

# A R I E L



J E A N R O S S J U S T I C E

Easter eggs, pumpkins on the front porch for Halloween, notes to teachers – those almost forgotten things were coming back into her life. And so late in the game! They were what the boy was bringing with him. (And who knew what else?)

She walked over to school with him the first day. A couple of other women were there, mothers of transferring pupils. One of them smiled at her in a way she took to be sympathetic, which she didn't like: did the woman think she was a grandmother in charge of the child because of a family calamity? She wanted to say, "My daughter's work schedule makes it awkward for her to come." Which would not have been true.

She'd already asked about his schooling back in Oregon; he was nine – fourth grade? He'd been home-schooled, and he was vague about it, as if he barely remembered it or had slept through it (or gone through it in a druggy haze, the way his mother, God bless her, God damn her, apparently went through her days).

At the school, the secretary said, "Ariel! That's unusual."

"It's in Shakespeare," Marietta said firmly. She didn't like the name. Maybe she could somehow enact a nickname? Some people

had nicknames out of nowhere, like her cousin Wilfred, always called Bob.

“Oh, it’s nice,” the secretary said.

“You can call me Ari if you want to,” Ariel said. Was that what they called him back home? She didn’t ask him; she didn’t want the secretary to see that she didn’t know everything about him.

The secretary asked what he’d covered in math – fractions, decimals? He said yes but maybe not enough; he seemed to have dealt with workbooks that came in the mail, or computer programs. The secretary said they’d put him in fourth and see how things went.

It was the boyfriend who’d called, the man Becca, her daughter, called her partner. An unofficial stepfather for Ariel: Sebastian. Sebastian said Becca was going to rehab; they would be really happy if Ariel could live with Marietta for a while – would that be possible?

“Rehab? What for? Oh. Oh God. I’m sorry . . . Of course he can come. Thank you for calling. No, listen – tell her to call me. She can do that, can’t she?” The least! “She needs to ask me herself.” If that meant the end of it, so be it.

Sebastian was taken aback, of course. “Oh.” He said he’d give her the message. Marietta sat staring at the phone; it took her breath away to think what she’d done. All day she thought of calling back. Well, with any luck she might be able to put it out of mind again in a few weeks. The child had been five when she last saw him, sweet and malleable, but who knew about the time since? (With someone who needed rehab.) Anyway, he might well hate the idea of coming.

But Becca called. It was nearly three years since she’d called last. Marietta had begun to call it “estranged.” She’d called Becca time and again and left messages, calls that were never returned. “Mummah, please, I’m sorry I’m such a mess, I’m really sorry, I don’t know how I got here, I really don’t. I’m going to get cleaned up, please help us through this, Ariel needs you – ” She began to cry. It sounded sincere, the crying.

“All right, baby. It’s okay, just get *rehabilitated*, hear? You’ve got to do that. And you’ve got to call me off and on, okay? – you can do

that too. You remember that, we need to keep in touch. Okay. Tell me when to meet him.”

At the airport, the flight attendant who led him over to her said, “He’s a good kid.” He was a nice-looking blond child, self-possessed but unsmiling, with a suitcase as big as he was.

“How was the flight?” she asked him in the car.

“It was okay.”

He didn’t have much to say. Yes, he remembered being here before. No, he wasn’t too tired. No, he hadn’t slept on the way; he’d had a window seat and liked to look out.

What she wanted to ask was: How is your mother? What does she do every day? – when she’s not at rehab, that is. What do you talk about? Tell me something she’s said lately. But she didn’t ask.

After a while he said, “This is a nice car.” She kept her seven-year-old Camry neat, and it was nice enough, but that was all. What did he usually ride in? She imagined a pickup truck, but didn’t ask.

He needed a haircut. “We better get you a haircut, if you don’t mind – that’s not the style around here,” she remarked the next day. “You don’t want to stand out as different, I expect.” The hair was not outrageously long, but long, and looked as if someone had cut it at home.

He shrugged; he shrugged a good deal. “I don’t know.” He said “I don’t know” a good deal.

She was pleased with herself for understanding that it would be good to buy him a bicycle, though school was close enough to walk to. He knew how to ride a bicycle, though he didn’t know how to do much else. It was late summer, probably not the time to sign him up for, say, swimming lessons; anyway, it would be better to go slow on things. Next summer – would he still be here next summer? It wasn’t a thought to linger over.

“You’d better start saving for his college education,” her friend Rowena said. Rowena knew Becca’s story; not all of Marietta’s friends did.

