



Parson's Corner

SMSMITH

Parson's Corner

is the background story of American-born Maria Lewis (1933-2014) who became the European singing sensation, Mya Loden in the 1950s/60s. This novelette explores the enduring theme of family ties that try to bind—of misunderstanding, estrangement, and longed-for reconciliation between a father and his gifted daughter.



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To loving parents, everywhere.

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When Maria stepped from the train, it was to feel eleven years drop from her life. For the past hour, she had fixed her eyes to the landscape as its increasing familiarity had rolled into view, but all seemed as she had left it—all except a few new-built homes framed within lush green meadows. But new homes in Parson's Corner told little of the passage of time. In Parson's Corner, house raisings were single-day events, when friends and neighbors gathered to work miracles. Maria's own childhood home had been raised in a single day.

She could not yet see that house of her childhood, but behind the station and one-half mile down tree-lined Parson's Road, she could see, in her mind's eye, the clustering of stately oaks

and the green and white house with its porch and shutter-fringed windows. She knew it rather foolish to remember that modest home as one she had built, but nonetheless her childhood feelings remained. Thus, how could that home refuse her now? There had not been a day of her eleven-year absence when she had not thought of Parson's Corner; of her parents and little brother sitting down to a simple meal at the precise hour of six; of bowed silence while church bells sang their distant evening round; of heartfelt grace for blessings voiced by her father.

"Oh, my father!" The words seemed rung from the depths of her. She looked around, but no one had heard, for her exit from the train had been upon the far end of the platform. Thus, standing outside the clustered groupings, she had gone unnoticed. She had not anticipated otherwise. She had not told anyone she was coming. No one could have known to greet her. And even had they known, would they—could they—have come?

She would walk the distance. She would leave her bag at the station and send for it later. She had not brought much on this journey home—though it was much more than when she had left. She had been so distraught that day, she had not even taken sufficient necessities.

Her father had said she would be dead to them if she left Parson's Corner—"In this way, for this purpose"—so let them enter her room, she had vowed, as one who was dead, leaving all behind, except the soul of her and that bursting dream that had consumed her days and nights.

On this return, she was glad the station clerk was someone she did not know; evidently a new-comer to Parson's Corner, so she did not have to endure a glance of startled recognition or a rush of questions. She would leave her bag, she said, and come for it later.

She could see the curiosity in the man's steady gaze, but her confidence, cultivated so well since leaving Parson's Corner, gave him no opening

to offer assistance. Her cloak too had been carefully chosen for its simplicity. She had tried to mute everything about the elegance of her life in making this journey back to her beginnings.

For eleven years she had walked, in her imagination, the path of this improbable return—down the street-side steps of the station, across the paved avenue and into Stationside Park. There amongst the towering elms, she would find her grandfather's bench with its engraved plaque. She would sit and trace with her fingers the words: *In memory of Roland "Parson" Lewis*. And underneath, she would trace the span of his years: 1870–1933.

That bench had become the focal point of a weekly, family tradition. There, her father had told her, during the many times they had sat upon that bench of a Sunday afternoon, how this grandfather who had died in the year of her birth had done more for the establishment and growth of Parson's Corner than any other. There, she had learned how this grandfather had

protested the nickname the locals had bestowed upon him—a simple farmer—but his protests had proven in vain. To them, he was “Parson,” because that is what he should have been, they said. To the young people, he became “Grandpa Parson.” The turnoff to his farm became known as Parson’s Corner, and eventually the name had been adopted for the entire village and surrounding area. It was so much better than “Mile 12 Siding,” everyone had said.

Over the years of her childhood, upon that bench, her father had regaled her with pioneering tales he had heard from his father’s own lips. The stories were branded in Maria’s memory. She considered those Sunday afternoons in the park as the best memories of her life—sitting upon her mother’s lap, and later beside her upon that grand bench, but always listening to the stories told by her father.

The bench was there as she knew it would be—comfortable, curving perfectly to the measure of

her back—unchanged when so much else in her life had. She could remember vividly the beginnings of that change; how she had come to this bench alone and sobbed as if her heart were breaking; and she had not known why. Until that time of weeping, she had been sweet, contented Maria Lewis, the pretty child with the remarkable voice—a voice that had charmed almost every village and church gathering in Parson’s Corner for as long as she could remember. Many had said, she’d been gifted the voice of an angel.

But that night of weeping, at barely thirteen years of age, she had sung a song of her own composition and seen the rapture and tears that had held her listeners entranced. The power of it could not be contained in her small body, so she had wept it out upon her grandfather’s bench.

Her mother had found her there and held her till it was over. Her mother had not asked why, but had wept in turn, quiet tears as if she too were weeping for something that would never be the same. No words were spoken between

them about that time, perhaps because neither knew how to address that nameless thing that had been stirred within.

Now, sitting upon this bench in the midst of her flooding memories, it occurred to Maria for the first time that perhaps her mother's tears that night were because she had sensed all that would come; because she had recognized the stirrings—the restless yearning—that would take her daughter from the gentle, pastoral existence of Parson's Corner. But in their shared silence, that stirring toward future things had remained nameless for almost two years—until Amanda Featherstone had come in the cause of her sister's Charity Concert in distant Bakerton.

Maria's father had objected to their request. It would mean two nights away, he protested. It would mean performing before strangers. It would mean Maria's leaving her mother, so near her mother's time of confinement. But strong-willed Amanda Featherstone had shamed him into reluctant consent.

There are God-fearing people in more places than Parson's Corner, she had said. There are charitable causes just as worthy in other places, too. And how could he, Matthew Lewis, possibly object to an overnight stay? Had he objection to Amanda's sister? Did he think Harriet Liston's home in Bakerton would harbor some unnameable corruption? Did he think she, Amanda Featherstone, their church organist nigh thirty years, incapable of adequate chaperonage?

So Maria had gone to Bakerton and it had changed her life forever. She never confessed the whole of it to her father. In truth, she had never even sorted the full sequence of it until that day—scarce two days past—when she had finally determined to return to Parson's Corner.

The momentous change had begun with what seemed an innocuous question as Maria sat beside Mrs. Featherstone on that first train journey away from Parson's Corner.

"Have you ever heard of Avinah?" Mrs. Featherstone had asked.

"Avinah who?" Maria asked, intrigued by the beauty of the name.

Mrs. Featherstone replied, "She has no last name. She is just Avinah."

Maria had not been able to comprehend it.

"She began with a gift like yours," Mrs. Featherstone continued, taking Maria's hand in hers and patting it. She had paused then—staring out at the rushing scenery. After some time, she turned back and kissed Maria's forehead before saying, "I'm telling you about Avinah, my child, because she will be guest star at the Bakerton Charity Concert. There you will see how she has not forgotten her beginnings; but more than that, I want you to witness how those beginnings have not smothered her either. That is what you will see tonight."

Mrs. Featherstone had seen the question flash in Maria's eyes, so she had hurried on.

"Avinah is in concert tonight—a concert of her own," Mrs. Featherstone said. "That is the reason she came to Bakerton—the reason she

can be guest at the Charity one tomorrow, but I think—and I hope I do not mistake in this—I think you should see her tonight.”

Maria had been astonished. “A whole concert by herself! The only singer?” she exclaimed. Mrs. Featherstone had laughed. “It is something you must see. I think you will find it marvellous.”

