

CHAPTER 1

Moving, 1965

They say the hardest things in life are divorce, moving, and death. Well, my parents were divorced, my mom and I were moving to a new town, and I felt like I was going to die.

"You are ripping my heart out, I hope you know!" I said, grasping my chest as if in pain. I've always been a bit on the dramatic side with my mom, but usually I am pretty shy, mostly because I am so hideous. She rolled her eyes and said, "Tisk. Tisk," like she was some high-class duchess instead of a middle-class, small-town realtor. "What's done is done."

"But it's not fair!" I continued.

"Whoever said life was fair? Don't make me laugh."

"My life will be ruined," I said in frustration.

She shook her head, took a sip of her martini, and said, "You know I can't turn down this promotion. It's good money."

"I know," I mumbled, "but I don't want to go to a new school, and I don't want to have to try to make new friends."

I hadn't been the most popular kid in Greenville, Ohio, to begin with, but at least I had an order in my life. Same house, same school, and same friends my entire existence, which was eleven and a half years. I was used to it all. I had a routine. It was school, playing, reading, and one hour of TV, except in the summer when swimming replaced school.

My two best friends lived on my street, the library was a bike ride away, and I could count on Mr. Verly at the corner market slipping me a free pack of Juicy Fruit gum occasionally when I walked in to get something Mom had forgotten to buy at the Piggly Wiggly. I recognized every face in town, and they recognized me.

I sort of stood out. You couldn't miss me, what with the huge violet birthmarks splotted over half of my body, but since everyone had gotten used to it, I didn't think that much about it. I knew that moving was bound to change that. I was scared, so I took it out on Mom. She was all I had. I had never even met my father and I had no brothers or sisters.

"Can't you just get a better job here?" I asked.

"Ann Elizabeth Jones, we have discussed this enough, and you know very well that I have had every good job within thirty miles. The time has come to expand our horizons. Cleveland it is!"

She clapped her hands once, her perfect pink polished fingernails adding an extra flourish. "Big city, great job, nice house, lovely neighborhood. My goodness," she paused for another sip, "Rockefeller himself lived right there, practically in our front yard."

"Rockefeller, Smockefeller," I said.

She poured the last few drops out of the martini shaker. "I know it will be a big change, but it will be fun. You'll see. It'll be fun to have more money anyway. I'll get you a nice stereo."

Even the bribe didn't help much. "Haven't you ever heard money can't buy happiness?" I asked.

Mom took a deep breath. "Enough of that, young lady. I'm the one who told you that saying. Money can't buy you love, either, but I'd rather have it than not."

There wasn't much I could say to that. She'd won. "I guess I'll pack," I said as I stomped to my room. In our two bedroom, shag carpeted, ranch style house my footsteps didn't really stomp much at all. Nothing was going my way.

I threw myself on my bed to stare at the ceiling. I looked over at my Beatles poster and all the taped-up pages I'd cut out of Tiger Beat. It would be hard to get the tape off the back of the posters without ripping them. I would have to cut the rolled tape and lay it flat. Lumpy, but re-hangable. I had to keep my Beatles stuff!

They were mostly pictures of George Harrison, my favorite Beatle. Most of the girls liked Paul the best, but I wasn't most girls. The promised stereo would be some help, but not enough. I scowled some more. It was getting to be my most common expression. If I wasn't careful, I'd have permanent frown lines, like crabby Sylvia at the meat shop, but I was too miserable to care. My future looked bleak and I couldn't imagine otherwise.

I had one last day before the movers came, and I wanted to spend tomorrow with Francie and Marla, my best friends. I worked until bedtime boxing up the stuff of my life: my four troll dolls, my Ginny doll, my Barbie, Midge, Skipper, and Scooter dolls and their clothes and furniture, fourteen stuffed animals, including Lucky from 101 Dalmatians, and Rabby, my oldest bunny, a stack of 45s, my first and only album "Meet the Beatles," my light blue, musical jewelry box with the twirling ballerina who popped up on a spring when I opened the box, my framed Hollywood photo of The Wizard of Oz characters, and my Nancy Drews. I had already packed my

Companion Library Classics and assorted other books. I wrapped up my collection of little china beagles carefully in Kleenex, hoping they'd retain their toothpick thin tails and tiny paws on their journey to Cleveland, but they probably wouldn't.

