

ELBOW & SCARCITY

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For my mother and father and in memory of my grandmother, Margaret Boyer Christenson

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*Elbow and Scarcity* is a novel, of which this work forms the first of three parts. Bea Hutchins narrates the critical events of her childhood that led to her being placed in Third Hill, a alternative reformatory for child murderesses. The events she narrates in these first chapters occurred when she was eleven years old, and deal principally with changes in her life and in her relationship with her single mother at this time. Later parts of the novel will address her time at Third Hill, and the aftermath of her release from that school.

## CHAPTER ONE

I was a student at Third Hill in southeastern Kansas, just south of the Sac and Fox reservation, and southeast of the Quaker ghost town at Osage. Most people think Third Hill was an orphan farm, but when I was there, I knew of only one true orphan and that was Edie, who killed both her parents. Third Hill was a place where child murderers were sent to be reformed. Boys went somewhere in North Dakota.

A man named Glen Bowden founded the school, designed its curriculum, and hired the staff. I joined the community when I was eleven and, at that time, some of the housemothers had once been students themselves. The student body tended to fluctuate slightly as new girls came and the older ones went, but when I was there in the mid-seventies, there were about ten of us at a time. New students arrived largely without ceremony, but each spring a Departure Festival was held for graduating girls. Given the monotony of our days, we looked forward to the festival as we would to a ball. But attendance was restricted, greatly adding to the festival's mystique. Only Mr. Bowden, some of the housemothers, and the older girls who had been selected for their good qualities could attend.

Every spring I would watch the procession leave. I would listen to them singing faintly in the distance after they faded from view. Hours later the procession would return, the honoree shining and distant, all of the girls bright-eyed and brimming with secrets. I decided there must be a rule against telling the rest of us anything about it. There were lots of rules at Third Hill; since only the girls who never broke them were invited to attend, I was left to my own imaginings during those first years.

All I knew of the Festival was that it took place away from Third Hill, somewhere on the open prairie, so I took this to be a clue to what happened: if the Festival took place where the

rules of Third Hill no longer applied, it was so that the girls could break them without being disruptive. I decided the most important rule was that we never speak of our crime. Everything fell into place: if the honoree of the festival was allowed to break that rule, it would only be natural that the other girls must not speak of it when they got back, both to maintain her privacy, and because they were back where the rule held. I convinced myself that this was the case.

I indulged myself imagining how good I would be at listening to the other girls' crimes. We did not have mirrors at Third Hill so that we would not be reminded of who we had been. So sometimes at mealtime I would nod my head sympathetically at my reflection in a glass or a spoon. I did this discreetly, so the others wouldn't see.

When my time came to attend the festival, I was so excited that I couldn't sleep for several nights. As I lay under my quilt in the sleeping quarters watching the Festival day arrive, I felt dizzy and sick. First thing in the morning, all the girls filed into the library to study. I worked at filling my copybook with passages from Mr. Bowden's book, *You Are What You Speak*. He believed words could be the vehicles of reform. Our problem was that we didn't have the right ones, so he provided them, as a church liturgist provides the lay person the right words to speak to God. We had to turn one copybook in each month, or our chores increased.

When the bell rang, we went to chores. When Miss Laura told me I had been assigned sewing duty, my eyelids felt heavy. I needed fresh air and activity. The sewing room was stuffy and small. Miss Laura sat in a corner with a pile of clothing that needed mending. She looked up and nodded toward the worktable where she had set out brown yarn and brown thread. There was also some fabric that always reminded me of panty hose and a small, blue calico dress. I would be making a doll. The school's founder, Mr. Bowden, collected and sold the dolls we



made. Mine were never very good, but they were easier to make than wall hangings, which he also sold.

Normally, we dressed the dolls in the same denim jumpers we wore. As I sat down, I saw that this doll would not wear denim; she would wear a thin cotton dress the color of cornflowers.

Piecing the body together was easy enough. I stuffed too much wadding into her legs so they were stiff and unmovable. I hoped there would be enough left to fill the rest of her. I blew into the remaining fluff and pulled it apart to make it last, but I still ran out and her head was flat and empty no matter how I pushed and prodded. I had to pull it all out and start over. I was afraid Miss Laura would notice and change her mind about my attending the festival.

“May I open a window?” I asked.

“Certainly.”

I stepped quietly across the linoleum floor and lifted the sash. I stood in front of the window a moment, letting the breeze cool my sweating body. The sewing room was in the main house, and looked across a yard to the chapel. On the other side of the chapel was the main barn, where girls worked with the animals. We ate no meat at Third Hill, but we kept goats and cows for milk, and lots of time was spent caring for the animals, which was considered good for us. There was little supervision in the barn; girls could often be heard laughing or mooing at each other from within.

“Bea, get to work.” Strings floated across my field of vision. I realized that the room had fallen silent; Miss Laura had stopped her work and was watching me. I returned to my seat.

The whole time I stitched on the doll’s features, my mind wandered. When I finished, I saw that I had sewn an eyebrow on crooked, and that one eye was smaller than the other, giving

the doll a hard, suspicious look. I set her aside, and glanced out the window to give my eyes a rest.

I started on a second doll, even though there wasn't time to finish. I had a mind to show Miss Laura that I was ready to attend, in case she was watching. The second doll was coming along more easily. Around ten o'clock Edie came into the sewing room. She had been excused from chores that day so she could prepare for the Festival.

"I'm supposed to be getting a doll," she said, looking at the one I had finished.

"What do you need with a doll?"

"For the Festival."

"But don't you know what for?"

"Bea," Miss Laura said.

I shouldn't have questioned Edie about the Festival, but she had caught me off guard, and I was embarrassed for her to see my work. We never initialed the dolls, and only one girl was posted to a chore at a time. This discouraged pride, or, in my case, embarrassment. I motioned with a movement of my head to the closet where the finished dolls were boxed up, though Edie knew as well as I did where they were kept.

"I'm supposed to have that one." She pointed to the one that I had finished.

I looked at the doll. I realized that the hair and eyes were the same color as Edie's, and that the dresses were also the same. I picked her up and handed her to Edie.

Edie held her up.

My dolls were never good, but this one was the worst I had ever made. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't know." I wished the housemothers had told me this doll would serve a special function beyond being boxed up and sold. I would have tried harder. I wondered why I

was posted on sewing duty; other girls were more talented, but then, the housemothers were always democratic about the distribution of chores. It was supposed to be more about what we got out of the chores than the concrete result of doing them.

Finally, at the blow of the whistle, we broke for lunch. After lunch we rotated, and thankfully, I was posted outdoors. I grew hot under the pale sky as I hauled buckets of kitchen waste to the compost pile and turned the mixture with my shovel, but I was happy to have an outlet for my nervous energy. As I worked I wondered what purpose the doll might serve. I wondered if, instead of simply talking about their crimes, the girls reenacted them, or maybe just reenacted the parts that were too hard to tell with just words.

But I was wrong. That wasn't it at all.

#

The procession left after the hottest part of the day had ended, when the sky had begun to deepen in color. Mr. Bowden led us through the gates into the land that lay all around us. Even though I had spent my whole life in southeastern Kansas, I might as well have entered a different world, one washed in sunlight, several leagues nearer the sun.

Mr. Bowden walked with Edie at the front of the procession. We were solemn at first, and none of us spoke; I suppose we were worried about being sent back. Only the tall grass whispered against our boots, and the grasshoppers buzzed raucously when they sprang out of our way. The land gently rose and fell in all directions. The ground was muddy in the bottomlands, but the sedge grass bent underneath our weight, covering the ground and keeping the mud off our boots. Occasionally we stopped to cross a narrow rift made by a creek bed, and Mr. Bowden helped us all across.

The housemothers began singing quietly in fugues, voicing only the syllables—fa, sol, or la—that corresponded to the notes they sang. Their voices grew louder the farther away we got. They broke into “The Pilgrims,” my favorite song from our hymnal. Dian, the housemother in charge of music, sang the verses and motioned for us to join in on the chorus. I wanted to be exuberant for Edie so I sang loudly.

O I'd rather be the least of them  
That are the Lord's alone  
Than wear a royal diadem  
And sit upon a throne!

I swung my arms until my fingertips grew heavy and tingled. I sang so long and so loudly that I began to feel light headed. I lost my balance once but scrambled back up, hoping no one had noticed. Mr. Bowden fell to the back of the line and strode by my side—I think he appreciated my effort.

At sunset we descended into a deep valley where cool, moist air had collected. There was a large flat rock. Other smaller rocks were arranged in a half circle around it. A previous generation of students must have hauled them here. I followed the housemothers' example as they turned to meet the sunset. That sun! Looking like a lonely ball of fire during the day, but now looking like a mass of lava that had been allowed to cool off, only to have its skin snagged by a needle, so that its molten interior mixed the watery sky.

Mr. Bowden led us in prayer, and even though my eyelids were closed, I could still see the sunset etched in light. When I opened them and looked around, individual particles seemed to vibrate. If I squinted, I could see a white halo around everything, standing out above the hills in the distance, standing out from the tree branches and around Miss Pauline as she helped Edie

bury the doll I had made. I was relieved. Mr. Bowden rose and gave Edie a blessing. He stood over her, his oil-dipped thumb making the sign of the cross on her forehead as he said, “May God forgive you. May your parents rejoice with the angels in heaven where, whole, they dance and sing, and hold their arms out to embrace their child, who is a child of the Lord and will join them one day with the saints in heaven.”