But despite the enthusiasm of her words, Amanda Featherstone had not been entirely comfortable with what she had undertaken. In the beginning, she had not even told her sister the name of the gifted child she had suggested for inclusion in the charity event. As the time drew near, she had only used the name Maria, and then had said that if Avinah could perform with only one name, so could this child; and considering the family’s reluctance in the first place, she felt it best they not divulge the last name. Harriet had been too preoccupied with other matters to feel sufficiently motivated to argue the point. So Maria was listed in the program with just a single name. That small fact would

come to cement even more the passion that was ignited to full flame that night in Bakerton.

Indeed, Mrs. Featherstone's prediction of marvellous did not begin to describe the wonders of Avinah's solo concert. Upon ascending the wide stairs of the Bakerton Theater, Maria had been transported into a world that even her imagination had not conceived. She had lost all memory of sitting beside Mrs. Featherstone. She saw, as if in vision, the desires of her life. That same sense that had moved her to weep upon her grandfather's bench two years before had flooded through her again, but this time—had she had the privacy for weeping—it would have been for joy, for in watching Avinah, Maria found vision for the passion within her soul.

The evening passed all too quickly; and it was long past midnight before sleep finally closed upon the churnings of Maria's mind.

The rehearsals for the Charity Concert that next morning had passed for Maria as if in a trance.

In her wonderment that she was standing upon the very stage that Avinah had graced the night before, Maria did not see the startled exchanges between the few who were allowed to be present for each participant's rehearsal. She heard their enthusiastic applause however, and it had pleased her, as it had always done in Parson's Corner. She was not aware of it, but she sang in rehearsal with a confidence that even Mrs. Featherstone had never seen before.

When Avinah arrived for her own rehearsal time, Mrs. Featherstone had asked if she and Maria could remain in the shadows to watch. As Harriet Liston's sister, she was granted leave and in that hour, Maria learned more about singing and performance artistry than she had ever dreamed possible. She could hardly refrain from bursting into duet with that voice that moved her so.

That night, the Bakerton Theater had again been packed, and the shouts and whistles for each

gifted performer had seemed unending. Maria's single number came just before Avinah's second appearance and final wrap up for the evening.

In her white muslin dress, with her hair in its usual chestnut-braided crown, Maria had walked out into the glare of stage lights; her youth so evident that no one but those few at rehearsal had known what to expect. In her innocence, she did not even know enough to be frightened. She gave her heart into her number and when the last clear, high-note ended, she bent in deep curtsy, only to freeze there within the stunned silence of the audience. Maria had never experienced such silence before and she did not know what to do. It seemed to endure forever until suddenly, the theater exploded. And just as suddenly, the thunder felt as terrifying as the silence.

In Parson's Corner, Maria had always been prepared with encores, for that had become a standard, but here, she was not prepared. The orchestra was not prepared and she had no idea

what to do. She saw Avinah waiting in the wings and her terror mounted. Even for Avinah's first numbers, they had not thundered like this.

Through glistening tears, Maria watched as Avinah entered the stage. She came, her hand reaching out toward the bewildered child. Maria grasped it as one drowning.

They stood together, center stage, as Avinah smiled and whispered, "Do you know my next two numbers?" Maria nodded without understanding as Avinah said, "Will you do them with me?"

Maria gasped at the impossibility of it, but her worshipful expression seemed answer enough. Avinah had held up her hand, but the crowd would not be silenced. She had smiled and stepped aside as far as Maria's desperate clutch would allow and then she had curtsied to Maria. The thunder had gone on and on.

At last, Avinah had signalled for the music; only then did the crowd quiet in anticipation of what was to come. They were not disappointed.

When at last, the second number ended to the same thunderous applause, and Maria had curtseyed till her knees were weak, Avinah had smiled and said, "Come, they'll never let you leave, so we will have to take it upon ourselves."

Together they walked into the wings, curtseying as they went; but before Avinah returned to perform an encore alone, she turned to a tall, bespectacled man and said, "When the curtain calls end, I want you to conceal this child in my dressing room. In the meantime, keep her safe from all questions."

It was a long time before Avinah's encores and all the curtain calls were done, but when the last curtain descended on the performers, Maria was hustled away into the grandeur of Avinah's dressing room as someone went in search of Mrs. Featherstone.

Maria did not know how well-protected she was from the crowds that flocked to see her, or of the excuses Avinah gave for her absence, but

Mrs. Featherstone heard and she knew, whatever Avinah's motives, there was none so grateful as herself. The extent of this reception had never been her intent and she was frightened.

When at last the crowds had gone, Avinah entered the dressing room and without preamble or introduction, she addressed Mrs. Featherstone. "Is this your child?"

Mrs. Featherstone was too upset to answer. She feared that Avinah considered herself to have been upstaged by this mite of a girl. She could only manage, "I am so sorry; I never imagined; I—" She left off, not knowing what to say.

Avinah turned to Maria and with gentleness asked, "How old are you, my child?"

"Fifteen, last month," Maria said.

With a deep sigh, Avinah sank beside Maria on the divan and taking Maria's hands in hers, she said, "You are too young, my dear. I want you to listen to me. Seventeen years ago, I was like you, and I would not listen, but I want you to listen. I want to promise you—if you will wait—

you must wait at least five years—you might not make the mistakes that I made. Your strength will be strength and not weakness. Do you know what I am saying?"

"I don't know," Maria said. "I never knew there could be a life like yours."

"Your mother should not have—" Avinah began, but Maria corrected her. She did not want Avinah thinking ill of her parents.

"My mother's at home—expecting a baby," Maria said, "and my father did not want me to come. But I wanted to come so very much when Mrs. Featherstone suggested it and—"

Avinah held her hand up against further explanation. She turned to the trembling accused and said, "And you are Mrs. Featherstone?"

"I'm Harriet's sister," Amanda said. She sounded contrite as she rushed on, trying to explain. "I have known Maria all her life. Her gift deserves recognition. She needs to be heard. I saw no harm in it. I thought this would be a wonderful opportunity for her."

"And her father did not," Avinah said. It was almost a question, but not quite.

"He is afraid of her gift," Amanda said with some spirit in her own defence. "If he has his way, her gift will never reach beyond Parson's Corner. And that is wrong."

Avinah closed her eyes as if in pain. Then opening them, she looked at Amanda and said, "Sometimes the wrong comes in not fearing enough such prodigious gifts."

Amanda had no reply, so with evident relief she took up Avinah's suggestion to go in search of Harriet who was attending to other duties.

"I'm not going to say more than I have said," Avinah began as the door closed upon Mrs. Featherstone, "but I want you to take this," and so saying, she pulled a gold-embossed card from her dressing case and handed it to Maria. "This is my agent's address and number. If ever you need me, you must call him and he will let me know. But please, please, remember what I have counselled."

Maria had taken the card with awe, rubbing her fingers upon the raised letters, reading the words aloud and feeling a joy and hope, she could scarcely contain. At last, she had carefully tucked the card into the pocket of her dress. She had scarcely done so when Mrs. Featherstone returned with Harriet. They had quailed under Avinah's chastisement.

This child was not theirs to promote, Avinah had said. This child belonged to parents whose decision that was. This child's gift was so far beyond her years, she would be crushed by the rush of it, if they took upon themselves decisions that were not theirs to make.

Avinah made them swear before her that they would fiercely protect Maria's identity—that they would cease their interference in something they could not possibly understand—and if they thought they did, then Avinah assured them, they did not. She told them in plain words what she meant. That the world that would inexorably come with exposing Maria's gift was not a world

for fifteen year old girls—it was not even a world for ones as old as thirty. It was a rapacious world where none escaped unscathed despite the gloss that masked a thousand sorrows.

