

...The moon looked down  
between disintegrating clouds. I said  
aloud: “You see, we have done harm.”

— Jane Kenyon, an excerpt from “While We Were Arguing”  
in *Let Evening Come*



...to be understood  
to be more than pure light  
that burns  
where no one is...

—Mary Oliver, an excerpt from “Poem” in *Dream Work*

## Eve

IT WAS THE BABIES they were after. Not that there wasn't a market for adults. Bushmeat sold well in the village.

The men were excellent trackers, silent as big cats on the hunt as they made their way through the hot dense green of western Uganda in search of mothers nursing their babies together.

Eve had been nursing while her mother groomed one of the other mothers. Mothers did that, groomed each other, taking turns. Had the birds ruffled a warning along the treetops? Eve didn't know. But in the deep rainforest where sounds were liquid, ape, cat, reptile, insect, bird, breeze, it was sudden when the green quiet exploded. A mother chimp fell from her rock and the barks, hoots, shrieks, screams of the others rose. Mothers scattered, made for the trees. The ear-hurting noise cut through the air again, again. Eve clung to her mother's back through the panicked scramble amid the *hu* and *waa* of alarm, fiery blasts again, again, bodies dropping. Blood, hair, shattered limbs. Blood, bone, pain. Tumbling from trunks and branches, spilling bits and pieces of themselves, mothers fell like heavy fruit, babies holding on to their chests or backs, babies holding on, holding on, falling, falling, falling through green, red, brown, falling hard to the ground.

The men were very good shots.

Two mothers did not reach the trees and they went down neatly, like the end of a dance, one breaking her newborn's neck when she

went down on top of the infant cradled to her chest. None of the eight mothers in the nursing party lived; the sticks that exhaled death reached them whether on ground or in the trees, and even the one mother who ran farthest, she went down too, her baby beside her, knocked loose by the blast, too dazed to scream until her eyes, ears, and nose woke and she joined the panicked mayhem of the surviving babies.

Eve's mother had jerked and grunted, crashed through the leafy green and brown of the tree she'd climbed, tipped to fall face-first. Still Eve clung to her back, though her mother's blood streamed in her eyes and her ears were stuffed with noise and terror.

Rough hands pried her, screeching, off her mother. A small metal cage, just her alone, other babies in other cages. Heavy cloth tossed over the cage.

Her mother's blood and her own fear-feces matting her hair, Eve curled, shrieking, under the covering. The movement rough as when she'd clung to her mother, knuckle-running for the false safety of the tree. Now Eve's body, locked in airless darkness, banged the bottom of her cage again and again, as the underbrush was thrashed aside and broke under the heavy movement, careless, loud as the other babies' terror cries now.

The poachers were pleased. The capture was done, and they would not be caught. Money to ensure their escape had changed hands. They'd gotten five babies. They'd hoped for more, but three died with the mothers. Middlemen waited at the marketplace for as many babies as could be had.

The brilliant light blinded when the cover was removed, the cage surrounded by noise and swirling figures, tall, loud animals that were bright as parrots. Eve cowered, trembling. A different stick was pointed at her, and she screamed as a sharp pain entered her thigh. Her muscles turned soft as mud, and the world dissolved as a starless, moonless night crept over her eyes covering

the last she'd know of good—sky, forest, fruit, comfort—for eight years. Then something would wake a memory, small as the ants her mother used to catch. Mother.

# Chapter 1

MY EYES ALWAYS THREATEN to spill tears when I'm really frustrated. Back when she had words, my mother used to warn me that women's faces get red and ugly if they cry when they don't get their way. She had me pegged all wrong though. What upsets me to that point is seeing my own failure. Like now, when it's clear I've failed to sway Marco Lopez.

"Dammit, Marc. No. Captivity is just wrong." My face was probably a crimson flag.

He answered in his low-key, unruffled way. No wonder he was so good with the great apes. "But the alternative is that inevitably some species just go extinct. Is that acceptable?"

