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Chapter 1

It startled her sometimes, waking up to a new day. She would blink her eyes open, and vaguely wonder what awaited her. The new day tickled Colleen's senses. Shadows faded, as familiar details came into view.

On a chair hung the work clothes that she had worn at the laundromat last night. A red circle on the calendar marked high school graduation three months from now. Shiny brochures from the community college lay on her small desk.

Colleen walked over to the closet to get her bathrobe. Her slow movements left slices of isolated, early morning sounds. She yawned and glanced at the brochures, then looked in the small mirror on her chest of drawers. She felt a moment of stillness, then a new shiver of awareness, before joining her family for breakfast.

In the kitchen, the sounds of the dishwasher and a radio mixed with several voices. Colleen's father Ron was talking with his sister Brenda about the recent increase in gasoline prices. Brenda lived in the house with her husband Tim, who was calling the family dog Cricket from the backyard. Colleen's

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younger sister Francine wandered into the kitchen, glanced around, and then walked back out.

Ron looked over at Colleen as she fixed herself some orange juice and coffee to go with two pieces of toast.

“Good morning,” he said, with friendly assertiveness.

“Hi Dad.” Colleen sat down quietly as her father resumed his conversation with Brenda.

Colleen settled in at the breakfast table as she adjusted to another day in the life of her family. She glanced at her aunt, and wondered why she and her husband still lived there. Uncle Tim had been out of work, but didn’t he just get a new job? Oh right, they need to save money to pay off bills. She felt resentful towards her aunt and uncle, but this was her parents’ house—not hers. Especially as graduation day approached.

Brenda left the table. Ron watched Colleen take a bite of toast and then asked, “Well, how are you today?”

“Oh, fine.” Colleen appreciated the question, but wondered what lay behind the strained smile on her father’s face. He had recently been asking her many questions about her future. She had just woken up; maybe he’d give her a break this morning.

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“You know,” said Ron, trying to find the right words. “You know, Colleen, your mother and I have been wondering about your plans after high school. We’d like to see you get off to a good start after graduation.”

Colleen sipped some orange juice. “I don’t know,” she finally said, letting her words hang in the air. She looked around to see if anyone else could hear their conversation.

“We can help you with community college,” said Ron, with quiet forcefulness. “You can stay here, and work too.”

Colleen felt a flash of awkward gratitude for her father’s concern and persistence. He’d really like me to go to college, she thought. But am I ready...?

In high school, she was a B, B- student who did best in English. If she went to the community college, she wasn’t sure what she’d take. Many people used that school to prepare for a four-year university, but she didn’t think that she or her family could afford a university. Also, high school had been a struggle. She looked forward to taking a break from school—take some time to think and earn a little money.

“I’m just not sure, Dad,” she said, more forcefully than she intended. “I’m not sure if college is right for me.” She felt a

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mixture of annoyance and confinement. She just wanted to get through this day and all of the rest of the days until graduation.

“OK,” said Ron slowly. He was used to her indecision, but was losing his patience. “I understand. But the future’s still on its way.” He patted his hand on the table in her direction and then left to get ready for his job at the machine shop.

Later that day, Colleen arrived home from school and walked into the family room. Brenda was folding clothes. Just hers and her husband’s, it looked like. Brenda had a focused, tense look on her face. On the television was some kind of drama, maybe a crime show.

As two perfectly groomed police officers questioned a suspect, Colleen took a sip of a soft drink. She wanted to watch something else, but once again, her aunt had beaten her to the TV.

Still, she couldn’t resist the temptation to let her aunt know that she was there. She casually walked between her aunt and the television and said, “Well, what are you watching today?”

“Some movie,” replied Brenda, who continued folding clothes, her eyes fixed on the TV screen. “I don’t know what

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it's called. It just looked good as I was going through the channels."

"Did you happen to see what was on the game show station?"

"No."

Colleen felt a small flash of irritation, but tried to take it in stride. She faked an interest in the movie, and then walked into the living room. She looked at some old family pictures on the small end table by the sofa.

Across the room, decorating the top of the fireplace mantle, was a miniature ballerina. It stood perfectly balanced on one leg, a pastel blue picture of grace. One arm stretched toward the heavens, and the ballerina's eyes stared vacantly in no particular direction.

Colleen thought, it would be so much different if my aunt and uncle didn't live here. Wonder what *my* place will be after I've graduated? Will I seem like an awkward guest?

She sometimes felt sorry for her aunt and uncle not having their own place. Sometimes people just had bad luck. But the day-to-day stuff with them—their arguments, the crowdedness, her parents' divided attention—kept her unhappy with household life. And high school graduation was bringing

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on an unsettled feeling that was hard to shake. It all seemed to be piling up into something that she couldn't handle.

