touches Barb’s hand, already cold. She kisses Barb’s cheek.

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Two of Amy’s friends have come down from Ogden—Luke and Ellen—a nice young tanned couple from her hiking group. Her high school pals Susan and Jill have been waiting out in the hall. They flank Amy on the couch in the little waiting room. “What makes me feel so bad,” Amy tells them, “is that the only part of her they can use is her corneas. Nothing else was good enough.”

“A cornea is a huge gift if you need one,” says Susan, unbuckling her sandals and settling herself into a lotus position. She smiles at Carma, sunk into an overstuffed chair by the door. Dan is out in the hall talking to Sophie on his phone.

Barb’s body is to be cremated, her ashes—Amy doesn’t know yet. Maybe she’ll scatter them someplace, maybe Millcreek Canyon, maybe Alta. There will be a get-together, a small one, at the house. In about two weeks, or three. Dan and Carma will fly back. Barb’s ski bum friends, some of her cousins from Logan, Amy’s own friends will come. And Grace and Ryan. “And the kids,” Amy says. “Then I can see the baby. You don’t mind if I don’t drive down on Sunday for that blessing ceremony? I can see Grace and the kids at the open house.” Carma nods to signal of course.

What to do with the house? She’ll have to decide. Buddy? “No one who knows him will want him,” says Amy.

“Maybe we can donate him,” Luke grins, “to a research lab.”

“Craig’s List,” says Ellen. “We’ll write a killer ad.”

Susan and Jill insist Amy stay in Jill’s apartment for the night, as many nights as she wants, Jill says. Amy agrees.

Dan slips back into the waiting room. He reaches down into

Carma's chair to lift her to her feet and puts her cane in her right hand. When Amy hugs them, her eyes fill with tears. "We'll come back tomorrow," Dan says.

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Just Dan comes back. It's a bad night for both of them, but in the morning, Carma can hardly move. Her knees and ankles throb. Dan takes her to Grace's and insists she lie down on the couch. He puts an orange afghan over her legs. Bradley sidles up to her. "Will you watch my programs with me, Gamma?"

"Sure," she says and waves goodbye to Dan. Sometimes she laughs when Bradley laughs, sometimes she hears his programs and his whining and the baby's fussing and Grace's cooing through a haze, sometimes she sleeps. "I'm sorry you feel so crummy," Grace says to Carma, "but it's great to have you here, all to myself."

Carma pushes her head up to the arm of the couch. "You're a natural mother," she says, "something I could never be."

Grace smiles. "You don't think we should postpone the blessing tomorrow, do you?"

"Of course not," Carma says. "That's what allows us to accept death. Life. Babies."

"We won't be able to think of Cammy's blessing without remembering Aunt Barb dying."

Carma sits up straighter on the couch. "We won't be able to think of Barb dying without remembering Cammy's blessing."

"Touché," says Grace.

Dan is back by supper, minestrone someone from the church made, and Carma thinks it tastes wonderful. Dan usually gives up dinner the evening before Fast Sunday, but neither he nor Ryan suggests that tonight. Carma and Dan leave early for the motel, and this night is different from all the preceding nights: they sleep.

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Carma and Dan meet Grace and Ryan and the kids at the church—they won't all fit into either of their cars. They slide into a side pew halfway down the chapel aisle: Carma and Bradley, who has taken possession again of Carma's cane, next to the wall; the baby, now sleeping, in a ruffled carrier on the floor beside Grace. In the pew in front of them, Ryan's parents and one of his brothers

and his family stand up and greet them and offer hands to shake and cheeks to kiss. “We’re so sorry,” Ryan’s mother whispers, “about your sister.” Ryan’s nieces run to look at the baby. Into the pew behind them file more of Ryan’s family, another brother and his brood. Everyone settles down just before the meeting begins. The opening hymn is “Master, the Tempest Is Raging.” The organist misses a few chords, but the congregation enthusiastically belts out both the “Storm-tossed sea” and the “Peace, be still.”