“No hope there,” Marietta said. She was fearful of unexpected large expenses but knew she felt more concern about money than she needed to. She’d fixed up an apartment in her basement and

rented it to a college student; he had kitchen privileges. She was hoping Ariel's presence wouldn't bother Blake, the student. In the beginning she'd arranged her breakfast time to leave Blake alone and free in the kitchen, but by chance they'd happened there at the same time over and over, until this had become the expected routine; they were chummy. This was important to her.

"This is a nice house," Ariel said.

"I'm glad you like it." Nice car, nice house: it was slightly depressing, this automatic and probably insincere politeness. She liked the house, an old brick house on a hillside street where a short flight of steps led up to the front walk; she'd bought it when she and Becca's father had split up, being unwilling to stay in the house they'd shared, and being fond of old houses in the historic district of this college town. A spur-of-the-moment choice, mostly because it had a couple of Gothic windows and a good backyard with a willow tree. Now, well into her seventies, she ought to be thinking of condos or retirement communities.

Did Ariel's polite remark show some imaginary need to ingratiate himself? She squeezed his shoulder. "I'm glad to have you in it, it's a bit big for one." She explained about the basement roomer. "We'll get in touch with your grandfather. He'll be wanting to see you."

Becca had come back four years ago. She'd spent some time with Jay, her father, across town, and after the visit he'd called Marietta to talk, which they seldom did. "Listen, what did you think about her – Rita thinks she's *on* something. She'd sleep all day and be up half the night, and she was sure edgy. She didn't eat much of anything. I asked her if she was on a diet and she didn't say yea or nay. I spent a lot of time with the boy; she wasn't paying much attention. She was kind of rude to Rita a time or two. You think she's on something?"

Oh, hang Rita. She told him Becca was just depressed – maybe things weren't going so well with the partner. "She'll pull out of it." She'd been worried silly. Her own visit with Becca seemed scarcely to have happened: Becca had been slippery, avoiding moments when they could have talked seriously. She herself had

waited hopefully, thinking the time for it would come, but it never did.

Poor Becca, a sweet child who could draw almost effortlessly. Named for her own mother.

Pretty soon she wasn't hearing from Becca any more.

"How big is your house?" she asked Ariel.

"It's smaller than this." Later he told her they – he, his mother, and Sebastian – had roughed it for a while in a house "out in the sticks," with an electric pump often on the blink. (Some kind of hippie nonsense? – a little late for that here in the 1990s.) "We got kind of tired of it, so we moved to where we are now." They were in a small town, but went to Eugene off and on. Sebastian was a musician; he played tenor sax and did some work at home involving the computer, work Ariel couldn't describe very well.

She wanted to hear more about his mother, and waited, but he offered nothing.

"Does your mother cook most of the time?" she asked.

"Yeah. Sebastian cooks some too. We get take-out some when she's working."

"Where does she work?"

"At the hospital. Part-time. In the office . . . Sebastian cooks some. And I know how to make grilled cheese."

"Good for you . . . I guess your mother does the best she can," she murmured.

"Well." A shrug. "She gets sick sometimes. She had to go off once before."

She was almost displeased that he showed no signs of homesickness; it must have all gone underground – not good. She told him he should sleep in the other twin bed in her room, "till you get used to it here." It was a little awkward, calculating when she could dress and undress, and in a couple of weeks she moved him into his own room. The whole business was awkward, of course, and she thought of Becca's early years, which had sometimes felt awkward too. She'd been an overage mother, pushing forty – they hadn't been too well-off at first, she and Jay, and he'd come from a big family and didn't seem keen on kids; she wasn't used to them, having had no younger siblings. She'd observed people whose faces

brightened the moment a small child entered the room; she hadn't been one of them. Still, she'd felt her late pregnancy was meant to be, even if she didn't slip gracefully into motherhood. She thought of the relief she used to feel when she could put the young child to bed, and do whatever she wanted to do, read or quilt or even just go to bed herself; she'd been chronically tired. And she was going to be tired again.

Almost more than that she regretted the way another presence was going to shake up some of her habits. She usually ate her meals still in her apron, hunched over her reading there at the kitchen table, where her vitamins and antacid pills were set out; she flossed her teeth there, and took her Tums. And she might as well kiss her mornings good-bye. She loved these mornings of her retirement: she could get up when she pleased and linger at the breakfast table forever, wearing her short, twenty-year-old robe. Becca, the old Becca, the pre-hippie and pre-drugs Becca, would simply have laughed fondly at her oddities. She didn't know what this new little observer would make of them. And she wouldn't be lingering; she'd be seeing to his breakfast and making sure he had everything he needed for school.