In the energy of Avinah's tirade and with memory still fresh from the thundering adulation of the crowd for this unknown Maria, Amanda and Harriet knew things had gone far beyond their expectations. They were not sorry to give the promises Avinah demanded. They wished only it could all be forgotten. They were grateful for the charge that all persistent inquiries were to be directed to Avinah. She would take care of securing Maria's identity, as far as possible.

The following morning, taking precautions orchestrated by Avinah's security, Maria Lewis and Amanda Featherstone had returned the long distance home to Parson's Corner. Thus, Maria never saw the morning papers that Harriet Liston read; nor heard the swirling rumors that began circulating almost immediately; and she never knew of the hundred silent prayers that Harriet

offered in hopes that none would think to seek as far as Parson's Corner for a teenager named Maria. Somehow Harriet's fervent prayers were answered, but Amanda's were not.

Amanda had prayed on that journey home, that Maria would forget the crowds who would not be silenced in the thrill of hearing her voice. But she could see in Maria's face that she would never forget. Amanda had tried to explain the meaning of Avinah's words, but Maria was beyond caring for anything but the memory of standing stage center with Avinah, and feeling the electric surgings that plugged her into a world of unimaginable dreams.

For the next four years, Maria had struggled with the confusions and contraries of her young life. Why did she feel as if she had been plummeted from glory into a wrenching emptiness? Why had no one come to claim her—to discover her? Why did her community performances now feel so diminished, so different—so painful? Why had

the crowds thundered such acclaim and now life was nothing more than what had been before? It was like the frozen silence before that thunder of applause. But this silence was not ending. It seemed to go on and on.

It became so painful, Maria began making excuses not to perform. A sore throat. A cold. Sick headaches. Tiredness. Work. Anything to avoid the memories and emotions of Bakerton—the wrenching disappointments of everything thereafter. Even when pressed into performance, the soul of her voice was missing. Some began to think her maturing voice was losing its brilliance. But the knowledge of what could be was always in Maria’s mind and dreams. And in the touch of that gold-embossed card that marked place in her soulful diary.

There was also unrelenting memory of that gifted voice in Amanda Featherstone’s remorse.

Sometimes, when it could not be borne alone, Maria had tried to explain her hopes and dreams to her parents. Her mother had said little in those

years to confirm or deny Maria's feelings; she mostly just listened, pained by the moodiness of her once vibrant Maria; utterly perplexed as to how to reconcile what seemed irreconcilable. But Maria's father had said a great deal. It all sounded so much like Avinah's tirade, but in Christian dialogue.

Her father had read to her from the fourth chapter of the gospel of Matthew and thundered warnings against the bread, fame, and riches of the world. He read to her of Babylon and of casting pearls before swine. Maria countered with the parable of the talents and with Peter's vision of the clean and the unclean. Her father spoke of wise Solomon who lost his gifts to the world and Maria spoke of Egypt's Joseph who had not. He said that Joseph had had a saving purpose in going down to idolatrous Egypt, and Maria had asked how her father could be so certain that she did not.

In the end nothing was resolved between them, so Maria left off speaking of her desires,

because her father could not hear. In turn, her father let himself believe that she had given up her dreams of going out into the world—until that fateful day, one week past her nineteenth birthday, when she had done the thing he could not comprehend. She had left Parson's Corner.

She had not answered his last despairing, "Why?" because there was no answer that would satisfy him. Why does one feel driven to acts that seem senseless to others? Why indeed refuse the courtship of the finest boy in town? Why throw away her scholarships for nursing school? Why, of all things, become a stage idol? for that is what it would come to, he had declared.

That day of her traumatic leave-taking from Parson's Corner was still a fog of memory. The pain, the hopes, the worries, the ecstatic imaginings, the flooding tears were all mixed and churned together. She had clutched Avinah's gold-embossed card all the way to New York. Through the unexpected kindness of several strangers—whose names she had not even

asked—she had finally arrived to announce herself at the office of Avinah’s agent. She had prayed desperately during the long train ride, that Avinah would remember her. She had asked herself a thousand times what she would do if Avinah did not.

She never had to know for that gold card, which Avinah had so earnestly pressed upon her the night of the Charity Concert, seemed to open doors as if by magic. Before Maria could scarcely grasp what was happening, she’d found herself bound for Paris to join Avinah and begin a future that called so loudly, she could hear nothing else.

Maria shook off her memories for a moment and gazed about her. Beyond the towering trees of Stationside Park, she could see the familiar fronts of the stores that had provided her simple childhood needs and wants. From her place upon her grandfather’s bench, she could see the narrow frontage of *The Parson Weekly* and wondered if it

had ever mentioned her remarkable rise—how in the years since leaving Parson's Corner, she had become front-page celebrity news more times than she could count. Probably not, she decided, for her initial fame had been cultivated in Europe. In America, the land of her birth, she was viewed more as a foreign celebrity. But that had all been part of the calculation.

She could see the corner of the main street Mercantile where she'd had her first paying job. She suspected her first employers, like most everyone in Parson's Corners, would find the stage elegance of Mya Loden too far removed from the primness of Maria Lewis to be credible. Besides, she had gone to great pains that no one should ferret out her past and descend upon Parson's Corner with invasive questions and intrusive lenses. She would never do that to her father. She would never do that to Parson's Corner. She had done all she could to protect them from the unrelenting intrusions that Avinah's family and hometown had had to endure.

But there was one thing she could not protect them from and for that she hoped they had never heard of Mya Loden, nor connected her to their own Maria Lewis. That thing she had no power over was the gossip and scandal mongering that spun about the “incredible” Mya Loden, beginning even before Avinah presided over her official debut.

Had young Maria begun her venture alone, her remarkable gift might have ensured a swift rise to stardom, but under the tutelage of the already famous Avinah, Maria’s coming was as a sudden, compelling brightness in an already starlit European sky.

Avinah had known what would come, even before she finally bowed to Maria’s passion to begin. For many weeks, she had groomed the impatient Maria. Together they had chosen a stage name, though, like Avinah, Maria soon became known by Mya alone. And for the first time, Maria heard of the swirling rumors that had begun four years previous in Bakerton.

When questioned in those days and months after the Charity Concert, Avinah had said that a mistake had been made in exposing this child too soon; that when the young Maria was older and more prepared, she would reappear. In her own attempts to protect Maria from promoters and would-be agents, Avinah had claimed that Maria was already under contract. Her career would begin when the time was right. She never promised it would be in America. And in all the complexity of Maria's desires, they had decided Europe was best suited to their circumstances. Maria's gift for language soon manifest and she felt she was truly in a dream.

Yet some of the realities were not so dream-like. Avinah had said that if Maria were adamant about concealing her origins, the best course would be to neither confirm nor deny the old rumors, but to simply state that Maria's birth and background were private matters and to request respect. Thus, many chose to believe the rumors. It was almost laughable to Maria that people

should believe *her* to be the daughter of Avinah—a love child, as some took to calling her. For others, it was scandalous until they found reason in Avinah's gifts and fame to excuse the bearing of an illegitimate child.

But, as Avinah said, what more serendipitous account could they have possibly invented to protect Maria's past than to allow people to believe things that weren't true. They had sought to keep inventions to a minimum and it had seemed to work. People's desire to believe filled in so many gaps.

