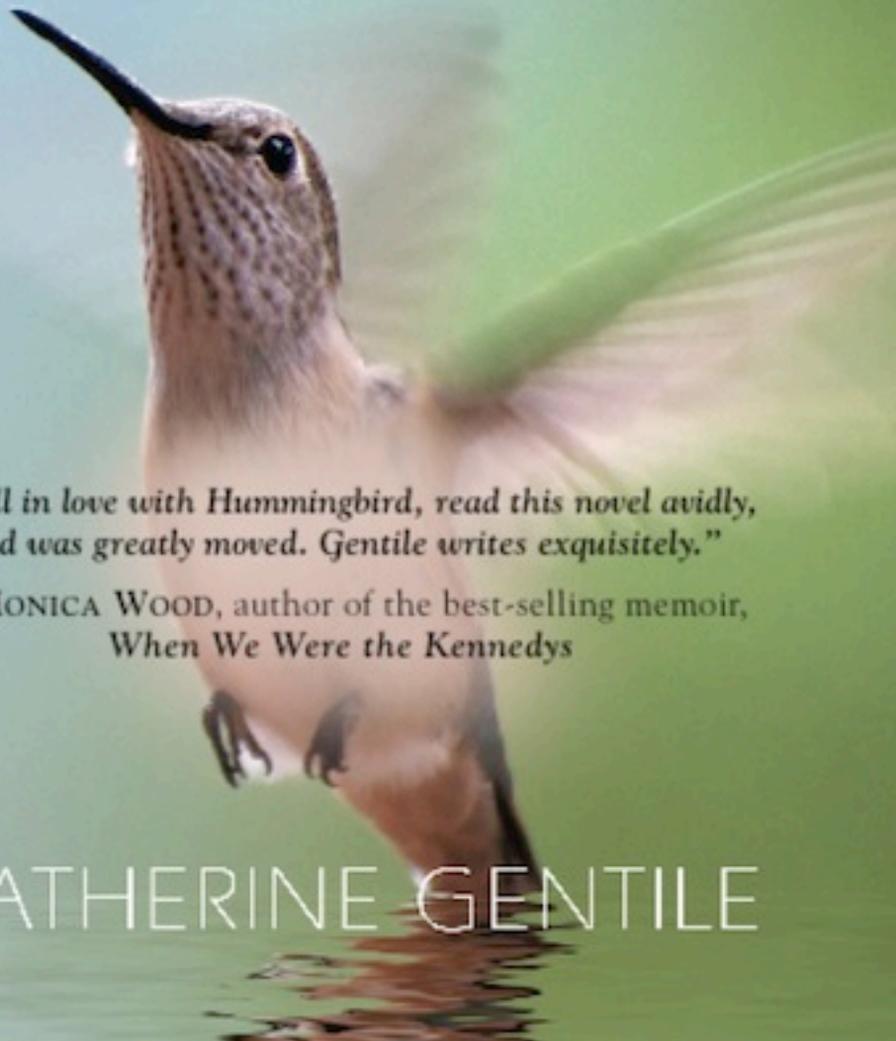


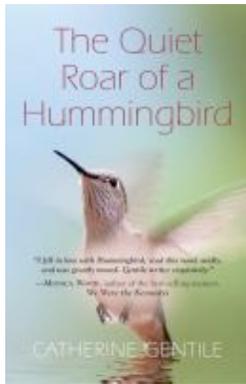
The Quiet Roar of a Hummingbird

A close-up photograph of a hummingbird in flight, hovering over a body of water. The bird's wings are blurred from motion, and its long, dark beak is pointed upwards. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting a natural outdoor setting. The bird's reflection is visible in the water below.

*"I fell in love with Hummingbird, read this novel avidly,
and was greatly moved. Gentile writes exquisitely."*

—MONICA WOOD, author of the best-selling memoir,
When We Were the Kennedys

CATHERINE GENTILE



Seventeen-year-old Hummingbird Windsor should have known that stealing glitzy clothing in exchange for protection from an ex-boyfriend/bully wasn't a smart move. In legal trouble, she is sent to live with her estranged father in Bellesport, Maine where she must volunteer in the locked memory care unit on which her grandmother has recently been placed. Tragedy ensues. Only when misplaced trust is overshadowed by unexpected friendship does Hummingbird experience the painfully won gain known as love.

The Quiet Roar of the Hummingbird

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Praise for *The Quiet Roar of a Hummingbird*

“I fell in love with *Hummingbird*, a generous, willful teenage narrator on a futile mission to rescue her grandmother from the ravages of Alzheimer’s. I read this debut novel avidly; I learned a lot about dementia; and I was greatly moved. Gentile writes exquisitely.”

- Monica Wood, author of *We Were the Kennedys*

The Quiet Roar of a Hummingbird is as compassionate as it is courageous. If we are what we remember, imagine that self in the throes of forgetting all that was. This is the story told by Catherine Gentile, though what compels isn’t so much its subject matter, but how she tells it with such grace and hope and conviction.

- Jack Driscoll, author of *The World a Few Minutes Ago*

“*The Quiet Roar of the Hummingbird* captures you on page one with a charmingly edgy protagonist: a young woman on the cusp of adulthood who is both gifted and needy. With intelligence and compassion, she challenges the rules in the memory care unit where her grandmother lives, its assumptions and strategies. Within the loving frame of relationship, the reader sees that world through two sets of eyes: one losing its hold on reality, the other approaching it with the freshness and intuitive skill of a loving grandchild. *Hummingbird*’s transformation is not the only one, for the story will teach you, make you question, and open your heart to a view of Alzheimer’s care that is grounded in compassionate listening; even when the only voice is silence.”

- Mary E. Plouffe Ph.D.

“I read this story with great interest because I am a Neuropsychiatrist and have been caring for many years for patients with Alzheimer's disease. In addition, for almost 10 years I have watched my father's slow decline at the hands of this terrible disease.