Being eleven and a half, I was torn between still playing with my dolls and simply, maturely, displaying them. I did both. I liked to look at Barbie and imagine myself someday in the future being that stylish. I related more, however, to Midge's little sister, "Skooter," the least attractive of the bunch.

Down deep, I really wanted to be Barbie's little sister Skipper. She was my ideal of perfection, with her waist-long, silky honey-blond hair, blue eyes, creamy white skin, and adorable clothes. I barely allowed myself this fantasy because I thought it was ridiculous and therefore pathetic. Even if I wasn't a slightly plump girl with curly, brown hair and matching brown eyes, I had violet blotchy birthmarks all over the place. Skipper and I couldn't be more different. One glance in the mirror reminded me of what I was not and could never be.

The stain started at my right temple and, like a large ink spill, covered the right side of my face catching the outer eyelid and rounding the eye to mid-cheek, weaving near my mouth and back down my neck behind my ear. It spread in uneven patches down my arm to my knuckles, down my torso, hip, and leg, stopping only above my ankle, so I had two perfect, white feet.

They called it a port-wine stain. It looked like someone had poured thick violet paint all over half of me. It was impossible to hide. It was ugly, disfiguring, but no one had ever come right out and said it. Sometimes little kids might say, "What's that stuff on her?" and point or say, "Look at that kid!" while their moms shushed them, grateful their child didn't look like me. I was scary.

I knew the worst was yet to come when I moved into a new neighborhood with a school full of strangers. Everybody will stare, I thought. The freak show is coming to town and I am it. As I looked in the mirror, I saw the stain on my face reddening. They won't give me a chance. They'll be mean. My eyes reddened too, and tears glazed them. I'll never have friends again, I thought. I watched as the tears squeezed out and slid down one pink and one purple cheek.

I turned from the mirror, sat on my bed, and pulled out some Kleenex from the box on my nightstand to blow my nose and dry my

face, but my throat burned. Mom is such a jerk. I hate her. I hate her. It's all her fault. No wonder she's divorced. My father couldn't stand her either.

I raised my head. This surprised me. Mom always had said he left because he just wasn't cut out for marriage. That was vague enough that it could mean a lot of things, all which could lead to divorce. I had supposed that he left us when I was an infant because he didn't want a freak daughter, but maybe I was wrong, that it was Mom's fault after all. At least that made me feel better for a moment, until I got angry at her for driving him away.

Why can't she see what she's doing to me? It's so unfair I could puke, I thought, but I didn't mean it. I hate puking. I hated Mom, but not totally. She still had some good points, like taking care of me when I was sick. Puking made me think of that. My father, on the other hand, had no good or bad points as far as I was concerned. I never knew him and probably never would.

No one else I knew had divorced parents, but in my head I pretty much pretended he was dead. That made my mom a widow, which was much more respectable. Nobody ever asked me about him, and no one ever asked me about my birthmarks, and that was the way I wanted it to stay. In my new town, if anyone asked, I would lie and say my dad was dead, and if anyone asked about my birthmarks, I might just have to punch them. I never had punched anyone, but I am not ruling it out. I've always been pretty open minded like that.

I got ready for bed and lay down to read myself to sleep. Mom came in, but I wouldn't look at her.

"Night, honey," she said. I kept reading, ignoring her. "Oh, all right! If that's the way you want it. See you in the morning." She leaned over to kiss my cheek, but I turned away. The medicinal smell of the martini on her breath hung in the air. Yep. That was the way I wanted to play it.

I kept it up the next day, giving her the silent treatment. It really upset her, and I liked that she was unhappy too. My goal of the day was to spend time with Francie and Marla and continue to bug my mom until she decided not to move after all. It was a useless plan, of course. I'd been begging, pleading, yelling, crying, ignoring, and conniving for three months with no luck. As the moving date approached, I had only become more desperate and more miserable.

I decided to take a final spin around town on my blue-with-silver-fenders Schwinn. The August morning was overcast, the gray haze broken by scratches of stratus clouds. It was warm enough that I could wear my pedal pushers and a short-sleeved blouse.

As I rode around town, I silently said goodbye. “Goodbye Verly’s Market where I buy bubble-gum gold nuggets in a drawstring cotton bag! Goodbye Hamm’s Bakery with the best glazed donuts on earth! Goodbye Woolworth’s 5 & 10 where I picked out my Barbie doll, church gloves, and paint-by-number horses! Goodbye Baxter Elementary, where I learned to read and write and multiply and divide! Goodbye all my teachers, even the strict ones! Goodbye classmates! I’ve known most of you since first grade. Goodbye library, especially the mystery section! Goodbye Gershuh’s Restaurant and your homemade pie! Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye cruel world!”

