

Ruthe befriends strangers and has intimate running conversations with God.

Ruthe's Secret Roses

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Ruthe's Secret Roses

by
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Scripture references are from the King James Version, except for one, which is from the New International Version.

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Dedication

This story is written for, and with the great encouragement and help of my very best, dearest Friend and Confidante, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Disclaimer

Writers on writing often say that one writes best at what one knows best, so I have created a main character who shares many of my own interests and traits. In fact, I reached a point where I stopped trying to please all other categories and wrote a book to appeal to my own tastes. Aside from the Lord Jesus, and chunks of myself, it is filled with characters that are figments of my imagination, but have become quite real to me. I borrowed traits from people I know as seemed useful to this story. They are in no way accurate or complete portraits of them. Otherwise, all the characters, events and circumstances described are totally fictitious. I hope you enjoy them as much as I did.

Story Summary

Caring, imaginative, Ruthe supports her family as a telephone operator, using her free time to rescue others from evil but dares not tell her prairie hometown Mennonite family. Trapped by her deception, Ruthe must find a creative solution for her own torment.

Wish a miracle-working angel would rescue you from your family problems? Wouldn't a friend be great who knows what to say or do in every crisis? Ruthe is that kind of miracle-working friend. But having so many friends creates a few problems for her, especially since she doesn't want her family back in her prairie Mennonite hometown to know about her wonderful city friends.

How can Ruthe be totally devoted to Christ, winning friends, and helping them to live holy lives, and to be so blind to her own short-comings? Watch as her deception and double-life sets a trap for Ruthe, and the creative way she finally deals with it.

Preface

At age 12 I dreamed vividly that I would one day write a book that would win many friends to my Best Friend, Jesus Christ. I did not believe my family or friends would think I could ever do it, so for many years I worked at it in secret, sometimes setting it aside in discouragement, and then at His gentle prompting I came back to it. Since I couldn't afford to go to college to learn to write, I told Him that He would have to teach me, and in the many re-writes and by my reading of library books on writing, He did just that. I owe all I am or have become to the patient work of the Lord in me by His dear Spirit. Therefore, I have long ago promised to give away all the profits from this book, and its sequels, as He guides and prompts me. That will be a new adventure, I'm sure, but I look forward to it. My goal is to be a generous giver, like God.

For a number of important years in my life I worked with children's ministries, particularly with girls' clubs. My best rapport was with young teen girls. They often were already whispering secret prayers to God, and hungry to know Him more intimately - exactly what I wanted to teach them out of my life. The crafts and outings were just ways to bring us together more often.

This novel will be like rich, delicious cream to such girls wherever you are.

Naturally, I like to think there are women, and even men, and kids too, who also crave an intimate relationship with the Lord; one where they sense His loving presence, where they may pray conversationally, and see God act in response to their prayers. I hope you'll all read this book and be delightfully affected by Ruthe and her friends.

Anticipating certain questions, let me answer them ahead of time. I have put in some dialogue with the Mennonite Grosz'mama in Low German or Plaut Deutsch language to honour my grandmother and heritage. Playing with written dialogue as I hear it proved to be great fun, for my ears tend to hear such nuances. I hope it does not get in the way of your reading and enjoyment of the story. Just take them phonetically, as the letters sound to you. Do the same with the Low German (Plaut Deutsch) words if you want to try them. Remember, the translations are always in the endnotes.

ONE

"Please, Dad! Wear your tie tonight!" Ruthe clicked into the living room with her first ever high heels. The mismatched, second-hand furniture looked worse against the pink lace shirt-dress swirling around her knees. But with nervous self-examination her eyes were on her skirt edges.

"Or what?"

"I won't go to my own graduation!" Ruthe's threat rang high-noted, hollow and desperate.

"He will. He will." Ruthe's mother pacified from the bedroom where she was dressing. Anna Veer began to nag and prod Ben to put on the tie she'd bought for their wedding. He saved it for extremely high and holy occasions.

"Kids get disrespectful once they've some education—" Her Dad strolled back into the living room in a hunting pose, pausing to watch his eldest checking herself nervously in one mirror then another.

She caught his glance and turned away as she realized her undemonstrative father was rather proud of her. He would wear that despised tie for her. A long tense whoosh of air expelled from her trembling rib cage. *Lord, they don't understand me or life... I've got to protect and take care of the folks.*

Now she threw herself back into analyzing her appearance. Ruthe straightened the wide belt with the square rhinestone buckle, pulling in her breath and again, slowly twirling the rustling skirt around her knees. There. That flat, undecorated bodice reminded her with a fresh crush that the other girls had ordered real flower corsages. She patted the spot on her left side where deep pink roses with an iridescent bow should be, and sighed silently, *no one can tell this is a second-hand dress, can they? Thanks then, Lord, for this good find.*

Gingerly she poked into the mass of light brown curls and waves that tumbled down and beyond her shoulders. She had far more hair than her delicate features warranted. Now she swung the whole mass of sprayed hair like she had seen others do in the school washroom. She spotted a few stray wisps on top and tucked them down a bit.

More waiting? Ruthe took off her glasses and rubbed them vigorously with a tissue for the third time, then studied her nails critically. Her dad would not allow nail polish, but Maelyn had lent her clear nail strengthener in school, and so far he had not spotted it. She had even worn it to work the last two nights at the telephone office in the city.

Ruthe's Secret Roses

The phone shrilled. Ruthe nearly tripped on her seven-year old sister, Sharri, as she dashed into the kitchen just fast enough to beat thirteen-year old Suzanne to the receiver. "Hello?"

She ignored Brandt, grinning from his perch on the counter, swinging his lanky legs, eyeing the comedy. "Yes. Speaking."

For a long attentive minute she froze in a listening pose, weighing, deciding.

Suddenly the gold flecks in her teal eyes jumped with life. "I'm coming right in. It's okay. Hold on— I'm on my way."

In one motion Ruthe hung up, swooped the car keys from the kitchen windowsill, and her new white patent purse from the table. As she tore through the porch doors, she called over her shoulder, "matter of life and death! Go ahead without me. I'll be back soon's I can!"

In those same split seconds her parents had appeared in the kitchen, Suzanne had bounced back downstairs from their bedroom, and Sharri screamed Ruthe's name. But their dressed up graduate jumped into the old brown '59 Pontiac, backed out into the gravel street and spun away, hearing none of them.

Ruthe breathed deep trembling breaths as she steered nimbly around the familiar corners of Kleinstadt and onto the highway to Saskatoon. She was now an adult on a serious mission.