How could a man as smart and kind as Marc, a man who'd been a primate keeper for seven years, still believe zoos were ethical or moral? He couldn't think they were for the chimps, anyway, not after all he'd learned about their minds and hearts; I'd trained him to work with our primates myself. Before we hired him, he'd been a top-notch vet tech whose references had blown us all away, but he had zero experience with gorillas or chimpanzees.

And now, we were arguing in the zoo's break room, the last people at the table. He had that earnest look he'd worn so often as he sat by my desk in his pressed open-collar shirt, clean shaved, and dark hair clean cut, even his heavy dark eyebrows not straggly. I'd heard he lived with his mother and wondered why a good-looking

guy well into his thirties would want to do that. Contrasting his life choice with my own made me feel bitchy, but then he'd say or do something that elicited something better in me, and when I looked at him, I'd wish I'd combed my hair and tucked my shirt in, too, instead of letting it wander around untethered from my waist like a lost child. I couldn't help liking his aftershave if I leaned over his computer to show him something. He'd get up to make space for me, and I'd notice again how he moved like one of zoo's big cats, at ease with his strength. Every woman on staff, even the well-married ones had noticed his good build. A couple had even made jokes about our individual supervisory meetings being nice and private. Hadn't they read the code of ethics? I was his supervisor for god's sake.

Or I had been until Thurston, the zoo's Executive Director, took that job away from me, showed me that my career was made of flimsy toothpicks when he said that I wouldn't be considered for the new Research Director job I wanted so badly. With my experience on top of my doctorate, I was ideally qualified for the position, but Thurston had gotten wind that I wasn't committed to the zoo's essential mission, as he'd put it. At first, I thought he was letting me go, but instead, he'd put me in charge of creating the new habitat for our primates—with no staff reporting to me, no one to contaminate with my heresy.

Marc went on now, animated and sincere, but not upset like me, though I was trying to hide it. "They're taking down the rainforests, the corporations," he said. "Logging. Farming. On industrial scales. How can the apes live with no habitat? They're on their way to extinction. I'm not saying anything you don't know better than I do. Do you think I don't love them as much as you? We're their last line of defense." It was Marc's pragmatic logic. And it put him right in Robert Thurston's camp.

He must have known exactly what I'd say—again—before I jumped in with, "We have to put a stop to the clearcutting, act

against the poachers. Bushmeat has to be illegal in the countries where it's sold. We've got to supply incentives in countries that don't have endangered species laws. Stop the problem where it starts. Because the chimps will die out sooner or later in zoos, for god's sake. Zoos are a finger in the extinction dyke." My voice was going up with the heat of my certainty. The tingle behind my eyes meant tears were about to embarrass me, but I couldn't stop. Every chimp I'd known had become a dear individual to me.

Linda Marchers, who was the Primate Curator and my boss—and now Marc were the only people with whom I'd had discussions like this. Linda wasn't unsympathetic and I'd thought I was in line for her job when she eventually left, since I was her assistant curator. Well, I'd thought a lot of things I doubted now.

"You really think we can stop human greed? That's what's at the heart of habitat destruction." Marc shook his head. "Not gonna happen."

I brushed my hand across my cheek pretending I was moving a wayward strand of hair instead of keeping a tear from spilling. "You're saying we just give up? Catch a bunch of them, breed them in cages, send 'em off to different zoos?" A deliberate exaggeration on my part, but I didn't care.

Marc started to answer, but right then, Thurston came in the door. I'd heard others mock the director behind his back for his flattop hair and nineteen sixties black-framed glasses, true-enough descriptors, but I noticed something strange in his footfall, as if one foot had a slight drag. He carried himself with a barely discernable lean to the left. Was it his hip or his knee that bothered him? Strange how paying attention to the bones of the great apes sensitized me to those of homo sapiens.

Marc and I made eye contact and understood each other, as usual: time to get going. Each of us picked up our cups and napkins and pushed back our chairs before Thurston could turn in our direction. Marc was sensitive that way, something I really liked

about him, especially since we both knew Thurston would have jumped on his side.



“Are you serious?” Marc yanked his attention away from the lunch remnant stuck in one of his teeth and turned in his chair to look at Linda, his eyebrows up and eyes wide. “We’re getting another chimp? How’d you pull that off?”