Hummingbird reminds us that Alzheimer's disease is not simply a condition that affects individuals; it affects the entire family. Throughout this story, Hummingbird remains steadfast in her efforts to maintain her grandmother's dignity in the nursing home. She reminds us to always strive to understand the meaning that underlies the behaviors of the Alzheimer's patient. This is a story that will appeal to many readers and it is certainly a must read for anyone whose family has been visited by the unwanted guest Hummingbird refers to as “Arlene Alzheimer.””

- Dr. John Campbell, Maine Medical Center

“Catherine Gentile grabbed me on the dedication page of *The Quiet Roar of Hummingbird* and never let me go. Her thoughtfulness in showing the frustrations of those living with Alzheimer's and their inability to have others listen to their new way of communicating will touch anyone who has cared for loved ones during their end of life struggles. Drawing parallels between Hummingbird's being bullied and her grandmother's descent into Alzheimer's, the author connects two generations to create a bond that helps each find a voice that will be heard. It is a caring portrayal of love, loss, holding on and letting go.”

- Lesley MacVane, Community Television Network

**THE QUIET ROAR OF A
HUMMINGBIRD**

A Novel

Catherine Gentile

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The Quiet Roar of a Hummingbird is a work of fiction. The characters, events, and settings in this book are creations of the author's imagination and are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, actual events, or locales is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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First Edition

Dedication

For Mom, who followed her heart
while dancing with
Alzheimer's

Chapter 1:

When I was at Granville High, where I'm supposed to be a senior, I got involved with a group of bad actors, fashionistas my age who called themselves "Blingers." At first, when they named me as their pet project, I went out of my way to get them to like me. I aced a series of initiation stunts that tested my loyalty and as my father, Jake, later observed, my intelligence. He didn't understand that I was intent on showing the Blingers how much they needed me. Truth was, I needed them and would have done backflips to get them to help me. Eventually, they reciprocated by doing important, lifesaving favors for me, which was exactly what I wanted. Problem was, if they did me a favor, I owed them one. That's where I went wrong. Get-into-trouble-with-the-police-wrong, which is why I had to stop going to Granville High. For a while at least. That's the story I tell myself as I roll onto my tiptoes and pull the overhead buzzer on a public bus in a Maine town I hardly know.

The bus lurches past Bellesport's morning traffic, flattening my feet to the riveted steel floor, forcing me to grab the seat handles to either side of the aisle. Thanks to my gymnastics training, my shoulders are thick and wide, and my hips, well, they don't exist. Despite leaving me with a little girl's physique, gymnastics taught me how to regain my balance after botching a routine and come out looking like a ballerina. As the bus driver pulls to the curb, I jam my arms through the straps of my backpack and wish those endless hours in the gym had taught me to stick a perfect landing whenever kids my age throw me off balance.

I bolster myself with hopes that the next eight weeks will be an adventure and pretend the taste in my mouth is sweet.

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“Goodbye old life,” I whisper, jumping from the last step of the bus to the hard ground. The chill wind skirting along the river whips a funnel of leaves around my ankles. I open my arms to embrace my new life. “I proclaim this, the second Monday in October, my official new birthday. Today, the Blingers of Granville High morph into a memory, a bad dream I’ll soon forget.”

The bus doors close with a groan as I silently review my birthday wishes: First, to prove to Jake and his new wife that though I got myself in a pile of really stupid trouble, I’m not about to become a repeat juvenile offender. And second, to find a real friend, someone who isn’t put off by a short seventeen-year-old girl who is brighter and more flat chested than most.

Suddenly, I feel something is missing. My hand shoots to my shoulder, where the strap to my waterproof camera bag, the black Wal-Mart’s special dubbed “freak wear” by the kids at school, usually rests. I panic. I’ve been so focused on getting off at the right stop that I left the digital camera my grandmother gave me on the bus.

“Wait! St-o-p!” I shout and wave and jump up and down, but the blue bus shoots into the lane farthest from me. Traffic spills from the nearby intersection, filling the space between the bus and me, drowning my voice and any possibility the driver will notice me trying to get his attention.

I imagine bolting into traffic, dodging cars and slapping hoods to alert texting drivers that I’m standing in the road. By the time the bus driver hears the commotion, startled commuters are rushing out of their cars toward a small heap. Eighty-five pounds of lifelessness. The high-pitched whine of the ambulance adds to the chaos ... *Get a grip*, a tough voice from inside me scolds, *it’s only a camera*.

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I scramble backwards toward a bench and leap onto it as though it was my old balance beam, stand on my tip-toes and crane to see the bus. My heart clutches, not from exertion, but from the feeling that I've lost my camera for good. I yank a notebook out from my jacket pocket and scribble the bus's license plate: *Maine. 701*, then add *Route 31*, the number below the red NO PARKING BUS STOP ONLY sign.

From alongside the rhododendron garden arching protectively by the bench, a low rolling movement catches my eye. "Lucky for you your eyesight is so good," a deep voice says.

I'm not inclined to chat it up with a stranger of the male variety, but I'm so upset I'd talk to the bench if I thought it would help. "I forgot my camera on that bus..." I pause to catch my breath. "I can't believe this. I'm usually super-organized, unless something's on my mind. Then, my thinking floats driftier than the Straw Man's before he's awarded his degree from the Wizard of Oz." The minute I mention the wizard, I roll my eyes; when will I stop pretending that my life is one giddy fantasy, complete with a happy Auntie Em ending?

Slouched in a wheelchair, is a kid my age, his black Hell's Angels jacket zipped against the wind, his shaved head sporting a tattoo, unlit cigarette, and a pained expression. "Wizard of Oz? You're kidding, right? Unless the wizard lent you his magic wand, I'd call the bus company, pronto. If you move fast enough, you'll get your camera back. I guarantee it."

