

A painting of a town with a river and a large building. The scene is viewed from an elevated perspective. In the foreground, a large, multi-story building with a dark blue roof and many windows is prominent. To its right, a river flows through a sandy area. In the background, there are green hills and a blue sky with light clouds. The overall style is impressionistic and colorful.

the
away place

ruth tiger

The Away Place



Ruth Tiger



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Dedication

To Lou and the others who made it out,
and to those who didn't



Acknowledgements

The writing of this book has been a long journey, from tossing around the seeds of the idea on our back deck in Denver in the early 1980s to its fruition many years later. The funny, tragic, and even bizarre events of those with whom my husband and I have worked, and whom we knew and loved, seemed like a story that must be told. Important rights were established for those with disabilities since the 1970s yet it is vital to remember both how far we have come from the days of habitual institutionalization, and that there is still far to go in giving equal opportunities to the most vulnerable among us. This book attempts to give a snapshot into the lives of institutionalized individuals and the life-changing opportunities that occurred when they were integrated into a world they knew nothing about, in John's words, *The Away Place*.

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Chapter 1

Larkspur

The urge to pee woke him. John thought about getting up, but what if the Mean Man was still here? He tugged the sheet down from his face and peered to his left to see if Lonnie was awake yet. The sheet-covered form in the bed next to his was still, as were all the others. A narrow window near the top of the wall was faintly gray. Any minute the wake-up call would come.

Instinctively, John fingered his ear. It was lumpy from all the pulling. The Mean Man was the worst at that. Nurse Julette called it cauliflower ear. She told John she was trying to stop the ward techs from pulling on ears, but they kept doing it anyway, especially when she wasn't there.

Soon the impulse became too powerful. John swung his bad leg over the side of the bed. He stood up slowly, testing to be sure it would bear his weight. Then he tiptoed toward the toilet room, trying not to let the flats of his feet touch the cold floor. He passed the row of beds that lined the white walls on both sides of the sleeping room, each bed containing a white wrapped figure. In the light of the bare bulbs overhead, they

looked like mummies. Everyone, including John, kept the sheets over their eyes to ward off the glaring lights. The techs kept them on all night for safety, they said.

Barney-the-Giant's enormous feet poked out from the end of his bed. John resisted the temptation to tickle them. He knew that Barney-the-Giant would roar awake and that would surely bring the Mean Man running. As he passed Timmy's giant-size crib, John noticed Timmy was already awake, writhing under the covers. Hurrying past, he decided he would stop to talk to Timmy on his way back.

John held himself as he shuffled quickly toward the toilet room, mumbling softly so the Mean Man wouldn't hear, "Gotta pee. Oh, gotta pee bad."

He sat down on his favorite toilet, the one near the wall where he could hang on. The tingle of relief made him sigh. He absently glanced down the row of black-seated toilets that stood out against the white of the tile floor. Just around the corner were the showers. John didn't like them. The drain in the center of the floor sucked the water down, and when he was wet, John had trouble maneuvering this slope. He had fallen more than once and was secretly afraid he might get sucked down the drain. At least that's what the Mean Man had told him once.

John pushed the silver flusher with his foot. Water whooshed down loudly and he cringed. He hoped the Mean Man had his radio turned on loud. John stopped at the clouded mirror above one of the sinks and gazed at his reflection. His hair was getting long, curling over his ears a bit. The barber would probably come this week. John's eyes were slanted, folds of skin partly covering them. Cookie said he looked Chinese. She told him he was a Mongoloid, but John wasn't sure what that meant. He peered at his flat nose then stuck his finger up his nostril. John's tongue was thick and fell out of his mouth as he con-

centrated on exploring. Finding nothing, he swept his hair back from his forehead with his stubby fingers and slurped his tongue back into his mouth. He thought of the Mean Man and quickly headed back to bed to wait for Cookie, his favorite tech, to arrive and waken them. Just as he turned the corner, intently watching his bare feet, he nearly smacked right into Cookie. They both jumped.

“S’cuse me!” she frowned. But John could tell she wasn’t mad. Her brown jiggly face shook reprovingly. She had the biggest cheeks he’d ever seen and tiny black eyes with deep creases around them. Her eyes were smiling behind the frown. “You gotta watch where yer goin’, Johnny boy. I was just comin’ to wake ya’ll.”

“Sowy, Cookie.” He patted her cheek and frowned empathetically. “Me sca’e you?”

She rubbed his shoulder. “Nah, I’m just jumpy.”

“You hab good sweep?” he asked.

“Just dandy, Johnny boy. I always sleep like a baby. And you?”

“Me hab bad dweam.” That always got her sympathy.

“Again?” She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side, her eyebrows scrunching up in the middle.

“Yep. Icky hands pokin’ me.” John wiggled his fingers toward her face in a spooky way.

She pushed him back. “Git outa here. You know I don’t like that stuff.”

“Sowy.” John hugged her then pushed away and looked into her smiling eyes. “Wo’k day t’day?”

“Yes sir, it’s a workday all right. And it’s a special day for you, I heard.”

“My bi’fday?” John’s eyes widened hopefully.

“No, your birthday is in October. It’s only January. Some woman named Sarah something or other is comin’ to talk to

you about some experiment, taking kids out of here. I don't know. Anyway, your name came up and she's going to be here after lunch to see you." Cookie turned John around and patted his butt. "Time to git everybody up around here."

John followed her down the aisle between the rows of beds. He could see her dark skin right through the thin white tech dress. Her short sleeves were tight and her chubby arms bulged out from under them. John had known Cookie ever since he came to Starlight, more Christmases ago than John could count.

Cookie pulled the little bell out of her pocket and handed it to John. "Go ahead, Johnny."

He shook it hard. The mummies sprang to life.

Cookie walked down the aisle and called out the same thing she did every day, "Rise and shine! Up and at 'em you passel of sleepyheads!"

All but two boys scrambled from their sheets and trudged in their pajamas to the toilet room. Timmy lay in his crib, helpless. His arms flailed and he grunted loudly.

Cookie pulled the sheet off Timmy. "Good mornin', Mr. Tim. I'll send Marley back to help you in just a minute."

Oh, good, John thought. *The Mean Man is gone and it's just brown-toothed Marley.*

Timmy grinned up at her. His mouth was open wide and his arms drew back beside his head. He was arched backward uncomfortably, but John knew that's just how his body moved. Timmy couldn't do anything for himself. He was fairly new to their ward. Marley said he was a veggie, but he wasn't. When John talked to him, he could tell Timmy understood. He even talked, though John couldn't always understand him. Cookie didn't believe it.