And her nap, her inviolable nap! She would have to take it before he got home from school, setting the alarm; and she'd thought she'd said good-bye to setting alarms. Oh, what the hell, get him a house key, make it a rule that he must wake her up as soon as he got home from school. How she'd always hated enforcing rules!

"There goes my retirement!" she wanted to say to somebody, but couldn't; it would sound too self-centered and ungenerous. Unwilling to take in your only grandchild? – unthinkable. She was supposed to be happy to do it, and she was, she was – if she could handle it.

"Lucky you," Rowena said – her usual double-edged teasing. "You'll have somebody to keep you company in your old age."

"Oh, stop it," Marietta said.

She called Jay and told him he should take Ari for the weekends.

They hadn't talked much since the divorce seven years ago. Had the divorce been amicable? – she wasn't sure. On the surface, at least. He'd been a skirt-chaser before the breakup, and she'd de-

cided she could let him go. She was tired of hearing about the little theater group he'd joined ("Did you ever think I'd turn into a *Thespian*?"), tired of seeing him bound out of the house on his evening run, trying to keep in shape for his dramatic roles; tired of going to the not-very-well-acted plays. The country boy she'd loved and helped educate – it was true! – at an inferior little college down in Missouri was gone. He was still good-looking in an ordinary way, and a fairly nice guy, and in the end she'd missed him. He'd been a high-maintenance husband, sweet but somewhat spoiled. In recent years it had become another household chore to go to bed at night and try to stimulate him to performance. "Guess we're getting old, dearie," she'd said. He'd murmured, "I'll get a prescription." But Rita, one of the theater group women, had made a play for him: new stimulation. The terms of the divorce were fairly generous, since his construction business had eventually prospered. She refused to read in the paper about the theater group, to see if he still took part.

Jay said now that he'd talk to Rita.

Oh, hang Rita. "You can take him to the park or the movies or whatever, let him stay Saturday night – she won't be inconvenienced that much."

Ah, Rita. She'd seen Rita only a few times, and, not knowing Rita was going to join her life in an auxiliary way, had dismissed her as merely a different kind of woman from herself. If she herself was no longer so pretty as once, if it surprised her to see her somewhat pendulous lower lip in the mirror, she looked intelligent and nice, didn't she? – still tall and not too plump, and her light hair, often pulled back in a high knot, didn't show the gray too conspicuously. She didn't bother much with beauty salons and cosmetics counters. She felt an uneasy disdain for petite Rita, who could clack around all day in high heels. Rita had been a widow, some kind of administrative assistant in an office at the courthouse, though perhaps she'd retired after marrying Jay. She'd had a career woman's care for her looks – a stylish haircut, exposing ears with dangling earrings; her makeup had been subtle, granted. She'd appeared in one of the plays Marietta had attended – a so-so actress with a ringing voice, that was all.

She'd had a career herself, but different from Rita's; she'd felt free to go to work done up as plainly as she liked. She and Rowena

had owned a fabric and craft shop; they'd sponsored quilting groups, taught people to knit. She'd been a quilter, and her work had been admired and sold for hundreds of dollars. Jay had liked seeing her at work on the quilting frame she sometimes set up in the rec room of the house – sweet and old-fashioned, he thought. She didn't like “old-fashioned.”

She'd made a special small quilt for Becca, little girls in sun-bonnets – a time-honored quilt pattern. It was stored in her cedar chest, and she thought of getting it out for Ari to use, but decided he might consider it girlish.

Becca had slept under it and got up in the mornings flushed and happy, eager to join the world again; still in her pajamas, she hurried to see if her sweet-potato vine in the murky glass jar on the windowsill had grown any, and to the goldfish bowl to see how the fish (Johnny, Ann, and Meg) were doing. When she was in kindergarten, learning to print her name, it had been on a piece of paper on the nightstand: REBECCA. Darling little Becca, an easy child.

Blake seemed to like Ari, and the three of them breakfasted together cheerfully some mornings, almost a family there at the round oak table in her big kitchen before Ari wrestled on his backpack and went off to school. “He's behind in math,” she told Blake. “Home schooling. The teacher's trying to help him catch up but I don't know . . .”

“I'm pretty good at it.” Blake was a big clean-shaven guy with a deep voice and an easy, modest smile. She knew he was an education major; had her subconscious planned this? “Yell for me some evening, I'll come up and work with him a while.” It was a good sign: things would work out.