"And who are you—the biker boy who's going to save me, is that your deal?" I imitate his cynical tone, then feel like a cretin for mocking him and his clothing, a super cheap move.

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It's unlike the "new" me to have an in-your-face conversation with a guy. I've stayed clear of the species since last spring when one of their kind landed me in a heap of trouble. I even refused to let my brother's best friend take me to my junior prom. No, thank you very much, I don't want to have anything to do with any male under the age of thirty-five, the age at which I might start to date again. Still, I'm happy this kid isn't intimidated by me and my recent vow not to dress, think, or act like others, especially the Blingers. If there's one thing I'll never do again, it's let myself morph into someone else's "ditto."

He slugs down a mouthful of his whale-sized Coolatta, then digs inside his jacket pocket. "Here, call this number." He waves the card upward but can't reach me, standing on the bench, nervously anchoring my unruly hair behind my ear with a rhinestone-studded hair comb. "This would be a lot easier if you came down to earth. A minute or two won't kill you."

"Sorry," I mumble as I step down and take his laminated card with the bus schedule for Route 31 and an easy-access phone number. "Do you always carry this? You must use the bus a lot."

"Not until I get my degree from the wizard in there," he nods back toward the three-story brick building with Highfield Health Center in tarnished letters above the entrance, "then I'm gonna ride what's left of my sorry bones all over Bellesport."

I glance at his limp sweatpants, folded and pinned at the base of two stumps that protrude from the edge of his wheelchair. Not wanting him to think I'm staring, I cut to his eyes. Deep blue, they shine with the defiant honesty that once stared back at me when I studied my face in the mirror. There's more to this guy than a leather jacket and a

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wheelchair, and I'm surprised to find I'm curious about him. "You look like you'll be boarding that bus before you know it." I consider how to say what I want to say next without offending him. "You've got problems, that's for sure. But my grandmother would grab yours over hers in a worm's wink."

"Worm's wink? Wizard of Oz? Where do you get that stuff?"

I point to the top floor. "From my grandmother and the magic she once wove into her language. It's my way of hanging on to what I know of her before..." My chest tightens as I look up at the Highfield building. "Do you think she can see me from up there?"

He wheels his chair around and squints into the sun. "Third floor, huh?" I nod. "I get it. Nothing's worse than Alzheimer's."

I let out a mournful little yip. I hate lumping my grandmother, Sukie, and that label into the same sentence. If circumstances hadn't forced me to explain to my probation officer that because my grandmother and others with Alzheimer's deserved good doctors, I was more determined than ever to become a geriatric physician, I may not have edged across that balance beam. I didn't have much of a relationship with my probation officer back then, so I censored the tidbits I offered about Sukie. Like I'm doing now.

I turn my notebook over and flip my cell phone open. Biker boy scrunches his eyes as he takes in my slim spiral notebook, attached with two-sided carpet tape to my billfold-like phone. "If you're going to tell me I can buy a Smart Phone, don't. That's old news. I don't have time to chase gadgets." Scary as he looks, I sound scarier, and he pulls back against his chair. I can hardly blame him for commenting on my rig; the few kids who hung around with me before I hooked up with the Blingers did, too. "My turn to apologize. I

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didn't mean to snap. It's just that I was supposed to visit my grandmother an hour ago and now I'm late. All because I'm stupid."

A thoughtful expression comes over the boy's face. "You're definitely out of sync, but I don't think you're stupid. Far from it."

Everything that has happened on my first full day in Bellesport has flustered me. This morning turned to a mad rush after my alarm didn't go off. Trying to do too many things at once, I spilled orange juice on my stepmother's expensive new skirt. Then, after leaving my camera on the bus, I meet a strange kid who hits me with the most sincere compliment I've ever received. "Thanks," I murmur, jabbing the bus company's number on my cell as seagulls screech overhead.

Leaves skitter across the sidewalk as I press star for an English-speaking human, then explain my situation to the woman who answers. "No, I don't have insurance. Yes, it's an expensive camera." I gulp a mouthful of crisp air. "It was the last gift my grandmother bought for me before she..." I pause while the woman expresses her condolences. My grandmother hasn't died, but the woman gets the idea. Loss is loss. "Thanks for understanding. Sure, you can reach me at this number."

The boy whirls his wheelchair aside. "Don't let me keep you. I'm all for visiting grandmothers; wish I had one of my own. By the way, I'm Elliot. Until the wizard grants me a pair of my own legs, I live one floor down from your grandmother."

I stick out my hand. "Abby Windsor, but call me Hummingbird, everyone does." I wait for a sarcastic remark about my name. But he doesn't make one.

Chapter 2:

Cargo-sized double doors at Highfield Health Center automatically open, urging me along. I enter the glassed-in foyer that protects patients and staff in the reception area from the elements. EMTs wheel a gurney topped with a shriveled woman wrapped papoose-like in a pink blanket. An elderly man whose eyeglasses are snuggled into his disheveled white hair sits on the sofa, leafing through a magazine. The hall display brightens the waiting area by the elevator. Artificial pumpkins, gourds, bunches of silky orange and yellow leaves aside a trio of grinning scarecrows have the same homey feel as the panorama in my old fourth-grade classroom and are just as childlike.

In the elevator, I press 3 for the Anne Fitzgerald Unit for the Memory Impaired, and seconds later, step out. No thoughtful display here. Only drab steel fire doors that open into the unit and outside them, a keypad. I key in the numbers I committed to memory: 953-148. A whistle sounds and the lock on the door releases with a piercing noise that makes seagulls' screeching sound like a lullaby. I follow the directions on the sign: *Help Keep Our Patients Safe - Be Sure to Close the Door* and wait until the door reconnects. The lock click-clicking into place sends a shiver through me.