"Ga man!" Timmy chewed exaggeratedly around the words.

“Him say, good mornin’,” John told Cookie.

“That’s what you tell me,” she said. “Sounds like gibberish to me.” She patted Timmy’s leg and walked on down the aisle.

Timmy’s smile faded as John moved away. John wished he could help him but he had to get Lonnie dressed so they wouldn’t be late.

Walking on ahead, Cookie shook Lonnie’s foot. He was the other figure who hadn’t risen. “That means you, too, boy.” Then Cookie meandered out the other door to go over to the girl’s side, just like she did every morning.

John hurried to Lonnie’s bed. He sat down beside the white bump and bounced it up and down. “Wake up, Yonnie. Time fo’ bweakfas’.”

Lonnie didn’t stir beneath the sheet. John jerked the sheet down. Lonnie’s smiling face peered upward.

“Oh, you,” John laughed. “You ‘wake. You jokin’ me. Git up now!”

Lonnie’s face was much like John’s, slanted eyes and wide mouth, his over-sized tongue often curling out. Cookie said he had the Mongolism, too. Lonnie wiggled his fingers in a baby wave right at John’s face.

“Git up,” John commanded, ignoring the wave. “Me bewy hungwy! Us gotta huwy!”

Slowly, Lonnie lifted his head, then his shoulders, then his waist and hips, in one long smooth gliding motion. Shot with slug juice, that’s what Cookie said Lonnie was. He moved so slowly that finally John couldn’t stand it.

“You too swow.” He pulled Lonnie’s arms until he sat upright.

Lonnie pushed John’s hands away and carefully knotted his legs like a pretzel. He was not in a hurry. He stared at John, grinning. His tongue slipped out and explored his chin. Then he tried to tickle John’s neck.

John shrugged his shoulders up to cut off the tickle. “Come on, Yonnie. No ticko’. Me get dwessed. You, too.”

John opened one of his two dresser drawers and pulled out his clothes—a blue pullover sweatshirt, jeans, socks and underwear. Cookie said they ought to change their underwear every day, but if he was in a hurry John didn’t always do it. He looked around and saw that Marley had come in and was struggling to get Timmy dressed. John decided he better change his underwear today. He lined everything up on his bed in the order he would put it on, then stripped. He liked to dress from the bottom up, socks first. Because of his bad hip, John had to put them on from behind, slipping his hand into the sock, pulling it inside out and then rolling it up over his foot while it stretched out behind him. Underwear was easy but he had trouble with the jeans. This pair had no button at the top. John’s fingers were thick and he fumbled with the tiny clasp on the zipper before working it up. He slipped on the sweatshirt then teased his loafers out from under the bed with his toes so he didn’t have to bend down. Bending down hurt his hip.

Quickly John smoothed the sheet and blanket on his bed and tucked them in all around. He fluffed up his pillow. All done.

Satisfied, he glanced over at Lonnie. He hadn’t moved. Lonnie sat in the center of his bed, legs crossed, finger-flicking. Tap, flick, tap, flick, tap, flick. The baby finger of his right hand flicked against the thumb of his other hand, palms open like he was fanning himself. He chewed on his massive tongue, making a squeaking noise.

“Yonnie!” John glowered, hands on his hips trying to look like Cookie. He tapped his foot impatiently. “No veggin’!” Vegging was what you did when you were not doing what you were supposed to do. Finger flicking was Lonnie’s way of vegging. “You betta git up! Us be yate fo’ bweakfas.”

Snail-like, Lonnie finally began to move. One foot unwound itself and crept onto the floor. The other foot followed. Each painfully slow movement made John feel tighter inside. *We'll never make it*, John worried.

“Now go pee.” John pointed toward the toilet room.

After one more thwarted attempt to tickle John's chin, Lonnie rose and strolled to the toilet room in no particular rush.

“Huwya back!” John admonished, shaking his head. He knew he would have to go and get Lonnie, like he did every day. First he reached into his drawer and groped around for his watch. He had found it outside along the walk. The hands never moved and it didn't buckle, but John liked it anyway. He stuck it in his pocket. Next he plucked out his wallet. Santa had given this to him for Christmas. He flipped the wallet open. Not much in there. An unused Balhalla buck, the money they earned for being good or working. They could use Balhalla bucks to buy things at the canteen. In another slot of his wallet was a picture of John, taken when he was younger, standing in front of Beacon Hall with Gretchen. He liked Gretchen. She was red-haired and skinny, and had freckles all over her arms and neck. She was his favorite tech at Beacon, but he hadn't seen her since he left. Now the Veggies, the others like Timmy who couldn't do anything for themselves, lived in Beacon, and John had moved to Starlight. He jammed the wallet into his back pocket.

Turning toward his nightstand, John kissed the tiny framed picture beside his bed. “Bye, mama. See ya yate'.” Mama was beautiful, her flowing blonde hair covering her shoulders as she tipped her head to the side and smiled coyly.

John started toward the toilet room to get Lonnie. The other boys were all getting dressed as fast as they could. On workdays, they had to go down to the main cafeteria for breakfast. John passed Marley who had finished dressing Timmy and was maneuvering him into a wheelchair.

Marley growled at the boys, "Straighten out that sheet! Yer bed looks like shit, Pat. Ain't you dressed yet, David? We're leavin' in five minutes. If you ain't ready, we'll leave without ya."

John passed Marley without looking up. He didn't like the look of Marley's cigarette stained teeth and pale pimply face.

"Peter! For God's sake!" John stopped when he heard Marley yell. "Another ripped shirt? When are you gonna stop this shit?"

Marley grabbed the torn shirt and jerked it off Peter's arms. He rolled it into a ball and tossed it at the big garbage can in the corner. "You come over here and git another one. I oughta let you wear the ripped one and freeze yer butt off. In fact, you oughta go naked. That'd teach ya."

Peter stood still, staring at the ceiling. He didn't talk, he didn't look at people, and he hated to be touched by anyone.

After waiting a few moments for Peter to move and pointing to the clothes cupboard, Marley lost his patience. He grabbed Peter's ear and tugged him forward. John shook his head. Marley shouldn't have done that.

Peter screamed, a bloodthirsty scream that John knew from experience could be heard from outside. Peter jerked backward and banged his head with his fist. Wham! He screamed again and beat his temple repeatedly. Wham, wham, wham!