In the weeks of Maria's preparations, they had created a persona that expressed the soul of her. As she looked at herself those first few times—at the exquisite gowns, the hairstyling, the make-up—she had felt a flood of recognition. This was no facade, but the expression of her calling. The braids, the freckled face, the simple muslin had been the facade. She had always felt elegant and realized that had been, in part, her weeping at

age thirteen over unnameable desires. She had felt so at odds with the strictures of the many pastoral expectations and had not even known it. But she knew, in the tutelage of Avinah and in self-recognition, that her father would see in her the decadence of all he feared in the world beyond Parson's Corner.

If only her father could have heard Avinah's repeated counsel. She had warned Maria of the emotional highs and lows that seemed to plague so many gifted artists; how adulation could warp reality; how enticements and temptations could make one forget the things of most worth. She knew whereof she spoke, Avinah said. That glory seeking was not self-rewarding, but like threads of tinder. She said that she saw in Maria a few threads of self-seeking; that if Maria were not unrelentingly vigilant, crowds and fans would prove a flaming candle. So Avinah had given Maria an engraved locket. She had made Maria promise to read the inscription out loud, every day and in every concert dressing room. It read:

"It's not about you.
It's about God and gifts."

Maria thought too, if only her father could have talked to Malcolm and Rosamond, the grey-haired couple who tended to her needs, whether in her small Paris apartment or her New England country home. They could have told him that despite the gossip sheets, there was no decadence in Maria's life. Her passion was for her craft and she was rock solid, but Malcolm and Rosamond knew only the rumored history that Avinah and Maria acquiesced to, so they could never witness the truth to grieving parents.

As Maria sat upon her grandfather's bench in the dappled rays of the afternoon sun, she thought again of her mother's weeping on that day so long ago. Perhaps in such weeping, her wise mother had begun building the strength she would need to let Maria go. But at the time, in the face of Matthew's bitter pronouncement

of their daughter's death, her mother's seeming acquiescence to it had seemed unfathomable and deeply uncaring. Except, Maria knew her mother loved her deeply. They had always been the best of friends. Perhaps it had been the gift Maria needed to leap into the vast unknown. If her mother had pled for her to stay, Maria doubted she would have had the strength to go. But her mother had not. She had stood silent and quietly weeping, thus Maria's passion had burned bright enough to get her on the train to New York, and thence into all that followed. But she had left a note. She had written: "Don't worry, Mother. Avinah said she would help me, if ever I needed. I will love you always. Maria"

The anger was long gone and soon the silence would be broken too, though Maria knew it might have lasted, perhaps forever, had she not married her beloved Asher. She had longed many times to break the silence her father had commanded; to write to her mother, to her little

brother—now an unimaginable fifteen himself; to remember with gifts their birthdays, their anniversaries, their Christmases; to send them gifts for no reason at all. But she didn't know how to reconcile her life's calling with her father's command. He had said that as long as she remained in the clutches of a dissolute world, he did not want to know anything about her life. He did not want to hear from her; he did not want to be reminded. And if she had any shred of respect left for this family and life she was forsaking, she could at least honor him in keeping silent about them and with them. That was the last and final thing he would ask of her, he had said.

So Maria had kept the silence. But on birthdays, Christmases, anniversaries, and sometimes, for no reason at all, she would buy gifts to give anonymously to others in silent memory of the ones she still loved. Sometimes they were expensive gifts; sometimes simply flowers sent to a lonely figure on a park bench.

It was through one of her gifts that she had met

Asher Lee. It had been her father's birthday and Malcolm had driven her in search of a prompting. That's how she had always tried to give her gifts. This day, it had come in a small town, an hour's drive from her country home. Directing Malcolm to pull to the curb, she had watched a young couple. The woman was crouched beside a wheelchair where her companion sat—a sheaf of papers upon his lap. She was speaking earnestly while he listened. At last, he nodded and she arose to wheel him to the entrance of a modest brick building. By then, Maria was already crossing the street. When she reached the glass doors of the small credit union, the couple was already partially through, but Maria held the heavy door and followed them in. She heard them ask to speak to a loan's officer. In her turn, she asked to speak to the manager. So it was that on Maria's father's sixty-fifth birthday, Asher Lee had directed his loan's officer to grant whatever loan the young couple was requesting. And so it was that a young war amputee and

his wife left their appointment, knowing their loan request for sufficient to purchase a thriving saddle and shoe repair had been granted, though they would not know for another week, that their loan had been underwritten in full—a gift from an anonymous donor.

Even when Maria had removed her scarf and sunglasses, Asher had not known who she was for he did not attend much to the music scene, but Asher recognized the name when she gave it, requesting anonymity.

There had been a spark of something though in their meeting. Asher had glanced at his watch and seeing how the noon hour had come so fortuitously, had invited Maria to lunch. She had accepted.

Over the next four months their interest had deepened beyond friendship. They had explored all the pros and cons of a life together. It would not be easy with her career and profile and his preference for the quiet, simple life, but they had agreed, their first priority would be to

make it work. It would soon be time anyway, Maria decided, to scale back her tours and performances.

She had revealed only a portion of her past to Asher—that her real parents lived; that her father had rejected her life choices; that she had kept silent about her family and hometown, both in obedience to her father’s request and to protect them from a publicity they did not want. Asher said, he would not press her for more than she felt able to share.

In the short weeks of their engagement and in the fifteen months since their marriage, Maria had convinced herself, a thousand times, that there was no option to the silence. She thought she would have to go on forever, living her life, unable to fully share her past. She had thought so, until the doctor’s confirming test. It had been agonizing—to feel in those moments of supreme joy, a wrenching and overwhelming sadness.

How could she bring a child into the world and deny its living links to the past? Only her

family could give this child living links, because Asher's parents were truly gone. She had visited their graves and felt deeply the loss of never experiencing the goodness that Asher described.

The desire to raise this child with more than pictures and grave markers from Asher's side became almost unbearable. If she did not attempt reconciliation, there would be nothing but words to share, for she did not have even pictures.

She knew she wanted to sit in coming years upon this bench that honored her grandfather, with this child on her knee, with face turned toward the stories of its fathers and mothers. She wanted this child to feel its grandmother's arms. She wanted this child to know and love Parson's Corner as much as she did. And she wanted to tell the story of her childhood home. She wanted to help tiny fingers trace out those letters her father had carved and burnt deep into the quaint sign he had hung between white-washed posts at the entrance to their home. Words carved in child-like script, "The House that Maria Built."

Her father had carved those words and for years she had felt them to be true. At five years of age, she had stood with her bucket of nails, handing them in swift rotation to her father. She had held his hammer; had carried water to quench his thirst; had focused to anticipate his every need. Beside him and a dozen others, she had carried armful upon armful of scraps and debris to the salvage and burn piles. She had polished the inside of new windows to transparency while he and others painted the last outside coat. She remembered, as though yesterday, the feelings of pride and usefulness that had welled within her as her father praised her every effort and hung that sign for all to see.

In those feelings, she had finally revealed the full details of her past to Asher. He had wholeheartedly encouraged her to make the return journey. He would follow on the second day, unless she sent word that there was no purpose. Then she would return to him, having done all that she could.

Her long reverie was shattered in the hesitant pronouncing of her name.

"Maria?!" the voice said, and Maria looked up to see a grey-haired Amanda Featherstone, standing uncertainly upon the path.