I'm desperate to see my grandmother, but afraid of what I'll find. My parents were divorced when I was eight. Shortly after, my mother enrolled in graduate school and I spent every day from 2:30 on with Sukie, who lived on the saltwater farm across the street from my grade school. Once I entered Demming Middle School on the other side of Granville, I saw less and less of my grandmother. Gymnastics occupied my time along with photography club and tons of projects for my gifted and talented classes. When I finally finished my first-

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quarter exams, I made time to visit Sukie. Instead of asking for the latest news about my brothers and sister as she usually did, she kept asking what I loved best about school. *Was she trying to make me feel guilty for not having seen her in so long?* I dismissed this possibility—Sukie’s not like that. Flustered and more than a little frightened, I answered the same question over and over with, “I’m like you—math and science are my favorites.”

Soon Sukie, a devoted shopper, gave up her favorite pastime: going to the stores to buy surprises for me—the next book in the Harry Potter series, sunshine-bright cotton tops, or small notebooks like the one in which she copied a poem that started with *When I get old...* over and over on every page.

I venture down the hallway; on either side, large cookie-cutter bedrooms with lighting as gray as the meat locker in Benny’s Maine Market. Twin hospital beds are disguised with oak headboards, matching nightstands, and tall shoebox shaped armoires. Nothing like my grandmother’s room at home with her comfortable four-poster double bed and her and Pop-Pop’s bureau dotted with family photos, Pop-Pop’s keys, and the lustrous pearl earrings Sukie would fasten onto my ears so I could see how beautiful I’d look when I grew up.

I pad along the tweedy carpeting. Eyes lost in pale faces, those of wives, mothers, grandmothers, and the occasional grandfather follow me, a sturdy young novelty.

Dressed in practical wash-and-wear-style clothing that you see at Wal-Mart, the gray-haired residents look sadly alike: women in elastic-waist slacks and tops bleached of sparkle; the men favor rumpled khakis and t-shirts with the faded lettering, *L.L. Bean*, over their hearts. Occasionally, the collar of a button-down long-sleeved shirt peeks from the top of a cardigan or two.

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Some folks shuffle along the outer edges of the hallway, their shaky hands fondling banisters that run waist-high along the walls. Others dodder within the safety of adult strollers—large versions of the one I waddled in before my legs grew strong enough to hold me. The third and sickest group sags into the contours of molded wheelchairs. Members of the smallest clique stand on their own, their proud faces distinguishing them as geriatric eagles among broken sparrows.

My grandmother stands by the nurses' station, wearing an oversized plaid bathrobe she wouldn't buy if it were the last robe on the planet. Had my stepmother, Solange, been here, she'd have scurried to Sukie's room to find her a change of clothing. Two weeks earlier, instead of accompanying Sukie to the admitting unit himself, Jake had talked Solange and Aunt Elizabeth into bringing Sukie to her "new home." The smiley Admissions Director greeted Sukie, then hustled her off to meet some ladies—a lie that still makes me furious. Meanwhile, Solange and Aunt Elizabeth hurried to the car before Sukie, thrilled at the possibility of making new friends, thought to ask where they'd disappeared.

Seeing Sukie being hustled off was as gut wrenching as watching Jake drive away late Christmas Eve ten years ago, never to return. Aunt Elizabeth, who'd been caring for Sukie after Pop-Pop died, said stepping inside the locked doors of the Anne Fitzgerald Unit was the same as being sentenced to life in prison. I'll never break the law again.

Thank goodness the Juvenile Community Corrections Officer and my school counselor agreed I wasn't your run-of-the-mill punk juvenile offender. Last April, after putting me through a battery of tests, the officer said I was basically a good kid who'd made a desperately wrong decision, and therefore wasn't a risk. My parents and I met with the officer.

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Together we decided that I should bundle the Senior Service Learning Project required by Granville High and the restitution work I agreed to do at Highfield Health Center. To make up for the classes I'd miss, I enrolled in summer school, where I aced my English, Trigonometry, and American History courses. To make up for the class time I'm missing this semester, I agreed to complete extra assignments so I could graduate with my class. Of these, a project log with an accompanying report is the most important.

I started that log with a prediction of what this, my first visit since Sukie's admission, would be like, describing it from nerve-wracking to a flood of weepy accusations to a hugfest reunion. I imagined Sukie in her usual skirt, sweater, and pearl earrings with her white hair combed into the short "good looking" style she loved, one large wave across her broad, smooth-skinned forehead. In short, my grandmother would be as beautiful as ever.

If not for her dazed smile, I would think she's fascinated by all the activity behind the nurses' station. Between the man's bathrobe, those fuzzy slippers, and the crumpled handkerchief she dabs her nose with, she looks as though she'd shopped at the local thrift store. The possibility that she's no longer interested in her appearance makes me worry that she's changing for the worse. That she's becoming like the others on this unit. A weight like a lead apron wraps itself around my heart. *Alzheimer's steals you, one piece at a time, until - No!* My insides rumble. *Sukie isn't sick like the others.* I tell myself that she's stronger than they are. That this isn't the beginning of losing the one person in this world who really loves me.

"You must be Abigail," a voice from behind me says. I turn toward a woman with the nametag *Corki Goodale, Social Worker* pinned to her way too low-cut blouse. Her big henna

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hair corkscrews around her large square features, blue eyes, and bubbly cheerleader's enthusiasm.

Relieved to hear my name, I return her white-bright smile. "Hummingbird, call me Hummingbird—that's my grandmother's nickname for me."

"I can see why. Your grandmother's been asking for you," she bumbles without taking a breath.

"I knew she would." I gobble this satisfying morsel, thrilled and proud that this part of Sukie's memory hasn't changed. "I should have come sooner."

"If it makes you feel any better, she's been asking for Solange, too. And she's here at least once a week."