Mr. Bowden returned to his place. Miss Pauline led Edie onto a flat rock that would serve as a dais. Edie wore a blue calico dress, and a housemother had woven blue ribbon through her thin cat braid. I had heard that Edie didn’t have much hair when she had first arrived. It had mostly grown back and she had put on weight. We all sat down and I looked around. Some girls who had been released but had not become housemothers themselves came back for this event to offer encouragement. Edie especially needed encouragement because she had no family to go to.

Edie was having a hard time getting started and I imagined that this was because, until now, most words she had spoken during her stay at Third Hill were memorized from Mr. Bowden’s book. Of course, that depended on which housemother was in charge of her. Miss Karen, who had sleeping duty, sometimes let us chatter well into the night.

While I waited for Edie to begin, I turned my attention to Mr. Bowden, who sat in the grass next to me. I wondered if he was considerate, and wanted to make sure there were enough rocks for the women, or if he was just more comfortable on the soft grass. His knees rose up in sharp angles. He held a hat between his knees with one hand and he picked at the grass with the other. He turned to me and nodded.

I couldn't think what to say. So I said, "Words form in the soul. While their body flies out the mouth, their spirit remains eternally." That was one of the first things I had memorized and copied when I came. I had also stitched it onto countless wall hangings.

He smiled, and bowed his head slightly. He asked me my name.

"Bea Hutchins," I said.

He nodded again, leaned back, and admired the sunset. "Out here you realize that the sun isn't just some bulb that God turns on and off."

"Yes," I said.

"Living in the city, one loses touch," he said.

Eddie began reciting, and Mr. Bowden sat up straight and turned toward the dais. Her voice startled me; it was smooth and her face composed. I had expected her to pull her hair and gnash her teeth, but as she spoke, reciting from Mr. Bowden's book, I understood that she was showing off her skills, and that she was not going to tell what she had done. Miss Pauline, who sat on the other side of Mr. Bowden, began to weep, I suppose because of how much progress she had made. I also started to weep, but from exhaustion and disappointment. I had so wanted to hear her story.

When we rose to recite the prayers set for this occasion, Miss Dian and Miss Pauline came to me. They each took a hand and said, "Next year will be your turn."

But by that time, the school had closed down and Glen Bowden was forced to defend himself—that's how I found out Edie Downs had killed her parents. After it closed, Third Hill vanished from public memory, though its ruins still stand. From above, they resemble a geometrical bust, with the narrow main house raised over the pent-roofed chapel like an arm, making some grand but inscrutable gesture.

## CHAPTER TWO

When I turned five years old I received a package in the mail from my father. I had never met him. My mother snipped the twine and I stood on a chair to unwrap it. It was a box of maple candies. My mother asked if I didn't want to eat one of those candies right then and I said I was never going to eat those candies. I got down from the chair and carried them to the bedroom. I wrapped them in an old pair of pajamas and put them in the bottom drawer of the chest—my drawer.

My mother and I shared the single bedroom in our apartment and it was easy to tell when one of us got up in the night to go to the bathroom, get some fresh air, or a drink of water. So I woke up almost immediately when I sensed she wasn't there. There weren't many places to look, and I found her in the kitchen. She was bent over the sink eating, one after another, the maple candies. I tried to grab the box from her hand but there was only one left which I sucked on with a greed I had never experienced before. The grains of maple sugar dug into my tongue and into the roof of my mouth. The first shock was so overpowering that my eyes watered, but the candy dissolved into a musty flavor of indifference that left a taste in my mouth like mushrooms.

My mother said either I made the whole thing up or else had an unusually vivid dream—I was at an age when children often cannot tell the difference between made-up things like dreams and stories, and real things. But I knew the difference.

I knew that when I wanted to make my mother jealous, I would invent stories about nice things my father had done for me. How he came during the night and fed me honey with a spoon when I had a cough, or took me to parties thrown especially for me. How he gave me jewels and ponies and baby monkeys as gifts but told me not to show them to my mother, who would take them away and keep them for herself. These were made-up things.

Real things were how I stayed at home for school, just as my mother had done when she was a girl. And how she always read every book before I could read it, to make sure it was “improving.”

My mother was beautiful and no doubt her beauty increased in my mind, surrounded as I was by the plain looks of the housemothers. She had a folded earlobe that she tried to cover with large earrings, dust-colored hair and freckles of the same shade on her sloped shoulders. She had plump hands and feet, and often complained that her knees hurt.

Anyone who saw my mother would not fail to notice her eyes. They were large and China blue. As with most people with pale-colored eyes, they registered little change, though her face might wrinkle in displeasure, close in anger, or open in delight. They were always clear and steady, and full of certainty. It is a look common to those who believe they are saved. I’m sure that kind of certainty made our life easier.

In the evenings we ate our supper underneath a map of Jerusalem in the Time of our Lord that my mother had copied when she was only nine years old. She liked to test herself, by pointing out all its features to me: Cavalry, Herod’s Palace, The Temple, Gehenna. She had received her schooling at home, and this was the sort of activity she had done with her mother to pass the days. That is why, she said, she couldn’t have a better job now, despite her knowing so much, more than my teachers.

Sometimes, I would test her. I would ask, “If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?” She never said Jerusalem.

Sometimes she said, “Mexico.” Sometimes she said, “Heaven.”

Then I would ask, “Would you take me with you?”

“Neither Mexico nor Heaven is a place for little girls.”



Once when I asked where she would go, she said, “Home.”

“That’s not a real wish,” I laughed. “You are home.”

“I mean the home where I grew up with my parents.”

I didn’t ask if she would take me with her. I was afraid to know what her answer might be. I had no contact with my grandparents because they had shunned my mother, according to their rule of faith, when she bore me out of wedlock at age seventeen. My grandmother had died a few years back, and, though my mother grieved, she had also hoped that the death might at least bring about reconciliation with her father. So far, it hadn’t.

At age eleven, I was still taught at home. I woke up with strands of her long, dust-colored hair in my mouth. There were no secrets between us, and yet there was a new part of myself I was becoming aware of by degrees, and I was shocked that she seemed blind to it, as if she knew all there was to know of me. I was alternately glad, and irritated, that she did not see it. Though by that time I had a babysitting job I wanted something else of my own. I didn’t know what it was, but I knew I’d take it from her if I had to. I suppose that, ultimately, that is what led me to do what I did.

I was alone in the kitchen when the phone rang. I did not expect my mother to return home from work for at least another hour.

“Ms. Hutchins,” said a quiet woman’s voice.

I searched my memory to place the voice but could not think of a voice so hollow and full of echoes. I know now that it was a voice that flew from the past into our lives to unsettle everything, and that I should have hung up the phone and closed all the windows and doors. But I didn’t know that then, so I said, “This is her daughter.” I thought that my name might not mean much to her.

“Are you old enough to take a message?”

“I am eleven years old.”

“It is urgent that Ms. Hutchins get this message.” She paused, then added, “I am calling on behalf of Ms. Hutchins’ father.”

I pulled a pencil stub out of a drawer. “I am ready,” I said.

“Ms. Hutchins’ father is ill and in the hospital. His property needs looking after and she is his only living relative.”

I looked out the kitchen window at the screen of leaves and branches. I thought it suddenly remarkable how the world extended both outward and upward. I wondered if since the beginning of time, there had been a leaf or branch in every bit of air. It bothered me that she did not refer to anyone in relation to me. She called my mother “Ms. Hutchins,” and my grandfather, “Ms. Hutchins’ father.” I suppose this distracted me so that the gravity of the news she shared did not register.

I began to write my name.

“Do you understand?”

“I will tell her,” I said, turning the paper on its side and superimposing my name like crosshatch over what I had just done.

“And will she come?”

“I couldn’t say. I am her daughter,” I repeated.

“It is urgent. Please tell her that.”

When I hung up the page was covered on both sides with my name.

My mother never talked about my grandfather. She only said things like, “I am sorry I disappointed him so.” Of course I was the part of her that had disappointed him.

So after I hung up, I got over my irritation with the caller quickly: now I knew a secret about her secret. I would have to be careful with it; you can only tell a secret once, before it is not a secret anymore. I felt puffed up with the importance of the task that had befallen me. In an instant, through nothing more than accident, I had become indispensable to my mother! If something happened to me, she would never know! I sat down on the front porch with my delicious feeling, not eager to part with it soon.

It was the late afternoon pause before everyone came home from work. I felt very grown up. As the shadows pushed eastward, I pictured over and over, in different variations, how she would tilt her ear, her folded ear, to catch the heavy words that dropped from my mouth, and how her face would change from curious to appreciative as I shared the news.

Mr. Fletcher pulled up to the curb to let my mother out. He owned the building where we lived. Also, my mother worked for Mr. Fletcher. During the week she served food in the cafeteria of his office building. She said, “You’d never believe the mess a bunch of grown men can make with peas.” Over the weekends she swept and mopped the floors.

My mother came up the walk. She looked tired, and somehow the way she said hello to me was not at all how I had pictured her saying it. As she joined me on the porch, I opened my mouth. But I could not spit it out!

“Were you going to say something?”

I shook my head. I would have to rethink how I told her. Then she paused in the doorway behind me waving to Mr. Fletcher. As she stood there, I thought, *She’s tired. If I tell her, there will be lots of decisions to make—whether to move back, what to do with me.* I decided to save the news for a better moment. Then she said, “Well, I’m going inside,” and let the screen door bang shut behind her.