Abruptly she giggled a tiny taut giggle. What a crazy reprieve from the fussy banquet and public ceremonies and speeches, the anticipation of which had tied her in knots all day. This was exhilarating; speeding down the highway in the magic of an early evening hour in May. The sun shone warmly, a welcome surprise after a long winter of cold and very short days.

Just when she was beginning to unwind a new nervousness washed over Ruthe. What could she possibly do for the O'Briens when she got there?

On the phone Muriel had said that her mother was dying and asking for her, and her older sister had vanished. "Ruthe, you've got to come help me find Cathy before Mom dies!" her new teen friend had sobbed.

"I've never been at a deathbed before," Ruthe worried. "I was not really at Grandpa's last year. Not right when he died. What will the rest of the O'Briens think, me barging in like this?"

Swiftly her thoughts went into a soundless but high-charged dialogue with God, a habit developed in her lonely preteen years. *What will I do, Lord? I'm only that mousy bookworm who reads too much and is scared of strangers. Just look at what I've got myself into now!*

Vivid scenes from the last two weeks washed in like tidewater to remind her how she stumbled into this double life.

Her dad had been out of work all winter. He was a strong, healthy man who was not afraid of strenuous outdoor labour. It was the first time ever that he had

been unable to find work. Her mother had been in poor health almost as long as Ruthe could remember, and had suffered several big surgeries in recent years, but when she, with rash pride, began to threaten to go washing floors for others, Ruthe knew it was time to step in to help. Her parents had promised she could stay in school as long as they could afford it, but before they would go on welfare, she would be expected to do what all good Mennonites, at least of her parents' generation, had done; work to help the family pull through hard times.

Ruthe was observant enough to know if she dropped out of grade twelve, chances of finishing would get slimmer with time. After much deliberation and prayer and quiet inquiries, she wrote a letter she had polished daily for three weeks. It won her a special interview in the city with the Chief Operator at SaskTel, the provincial telephone company. She got a fine arrangement to work weekend night shifts in the telephone office, with extra shifts in any week when she notified the scheduling clerk she was available.

The Chief Operator had been so understanding and amenable to help Ruthe this way until she could take full-time shifts, because she had done it herself in the fifties, in a small town not far from Kleinstadt. Since the late sixties, operators were now to have their high school completed. It was a coup, yet Ruthe did not brag.

Her parents did when she announced the job to them. They told everyone they knew. Her mother worried about her commuting to and from the city those forty minutes at night and again at so early in the morning. At the same time, they were both clearly relieved that Ruthe had found a way to support the family and stay in school until after her June finals.

City life held a unique fascination for Ruthe. Characters and intrigues she had experienced vicariously in books percolated and blended in her imagination. She couldn't keep from staring at people in the streets, and at the huge buildings, which held so many unrelated individuals at once. Each face, each voice she heard in her headset hinted at volumes of personal stories.

Tenderhearted, Ruthe soon began to have physical cramps of empathetic ache at the human suffering she sensed. A month ago she began to come earlier or stay a while after a shift to drive up and down the streets, sub-consciously hoping to be in the right place at the right time to help someone, she supposed.

"Dear God!" she moaned now, as she brushed her damp hands on the pink lace and gripped the wheel tighter, unaware that her foot pressed down as she thought of Muriel and her mother, waiting. *You did a miraculous thing the night You directed me to Muriel. You even put words in my mouth. Do it again! Please Lord! I cannot turn around now! Ple-as-e. I've promised.*

Two weeks earlier Ruthe drove down one of the more run down business streets when she spied a narrow, weather-beaten building, held upright by a cafe

Ruthe's Secret Roses

on one side and an over-stuffed pawn shop on the other. An eye-straining sign flickering over the door proclaimed it to be Rona's DanceSpot. She knew she was too naive about this, but felt one thing instinctively; there had to be some unhappy kids there, never mind what Arlene at school said about the fun of modern dancing.

Cold clammy fear touched her neck. Some of those people might be hiding their misery under a false gaiety, but which ones would admit it in there right now? And, what would the plain, conservative people of Kleinstadt say if she set foot in that place? A few of her classmates would be willing to dance there, but would sure be selective in whom they would tell about it.

Still driving steadily toward the city, and away from her own graduation banquet in the streamer-decorated basement of the biggest church in Kleinstadt, Ruthe's mind was reliving how she had driven around and around the block two weeks ago. She had stopped across the street and stared at the door, which seemed to open and close with each colour change of the sign above. With great turmoil, she had distorted and drawn out the sleeves of her old white cardigan sweater draped over her shoulders.

Fears taunted her after a fresh surge of compassion came, "Wow, you're schizo! Know something? You're too naive for words!"

Oh-h Lord! another part of her whimpered, *I'm sorry, but, unless You give me the courage, I can't do it! Should I really go in there?*

"Ach-h, you silly country bumpkin," her fears taunted her again, "Drive yourself to Emergency. There's St. Paul's hospital just up the street."

"Will you shut up!" Ruthe cried out. "The Lord God Almighty is with me. If He wants me to go in there He'll give me the courage."

For a stunned moment she considered the echo of those words. The battle eased for her some, but she drove around the block once more.

Three tears dribbled down her cheeks as she prayed with a fresh conviction that there was someone God wanted her to rescue in that place. She vowed to go in. Abruptly, she parked in front of the door and dashed in. Fast.

The throbbing, thumping music deafened her as she entered. That, and the purple-brown haze of the psychedelic lights flashing on and off through a cloud of suffocating smoke promptly numbed her good intentions. Ruth froze as bodies shook and shimmered before her. Suspended in space like a speck of dust, she was about to call herself a daydreamer and worse, when she heard a muffled sob behind the door handle she was still clutching.

Ruthe about-faced, ducked some flailing limbs, and looked under the coats on a coat rack. There was someone with tousled auburn hair on her white knees, with white arms hugging her thin white legs to herself. Ou-p. Ruthe's heart

jumped into her mouth, as she blinked to clear her quickly smarting eyes from the smoke.

You've been wanting to help someone, whispered her silent companion, *how about her?*

That flesh has to be covered! Ruthe whipped her cardigan off her shoulders and onto those creamy white ones, whispering urgently, "hey, com'on. Let's get out'a here."

A white swollen face lifted under the auburn mop. "–Like a game! Two guys fought over me. Then-n, wh-when I split a seam, they tor-e my dres-s! God! I can't go home. Ever!" Her head dropped on her knees again. "I wanna die!"