Happy that Solange visits regularly, my shoulders sag with disappointment over yet another example of Sukie's declining memory. But Corki is nonchalant, as though a failing memory is standard news, and gently leads me toward my grandmother.

"Someone's here to see you," she says in her chirpy voice. "Do you know this young lady?"

"I can see, it's my granddaughter," she says, as though Corki's reminder is completely uncalled for. Sukie opens her arms for the hug she has always given me; the one I've been longing for.

"Your grandmother has been complaining of a runny nose. She has a history of allergies, so the nurse gave her a Claritin about fifteen minutes ago along with her afternoon dosage of Depakote. As soon as it kicks in she'll feel less congested," Corki says confidently, seating herself behind the half-wall of the nurses' station.

"My grandmother's allergies always act up in the fall. Claritin is what she took at home." I'm not sure what "Depakote" is and I forget to ask.

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I slip my arm in Sukie's and we stroll down the hallway toward her room, number 311. "And how is my Hummingbird?"

"I'm glad to see you. How's my Sukie?"

She studies a cart packed with cups, syringes, hygienic alcohol swabs, and medication charts. "I never thought I'd land in a place like this. But here I am. It'll be good, you wait and see. It's like I tell you, you've got to make the best of today—"

"—because it's the only one you'll have." We giggle and as we do, my shoulders relax.

"So you remember," says Sukie. Her gray eyes soften.

"Well, sometimes I forget things..." *my camera bag for one*, "...but I remember most everything you've told me."

Sukie taps the frame of her glasses, as she always does when she's trying to shake her memory free. "Something awful must have happened to me, or I wouldn't be here," she says. She stops in front of room 311, doesn't recognize it as hers.

From down the hall, someone shrieks once, twice, again. Expecting one of the nurses to run from the station to see who is hurt, I watch. No one comes. Sukie's perplexed expression disappears. In its place, the all-knowing look that comforted me whenever I'd scraped my knees. She takes my hand in her firmest, most "in-charge" grasp and marches toward the noise.

A boy without legs, old people without expressions, an overly cheery social worker, shrieking from the corner room—Sukie and I have landed in a B-rated horror movie. The bizarre sound coming from down the hallway reminds me of the audio version of *The Cask of Amontillado* and it scares me. "What is that?" I ask, straining to filter the distress from my voice.

But Sukie is unperturbed, her face calm. Her eyes brighten with intention just as they had when she owned All

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Occasion Custom Dress Designs. “Come with me, Hummingbird. I want you to meet someone.”

Before I know it, Sukie slips away and disappears into the corner room. I hurry after her. By the time I enter, the screeching has stopped.

A crocheted bedspread lies in a heap on the floor between twin beds. A woman with the kind of hacked haircut I once gave my sister’s Barbie doll stands on the spread, holding Sukie’s hands. The woman’s jaw hangs open as she gazes into Sukie’s gentle face.

Sukie catches sight of me, her face brightening as though this were the first time she’d seen me today. “Oh, hello, Hummingbird, I’m so glad you’re here. I want you to meet my friend.”

The toothless woman faces me. I gasp. I’ve never seen anything quite like her. Her thread of a body supports a baggy jersey and slacks that leave her looking like a scarecrow.

“Hazel, this is my granddaughter. Isn’t she beautiful?” Unaware of the hideousness of the picture she and Hazel cast in the grimy light, Sukie beams.

I understand. She wants me to see she has a friend and for a wild moment I long for someone with exactly the kind of acceptance they share. Someone who doesn’t roll her eyes when I make a weird, know-it-all kind of comment. Someone who will look beyond my geekiness and like me for who I am. This is what Sukie craved during the months after Pop-Pop died but could never find the words to tell us.

The setting sun adds an unwelcome chill to Sukie, nestling into Alzheimer’s “now,” and Hazel, fading into Alzheimer’s “later.” They form a living time line like the ones in my history book, except this is real time in a surreal place. Blue-black shadows inch their way up the wall and close in.

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The poorly lit corridors feel like tunnels inside a cage that keep getting smaller and smaller. Warm brown smells like those in the school cafeteria waft from the steel meal cart being rolled toward the dining room. Sukie and Hazel will probably have meatloaf and gravy, mashed potatoes and overcooked string beans, a wilted salad, tea (decaf, please) and apple crisp. The smells nauseate me but don't seem to bother my grandmother or Hazel.

Sukie chatters in delighted girlish tones, telling me that Hazel can't talk. "She makes sounds like a crow. Hear her? Do you? She has no one, no friends, no family. We have to take care of her, Hummingbird. Promise?" She is talking non-stop just as she did when she lived with Pop-Pop. "Sundowning" was what her geriatric psychiatrist called it. A late afternoon phenomenon. Fear of not knowing what will happen next. I know how my grandmother feels.

Beneath my fear, a mounting anger, one that appears each time I talk myself into believing Jake will do what he says. Last night—the first I spent with him since he and Mom had divorced—he promised to call the supervisor and remind her to have alarm mats placed on both sides of Sukie's bed. Today as I stood outside her room, I checked, a quick peek: not a mat in sight. What's the matter with him anyway? I reminded him about Great Aunt Patty's accident. Between her stroke, the unfamiliar surroundings of the rehab unit, too much medication, and an urge to use the toilet, she got out of her bed and fell. Broke both her wrists.

How could he forget? Just last night, after we talked about Aunt Patty, I overheard him on the phone with Aunt Elizabeth. "Mother's safety is at the top of my to-do list." He doesn't get that Sukie's safety begins with him taking the time to make sure she gets what she needs. Same goes for me. He didn't get how much I needed him when I was younger.