After I began to grow chilled by the shade of the chokecherry that grew next to our front door, I followed her inside and fixed myself a glass of water and drank it down. Then I fixed another, and drank it as my mother watched me. After the third, I set the glass down on the table and wiped my mouth. I said, "I must be having one of those days when I can't get enough water."

#

Days passed, and my secret began to rot in my mouth. But the longer I waited, the harder it was to tell. My mother went to work with Mr. Fletcher in the mornings, and I spent the afternoons babysitting, earning three dollars. They were easy enough boys to keep in line until one day the middle boy, William, asked if I ever wanted to kiss Travis, who was ten, and just one year younger than I. Travis started giggling from wherever he was hiding. I turned and spit onto the ground twice and told them to clean it up or I would tell his mother what he had said. I prided myself on being strict.

By the end of the week, I began to wonder if I had dreamed the whole conversation. Otherwise, why hadn't the woman called again and relieved me of my burden? If it was a dream, I didn't need to tell my mother; in fact it would be wrong to tell her and worry her about something she could do nothing about.

On Saturday, while my mother was getting ready to go to work, I opened the mailbox and found that a letter had arrived. I don't know what made me sense it was from the woman I had spoken to, but I opened it up, and my hunch proved correct. The letter told me something obvious, yet I never even suspected it: he had a dog. I would have left the letter on the kitchen table for my mother to see, but it implicated me in my secret. It said,

This letter will probably miss you, as I told the news to your

daughter yesterday, and this letter will take a few days to arrive.

I imagine by now you are there already caring for your father, and seeing to that dog he loves so much it is a sin. I hope you are, because that dog won't last long on its own. I live forty-five minutes away, and share a single car with my husband, so I can't make the drive every day to set out food. But I'm sure you are there by now, and all is well. I hope to be in touch soon. You will find my phone number and address below on this page.

Yours,

Joanna Evans

I counted the days; it had been four. Dogs were smart, I thought, they could open cabinets, and drink from toilets. There still was a chance. But I had to tell my mother right away.

Then I saw my outlet. Mr. Fletcher would be coming by to pick her up. On Saturdays when she cleaned his office building, and I sometimes went with her. We often played games to see who could sweep the largest pile of dust or clean the most windows. In this way the work passed more quickly. I decided to propose a game: the loser had to tell a secret.

#

I rode along in the back seat, willing the car to move faster, but also nervous about what I had to do once I got there. Whenever I lost heart, I would picture the cutest dog I could imagine, dying of neglect.

"The bagworms are bad this year, Bea," Mr. Fletcher said suddenly from the front seat.

I paused a moment. "Would you like me to pick them?"

“Yes, I’ll pay you by the sackful.”

He used to pay me by the worm. That way I could round up, and, not wanting to say an obvious number like “fifteen,” could say “sixteen,” when there were only twelve.

“You’re big enough to push the mower.”

I began to worry that I would never have a chance to tell my mother.

“I’ll tell the fellow who does it not to do it any more. Then you can earn a little cash over the weekends while your mom cleans.”

“She’ll need some once the boys she babysits start back to school.” My mother was unerringly polite.

He pulled into the parking lot and handed me some paper sacks. “These ought to get you started.”

I thanked him.

Normally he stayed and worked in his office, shuffling through papers and opening and shutting file drawers, but today he drove off, saying he’d be by in two hours to take us home.

I was glad he wouldn’t be there. I would be able to work more quickly. There were lots of evergreen shrubs against the building. I worked quickly and haphazardly, only picking the bags that hung on the most visible branches. I used to like to open the little cocoons and look at the white grub inside, but not today: I could hear my mother working through an open window. I could hear the metal parts of her broom click each time she raised it. I imagined her pile of dust getting bigger as it moved down the hall. She would leave the pile outside the offices as she swept them, then she would add the new pile to the old until she got to the lounge at the end of the hall.

I went inside and found her. She had finished sweeping and was beginning to mop. I didn't know of any mopping games. There was only one mop, so I just said, "I bet you'd like to know something."

"Would I?" She seemed tired and in no mood to play.

"I'll tell you," I said, "but only if you can skid farther than me." I took a running start on the dry end of the hall and slid onto the thick soapy water she had begun to spread over the floor.

"Either help me finish or go outside."

"All right. I just thought you wanted to know something, that's all." And I started to walk toward the front door. Then I turned back around and looked at her.

She moved a strand of hair behind her ear. "What do you need to tell me, Bea?"

"Well," I said, "Someone called. I didn't catch her name. She said your father is sick and you should come look after the property." I walked toward her as I said this, conscious that I had ruined my opportunity. She looked at my mouth as though her eyes alone could pull more from me. Then I began to think that she might just have that power so I opened my mouth in case I could say more. I wish she would have grabbed hold of my tongue and yanked out what she needed to know. Instead she remained planted where she stood and I said nothing.

I reached toward her. She handed me the mop she held. I turned and started to work. I could feel her at my back watching me as though trying to figure something out.

"When did she call?" Her voice was surprisingly soft.

"Maybe it was yesterday, or maybe it was the day before. That's just it." I turned around and faced her. "After it happened, I thought I had dreamed it." I felt light and energetic. "I think we should go today if we can. I'll hurry and finish up." I polished the floor, moving the

mop, heavy with water, back and forth over the large square tiles until my skin gleamed with sweat.



### CHAPTER THREE

My mother might have been angry about the cagey way I told her about the phone call. But she wasn't. Not at first. She only looked at me as though I might be something different from what she thought I was, her eyes flitting over me, unable to settle on anything familiar. It was the first time I had seen uncertainty on her face. It was, in some sense, what I'd been wanting, but now that I had it, I was scared.

Mr. Fletcher pulled up in front of our apartment building and stopped his car. My mother told me to get out. She and Mr. Fletcher had things to talk about. I walked to the porch steps of the building my mother and I lived in. It was a brick building, two stories tall, painted gray with black shutters. Two staircases led to a porch on the second level. In between these, a set of cement steps lead to the lower level porch. I climbed these and, since I didn't have a key, sat down on the porch and watched the scene unfolding inside through the car's passenger window. I could see the back of my mother's head moving and her arms gesturing. Mr. Fletcher rested his left arm over the top of the steering wheel as he turned to look at her. I imagined his face showing sympathy as she told him about my deceit. He always showed a great deal of concern for my mother.

Finally the passenger door opened a crack as my mother leaned her weight against it from inside the car. I stood up, expecting her to get out, but the car door only hovered half open. I crossed my arms and leaned against the screen door. She planted her foot on the curb beside the car and then the rest of her finally emerged.

She wore dirty leather Keds the color of mop water, jeans, and a loose white jacket Mr. Fletcher had given her to protect her clothing while she worked. She walked toward me, looking down at the sidewalk.

“I have ironed things out,” she said, pulling the key out of the pocket of her jacket.

“What have you ironed out?”

“I’m leaving to go see what’s the matter. It’s a four hour drive to my father’s. If I leave soon, I’ll get there before dark. Mr. Fletcher has given me a few days off.”

“I’ll go get ready,” I said, standing.

“Bea, I think it will be easier if I go alone.” She opened the door and stepped inside.

I stared at the screen door as it slammed shut. I didn’t like feeling left out. More importantly, supposing my mother found my grandfather’s dog on the verge of death, would she know what to do to nurse it back to health? I doubted it.

I stood up and followed her inside. “Is he going, too?”

“Who?” She paused in the kitchen and turned to me.

“Your boyfriend.”

She stopped, exhaled loudly, and studied the patterns on the linoleum floor. “Don’t make this any worse than it needs to be.”

“Well, is he?”

“I’m going alone. He’s offered me the use of his wife’s car. He’ll be by in a little while. Now leave me alone while I pack my things.”

I followed at her heels as she walked into the bedroom. She closed the door on me, pushing the door against my weight, but I opened it right back up, and decided to try a different tack. I walked to the bathroom to gather her things for her, then returned to the bedroom with them. “I just don’t think you should leave me behind,” I said. “For one, you need support. You’re not in shape to face this by yourself. Who knows what you’ll find when you get there? And two, I could help out around the house.”

“That’s nice of you, Bea.” She took her hairbrush from me and set it on top of her things. “I’m sure there will be lots of opportunities for you to help out. For now, why don’t you run along. That would help me out—I really need to be alone.” She walked to the dresser and began pulling a few things from the drawer.

I stood a moment in silence. So this was my punishment for keeping a secret all to myself? Well I wouldn’t take it. “But you can’t just leave me. I’m too young.” My voice sounded high and whiny. “What kind of mother are you, and what will the neighbors think?”

“I’ll only be away a few days. And besides you have to babysit Monday. What would the Rohrbachs think if you just didn’t show up?”

She folded a dress and set it on top of a pair of sweatpants in her suitcase.

“And who’s going to do your work?” I picked the dress up, and walked over to the dresser to put it back. “Who’s going to take care of me?”

“Stop. You’ll wrinkle it.” She snatched the dress from me. She cleared her throat. “Mr. Fletcher will come check on you. Think about how much fun the two of you always have together.”

“Oh, your boyfriend.”

She swung the dress and hit me in the face with it.

“My work is to come along,” I whined. “You’ll need my help. That’s what Joanna said.”

“Joanna?”

I brightened. “From the church. She’s who called.”

She slapped me again with the dress, this time harder. “What else have you not told me, Bea?”

“Nothing,” I choked. “There’s nothing else. I only remembered her name just now. I don’t know what made me think of it. I tried to remember it before, but I couldn’t.”