Maria removed her sunglasses and slipped the scarf from her hair as she smiled.

"Yes, Amanda, it is me," Maria said cheerfully and then watched in dismay as Amanda broke into sobs.

Maria glanced quickly around for help, but there was no one else in the park. She pulled Amanda down to sit beside her and caressed Amanda's shoulder until her sobs quieted.

At last, Amanda spoke. "I have lived with the guilt of your leaving for so long—" She paused striving to hold her composure, but Maria did not speak for she could see that Amanda had more to say. "Every single day for eleven years, I have walked past this bench before going home, and begged in my heart for you to be here. Have

begged for the chance to say how sorry I am that I interfered. How sorry I am that—”

In those words, Maria understood the wrenching sobs and interrupted. “Amanda, please, don’t be sorry. Sometimes, somehow, some of our wrongs seem to work toward right ends. I really believe that.”

Maria touched Amanda’s chin, nudging it up so she could look into her eyes. She spoke on. “I have the life I was meant to have. How can there be guilt in that?”

Amanda cleared her throat. “Because we never talk of you; we never see you—it’s like you never were. And that’s wrong, that’s wrong.” She was again near tears.

“Amanda, I know that everything isn’t all right, but so much is. So much that I wouldn’t have, if I had stayed.”

Amanda spoke, “I have heard so much, yet know so little. I have feared you had forsaken everything Parson’s Corner stands for. But then I read of your marriage and I hoped—” She

paused not knowing how to express her fears.

Maria smiled. "Amanda, I have stayed as true to Parson's Corner as if I have never left—whatever the gossips say. The only thing I am truly sorry about is the way I left. But I have pursued what I had too, and in doing that, I have never shamed Parson's Corner. It will always be the core of me."

Amanda gazed upon Maria for a moment and then she said, "Does your mother know you are here?"

Maria shook her head. "Not yet," she said, "I came on impulse. It's just something I had to do."

Amanda gazed a moment longer and then she said, "You're expecting a baby, aren't you?"

Maria laughed. "Laws, Amanda, I've scarcely known a month myself."

Amanda said, "I've always been able to tell. And so has your mother. I can't tell you how emotional this will be for her. She has stood by your father when I would have gone berserk."

Maria laid her hand on Amanda's. "Please, I don't want you to judge either of my parents. Had they not been precisely as they were—even my father—I doubt I would have had the strength I needed, to do what my heart told me to do. And though it has not always been easy, I believe now, that maybe I had the very parents I needed."

Amanda's voice took on a touch of anger. "Then why did you make up that cockamamie story about being the love child of Avinah, of all stories; as if we—"

Maria raised her hand against Amanda's rush of words and spoke firmly, "We didn't make it up, Amanda. It started the night in Bakerton. For four years, she faced questions about me, till at last, I reappeared and we let the rumor stand, for the very reason of protecting my family and this village from the inane, awful barrages that sometimes accompany fame. I didn't want anyone, especially my family, to suffer any more than they already had by my decision. Parson's

Corner does not need—does not want—to be known as the place of my birth. I choose to take the consequences of fame, but I did not think it fair to choose for this place. And had Parson's Corner wanted to acknowledge me, they could have. But as you said, No one talks of me—undoubtedly in respect of my parents—and that's OK, even though people don't know who I truly am. It's OK because I know, and I love Parson's Corner, and I would never want this place poked and prodded and peered at by an endless line of strangers because of me. And I'm not being boastful, Amanda. But I cannot do what I love, what I have to do, without getting some of the debris that comes with it. If I could perform for weeping, cheering crowds and then go home to blessed anonymity, I would do it in a second, but I can't. Fans are a fact of my life. But I'm not asking they be a fact of life here. It's as simple—as complex—as that."

Amanda smiled, but her words were tinged with impatience. "You remind me of your father;

God forgive his stubborn soul."

Maria sighed. "How are they? And my little brother? In some ways, I'm terrified to leave this bench and go—to I know not what."

"Your parent's are a little greyer, like me," Amanda said, "but that's about all. And your brother, a whole lot taller. He's enormously like your mother in his humor, but so like your father too, in many ways. And though I hadn't thought of this till now, yet I'll say it. I believe your brother is exactly what your parents needed to survive the loss of you."

Amanda finally broke the silence provoked by her words. "Come," she said, "I should not keep you from your family a moment longer. I'll drop you off. I'm on my way home, too."

They retrieved Maria's bag and travelled the half-mile so rapidly, she had no time to collect her thoughts, except to ask Amanda to keep the news of her return quiet for now, and to drop her at the road so she could walk in alone. As they stopped on the grass verge of Parson's Road,

Maria could not help herself. She turned toward the weathered posts that had held the sign, "The House that Maria Built." But the sign was gone.

She should have known it would be, yet she closed her eyes at the grief of it. Whenever she had thought of home, she had seen that rustic sign hanging at the drive's entrance. It had held for her the hope and promise of reconciliation. But it was gone.

Amanda saw the pain in Maria's face. She stroked Maria's arm and said, "He took it down the day you left. Your mother told me, she begged him to leave it, but he said, he couldn't bear the memories."

Amanda gave a disgruntled sigh and continued, "But you ask me, those empty posts have caused more unnecessary tears than if he'd left the whole bloomin' sign up."

Maria couldn't help but smile at the disgusted frankness in Amanda's voice. "Thank you, dear Amanda," she said. "For the ride, and yes—even for Bakerton."

Amanda sighed again as Maria retrieved her suitcase from the back. "God's blessing in this," she said and then added, "If you need, you're always welcome at my house. Otherwise, I'll drop by tomorrow." She put her car in gear and proceeded on.

Maria knew her mother would probably be preparing supper, facing the back garden, so she would not see Maria's approach. She would have no warning before opening the door to find her long-absent daughter, suitcase in hand, upon her porch. Her father would be out in the fields or in the back shed fixing something as usual, waiting for the supper call. Joshua would probably be with him, the son who had made his life bearable.

Maria felt a surge of love for Joshua. When she had cried that day of her leaving, she had hugged him so tight he could scarcely breathe, but he had patted her back with pudgy, four-year old hands and said over and over, "Don't cry, Maria. Don't cry."

He had tried to comfort her, not realizing she was giving him a final hug; that she wouldn't be returning as usual from her clerk's job at the Mercantile to find him waiting joyfully upon the porch. When he could see her begin her walk down the drive, he had always run to greet her, babbling out his excitements of the day. So when he had said, "Don't cry," she had cried all the more, all the way up the drive and all along Parson's Road. And silently, a good share of the way to New York.

As Maria walked down the drive, it seemed that everything was the same, except perhaps there were more flowers. Yes, the flower beds had been widened and there were new ones. There were even pansies—her favorite pansies—all along new beds that bordered the gravelled path that led round to the back. And a mass of sweet peas along the south wire fence near the old home-made swing-set. And the trees. They seemed to tower beyond her expectation.

It wasn't till Maria turned, sweeping it all into her gaze, that she saw the young man standing in the shadow of the house near the corner path. He was leaning against the rail fence, his arms and chin resting on the top, as if he had been watching her progress, all the way from the turnoff.

Her first thought was that he would not remember her, for he'd been but four. And yet, she was afraid—so afraid he would be angry if he remembered at all. Perhaps he would turn away, refusing to acknowledge her presence.

She couldn't seem to frame the words to introduce herself, but he spoke, obviating the need.