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“You’re going to the dining room to have dinner now,” I tell Sukie, pointing to the sign for the dining room, hoping this prediction will ease her worries and slow her chatter. Holding hands with my grandmother, who holds hands with Hazel, we pad down the corridor to the nurses’ station. No one is there. Not a staff person or patient in sight. No one had come to get Sukie or Hazel for dinner. What would have happened if I hadn’t been here? I look at the clock; it’s late, if I don’t hurry, I’ll miss my bus. But I can’t leave them here alone. I feel as nervous as the night I pressed my nose against cold-numbing glass to watch Dad’s taillights dim. Christmas Eve, the night he left my mother for good. The night of a very significant birthday. Also mine.

Sukie tugs my hand. “Hazel and I are hungry. When are we going to eat?”

Glancing at the clock, I kiss her cheek. “We’re on our way to the dining room. You’ll have your dinner in a few minutes.”

“Will you take a picture of Hazel and me together?”

I blink in surprise. *Sukie knows?* “I’m afraid I don’t have my camera with me.”

We round the corner into the dining room and, thankfully, Sukie forgets. The eagles, who are feeding themselves, distract her. Others eat while aides open their milk cartons or sweeten their tea. The sparrows sit beneath huge white bibs, opening their wrinkled little mouths to spoonfuls of pureed food. Suddenly, Sukie drops my hand, leads Hazel to a seat, then seats herself. As soon as the aide places Sukie’s tray in front of her, she starts eating. I wave from the doorway. She doesn’t look up.

Chapter 3:

Jake's house sits on the highest point in Bellesport on Madison Hill Road, overshadowing normal-sized homes, Cape Cod houses snuggled like worn Monopoly pieces on small square lots below. Yesterday, when my mother dropped me off alongside the oversized brick home she'd been telling me about, I was blown away. Head tilted back, I gaped; the house was just like Jake: imposing and unaware of the effect it had on surrounding homes. As my mother's Saab roared off, Jake joined me in the dusky light. He didn't ask about my mother, or me, for that matter, although as we stood on the back patio, my laptop and duffel bags at our feet, he gave me a stingy hug.

He pointed to the house, as if this was what I came to see, and launched into a lecture about the craftsmanship of the masons "who fashioned this remarkable piece of early twentieth century architecture, soon to be featured in *Architectural Digest*." I oohed and aahed, as my mother had coached, listening politely while twisting a paper clip into knots. Jake went on about the exacting calibrations required for the arches, the carved precision of the lintels, the mathematical artistry of the tiled ballroom-sized porch gracing the front entry, and the copper-covered turret, now undergoing restoration. Amazing. So like him. I marveled at his ability to wax eloquent about the standards necessary to create his caliber of excellence. Never did he blush with embarrassment—the man could have been describing the child-rearing philosophy he'd practiced on my sister and brothers and me.

"Standards. Without them, buildings and people crumble," he said, looking down over his glasses at me, referring more to his theory of why I landed in trouble than to his house. I got the message but refused to say as much.

THE QUIET ROAR OF A HUMMINGBIRD

We hadn't seen one another since he and my mother and I appeared before the Juvenile Community Corrections Officer, and first thing out of the starting gate, he laid this on me. Unfortunately, Jake's standards are as two-faced as the masonry he so admires. And though his carotid artery didn't pulse furiously, as it did when we were with the officer, he was still plenty angry—my arrest made it clear that the mortar holding his stony standards in place was more watered down than he cared to admit.

As I walk along the side of the house, a gust of wind startles me. It reminds me of Jake, who, when we lived under the same roof like a real family—two parents, five kids, a cat, two dogs, and a hamster—snapped at my sister and brothers and me whenever we failed to meet his precious standards. I yank my hand from the cold brick and jump, but not as far as I'd jumped from Jake when he broke up my wonderful squabbling family.

Ordinarily, my mother kept her opinions regarding Jake to herself, but when she learned that he'd bought the old MacMullen place she made her displeasure known. Claiming she didn't understand why he'd lashed himself to a house in need of repair, she glanced forlornly at her extra-large sweatpants. "He left me when I started to need restoration," she said, "claimed he needed his freedom. But tell me, since when is being saddled with old real estate freeing?" The bitterness in her voice told me I'd failed big-time. The youngest of five kids, I was the baby who was supposed to rekindle the spark that had brought my parents together in the first place. Instead, I drove them to divorce.

"Fight back," I suggested to my mother. "Get out of this dumpy sub-division and buy something neat. Show him you don't want his leftovers."

CATHERINE GENTILE

My mother disagreed. “Your father always wanted to build a contemporary. What’s come over him?”

Solange came over him, that’s what. Fifteen years younger and beauty-pageant-queen pretty. I teasingly quoted my English teacher to my mother: “...subtexts are the charged undercurrents crackling beneath the story’s surface.” My mother insisted she was referring to the old house in Bellesport, but the electricity in her voice crackled like subtext through and through.

My thoughts vibrate with my own subtexts, those having to do with Sukie’s alarm mats. Later this evening, I plan to ask Jake what had happened to insuring Sukie’s safety. If it really was “no big deal, eminently doable” as he claimed, then why hadn’t he called Highfield? If Sukie had been his client, he would have scrutinized the most obscure details. Unfortunately, she was family and when it came to family, details were a nuisance.

If my experience as the youngest kid who could count on not receiving a birthday card from him rang true, then Sukie, the oldest member of our family, was up to her pearl earrings in trouble. Undemanding bookends of the Windsor clan, Sukie and I were easy to ignore. Until we both got into trouble.

I cross the patio and let myself into the mudroom. His and her rain slickers, matching olive green Wellingtons, and a case of empty wine bottles line the back wall. No catchers’ mitts, sweaty baseball caps, flat bicycle tires, muddy sneakers, coffee cans filled with worms for tomorrow’s fishing trip; this is strictly an adult zone. I unlock the door to the kitchen and flick the light switch on. Instinctively, I feel my shoulder for my camera bag—it’s the first thing I remove when I get home from school—and remember this morning’s bus ride. The woman at the bus company hadn’t called back. The image of Sukie and the friend she’d adopted flash in my brain, a photo

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from hell. It had been a terrible day. My mother was right—coming here was a mistake.