"Let's go fast." Ruthe urged briskly. "My car is at the door."

"They threw my dress away!" the young teen wailed.

"Com'on." Ruthe coaxed, feeling desperate for fresh air herself.

Slowly the redhead got up out of the coats and stood on wobbly platforms, stretching the bottom of Ruthe's sweater down past her panties, and attaching herself to Ruthe's arm slunk out with her.

The redhead had begun to cry aloud in the car, and Ruthe, not sure what to do with an unhappy soul now that she had found one, simply pulled away and drove out of that area. She decided that what was needed next, was to talk it out, and let this girl spill her trauma. If in her place, she knew she would not want to be taken to the police, or other strangers, but now that she had begun, Ruthe was ready to die before she would bail out of helping this girl. Whatever it took, she was in this one hundred percent, plus.

When she saw that they were on a quiet residential avenue parallel to the riverbank, beautifully canopied with shade trees, Ruthe decided it would be okay to park in a hidden spot.

"Ahm? My name's Ruthe. What's yours?"

"Mu'riel–l." Embarrassed, she cried again, "Oh– my-God, Ruthe! I can never face my mother and dad!"

Glancing in the back seat to be sure, Ruthe apologized that she had nothing more to offer for a covering. Nervous at first, then growing more tender, she got Muriel to talk more coherently.

Muriel told how it happened that certain new boyfriends that she had tried to impress had persuaded her to try that DanceSpot.

In reply to a question about why she had come to rescue her, Ruthe opted for the truth. That led her to explain some things about her family, and her own feelings about people. How her parents took the family to every service at their small Mennonite church, but they were reluctant to care about strangers, while on the other hand, she had a great hunger and ache for people with problems. Since about nine, when she invited Christ to save her, Ruthe said, she had found

Ruthe's Secret Roses

Him to be a great personal Friend to whom she could confide all her thoughts. "I always capitalize words or pronouns related to Jesus. He's that precious to me. Only, I'm not greedy, Muriel. I want everyone else to have this same wonderful Friend. He died to save every person in the whole world, and wants to be close to everybody!"

Muriel drank it up. Her family were good Catholics, but she had never met anyone willing to discuss religious stuff informally with her. She had never presumed that she might be able to talk directly with the great Creator Himself.

Rapt in this conversation Muriel forgot for a bit that she was curled up sideways, in just her black bikini underwear and still stretching Ruthe's sweater like a blanket around herself. "I'd love to talk to God," she said wistfully. "Show me how."

Ruthe demonstrated her informal chattering style with her invisible Friend, and bubbled enthusiastically as she introduced Muriel to Him. "She's anxious to meet You, Lord, tho' I bet You've been looking forward to this much longer than we can guess. –Go ahead, you talk to Him now, Muriel."

"Oh sweet Jesus; I've never done this, but my new friend talks to You as if You understand ordinary English... an' have feelings. Oh–ho-o God!" Muriel dissolved in tears again. "How I wish it had never-ever happened! Can You forgive me? An' please, can You make my life okay to live again?"

Ruthe smiled at an oncoming car as she remembered those prayers.

Nearly three in the morning they had rolled up in the O'Briens' quiet drive, just a few blocks further. The car stopped between lovely lawns and landscaped trees in the pearl grey moonlight. Muriel's brick home was all dark and solemn. The clinging ivy rustled. Ruthe watched Muriel slip up to the large oak door, find it unlocked, and slip through, still stretching the old sweater all about her.

In her ears rang an invitation to come visit soon.

Ruthe smiled with dimples now as she checked her graduation hairdo in the rear view mirror and recalled how she had felt driving back to Kleinstadt that night. A six to midnight shift plus another two hours spent with this new friend meant she had robbed herself of sleep, but she didn't care. She sang at the top of her lungs, praising God and venting the extra adrenalin energy that had built up.

Over and over she had exclaimed, "Oh Lord-but-I love You! I love You! Oh-ew-how I love You!" Then she worried that there would be such a shine on her face the next day that people would make her tell what happened. That she resolved not to do. This night would always be a secret between Muriel, the Lord, and herself.

A glance at her watch; she could be at Mrs. Pearl O'Brien's bedside in another ten minutes.

When her mother had asked where her sweater was, Ruthe said, "In the city," correctly guessing her mother would think she meant her operator's locker. Her mom warned her sternly about leaving temptation lying around for strangers to steal. "Don't trust anyone in the city, no matter how nice they talk to you." Grateful not to be quizzed further, Ruthe accepted the warning with a nod.

The following Monday Ruthe had stopped at the O'Brien house to pick up her cardigan. Mostly she was curious to find out if her new friend was still traumatized. Had she told her parents? What if Muriel pretended not to recognize her today?

A poised woman in a tweed and cream ruffles ensemble, wearing her thick auburn curls in a smart coiffure, answered the door's chimes.

"My name-um-m," suddenly Ruthe was the painfully shy Mennonite girl others in her hometown thought she was. "Ah. Is Muriel home please?"

"No. But do come in, Ruthe. She'll be home from her music lesson shortly." Mrs. O'Brien drew her in with both hands and closed the handsome door behind Ruthe.

"I'm so glad you came." She motioned the gulping guest into an elegant living room. "My daughter told me all about... well, what happened on Friday night, and the kindness you showed. I told her she ought to have taken your number and address so we could thank you properly."

Panic hit Ruthe at the idea of her parents meeting these people. "Oh-no. That's all right. No need!" She made a mental memo to impress on Muriel never to call her at home. Leave a number with the operators' clerk instead. Nerves knotted her neck and between her shoulder blades as Ruthe glanced about the room. It was perfectly appointed in a navy blue, white and gold French Provincial decor.

With a gracious wave of her hand, Mrs. O'Brien had offered her the blue brocade chair, and perched on the edge of the brocade sofa nearby. "Just today I've been wishing I could talk with you, alone. So this is timely." Twisting her hands fiercely, she went on to tell Ruthe what a wonderful thing she had done to help Muriel escape that wild hangout, and how good her attitude was now about life. "You saved our family from an awful scandal." And more. "Of course," she interjected a couple of times, "that's the first time any of our children have ever been involved with such crude young people."

Abruptly her shoulders sagged. "I just wanted to thank you, Ruthe."

Intuitively, Ruthe sensed that Mrs. O'Brien had just lost the courage to say something. Looking at the tense face and the fingers twisted into pretzels, compassion rose in Ruthe like warmed mercury and she found herself suddenly sitting beside the tight woman, her hand gently on the twitching back, "Okay. What's really wrong?"