"I've missed you, Maria," he said.

"Oh, Joshua," she cried, dropping her case and running across the grass, her arms wide. He strode to meet her. It seemed like a repeat of their parting scene, except that Joshua was a good four inches above her and his once pudgy hands now big enough to almost cover her back.

At last, when he pulled out of her embrace, he gave her a crooked smile and said, "I don't remember you being so scrawny."

She laughed, for the relief of Joshua's welcome was indescribable.

"Dad's in the shed," he said. "And Mom's in the kitchen, so how about we go first to the shed—" he held up his hand as Maria opened her mouth to protest, then leisurely added, "by way of the kitchen."

Maria smiled in the midst of her deep sigh. Joshua's sense of humor was indeed very like their mother's. She sensed he was trying to ease, with humor, the fears that must have been so evident in her halting progress down the drive.

"I am so afraid of this," she said.

Joshua replied, "I can't speak for father," he said, "but mother told him—after she read of your marriage—though I don't think she has told him of that yet, but she told him, if you ever returned, she would welcome you with open arms; and that she hoped he would be able to

accept you too, but that she would leave it up to him. As far as I know, Mother never told him the things she read and heard about you, but sometimes, she told me."

Maria winced and Joshua hurried to add, "Only the true stuff. Only the true stuff."

He smiled and Maria caught a glimpse of the impish four-year old she remembered so well. Then, just as with Amanda, the words he spoke next were totally unexpected. "I'm going to be an uncle, aren't I?" Joshua said.

Maria's jaw dropped in surprise for the second time. "Good grief," she said, laughing, "what is with everybody?"

Joshua grinned. "Mom said it would be the most likely thing to bring you home, so she and I have been praying ever since she read you were married. So you see, you didn't have a chance. We had it all planned."

Maria shook her head in amusement. "Then I had better go tell her before she's the last to know, hadn't I?"

As they fetched Maria's bag and entered the house, they could smell the scent of fresh bread mingled with a strong fishy odor. Joshua sniffed the air with gusto. "That's my morning catch," he whispered, and then as he peeled his boots off with his toes, he called out, "Mom, could I invite a friend for supper?"

"If you mean that old raccoon, the answer is no," their mother said.

Joshua winked at Maria. "A girl friend, Mom," he said.

There was a slight pause before their mother said, "Oh!" and they could both visualize the widened eyes and raised brows.

They could hear her footsteps as she crossed the kitchen floor. Maria felt her own eyes widen in suspense as her heart took to beating a frenzied rat-a-tat.

When Diantha switched on the hall light, flooding the dimness where they stood, her breath came in gasps. "Oh ... oh ... oh," seemed the only word she could say, as she frantically

wiped her fish-batter fingers upon her apron, while at the same time, rushing toward them, the tears gushing.

"Maria, Maria," she cried, as she stroked her daughter's face and hair in stunned disbelief. Then she was laughing as she tried to pick fish batter out of Maria's hair and from the fabric of her cloak.

"I'm sorry," she said, between laughter and tears, "but you both deserve to be fried for shocking me this way." And then she was hugging Maria again. "Oh child, if you could only know how I feel." But she was deflected from her course by Joshua's practicality. "Mom, are you burning my fish?" he said.

Maria found herself tugged with laughing haste into the kitchen that held uncountable memories. The lino was new, the paint fresh, but otherwise all seemed the same.

"Joshua, set a place for your sister," their mother commanded as she split her focus between Maria and her pan of sizzling fish.

She explained immediately that they would wait for supper to ply Maria with questions. "I want your father to hear it all, so for now, I'll bring you up to date on Parson's Corner."

As Diantha had always been a gregarious soul, she was full of eleven years of news. They were only vaguely aware of the distant church bells chiming the hour as she continued her news. She was not nearly through, when Joshua spoke, "Uh, Dad's turned out the lights," he said.

"Oh, dear. He must wonder why supper's late," Diantha said. She squeezed Maria's hand and hurried out the screen door. Maria and Joshua could hear their mother's voice in the cooling air of the evening.

"Matthew," she said in her gentle voice, "our Maria has come home."

There seemed no reply so their mother spoke on. "We're not asking any more than you can give, but she's in the kitchen now. I haven't asked her plans, but I imagine she'll be staying a few days."

"I'll be in shortly," their father said, without acknowledging the news he had just received. "I'm needing to check the irrigation."

They all knew he'd been headed in, but that now he needed time to prepare himself. They heard their mother say, "Will ten minutes give you time?"

"I think so," Matthew replied, and then they listened to the crunch of his footsteps across the gravel as their mother reentered the kitchen.

They didn't voice this understanding concerning their father. He had never been good with emotions but they had known in the things he did, how much he loved them: in the sign he had carved and hung at the roadside for Maria; in the birdhouses he'd crafted; the fishing trips together; the home-made swing set; the tree house; the horse cart he'd made.

Their mother had said more than once, "Your father says with his gifted hands what he cannot say with words. You will just have to accept him as he is."

But in that last terrible month before Maria's leaving, she had cried to her mother, "If I have to accept him as he is, then at the least, he can do the same for me."

And all her mother had said, was "Perhaps someday, he will find the means."

The old clock notched into the half-hour when their father came in. He acknowledged Maria with a brief nod as they took their places, almost as if nothing had changed in eleven years.

Diantha, Maria, and Joshua carried the conversation as in times past. Matthew said very little, but that was not unusual. He'd never been a man of many words, except when telling the stories of his father, but he stayed and he heard the answers to the many questions Maria was asked. They were not questions about her career directly; rather about where she lived; where she had travelled; about Malcolm and Rosamond, when they learned of them; and of course about Asher.

She told them how Asher was the middle, between a brother and sister; how he was a small town boy, too; how he loved the simple, quiet life, and was a rock of normalcy—a true miracle in her life. She talked of the altruism that Asher's father had instilled in his children; and how she had found, in every place she had been, enclaves of value that reminded her of Parson's Corner.

She told them too, that Asher was hoping to meet them, in two days time, if they wished—if things worked out. And her mother said, they wished it very much.

Diantha had not yet spoken of the baby, so Maria didn't speak of it either. It did not seem the time, but after, when the dishes were done, and she was alone in the guest room—once the room of her childhood—Diantha came and they talked. "I want you to be the one to tell your father," Diantha said. "I think it might begin the peace you both need, so I want you to be the one to tell him."

The following day had flown by full of the thrill of working again beside her mother: fresh-baked buns and apple pies for the library bake sale; bean and berry picking from the back garden; and a dozen other daily farm necessities consumed her time, including Amanda's visit; but always Maria was conscious of the need to find her father alone. It wasn't until late afternoon that she was able to slip away. She found him in the shed, fashioning a halter from a length of rope. He looked up at her, but went on with his work.

"Father, I know you can't understand why I felt so driven to do what I did, and I don't know if there is anything I can say that would make it understandable. But there are some things I want to say. I'm not asking you to respond. I'm asking only that you listen."

Her father worked quietly on, so Maria continued. "I want you to know I have never strayed from the values you and mother taught me here in Parson's Corner. They have been my great

treasure. I know you said that the last thing you would ask of me was to honor the silence between us. I have done that for eleven years. But there has come into my life something that I feel compels me to a higher honor than the one you asked. I suppose what I'm trying to say, is that honor may not always mean strict obedience."