John flinched. "Ouch," he whispered.

Marley let go as if Peter's ear was hot. He looked around the room. Everyone was staring at him. "Shut up, Peter! Stop it!" he hollered.

Peter kept screaming and hitting himself mercilessly.

"Just shut the fuck up! What the hell am I s'pose to do with you?" Marley made two fists that trembled at his sides. Somehow he controlled himself and backed up a few steps.

Gradually, Peter's screams subsided. Silently he pounded his forehead until it turned a deep red.

Marley backed away further. Peter's hitting slowed.

Cookie stormed around the corner in a huff. "Marley, what did you do? Did you touch Peter again?"

"Just barely, the son of a bitch," he spat.

Cookie shook her finger in Marley's face. "I told you, you can't touch him, you fool. He hates that."

Marley shoved his hands into his pockets. "He ripped his shirt. What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"Just git him another one and try not to make him mad. We've tried everything and nothin' works. He's gonna hurt himself." Cookie's face looked awfully mad.

"Shit. If it was up to me ..." he said, turning his back on Cookie.

"Well, it ain't. And don't touch him again," Cookie scowled, then left.

John snickered behind his hand. Marley was so dumb. He didn't know anything about being a tech.

Marley stuck his middle finger up toward Cookie's retreating figure and threw a clean shirt at Peter. "Here," he sneered. "Put this on. You git off easy this time, but don't count on it next time. If it was up to me, I'd wallop you!"

Peter thumped his head a few more times, not so hard, and stared up at the lights. Marley turned away to help some of the other boys who had trouble with zippers and buttons.

John walked to the toilet room. It was empty except for Lonnie, who sat on the toilet bent over so far his face lay flat on his knees. He didn't move, but John could hear him humming.

"Yonnie, huwy up!" John's voice echoed against the tiles. "You done?"

Lonnie peered down between his legs. "All done," he signed, flipping his hands apart. Lonnie didn't talk much but he knew a lot of sign language.

Before John could remind him to wipe, Lonnie stood and yanked his underwear up from around his ankles. Too late. Sluggishly Lonnie lifted his foot and pressed down slowly on the silver handle until it finally flushed.

Lonnie liked to watch the swirling water but John snatched his hand and dragged him back to his bed. He pulled Lonnie's shirt and pants out of the drawer and quickly helped Lonnie into them. When he reached for Lonnie's socks, they were all tied together in knots again.

"No good, Yonnie." John threw them back into the drawer. It would take too long to untie them and John could never get them undone by himself. "You no git socks t'day."

Marley called, "Everybody in line, boys!"

The rest of the boys moved toward the doorway to line up. John's heart pounded. "Put shoes on!" he shouted at Lonnie. Lonnie slipped one foot in, working it to the end and giggling.

John's hands were trembling. "No yaugh! No funny!"

Marley called, "Why don't you jest leave him, John? No sense in you missin' out on yer cinnamon roll. Teach him a lesson." Marley wheeled Timmy out into the dayroom where they would meet the girls and walk down to the cafeteria together.

The line of boys started out through the sleeping room door into the hallway. They were putting their coats on.

"Yonnie, dem yeavin'!" Quickly, John stuck Lonnie's other shoe onto his foot and pulled him to a stand. John smoothed the covers on Lonnie's bed as best he could in three seconds. Lonnie tried to get the wrinkle out of the middle, but the sheet was crumpled underneath it. He didn't like to leave unless it was just right.

"No good, Yonnie!" John panicked. The cinnamon rolls would be gone if they were late. "Fix bed yata."

John pushed Lonnie from behind out into the dayroom. Lonnie wanted to stop and push all the chairs under the table where they belonged but John wouldn't let him. When they finally reached the outside door, the line of boys and girls was winding down the walkway, everyone holding hands. The frigid air brought instant goose-bumps to John's arms and back. In his rush, he had forgotten their coats. He plucked up Lonnie's hand and rushed to catch up with the group. Lonnie bounced stiffly after him. He hated to hurry.

John and Lonnie wound down the path past the stone and brick buildings that were spread throughout the large campus. Leafless trees loomed over them as they twisted between the ominous-looking structures with their small windows peering eerily down over the lifeless grounds. The line of workers headed for the low building with steam rising from its chimney.

Halfway down the path John and Lonnie caught up with the group. John snatched the hand of the last boy in line and they slowed to a walk, their breath puffing out like smoke. By the time they arrived at the cafeteria he was shivering with cold.

The sounds of clinking dishes and the delectable smells of bacon and cinnamon rolls greeted them as they entered. Dozens of workers were already seated at the tables eating their breakfasts.

While they stood in line, John finished buttoning Lonnie's shirt. They picked up their trays and silverware. A tech in a white hat and hair net handed them each a plate of scrambled eggs, pancakes and bacon.

John swallowed the saliva that filled his mouth in anticipation. A worker stood at the end of the line handing out cinnamon rolls. Everybody from Starlight got one today.

Mick was just ahead of John in line. After he got his cinnamon roll Mick stumbled toward the nearest table with his

tray. He set it down quickly then dove for his neighbor's cinnamon roll. Luckily, one of the techs was right behind him and nabbed it before Mick could shove it into his mouth. Mick was always stealing food.

John spied a space next to Rochelle. She was a laundry worker like John, but she lived in Moonbeam. John considered her his girlfriend.

"Hi, Wocheo. How you?" He set the tray down on the table beside her.

"Okay, John." She snickered and hid her face with her hand.

"Us sit he'e?"

"Okay, John." She didn't look up. Her body quivered a little.

Lonnie slid slowly onto the bench, too close for John to squeeze in beside Rochelle.

"Move ova', Yonnie. Me sit by Wocheo." He shoved Lonnie sideways and scrunched in between them.

"Co'd outside," he commented, picking up his fork.

Rochelle didn't answer. Every time John bent over to look past her hair into her face, she turned away.

"You happy, Wocheo?"

"Yeah." She moved away a bit.

"Dat good." John cut his pancakes up with his fork, then he cut Lonnie's. "You eat, Yonnie," he commanded. In slow motion, Lonnie picked up his fork and aimed it at the plate.

John peeled his cinnamon roll apart into a long ringlet. Leaning his head back, he let the end of it fall into his mouth and bit his way up the dough. He looked to see if Rochelle noticed. She glanced up briefly, but then quickly hid her face.

“You yook pwetty,” John said to her when he had swallowed his entire cinnamon roll.