Ruthe's Secret Roses

The woman's face dropped into her hands. "I- went to my do-doc-tor's th-this morning an'-and the tests sh-show advanced ca-cancer of my cer-vix!"

Ruthe tried to explain that before this became serious, the doctors would help her.

"No-no. You don't under-s-stand! I hid it too long! The doctor said this morning-g that I have only a few days. At most th-three weeks! Ouh, Ruthe!" she wailed. "I'm so scared! I've been stumbling around all day fee-ling icy... with f-fear. How will I ever tell Ian tonight? What will become of my children?"

Now she clung desperately to Ruthe. "An-what of me? I don't want to die! I can't! I jus-won't!" Realizing she had no power over death, her voice trailed in anguish, "Oh-h God-d, must I!?"

Though death had never worried Ruthe much; she had heard so many sermons on the glories awaiting believers in eternity; this woman's fear was catching, and Ruthe shivered with cold. She could not think of anything appropriate to say, so she patted Mrs. O'Brien's back and let her cry herself into exhaustion. That took some minutes. During that time Ruthe did what was her habit whenever she didn't know what to do next. Her thoughts became a dialogue with her Friend who always listened and often prompted her with ideas what to do next.

After a time Ruthe felt impressed to whisper to Mrs. O'Brien, "Do you feel God loves you? Specifically you?"

The tweed shoulders grew quieter and a muffled answer agreed. "Yes, God loves us all."

"Since He is perfectly holy, do you think He might ever make a mistake and let a sickness or death slip by Him to a person, and then say, 'Oops. Didn't mean that to happen!'"

Sniffing into her ruffled wrist, Mrs. O'Brien raised her head and dried her eyes. "No. He's got to be reliable, or He is not worth calling God. Or regarding as one. But--"

"Exactly." Ruthe warmed up. "If we understood everything we could run for His office. We need to trust Him and see His view on things. Sometimes He tells people- in fact, the Bible teaches that He always warned people and told them what He was doing, especially if they were His followers."

"I wish I could ask Him about so many things!" she interrupted. "Muriel said you- you talk with Him personally."

Ruthe's favourite subject. She was so relieved that prayer was the key to helping this woman. They knelt then on the ivory broadloom and she had taught Mrs. O'Brien to pray in her own frank and intimate way. They took turns for half an hour. Then the city woman began to believe that God had heard her, and that He felt very tenderly towards her.

"Oh Ruthe!" she beamed. "He says He loves me! He's even willing to forgive me for being unfaithful to Ian. An-an the reason He let these things happen– was so I could end my long search for Him. It's just as if He's kneeling here on the other side of me. I just know I've met Him at last!"

That was when Muriel came in. Mrs. O'Brien was all over her daughter, excitedly telling of her encounter with God. Next both of them were handling Ruthe with hugs and kisses. She felt embarrassed and tried to leave for work, but they were loath to let her go.

Floating on secret clouds, Ruthe had made two more visits since. One in the hospital just after a hasty hysterectomy was performed, but Mrs. O'Brien's surgeon had found her bladder and lower bowels perforated and filled with cancer too. The specialist offered no hope and let her go home when she insisted she meant to die in her own bed. The other visit, at their home, had given Ruthe a passing glance at Muriel's brother, Ross, but not the rest of the family.

Ross was eighteen, and like Ruthe, graduating from high school. His class ceremonies were to come at the end of June. He was red haired like his mother and sister Muriel, and Ruthe was warned that he considered himself a captivating ladies' man.

Cathy, seventeen, was described by her mother and sister as a well-proportioned blonde looking twenty-seven; a jet-set party animal. Until that other Friday night, fifteen-year old Muriel had envied her sister's many adoring boyfriends who bet each other for turns at dates with Cathy.

Keith, three years younger than Muriel, was more like her, though blond like Cathy. "He's creative and brave," Muriel had explained. A few twelve-year old boys tagged after her brother into whatever projects he thought up. His mother felt he was hiding his real brains because of peer pressure.

It usually took Ruthe thirty-five minutes to make the trip into the city, but this night she arrived in twenty-five as she turned in at the curved driveway and stopped before the brick two-story house.

Muriel was in the doorway. "Oh Ruthe! What are we going to do?" she cried, running around the car front and directly into her friend with arms outstretched.

TWO

"What's happening? Found Cathy yet?" Ruthe asked briskly.

Muriel locked arms with her and led her inside as she described how a few hours earlier her mother's pain had become unbearable. "Daddy got the doctor to come out, but he agreed with Mom. So he gave her morphine. However, it won't delay the end. He said there's nothing else he can do unless Mom changes her mind and wants to die in the hospital."

She stopped. "My Mom is dying!"

"I know." Ruthe moaned sympathetically. "What about Cathy?"

"She told me she was eloping with her boyfriend, Lloyd, tonight from a party they were both invited to."

"When was that?"

"About four. She was dressing. But I didn't know Mom was dying right now until just a bit later. I went to tell Cathy but she had slipped out the back way."

Muriel's voice once more leaped to a helpless crescendo. "Oh Ruthe! What are we going to do?"

In her hidden thoughts Ruthe was praying. Until an idea came, she would keep Muriel talking. "Have you told your Mom? Or Dad?"

"I told her that Cathy is out on a date. I haven't had the heart yet to tell her Cathy doesn't plan to be back. If only we could find her real quick. She'll kill herself if she comes back from a weekend honeymoon and finds it too late to say good bye to Mom!"

Ruthe wondered how she would persuade Cathy, if they did find her. They might miss them by minutes, and it would take even the police days to find Cathy. But Muriel was counting on her for some action. Brimming with reckless compassion, Ruthe hugged Muriel. "Okay, where's that party supposed to be?"

The rust-flecked olive green eyes shone with new hope. "She didn't say, but with her set, most likely at her friend Ida's, or, as it's a weekend night, at Harold's Club on Cumberland."

They had neared the top of the stairs.

A boy sat in the doorway of the bedroom, looking glum and mixed up. Like he was afraid to leave and uncomfortable staying. Must be Keith, Ruthe decided, and smiled at him as they stepped over his legs.

Ross had been pacing noisily up and down the carpeted stairs with a soft thud-thud, and in fierce circles in the living room and kitchen. Just then he was thud-thudding back up into the bedroom behind the girls. He stared hard at

Ruthe, then marched down to pace and smoke some more, swearing under his breath and billowing clouds like an old locomotive.