She paused, wondering if she dared say what was in her heart. She continued. "I know I didn't obey you when I left Parson's Corner, but I felt that in honoring your wish for me, I would be dishonoring myself and you too, in a way I cannot adequately explain. But there has not been a day of these eleven years, when I have not thought of you and mother and Joshua, and of Parson's Corner. And though you may not understand or approve of the career I have chosen, yet, I have never done anything you would ever be ashamed of."

Her father worked on as if she were not there, struggling to explain the soul of herself. But she knew he was listening. She also knew, the only

words he had ever been good at were in those stories of his father. He'd been like a different man in those times of telling.

Maria continued. "Father, the best way I know to honor you—in the differences we cannot seem to bridge—is in giving my children what you and mother gave me. I want them to grow up knowing you. I want them to grow up loving Grandpa's bench and the stories we love."

Her father worked on. "Father, I want to know how you feel—if I can bring my baby home?"

When at last her father spoke, he did not look at her and he did not cease his work. "Your Mother knows what I feel, Maria. It will be best if she tells you."

Maria couldn't understand. She forgot her promise that she would only ask him to listen. Her frustration sounded in the words. "Father, can't you even say yes or no?"

Her father looked at her then and with his voice breaking on the last words, he said, "I have listened, Maria. I have listened."

There was something in the breaking of his words that opened Maria to the realization of much of their unresolved conflict. If her father had never accepted the enormity of her passion, she, in turn, had never accepted the core of his limitations.

"I'm sorry, father," Maria said. "Whatever you are able to give; it will be enough."

She saw her father turn away to conceal the emotions he could not bear to display. She left him then, closing the door softly behind her.

She found her mother on the front porch snapping beans and joined her. They worked in companionable silence for a time listening to the soothing sounds of the rural landscape. At length, her mother spoke. "He's OK with your coming home, Maria. It might take him time to adjust, but it will come."

After a time she spoke on. "It's hard for a man to lose the biggest part of his heart, Maria. And whether you know it or not, that's what you were."

"He has a funny way of showing it," Maria said.

"No, Maria, he doesn't," her mother said. "He has a frail human way. He wanted the best for you, and he thought you were choosing the worst—the path most calculated to destroy you and the enormous gift God had given you."

"He could have trusted me," Maria said.

"Yes, he could have," Diantha said, "but there is so often an Esau in the mix, if you understand me."

"I haven't sold my birthright, Mother. I told him that in so many words," Maria said.

"Which was the thing he most needed to hear," Diantha said.

Then, after another slight pause, Diantha continued. "And this, I think you need to hear. Your father sensed that the silence he demanded of you—the death you imagined you had experienced—was the thing most calculated to keep Parson's Corner forever in your thoughts. That, in some symbolic way, you needed to feel what

dying was like to keep you alive. I'm not saying this very well, but had you been able to write or call or visit at will, or been rescued from unwise choices, would you have valued the truths you'd been taught in Parson's Corner? Would you have cherished the things your father believed—no, I must rephrase that—the things he knows to be of greatest worth?"

Maria opened her mouth to say how Avinah had often used those very words—"The things of greatest worth"—but Diantha stopped her. "No Maria, let me finish. We waited so many years for a child—for you—and then so many for Joshua. He loved you so much and was so incredibly afraid because of your gift. And there is a reason."

Diantha paused again, closing her eyes before continuing. "I don't know if you ever wondered why your father never spoke of his mother. Perhaps he should have. It's not because he didn't remember her. It's because of the pain; because he remembers too much."

She shook her head at the memory. "You don't know this, and neither does anyone in Parson's Corner, as far as I know. It all happened before your Grandpa Parson came here, but your grandmother had a voice—an incredible gift—and a passion like yours. She was discovered, as they say, the year after your uncle Roydon was born. But within months, she became caught up in—" she paused. "I won't go into the details—they're not important now—but as young children your father and uncle came to witness things children should never have to witness in a parent. She was so gifted, but so naïve. So deluded by some who claimed to have her best interests at heart. And eventually, so overwhelmed. Your grandfather covered for her, misstep after misstep. They rescued her so many times—till the very end. She was only thirty-three. That's when your grandfather brought his boys here. It wasn't much more than a whistle stop then, serving the farmlands. But there is no better place in the entire world, even with all our faults."

"Why didn't father tell me this?" Maria cried. "Why didn't you? Why was I not—"

Diantha cut in, "Because you needed to make your own choices—pursue your own life, not overlaid by your grandmother's—for good or for ill. We simply didn't know how you would have viewed your gift had you known; how the pursuit of hers had so damaged her; how so many suffered. It was such a pain-wracked story. And I don't even know the tenth of it. Your father didn't know what to say; so we said nothing. ... Maybe we were wrong."

Finally Maria spoke. "I honestly don't know. It might have made me afraid."

"The greatest pain, I think, for your father, at least, was that she had finally committed herself for treatment. He said, their feelings of hope were indescribable. And then, within the week, she was gone. An aneurysm, they said. It was devastating beyond belief."

"Oh, Mother," Marie cried. "I wish I had known."

"I think your grandfather blamed himself for not understanding sooner what was happening," Diantha said, "which is like your father with you. He has second guessed himself so many times—imagining he had done the worst possible thing in trying to protect you. And I admit, at times when I heard rumors—I did, a little, too. But your father did the one thing for you he came to feel might have saved his mother; might have shocked her into seeking help sooner—of finding the balance that could have blessed them all."

"I've never told this to anyone," Maria said quietly, "but so many times I have felt a guiding voice. It's hard to describe, except that in this business, adulation is such an intoxicant. It's so easy to lose perspective. Avinah warned me from day one—that I would be tempted to imagine myself exceptional and the exception to everything; though sometimes, it would be just the opposite. And she was right. I have felt the pull, both ways, so many times—and I've seen it

in others. So I think I understand some of what grandmother suffered, but somehow, there was always something in my mind, of my heritage. I told myself, it was just vivid memory or maybe your prayers for me, but it always seemed more real—more present. Like a whispering. And when you spoke of grandmother, just now—I felt this incredible rush of warmth and tingling. How incredible that would be!”

“Your grandfather said she was a beautiful soul. In all the years I knew him, he never once disparaged her memory. He didn’t want his sons to, either. The most he ever said was, his dear Elena just got lost and never got the time to find her way back to them. I think that’s part of why your father never told you her story.”

“Someday, I’m going to tell father about the Elena’s I’ve seen in my career,” Maria said, “and how they are truly different from the many who wilfully do their own thing because they can get away with it. From what you say, grandmother wasn’t like that.”

"As a child, I don't think your father could make the distinction," Diantha said. "The pain is so enormous, either way."

"Yet, there is a difference, Mother," Maria said. "Had she lived; had she completed treatment; had she found the balance you spoke of, father might have had stories about her as wonderful as those of Grandpa. We can't know, but if she was trying to make things right when she died, I want to remember that."

Diantha spoke softly. "In some degree he has forgiven her, but she has colored so much of his life."

"And mine," Maria said. "I am sure of it. I feel it so strongly. And if father knew, I think it could begin an unimagined healing."

"Write about it, Maria. That will be the best way to tell him. If he could read and reread your account in some quiet place—that would be a gift for him beyond measure."

"I have so many pages from my journals of impressions and feelings and words that kept

me going in all the highs and lows. Avinah was so right. It truly is a rapacious world in so many ways—that we all need a contingent of angels to keep us in balance. And incredibly, she who has been my constant, invisible companion now has a name.”