There was a park in the next block, and the street drew runners and walkers. She watched the elderly people who passed, walking briskly in gleaming white running shoes: why wasn't she as free as they were, why did she have to get up and get a child off to school every morning and feed him every night? “Don't complain,” her friend Rowena said. “You could be working at McDonald's to supplement your Social Security. And there're people with no grandchildren who may wish they had some.” She meant herself. She

came over every so often, roaring up the uphill driveway in her old buff Mercedes – a solid, square-built, broad-faced woman who liked to set Marietta straight. “You were lonely before, admit it.”

True. Before Blake in the basement, before Ari, she would wake up sometimes to the startling thought: there is no one else in this house, I am alone here. Sometimes she dreamed that Jay was there in the twin bed almost close enough to touch, and was annoyed at herself. No one to share little jokes with, or random thoughts.

She could share some, not all, of her thoughts with Ari now.

“That woman annoys me,” she said to him, looking out at the street. It was a young woman in a smart cap who pushed a stroller and had an old dog on a short leash; the dog seemed to struggle to keep up, but the woman pushed briskly ahead. “That dog looks tired, he’s too old to be pulled along at that pace.”

“Well, maybe you could tell her,” Ari said. “If you could be walking out there when she comes along, you know. You could say, ‘Your dog looks tired’ – something like that.”

“Maybe so. It would be hard to time it.”

He was looking out the front windows at the opposite sidewalk and the row of houses slightly below her side of the street. “Maybe we could get a dog.”

“Oh, oh. I love dogs, but I’m too old to take care of one. You have to walk it and take it to the vet. You may not be here all that long to do it.”

He shrugged.

He seemed to be making friends at school. “They like somebody new. You know, from somewhere else . . . There’s another kid that lives with his grandmother,” he remarked later.

“Do you like him?”

“He’s okay . . . Chris says he’s going to get a job washing dishes at a restaurant, like his brother, when he’s a little older. Make some money.” It was after supper; she was loading the dishwasher. “Maybe I could learn how to wash dishes and do that too.”

“Oh, it’s different from washing dishes at home, you’d be loading some big machine. Anyway, by the time you’re old enough you may not want to do that any more.” (And who knows where you’ll be?) “I doubt that it’s much fun. In a hot restaurant kitchen.”

“But you make some money doing it.”

“Oh! I guess you ought to have an allowance, I’d forgotten about that.”

She doled out a couple of dollars for the week and told him to ask his friends what allowances they got. “No, I guess that might not be good. But if any of them ever say, remember and tell me. I expect I’m behind the times – my ideas about money were formed a long time ago.”

One evening he asked, “Why don’t we go to church?”

“Oh. Did you go to church back home?”

“No, but it seems like everybody here does.”

She and Jay had taken Becca to Sunday School and church (and what good had it done?). She asked what churches his friends went to. His best friend went to one not too far away, and she began to rouse herself on Sunday mornings early enough to go. It meant forgoing the Sunday morning pancakes she’d occasionally made for him and Blake, but so be it.

And it didn’t feel bad, sitting in church again. When she and Ari got there in time for Sunday School, they went to their separate classes; she listened without taking part in the discussions. Sitting through the sermon, she was likely to be thinking of other things. But there was a virtuous feel to it, and an automatic peace. The blessing of the benediction was bestowed, and she accepted it as one.

She and Jay had studied together at college, in the evenings sitting in the library at one of the big tables until closing time, then walking back to her dormitory to sit in the parlor there till midnight. Other girls and their dates came in and said goodnight, and she and Jay went on talking till the last minute. She read his papers before he turned them in, inserting a few commas and varying his word choices.

“Hamlet is in a bad fix. He wants to get revenge on Claudius for killing his father . . . ? How about ‘wants to avenge his father’s death’? That might sound better, don’t you think? ‘In a bad fix’ – I guess that’s all right. ‘Has a problem’ – um, I don’t know.”

“I should have gone to business college instead of here. We studied Shakespeare and so forth in high school – I don’t need to do it again.”

“There’re things educated people know, like *Hamlet*. It’s like experience, it broadens you. Makes you a *cultured* person.”

“Okay. If a cultured person is what you want, I’ll stick with it,”

and he took her hand, the pencil still in it, and kissed it. He could surprise her, doing the romantic thing.