“Oh, John.” She put her hand over her eyes and shuddered. John stared at the back of her head. Her dark hair was matted into tight snarls, as usual. When she turned back around to take another bite John saw his chance. He kissed her bulging cheek.

She dropped her fork. “John!” Her face turned scarlet. She covered her cheeks with her hand and buried her face in the crook of her arm on the table.

John nudged Lonnie. “Me kiss Wocheo. My gewfwend!”

Lonnie’s fork was poised over his eggs. He stopped, looked over at Rochelle, and shook his head. “Tsk, ts, ts,” he scolded.

John giggled. He had done it. All tingly inside, he dug into his pancakes with gusto.

“What’s your job now, John?” said Harold, a worker John sometimes saw at the canteen. He sat across the table from them and had already finished eating.

“Yaundwy. What you job?” John took a bite.

“I work outside today, doin’ some rakin’. I like workin’ outside.” His face sagged down on one side and only the other side of his mouth moved when he talked. One eye was always half-shut, and when he walked, he dragged his leg. When John had asked him what happened to his face, he pointed to his head and said he had a stroke. John didn’t know what that was, but it sounded bad.

“Pwetty co’d outside. Us wo’k inside. Wa’m in yaundwy, wight, Wocheo?” He nudged her with his elbow. She sat up and nodded without looking at him.

“What you fwend name?” John asked, pointing to a new girl sitting next to Harold. She had short brown hair that

looked greasy. Her eyes were like black marbles resting in dirt holes.

“She’s not my friend!” Harold scooted away from her then asked, “What’s your name?”

“Sheila.” Her voice was husky, more like a boy’s.

“Whe’e hu fwom?” John asked.

“I don’t know. Where you from?” Harold repeated.

When she lifted her eyes, they darted around the room. She talked very fast. “You know. Had to leave. They hate me. Go up the hill!” Her voice got loud and she pointed straight upward. John looked up to where she pointed. Nothing but ceiling.

“No, no, no!” she shouted. “I won’t go! No, I won’t! You can’t make me.” She paused and looked behind her, then lowered her voice. “Okay. It’s okay. I’ll be good. The table said to be good.”

A tech approached and Sheila put her head down. She bent low over her plate and shoveled food into her mouth.

“Sheila, are you having a problem?” the tech asked.

“Nononononono!” she fired. “I’ll be good. Not going back. Not Cadby.”

The tech walked to the end of the table and stood guard.

Cadby! John stared at Sheila. So that’s where she was from. She was crazy then. The thought of Cadby terrified him. The groping hands of his nightmare flickered before his eyes.

Sheila ate as fast as she could until her plate was empty. Then she picked up her tray and stomped away. The tech followed her.

No one spoke for a while. John concentrated on his eggs.

After a minute, Harold broke the silence, “I know someone who went to Cadby before. Let’s see, who was it?” His eyebrow drew down. “You goed to Cadby, right John?”

John stuffed a forkful of eggs into his mouth so he couldn’t answer, his heart pounding like a drum.

Just then a worker came over in a white apron and began washing the tables. Harold started talking to her. John sighed. He had to remember not to sit by Harold anymore.

The buzzer rang loudly, startling them. Workers from all over the cafeteria got up and took their trays to the dishwashing window. Lonnie had only eaten half a pancake, but John made him stop.

“Aw done, Yonnie. Go wo’k now.” John pulled the fork out of Lonnie’s hand and set it down. He made Lonnie pick up his tray. Lonnie followed John to the counter where they slipped their silverware into a large dishpan half-filled with dirty water and set their trays on a moving belt. Lonnie dangled his napkin over the trashcan until John gently slapped his hand to make him let go.

When the napkin finally dropped in, Lonnie said, “Putsch!” the sound he loved to make when something fell.

The workers congregated near the outside doors. Some techs were already there, and others soon appeared, laughing and smiling. Two of them crushed their cigarettes out on the side of the trashcan and blew a stream of blue smoke upward. John always wondered how they did that. *Did they have fire in their mouths?*

One of the techs, Erickson, shouted, “Line up!” Erickson was fat. His stomach hung down over his belt and he had big folds of skin under his chin that reached to the first button on his shirt.

“Time to get to work. No more time to stand around and look stupid.” He laughed.

Linda Stern, John’s work tech, waited in her usual spot with the other laundry workers. She looked tough with her man’s haircut and faded jeans, but she was nicer than she looked.

John pushed Lonnie into Marley’s line. “He’e. You go wo’k Sta’yight.”

John pretended that Lonnie went to work in Starlight, even though Lonnie didn't have a real job yet. John could never figure out why he didn't have a job; Lonnie wasn't a dummy like Mick or Mamie, or Peter. Lonnie leaned against John's hands, resisting.

"Yep, Yonnie," John said, pushing harder. "You go."

Lonnie grunted and shook his head. He was getting into a "no" mood. A "no" mood always got Lonnie in trouble because he eventually slumped to the ground and hit or kicked someone. He even bit a tech once, which is why he had no front teeth now. Anyone who bit someone got his front teeth pulled.

Lonnie tried to sit down, but John grabbed him under the armpits and hoisted him into line. "You be good, Yonnie," he admonished.

"Come here, you little punk." Marley took Lonnie from John and held his upper arms firmly. Lonnie winced and shook his head.

"Be good, Yonnie! No 'no' mood!" John called back as he followed Stern out the door. He hoped Marley wouldn't pull Lonnie's ear.

John trailed the other workers down the paved pathway to the largest stone building on campus, Lawrence Hall. Rochelle was just ahead of John and he watched her awkward gait as she swung side to side. Every once in a while she slapped the side of her head. John wished she wouldn't do that because that reminded him of Peter, who was a dummy. At the basement door to Lawrence Hall, Stern fumbled through her fist-sized key ring until she found the right key. She held the door open for the workers to enter. A draft of warm air and the fresh smell of clean sheets swept over them. John liked work. It made him feel important, like a smart one.

Stern led them down two series of steps to the basement. The whirl of motors grew louder as they descended to the laun-

dry area. The cavernous space below was wide and open, the floors and walls of gray cement. Washers and dryers big enough for two people to crawl into lined the perimeter. Dull lights hung on chains from the ceiling high above, casting funny shadows that John liked to experiment with when he wasn't busy. In the middle of the room were worktables where sheets and towels and clothes were folded. Bins of dirty linens were already lined up ready for the washers.