They were in the staff lunch area and Linda had just told him that the first new chimpanzee since Marc started at the zoo would be coming soon. He’d been hired just after Lolly’s arrival and was too inexperienced with primates then to be involved in socializing her. Lolly, who was now seven, had been an orphaned baby the zoo acquired after some idiot realized it had been a terrible decision to buy a chimp as a pet.

During his initial orientation, Linda had gone on an extended rant about it. “Maybe people don’t know that chimps nurse their babies for five years, or that the only way to get a baby chimp away from its mother is to kill the mother, and that’s exactly what the poachers do to feed the pet trade,” she’d said. “They damn well *ought* to know.” She’d been showing Marc the correct way to offer the chimps a new toy, which Kate would teach him at least three more times before letting him do it himself. “It’s called failure to thrive, and it’s just like what happens to human babies when their worlds fall apart. Or maybe people do know, and buy them anyway, dress them up in those ridiculous outfits and put diapers on them, thinking they can raise a chimp like a human child in their family. Well, that lasts until they get tired of the whole thing, or the chimp gets too big and too strong to manage. But baby Lolly must have been too sad and needy and sick to be to even start out cute.”

The zoo had taken Lolly for lack of a better alternative, tried pairing her with Jasmine, and bless that chimp’s good heart, she’d



taken to mothering. Jasmine had had enough time with her own mother that she'd had a model. She'd remembered. "You should have seen it," Linda told Marc back then. "She was great. Carried Lolly around like she'd given birth herself until Lolly caught on and could ride on Jas's back, groomed her, you know, the whole nine yards."

The whole nine yards was Linda's favorite expression and it always meant something extraordinarily good or bad. Linda had an unguarded, straight-on honest gaze beneath a mane of untamed, helter-skelter curls that were dark as the cafeteria's late day coffee. Her brows, just as dark, were narrow as pencil lines on her fair skin, and her nose was thin and centered. She was a kind woman and attractive, Marc thought, though he tended to fall for women like Kate who didn't show the slightest interest in him. It was a tendency that didn't lend itself to long-term relationships. It didn't matter, though. He knew what was appropriate in the workplace.

"So, what's the deal?" he said now, leaning over the table and squinting as if trying to figure something out. "Is this because we'll have room? I mean, once we have the new habitat?" He paused and when she didn't answer right away, cleared his expression. "Anyway, it's great. I want in."

Linda ignored the question about timing. "That's why I'm telling you." Sitting next to one another, they were nearly the last people in the staff area. "This may be tough," she said, "but I'm giving you the lead in transitioning her. I know you haven't done it before, but no one else has either—Lolly was a different set of issues—and it's going to require a lot of time and patience."

"You got it. Tell me..." Marc said, while his mind stuck on Linda not assigning Kate. She'd been lead with Lolly.

"She's coming from a medical lab," Linda said, animated, angry. She'd put her glasses on top of her head and now they slipped down toward her forehead. They had tortoise shell frames and Marc had wondered if that was a statement one way or another. As she

grabbed to catch them, her elbow hit the edge of her tray, and her bottle of iced tea rocked. Marc stuck his hand out and braced it before it tipped over.

He let go of her bottle and closed his eyes. "Shit."

"Exactly." She shoved the glasses back on her head and sighed.

"How bad?"

"Don't know exactly. Do we know of any that are good?"

"How much do we know about her background?"

Linda sighed. "Some of it's expectable. She's *Pan troglodytes verus*—western African origin like most lab chimps. Wild caught when she was maybe three, three and a half. Still nursing." Linda paused to shake her head. "Breaks my heart over and over. Have you heard Kate's spiel about what those poachers do to capture them, the whole nine yards about how they're treated?"

"Not that part."

"Well, Kate's witnessed the aftermath in the field, so I shouldn't call it a spiel. You'll likely hear it when we get the new chimp. Kate's ideas drive Thurston up a wall. But we're damned lucky to have her, especially with her reputation in the field. Thurston's not exactly an expert on primates," she added, rolling her eyes, "and Kate wrote the book on them."