The bedroom drapes were drawn though it was still quite light outside, and Mr. O'Brien was wandering aimlessly about the room, a tall, gaunt shadow in the pale pink and blue light of the lamps.

Ruthe hesitated near the door, watching.

He had just broken some petals from an enormous bouquet of deep pink long stemmed roses on the night table. He was shredding them as he begged plaintively, "I don't understand you, Pearl! Why? I know you liked Father Inglis a lot, but why won't another priest do while he is out of town?"

Struggling to answer, she saw Muriel and Ruthe entering. A relief broke out on the chalky white face.

Quickly now, Ruthe moved closer.

Mrs. O'Brien laid a cold, damp hand over Ruthe's and gasped between breaths of pain, "Ruthe dear!.. I'm so glad.. you've come. You know... I doubted... Him for a bit... yesterday. But I found.. in... the Testa-ment..." She paused to groan as a stab of pain deepened. As it lifted a smile of confidence crept over her. "You're right!" She nodded at Ruthe. "God does not... make mistakes!"

Ruthe blinked hard. Her throat constricted. She had said that so confidently to this woman a few days ago. Was it true now?

Muriel's arm over her shoulder helped Ruthe to kneel. She stroked the cold, clinging fingers through another extremely strong wave of pain. Gritting her teeth, Mrs. O'Brien said, "Ruthe, my husband... my family... they're so distraught!"

"Of course. Because they love you. They're going to miss you a lot." Tears were quivering on her own lids. Trying to regain her composure, Ruthe quipped weakly, "they can't take off their feelings like a coat and lay them in a trunk like souvenirs."

The woman, lying flat, gaunt white, smiled back.

"Don't worry about your family." Ruthe said with more assurance than she felt. Inwardly she suspected she would have a big job to comfort them. "Just trust them to God's love and care like you did with your own soul. He loves each of them as much as He loves you, and will draw them to Himself too."

"Isn't He... marv-el-ous?" she sighed. "I'm counting on you to help them learn to love... His voice. Like you did me. Soon I'll see... His face!" Her smile faded as she poked her white fingers around her unusually tousled hair. "Where is Cathy? Maybe we could... pray? All together?"

"Sure. Tell you what. You save your strength." Ruthe got to her feet. "Muriel and I will go find her."

Ruthe's Secret Roses

The woman drew a deep breath. "So sweet..." She bit her lip apologetically. "You're... all dressed up. Grad night?"

"Don't worry about that," Ruthe said expansively. "I was hoping to get out of my speech somehow."

Impatiently Muriel took her arm and said, "Mom, we will be back as quick as we can. You rest."

"Ken I go?" Keith muttered as he got up to let them exit.

"Sure," Ruthe whispered as she and Muriel began tripping down the soft stairs. "But let's hurry or she may be in Banff soon."

First they drove past Ida's home. All they saw was a woman in a lawn chair sipping a tall drink, and a man in Bermuda shorts, practicing golf swings. No party, Muriel decided.

However, there certainly was a party at Harold's Club. It wasn't seven yet and the parking lot was full. The building looked large and fairly new. It obviously catered to a more formal society, judging by the elegantly dressed people arriving and leaving. The band music swirled in the air around the building. *It was not quite as primitive as that at the party Muriel had been at two weeks earlier*, Ruthe thought. *This has a lively, gracious swing to it.*

She drove slowly around to the back of the club restaurant as they tried to pool ideas for finding Cathy with the least attention to themselves.

Both Keith and Muriel screamed at the same time, "There she is!"

Ruthe looked up at the balcony and the natural-rock stairs coming down the back of the building. Sure enough, there was a lovely blonde in a red raw silk gown and stole. The belt and borders of the stole were encrusted with tiny diamond-like stones. She was followed closely by a handsome escort, wielding a wrapped bottle over his head.

A stray dog had been barking insults and demands around the corner at the service door. He became aware of the two, and came bounding to the foot of the stairs, barking even more furiously.

It was clear that Cathy was afraid of strange dogs and just now, this one.

"Run for my car, Cath!" they heard the gallant Lloyd shout. "I ain't scart of no dog. I'll kill 'im!"

"Quick," said Ruthe, pulling closer to the bottom step. "You and Keith pull her in as soon—"

Cathy was so terrified she didn't think about whose car she had jumped into until Ruthe was glancing past her face, left and right at the street.

Keith crowded the rear window. "Hey, Lloyd kicked the dog! He's going to have to pay for that Tux now! The dog's taking off with one leg of the pants!"

Cathy began to squirm and scream in her tight space between Ruthe and Muriel on the front seat. This upset Muriel.

"Whoa-there, Cathy." Ruthe said sharply, though still a bit bug-eyed at how she had clambered right over her sister. "Your mother wants to see you before she dies."

"I know she's got cancer," Cathy retorted. "*This* your *new friend*, Mur? Anyway. She's still dragging around the house; I want Lloyd!"

"Listen, Cath! Please!" Muriel begged. "Mom told the doctor she wanted to die at home. With us. He was over after you left. Cathy, Mom is really truly dying! Tonight!"

The teen in the sparkling evening wear stared at her younger sister as if trying to discern a trick.

"She's right," helped Ruthe. "Could be in hours, or minutes."

Cathy fumed and pouted the rest of the drive home, but showed signs of fearing the truth, and not having the resources to cope.

Muriel explained that she had not told their mother about Cathy's elopement. She only promised to bring her home as quickly as possible.

Once she sighted her mother's heaving form in the softly lit bedroom, Cathy flung herself across her mother's body and burst into the loudest, most frightened sobs Ruthe had ever heard in her life. "No! No-o-o! Mom-m-my! You can't die! You can't! I need you-ouh-h-eo!"

Mrs. O'Brien tried to lift her face from underneath Cathy, but she had grown too weak to speak. Her eyes searched the air until they met Ruthe's. With them she pled for Cathy's sake.

Gently, Ruthe took hold of Cathy's shoulders and tugged and lifted, until she turned around and clung to her, weeping uncontrollably. Next thing she knew, Ruthe was crying, Muriel and her Dad were sobbing on the other side of the bed, and even Ross and Keith were hiccupping helplessly somewhere in the room.

Ruthe ached. This family's wife and mother was fading from this life and there was nothing any one of them could do to keep her. She couldn't think of anything appropriate to say, so she just stroked Cathy's back over and over and let her own tears drip into the red silk. A half-glance away she saw Mr. O'Brien making the sign of the cross over and over.