It was funny: he'd been a little shy and he hadn't pestered her for sex the way her first boyfriend had (it wasn't the style in that time and place, and it had led her to break up with the first guy), but he'd turned out to be a skirt-chaser later, as if marriage had given him confidence. Not that many affairs, probably, but he often seemed to be pushing close to one, paying conspicuous attentions to some woman at a party, hugging one off in the kitchen. Oh, who knew, who knew.

Those youthful ideas, how love would last forever and all that: you didn't even need to hear them, growing up; they seemed to spring up naturally inside you. Later, you knew it was all make-believe; you made up the man, pretending he was something he wasn't; making love, you shoved aside what you knew and told yourself this was the wonderful person you loved, loved, loved. Oh, what a lie it all was.

Still, she missed him. Companionship, comradeship, collaboration – that was all gone too. It would have been easier to care for Ari with Jay there – why pretend? He'd turned out to be a good father; there was a paternal strain in him. He'd worried about a kid working with the construction crew on a house he was building on a wooded lot up on Highland Road. "He fell out with his folks and he wants to pitch a tent up in the woods," on the building site. "I said go ahead, but I better speak to the Bellinghams," the people he was building the house for. "Maybe some question of liability, you know." He waited for her to say something. "I feel kind of sorry for the kid – Tim. He's a good worker." He waited some more.

"Why don't you just tell them about it without saying 'liability'? They probably won't mind."

"I don't know. Hey, we've got a spare room, want to ask him if he wants to stay here a little while? Till he works this out?"

"I guess we could. If he's not too much of a slob. If you'll be the one to speak to him if he is. We better put a time limit on it to start with, don't you think?"

Maybe a month, he said; time for the kid to make other arrangements. And so Tim had come and moved into the guest room, and he'd kept the music down and tried to be unobtrusive

without quite succeeding. A shy fellow, not always meeting your eyes when you passed in the hall; he'd warmed up after a while and sat talking to her in the kitchen. He'd found another place to crash in a few weeks, and she and Jay had felt virtuous together.

Ari brought interesting facts back from school. "Way up in the Rockies there's a tiny little butterfly that doesn't live anywhere else much. It's about to go *extinct*. They don't want to spend the money to try to save it, but there's this one woman that studies it that thinks there's more of them up in some mountains, more of them than you'd think. It's getting too warm for it – you know, climate change. And loss of habitat."

"That's interesting. You have a good science teacher, don't you?"

"Everything's warming up. But in about five billion years the sun is going to die and everything on the earth is going to die too."

"Oh, my. Well, we won't be around to see that, will we?"

"But think about it, night all the time. They could put up big lights everywhere, for a while, anyway. Plants wouldn't grow right, though. Plant lights, maybe for a while. As long as they could make electricity – Sooner or later, though, I guess everything would go on the blink."

A letter came to him from his mother. She couldn't read his expression as she handed it to him. He went off to his room to read it. He seemed quieter than usual the rest of the day, and she thought the letter might have crashed through some fragile barrier he'd managed to put up. It was at least a day before he said to her, out of a silence, "She said give you her love."

"Oh. Did she. That's nice." She was too proud to say, Ask her why she isn't writing me too. Why she isn't calling both of us! Tidying his room, she hoped the letter wouldn't be in sight so that she wouldn't have to fight off the temptation to snoop and read it.

In a day or two he was fumbling with the little Chinoiserie box she kept stamps in on the hall table; he stamped a letter and put it in the mailbox on the front of the house without a word.

She and Jay talked for a few minutes when he brought Ari back after a weekend. Ari went off to his room to put up his things, and she and Jay stood inside the front door talking. She studied him –

the soft, bland, unclouded face, thicker-jawed now, and thicker waisted; she realized she'd been picturing him in memory from the past, not as he'd been when she last saw him.

He gazed off into her living room; he would recognize the white sofa and the wing chairs, the pictures on the walls. "You've got it fixed up pretty nice."

"Thank you." He hadn't been inside before; she'd delivered Ari for the weekend.

"These old houses, though – I'm afraid you're going to get into repairs. Thought about a condo?"

"Thought is all. With him here, it's better to be in a house – this kind of a neighborhood."

"Your willow tree's nice, but you know what they say about willows – the roots seek out the water lines."

"I thought that was just an old wives' tale. Did you have a good weekend?"

"He's a good kid," Jay said. "Rita's okay with this."

"Is she. I should hope so." He shouldn't have mentioned Rita, didn't he know that? She gave in to a mean impulse. "You're using something on your hair, aren't you." It was darker, not quite so gray.