“I’m supposed to believe that? I wonder,” she said. “I wonder what else can you remember if you’ve a mind to?” She picked up the phone and pushed some numbers. She switched into her phone voice. “Yes, is this the adoption agency? Yes, this is Ms. Hutchins, and I want to talk to you about my daughter.”

I felt relieved; it was the oldest trick there was. I did it all the time with the kids I babysat. I snatched the phone from her. “I am eleven years old and my mother is leaving me. Put that in your records.” Of course there was only a dial tone.

My mother threw the dress at the chest, where it hung from an open drawer. She sat down heavily on the bed and stared at the carpet.

I took her limp hands and looked into her face. “I’m sorry. You need a little rest. Everything will look brighter tomorrow.” I said.

She smiled at me, and I felt her resolve soften.

“Let’s rest while we wait for Mr. Fletcher to come.” I raised her arms over her head and lifted her t-shirt over her head. “Don’t argue, do as you are told,” I said. “You lie down, I will rub your back, then I will pack our things.”

She stood up and kicked off her Keds. Then she lay down on the bed in her jeans.

“A few minutes of rest won’t make any difference in the long run,” I said.

She rolled onto her stomach. I straddled her back just as I had done when I was little and would fill her hair with barrettes and baubles. I unhooked her bra and rubbed her back and shoulders, but, after a while, I felt heavy with sleep. I lay down next to her.

Some time must have passed before I heard a knock at the door. I sensed that she was getting up. I tried to follow her, but my limbs felt too heavy. I heard her and Mr. Fletcher's voices in the kitchen, and finally mustered the energy to sit up in bed and look out the window. Mr. Fletcher's car was parked against the curb; Mrs. Fletcher's car idled in front of it. She sat behind the steering wheel, looking straight ahead. I heard my mother say thank you. The door closed. Mr. Fletcher started to walk to the driver's side of his wife's car, but she didn't scoot over to the passenger side, so he went around.

I heard my mother open a cabinet in the kitchen and take something out. She opened a drawer, and placed something on the counter. Then I heard the sounds of her making soup in the kitchen. I lay back down on the pillow, and fell into a black sleep, without any dreams that I can remember.

#

I woke up the next morning and called for my mother. I called again. I called for her until my voice grew hoarse, then I sat up in bed and removed a strand of hair from my palate with my index and forefinger. I held open a curtain and looked at the strand among the swirling motes. I imagined it was a piece of my voice that had come unraveled from the rest and broken off. I am left behind, I thought, but, by now, at least she has found the dog. Unless it had hidden somewhere she couldn't find it. I had heard of that happening. I looked over at her blue dress that had fallen out of the open drawer of the chest. I had always admired it, but had never had the chance to wear it. I put it on and wore it around all day Sunday and part of Monday. It was long; if I didn't hold it up, it fell past my ankles. I spent Sunday by the creek, gathering wildflowers to dry. My mother and I had a collection of wildflowers. We had cardinal flowers, bergamot, thistle, sunflowers, prairie clover, evening primrose. One night we had even snuck

underneath our neighbor Mrs. Reynolds' bedroom window and scissored a blossoms off her moon-flower vine. We kept them in a bowl on our dresser. The boys I babysat knew of my collection and brought back a poop flower when they went on vacation in Colorado, but by the time they gave it to me was too dried out to smell of anything.

Every weekday, I babysat the Rohrbach boys. There were three of them, but the oldest didn't really count, since he was almost my age, and went off by himself most of the time.

On Monday afternoon I hurried over. I had overslept and was supposed to have been there hours ago. I wasn't sure if Mrs. Rohrbach would have left to make it to work on time, assuming I would be there shortly, or if she would have called in with the excuse of an errant babysitter, and stayed at home waiting for me to arrive. If she was still there, I decided I would tell her I was late because my grandfather was dying and I had been sad about it, so woke up late. She didn't know about our family, or that I had never even met him.

They lived fifteen minutes' walk away from where I lived in a brand-new neighborhood. The houses were in various stages of construction. Some were complete, but had no yards yet, some were just holes in the ground that would one day be basements, and some were just wooden frames.

When I got to the Rohrbachs' cul-de-sac, I could tell I didn't need to have prepared any excuse for Mrs. Rohrbach; no cars sat parked in the drive. Their cul-de-sac was the only one full of completed houses, with full grown grass, and spindly trees tied to stakes to help them grow straight. Their next-door neighbor was an older woman, a retired school teacher, with a collection of turtles. In the summertime, she kept their cages lined up against the side of the house so they could take in the fresh air. She didn't mind if we went by and took them out and

played with them; she said they liked the attention, and that she could always tell when we had played with them, because their moods brightened.

I cut through her yard, thinking of ways I could bribe the boys not to tell their parents I had come late, when William, the middle boy, opened the door and, totally naked, held a turtle aloft in both hands, and sang, “We are Siamese, if you please,” then slammed the door behind him.

I stopped where I stood, and looked over at the row of cages. They were open and empty. I ran across the yard toward the Rohrbachs’ front door, but stopped short when I nearly stepped on one of the turtles scabbling over the high grass, more and more exhilarated by each screen of grass that he so easily pushed down. I picked him up and, ignoring the warm liquid that ran down my wrists, started to return him to a cage. I was careful where I stepped and found two more turtles on my way. I put them up, closed their cages, and made for the front door again.

“I’m going to punch your lights out!” I called, running up the steps and reaching for the door handle. It didn’t budge; the door was locked. The garage was closed, so I ran around the side of the house to try the back door, but found it locked also.

There was nothing to do but find the turtles myself. It was my fault for leaving the boys unsupervised. Besides, I didn’t want anything to happen to the turtles.

“There will be a price to pay if I can’t find those turtles!”

There were eight in all, and I quickly found two more. They peed when I picked them up, and I had to use my mother’s dress to wipe it off my hands and forearms. The other turtles were small, and I was crawling around in the grass trying to find them, when the front door of the Rohrbachs’ house opened again. I looked up. William and Ryan were buck-naked. “We are

Siamese, if you don't please," they sang. They turned around and shook their rear-ends to the beat while yelling, "Doo-doo, doo-doo."

"Put some clothes on," I yelled.

"Only if I can wear your dress," William said.

"I can't find three of the turtles!"

"Turtle soup for breakfast, turtle soup for lunch. I would eat some too for dinner if it didn't make me grunt."

"Well you're on your own ," I yelled, and turned toward home.

I heard some shuffling behind me as William tried to come after me. Then I heard Travis hiss, "Let her go. Who cares?" There was a scuffle. The door slammed.

#

Halfway home, I realized I had lost my key while catching the turtles. Our neighbors all disapproved of my mother, because of the amount of time she spent with Mr. Fletcher, and the discount they supposed she got in rent because of it. I sat down on the porch steps thinking of what to do. I was hungry; I hadn't eaten all day. I considered going back to the Rorhbachs', but ruled that out. I found myself wondering about the dog, and whether my mother had found it alive. If not, was it enough for her to know that I had kept the news a secret for a few days?

I heard a car coming, and craned my neck to watch it come into view. I hoped it would be Mr. Fletcher coming to check on me, but it was Mrs. Vardaman.

"Mrs. Vardaman," I said, standing up and stretching my legs for a moment. "Do you know how long a dog could survive without food?"

I think she misheard me, because she said, "I'll say so!" She looked me up and down and turned away, shutting the door behind her.



I looked down at myself. The turtle pee had dried on my dress, leaving the satin creased and stiff. I sat back down. I closed my eyes and began to imagine huge cartoon drumsticks and plates of spaghetti.

I heard another car approaching. When I saw that it was the Reynoldses, I hid in the space underneath the porch so they could pass by without seeing me. Mrs. Reynolds had two daughters, Ivy and Melissa. I found them disconcerting, partly because they were in high school, but mostly because they were identical twins. I'd been both fascinated by and suspicious of twins from a young age; my mother said it came from a nightmare I'd had when very young. But since I didn't remember the nightmare, I didn't know how the feeling could have stayed with me.

"Mother, I think we shouldn't have gotten the blue denim instead of the red twill," said one of the girls. With each step, a shower of dust fell into my eyes, nose, and mouth.

"Well, Lissa, it's too late now. Once they cut it, they can't give you a refund. That's the rule." I heard her digging through her purse to find her key. "I swear, I've never met anyone as indecisive as you." Her voice faded as they walked into their apartment.

Once they had gone inside, I crawled out and took up my position on the porch again.

Mrs. Vardaman emerged again from her apartment, apparently leaving on an errand, but she gave me such a suspicious look that I pretended I was sitting on the porch by choice, not because I had to, and I didn't ask her for help.

After this third failure, I gave up. I was too sleepy to sit up any longer, and too embarrassed to lie down in full view, so I crawled back under the porch. I cleared the rocks away and lay down in the dirt.

I still remember the dream I had then because it seemed to say something important. I dreamed I was at my grandfather's house, but I must have added that detail later, since when I

had the dream, I hadn't yet been there. The surrounding landscape was more desolate than that which I later found there, so that the lone house reared up abruptly from the land beneath it. In the dream I recognized it, and the outline of the landscape around it, as I place I'd visited many times before in other dreams. I looked in all the windows but couldn't find my mother. There was one window I couldn't get to because it was the attic window. I kept trying, and finally I simply lifted off the ground and went up to the window. The window was open, but I hovered outside. Spotted and striped pelts covered the floors and hung on the walls of the room. More were draped around the form of a girl who stood in the middle of the room, a scepter in hand, and dog at her side. When I woke up I couldn't remember if the girl was me, or my mother, or someone else.