Mrs. O'Brien tried once more to speak to her family, but when she found she could not, she gave up and simply looked wistfully from one to another in a circle. Her eyes stopped. Her smile shortened ever so slightly as the muscles in her face relaxed, and with a tiny sigh, the spirit of Mrs. Pearl O'Brien slipped away to heaven.

Ruthe burrowed her face in Cathy's bejeweled shoulder. For some time they all remained as they were and went on with their weeping. *Lord*, she prayed, *thanks for helping us find her in time.*

Ruthe's Secret Roses

Cathy's sobs were the most wrenching, and after a while Ruthe motioned Muriel to help her take Cathy out of the room. They steered her into her own bedroom across the hall.

Though Ruthe knew in her mind, she need not sorrow for their mother, her goneness now left her with a cold, amputated feeling. As if one of her own arms or legs had been abruptly cut off.

Cathy, the socialite, now shrunken and childlike, clung to Ruthe's arm as if she were the last ray of warmth from her mother. Even while all three applied gobs of tissues to their faces, Cathy wouldn't ease her grip on Ruthe.

"Y'know— both Muriel and Mom tried to t-tell me about the x-citing things that happened when they met you. Sounded like religious talk, S-so I...."

"That's okay," Ruthe soothed.

"No-but, but now it's different. Here you— you cry with me—" She began to hic with fresh snuffles. "Af-after seeing how much you c-care about us, about me— I want to love you back!"

"Oh Cath!" exclaimed Muriel.

"@#\$\$%@" Cathy grabbed Ruthe tighter. "God must think I'm a terrible phoney. Spoilt, selfish! I hate myself too! Listen; can you get God to forgive me?"

Suddenly Ruthe knew what was happening. A tiny giggle burped out, and she hugged Cathy's head, rubbing her nose in the silky blonde hair. "Cathy-O-Cathy! God loves you already! He knows exactly how you feel. He can tell you are truly sorry, and He knows just how bad you are. Better than you do. The important thing is to admit it, and ask Him to forgive you. Then you just let Him do whatever He thinks best to change you, and, of course, obey His Word."

"Does He ever!" added Muriel encouragingly. "I find something new about Him, and me, almost every day now."

"What I want is the kind of quietness He gave you and Mom about dying. I was scared out'a my tree! I still am. It's so for-ev-er!"

Cathy was about to start crying again, so Ruthe and Muriel encircled her with their arms and led the talk to prayer. It would make Jesus become real; they urged her to listen, and then try it.

Ruthe and Muriel found words to express their grief, however, confidence in God flowed in once they got started.

Cathy was hesitant, then broken, then touched in a holy way too.

After that, they had ever so much more to talk about.

Abruptly, Muriel remembered. "O-no! The Chief Operator said this was your grad night when I persuaded her to put my call through!"

"Ruthe," she moaned contritely, "I'm sorry we ruined it for you!" Cathy wanted to know why a May grad instead of June or September, so Ruthe told the

story of the class decision to beat the pressures of finals and grad preparations at the same time, and some were leaving the province the day after the last exam.

Suddenly Cathy stood up and took charge. "It's 8:20," she said as Ruthe and Muriel picked themselves up from the candy pink fake fur carpet. "When were the ceremonies to begin? Eight? How long a drive?"

Ruthe said lightly, "I might make it for the scroll presentations and the candlelight march if I hurried." She honestly wasn't in a mood for a graduation after all this, but the girls insisted. They were so sincere, even when she added, "the diplomas are only blank sheets that another girl and I had to antique with tea and tie with ribbons. It's all just symbolic."

"Wait a sec." Cathy cried, dashing out into the hall. She rushed into the room where her mother lay motionless and straight, and her father knelt just as still, his head buried under his arms. She paused an instant. She tiptoed to the bedside stand and broke out three roses and two rosebuds from the pink bouquet.

As she returned to the hall, Muriel seemed to see what Cathy wanted to do, and ran off ahead down the stairs to fetch a roll of green floral tape and a few short wires from the sun room. With quick, efficient twists of her fingers and wrists, Cathy wired the roses and their leaves, while Muriel was off for ribbon and a corsage pin. In another minute the sisters had put it all together and Cathy was deftly attaching the large fragrant corsage to Ruthe's shoulder. "Something Mom would probably have thought to do for you. She wore flowers to everything. Myself, I prefer lights."

"B-ut-t!" Ruthe stuttered with admiration. "How did you learn to do that? It's beautiful! The one thing I thought was missing!"

"Watching Mom, I guess." Cathy's calm smile was amazingly sunny.

At the car, Ruthe promised to stop in the next day to ask about funeral arrangements, then exchanging assurances that God loved them for their profuse expressions of gratitude, she left.

"What an evening!" she sighed. "Not just a vicarious adventure in a book; I lived this!"

Almost immediately she ransacked her mind for a good explanation of her disappearance. She could never tell an outright lie. How could she skirt all the questions that would be asked? Horror of horrors, what if the principal asked her publicly?

No, Lord! she groaned with a lightened sensation as if in a falling dream. *Is this going to force my secrets out into the open after all? What will Mom say? She might draw the line and consider letting us go on welfare after all rather than let me work in the city!*

She fell silent, utterly deflated.

Ruthe's Secret Roses

In a moment more Ruthe laughed aloud. She knew the answer to all this frightened drivel. *If You're as loving and great as I told Cathy tonight, You won't be any different when I reach Kleinstadt, will You? You never make a mistake!*

Ruthe was breathless and more than nervous as she reached the school auditorium. It was too late for her toast to the teachers. By now the banquet was over and the ceremonies, to be held here, almost done. *Good. It's almost over, Lord.* In one sweeping motion she glided through the side entrance behind the piano, through the swinging door to the backstage area, and up a few dark steps.

She recognized the familiar drone of the principal, Mr. Logan's voice on the platform and glanced at the darkened auditorium with its sea of shadowy faces and figures. Pausing behind the curtain to catch her breath, she saw that the grads on the platform were rising. Now the gap at her chair was a little less obvious; she would be able to pull it back to step into her place.

Melinda walked to the centre of the platform to accept her scroll and shake the principal's hand, just as they had been coached. Ruthe stood breathing heavily in her spot. *Well. I missed the guest speaker even.*

While Melinda rustled her chiffon skirts back to her chair, Mr. Logan read from his list, "Ruth Veer—" He stopped to look up, remembering her absence. Surprise and relief flooded his face as he saw her coming for the scroll in his hand. Right on cue. He beamed as he pumped her hand. He sounded as if he truly meant the congratulatory bit he parroted to each of them. Other than that, he carried on as if nothing had gone amiss all evening.