Linda had never spoken of another staff member to Marc, and he wasn't sure how to respond. Was this some kind of defacto promotion? A test? Was that tea spiked?

Marc nodded. "Yeah, she really is great." Was that a safe thing to say?

Linda nodded and took a long drink. "Oh, and her name's Eve. The chimp. So, anyway, Eve got to be with her mother for three years, not near enough time, but not quite as bad as a lot of what the bastards do taking the tiny babies away," she said.

"And now the lab is dumping her because?"

"They weren't the first lab to have her. They got her from another one. The first lab failed to get their grant renewed, I guess it

was pretty soon after they started chimp experiments. Don't know why. The usual, I imagine. Inadequate safety protocols for their workers. It wouldn't have been failure to protect the apes, that's for sure. Probably used for hepatitis or AIDS research. We'll be sure if she's got the scars like here," she looked down and pointed to a spot high on her own abdomen, "you know, over her liver, from multiple biopsies. Anyway, that lab, couldn't go on because of, you know, Endangered Species Act. Can't do what they want anymore, too many limits, too expensive to feed and house chimps, even in their tiny cages—well, be grateful for that much because at least then they go looking for a zoo to take 'em. You know."

"Yeah." He did know. He'd been wondering if there was something other than the usual. Apparently not.

"So...Eve, huh?" He grinned. "She socialized at all?"

"Nope. Caged. Alone."

No grin now. "How old?"

"Eleven. I mean as best they know. No menses yet, so probably accurate."

"Uhhh." Marc blew it out through pursed lips. "What's the word on personality?"

"Nothing helpful. Not that a lab paid a lot of attention to that. No mention of aggression, though." Linda leaned forward over the lunch table now, shoved her tray aside. "Look, it's going to be a steep learning curve, but it's a pretty good time for us to get her, since we're building the new habitat. Maybe she'll be able to be integrated into the social group about the time that's ready. We can aim for that, right? Coordinate with Kate on the timing. And you can consult with her too, about integrating Eve, if she's got the time."



On his way back to the primate area after lunch, Marc let himself be really excited. Tuition reimbursement, his zoo salary, and

the help with his mother from the hired graduate students had gone a long way toward transforming his life. He'd hoped that comfort in the wider world and deaf culture that the few audiology students with their own hearing issues would encourage his mother not to be so dependent on him, even start venturing out. That hadn't happened, but still, Marc was thinking about going on for a Ph.D. He could probably do his dissertation research at the zoo. Why not? The other keepers had become good work friends, happy to trade schedules when any of them had a conflict. His life—other than living with his mother and her dependency on him—had settled toward normal, like earth neither flooded nor parched. And now this! Being the lead with the new chimp. He flipped through his mental files searching for what he knew about socializing a new chimp into a troop. He'd ask Kate for help if that wouldn't be too weird now.

He did have a bit of a thing for Kate McKinsey. Maybe her looks put him in mind of Dr. Duff, the first vet who'd mentored him, or maybe he just liked blondes with that nice eyebrows and streaky hair thing, and the same way of carelessly tying it back or sticking it behind their ears. It was almost like Kate couldn't really be bothered with fixing herself up much because she was too busy fixing things for the apes. Not that she needed to fix herself up. When she smiled, which he wanted her to do more, he could see she had nice straight teeth, so why not? He got it, though. All the supervisors kept a distance; the zoo ethical rules were strict, and the big departments operated separately. It had to be lonely. He liked trying to make Kate laugh. And she was so smart. That's what first drew him to her, that and her passion for the apes.

After all this time learning from her, all he really knew was her devotion to the apes and to leaving yellow sticky notes on staff desks with little reminders. And if someone proposed something she thought would be bad for the primates, she'd say, "Over my cold dead body," he knew that, too, and had taken pride in not provoking

that response. But there wasn't anything she didn't know about great apes, and she was generous with explanations, in the way the best teachers are. She hid it, but he guessed it must drive her crazy to tiptoe around Thurston, who was all about publicity, fundraising, getting the next tax levy passed. Marc let himself off the hook for noticing her breasts when she wore that one light green shirt with the sort-of low neck; there wasn't a straight male alive who wouldn't notice. He'd have tried to get to know her as a person, but he wasn't an idiot. She was his supervisor.

