

JENNIFER HAS A SMATTERING OF FRECKLES across the bridge of her nose. They appear to have been carefully dotted on with eyeliner pencil. They are that perfect and that symmetrical. It's tempting to count them but I don't. Jennifer's in a crabby mood. Counting freckles would be silly. We're sitting at the end of the dock. Jennifer is supposedly fishing while I'm just dangling my feet. It's almost dusk. The cottage behind us is ablaze with light. The voices and laughter of three generations of family drift our way. For the past two weeks we've managed to accommodate five adults and seven children in this ramshackle refuge. Close quarters but so far minimal family squabbling and angst—with the exception of this little moppet at my side. Her personal demons touch everyone.

"You're scaring the fish away with your feet in the water."

The snippy accusation would offend if there were an element of truth to it. No one ever catches a fish off this dock. "My sincere apologies. I didn't think you were doing any serious fishing. You haven't cast your line for about ten minutes."

"I'm dangling my line. They're gonna have to come to me."

"You'd have better luck casting." I remove my feet from the water. Clutching my knees to my chest, I turn and observe Jennifer. Her dark curls are plastered to her forehead and neck. The heat of this wicked summer day hasn't let up. With a stubborn tilt to her chin, she's staring across the lake.

She finally glances my way. Looking me straight in the eye, defying me to contradict her, she states for the umpteenth time this summer, "My parents are getting back together. Any day now." Jennifer is my niece and she is eight years old. I believe her when she says this. No one else in her world does. "It's gonna happen, Aunt Kate. Don't worry. Mom and Dad will be okay," Jennifer insists.

I'm not worried about them. I know for a fact that they aren't getting back together. Ever. Perhaps I should worry about Jennifer's belief in a fairy-tale ending to a bitter separation, but I don't. And I'm not about to disabuse her of this comforting notion either. Everybody else is trying to get her to face reality. Right now, the reality in Jennifer world sucks—a favourite word in her vocabulary these days.

I've been in Jennifer's world. Years ago I came across some lines in Robert Penn Warren's novel *Meet Me in the Green Glen*. They were written for Jennifer and me: "The dream is a lie. The dreaming is true."

The dreaming is keeping her sane right now. Never mind that the actual

dream will never become a reality. Jennifer is in denial, as I once was. Denial got me through a stage in my life that would otherwise have been unbearable for a child. I think it's going to get Jennifer through this one.

"I'm not worried, Jennifer. What will be, will be."

She snorts at my vague reply. Jennifer never pushes me for outright reassurance. Something inside that busy little brain warns her not to. I have never lied to Jennifer. I just listen. I wish I could have shared my dream with someone when I was a child.

At age twenty-one I read Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's book *On Death and Dying*. The recognition factor kicked in with a snort of cynical, sad laughter. Denial stage? Hey, you want a great example of denial? I can give you one—in spades. Try this: ten years old and a kid reconstructs the events surrounding her father's death. Revisionist history. No way did he have a heart attack. No way did that ambulance take away his lifeless body. My father had staged the whole scenario just to make a getaway. He was that inventive, that good. Every detail was down pat to look like he'd died. He'd be back. Or he'd call. It was just a matter of time.

And it was a matter of time. Months later I had accepted the fact my father was never coming back. It was that or go crazy trying to figure out why he'd had to leave. (Something I'd said? Something I'd done? It was all so personal. The world revolved around me.) If I wanted to remember my father as the loving person he was I had to finally acknowledge that only death could have made him leave us.

Jennifer swishes her rod back and forth in the lake with one hand and picks an ugly-looking scab on her left knee with the other.

"That is truly gross. You're going to end up with a scar. Why do you do that?"

"Because I can," comes her muffled reply. Jennifer needs time. She cannot comprehend the adult world of choices, mistakes made—and the scariest one of all—love going away. Her mistaken but so strongly held belief that her father will return, that the family will be normal again, is holding her world together. When the walls of that support system do come tumbling down, it will be because Jennifer is damn good and ready. She'll blow it sky high on her own. An older, wiser and slightly damaged Jennifer will build a new support system.

"Quit picking the scab and give me your right foot. I'm dying to get at that sliver in your big toe."

"You need tweezers."

"I grew my nails this week." I hold up my ringless fingers with the partially grown nails as proof. "Let me try."

Big sigh. She wriggles her bottom, shifts sideways and lies down on the dock. Her dusty and still chubby little foot lands in my lap. There's a hint of girlish ankle about to emerge. The fishing rod is put aside. "This little piggy went to market . . ." "Hey!"

Giggles. The kid is very ticklish. "The sliver was just an excuse. It felt like tickle time." Her leg is now vertical, foot waving in the air. I catch a glimpse of a tear in the butt of her black, spandex shorts. She's lived in these shorts this summer. My sister or I grab them for a quick wash when Jennifer's in a bathing suit. "Okay, okay," I holler while dodging the airborne leg. "No more tickling. Gimme back the foot."

"Pinky swear."

We lock pinkies. I manage to pull out a minuscule piece of the sliver. A tiny drop of blood appears. Jennifer doesn't flinch. "Did that hurt?"

"Not yet, but it will."

"If it hurts, I'll stop."