It was like I was dying. Everything and everyone would be gone. Moving is only good if you want it, like my mom did. For me, with each goodbye, I felt the strike of one more nail in my coffin.

When I got back home, Marla and Francie were sitting on my front steps, each resting their heads on a hand, doing what looked like an imitation of “The Thinker.” Marla had her chestnut brown hair in the usual ponytail, and Francie had her dark auburn hair pushed back with a blue plastic headband. Both were in shorts, sleeveless blouses, and flip-flops. They lifted their heads and stood up as I rolled in the drive, braking with squeaky pedals.

“Geez, Annie,” said Marla, “where’ve you been? We’ve been waiting...”

“Forever!” said Francie, her dimples showing as she pouted.

I couldn’t answer. The thought of leaving them...

Marla must have seen the tears that were forming, and her voice got gentler. “Aw, we’d have waited all day, wouldn’t we?” she said looking at Francie.

“ ‘Course! Shoot, I’ve got nothing to do anyways,” Francie answered. “So what do you wanta do?”

Marla said, “I’m starving! Mom said to bring you over for lunch, being your last day and all. And you’re invited too, Francie, just ‘cause.”

“Cool,” said Francie.

“Super,” I said, brightening up. Marla’s mom was nice and

her kitchen was sparkling clean all the time, even with all her baking and home cooking. I loved going there. Marla's mom was way different from my own, the queen of the TV dinner with a side of grapes.

"We already told your mom," said Marla.

"She's packing like crazy. I betcha don't have much food anyways, huh?" Francie asked.

"Even less than usual!"

"Did you finish your packing?" asked Marla as we walked toward her house across the street.

"Yep. Boxes and boxes," I said with a big sigh.

"Oh! This is SO SAD," said Francie.

"Our trio is going to be just a duo," said Marla.

"And I'm going to be solo," I said.

CHAPTER 2

My New Neighborhood

“Ann.” I felt a hand on my shoulder. “Ann.” It was Mom. “I’m going now.”

“Huh?” I mumbled, pulling up the sheet. She had interrupted a good dream about ice cream and flying.

“I’m going to work,” she said. I opened my eyes. She had on fresh, pink lipstick and her hair was in a perfect flip. She looked pretty. She was pretty. It was her first day at the new job as office manager. She’d won and we were in the new house.

“Bye,” I mumbled.

“You sure you’re going to be okay?” I saw worry crease her brow. “I hate to leave you all day.”

I propped myself up on my elbows and said, “Aw gee, I can take care of myself.” I’d been taking care of myself forever. I’d had to be alone before, had to cook, do laundry, even shop, for years. She didn’t realize how often she’d been absent, how she’d fall asleep in front of the TV, or come home late from work and flop into bed. “I’m going to be in sixth grade next week. I’m not a baby you know,” I said.

“Oh dear. Oh, okay. Well, got to go. Love you. See you at five. Wish me luck!”

“Luck. Bye.”

She clicked off in her high heels down the stairs and down another set of stairs to the garage, which was attached to the basement. Click, click, and then the sound of her Ford Falcon convertible starting up and driving away. Good riddance, I thought. I shut my eyes, but the sunlight was pouring into my bedroom through the ruffled, white cotton curtains, the same ones from my old room. Getting back to sleep was impossible.

I yanked up the sheet to expose my feet, my two perfect, matching bare feet. I liked to look at them, the rest of me hidden under the cool, white cover. My feet weren’t too small or too large, the arches were just right, and I had lovely toes. It was a shame I couldn’t wear flip-flops year ‘round.

I pointed my toes, wiggled them, and crossed the big toes over and under the second toes. I made my toes dance and reach like baby birds to a worm. All those bones and muscles, all the patterns I

could make right, left, bent, and straightened, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't wiggle every toe individually.

My attention shifted to my room. It was still a mess because we'd only been in the new house for three days. The rest of the house wasn't much better. We had no pictures on the walls, and boxes were in every room.