He laughed, only mildly embarrassed. "Yeah. Something my barber told me about. Why not – why shouldn't we try to keep ourselves up as we get older?"

"No reason at all."

"By the way – I called that fellow – Sebastian?" He said it with a faint touch of derision, as if it were an alias. "I asked him how she was getting along. He said, all right, far as he could tell. He was nice, he sounded concerned. He asked about Ari. Well. I worry about her – you do too. But I'm not beating myself up about it any more. She fell in with the wrong crowd. Those rich kids across town."

"No, no, that was high school stuff, it was okay. They got into pot a time or two, just experimenting, but that was all. She was fine in college, you know that." Marietta had clipped every little squib in the paper that had Becca's name in it – dean's list, a small part in a play. After college she'd worked as a graphic designer, and later began to sing with a band that played at local clubs, taverns, and weddings. They'd gone to a tavern once and sat listening to

her singing, smiling through every number. Amazing, that small, hard-working voice. She'd been proud of Becca and this unexpected talent; at the same time, it put Becca farther away, standing there singing songs they'd never heard before, proffering her emotions to all these strangers.

"It was okay till she met that guy and they went hippie," she said. "And going out west."

"Yeah, that guy Dave. He had enough problems for two."

"That was part of it, I guess." There was so much they didn't know. And they'd said these things before; it made her feel tired to say and hear them again.

"But I don't worry about it any more. And don't you, either."

"Thank you, Jay." She kissed his cheek, without knowing she was going to, and he looked grateful.

She thought about him after he left. It was easy to pull up the memory of the party where she'd first met Rita. Across the room, later, she noticed Jay talking to her, a weak, silly, flattered smile on his face.

She'd thought it before: maybe he hadn't meant to leave. He'd told her he'd been carrying on with Rita, and said, "I guess we ought to call it quits. I'm sorry." Had there been a little hope in his look, had he expected her to burst into tears and say, "You can't go after all these years, I love you too much, just break it off!" throwing her arms around him? But she was too angry; she was going to punish him this time. "Oh, I expect so. That makes sense." This had happened once before; she suspected there was another time he hadn't mentioned, and she didn't want to know whether it had happened or not. Maybe she'd thought he wouldn't really leave. Maybe, maybe.

How funny it was: she hadn't allowed herself to wonder till now if he needed that prescription with Rita.

Ari had been there six weeks when he was late returning from school one afternoon. She got up from her nap and was surprised to see how late it was. It took her a while to collect her thoughts, a while to think what to do. She had a cup of coffee, and finally called the school. No one answered, which told her how very late it was, and she was suddenly frightened. What was his best friend's name? — she couldn't remember. It came at last: Tanner. Tanner Who? She closed her eyes and began to pray. Tanner Lineberry.

She called the Lineberrys. Tanner was home. He came to the phone, his voice a little thin, possibly a little frightened. Ari had been planning to take a bus out to the Walmart shopping strip, that was all he knew. After a while he added, “He had a lot of stuff in his backpack.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Oh – I don’t know. Some socks and crackers and candy bars and stuff.”

“Well. Thank you.”

How disgustingly unfair it was that she had to cope with this! She needed advice. Jay, Rowena? Should she get in the car and drive out to the shopping strip and look for him? No, better stay here in case he – or somebody – called. She paced around the house, to the front windows and back again. Down the street, a car turned into the Needhams’ driveway and a woman in a red jacket got out and went inside. A little later, Mona Trotter came out of her house and walked her curly gray Cockapoo. An occasional car passed.

Oh, she was too old to have this responsibility! She’d been put to some trouble for him and was doing her best, and in return he was doing something sneaky. She longed to pretend it wasn’t happening. Maybe it came from some irresponsibility in herself. Once Becca hadn’t returned from high school at the usual time in the afternoon; she’d gone downtown with a bunch of kids and was late getting home. Jay had told Marietta she was careless: make it clear that Becca must come straight home from school, or call and explain why not! He’d been right, though she’d protested that she trusted Becca’s judgment and it had come out all right, hadn’t it?

Socks and crackers – there was a hint there she didn’t want to take. Well, if he was out on the road, he’d lose his nerve pretty soon. He was a sensible kid.

Later she knew that in spite of those tortured hours it had been her lucky day. When Ari had gone out to the shopping strip and somehow crossed the divided highway and stuck his thumb up, a woman had picked him up almost at once – a teacher in one of the high schools heading home to a nearby town, later than usual because of a meeting. She asked Ari where he was headed and listened politely as he explained that he was hitching out to his

father in Denver; his father had sent the money for the bus, but he'd lost it somehow and had to do this.