"Go to your stations and get to work," Stern directed. She spent most of her time drinking coffee and smoking in a small office that faced the work area. The workers could see her through the glass window.

John grabbed a bin of dirty laundry and pushed it to the deep utility sink where he had to shake the sheets out, in case there were messes. If there were, he had to wear his special gloves and rinse them out before loading them into the washer. John reached into the bin and pulled out a balled-up bundle. Untangling it, he held it away from his body and shook it out. Nothing in the first two sheets. He stuffed them into the washer. The next one smelled bad and John slipped on his gloves. He turned on the faucet and rinsed the slippery mess down the drain, breathing only through his mouth so he wouldn't smell the accident, like Stern had taught him. Then he rolled it up and squeezed it out before stuffing it into the washer, too.

When the washer was full, he took two scoops of soap from the soap box and poured them into the spout. His favorite part was pushing the green button. John poised his finger over it for a second, thinking what an important job he had, then punched it. The machine roared. He watched the sheets tumble inside until the suds blurred his view. When all the washers were loaded and running, John could take a break. He wheeled the empty carts out to the main aisle where another worker pushed them back to the wards, then he sat on the laundry

folding table to watch. The gushing sound of the water reminded him of a fishing show that the cartoon day tech, Smitty, liked to watch.

John dangled his legs off the table and pretended he was sitting on the bank of a river, fishing. He imagined that the shadows cast from above were big, silver fish lurking below the water, just waiting to be caught. He cast his imaginary fishing line and felt a tug on the end. A fish as long as his leg flipped out of the water. John wrestled it, flopping around, onto the table just like on TV.

“John!” Stern called, sliding the window open. “What the hell are you doing?”

John straightened up. The fish disappeared. “Me fish,” he answered sheepishly.

She rolled her eyes. “Fish? That’s a good one, John. Look. One of your washers is done. Get back to work, you screwball.”

The light was off on the first washer. One by one each of the washers shut off. John unloaded the linens into two clean laundry bins and rolled them down to Barney-the-Giant, who ran the dryers. Barney-the-Giant was so tall that if John looked straight at him he saw only his chest. But he was friendly, not mean like the giants he saw in the cartoons.

On his way back to the washers, John passed Rochelle. She was busy folding clothes on a worktable. He waved. She looked up through her hair and waved a finger, then hid her face with her hands. John thought about the kiss at breakfast. A rush of heat flooded his face.

From across the room, he watched Rochelle work. Rochelle’s hair hid her face most of the time, but once in a while she looked up at him through the clumped strands, smiled then turned quickly away. She was silly, but John liked her. He used to have Brenda for a girlfriend, but she got mad and called him

“dummy” and she started liking Gerald instead of him. He ignored Brenda now.

The room was steaming hot when the noon buzzer finally rang. Trickle of sweat eased down John’s back. His stomach had been growling for a long time.

As the workers filed out and started back toward the cafeteria, Stern handed each of them their pay, five Balhalla bucks.

“Don’t spend it all in one place,” she said, slapping John on the butt. “And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Yep, Ste’n. Me be good.” He folded his brightly colored paper bucks neatly into his wallet and slipped it into his hip pocket.

Lunch was served in shifts and John didn’t see anyone from Starlight today besides Barney the Giant. He ate his lunch sitting by Rochelle. Rochelle ate more slowly than he did and she didn’t talk to John at all. When John finished his lunch she offered him her banana.

After he ate it he said, “Tanks, Wocheo. Me kiss you?”

She shook her head. When he tried to put his arm around her, she shrugged his hand away, turning her back to him.

John was peeved. He didn’t understand girls. Sometimes they let him kiss them and sometimes they didn’t. He put his tray away, shaking his head. “Gew’s!” he muttered. He had heard Marley say that when the girls messed up or Cookie made him do something he didn’t want to do.

Suddenly, John realized how hot and tired he was. His bad hip ached from standing on the cement floor all morning.

He walked over to Stern who now sat by the outside door smoking. “Me go outside?” he asked her. “Me hot.”

“Sure, John. In fact, you might as well go back to Starlight.” She blew the smoke upward and cocked her jaw a couple of times. Little circles of smoke floated up.

“How you do dat?” he asked.

“Well, I practice a lot.” Stern almost smiled.

Outside, the sun was gone. Winter clouds made the sky solid white. John walked up the little grass-lined path to a bench and sat down. The chilly air felt good on his hot skin. He noticed the smoke coming out of his mouth and tried snapping his jaw like Stern, but he couldn't make any circles appear. Maybe that's why there were so many clouds now. Lots of people had been outside smoking into the cold air.

Gazing across the lawns, past the lower campus buildings toward the Away Place, John could see the tops of houses between the bare trees, the circle of gray water Stern called the bay and more buildings and trees on the far side of the water. He could see some long wires swinging down from green posts. Stern said it was the Yaquina Bay Bridge and that it was far away. John squinted at the bridge, then climbed onto the bench for a better look.

He imagined he was walking across those long wires like a circus performer. John stuck his arms straight out and walked carefully along the bench. When he got to the end he jumped off, then sat back on the bench, staring at the Away Place. He had gone through town on the bus once or twice, but that was a long time ago, before Dr. Balhalla came. Cookie said Dr. Balhalla cut everything so they couldn't go on field trips anymore. All John could figure was he must have cut the tires on the bus.

Walking up the path toward him, Stern broke his spell, “John! What the hell are you doing now? You live in your own little world, don't you? Get your butt home!”

John jumped up and hurried back to Starlight wondering if Lonnie was working with the dummies or just tying socks into knots.

Chapter 2

Sarah

The top was down and the heat was on full blast as Sarah shoved her Volkswagen bug into third gear and hit the gas. Her dad had given her his old VW convertible when he moved out east with his growing family. She cranked up the radio to hear John Denver's newest, "Annie's Song," wishing she was heading down Surfside Highway instead of up Larkspur Drive to the state mental institution. The road wound sharply upward through rows of overgrown firs. Sarah loved how her dad's car made her feel deeply alive and free, such a contrast to her mission today. She raced against the thought that her life was about to change drastically.

As she rounded the last corner and slowed, the carved stone sign reading Larkspur State Home and Training School, loomed up on the side of the road. Downshifting, Sarah pulled into the curving driveway that led between the iron gates, thinking how much the sign looked like a tombstone. *What a joke, that name. Why did they call it a training school? No one ever got trained here and no one ever graduated, at least not yet.*

The single lane led past several brick buildings, each one four or five stories high, and each as large as a small hospital. This was the state's primary mental institution; lawmakers' answer to the question of what to do with all those retarded and insane people whom no one wanted to meet out on the streets. At the recommendation of doctors and extended families, parents had been putting their damaged children away here since the 1930s.