The major item of ward business, it appears, is the blessing of their baby. Grace takes sleeping Cammy out of the carrier and carefully places her in Ryan’s outstretched arms. He and Dan and Ryan’s father and brothers walk down the aisle to the front of the chapel, assorted men joining them from their seats in the congregation or on the stand. Carma hopes the baby stays asleep. It would be terrifying to wake up surrounded by so many big men in dark suits. It’s good that Sophie is in New York. She would be outraged that Grace isn’t allowed in the circle. No women. When Dan asked Sophie why she couldn’t at least stay in the Church until she was twenty-one, she said, “Women aren’t welcome. Women aren’t important.”

This isn’t what went wrong for Carma. Carma doesn’t remember ever wanting the priesthood that the men have, and she certainly doesn’t want it now. But she has told Sophie that she believes that it would be better if everyone who wanted the priesthood could have it. “Do you want it?” she asked Sophie once. “Well, sure,” Sophie had said. But Carma doesn’t believe her.

Ryan begins. “By the authority,” he says, “of the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood, which we hold, we give this child a name and a blessing. The name by which she shall be known on the records of the church is Camilla Barbara Gibson.”

Carma lurches in her seat. She can see Dan’s face, eyes shut, tears leaking out. The men’s shoulders all move slightly as they bounce the sleeping baby.

Ryan says nice things about what he and Grace hope for Camilla—that she will be blessed with health—no autoimmune diseases, no addictive tendencies, thinks Carma—that she will be kind and sensitive to those around her, that she will one day find a young man worthy of her and marry in the temple and have a family of her own. Did Dan say those things when he blessed Grace and Sophie? He must have. That was some years before Carma’s faith failed. And

at both baby blessings, she was too sleep-deprived, too frantic, too ill to pay attention and remember.

The circle disperses, most of the men taking their seats. After Ryan holds Camilla up so the congregation can see her—white, frilly, angelic, and asleep—he struts up the aisle and lays the baby on Grace’s lap and slides in next to her. Grace scoots over next to Carma and Bradley, and Dan takes the seat on the aisle. The chorister leads the congregation in the sacrament hymn. A small army of young boys in white shirts and ties carry the sacrament bread trays up the aisles. Carma doesn’t take the bread even when Bradley looks questioningly at her. In—how many years?—he will be wearing a white shirt and tie and holding a stainless steel tray of bread. By then, he will perhaps understand that only one of his grandmothers is a real Mormon.

As a tall young man kneels to bless the water, Grace whispers to her mother, “That boy’s autistic, but he’s come a long way.” Carma has already noticed him, a beautiful boy with clear, unpimpled skin and a wide cap of curly blond hair. “O God, the Eternal Father,” he begins, “we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this water to the souls of all those who drink of it.” Carma is startled. His voice is not the voice of a teenager mechanically reading a prayer. He is earnest, passionate. For him, it is real. “. . . in remembrance of the blood of thy Son, which was shed for them”—the boy is almost keening—“that they may witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father. . . .”

He is a witness, this boy. He’s almost enough to make one believe. Carma shakes her head just a little. Almost enough, but not quite.

Ryan, then Grace, stand and talk during the testimony-bearing part of the meeting. Each expresses gratitude for the perfect baby, for Bradley, for their parents and siblings. Grace acknowledges the loss of her father’s sister and says they hope to honor her and him by giving her name to Camilla. Others rise and speak. Ryan’s father seems just a little pompous. A woman hiccoughs out a harrowing tale of driving down a steep hill, her baby in the carseat behind her, when the brakes went out. A voice in her ear told her to use the emergency brake. A leggy teenage girl in a very short denim skirt has to bend down to use the microphone. She loves everyone. Her ward friends are way cool.

After the closing prayer, the pews of Gibsons gather up children and bags, exchange pleasantries with local members in the lobby, and head out the doors. Ryan's parents are hosting a family brunch so none of the clan is staying for other meetings. Tonight, Carma and Dan will kiss Grace and Ryan and the children goodbye before the last night at the motel. Tomorrow early, they will touch base with Amy and then fly back to Oakland.

At the end of the parking lot, past the rental car which Carma wouldn't let Dan park in one of the handicapped places, she spots the blonde young man who blessed the water. He stands alone, hands on hips, looking up into a tree. He has shed his suit jacket. His trousers are not quite long enough—his yellow socks an unsettling swath above his black shoes. Carma squints up at the branches that have captured his gaze, but sees nothing, nothing but leaves. Maybe that's all there is.

"Coming?" Dan asks.

She leans lightly on her cane. "Coming," she says.