Just then Solange bursts through the kitchen door, taps it shut with her heel, and practically plows into me. She's pulled her hair, tinted a take-me-serious shade of walnut, back from her angular face into a sophisticated knot that makes her look harsh. I'm learning she is all but. She has a sense of humor about her professional appearance, and giggles when she describes it as "a tad scary." I understand. Kind of.

"Sorry, hon. Did I hurt you? Are you okay?" She pops a kiss on my forehead as I shake my head, no, then yes. "Remind me to tell Jake that Sarah Burns called. She and Bill can't make it tonight for drinks, which means the three of us will have the evening to ourselves."

I was about to have myself a good cry, but I'll have to save it for later. I blow my nose loudly into one of Sukie's embroidered handkerchiefs.

"I have a surprise for Jake." She plops a brown paper bag on the countertop, starts to open it, then stops. "I nearly forgot—how was your day? Have you been home long?" Solange studies my now filmy eyes. "You're not catching a cold are you? Everyone's sick—something nasty is going around."

"Allergies," I fib. "There are tons of allergens in the air at this time of year."

"Allergens? Where'd you learn about them, young lady?" I'm about to explain that a plump vocab is the legacy of being the baby in a family of adult over-achievers when she says, "I'm so happy that you're going ahead with your plan to apply for early acceptance in the pre-med program at Tufts. Jake says you're the smartest of his kids."

As if on cue, Jake enters with a wide swing of the door and an upbeat, "Hey, babe." For a hopeful second during

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which I remember him coming home from work and saying that to me, I assume he's talking to me. I glow with pleasure, lean toward him for his kiss, then pull back as Solange presses herself into his arms. Whew! That was close.

"Either you missed me something fierce or..." he eases her to arm's length. "No, something else has happened. Tell me."

If Solange had been a puppy, she'd wag her tail a thousand beats per minute. "After drowning the docs on Market Street in drug samples," she says, "they finally decided Healthbens, Inc. is *the* up-and-coming pharmaceutical company." Solange draws her smile into her dimpled cheeks. "So they handed me an enormous order. One that jumps me into the top sales position for my district." She disengages from his arms and spins around in front of him. Kinda like I used to.

I frown. Solange has hijacked the little girl routine I imagined returning to once Jake and I lived under the same roof again. Surprising as it is, *I* want to be in his arms, telling him all about *my* day, about how upsetting it was to see Sukie locked behind steel doors.

But something else niggles at me. A few years back, Jake won a wrongful death suit against one of the big pharmaceuticals. I'd watched him on television as he led the call for tighter federal regulation of drug companies. Years later, after collecting his share of what the *Granville Daily Reporter* referred to as "an obscene contingency fee," he married one of big pharma's top sellers. How does that fit into his standards? Or is consistency a part of excellence only when it's convenient?

He rolls his eyes in playful exasperation. "Great. My wife's abetting the civilized drug culture."

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Solange stirs the air as she whisks past me. With a noisy crinkle, she plunges her hand into the bag on the counter and produces a plastic bag stuffed with gossamer shelled crustaceans. “I bought shrimp. Enough for the three of us.”

My hand goes to my stomach. Last summer after eating shrimp, I broke out in hives. The emergency room doctor suggested I stay away from shellfish until I’d been tested for shellfish allergies. But I’d been so busy completing the summer school credits I needed that I’d never gone to my doctor. If I break out in hives, I won’t be able to start my Community Service Program tomorrow. And I’ll have to go home to my doctor in Granville to get a written “all clear” order. This is mega-serious; I can’t let anything interfere with my court-ordered program. If Solange’s shrimp don’t give me hives, this panic-attack-in-the-making will surely bring them on.

“Solange...” I start to explain, but she’s digging in the back of the refrigerator.

“Let’s not forget our champagne and the apple cider I bought for Hummingbird,” she says, closing the refrigerator door with her bum.

Jake hands me his suit jacket, same as he used to do with my mother. “Hang it in the closet, would you?” When I return, Solange dumps her brown alpaca coat into my arms and murmurs, “Thanks, hon,” kisses my cheek, and begins peeling the foil from the cork. *I’m on my way to becoming a doorman.*

Solange aims the champagne bottle toward the far wall and wiggles the cork back and forth. Absorbed by her task, she furrows her brow and purses her lips. “You showed me how to do this, but you didn’t tell me how stubborn a cork could be.”

Jake runs cold water over the shrimp, smiling like I’ve never seen him smile. I can’t blame him for being thrilled, happy, and bust-his-Brooks-Brothers’-buttons-ridiculous. But

CATHERINE GENTILE

I wish he'd fooled around like that when he was home with Mom. He was always serious. And annoyed with Mom for depositing me in his lap.

The clock on the stove reads seven—Sukie is probably brushing her teeth, getting ready to go to bed without the alarms she needs to keep her safe. I hang Solange's coat in the closet. If I mention Sukie now, Solange will want to know what's going on. If she knew Sukie was in danger, she'd hop all over Jake until he did what he promised. She might even get mad at him. They'd have a fight. And that would ruin her celebration.

If I could get Jake alone and quietly mention the problem, he could make a quick call to Highfield and remind the night staff to put the alarm mats by Sukie's bedside. I peek around the corner into the kitchen. "Hello?" I call, signaling him to join me in the hallway. But he's running the water full blast, letting it splash all over the wall while he eyes Solange wrestling with the champagne cork.

"Here, let me help with that," he says, drying his hands on a dishtowel and moving to Solange's side.

"Afraid I might shatter the window, are we?" They share a look—his, knowing; hers, impish—that says that's exactly what she'd done. He rocks the cork back and forth, slowly, and ever so gingerly. I can't wait any longer.

"Hold on a sec. I need to tell you something."