The dream scared me. I realized it was dark outside. I dragged myself from my shelter and banged indiscriminately on the first-floor doors, even my own, heedless of who found me and in what condition.

I waited.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Reynolds, who never slept, opened her door. Then shortly afterwards, Mrs. Vardaman opened hers.

"Not again." Mrs. Reynolds exclaimed when she saw us all standing there. "How do you like that? Teenagers! My girls told me about this prank. Someone knocks on your door, and by the time you've gotten yourself up, put on a robe, flipped on the light, and opened the door, they've hidden in the bushes. They're probably right around here listening to us and laughing. My daughters told me what it's called, and I won't repeat it in polite company! Well, I'm going back to bed!" She closed her door.

“Teenagers!” Mrs. Vardaman hissed at me. “Go find them! Hurry, they can’t have gotten far! I’ll give you a dollar for each one you bring back!”

“Mrs. Vardaman, I’m really sorry, but it was me who knocked. I’m locked out without a key.”

“Why on earth didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“Mr. Fletcher is supposed to check on me, and I thought he might come over today.”

“Where’s that mother of yours?”

“She’s out of town.”

This seemed to soften her. “Aah,” she said, as if it confirmed something. She motioned for me to come inside.

“Mr. Fletcher has every key. You should ask him to make an extra copy, and you can give it to me for safe-keeping. I’ll show you what I do.” She opened her front door again and lifted up the mat, but there wasn’t anything there, only the shape of a key outlined in the dust that had once collected around it. She laughed. “I must have used it. You see? It just goes to show.”

I wasn’t sure what it went to show, so I followed her into the kitchen in silence. She opened a drawer and took out a piece of paper torn from a motel tablet. It said LANDLORD and had what I hoped was Mr. Fletcher’s number next to it. I didn’t think my mother or I had ever called him at home, though such a call would have been within bounds, given our status as tenants. We saw him so often, there was never a need to.

He answered on the first ring, though it was late. It surprised me, and, for a moment, I forgot what I was going to say. When I told him I was locked out, he didn’t seem upset or put out. He even seemed eager to help. He said he’d be right over.

I told Mrs. Vardaman that I wouldn't disturb her any longer and waited outside.

#

Mr. Fletcher was the only man I knew well enough to talk to. There was very little about him that I had not taken note of. He had a waxy complexion like other men I saw who sat in offices all day, drinking hot coffee from Styrofoam cups. Also like them, he gave the impression of being uncomfortably full, as though he'd just eaten more than he could manage, but out of kindness to his host, rather than greed.

The most extraordinary thing about him was that he loved my mother, not in that distant, defeated sort of way that was appropriate to a married man, but in a manner so frank and open that it almost passed as virtuous, as though my mother were his spinster sister and not a single mother he flirted with and provided for within the strict bounds set by his wife. I knew this even then, in that canny way children know things adults would rather they didn't.

Mr. Fletcher arrived sooner than I thought possible. "You look like the ghost of your mother," he said, getting out of his car, coming up the walk, and skipping over the steps. He always said I was a spitting image.

"If a dog is left outside without any food, how long do you think it would survive?" I asked.

He walked right past me and put the key into the lock.

"Do you think it would live for five days if no one came to feed it?"

With the door unlocked, but still shut, he said, "Here, try to walk through the door." "I bet you go right through."

Just as I bumped into the door, he gave it a push, so it opened and I went through.

"You see? Ghosts don't need landlords."

When we were inside, he closed the door looked at me. He said, “What do you say we go to your grandfather’s house?”

It was just what I wanted, but the possibly it had seemed so remote that I hadn’t even let myself think it. I was so stunned I couldn’t say anything.

“What do you say, huh?” He put his keys on the table. “Let’s go help your mother out. Go clean up and change. We’ll get something to eat on our way.”

In the bathroom I turned the water on and stood under the shower, scrubbing vigorously. Usually my mother made me count to ten while I stood under the water. While I was pulling my jeans over damp skin, I paused. I could hear Mr. Fletcher talking to his wife on the phone in the kitchen. I stood still and didn’t breath. He seemed to have just told his wife where he was and what he was going to do. I wondered why he hadn’t told her that before he left.

“Really, you don’t need to.... Honestly, It’ll be easier without you.... Anyway, it’s only for a night or two.... I know but that was for a funeral....” He raised his voice a bit. “You have a father, imagine how difficult this would be for you.” Then he lowered his voice to a whisper. I turned on the water so it wouldn’t seem like I was listening.

“Suit yourself,” he said too cheerfully. “I’ll pick you up when she’s done getting ready. I don’t know when that’ll be. You know girls.” I heard him put the phone back in the receiver. I fastened my jeans. I was disappointed that Mrs. Fletcher would be coming along.

#

I had never been to my grandfather’s house, but Mr. Fletcher had. He had taken my mother to my grandmother’s funeral three years ago. He started telling me about it after we pulled through a truck stop off the highway, where he ordered me two hamburgers and a shake.

“She thought he might be more accepting in his grief and loneliness, but that was not the case. You know your mother was the child of his old age. It’s very Biblical, I’m sure it pleased him. Made him think he was Noah or someone. Old bastard. I’m sorry, Hon, I shouldn’t talk that way around you.”

But I didn’t really care at that moment. I couldn’t have been happier; I was eating my second hamburger and sucking down shake.

“That’s good,” he said. “You’re a growing girl. You got to feed that brain.” He paused, put his right arm across the seat behind me, and said, “You know, everything’s going to be just fine.”

“How do you know?”

“Your mother, she’s a smart lady. She’ll get everything taken care of.”

“No. How can you tell I’m worrying?”

“Just can, I guess.”

I was so absorbed, first in my food, then in what he was saying, that I didn’t notice we hadn’t picked up Mrs. Fletcher and when I did, I decided not to remind him.

So much had happened that day. I thought about how the boys wouldn’t let me inside. How I had lost my job and almost slept outside. None of that mattered now that I was being whisked away to my mother. I was lulled into a quiet stupor, listening to the radio, feeling the car swaying in the wind, hearing an occasional rock flying against the side.

When Mr. Fletcher honked, I realized I had been asleep for a long time.

“There’s the answer to your question,” he said.

“Are we there?” I straightened myself up and took stock. It was dark out, but I could hear a dog circling the car and barking.

“Remember? Question: What happens when you don’t feed a dog? Answer: He tries to eat the damn car.”

It was the middle of the night. I was confused, but my mind sorted things out in a matter of seconds. Still, I was disbelieving, and sought confirmation. “Do you think that’s my grandfather’s dog?”

“Dammit,” he said, bringing the car to a halt. “What’s this?”

There was a gutted sofa blocking our way. The dog jumped up onto it and sat there wagging its tail, panting, and watching us eagerly.

I felt giddy and started laughing. “Why is there a sofa in the driveway?” I asked.

“Stay here.” He leaned across me to lock my door.

When he got out of the car, the dog slid off the sofa and ran toward him. He told it to go away, but it loped along behind him. “Tess! Tess!” he called.

My mother’s name was Thessalonika. It wasn’t as weird as it sounded at first. First, it was a bona fide name; I’d come across it in old books. It was usually the name of an elderly grandmother. Also, it wasn’t weird at all if you knew she was part Dutch, and kind of named after her mother, Tessel. And if you knew that both parents were great admirers of Paul’s letters to the early church, and were especially interested in his views on the Second Coming, then it wasn’t weird at all.

She went by Tess, but I sometimes liked to call her Thessalonika instead of Mom.

## CHAPTER FOUR

My mother, it turned out, had gone straight to the hospital to be with her father, and hadn't even been to the house by the time we got there. The dog most certainly would have died, had vandals not broken into my grandfather's house, strewing everything they could find, including the contents of the refrigerator, across the floor, leaving the doors open when they had finished. The dog had survived. What's more, judging from her later behavior, she had spent the days as she pleased, going outside to sleep on the sofa, or to chase the garments from overturned drawers that the wind blew across the yard, or whipped up into the branches of the cottonwood trees.

I couldn't have dreamed up a more perfect arrangement had I tried to.

After taking stock of the situation, Mr. Fletcher had driven back to the last gas station we had passed, and gotten coffee for both of us. He looked through the phone book that hung from a silver cord in a lighted pay-phone booth, and after a few calls, found out how to get to where my grandfather was staying.

"No need to tell your mother about the house being broken into," he said. "It would only upset her more. Have you ever been around a sick person? You need to act very serious." He was talking quickly, and I could tell he was nervous. We drove a while in silence over the darkened landscape, then he added, "There's probably no need to tell your mother about being locked out. At least right now. We don't want her to worry she shouldn't have left you."

When we got to the hospital, Mr. Fletcher left me outside the door in the hallway. The walls were cinder blocks painted light blue. There was some artwork made by children hanging on the walls, and some letters written by the family members of patients. I became worried as I



looked at these, and by the time Mr. Fletcher opened the door for me, I half-expected to find my mother lying in a hospital bed, not my grandfather.

My mother didn't say anything as I entered the room. I felt like one of us should say sorry, but I didn't know exactly for what. "We were worried about you," I said.

"What did you tell the Rohrbachs?"

"They want Travis to start having more responsibility, so they're giving me a little vacation, so he can try it out. But the job would have been over soon anyway, with them starting up in school in a few weeks."

"Yes," she said. "I'm thinking about staying. Would you like that? I just told Mr. Fletcher about it."

"The dog would be happier here than in our apartment."