Maria felt the tears well up and sat silent for a time till she again had control. “There is so much hidden pain in this world. I have saved hundreds of letters that speak of it. Pain they had never shared or released before, but because of my song-writing and singing they could. That’s what I need to share with father, too. He was so afraid my gifts would become all about me. But I have tried always to keep them about God and what He wanted. That was another of Avinah’s gifts to me—reinforced by Grandma’s whispers and my memories of home. I have done so much more of His good out there in the world than if I had stayed here. But I had to begin here. It could not have been otherwise. And yet, I had to leave here, too, in incredible pain.”

Her mother was fighting tears, too. "It seems the pattern in all good and great things, my child. First the tears of sorrow and then the ones of joy, in ever spiralling cycles."

"I really hope that, in time, we can begin to talk of Grandma Elena for my children's sake," Maria said." Even her mistakes—for there are lessons there—but I want to remember her too in the way Grandpa remembered her. I think that might be his wish. And maybe, especially hers."

They were silent again for a long time and then Maria continued, "I have a wish too—that Father were not so closed—why he can't just share what he thinks and feels and get on with things."

"For the same reason you must sing," her mother said. "It's who he is."

Maria winced. "Were you always this perceptive?"

Her mother smiled, "I think so. I married your father."

"And Amanda claims she would have gone

berserk," Maria said with a laugh, breaking the seriousness of all that had gone before.

Her mother laughed, too. "Amanda and your father wouldn't have made it even to the soda fountain. Besides, I was the only girl smart enough in the whole of Parson's Corner to see past your father's shyness."

Shyness! The word rang in Maria's mind. She had always seen her father as strongly silent, but never shy.

"Do I know Father at all?" Maria asked, amazement in her tone.

"You'll know him best through your children," Diantha said. "Perhaps even better through your husband, though I think your father's a little nervous of meeting him."

Maria laughed. "If I had my guess, I suspect Father might come to love Asher even more than you say he loves me. Asher is the most natural person ever born. He'll probably even cry when this baby is born and he won't even try to stop or hide it."

Her mother's reply was quick and firm. "And your father will present you with a cradle made with his own hands and he will have rubbed his joy so deep into the wood, you'll not see it unless you want to." Her mother's tone was as if to say that Maria had as far to go as her father in the understanding each desired of the other.

In her mother's rebuke, they fell silent again; the only sound, the crisp snapping of beans. At last, Diantha spoke again.

"Sometimes Maria, what your Father gives without words is beyond our capacity to receive in words. I guess what I'm saying, is that like in dreams, a symbol is sometimes the only way to say something deep. Well, that is where your father comes from. A tree house is never just a tree house to him. He knows the deepness of the things he creates though most of us are pretty shallow recipients."

"Like me," Maria confessed.

Diantha patted Maria's knee. "He had his foibles, too, my dear—I'm not saying, he's with-

out need to be more open—but when it comes right down to it, he has surprised me more than once.”

“I wish he would surprise me,” Maria said with another deep sigh.

“Perhaps you will surprise each other,” her mother said, as she plopped her last broken bean into the bowl and stood up. As she gathered the other bowls, she said, “I think we had best give your poor father’s burning ears a rest; so why don’t you go find Joshua at the fish hole and give him some advice on girls.” She winked at that and sailed into the house.

As Maria wound her way down the cow trail that led to the old familiar fishing hole, she wondered why she had held out so long in coming home.

The supper and evening passed much as before, with a little more freedom in speaking of Maria’s career. Her father again said very little, and suddenly Maria realized: it wasn’t because he didn’t care about her interests; it was because

most everything he ever wanted to know someone else usually got around to asking or telling, so he never had to.

She remembered the time of a heated village controversy, when someone had bluntly asked why Matthew Lewis had no questions and someone else had said, "Because we're always two questions ahead of him," and Matthew had merely grinned and said, "Three." Everyone had laughed, yet when it came time for decision, there were more than a few who without even knowing in advance would say, "Yea or nay, my vote's the same as Matthew Lewis."

Her uncle Roydon had once said his brother Matthew was like a rock crusher. He'd gnaw on a matter till it was reduced to its smallest particles, and then, by Jove, he usually came up with the finest solution. But with Maria, it seems he had gnawed his fears into a thousand dreaded fragments and had never found the answer he wanted. He had taken a desperate, despairing course—the seeming cruelty and hazards of it

so incomprehensible he had finally resolved to leave it, as best he could, to the weavings and workings of God.

At the end of that first full day home, about the only thing Matthew said directly to Maria was that when Asher arrived on the morrow's 5:10 train, she could take the old farm truck to fetch him. Her mother said, she and Joshua would stay too, to finalize the welcoming feast.

The next day passed again all too quickly, and yet at the same time too slowly—visiting, sorting through forgotten possessions, reading tear-stained diaries of innocence and heartbreak, weeding pansies, walking the pastures, fishing with Joshua, remembering the good times, and preparing for Asher. And then it was time.

She drove to the train station in a state of joy that was almost painful to contain. She was weeping and laughing in chaotic bursts even before Asher could free himself from the train, delayed by twenty minutes—on purpose Maria

decided, just to aggravate her excited anticipation. Seconds seemed to stretch out in another agony of delay as she awaited the opening of the train doors. Even Asher's embrace seemed too prolonged for there was nothing she wanted more than to get him into the embrace of her family.

She was never so grateful for his economy of living as when she saw he carried his small luggage. They would not have to wait for baggage. Asher, seeing her excitement, laughingly tried to extract the keys from her hands, insisting on his right to safe transport. But Maria insisted—he must be free to focus on the scenes and wonders of Parson's Corner.

In the short drive, there was scarcely time to share even a fraction of a thousand memories, but the moment they turned off Parson's Road, Maria saw her father's unexpected, unimagined gift. The tears spilled, streaming down her face. Asher, not knowing the cause, pleaded, "Darling, darling, what is it? Not the baby?"

Maria could only shake her head. She pulled to a stop on the slope of the entrance road to stem her tears. At last she could speak.

"He hung it while I was gone for you. It has not hung there for eleven years. He took it down the day I left, against his wishes." She pointed with trembling hands to the quaint, rough sign that read, "The House that Maria Built"—hanging now by new silver chains from the weathered cross-post.

She spoke on. "It had hung there since I was five years old—since the day our house was finished. He is saying what he cannot say in words."

Maria reached out and took her husband's hand, and said, "Next to you, Asher, my father is the best man, I think I shall ever know."

She put the truck in gear and coasted down the drive to where her family would be waiting. Her father would be tending the roasting fire in the backyard, and Joshua would be helping their mother lay out the welcoming feast.

She knew that what her father had done would be diminished by the excessive celebration of it, so she would say nothing directly, but as soon as her dear Asher was introduced, she would kiss her father and whisper for his hearing alone. "Thank you, my beloved father."

And though there was much her father might never understand about her chosen life, yet she hoped that someday he would come to know how thoroughly she had honored him in all the reaches of the world beyond Parson's Corner.



A forgotten card found by Matthew Lewis in the old Lewis Family Bible when entering the name of his grandson: "Roland Matthew Lewis Lee"

To: R. Matthew & Roydon J. Lewis
Remember, my sons:
~ Old Testament | Proverbs 3:5-6 ~
This lesson we each must learn
in our own time and way.
Your loving father, RL

Colophon:

Title: *Parson's Corner*

Author: SM Smith

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