I'd never seen a house like this before, but it looked a lot like all the others on the street. They all looked like something from England, though my mom called them "French Normandy." Rockefeller Smockefeller had them built in the 1920s in his Forest Hill development. He was going to build hundreds, but the Depression came and that ended that. All I know is each house came with a maid's room with its own bathroom, and I got that room!

My mom's bedroom had its own bathroom, too, and then we had two other bedrooms with a bathroom at the end of the hall for them. Then we had a powder room downstairs and one in the basement. I never saw so many toilets in my life!

My favorite part, besides having my own bathroom, was the breakfast nook, which had a built-in wooden booth. The dining room and entryway had beautiful tile floors, too. And the doorbell chimed a song: Ding dong doong dong, doong, dong ding dong. Mom said it was the Westminster chimes. I rang the doorbell a bunch until she yelled "Enough already!"

It was so weird living in this tall, old house after being in a ranch house my whole life. It was dark and heavy feeling, except for my sunny bedroom, the one place I wished was dark so I could sleep forever. I'd already met the next-door neighbors on both sides, and once was enough...no one my age, just a senior citizen couple on one side and a family on the other. The family had a five-year-old blonde girl, named Holly, and twin baby boys. At least everyone had been polite and not asked me about my birthmarks, so I didn't have to punch anyone, yet.

I got dressed and made myself toast with raspberry jelly and had a banana and a glass of milk. I finished off the bottle, so I rinsed it out and took it to the milk chute, opening the little door in the back hallway and putting the bottle inside to await the milkman. He would remove it from the outside chute door and replace it with a full, cold bottle the next morning, just like at my old house. I packed myself a bologna sandwich and a bunch of grapes in a small paper bag. I got

my bike out of the garage, placed the bag in the front basket, and pushed off. Today I would explore.

I passed some landscapers clipping hedges and talking to each other in a foreign language. Across the street I could see behind a house where a woman was shaking out damp sheets as she hung them on the clothesline. A young kid roller skated by with her skate key on a string around her neck, but she was so busy concentrating on avoiding sidewalk cracks, she didn't notice me cruise by. The sound of metal wheels on the smooth slate faded as I rolled on.

So far, so good, but when I turned my bike left at the corner, I saw the strangest thing I'd ever seen, and I've seen some weird stuff. I once saw a goat with two heads—I'm not kidding—but never anything like this. My heart about stopped and I screeched to a halt. Silently gliding down Glynn Road, a block ahead of me, was a black, horseless carriage, and in the back sat a dark figure, a gray shadow of an old woman. Okay. That was peculiar enough, but I swear, no one was driving! I stood gripping the bike handles tightly as the carriage soundlessly drifted out of my vision.

What in heaven's name WAS that? It made no noise. It looked like an enclosed buggy. Maybe it was a Model T. I'd heard about them, but it was 1965 already. How could someone still have such an old car? And who was that creepy figure in the back seat? Who was driving?

By the time my heart stopped pounding, my palms stopped sweating all over the bike handles, and I got up the courage to ride to the corner and look left, the noiseless vehicle and its inhabitant had disappeared. All I could think was I'd just seen a witch. Maybe she had a magic carriage instead of a broom, but she sure looked like a for-real, honest-to-God witch.

Oh, how I wished Marla and Francie were with me now. They'd say, "Let's find her! See where she goes!" and we'd all giggle and ride like the wind after her. Being alone in this new town was another story. I slowly rode down Glynn Road, looking into open garages as I went.



No one was driving!

There was nothing to see but push mowers, station wagons, and leaf rakes. All seemed normal. At the end of the street, I saw a steep hill winding down past Forest Hill Park. Maybe the witch went that way. I didn't want to have to ride down and back up that big hill anyway, or so I told myself, so I crossed the street to ride back on the other side.

I was both relieved and ashamed that I hadn't found the witch car. If I'd been with someone, anyone, it would've been different. Mom shouldn't have made me come here in the first place. East Cleveland, Ohio. What kind of crazy town was this anyhow? Magic cars and witches and I'd only been out of the house five minutes! The whole thing put me in a grumpy mood. I pedaled on, ready to go back home when I spotted a vacant lot, the only vacant lot left on the street. A "For Sale" sign gently wobbled in the breeze. There was a well-worn path through the lot leading to a big field behind the houses. I could see a woods back there, too. This seemed interesting.