Passing the prison-like structures, thoughts of her brother's sad fate flashed through Sarah's mind. She wondered how she could feel both aching grief, and white rage at her mother's betrayal. The two emotions were inseparably linked now.

Sarah pushed these thoughts away and parked the car in front of Starlight Hall. Scrambling out, she deftly snapped the roof back into place, in case it started to rain. As her vaporous breath swirled around her face, she was reminded that snow was predicted later this week. John Denver's voice, still ringing in her ears, slowly died as she gazed at Starlight's ivy-covered brick. Her stomach churned and she gritted her teeth to ward off the urge to run.

Sarah had been to Larkspur several times before. Her first visit was as an undergraduate in one of the introductory special education classes. She had volunteered to go as part of an assignment to experience what it was like to have a disability. The last time, three months ago, she was with Dr. Montgomery, or William, as he recently asked her to call him. They had toured several wards and talked to the administrators about Sarah's doctoral dissertation project. Her research had already been approved by the university, and William had secured a start-up grant for her. Now that Larkspur had given her final approval, Sarah was coming to meet the patients whose files she had selected for her study.

The criteria for her subjects included only patients with immeasurably low IQ's or those lower than fifty, if they were testable; "imbeciles" was the pejorative term that thankfully was falling out of common use. Sarah's subjects had to be ambulatory and toilet trained, have no serious health problems and take no medications for behavior control. Through her study, Sarah hoped to show that even the severely disabled could make it in the community, given adequate support.

Readjusting the stocking cap tightly over her mass of dark curls Sarah strode quickly up the stone steps to the gray metal door of Starlight's entrance. She buzzed the doorbell. *How strange to hole people up like this*, she thought again. She watched through the reinforced window as a technician, a.k.a. tech, the institutional euphemism for an untrained, low paid assistant, strode down the wide corridor toward her with a large ring of keys. The tech, a thin white man with bad teeth, opened the door. Immediately the smells of disinfectant and urine accosted her. Moaning and low, repetitive thumping sounds could be heard from within.

"Hi," Sarah said, trying to sound at ease, her heartbeat rapid. She pulled out a paper from her backpack. "I'm here to see some of the residents. I have a letter of permission here from ..."

"Come on in." The tech held the door open and nodded her in without asking to see her paperwork. He led her down the tiled hallway to the dayroom.

Sarah forced herself to follow.

The dayroom, the main living area in each ward, was an open area where a dozen or so obviously disabled men and women sat on worn out furniture or lay on the tile floor. The room was bleak, like all the wards she had visited, and Sarah noticed with distaste the sickly green walls spotted with dirty smudges. A TV was mounted high on the wall and a cartoon show blared. Several residents were engaged in self-stimulating

activities—one man lay flat on his back dangling a piece of shiny foil a few inches over his eyes and a woman with clouded eyes sat cross-legged on a wooden chair tossing her head back and forth in a figure-eight pattern. These were the things that had bothered Sarah most on her previous visits, people with nothing to do all day, just wasting their lives.

Without saying more, the sleazy tech pointed to the nurse's counter. Sarah presented the letter she had received from the director of Larkspur, Dr. James Balhalla, to the heavy-set black woman seated behind the counter.

"I'm Sarah Richardson from the university and I have a letter here from Dr. ..."

"I'm Cookie. I heard you was comin' today," the woman interrupted. "The boys you want to talk to are here in the dayroom. I'll show you."

Cookie came out through a locked half-door and walked over to the only two residents who were actually watching *Bugs Bunny*. Both men had Down Syndrome. The bigger one had his arm slung around the shorter one. They sat cross-legged on the vinyl-covered couch, the smaller one repeatedly tapping his baby finger against the opposite thumb in a rhythmic, waving motion. They were dressed in clothing that looked a size too big, but at least they looked clean.

Cookie addressed these two loudly. "John! Lonnie! You have company." She had to amble over and tap the larger one on the shoulder to get his attention. "This is John," she told Sarah over her shoulder. "This one folded up like a pretzel is Lonnie. I'll find the others for you when you're ready."

John turned toward Sarah and slid his arm off Lonnie's shoulder. He stood up. Lonnie stared up at her, his tongue bulging into his cheek as he noisily chewed on it.

Sarah couldn't help but think of the brother she had never met. *What would he look like now, if he were alive? Down Syn-*

drome people looked like they could be related to one another. He would look pretty much like this, she thought as she extended her hand.

“Hi, John. My name is Sarah. I’m wondering if I can talk to you.”

“Hi, Sawah,” John said. He shook her hand enthusiastically.

“And this is your friend, Lonnie?” Sarah bent down to shake Lonnie’s hand, as well. Lonnie stopped tapping long enough to shake the tips of her fingers before resuming his rhythmic tapping.

Sarah turned to Cookie. “Where can I sit down to talk to John and Lonnie, preferably away from the TV?”

“Back in the lunchroom would be okay. Down the hall and to the left.” Cookie pointed. “Go with her now, Johnny. And take Lonnie with you. You boys be good.”

Sarah walked with them back to a small room off the main hall. She found her heart hammering again, inexplicably. Reading the records was one thing, but thinking of actually taking these men out of the institution, where they had lived all their lives, was another. What if they didn’t do well? What if this experiment didn’t work? She remembered William’s words that were her inspiration, “These places should never exist. People with disabilities have just as much right as anybody else to a life in a real home with people who care about them. Your work can make this happen, Sarah.” That’s why she was here.

She opened the door to the smallish lunchroom for John and Lonnie. Only one other resident was here, an extremely short man with misshapen arms and fingers standing with his back to them. He looked out the window and did not turn around when they came in.

Sarah motioned them to one of the three round tables and they sat down. Lonnie managed to perch cross-legged on his

chair. He began to flip his fingers once again, back and forth, back and forth in a long practiced pattern.

“I have something I need to talk to you two about,” Sarah said, pulling off her cap and unconsciously running her fingers through her disheveled hair to fluff it. Her voice quavered slightly. “I am starting a group home in town. It’s a place where people like you and Lonnie can come and live in a house in the community. It’s a home where you will have your own bedroom and you will learn to cook and clean and take care of yourselves. You’ll have a job, too. I’d like you and Lonnie to come and live there. What do you think?”