Where had he been staying there in town? He hesitated, then said with his grandmother. Did she know he was out on the road? Oh, sure.

"Are you sure? You know, I have this funny feeling you might be fibbing." She waited a little while. "Are you sure? Did you leave her a note?"

He didn't answer, and she said, "Listen. When you don't turn up after a few hours, do you know what she's going to do? She's going to call the police."

She'd waited a little while for that to sink in, she told Marietta when they talked the next day; she'd been proud of the way she handled the situation. "The police will start looking for you. There'll be this big alert. They'll track you down. Do you want them to take you back, or do you want to go back under your own power? With me."

She'd seen in the rearview mirror, far back in the traffic, a police car already, and she thought it might turn on the siren and come after her if someone had reported a child hitchhiking and she'd been seen picking him up. But no siren sounded, and she was relieved. She wanted to lock the doors in case he got the crazy idea of jumping out, but he would hear the click.

In a while they were entering her small town, and she wound around a few streets and headed out onto the highway again.

She reported to Marietta that it had been a mostly silent ride back to town. "But I had to tell him not to try it again. I said, 'I want to tell you something else. Out on the road like that, you're just asking to be molested. Ask your grandmother what that means.'"

Back in town, he told her his grandmother's name and directed her to Marietta's. "Don't worry," she told him. "She'll be so glad to see you – you won't believe how glad she'll be. Relieved, really relieved."

The car stopped in front of the house, and he was here with a woman – his teacher? No, she'd met his teacher. This was a tall young woman with hair cropped very short, and a big bag slung over her shoulder; she talked to Ari as they came up the walk. Marietta was already out the door.

“Oh, hello! I know you’ve been worrying but here he is. He was out on 6 hitchhiking – going to Denver to see his father. I think I persuaded him it wasn’t the best way to do it. I’m Janie Howe, I teach at the high school – I picked him up.”

“His father?” Ari’s father was Dave Barrentine, the man Becca had been hooked up with when she first joined hippiedom; it seemed unlikely that Ari knew the name, even if the guy hadn’t already succumbed to an overdose. “Oh. Oh. I see,” though she didn’t.

The woman seemed to see herself as Ari’s apologist. “The distance on the map doesn’t look so bad, you know, and if you’re dying to see your father – Well, he’ll tell you about it. I’ve got to go, I’m twelve miles from home and I’m later than usual.”

Marietta was dazed, trying to piece it all together, so dazed she almost forgot to say thank you before the woman was off down the walk. “Oh, thank you, thank you so much!”

“I’ll call you,” Janie Howe called back, waving.

Inside, Ari dropped into one of the wing chairs, burying himself in it, his head halfway down the back, his legs sticking straight out. She stared at him angrily. “Going to see your father? Wherever he is, he’s probably not in Denver. I guess you were going to make it back to Oregon. Don’t you know how far it is? Don’t you have better sense than to get out on the highway like that? Some bad person could have come along and picked you up and molested you – some guy who wanted to do things to you, like stick his Thing in you – think about that! People like that don’t care who you are, you’re just a body to them, and when they’re through with you, they’ll just throw you away. Your body might have been found out in the woods somewhere six months from now!”

Ari said nothing; he seemed far away. He looked down at his fingers, which moved back and forth across a spot on the arm of the chair where the upholstery met the wood frame.

“Listen! Did you think about me at all, didn’t you know I’d worry my head off?” He was stubbornly silent, scrubbing at the spot on the chair arm, his face expressionless. “I don’t want you to be here any more than you want to be here! I wish you could be where you want to be. I’m an old woman, maybe I’m too old for this . . . Your mother – I don’t know what about her. Maybe she’ll have you stay here till you’re in high school, and you’re used to it

and like it, and then she needs you and calls you back! – I’ll bet that’s what happens!”

Had she gone crazy, talking this way? Did she even believe that? She burst into tears. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

He seemed to come to, slowly. He pulled himself up out of the chair and stood looking uneasy, then came closer, tentatively. “Don’t cry,” he said, and touched her arm.

She found a Kleenex in her pants pocket, wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and hugged his stiff, unyielding little frame. “I was really scared, really scared. You scared me!”

In a minute he said, “Sorry!” but brightly, without feeling.

“I’ll try to calm down. Well! Let’s pull ourselves together. I expect you’re still kind of wound up, aren’t you? Go get yourself a drink or a snack or something.” She sank down on the arm of the sofa and took a deep breath.