My mother cocked her head to the side and looked puzzled. "There's a dog? I wonder how it managed to survive with no one there to take care of it?"

"I guess it was okay in the barn. There are mice and stuff for it to eat."

"Oh, do dogs eat mice? Well, I guess they must. And it doesn't matter now, anyway." She smiled. "There will be lots of things for you to do. You'll have to help out with my father."

Before now I had avoided the small form wrapped in sheets. He lay there with his eyes open, staring up at the ceiling. I looked to see what he was looking at, but there wasn't anything but ceiling tiles.

"He's had a stroke, Bea. He doesn't even know me." She paused, straightening his blankets, "Perhaps that's best. He would never have consented to letting me take care of him" She smoothed the strands of oily gray hair that lay across his forehead. "Look, Bea. You have his same color of eyes."

Mr. Fletcher opened the door a crack and suggested I leave with him. “We’ll get the house all ready for your mom and granddad.”

Before we left, he pulled around to another entrance, and picked up a cot that was folded up. Two men wrestled it into the back seat. Together we rode back to my grandfather’s house.

“I’m hoping,” Mr. Fletcher said significantly, “that your mother won’t need to know anything happened. That we can get everything cleaned up the best we can, and she’ll just think they had gotten rid of some things since she last lived there.”

It was dawn by the time we arrived back at the house, and we saw in the light that the vandals had spray-painted some really large boobs on the side of the house, so Mr. Fletcher had to abandon that hope—there was no way we get the whole house painted before my mother got back. He found a stack of sturdy two-by-fours in my grandfather’s barn, and positioned these over the porch steps and over the part of the gravel driveway that was nearest to it. That way, the sofa and other furniture could be dragged inside, and it would serve as a ramp for my grandfather when my mother brought him back.

While he did this, I gathered up things that had been strewn about the yard. Since I had had coffee for the first time ever, I found myself working quickly and energetically. I climbed a tree to retrieve a garment that had been blown up to its crown, and unhooked it with a broken-off branch, and flung it to the ground, where the dog ran off with it.

My mother came later with my grandfather. Mr. Fletcher lifted him from the back seat like a sleeping child, saying he was as light as a bird. My mother wrestled his folded wheelchair from the trunk of the car, and opened it up, and set it down on the boards that now covered the part of the driveway nearest the door.

Mr. Fletcher went home that day; he needed to return to work and his wife had been left without a car. He said he would be back over the weekend to paint, and that he would bring us whatever we needed from our apartment. His face looked troubled as he said this. I imagined he was thinking about what his wife would say.

#

The damage to the house had not been considerable: vandals had taken the television and an old antique stereo that my mother missed. A few other antique pieces were gone. My mother floated around her childhood home, in her element at last. Her shoulders lower, her broad back straighter, and the lines on her face gone so that she looked much younger. I lay on the worn carpet of the living room, the dog's wet nose on my neck. I called her Jessie-Jo. My mother didn't care for her, and refused to call her anything. My grandfather sat in a wheelchair all day, facing the spot where the television once stood. He couldn't speak, so I didn't know what his thoughts were, but I knew by the expression on his face that they were angry. At night, my mother moved him onto the rented cot she had set up in the living room. She slept on the sofa next to him, and I slept in her childhood room with Jessie-Jo.

My mother's old room was the only room on the second floor of the house. The floor was made of unfinished boards, and there were only a few pieces of furniture—a bed and a desk—at odd angles. Her belongings had mostly been cleared out. I didn't know if her parents had gotten rid of everything, or if the people who had broken in had taken things, but it was as though she'd never lived here. The more I searched, though, the more fossils I found. There was a small desk, in which I found a scrap of paper that said, "the house beyond the latter side of welcome." Behind the headboard, I found a crayon drawing of a hollow-eyed brontosaurus with a tiny upturned mouth. On the back of the closet door I discovered lines that had been penciled

in marking my mother's growth ever since she was old enough to stand, going up to her sixteenth birthday, which was only a little higher than the line that had been drawn at her fifteenth birthday. By the time she was seventeen, she was pregnant with me, and her parents had stopped measuring her.

It turned out there were other traces of my mother's existence in the house. On Mr. Fletcher's next visit, he went into the cellar to see what he could find, and came back carrying a cardboard box full of photos. Most of them were of my mother when she was young. Up until that day, I had never seen a photo of my mother, and it was the oddest feeling, seeing a picture of her when she was younger than me. Looking into the eyes of a person who had no idea she would one day have me to look at this picture.

"You were chubby, Thessalonika." I said.

Her eyes were bright and slanted like an elf's; her mind, I could tell from her expression, was smooth and free from care. In the picture, she drew her lips in when she smiled, so that her mouth was in a straight line.

Mr. Fletcher tried to put his arm around my mother, but she drew away. "Funny, I always thought she looked like you," Mr. Fletcher said. "I guess she does, sort of. The oval face, especially."

"My hair has always been the exact same color as peanut butter," I said. "And mom's is a little lighter now and was a lot lighter when she was a kid."

"The odd thing is," Mr. Fletcher said to my mother, "is she looks like you now, but not all like how you looked as a child."

“I never thought she looked much like me,” she said. “I suppose she’s just picked up on my facial expressions and copied them. Children do that. That’s how it is that adopted children sometimes seem to look like their parents.”

“I knew it!” I exclaimed. But my mother knew I was only kidding. Adoption used to be my favorite fantasy.

“Sorry, no such luck. In fact, you look a lot like my father, if you want to know the truth.” She pulled out a photo of my grandfather when he was about my age. From the large ears to pointed chin, I knew she was right, but it was disappointing. No more fantasies of a powerful mother out there who had lost me by mistake. There was still my father to think about, whose peanut butter-colored hair I knew I had inherited, even though no one mentioned it just then.

#

Every day, my mother shampooed her father’s hair. She used a spray bottle to dampen his hair with warm water, massaged shampoo into it, then rinsed it off with a warm washcloth. She prepared mixtures over the stove that she could feed him from a syringe. She had to give him pills every six hours. Every few hours, she wrapped his arm over her shoulder, and heaved him into the bathroom, where she sat him on the toilet, hoping he needed to go. If he didn’t, he went in a diaper that she needed to change.

The next weekend, Mr. Fletcher came, carrying boxes of our stuff. He didn’t have time to paint the house, so he made some calls, and hired some guys to come out and do it. Before he left, he said to my mother, “You’ve got your hands full, Tess. Why don’t you send her to school? I’ve looked into it, and the public schools are good in this area. Very traditional.”

My mother looked at me, then back at Mr. Fletcher. “I don’t even know where they are.”

“You don’t need to. They have a bus that will come and get her. They’ve only just started a week ago. They said she’d be able to catch up if she started soon. I just have to let them know.”

“What do you think, Bea?” my mother asked me.

I couldn’t believe she would consider it. How many times had I asked for the very same thing, and she’d adamantly refused?

“It would help your mom out. It would give her more time to take care of her father and get things straightened up here.”

So that’s how, the next week, I started public school. I couldn’t start right up, as Mr. Fletcher had said. The first time he talked to them, he hadn’t told them I’d been home-schooled. He had to delay going back to work in order to drive me over one morning so they could do some tests.

The next Monday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, two weeks after the official start of the school year, I started in the fourth grade, though I should have been in the sixth. They explained it was because I didn’t have math or science skills. The teachers liked me, and had me go to the eighth-grade English class, so that I could save face with the kids. “You’re not dumb, Bea. You’re just very uneven. You know more words than we do, but you’re lacking certain skills.” Luckily it was a small school and held first through twelfth grade all in the same building. I sat with the sixth graders for the twenty minutes of home room, because, according to the principal, “I would be joining them all day in no time.” It was the worst twenty minutes of the day. Most of the kids had started school together in the first grade. They weren’t used to new faces. They all regarded me with suspicion as Mrs. Wickman introduced me and explained that, because of my unusual background, I would only be joining them now for homeroom. I started to sit down in an empty

desk at the end of a row, relieved to finally be out of the spotlight, but Mrs. Wickman stopped me.

“Regina, scoot over to that empty desk. I think you would do better there.” She looked back at me, “Bea, you sit where Regina used to sit.”

Regina grimaced as she lugged her books and trombone case to her new desk. She let her trombone case fall to the floor with a thud, and sat down heavily.

“Now maybe you and Cory will get some work done instead of talking all the time.”

Cory turned red and stared at the top of her desk. When I looked at Regina, she was flaring her nostrils at me in disgust.

#

I spent the next two periods, including recess, with the fourth graders. The classes weren't bad. They were Math and Science, and I was allowed to sit in the back and not say much. The classes were very structured, so I didn't have to interact much with the other students.

Recess was a different story. I spent the first day wandering around the periphery of the playground, eyes to the ground, trying to look distant and unreachable, so that the kids wouldn't ask me anything about myself. It would have been nice if grass and flowers grew, but there was nothing but dirt and crabgrass. There was an area of the playground that the fourth graders didn't play on because all the equipment had smaller proportions. I had seen younger kids playing there during their recess. The fourth graders wouldn't go near it, as though proximity would mark them as babies. There was no danger of my being marked, towering over the fourth graders as I did, and I wanted to put as much distance between them and myself as possible, so that area of the playground became my area.

In the middle of it there was a jungle gym shaped like a half sphere. I climbed onto the top and watched the other kids playing. It was fascinating but also terrifying to watch; I had never been around so many children before. I watched boys playing on the slide. Two boys were stationed at the top of the slide, sliding rocks down to two at the bottom, who then attempted to launch them up to the top. A teacher tooted her whistle. She marched over, and told them that if they were going to play on the slide, they had to play on it properly. They walked away and stood against the fence, kicking it occasionally.