Glancing around, I quickly got off my bike and walked it on the dirt path, sneaking just in case I wasn't allowed to do this. Just past where the green lawns on either side gave way to the wild, I pushed my bike into some scrub, took the lunch bag out of my front metal basket, and wiggled the bike down into the jungle so it was well hidden. Then I ran around the wild shrubs far into the field and sat down in a clearing, hidden from sight. Eventually, feeling more comfortable, I lay back on the crunchy grasses looking up at the blue sky and studying the fluffy cloud shapes. Cumulus. I saw a dragon, a bear, and a monkey-faced dog.

The scent of the grasses, earth, and August wildflowers soothed me as I lay there removed from time. Tiger butterflies were fluttering by, and little yellow and orange ones, too. I lay so still a rabbit came close enough that I could see its chest rise and fall with each breath, but when it saw me, it scampered away, white tail disappearing into the brush. It must have seen my gross birthmarks, I thought. Not even a rabbit would want to be around me, the girl with the stain. I scowled. It couldn't make me any uglier.

I was getting hot and itchy. Was it the grass or ants? As I put my hands behind me to push up, I felt something metal and cool. I picked at the sod it was buried in to discover a rusty key. It was heavy in my hand. I fished my napkin out of my lunch bag and began to rub the key. A layer of mud and rust came off. The top had

an ornate design of some sort. It once was a beautiful key, I thought, the key to a castle...or a jail? Who knows? I'm going to really clean it when I get home. I dropped it in my lunch bag.

I strolled toward the woods, stopping to pick and eat a few little wild strawberries and pausing to watch the butterflies dance. Even before I entered the woods, I could feel the air cool, like opening a refrigerator door. Inside, the sounds of my footsteps were muffled, cushioned by years of decayed leaves, bark, and logs turned into rich, brown humus. The air was moist with last night's rain and a mist had settled over the ground. A chipmunk twitched around a moss-covered tree trunk as I slowly walked in, and I could hear other creatures scuttling through the undergrowth.

Then I heard something from deep in the woods. A voice. Humming a song. "Mm mm, mm, ah....da da da da....da da da da..." It was getting closer. I surely did not want to be seen. I didn't know whose woods these were, and I didn't feel like being stared at either, but where could I hide? I wasn't deep enough in to escape into some brush.

I frantically looked around. There! There were two trees growing side by side, grafted at the base. They would have to do, as no other trees wide enough were close. I thought maybe I could wedge between them, squishing into the groove between the trunks. I put my left foot into the division, but it immediately got stuck. I couldn't help but let out a little gasp. It wouldn't budge! Gulp! I was imprisoned like a bear in a trap, though still standing, but it was difficult to stand and hard to balance. I had to drop my lunch bag, softly, but not softly enough. I had to hug the tree or fall. My hands and part of my arms would be exposed, but maybe, if I was still enough...I waited, plastered to the tree like a sad cartoon character. The humming stopped.

I could see through a thin space where the tree trunks separated. My grip tightened. I watched in disbelief as a dark figure emerged from the mist. The figure was clothed in black and getting larger and closer. It looked like a witch coming toward me. The

witch!

It was definitely a woman: an old woman dressed in a long black dress with long, black sleeves. Was it the light, or was that old lady gray? Gray as in almost blue? A white-haired witch with gray skin?

I frantically tried to yank my foot free. I could see her looking straight at my tree. Then she started humming again. The spooky lady used a walking stick as she made her way directly toward me. "... Da da da da! Surprise!" The witch peeked around the tree. I stared in amazement as she said, "That's not the Surprise Symphony, you know, but it should be! It's really Beethoven's 5th. I hum that so the forest animals know it's just me. Then they're not scared." Yeah, but I sure was! She grinned, the blue-gray wrinkles crinkling around her eyes. She took a good long look at me and my predicament. "Well, dear, it looks like you're stuck," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I managed to squeak out as I trembled. As I turned my face toward her, she could fully see my stain, and I could see her skin was truly blue-gray. I wondered how she ever got like that. She was tiny, no fat at all. She had a pointy nose, thin lips, loads of wrinkles, and wisps of white hair loosened from two white braids circling her head.

She pointed her cane at my foot and said, "First, why don't you see if you can untie your sneaker?"

I had no choice. If I could just get away before she put a spell on me. I let myself down as gracefully as possible, which wasn't so graceful at all. Twisting this way and that, I untied my shoe and wiggled my foot free. "Now yank out your shoe," she said. With a twist, the shoe was out. I sat on the tree root and quickly put it on while she looked down at me. Slowly I stood up. We were about the same height, meaning she sure was short for an adult.