“Huh?” John gave her a puzzled look. He stared at her face through his slanting eyes. Sarah noticed the flatness of his nose, his open mouth and large tongue, classic signs of Down Syndrome.

She tried again, more simply. “The group home is a house, like on TV, a home for you and Lonnie to live in and to have a normal ... have a sort of family, away from Larkspur.”

“Us yive he’e, Sta’yight,” John stated matter-of-factly.

“I know, John. You live here now, but this is a chance to move to a new house, a better place where you would have more ... more fun. You would get to live in a nice house in town.” She knew she was repeating herself but she wasn’t sure how else to explain it.

John smeared his finger in something sticky on the table and licked it off.

Sarah cringed inwardly.

“Away Pwace?” he asked, licking all sides of his finger.

“Away place? Yes, it’s a place away from here. I’ll be there, too. We’ll work together and I’ll teach you how to do new things like shop, go bowling, go to the Y ... here. Let me show you a picture.”

Out of her backpack she pulled a snapshot of the stone house she had leased for her two-year project. According to her background research, nothing like this had been done before, so she told the landlord that she was renting to students. The house was spacious, with four bedrooms, and three bathrooms, one on each of the three floors. The expansive living room looked out over an ample front porch supported by pillars. Sarah loved the house from the first moment she saw it.

She scooted closer to John. "This is the living room," she pointed to one of the windows, "and the bedrooms are upstairs. You can share a room with Lonnie, if you like."

John nodded and touched the picture, showing some interest now. He handed the picture to Lonnie. "Yook, Yonnie, Away Pwace."

"I talked to Winifred Brecht, the assistant director about it. We've decided to have you and Lonnie, Mick Reimer, and Peter Brown all come to live in my new group home. And one more guy, Ricky, from another ward."

John looked at her breasts, braless beneath her tie-dyed T-shirt, and poked her breastbone with his finger. "You girl?"

"Yes, I'm a girl." She pulled her jacket over herself and reddened. "Do you know Mick and Peter?"

"Yep. Dummies."

"Oh, they're not dummies. They're, they're ... it's not polite to say dummies, John."

"Oh yeah," John rolled his eyes and nodded his head, "dem dummies!"

Sarah smiled in spite of herself and covered her mouth with her hand. What was it about these guys? She liked them already. No pretense here, no wondering what they thought.

She went on, "The house is in a quiet neighborhood and only two blocks from a park. There's a little store at the corner

where you will be able to go to buy things like pop and treats.”

“Buy candy?” John’s face brightened.

“Yes! You’ll have a job and earn real money.”

“Money? Ba’hawa bucks?”

“Bahawa bucks? No, dollars. You can spend them on things you want. We’ll do things together like go to the movies, swim, go to the gym ...”

John interrupted, “Mean Man de’e?”

“Mean man?” Sarah raised her eyebrows. She imagined there were a lot of mean men here, those hardened techs who had worked at Larkspur for years and treated these grown men and women like children. Or worse yet, abused them. John and Lonnie’s crumpled ears were evidence of this. There were all kinds of stories about what happened in the wards of Larkspur where no one saw, and no one squealed. “No. No mean men.”

“Good.” John smiled. “K. Go Away Pwace. Wif you!” He grabbed her hand and then unexpectedly leaned over and kissed her cheek.

Sarah laughed and patted his arm. “Great! You’ll be fun to work with and I’m sure you’ll like it there.” *John is going to do well*, she thought. He was the one who could talk, so he would be her star pupil. “How about you, Lonnie?”

John held his hand up to stop her from talking. “Me do,” he said, licking his lips. He poked two fingers from Lonnie’s eyes to his own, signing, “Look,” then he explained to Lonnie, “Yonnie, Sawah take us Away Pwace. Me go, you go.” John pointed from himself to Lonnie. “K?”

A smile crept slowly over Lonnie’s face and he screeched, “Eeeee!”

John patted his back. “Him go.” He stood up and pulled Lonnie to his feet. “Come on, Yonnie. Us go Away Pwace.”

“Oh, wait a minute!” Sarah gripped John’s forearm. “We aren’t going right now. In fact, it will be a couple of weeks before we can get the paperwork done. I’ll come back and get you when it’s time to move, okay?”

John’s face fell. “Not go Away Pwace?”

“Yes, but not today. I’ll come back.” She squeezed his shoulder and smiled. “Really, I’m coming back for you.”

John looked dubious. Sarah shook their hands again and thanked them. She wondered what they understood and whether they would remember this conversation when she came back to get them. John had a good chance of making progress from what she had read. He was cooperative and already held a job. Lonnie was his faithful sidekick, and though more limited, had few behavior problems. She was more worried about the other two she had picked from Starlight, the ones she needed to see next. Peter and Mick had a history of difficult behaviors and she knew they would present the biggest challenge to her and her university work study students.

Sarah followed John and Lonnie back to the dayroom where they returned to their TV show.

A little balding man with sagging red eyes hurried over to Sarah and grabbed her around the waist.

Sarah pushed him away and took his hand, instead. “Hi, I’m Sarah. I like to shake hands.” His hand was sticky.

“Hi! I Jackie! I like you!” He dug in his pocket and pulled out a penny. “I have money in my pocket!” He shouted this as if it was a total surprise to him. He shook the penny in Sarah’s face. “I have money in my pocket!”

“That’s great, Jackie,” Sarah said, taking a step backward.

Cookie rescued her. “Jackie likes girls.” Then to Jackie she said, “Leave her alone. Go show Marley your penny.”

Jackie stuck the penny into his pocket but wouldn't leave. He stood by Sarah staring at her breasts, his mouth hanging open.

"Don't stare, Jackie," Cookie said. Then she asked, "Who do you want to see next?"

"Peter Brown, then Mick Reimer," Sarah answered, zipping up her jacket.

Cookie led her to Peter and warned her not to touch him. Sarah knew from the records that he was extremely sensitive to being touched.

Peter's carmel-colored skin was marked with scars around his temples and forehead. He stood in the hall by the office door rocking vigorously. Sarah had heard that they called this movement the Larkspur Dip, a stereotypical behavior that she had seen in a couple of other wards. Peter leaned forward on one foot flapping his arms wildly, then leaned back briefly only to rock violently forward again, shaking his head, eyes closed. He was oblivious to the others in the room. He reminded her of a caged tiger senselessly pacing back and forth.