My fascination with them soon wore off. I looked down from my perch on the jungle gym and noticed little pieces of colored rubber on the ground among dirt and crabgrass. They must have peeled off. The bars of the jungle gym were wrapped in colored rubber. Exposed to the weather, the rubber must have dried and cracked, until little pieces peeled off and fell to the ground. I began collecting them. Looking for them gave me a sort of occupation to distract me from recess. Most of them were too small to be reckoned, but some peeled off in interesting shapes. I became as excited at the large pieces as if I had found monkshood. I brought a special box from home in which to store them, and I began to imagine they had names, just as wildflowers did. A rare piece, because large and yellow, was Scarcity. Another was the elbow flower, for obvious reasons. By far the most common were the fingernail flowers, which had to be scraped from the dirt.

One day, I found a large piece, but realized that some of the kids were peeling them off intentionally so that I could find them. This completely ruined the thrill of the search, which depended on finding pieces that had fallen by chance.

“Vandals,” I shouted. “I ought to tell someone. They’d make you pay for the damage to school property.” I left them looking very seriously at one another, and I took my things behind a



tree stump to take account of my collection. I laid them out on the bare earth. I heard three of the kids in the distance casting blame, and arguing about who was going to get it.

I softened. "I don't think you're in trouble," I said. "I just said that so you'd leave me alone."

For some reason, they took this remark as an invitation to approach.

A girl with tangly hair and t-shirt that said "Elvis Lives!" stood on her tiptoes, as if to peer in my box, and said, "Got any Scooby snacks?"

"She's always looking for snacks," said a tiny girl with hair so tightly braided that it pulled on the skin around her eyes.

"What grade are you in?" a boy asked. I recognized him because he sat right in front of me in the fourth-grade classes. He sat very upright in his chair and had a cowlick on the back of his head where his hair parted. Today during Science class he had come back from the bathroom with his fly open and saluted me before he sat down at his desk. I saw that he had since zipped it up.

The tiny girl shushed him.

The girl with messier hair said, "She's in our grade, stupid."

"I'm in sixth grade and I sit in your classes because I was home-schooled, and my mother was too stupid to teach me very much."

They laughed.

It turned out the word "stupid" was sort of a taboo it made them laugh when I said it. Also, they liked the idea of staying home for school to be taught by their mothers. They began arguing among themselves about whose mother was the smartest, and who was the dumbest. Everyone claimed to have the dumbest mother.

The next day, when they came to join me by my tree stump, I didn't send them away. I told them everything I knew about flowers, and when I ran out of facts, I made things up to keep their interest. "Each flower has a personality," I said. "Scarcity was the name of the place they came from."

"That's the moonwalk," said the tiny girl with braids, pointing to the jungle gym.

I had begun to get the idea that she was a know-it-all. "But they call it Scarcity."

"I thought that was what that piece was called," the boy said, pointing to the yellow piece.

Elbow used to be a perfect circle. She wanted to get back to Scarcity but the Gravels were always trying to stop her. They broke her up until she looked like she does now. The Gravels are very stupid. The kids laughed.

"Hey, I know this story," a boy with dark bushy eyebrows said.

"How can you know it? She just now made it up," said the tiny girl in a prim little dress.

The boy stared.

Before I could continue, the bell rang, I was off to my eighth grade English class.

#

That night, Mr. Fletcher left without saying goodbye to me. I had come down the stairs to get a drink of water when I heard angry whispers, so I stopped to listen.

"My father is right *there*," my mother hissed.

"He can't see us," Mr. Fletcher said slowly. "He can't hear us. And if he could, he wouldn't even know what we were doing."

"And how do you know?"

"Tess."

I heard some movement, then my mother said, “I will not desecrate my father’s bedroom. You don’t know me, John. You don’t know me.”

“I’ve been your only friend for *seven* years. Who knows you better than I do?”

“My father.”

The voices moved to another part of the house and I couldn’t quite make them out. A door slammed. I heard a car start.

I didn’t sleep well that night, and the next day during recess, I felt bored and listless. The three children came and sat by me, but I didn’t feel like telling them anything. I said that Elbow and Scarcity had made it back to Scarcity and had become lovers. The end.

They all got mad and said I had gotten it wrong.

“Oh yeah?” I asked. I opened my box up and dumped the pieces on the ground. I picked up Elbow and Scarcity and squeezed them between my hands, and clapped my palms to remove the dust from my hands. The boy looked at me like I had slapped him in the face. One of the girls ran to go tell the teacher, her braids swinging behind her. A whistle tooted, and Mrs. Jepson came running toward us.

After my first week, I was promoted to be a full-time sixth grader.

## CHAPTER FIVE

My mother feared Mr. Fletcher would demand his car back at any moment, so she took advantage of having it by running lots of errands while she still could. At first she would leave as soon as I came home from school, but sometimes, if she couldn't wait, she would leave a little sooner. She rarely brought anything back from these trips. It had been so long since she had been home, and I suspect she liked to look around and see how things had changed.

While she was gone, I was left in charge of my grandfather. He wasn't any trouble; sometimes expressions would flicker over his face—he would raise his eyebrow or pucker his lips. Once, while I was doing homework, something got into me, and I tried to draw on his hand. The tip of the pencil had been worn to a shiny nub by math problems, and his skin was so loose that it didn't leave a mark, though I outlined a triangle and filled it in with stripes as Jessie-Ho, wagging her sickle-shaped tail, looked over my shoulder to see what I was doing. Afterwards I felt a little guilty, as though I had doodled in a textbook.

Jessie-Jo often sat next to his wheelchair, watching him expectantly, her ears pricked and her tail tense and wagging, alert to the slightest change in his countenance. When his hands dangled to the sides of his wheelchair, she would lick them or nudge them in an effort to get him to pet her. When she got no response, she would whine and paw his slippered foot. When she wasn't sitting next to his wheelchair, she followed a patch of sunlight as it moved across the carpet. She would get up, find where it had gone, turn a few circles, and curl up again on the floor.

Once, the doorbell rang, and she followed me to the door to see who it was. It was a Jehovah's Witness with sweaty underarms, who looked down at Jessie and said, "That dog is pregnant."

I offered her a glass of iced tea.

She came inside and sat down on the sofa. She rested one arm over her head.

I told her how the dog had been loose for a few days.

She sucked on the ice and looked at the dog while she listened. Lowering her arm into her lap she said, “Yep. It happens. That’s why my father would never keep a female dog.” She finished her tea, handed me some pamphlets, and got up to go.

I remembered then seeing my mother pressing on Jessie’s belly and frowning.

I waited for my mother to say something, then a few days later, as we sat at the kitchen table unwrapping hamburgers she had brought back, she said, “Bea, do you know a little girl named Regina Thurmond?”

I nodded. “Well, I know of her,” I corrected. “She’s supposed to be good at the trombone. She’s going to be Piglet in the school skit. I don’t really know her, though. Why?”

“Her mother called the other day, to see if Regina could come home with you.” She set her hamburger down in its wrapper and leaned toward me. “Here’s the thing. I know you are fond of that dog, Bea, but it worries me, having her around my father, frail as he is. The other night she tried to jump up on his cot. It wouldn’t take much for her claw to tear his skin. She wouldn’t mean to, of course, but his skin is so thin.”

I set my hamburger down. I was too puzzled to be angry. Why didn’t she just tell me the dog was pregnant?

“I know this is hard, Bea, but I put an ad in the paper to see if someone would like to take the dog off our hands. Well, someone did: Mrs. Thurmond. And it turned out we have girls in the same grade, and you know the rest of the story.”

I decided the reason she had not told me must be so that I could not argue with her. There was something final about a sick man's safety. There was something else: she hoped no one knew the dog was pregnant until after they had agreed to take her. So I said, "Don't you think he'll know?"

"Well, that's just it. If he does know, I don't think he'll mind. I think he's a little scared of Jessie-Jo. I've seen him flinch when she barks at him. Regina's going to come home with you tomorrow and, if she likes the dog, her mother's going to take the dog home with them." She picked up her hamburger and chewed for a moment. Then she said, "I thought this might be a good chance for you to make friends. I'll tell her mother you'd like to come over and play some time. That way you could still visit the dog."

I decided it was best to act like I didn't mind. There was nothing to stop me from informing Regina and her mother that the dog was pregnant, provided my mother was gone on a drive like she usually was after school, and, judging from what the Jehovah's Witness had said, no one wanted a pregnant dog. Also, I was excited at the thought of having someone come over. The kids didn't dislike me—after the first few days, they stopped staring, but neither did they try to strike up a friendship. The teachers promised that if I could just ride out the difficult parts, I would make friends, and things would be better.

#

After school I waited in line by the bus barn. "Congratulations on graduating from the fourth grade," Regina said before setting down her trombone case and school bag about three feet away from me. She wore bright red pants, and a blue striped shirt. She tipped her head back, and smoothed the hair away from her face. Then she gathered her hair together and passed it from her right hand to her left while she twisted it over her right shoulder.

I thought I might as well tell her the dog was pregnant, to save her the trouble of coming home with me, but Regina crossed her arms and looked into the distance with such a preoccupied look that I had the feeling she didn't want me to talk to her, at least not in public, so I decided to wait until we got on the bus.

She sat two rows behind and across the aisle from me. It was a long bus ride, and, as we got further away from school, her manner changed until, finally, she sighed loudly and moved up to my row. "So where's your house?"