Ruthe appreciated that. At the same time she was overcome with a profound feeling that this pomp and ceremony was quite insignificant in the light of the real life she had just tasted.

Fuss and formality out in this sleepy village, she thought to herself as she fell in line with the others to light their candles, while out there in the world are exciting things to do, like rescuing Muriels and Cathys, comforting dying people. Probably lots more that naive little me, I've never heard about yet.

Oh God, she prayed, hardly noticing anyone as she stepped into the rehearsed marching line with her candle flickering gingerly. Some would call this youthful idealism, but I don't want to just exist. I want to do important, meaningful things in my life, for others, together with You!

In this cloud of her own, it took time for Ruthe to notice that people were turning to stare after her, whispering. When she did, Ruthe began to scheme her escape. Next time near that door....

But she miscounted while marching. The lights came up and there they stood in their prearranged reception line. The crowd was thickest at her end as people milled around, asking both sincere and snide questions all at once.

"—A matter of life and death, your parents said."

"Yes, a matter of life and death." She repeated it another time or two, as she realized it was a dramatic but evasive answer.

"Sorry, I can't break a confidence," nonplussed a few inquiries.

"Why can't you tell?"

"What kind of emergency would....?"

"That stupid telephone company! I would've told them off!"

However, there were so many others talking at Ruthe that she only shook her head and laughed helplessly. Then she saw a fresh wave of people coming. Seconds later she saw a small rift in the human mass. Ducking and veering sharply, Ruthe disappeared.

Without waiting for the rest of her family at the car, she drove the four odd blocks home and didn't relax until she was in the drive. *No sign of the kids*, she sighed. She was glad Brandt and her sisters had gone to the ceremonies, though only parents were invited to the banquet at six.

Ruthe was also glad she had got away before her classmates tried to wheedle her to come along to the all night grad party and breakfast a few miles up the river. They would have had fun tormenting her to tell all they wanted to know, or wanted to believe.

She opened the car doors on both sides and stretched out her full five feet and seven inches (1.5m) on the front seat. She looked up at the deepening blue way up in the sky and for several minutes simply breathed her lungs full of the delicious evening air. The only sounds, a cricket chorus in a muddy dugout a diagonal block away over a vacant lot of willow bushes, and the hum of the highway traffic shuttling past the little town. Closing her eyes, Ruthe yawned contentedly. A cooling breeze visited and went on.

Her mind cleared so she could see her life in perspective again. As she replayed the evening in her mind, she noticed things she had been too absorbed to see before, and saw questions to ask and consider. She was eager to work them all out with her most intimate Friend.

Hearing the shrill voices of her sisters up the street, she shifted herself and sat up. More urgent now was to pray for calm and wisdom in talking with her own family members in the next few minutes. Ruthe drew in spiritual strength with a deep breath.

THREE

Once her sisters sighted the car, they ran up, with demanding questions. "Why didn't you wait at the aud-a-torium?!" her pet sister cried, wrapping strong bony arms around Ruthe's waist as she got out of the brown sedan. "We looked– and looked– all over! No you. No car!"

"What were you up to?" demanded Suzanne. "We had no car to pick up Grosz'mama. She couldn't come."

"Oh!" Ruthe gasped. But she knew her demure grandmother would not have complained, only worried about her safety. And prayed.

"Had to work, huh?" teased Brandt in his deepening voice as he loped up behind them. He came between Ruthe and Suzanne in age.

With exaggerated calm Ruthe commanded, "Hold it. Keep your shirts on."

Their parents arrived next, panting heavily from a hurried trot. "W– wh're on earth were you, Ruthe!" exclaimed her mother showing tremendous anxiety.

"What kind of emergency'd be more important than your own graduation?" raged her stout father, his stomach quivering.

"Okay, okay," Ruthe soothed as she marshalled them into the small white house. "Let's not set up outdoor broadcasting."

"Now Ruthe. What happened?" insisted her mother, taking off her Sunday floral kerchief, and trying to regain her usual authority in the home.

"Someone was dying and asking for me." Ruthe blinked once. *What a nice, short answer. Thanks, Lord.*

"Why you? Couldn't she ask for another operator?"

"Because–" Ruthe hesitated. How little could she get away with? "She liked me, and she didn't know any other operator. So I did what I could, and came back as soon as I could. But, Mom. Having just been at a deathbed, I didn't feel like visiting around at the auditorium."

A flicker of sympathy lit in her mother's eyes.

"But we have a right to know!" shouted her dad, yanking loose his tie and shedding his suit jacket with the permanent wrinkles in his elbows.

Ruthe ignored him, knowing that if she got past her mom, she would take care of dad for her. "As a matter of fact, I still don't feel much like talking. So I'm going to bed."

"Me too," announced Sharri, taking her hand like a loyal nine year old sister. "I'm going with you."

"Yes– but," said her mother dolefully, dying to know more. "Don't you trust us any more? You've become so secretive lately, as if–"

"As if you're a stuck up city girl now!" finished her dad vehemently.

"Oh Dad! Mom!" Ruthe moaned in exasperation. She knew just where this conversation cycle was going.

Ruthe respected her mother's practical mind, but saw her as a worrier, and the things she did and thought about these days would only give her more to worry about. She looked on her secrecy as a kindness to her mother. Instead she reached for her intense sense of justice. "Mom, when another person trusts me, isn't it Christian and fair that she be able to count on me to keep that confidence?"

Though her mother was reluctant to let go, Ruthe could see that her logic was hitting its mark. For this moment.

Her dad, who knew nothing of keeping secrets, was opening his mouth to press for a total confession, so Ruthe added hastily, "I assure you, your little Ruthe didn't get into any trouble or do anything to be ashamed of, so how about all of you trusting her for a change?"

Turning, she added with an enhanced yawn, "I've had a long, hard day, and I've promised to work extra hours tomorrow. You know we need the money."

"Yeah. Think you're indispensable," muttered Suzanne.

It was delicate work negotiating understandings with this budding teenage sister, so Ruthe let that remark go, and turned to make her escape.

*"Mijall! Houl stell!"*¹

Ruthe froze at the anger in her dad's voice.

With a raised fist and a speech more nimble in his mother tongue, her father stood before her and told her that graduate or not, she was still his daughter, and was going to tell the truth, or he would pound it out of her.