Still lying face up on the dock, Jennifer lifts the fishing rod over her head and drags it blindly back and forth in the lake. "So now, when you're lying down and can't do a darn thing about it, the biggest fish in the lake is going to go for your lure," I comment.

"Or maybe the snapping turtle will go for it." This is said with a combination of horrified anticipation and delight. The kids are all terrified of the snapping turtle. Every summer the stories get wilder and more far-fetched as to whom the turtle attacked and what bodily parts were snapped off.

"He could do a real number on your sliver."

"What makes you think it's a he?"

"I don't know. I guess I just don't consider females being capable of vicious attacks."

"Oh, yes they are, Aunt Kate. Mother bears will tear you to pieces if you go near their baby cubs."

"Yeah, okay, so they have a good reason."

"Male animals have their reasons, too."

"I guess."

We are not going to travel down this path. Males who use their fists is not a topic Jennifer is prepared to pursue. She removes the fishing pole from the lake. Not taking any chances with that turtle either. She begins to hum the tune from a Backstreet Boys song. Evening rehearsals—including lip sync and all the right moves—have been going on for the past few evenings in preparation for "A

Concert by the Cousins.” This will be presented for the adults’ viewing and listening pleasure on Saturday night. “Do you know all the words yet?”

“Almost. Kevin promised he’d help me tomorrow.”

Kevin is her thirteen-year-old cousin. When not fishing, swimming or off on her own, Jennifer has been his little shadow. Last summer he would have given her the finger. This summer his patience makes me want to weep. Jennifer is staring across the lake again. The rhythm of her steady breathing is visible in the up and down motion of her protruding belly. There’s a good six inches of tummy showing between the bottom of her purple tank top and the waistband of those spandex shorts. I envy the childhood oblivion to excess flesh and suck in my own gut. “So, kiddo, how’s that belly button of yours doing? Any changes yet?”

“Oh, Aunt Kate.” Amazing how an eight-year-old can convey such disdain with just three words—one of which is my name. “It’s still an outsy. I know I’m never gonna have an insy. I used to think that *last* summer when I was a little kid.”

The good old days.

“So, you’re stuck with an outsy. That’s a damn shame. You might want to consider cosmetic surgery.”

“As *if*.” Teen-speak coming from that little mouth. It slays me.

“Hey, how come you swear and Mommy doesn’t?”

“Because she’s a mom and I’m an aunt. I don’t have to set a good example.”

“Maybe you’re supposed to, anyway.”

“Maybe. Want me to?”

Another giggle. “No!”

“Fine with me.” So perhaps my behaviour is not exemplary. And I don’t encourage Jennifer to face reality. Am I doing her irreparable harm? I don’t think so. Let her believe in whatever she can, while she can. Life is a journey from one safe haven to the next. In between are the crevices, the canyons, the depths—and the snapping turtles. You need a safety net to get you across. And you make your own. With a little luck someone might share that net with you for awhile, keep you company. Jennifer’s belief, her denial (call it what you will), is her safety net. It’s a little precarious. So far we’re keeping our balance.

“Is the sliver almost out?”

“Not yet. Give me a few more pulls.”

“Dad says slivers will usually come out by themselves. Especially when you swim in the lake every day. They sort of loosen up or something.”

The Almighty and Wise Father. The same guy who can’t keep his hands off women and who has thus far managed to conceal about half the joint assets

from a twelve-year marriage. Our family is going to have to pitch in and hire a forensic accountant if my sister is going to come out of this mess with anything. I could utterly destroy Jennifer with the truth. If she'd listen. The more likely scenario is that she'd end up hating me. Kill the messenger—that sort of thing.

"I guess he's right about the real tiny slivers. This honkin' big one needs my expertise."

The humming resumes. She's getting fidgety. Her left leg is pounding the dock again and again to the beat of the words she does know. "The Backstreet Boys are back—alright!" And then all movement ceases. "Aunt Kate, I have to ask you something."

Dear God, give me strength.

"How come people don't stay in love? The things that made them fall in love in the first place are still inside them, right?"

I ponder this latest zinger. She is so tough, so fragile. "People change, baby-cakes. And yeah, I guess you're right about that certain something that made them fall in love still being part of them. I guess it just gets so buried with the changes that people can't see it anymore. Or they change so much they no longer recognize it. What do you think?"

"Butterflies and caterpillars."

I bow my head to the little foot clasped in my hand. I kiss the dirty toe with its tiny drop of blood. Oh, sweetheart, you are so brilliant. Your world is beginning to make sense of it all. "Perfect example, Jennifer."

"Only, it's all opposite. You know, like the butterfly turning into a caterpillar instead of the other way around. Then you don't think it's so beautiful anymore."

"How'd you get so smart?"

My head remains bowed, seeking refuge from this child who terrifies me with her hope, her wisdom and her vulnerability. The sound of muffled chokes brings me back. Jennifer's mouth is quivering and her chest heaving. The tears slide from the far corners of each eye to the dock's hard surface. She makes no move to brush them aside. The fishing rod lies abandoned on the dock.

She looks right at me. "It's the sliver, Aunt Kate. Now it hurts."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry. Come here, baby." We reach for each other. I pull her onto my lap, wrap my arms around my precious baby girl, and we rock, gently. Such a big struggle for such a little girl. We cry together. Jennifer doesn't question my tears.