But there was always her grandmother Granny, who stayed in her bedroom most of the time. Colleen felt that she could trust her, talk with her, and feel like someone was listening, and maybe even cared. Whatever the reason for Granny's interest—concern, love, boredom, loneliness—she was always there for her granddaughter.

Colleen knocked on the side of Granny's bedroom doorway. Granny sat in a chair reading. Knitting was at her side. As Colleen sat down on the edge of the bed, she noticed the friendly picture of her grandfather on the bed table. Granny looked up and smiled, which made Colleen feel better after the tension with her aunt.

"Is that an interesting book?" asked Colleen as she bounced lightly on the bed.

"Not bad. One of my mysteries. A man's trying to clear the name of an ancient relative who was convicted of a crime."

"Oh really?" Colleen immediately thought, you're an ancient relative, Granny. She then felt bad about that thought, which seemed to come out of nowhere—like some other recent thoughts that bothered her.

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“From long ago,” said Granny, who was the mother of Colleen’s father. She always enjoyed the chance to share her private world of reading. “Well, darling. How is my granddaughter today?”

“Oh, fine. Another day closer to graduation.” Colleen suddenly felt a wave of strong emotions wash over her, and she wasn’t sure why. She walked over to Granny’s chest of drawers and laid her right forearm on top of it.

Granny sat quietly for a moment. She wasn’t a chatty person who let her words spill out compulsively. She always tried to be a good listener. She sensed some troubled feelings in Colleen’s mood.

“How was school today?”

“OK. They handed out some more stuff about graduation. How to order a class ring. Where to get your gown.”

“It’s not long, is it? Soon you’ll finally be done with all of your high school work.”

“Yeah. It’s really happening—I’m almost there.”

“Are you looking forward to it?”

“Not sure. All of my friends have different plans, and I’m still not sure what I’m going to do.”

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Granny was quiet for a moment, and then said, “You’ll find the right thing.”

Colleen felt a surge of mixed feelings, including some defensiveness, but appreciated Granny’s words. “I hope you’re right,” she said, with a quick, nervous chuckle.

“Just listen to old Granny, and everything will turn out fine.”

Colleen smiled and left the bedroom with a lighter step.

In the family room, Colleen glanced over at her 15-year old sister Francine, who was paging through a magazine.

She thought, Francine doesn’t have to worry about graduating from high school in a few months. She can just think about having friends and getting good grades and stuff like that.

The two sisters were close enough in age to have some things in common, but far enough apart not to feel competitive. Colleen could feel more mature and authoritative around Francine—more than she might feel around her parents, her teachers, or her supervisor at the laundromat. Francine often looked up to her for help with different things.

The other day, Francine had knocked on her bedroom door and asked, “Hey, big sis, can you do me a favor?”

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“What’s that?”

“Could you give me a ride over to the mall? I want to meet some friends.”

“Oh, I guess so.” Colleen welcomed the break from some studying. “So what do people do over at the mall these days?”

“Oh, nothing much—hang out, look for people they know, window shop, fool around.”

“Yeah, I remember doing all that.”

“You don’t go over there much anymore, do you?”

“No—no, not much. I’ve got this job now and, well, I guess I don’t have the time and I’m older.”

Francine was quiet for a moment. She thought, Colleen used to really like going over to the mall—I guess she isn’t that young anymore. She’s becoming an adult—I wonder what that’s like?

“Well, anyway, it’s fun going over there,” said Francine. “It might be different when I get my driver’s license and start working.”

“You’re right. That’s how it is.”

Francine left to get ready to leave for the mall. Colleen thought about her—young, a little immature, but still secure in

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the family home. Sometimes it seemed like their parents favored her, maybe because she was younger and prettier than Colleen. Maybe that was why Colleen was a little more independent and rebellious.

Would she want to be Francine's age again? That was me then—what am I now?

One of the high school graduation parties was at the house of Colleen's friend Sue. About 15 people were there, along with a few parents to keep an eye on things.

Graduation went fairly well. The speeches weren't too long and Colleen hadn't stumbled when she walked up the podium steps to get her diploma. After the ceremony, the sincerely happy faces of her relatives greeted her. Hugs and handshakes and good feelings all around.

At Sue's house, she sipped on a soft drink and gazed around the room at different people. A melancholy, poignant sense of happiness pervaded her senses. After today, her small central Ohio hometown wouldn't look the same.

There's Gary, whom she had dated for awhile. He was going to a small college up near Cleveland to study accounting

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or management. He was always good at math, so maybe that was the right thing for him.

She thought about some fun things they had done together—dinners, movies, some drives to the park. They'd enjoyed themselves, but as always, things came to an end.