"Ben! Ben!" suddenly her mother was pulling down his upraised arm and urging him to control himself. He jerked his arm away and sputtered some dirty words in Low German.

"Ruthe," her mother now turned on her with authority. "You're too big to spank, but if you are doing anything to be ashamed of, getting bad friends in Saskatoon, then I am going to phone up the telephone office and tell them— you quit! You no longer work there. I have always said I would never go on welfare, but I will do that before I will let you throw your life into the gutter! Hear me?!" "Yeah, y' hear that?" yelled her dad, coming back, dangerously close.

In the back of Ruthe's mind, deep in her thin body dressed in the pink lace with the corsage of deep velvety roses that now seemed to find it too hot and humid here, came a tiny whisper, "They don't understand! And see? They're too blind to notice the roses." However, her stronger, normal spirit seemed to blink and come to its senses, and knew that she loved her parents too much, despite all their faults to turn on them in revenge. Ruthe gulped, turned, not answering, and

Ruthe's Secret Roses

with scalding tears washing down her face, stumbled up the narrow wooden stairs for the bedroom under the eaves that she shared with her two sisters.

Sharri came running along behind, trying to catch Ruthe's hand. When they were nestled on the old, opened sofa bed that they shared, together with a roll of toilet paper that Ruthe kept handy for such occasions of nose-blowing and weeping, the little sister said to big sister, "I know you didn't do anything bad, Wuffie. Why didn't you just tell 'em what you did?"

Ruthe blasted into a wad of paper first. "Because, other people have a right to their secrets. If they can't trust me, then I don't deserve to be their friend. Besides, God knows the truth. The Bible says He will defend me."

"So? You're crying."

"Because my feelings are hurt doesn't make it okay to hurt back."

Suzanne came into the room and threw herself on her own cot, but Sharri knew better than to beg for Ruthe's secret adventure when this middle sister was there. So they sniffled, and Ruthe got Sharri to describe the graduation instead.

Here Suzanne jumped in and corrected or expanded on the junior's view, until their parents hollered that they should get ready for bed properly. Suzanne suddenly saw the roses, and wanted an answer.

Ruthe reminded her they were to be quiet, and just stared wistfully at the roses in her hand. She tried to memorize the colour and curl of the petals. Then her mind leaped into fantasy gear for a split moment and saw long hedges just dripping with roses of many shades.

If only they weren't so blindly afraid of other ethnic people, Ruthe thought to herself as she tucked her corsage away in a cast off box and hid it to dry. They often heard sermons in church on witnessing to the lost; rescuing the perishing. Her parents enjoyed missionary reports as much as she did, so why did they work so hard to spend time with only their own relatives and kind? Why did they run down any English or foreign types they saw or heard of in town? What was there to fear?

Ruthe mulled on these questions and others, discussing them with her Companion until asleep, and again at six the next morning, as she sauntered through the vegetable garden, and across a dirt road into an unkempt willow bush and rough pasture on the edge of town. She sat on a fallen log and watched the sun rise higher. The twittering birds, the rustling leaves, the cool dew all refreshed her. The masses of moving colours in the eastern sky filled her with awe for the Creator. It was easy then to talk to the Lord and imagine His replies.

Because of an old hymn she had heard, she thought of these walks and talks as her trysts in the garden of prayer, with Jesus, her Friend. She hummed, not aloud, but in the back of her mind;

*"I come to the garden alone²
while the dew is still on the roses;
and the voice I hear, falling on my ear;
the Son of God discloses."*

Ruthe sighed with satisfaction. She was loved and understood by this unseen Friend. Forty-five minutes later she turned and headed back to the house, some of her questions unanswered, yet it didn't matter. She almost swung His hand as her mind sang the chorus:

*"And He walks with me,
and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known."*

Her parents and Suzanne tried to bother more information out of her that morning before Ruthe left for work in the city, but she felt she had survived the worst battle. She found she could suffer and weep and hold her tongue at the same time. Ruthe wasn't totally sure God approved of secrecy and deception, but He did seem to be helping her avoid the clash with her parents that could put an end to her extra life in the city. No doubt there would be other scenes, and one day they might find out about the strange people she was meeting in the world. That hung over her like an axe on a thin rope, and she hoped she would be sufficiently brave when that day came.

Everyone was busy when she got back in the evening, so she didn't have to tell them about stopping in at the O'Briens again.

Ruthe took another early Sunday morning walk. The glow of that was with her right through breakfast, and the usual dressing up for church hassle, and as she taught a class of eight primaries in Sunday School.

As Pastor Ewert preached in the worship service, Ruthe gained a new insight into a comforting passage she could share with bereaved sisters, perhaps after the funeral that afternoon.

Ruthe eased the family home after church and sped up the noon meal, ready in the roaster, so that she could get away in time for Pearl O'Brien's funeral without having to let on.

Handing her mother the apron after she had done most of the dishes by herself, Ruthe said quietly that she felt like a drive. "If I'm not back by faspá³ I've gone on to my evening shift."

For a moment she thought her mom would say something about how hard it was to lose a friend to death, or ask what to say to Grosz'mama if she didn't show up for their usual Sunday afternoon visit. Instead she warned Ruthe to eat

Ruthe's Secret Roses

properly on her supper-break, "and lock your doors while driving. Remember, you promised Grosz'mama and me that you'd never pick up a hitchhiker."

Promising again, Ruthe slipped out before her mother remembered more questions, and before Sharri could notice her absence. She was always begging to come along for a ride. Not that Ruthe liked to refuse her, but right now she was not sure how well little Sharon Rose could keep a secret.

She smiled at her sister's name. When this baby sister had arrived, Ruthe had just discovered another name for Jesus in the Bible, Rose of Sharon, so when her mother asked for a modern, instead of the usual Mennonite name, that had been her nomination. Her practical mother had changed it to Sharon Rose. Changing her diapers, Ruthe and Brandt had called her Sharri and it was still used.

Ruthe wasn't sure what this Catholic funeral would be like, but she did look forward to being with her new girlfriends. *Muriel is so sweet and seems to look up to me. While Cathy is almost a whole year younger than me, she seems older; 'cause she's sophisticated.* Ruthe felt quite naive compared to her. Both sisters needed her. That felt nice, though the responsibility weighed on her a bit. *Lord, help me to transfer their dependency to You, she prayed as she drove. To depend on humans is to ask for trouble.*

Ruthe befriends strangers and has intimate running conversations with God.

Ruthe's Secret Roses

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