Until she wasn't. Not anymore.

But his wasn't the time to be distracted by what was under Kate's green shirt even though they were peers now. The truth was, he didn't know a damn thing about socializing a chimp coming from a medical lab. From what Linda said, he was going to know virtually nothing about her history. What hell had she been through for the last eight years, an orphaned, unmothered baby coming into adolescence and now coming to his care?

## Eve

THE TRACKERS RECEIVED ten dollars each, the middlemen many times that. Two of the babies were sold to private collectors, pets for wealthy people, a European and an American who would put them in diapers and baby clothes, raise them like toddlers until they were about five, large and heavy enough to assert their wills and bite their human caregivers. One infant was sold to a circus to be trained to perform. She'd wear a collar attached to a leash, rewarded with treats when she did the tricks, punished with an electric prod when she failed. One baby went to a medical test laboratory in eastern Europe where she died of a viral infection four months later. The experimental treatment did not work.

Eve was sold to a medical laboratory in the United States. Injected on a schedule to ensure she would remain sedated, she was moved by truck to the airport, transferred to another metal cage, and flown overseas to New York and then to Chicago's Midway airport in the cargo hold of a transport plane. Two lab technicians picked the three-year-old up there, where they hosed the urine and feces from the cage with her in it and, because she was stirring, one of them used an air pistol to shoot her with another sedative dart, in order to transport her to the medical testing facility. Seven other chimpanzees were already there, each in a separate, bare metal cage. The cages were stacked in twos, a line of four, so that the chimps could hear but not see each other.

When she woke, Eve tried to hide herself by cowering in the corner of her cage. The monkey chow was hard, strange, and there was no fruit, the cage cold, barren, the noise of a few older chimps shrieking protest or pain terrifying, though some had stopped and gone silent as they picked at their own bodies, slowly removing a patch of hair here, another patch of hair there. Eve started to rock, sometimes hitting her head on the solid back wall.

Too soon Eve knew what it meant when she got no food and her water was taken away. A big animal with little hair and covered in white would come with a gun to shoot her leg, unless he missed and hit another place that was worse, like the time it was her neck. She'd scream and curl away. One of them would make sounds, "Time to knock you down," and narrow his eyes as he'd aim, but the others made no sounds, just shot. There would be the pain, hot and searing, and then the blackness spreading over her eyes. When she woke up, her body would hurt.

Hurt where it had been cut.

Hurt all over.

Hurt.

## Chapter 2

ONE DAMN DELAY after another with the new habitat. First, waiting on the grant money to be deposited. I'd been able to argue for more space for the chimps, but that required moving the smaller enclosures for the lemurs, which would involve the sacrifice of one of the zoo's flower gardens, which meant moving some water lines.

Patience doesn't come naturally to me. But what's natural is the whole point, as in let the chimps live as naturally as possible for captive great apes. Give them space to climb, material to nest, a way to retreat. Let them have their family bonds, let them give birth if they've mated—don't inseminate the females, though we're not a breeding zoo, thank heaven. But let infants be nurtured and raised by their own mothers. A habitat richly green with branches, water, rocks, privacy. Leave them alone. Give them indoor space for protection in winter, outdoor space the rest of the time, and let them be!

It was that last part, leave them alone, that made Thurston batshit crazy, of course.

He wanted the animals in full, glorious display. The public didn't like coming to the chimp—or any other animal—exhibit and not seeing them. If the chimps could hide, well, they might well do it, and how would that exhibit be meaningful to the patrons?

It was complicated, for sure. I had a decent budget for consultation. What I wanted was cutting edge: overhead trails for



the great apes with an extra benefit—the big cats could use them in winter when apes have to be indoors. I wanted the zoo to have our own version of what the Philadelphia Zoo already had underway: ZOO 360, started in 2012, a whole treetop animal trail system that had let them create functional spaces spread all over the property for food, water, dens, and rest. It had been the Australian zoological park designer John Coe's brilliant concept. Big trails for great apes shared by the big cats; medium and small trails shared, at different times, by other species. It was revolutionary, a real effort to replicate how their apes live in the wild, with those kinds of trail-connected areas used at different times of day.