"Thank you," I said. I tried to not to look her in the eyes, hoping that would keep her from hypnotizing me.

"Oh, you're welcome. And now you know. That's how I learned. Learn by doing, that's what Frank Lloyd Wright said.

Experience is the best teacher.”

“Uh huh,” I said, glancing around. Now that I had my shoe on, I could outrun her in a second and would have, except she seemed sort of nice.

“Hiding were you? I know plenty about that myself. I guess we have a bit in common, if you don’t mind my saying.” I stared at her gray hands and gray face while she seemed to be looking me over. “Of course, I’m eighty, and you look to be about eleven.”

“Eleven and a half, actually. Almost twelve.”

“Oh, yes. I remember counting halves and almos. Now I simply count decades!” Then she giggled.

Witches don’t giggle. They cackle. So she probably wasn’t a witch, just an old gray lady. I turned to face her and we were eye to eye—my brown eyes to her clear blue.

“I’m Essie. What’s your name?”

“Ann. Ann Jones.”

“Jones? Well, I’m a Jones too! Isn’t that a coincidence, though I doubt we’re related. There are many Joneses in the world, though none like us, I dare say.”

“That’s for sure,” I said.

Essie said, “Funny, I thought I knew all the Joneses around here, seeing as I’ve lived on this property all my life. Who are your people?”

“Uh, well,” I didn’t quite know what she meant about my people. I guessed it was old-fashioned talk. “My mom and me, we just moved here, to Brewster Road, but we’re from Greenville.”

“Ohio?”

I nodded. “Annie Oakley’s hometown.”

“Just you two?” she asked. I nodded.

“Only child, eh? I guess you could call me one now, too, although I once had a big brother.” She paused, looking at me tenderly, cocking her head. “I have an idea, Miss Jones. How’d you like to come and have tea with an old gray lady? My house is just over there.” She pointed north.

“Okay, I guess,” I shrugged. She was no longer threatening at all. I had looked her in the eyes and all I saw was kindness. She was interesting and sweet, plus I probably outweighed her by fifteen pounds, so I could hold my own should she turn nutso on me.

CHAPTER 3

Essie's Amazing House

"Just follow me, dear," she said. I picked up my lunch bag from the ground. She walked fast for an old lady, using her cane occasionally. The carving was a winding snake, with the handle being the snake's head. I noticed that under her long dress, she was wearing gym shoes. A little way into the field, she stopped abruptly and said, "Miss Jones, you could do me a great favor. I'd just love it if you could pick me a strawberry. I just can't bend like I used to. Well, I can bend, but it's the straightening up that is the problem! How about one for me and one for you?"

I was happy to do it. As we walked, I kept picking. The little berries were warm and tasted sweet, and each time Essie ate one, she sighed with pleasure. "Nothing like a wild strawberry right off the vine!" she said. "I'm enjoying these so. I thought I'd never have one again, so I had accepted their loss, but now this unexpected gift, well, it's a joy!" Then she looked up at the sky and said, "Aren't I the lucky one?"

I'd never heard anyone talk like her before. Accepting the loss? Being lucky? I'd never felt lucky about one thing in my entire life. I didn't get it, but I did agree the strawberries were yummy. We walked near where my bike was hidden and passed the spot where I had sat earlier. Right on the other side of the scrub, I was surprised to see a huge barn. "Wow! A barn! In Forest Hill?"

"From before all the other houses," she smiled. "We used to have horses, of course, but now it's where I keep my cars."

"You have more than one?" I'd never known anyone who had more than one car.

"Oh, yes. I have to because while one is recharging, I can use the other."

She saw the quizzical look on my face. "They're electric cars. A 1904 Baker and a 1918 Rauch and Lang. They're old, but run like a

dream. Quiet as can be, and they don't stink up the air like gasoline eaters."

My eyes widened. "I think I saw you earlier! Were you in the car a little while ago?"

"I was, so I guess that was me. I always create quite a stir when I do my errands. You see, I sit in the back and drive with a tiller, and it looks like no one is driving! Most people are too young to have seen a car like that on the road. I think of it as driving around in a history lesson."

"Yeah, I never saw such an old car," I said, and then I clamped my hand over my mouth, afraid I was offending her.