When he returned, holding a white bread sandwich that smelled like peanut butter, she said, “Don’t fill up too much, though, it’s going to be suppertime pretty soon.” She wanted the day to be over, gone and forgotten. “You have any homework?” She had no idea why she was asking that. “I guess you’d have left it at school – you didn’t think you were coming back, did you.”

“I didn’t have any,” a little sulky now.

A heavy silence, while he chewed the sandwich.

“Let’s have pizza tonight. That’ll cheer us up, won’t it?” patting his back.

“Okay.”

“Look, I said some silly things. Don’t pay any attention to what I said, okay?”

“Okay,” without looking at her.

“Well. I’ve got to sit down and relax. Calm my shattered nerves. Well. Let’s see what’s on the TV.”

He didn’t reply, but followed her into the room off the living room that she called the den. “Maybe there’re some cartoons on.” She handed him the switcher.

There were cartoons; here was the Road Runner. She closed her eyes; she was exhausted. In a few minutes she heard him laugh once.

After a while she got up and ordered the pizza, though it was early for supper. It came; she overtipped the driver. She sat with Ari at the kitchen table, the open box between their plates.

"I'm sorry you're not happy here. I wish I could get you a dog, but I don't think I'd better. If there's anything else . . ."

He shrugged, muttered, "I don't know," and kept chewing. Nothing wrong with his appetite.

She didn't like the silence, and said, "Weren't you just a little scared out there on the road, the cars whizzing by? How'd that woman manage to stop anyway, in all that traffic?"

A shrug. "I don't know."

It was hopeless. "Well, remember. I said a lot of silly things because I was mad and upset – I got really scared. I didn't mean that stuff, it just popped out, so don't pay any attention, hear?"

"Okay."

*Time* magazine had come, and after supper he sat looking through it, then drifted back to the TV set. She didn't bother to see what he was watching.

At bedtime she said, "Sleep in my room, please. It'll make me feel better – I can't explain it, but it will. Making sure you're back. I'm so glad you're back, safe and sound!"

"Yeah." He waited a little too long to say, "Me too."

She lay awake for a while. She felt he was awake too – no hints of sleep in his breathing. Across the dark room, beyond the cedar chest, the small yellow glow of the nightlight.

"Your mother," she said, almost whispering, "she's going to be all right. Don't worry about that. Then you'll go back out there, the way you want to. She's missing you, we know that. She'll get over this and be all right."

"Yeah."

After a while she sensed that he was asleep.

She lay there, tried and found wanting, waiting for time to pass and blur the edges of recollection, waiting for this afternoon to sink deep into the past – all those things she'd said to him, which could never be quite taken back, which might never be forgotten. Fifty years from now, if this child were still alive (and surely he would be), he would remember this. She heard him saying, "Oh, yes, they sent me to live with my grandmother and I tried to run away once, I was out on the road trying to catch a ride" – Never mind what he'd say after that. Let the time pass.

Would she laugh over it some day? "Oh, I was mad, was I ever,

and I bawled him out!” There were people who could laugh at almost any fool thing they did. It was too late to become one of them.

She lay on her side and thought that she could hear her heart beating, though probably she was only feeling it. What if she died here in her bed one of these nights, and the next morning Ari found her cold and stiff? Maybe she should tell him what to do. No, of course not; it would scare him silly. He’d know to call 911, or maybe he’d go downstairs and call Blake. Anyway, her last check-up at the doctor’s had been good enough. Still, she was going to leave Jay’s phone numbers somehow written permanently on the scratch pad by the phone.

She’d have to tell Jay about this. Maybe it was a little bit his fault; if he’d been here – She wouldn’t tell him all she’d said, it was too shameful. Probably he’d tell her not to worry. He wanted to be nice to her to make up for having left.

Fifty years from now, what else would Ari say when he spoke of this day? “I wasn’t there very long, just a few months.” “But I settled down after a while – it’s where I grew up.” A trade had perhaps been effected, this child for Becca.

In the other bed he stirred but went on sleeping. His sleeping presence was soothing, though it was only slowly blotting out the afternoon’s leftover anxieties.

But she was tired, and began to drift toward sleep. In a little while a sound came to her; it was the garage door opening below, Becca in her little car, coming home from studying in the college library or being out with friends – back in a different house, a different year. Becca home, Jay somewhere around, back in some ordinary, forgotten evening. It was a great relief, that old customary sound, and it eased her into a deeper sleep.