And the Philadelphia Zoo visitors loved it. I'd seen how they stopped to stare, riveted on the pathways between exhibits because an animal might be making its way in a mesh-covered "trail" overhead. It was magical and all it required was millions and millions of dollars, a visionary director, and keepers who shared that vision and believed in it passionately. Three critical requirements.

Linda would support it. I was sure about our keepers, too. I loved them. They'd see the benefit for the apes, and I could train them in the new protocols. And the big cat curator had to want it, too; curators and keepers always want more space for their animals. I'd need Thurston on board. He was the budget man.

I did my homework. I had sketches and figures when I brought it up to Thurston, a specific proposal, and the design consultant I wanted to hire.

"We can't do that, Kate," he said, his voice flat, no apology in it. I'd mentioned the success of the Philadelphia Zoo. "Do you know the difference between Dayton, Ohio, and Philadelphia? Think about potatoes, will you? Fingerlings versus Idaho baking."

I must have had a baffled look on my face because he added, "Relatively speaking, one is small potatoes. And do you get that we're in a hurry? The new chimp is coming, we don't know exactly when..."

Another chimp was all the more reason. I kept trying different approaches. “Couldn’t we—”

“It would involve an overall redesign of the zoo. Isn’t that obvious? Find a designer to work with who gets what’s possible here. We don’t have that kind of money.”

“But if we did it for just the big cats and the chimps, the shared trail thing, different times for each, couldn’t that work? See, that’s what I’ve proposed, not the whole zoo.” I tried to filter frustration from my voice. I’d already told him that. “Or what about just the chimps? I can put a rush on everything. Of course, I understand about the new chimp. She’s a huge concern for me. We weren’t expecting to acquire—but can we look at some overhead trails between foraging and sleep areas just for the chimps, maybe we could—” I was casting, trying to salvage something of how they’d live if they could.

Thurston sighed and looked around the office as if there might be a hidden source of strength. He left enough silence to tell me he was annoyed but didn’t let his expression show it. He managed to keep it out of his tone, too. He shoved his glasses back up on his nose with a forefinger and said, “I’m sorry, Kate. I’m not sure what figures you’re working with, but they don’t seem to be the ones I gave you. Maybe we should go over the budget again, or would you like for someone else to head this up? Linda could—”

“No, thanks. I understand. I’ll work with the space specs. I just thought we could use the treetop area and maybe—”

“As I said, I’m sorry. Too big a picture.”

I’d known it would require not only extra money but a progressive director. We didn’t have either. It had been too much to hope for.

Back at my desk in the primate area when I was alone and with was no chance of being seen, I ran a search on for job opening at the big sanctuaries. Just to see if anything came up, which nothing at my level did. But really, I had something else in a secret mind-

pocket: to go back for another stint in Western Africa, the Ugandan home I found when I did two years of field work there after grad school. My heart never left the place where I'd learned to love and respect the chimps.

The work with an endangered species in an endangered habitat had saved me, which is ironic. Some nights even now I dream I'm sleeping again in that tent in the rainforest and it's not my own voice that wakens me, but the thrum of insects and wildlife calling in the dark stealth. I was fearless there, and it had been so easy to make friends. The director was as hands on as the rest of us, without the power hierarchy and constant focus on everyone doing what would raise money. Not that we didn't need it, for sure. But it was all about the work. I still skyped often with Becky, my tent mate who'd become a dear friend. She was now Assistant Primate Curator at the Seattle Zoo. Our cohort was scattered in random states and Europe, but we had reunions. In a year and a half, I'd be hosting in Dayton. Those who'd remained in Africa came in on Skype, too. We'd all developed the same mindset from seeing what was happening live and up close. I needed some Becky time and advice now; maybe I should take some vacation time and go out there, see what she thought about my going back.