She smiled. "My goodness, I'm older than the cars. Born in 1885 and proud of it! Don't you worry about offending me because of my age. I equate being older with being wiser, and, therefore, I'm aiming for one hundred!"

The barn was a well-worn red with white trim. On the side of the barn, we passed a dusty, dirty window. I caught a glimpse of what looked like a horse stall, with leather straps hanging on the wooden slats.

"Is that a stall? Is that where you had a horse?" I said, peering in the window trying to see.

"That's the tack room. You wouldn't want to put a horse in a stall with a glass window. Their stalls were on the sides...nice box stalls. We had field horses and carriage horses. We even had a sleigh. It's in there somewhere still. Another day, Ann, and I'll show you. I don't have the key with me right now and I'm ready for some tea!"

We passed by the front. The huge, arched doors were closed tight and padlocked, the overhanging barn roof made of tin. A gravel drive curved in front and we crunched over it to the lane. Another driveway led to a small cul-de-sac around a circular rose garden, and to the right loomed a Victorian wood-shingled, two-towered mansion. It was brown with yellow trim. I stopped to stare. "Wow," I said. The only house that came close to that in my former town was the funeral home.

“The inside’s even better,” said Essie, eyes twinkling. She carefully walked up the stone steps, holding the railing with one hand. She unlocked the heavy wooden door, which swung open easily. As I stepped inside behind her, I felt instantly cooled, just like in the woods. “Would you like a little tour before tea?” she asked.

I nodded. From the vestibule, it appeared I had walked into a museum, a wonderful museum, and I was going to get a private tour! Light from a round stained-glass window made moving colored patterns dance on the walls, and the rooms seemed as lively as a bouquet of flowers. Essie said, “This vestibule floor is made from Italian marble.” I looked down at the pink and black tiles beneath my Keds. As we walked through the archway, she pointed up and said, “This is hand-carved oak. This entire house has oak trim, which I just adore. Did you notice the big oaks out front? They’re my favorite trees, I think.”

I shrugged and shook my head.

She asked, “Do you have a favorite tree Ann?”

I said, “I don’t know. Maybe a weeping willow, or a crabapple.”

“Mmmm,” she nodded. “Let me show you the living room. Mother used to call it the parlor, but I try to keep up with the times, well, except in furniture, as you can see.”

“I guess they’re all antiques, huh?” I asked as I looked at the claw-footed sofa, a china cabinet with curved glass sides, and two armchairs with wooden legs. What was interesting to me were all the small things displayed in the cabinet, on the window seat, and on the mantle. There were carved animals, statues, china vases, painted fans, and stuff I didn’t even know what it was.

“Let me show you some of my treasures,” she said. “Although I am morally opposed to materialism, it hasn’t stopped me from collecting arts and crafts from all over the world.”

I nodded, not quite understanding what she said. I knew what materialism was, wanting stuff. My mom loved material items, like her clothes and sporty cars, and I guess I did too. Easy for Essie

to say she didn't care about stuff, when she had so much. What's that?" I asked, pointing.

"It's a musical instrument from Japan," she said. She picked up a light wood and drum thing with two strings, and a bow, and started to play a three note tune. "That's all I know!" she smiled. That was fine with me because the notes sounded all weird, like they were out of tune. She smiled at my scrunched up expression. "Their music sounds atonal to us. It's like a whole other language!" she said.

"Over here is a little African elephant made of ivory, very old, and this is a Korean lacquer box inlaid with mother-of-pearl. That's a Chinese silk fan, and those are sandalwood carvings from India."

"You've been all those places?" I asked, amazed.

"Yes, and more. That ceramic vase is from Mexico, and that pot is from Taos, New Mexico. I've seen a lot of our country, and Europe, too, but I love the exotic places the most." Then she whispered, "There, being gray was exactly the same as being white. I was different from all of them, just as any white person would be." She smiled fondly. "I still remember the little Kenyan girl who asked me—in Swahili, but I understood—if she could touch my skin. So I held out my arm and she gently stroked it. Then she skipped back to her mother, having learned my skin felt just like hers."

I never thought about that before, but it was true my stained skin did feel the same as my white skin, and I guessed her gray skin was the same as any other old lady skin.

"Tea time!" she said, walking. "Over there is the library, and this is the dining room. The rug was made in Persia." We walked through a swinging oak door to a room full of glass cabinets. "This is the butler's pantry, where all the good dishes are stored. But we'll have our tea in the kitchen."