Jake raises his left eyebrow, a disapproving gesture of maximum proportions. "Is this related to what we're celebrating *right this minute?*"

"I have to talk to you. It's important." I sound frightfully serious, as serious as the day he'd brought me to meet with the Juvenile Community Corrections Officer. That alone should draw his attention from Solange, who is now in the dining room, getting champagne glasses from the cabinet.

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Mom warned me my father wouldn't take kindly to my interfering with his new life. That he isn't beyond sending me back. If that happens, my Service Learning Project at Highfield will be history. There'd be no substitutions; the program is so competitive that by now every Service Learning site in Granville has been filled. Taken. I'd have nowhere to go to earn the last credits I need to graduate from high school and to fulfill the agreement I made with the Juvenile Community Corrections Officer.

Because this was my first offense, and because I admitted to breaking and entering along with theft, the Juvenile Corrections Officer agreed to divert my case and treat me as a "Youthful Offender." It was the break I needed. *If* I fulfill the terms of what he calls my IAP—Informal Adjustment Program—"that means cross every last 't' and you know what to do with the dots," is the way the Corrections Officer put it—my offenses would be treated as though they'd never happened. Gone. Therein was the rub.

When I asked Jake if I could live with him, I explained I planned to target two very important birds—the Community Service hours I owed the court and the Service Learning Project required for graduation—with one huge stone. A boulder is more like it. My having presented him with "carefully considered goals" and an "action plan"—double-spaced, Times New Roman—showing the steps I intended to take to achieve those goals was better than his being crowned King. "An exceptional plan, exactly the quality I expect from someone of your ability," he said.

Problem is, receiving credit for my Community Service hours is tied to completing my Service Learning hours: if I don't fulfill one, I'll earn an incomplete for the other, and my plan to go to Tufts will dissolve. So, I need to live here in peace. That means I can't upset Jake.

CATHERINE GENTILE

To my surprise, he senses that something is wrong. He wraps his arms around me and whispers, "Listen, Solange worked long hours so she could land this contract. It's huge for her. Go along with her celebration for tonight, okay? We'll have lots of time to catch up later, I promise." As he squeezes me and pecks my cheek, I suspect he's being his manipulative old self until he says, "I'm glad you're here, Birdie."

Too shocked to say anything else, I murmur, "Me, too."

Birdie. Jake calling me his pet name eases the panic rising inside me. It had been two weeks since Sukie was admitted to Highfield and during that time she'd not had one accident. So why worry? The little voice inside me sounds an alarm. *Terrible, horrific idea*, it screams. But I'm not one to listen.

"Do you mind if I fry a couple of eggs for myself? I love shrimp, but it doesn't love me. I'm allergic to shellfish," I fib.

Jake gazes down his long nose, assessing the truthfulness of my story. "I've been trained to detect lies," he once told me when he'd caught me doing just that. Satisfied that I'm not engaged in a plot to sabotage Solange's dinner, he takes a second frying pan from the overhead rack and motions for me to use the first pan, the one with sizzling butter.

"Oh, if I'd known that, I'd have bought steaks," Solange says as she takes two eggs from the refrigerator door and hands them to me.

"It's okay," I say. Being alone with newlyweds is exhausting. All I want to do is go upstairs to "my" room. With one thwack, I crack one of the eggs in half and watch the albumin-surrounded yolk slither down the side of the frying pan.

"How about some toast to go with your eggs?" Solange asks.

The atmosphere in the kitchen takes a sober turn. Jake's gaiety gone, the circles under his eyes seem darker, more

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pronounced. Solange's hair is undone in limp walnut tangles that she tucks behind her ears. What little appetite I had has disappeared. The last thing I want is a mouthful of dry toast.

"Thanks, that'd be great." *That might be what the perfect guest would say, but what about the perfect daughter?*

Upstairs, alone after dinner in the guest suite, I sit at the library table in the bedroom and record my impressions of the day's events. I draw a huge zero. I think back to my grandmother in that horrid old bathrobe, not caring a hoot about anything except her new friend. If Sukie had been here sitting beside me as she used to do while I worked on my homework, she would ask, "What has gone right today?"

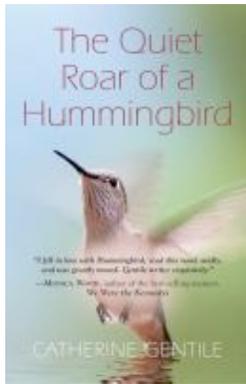
The sheer curtains dotted with flocked hummingbirds—one of Solange's sweet but silly welcoming touches—are reminders that someone besides Sukie is trying to comfort me. That's what Sukie would have pointed out. If she could befriend Hazel, shouldn't I do the same with Solange, the woman who makes my father's eyes shine? My heart tells me one thing, my head another.

I open my journal on my laptop and type: What went right today? First, I learned that the staff at Highfield is too busy with ailing patients to spend time with someone as independent as Sukie. That's important to know and understand. Second, even though both towns are in Maine, I don't know my way around Bellesport as well as I know Granville, where I can get around blindfolded. I'm new here, and it will take time before I feel comfortable. The same applies to my father.

I hope coming here doesn't turn out to be another of my famously bad decisions.

CATHERINE GENTILE

I glance at the computer screen and in a burst of typing confess: MY FATHER AND I ARE STRANGERS. I wonder if he knows.



Seventeen-year-old Hummingbird Windsor should have known that stealing glitzy clothing in exchange for protection from an ex-boyfriend/bully wasn't a smart move. In legal trouble, she is sent to live with her estranged father in Bellesport, Maine where she must volunteer in the locked memory care unit on which her grandmother has recently been placed. Tragedy ensues. Only when misplaced trust is overshadowed by unexpected friendship does Hummingbird experience the painfully won gain known as love.

The Quiet Roar of the Hummingbird

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