I tried quickly to think of what to say; I didn't know where my house was, or how to describe it, but I didn't want to say that because I knew Regina already thought I was stupid.

She slumped down impatiently and drew up her knees so they were resting against the back of the seat in front of her. She looked out the window, shaking her head, having given up on my ability to produce an answer.

The driver pulled the bus to the curb and opened the door. Regina jerked her bag and case off the floor and tripped lazily down the stairs, like she was bored out of her mind but determined to make the best of it.

It was late afternoon, and blackbirds were buzzing in the fields around the house. I took out my key and unlocked the door.

"You mean your mother's not at home?"

I shook my head. "I think she must have left on an errand."

"Wow. Must be nice." She set her things down inside the door and followed the dog, who had come to the door to greet us, into the living room where my grandfather slumped in his wheelchair. "She just leaves you in charge of him?" She stood in front of him and waved her hand slowly, her eyebrows raised. "You must take after him," she said.

“He can’t really see you,” I said.

She looked down at Jessie-Jo and laughed. “Do you even know what kind of dog this is? We were going to buy one of her puppies from your grandfather for a thousand dollars or something like that. My mom couldn’t believe you guys wanted to get rid of her. Then she figured it out.” Jessie-Jo sat down in a patch of dying sunlight.

All along, I had felt protected by that information, now I had led her right to Jessie, only to find I was unarmed.

“She realized your mother was trying to get rid of her *because* she was pregnant, and she thought we wouldn’t notice until it was too late!”

“I don’t want to get rid of her.”

“Your mom does. Maybe you can buy a puppy for ten thousand dollars.” She sat down next to the dog.

It was suddenly so simple. “How about this: you get all the puppies you want for free. But you can’t have her.”

“Maybe Bea’s not so stupid, after all,” she said to Jessie-Jo. “Maybe she’s even a little bit smart.” Then she looked at me. “It’s a deal.” She leaned forward onto her feet and stood up. She rubbed her palm against her jeans. “It’s really cool that your mom leaves you alone and in charge..”

I shrugged.

“So what do you want to do?”

I had never had friends over and I had no idea what they did. “What sort of thing do you usually do?”



“What do I usually do?” She exhaled loudly. “Let’s see, I have to wake up and do chores every morning at five. Then I have to practice my trombone because I’m really good. My mother takes me to Lawrence once a month for a special lesson. After school, I have to practice again. And then I have to sit down with a lady from our church who is teaching me Latin. My mother doesn’t let me do anything.”

“My mother makes me look after him,” I said, gesturing toward my grandfather.

“But that’s fun. My mother would so never let me do that. Don’t you have fun doing it?”

“Yeah, it’s okay.”

“Your mother is so great. She didn’t make you go to school.” She walked across the living room and looked into my grandfather’s old room. She turned to me. “Do you think it’s because she’s so young? I’m going to have kids when I’m young so I’m like her.” She came back to the living room and plopped down on the sofa. “What are these, she asked?” looking into the box of dried flowers that sat on the coffee table.

“I collect flowers. The one on top is a poop flower.”

“Really?” She laughed. “I want one. I want to give it to my mother. What do you want to bet that she acts like she thinks it’s pretty and smells good?” Regina widened her eyes and pursed her lips. “She’ll say ‘Ooh, how lovely, *dahling*.’” She was still laughing at the vision of her mother sniffing the poop flower. “She’s so embarrassing. Will you help me find one?”

I told her I would. I did not tell her they only grew in Colorado.

“Do you take him with you?” she asked, looking at my grandfather.

I nodded as I stood behind his wheelchair. It was hard to move the wheelchair out of the ruts it had made in the carpet. I had to push hard to get it over the carpet to the entryway, where

Regina held the front door open, humming something under her breath. When I got to the tiled floor, I was pushing so hard to get the wheelchair over the carpet that it slid right over and out the door and down the ramp onto the boards of the driveway.

Jessie-Jo had followed us outside, so I left my grandfather and took her back in.

It was getting on late afternoon. The light was fading, and the air hardly moved. Luckily the driveway was flat, so I regained control for a moment before turning onto the road, which went downhill, but was gravel and so slowed the movement of the wheelchair.

“Do you like Mrs. Wickman?” Regina asked as she walked alongside me.

I shrugged.

“Her nipples stick out. I can see them poking out through her blouse sometimes.” She laughed and sat up. “Hey, I dare you to point your finger at her and say, ‘Poke, poke.’” She giggled.

The back of my grandfather’s head bobbed as the chair clattered down the hill, and I had to speed up to keep pace with it. Regina jogged along beside me.

“I hate my mother. When I have to ride in the car to Lawrence with her, she hums the whole way. It makes me want to scream. One of these days I’m going to strangle her. If I say anything, even in the most normal tone of voice, she says ‘Don’t talk back to me!’ and grounds me for a month.”

I was struggling a little with the wheelchair; my palms were sweaty, making it hard to grip the handles.

“She’s best friends with Cory’s mother and I overheard her talking on the phone about how sweet Cory was compared to me. Can you believe it? Sometimes Cory drives me crazy.

She's such a Goody Two-Shoes. But your mother lets you do whatever you want. So where do you find the poop flowers?"

The wheelchair slipped from my grasp and went clattering down the hill, picking up speed. I stared at it. It remained marvelously upright as it bumped down the road, and I felt that if I stayed perfectly still, it would remain so. I willed Regina to stop shrieking.

The wheelchair no longer seemed to be bumping over the pieces of gravel, but to be sailing over them. Still shrieking, Regina ran toward the wheelchair. It hit a rock. My grandfather was thrown against the seat back then forward. The chair tipped forward and dumped him out. Freed from his weight, the chair tumbled over, the leg rest hitting my grandfather in the back of the head.

Regina stopped screaming. She was sobbing now.

The more she reacted, the more I felt myself unable to, like there was a glass of reacting juice and she had gulped it all. I felt that I was crouching in the limbs of the nearby hedge tree, watching this all come to pass. It was all happening to Regina, not to me. I felt very tired, and lay down on the road.

"Get! up!" she screamed.

I heard my grandfather make a noise I had never heard before. I heard the wheelchair clatter to the ground and realized Regina had thrown it off him. I heard something like a slap. I heard her talking in another language. I got up, stumbled to the shoulder and threw up. I felt better, and stagger over to where Regina bent over my grandfather's body.

"It didn't mean to. It slipped," I blubbered.

"Stop it," she hissed.

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to stop.

“Stop breathing down my neck.” she said.

I willed myself to go in the direction of the wheelchair, which was in a heap now in the middle of the road. I tried to stand it up, but one of the rear wheels had broken off.

Regina stood up, grabbed ahold of my grandfather underneath his arms and began dragging him off the road into the grass.

I stopped her so I could get a hold of one of his arms. She took the other. Together we dragged him over the grass. My grandfather was covered in dust and he was bleeding from the back of his head.

We paused while I was sick again, then we continued dragging him. I was cold and sweating.

There was a barn behind us where we were headed. Since it was on a hill, there was a back entrance that led directly into the hayloft. We dragged him inside. It was cooler, but also dustier, and I began to cough, and thought I was going to throw up again. I dropped my grandfather’s arm and went into the corner, where I crouched on some old loose hay. I watched Regina wander around in circles, tugging on her hair. Every now and then, she convulsed into dry sobs. I picked up a handful of hay, carried it to my grandfather’s form and placed it around his head.

“Look at you.” Regina’s voice was barely audible now. “You’re so filthy.” She grabbed the handful of hay from me, got on her hands and knees, and began dusting the floor around where my grandfather lay. Particles, stirred up by our presence, hovered in the shafts of light that came into the barn.

Regina threw a handful of hay down into the stables below, made a final convulsive sound from the back of her throat, full of resolution and disgust, and ran out of the barn into the fields.

#

I was easy to find; the search party saw the wheelchair in the road, and simply followed the trail to the barn where I crouched and trembled in the darkness, aware of wailing police sirens. Clumps of Regina's hair lay among dust of the hayloft, though she was not found until four days later, when her body turned up three miles to the north.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Julie Christenson lives in Florida, where she has made improvements in the lives of countless feral cats. She plans to soon take her crusade in Columbia, Missouri, where she will pursue a Ph.D. while completing her first novel.

Scarcity as an economic concept " refers to the basic fact of life that there exists only a finite amount of human and nonhuman resources which the best technical knowledge is capable of using to produce only limited maximum amounts of each economic good ." If the conditions of scarcity didn't exist and an "infinite amount of every good could be produced or human wants fully satisfied there would be no economic goods, i.e. goods that are relatively scarce..." Scarcity is the limited What metric to use for visualizing and determining an optimal number of clusters much better than the usual practice "elbow method." Consequently, a wrong assessment of the number of clusters can lead to sub-optimum allocation of precious resources. Source: <https://www.singlegrain.com/digital-marketing/strategists-guide-marketing-segmentation/>. The elbow method. For the k-means clustering method, the most common approach for answering this question is the so-called elbow method. An ELBOW, on the other hand, is a specific, standard, engineered bend pre-fabricated as a spool piece and designed to either be screwed, flanged, or welded to the piping it is associated with. An elbow can be 45o or 90o. There can also be custom-designed elbows, although most are categorized as either "short radius" or long radius". A bend can be an elbow; an elbow does not mean a bend. If you use the term elbow, it should also carry the qualifiers of type (45 or 90o) and radius (short or long) - besides the nominal size.