The white-tiled kitchen was dominated by a huge gas stove and a large refrigerator with silver doors. The ceramic double sink was the kind that had a built-in drain board.

"Have a seat," Essie said as she pointed to the light blue

painted table and chairs, and she started to prepare the tea. "I've got some very special tea from China. They pretty much invented tea long before the British knew of it." She paused. "Of course, the Japanese have those tea ceremonies in those wonderful little tea houses in the garden. Mmm. I wonder who drank tea first?" She looked back at me. "Do you know?"

"Heck no," I said. "All I've learned about is American history. Every year the three branches of government over and over, and that's about it. I have heard of the Boston Tea Party," I said hopefully, but after looking at her face added, "but that's no help."

"Pathetic, dear, simply pathetic! But you did learn to read, I'm guessing, and that's what encyclopedias are for. That's why I've read the entire World Book Encyclopedia, including updates. Unfortunately," she said tapping her forehead with a gray finger, "I can't remember everything. If you wouldn't mind, go around there," she waved her gray hand out and to the right, "to the library. You can't miss them...and bring in C and J. We'll get to the bottom of this! A watched pot never boils, you know, so it should whistle by the time you're back!"

"Okay," I said, interested to go into the library, but not caring if China or Japan had tea first. Old people are interested in the weirdest things, I thought. Even though the library had armchairs and a giant roll-top desk, I mostly noticed the zillion books on built-in shelves that went up to the ceiling. I found the two encyclopedias, but had to push a ladder on rollers over to reach them. Luckily, the ladder moved easily and it didn't fall over or break a lamp or a vase, like I was nervous it would. By the time I returned to the kitchen, the teapot was whistling. Within minutes, we were drinking green tea and nibbling Essie's homemade cookies.

"I call these health cookies. They're made with applesauce and oatmeal. You are what you eat," she said.

Brother, I thought. She sure is full of sayings. I still couldn't believe I was in this big, old house with a gray-skinned old lady. It was like being in a movie. It was after lunch time and the cookies

didn't fill me up. "Uh, would you like half of my bologna sandwich, or some grapes?"

"I don't eat meat, dear, but I'll share a few of your grapes. Thank you."

I didn't get the no meat thing, but I wasn't about to ask. Maybe old ladies aren't allowed to eat meat...or old gray ladies, anyway, I thought. I'd never known my own grandparents. My mom's parents had died and last I heard, my dad's lived in Chicago.

I put the grapes on the flowered cotton tablecloth and pulled out my sandwich, which was wrapped in waxed paper, and spread it on the table.

"I'll get a plate to spit the grape seeds on" she said.

"Thanks," I said. I didn't want to spit them on her dainty linen napkins, and my paper napkin was all rusty from that key. "I brought a paper napkin, but when I found an old skeleton key, I rubbed the key off with it and it's real rusty now."

"A skeleton key? What fun!" she said.

"I'll show you," I said as I dug it out of my bag. "Here it is."

I held it out. I was happy to show her something new, seeing that she'd shown me nothing but new stuff all day, but when she saw the key, her smile fell. She slowly put out her gray hand and I dropped the key in it. She stared at it, then squeezed it tight, then opened her hand again.

She looked into my eyes as before, but this time they were watery, far away. "You...where? Today?"

"I...I found it in the field, sort of half-buried, right past the barn there. I ..."

"Behind the barn? Our field?" She kept looking at the key. Then she reached in the pocket of her long dress and pulled out a shiny key. She laid them both on the table, and, except for the rust, they were identical. She looked at them and at me, not speaking. If it wasn't for the clicking of the wall clock, and the sound of birds outside the screened window, there would've been no sound at all.

It was too quiet. She was acting weird, over an old key. What

was the big deal? So she lost a key a long time ago. Old ladies. What am I doing with an old lady anyway? I wanted to get out of here.

“Uh...well...uh...I gotta go,” I said, repacking my sandwich and stuffing it into the paper bag. I’d leave the grapes and the key. It was as if I wasn’t there anyway.

“Oh, yes.” She looked up, but I could tell she was still in a fog. “I’m sorry. I... could you stop by tomorrow? Show me the spot? Three o’clock? Can you?”

I nodded. “Sure.” She looked back at the keys. “I’ll just go out here,” I mumbled, heading to the back door. She remained seated, shaking her head. Next to her, the encyclopedias sat unopened on the table.