Sarah approached him cautiously and waited. Catching a glimpse of her during one of his head dips Peter suddenly stopped. He folded his arms, his hands tucked into his armpits, and looked away. He was tall and lanky, with thick curly hair that looked like it hadn't been cut for several months. He squeezed his eyes shut and his narrow face was pinched, as though her attention was painful to him.

"Hi, Peter. My name is Sarah. I've come to talk to you."

No response.

"Peter, I won't touch you," she said, clasping her hands behind her. "I just wanted to meet you and let you know ..."

Peter turned his back to her. She moved around to try to look into his face, to find his eyes, but each time she moved, he spun away. She knew that Peter didn't talk and probably

wouldn't understand what she was going to tell him anyway. He was autistic, untestable. No one knew what he understood though his records reported that sometimes he had done unexpected things when asked.

She decided to explain anyway, more for Cookie's benefit than for Peter's, "I just wanted to let you know that I want to be your friend and I would like you to come to live in my new group home. I know you may not understand, but I think you'll like it there. I'm looking forward to working with you, Peter." She held her hand out toward him.

Without looking at her, Peter tentatively pushed his hand forward and shook her hand ever so briefly. Then his hands snapped back into place in his armpits.

"Very good, then!" Sarah smiled and turned away, thinking to herself, *We'll give you things to do besides the Larkspur Dip. Eventually, you will be glad you're out.* Of course, she knew there would be adjustments. But look how well they were responding to her, a stranger! Not nearly as hard as she had expected.

Cookie pointed out Mick next. He lay on the floor under a table rubbing the linoleum with his fingers. Sarah sat down confidently beside him. She tried to talk to him as she had the others, but each time she came close he scooted away from her.

"Mick, Mick! Come back! I just want to introduce myself." She tried to follow him along the floor but he jumped up and stumbled awkwardly toward the latrine, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He almost tripped and Sarah caught her breath. Somehow he recovered his footing and disappeared.

Wondering whether to pursue him or not, Sarah stood up.

"Mick ain't gonna talk to you," Cookie said. "He's a wild one, he is. He's got his pockets full of pencils. God knows where he gets them all. He breaks them into tiny pieces and hoards

them like they was the best thing this side of heaven. If you try to take them away from him he'll whack you. Just warning you. You should take Barney instead." She pointed to a very tall man draped over the arms of an overstuffed chair. He was so large he dwarfed the chair like Alice in wonderland.

"Thanks for the warning, but I already have clearance on these four." Sarah didn't look at Cookie. She didn't need any advice at this point.

Cookie gave her two-cents, anyway. "If I was you, I wouldn't even have any pencils around with Mick. You can't hide 'em from him. If he finds 'em, they'll be broke up into little pieces and stuck in his pockets. That's the main thing about him. Oh, and Mick likes to eat—you're gonna have to watch him. He'll eat anything, and I mean anything. It don't even have to be food. He'll stuff his mouth 'til he chokes. And he steals food from others."

Sarah nodded uninterestedly, trying not to encourage Cookie. She had read about his hoarding behaviors and had an idea of the treatments that she wanted to try. It was a matter of training and finding the right reinforcement. She would soon cure Mick of hoarding.

"Oh, and be careful how you touch Peter," Cookie continued. "Don't touch him, especially when he's not looking at you, or anytime, if you can help it. Otherwise, he'll beat the crap out of himself."

Sarah smiled absently. She had been reading about desensitization programs, exposing the subject to a variety of textures for longer and longer periods of time so he would eventually tolerate touching. "Uh huh," she murmured, watching a woman whose blouse collar hung over her bare shoulder thump her head against the wall.

Cookie finally got the hint. "Well, the rest you just got to learn for yourself, I guess." She walked away shaking her head.

Sarah felt a twinge of guilt for not listening to her, but she didn't want her plans tainted by Cookie's homespun treatments. "Thanks," she called to Cookie, too late to make her change course.

Sarah pulled on her cap and started for the door. "I have to rush off to Moonbeam to see my other client. Dr. Balhalla said the van will bring them down when the home is ready, so I guess I won't be back."

Cookie shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, whatever you say."

Sarah thought she heard Cookie whisper sarcastically, "Miss hoity toity," under her breath.

Somewhat chagrined, Sarah approached the greasy tech with the ring of keys, "I'm ready to go. Can you let me out?"

"Sure." He set aside his mop and walked with her down the hall. As he unlocked the door he said, "You sure you know what you're doin', little lady? These guys ain't easy and they ain't never been out of here."

"I know. That's why I picked them." Sarah slipped on her gloves, anxious to leave. "I've done a lot of research and I think we'll be able to help them adjust to living in the community. In fact, I think they have a right to be out there ... instead of in here. That's what I hope to prove."

"Well, good luck. It ain't no picnic in here sometimes." He opened the door for her to pass through. "Nope, it ain't no picnic, that's for sure."

"Which building is Moonbeam again?" she asked. These institutional monstrosities all looked alike.

"The third one," he said, pointing down the path to the right. He got so close Sarah could smell his tobacco breath. "Who ya lookin' for?"

Sarah stepped away from him. "Ricky Johnson. I've already met him, but I thought I'd stop in and say hi. He's my high functioning client."

The tech let out a howl of delight. “That’s a good one! Ricky, high functioning! Don’t know what records you saw but he’s just plain trouble.”

Sarah smiled faintly. “No, really. Winifred thought he would do well.”

“I’d say he’s gonna hurt somebody, but what do I know? I guess you’ll find out, won’t you!” He chuckled and shook his head, withdrawing into the ward and locking the door.

Sarah headed toward Moonbeam breathing deeply to clear her lungs of disinfectant. The icy air almost took her breath away.

I can’t wait to get them out of this depressing place, she thought. She was irritated that the slimy tech had laughed. And what hadn’t Winifred told her about Ricky? She tried to imagine Peter doing the Larkspur Dip in the kitchen of the grand old home, or Lonnie’s thick tongue dripping saliva down his shirt at the dining room table. She thought of Mick crawling on his hands and knees, searching the newly laid carpet for pencils.

Then she thought about her brother again. Why hadn’t her mother told her about him—until she was dying? Tears brimmed in her eyes. She changed her mind about visiting Ricky and broke into a run toward her car. Despite the cold, she flipped down the roof and wrenched the gearshift into reverse. Sarah careened out of the Larkspur drive letting the wind dry her tears.

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