Some vague memories of their dating came back. A happy day, at the county fair, when things were at their best, and the future seemed limitless. And then one evening, at his parents' house, alone, an exchange of mysterious and awkward glances. That had seemed to be a moment of decision about something, and nothing happened.

Colleen wasn't sure how much she wanted to meet someone right now. How much difference would it really make? She'd dated enough to get some things out of her system.

Her mind always drifted towards having a friend, a partner, a guy who would bring new and special things out in her. It felt like an emptiness that had to be filled, sooner or later. But in the cold light of day, as she struggled towards adulthood, a relationship didn't seem that important right now.

Sue and another girl talked near the kitchen door, trying to stay out of the way of people carrying food and drinks. Good ol' Sue, thought Colleen—she was a fine friend. We got along

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pretty well. Sue kept changing her mind about what she wanted to do, but finally decided she'd try some kind of computer job after community college.

Colleen felt relaxed. This party was quieter than some of the others going on. Everybody going their own way, as usual.

But today changed everything. Some of her old classmates were gone from her life forever. That's that, she thought, with a little sadness, but also with some relief.

Sue walked over and sat down by Colleen, who accepted some of the potato chips that Sue offered.

"How do you think the party's going?" asked Sue.

"Not bad. Your parents got enough food and stuff for everybody."

"They weren't sure about having so many people here. But we talked over the invitation list, so I think everything's OK."

Colleen took another sip of her soft drink and then said, "Just think, today might be the last time we see some of these people."

"Yeah. I might actually miss a few of them."

Colleen chuckled. "I'm glad it's over too."

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Sue took another potato chip and asked, “How’s it going with community college? Still thinking about applying? I think there’s still time to enroll in summer classes.”

“I don’t think I’m going right now. Maybe later. Right now, I’m just going to put in more hours at the laundromat. They said I could work full-time if I wanted to.”

“That’s good,” said Sue, who was starting to feel restless. “You can make some money.”

“I guess.” Colleen looked around the room to see who else was there. “It can’t hurt.”

Sue stood up and patted Colleen on the arm. “Hey good buddy, I think I’m going to see if my parents need any help. I’ll leave the chips here. Thanks again for coming—I wasn’t sure how many people would show up.”

“That’s all right.” Colleen relaxed for a few more minutes, and then walked towards the back porch. A strange mixture of elation and dread had been teasing her emotions all day. Could the night air calm them?

She savored this unique feeling of graduating and accomplishing something big. Thinking back to the good times of high school, looking forward to what the future might bring. All mixed together on this special day. In the last few weeks,

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she had noticed that there was more to some of her classmates than she had realized. They were moving away from how she'd always known them, into something new.

As she walked into the backyard, she thought back to a carnival that had been set up at the high school as part of graduation.

A brightly dressed clown was passing out balloons of various shapes and colors. He was entertaining everyone with his gifts and banter.

"Let us see," said the clown, in his high, squeaky, exaggerated tone of voice. He was talking to a young woman. "You look like an animal lover. You've got that sweet, innocent, puppy love look on your face." The woman and two friends laughed.

The clown took a long red balloon and nimbly twisted it into the shape of a dog. "Here's a little Red Rover for you, young lady," he said as he handed the balloon to her. She looked into its imaginary face for a moment, and then, with a laugh, let it bounce into the air against a string that was tied to the end of it.

Colleen stepped a little closer. She admired the clown's ability to stay in character and hold the attention of the

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audience. The clown had a giddy, surreal air of frivolity about him.

“And how are you today, ma’am?” He’s talking to me, she realized. The clown’s head was slightly bent towards her, and his smile was restrained and knowing. The clown’s attention startled her some.

“Oh, OK,” she answered, with nervous laughter. Everybody was now looking at the clown and Colleen.

“What have you got there?” she asked, as she glanced at the clown's plastic bag of balloons.

“This bag? It’s just my bag of fun. I can make all sorts of merriment with its contents.”

“Is that so?” asked Colleen, now more relaxed and more into the game.

“You’ve got it, friend.” Then the clown stepped back a little, to acknowledge the other audience members more.

“It’s a bag of fun, ladies and gentleman, but it can also be a bag of sorrow. In the end, it’s a bag of emotion.” His audience grew more quiet and curious.

“It’s a bag of feelings.” The clown pulled some more balloons from the bag. His face became more solemn, as he

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expertly manipulated the balloons. Soon, he was holding a human figure, with hanging arms and a tilted head.

“What a sad sight,” commented the clown with mock despair. He was holding the figure at arm’s length, directly in front of him. “What should we do with him?”

“Or, what should he do with himself? How can he get rid of his blues?”