But of course, I couldn't. The thought of going back to Africa, working to stop poaching and clear cutting, actions that really would save the chimpanzees—the notion was nothing but a gossamer wing that had brushed over my eyes, iridescent and lovely. I blinked and when I opened my eyes again it was gone. At the same time, my cell phone rang.

Sycamore Community, the screen said. My mother's assisted living center. At the time, I thought, yes, this is how it is: offer up a bad day to the universe and the universe will hand it back worse.

"We'd like you to attend the next team meeting when Dorothy's care is discussed," the director said. "Thursday at ten. We need you present since Dorothy can't speak for herself."

A masterpiece of understatement that was. Even though Mom shouldn't be the only one who can't speak her mind, it was doubtless a good thing that I managed not to spout what I wanted to: Oh thanks, but I have a luncheon date with a great ape, so I'll skip the meeting since I already know what you're going to say and damn, I do not want to hear it.

Even a long weekend out west with Becky would be of the question.

I made a face at the phone and exhaled so my head wouldn't explode. Then I dragged up a polite voice and agreed to be there at ten on Thursday. I even said thank you. Mom would be so proud.

But if Mom could have been proud, it would mean she could have made sense of what was being said, and I could have gone to Seattle or to work in Africa, and the earth wouldn't have been slowing, tipping over on its axis until it fell and spun off, irretrievable.

What they were going to tell me was entirely predictable. I could already see the bony, pinch-nosed director patiently trying to make it clear to the resident's clueless daughter: *your mother isn't understanding what anyone says to her at all, and she can't tell the staff what she wants or needs. It's not safe. What if there's a fire? It's a safety issue. Really, she needs to be moved over to skilled nursing where there are other residents who need close attention. It's entirely for her own safety.*

The woman would never say that it was too time-consuming to ferret out pictures of anything my mother might need. Or to figure out what she might be feeling, for god's sake. In other words, she'd be saying she needed to be where there's a better cage and more keepers.

The director's ace would be "What if there's a fire?" In assisted living, residents had to be able to understand evacuation instructions. Pictures weren't possible to use in case of fire, the director would explain with elaborate patience. She'd be dressed better than I, to remind me who held the power here, and power would be why

she'd overcome my arguments, even though I'd whip out some polysyllabic words that just meant, *hey, I'm educated too. I'm trying to tell you my mother is in there and I'm trying to save her. It's words she's lost, not her mind.*

The skilled nursing building would mean another diminishment. I'd have to move the furniture I'd hauled here—with help, of course—from the big old house, gone now, to her two-room unit with its kitchenette and her own table and chairs in the dining alcove, the drop-leap walnut table we'd had all my life. I'd salvaged that for her, along with placemats and personal things that Mom had saved from her own mother. Well, those and a lot of other junk I waded through, wondering if everyone's parents saved so much crap or if I was just exceptionally lucky.

My idea was that Mom's friends could come see her there, have a simple lunch with her in her own little apartment. There'd be a vase with a few red, yellow and orange dahlias on the table in summer, and the favorite pictures, also from the house—Monet prints—that I hung around the living area.

But Mom still had some language when she'd moved in to assisted living. Labor-intensive for her to birth them, but words were still there. And she'd been slow to comprehend what was said, but if a person took the time to try a couple of different ways, the right combination of words would click into place in her mind like tumblers unlocking meaning. Not anymore. Friends slowly stopped coming until there were none, and I almost didn't hold it against them.

Except I did. I understood how helpless they felt, but did they understand that I felt helpless too—and alone on top of that? My closest friends were scattered around the country. Zoo rules about boundaries—to make sure supervision wasn't compromised and safety for animals, guests, and staff were always the focus—had limited my socializing with the people I really cared about. I rarely talked with my father, and certainly not about Mom. He was

wrapped around his new family, Candy's family. I didn't fit into that package.

The next time I moved my mother, it would be to one room. One small room that would put me in mind of a cage. A bed, a night table. A chair. A bathroom. Oh, it wasn't difficult to see what was coming. I could see it just fine. I just didn't know how to bear it.