The clown adjusted the balloons some, and a small hissing sound soon became apparent to the crowd.

“Our balloon friend can wallow in his sadness, and hope that it will just fade away after a while. But is that the best decision?” The clown twisted the neck, and the hissing stopped.

“Maybe the blues won’t want to go away. Maybe they’re not as tired as the person suffering from them.

“But there’s another choice. We don’t have to just let our emotions become a home for the blues.” He quickly squeezed the balloons, with a loud pop, which startled the crowd and made some people laugh nervously.

“You see,” the clown said, as he dropped the remains of the balloons on the ground. “There *is* another choice. We can attack those nasty old blues head-on and wash them away. Right?” A few people clapped, while others laughed.

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Interesting, thought Colleen, who had been grateful for the diversion from the stress of the day.

At the party, she looked up into the night sky, and then around the backyard at different people. You're right, Mr. Clown—it's all about choices.

After graduation, Colleen settled into a routine of full-time hours at the laundromat. She requested evening and weekend shifts so that she wouldn't have to cross paths with her parents too much.

Her father Ron kept pushing her to find something more than just extra hours at an unskilled job where she'd worked for two years. Her mother Paula also seemed less friendly, especially on days when she had argued with Colleen's aunt or uncle about their place in the household.

Something was going to have to change, thought Colleen, and probably soon. She wasn't sure what, but she knew her current life couldn't continue forever. Her struggle to sort out her options left her almost paralyzed with indecision.

One evening, after she had come home from a four-hour afternoon shift at the laundromat, her father knocked on her

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bedroom door. She was relaxing on her bed, reading a fashion magazine.

“Can I talk to you, Colleen?” he asked, before sitting in her desk chair. He had a serious tone in his voice.

“OK,” she answered cautiously as she closed the magazine. She sat up straight on the edge of the bed, trying to keep some distance between them. She knew his serious tone of voice very well.

“How was work today?” Ron asked. He wasn’t that interested in her answer, but wasn’t sure where to begin with what he really wanted to say.

“Good,” replied Colleen, trying to read his mood. “It wasn’t too busy.”

“How long have you worked there? Two, three years?”

“About two.” Colleen tried to keep any nervousness out of her voice. “Yes, two.”

“That’s good.” Ron looked down at the floor for a moment. “I remember when I was young, the different jobs that I had before I settled down.”

Colleen relaxed a little, then was surprised when her father took a deep breath and stood up.

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“You know, Colleen, you’re out of high school now. You’re not going to work in a laundromat all of your life. I know you work hard and save your money, but a time comes for everything, and it’s time for you to seriously think about your future.”

Colleen struggled to answer. She could feel a stiffness push up through her cheeks, against her lower eyelids. “I know, Dad, I’ve been looking at the community college catalog, but nothing looks very interesting. I’d feel like I was wasting my time.”

“And what are you doing now?”

Colleen scowled and replied, “Well, earning some money to pay off my car. Do you want me to give you part of my paycheck for rent?” The sharpness of her reply faded away more quickly than she expected.

Ron stared at her for a moment, then said, “That’s not the point. What your mother and I really want to see is some ambition from you. If we don’t see that, all we see is someone who’s just drifting through life.”

“Is that how you see me!” Colleen stood up. “You don’t think I can make it on my own?” Confused emotions took control of her.

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“We know you can make it on your own,” Ron responded. He tried to hold his temper. “But the only way you can survive in this world is to push yourself. Anybody can just get by, if that’s all they want.”

Colleen stared at her father, but soon looked away. She felt a self-conscious tension in her face as she sat back down on the edge of her bed.

With a strange, awkward feeling of courage, she looked up at Ron, whose eyes had a focused stillness. He was very serious about what he was saying.

“OK, sure, I understand,” she answered nervously. “I’ll take another look at the community college catalog.”

Ron started to walk out, then turned around. With a softer tone of voice, he said, “It’s not impossible, but you still have to try. Maybe you can juggle some school with your work schedule.”

“Sure, I could try that,” said Colleen. “Thanks, Dad.”

Later that evening, Colleen stepped outside of the house, taking in the peacefulness of a warm summer night. The mailbox in front of her family’s house shone under the light of a

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nearly full moon. Lamps glowed behind the curtains of windows in other homes.

She took a deep breath of the night air. She gazed into the darkness, her eyes drawn to the subtle shades of light and shadow that spread across the neighborhood. In the distance, a car sped by on the main road at the edge of the subdivision. Something in the car's rushing sound brushed her emotions.

What am I going to do, she asked herself. Why do I feel so powerless?

She walked down to the sidewalk and looked back at her family's house. The lit windows carried mystery, but also a small glow of hope.

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