# The California Story

## (Chapter one of a novel in progress)

### By Mary Troy

In late August in the Midwest, the heat travels through flesh and bakes joints and bones; breathing would be easier with gills. At Joy's house, the windows are nailed shut for safety, all of them that is but the window in the kitchen with the impotently rattling window unit. She leads me back to her tiny kitchen and fixes two glasses of ice water. In spite of all her years of restaurant work, that's the extent of her hospitality. Even before we sit across from each other at the white painted wood table, the sun coming in through the window behind Joy and above the air conditioner, filtered through her blond frizz, the first complaint is launched. An exclamation about how long it's been since I last visited. She asks why I'm there now, and says if I want to leave she'll get over it. I say my job keeps me busy, though I doubt she remembers what my job is. I'm here out of guilt, I do not say. I tell myself that at thirty-eight, I'm no longer bothered by the past, no longer controlled by Joy's neediness. Joy says if I leave, she'll get over it.
An hour at the most, I tell myself and watch the ice melt in my glass that is soon as wet on the outside as the inside. "What's new, Joy?"

"Mom. I'd like it if you called me Mom."

I shrug, and then probably because the new is mundane, she launches into the old, her California story, one I know but haven't heard for a while. I managed an escape from Wolf Pass for more than a decade, but a promotion in the National Parks System brought me to St. Louis, a mere hour's drive from Wolf Pass where all three of my mothers live. I put off visiting for as long as I could, feeling their needs and wants like hot breath on my neck, like small electric shocks, and finally chose to start with Joy. Joy's story is also about escape, hers from Lee and Eisenhower and fascism and having been dropped on her head. If someone had just painted over the hot pink, if Lee had done it instead of moaning about the fool lost to time who'd slathered thick hot pink over the natural red bricks of the three-story, hundred-year-old house in the South side of St. Louis, Joy would've had a different life. But she claims she'd change little of the experience, the good or the bad. She has her Jeff and her memories of Kevin who will love her always and whose face surprises her still in background scenes of old television shows, a face with those perfect comma-like dimples on either side of his mouth, the right side deeper and just a smidge farther from his lips.

It began, she always says, with her suspension from Angus Dei High for two weeks in her senior year, an over reaction to a bit of plagiarism that meant she was alone in the hot pink house that Monday in early April, trying to read about Eisenhower and the cold war as her social studies teacher and Lee, my granny, had ordered. But instead, she went out to the concrete stoop, sat in the weak April sunlight, and soon one of the water company workers tearing up the street sat beside her to eat his bratwurst. Whoever lived in the hot pink house must be odd, he joked. He and his fellow ditch diggers all assumed so. He

smiled, claimed he'd been designated to find out. Was she odd? She'd never been teased by someone so good looking. He was Kevin O'Malley, a twenty-six-year-old destined for stardom. For the next three days she fed him priced-for-quick-sale cold cuts and cheese, gave him a few of Lee's Budweisers. Kevin was on his way to Hollywood to be discovered. He knew all he had to do was hang around the sets and be chosen for crowd scenes and then his good looks would make him stand out and he'd be given a line or two and the rest, fame and money, would follow without much effort. The hardest part was driving there, and he wondered if she could drive a stick shift. Two drivers pushing his old VW Beetle across the desert and mountains would be better than one.

Because on the fourth day he kissed her right on the front stoop in full view of all the South City busybodies, his lips like down filled pillows over rocks, she knew they'd have to go the next day, and they did, leaving at mid-morning on a Friday while Granny was sitting behind her mahogany-veneered desk at the downtown Mercantile bank denying yet another small business loan, something she loved doing because it proved her view of life: If you needed a loan, you probably didn't deserve one.

Joy is one of my three mothers, and I've heard all their stories. As I sit in Joy's stifling kitchen, the window air conditioner behind her rattling and pushing about stale air smelling of burnt bacon, I think that of my many mothers, Joy may not be the most fascinating, interesting, or complicated. On certain days when I am in a self-pitying mood, she seems the worst. Other times, like Mother's Day or Christmas, I think not one of them is fascinating or interesting, and the complicated part is only that they've turned their own minds inside out trying not to seem what they are, trying to be what they pretend. Joy and the others say they do not pretend. We're not a fanciful people, Sammie says. We live the lives we've been given, Kay Baby says. Everyone here is against me, Joy says, adding it's the rock-bottom truth.

What do I say? Leave me alone, or I don't blame you, a statement often a lie. I was passed from sister to sister with seeming little thought, as if I were a casserole dish they shared, so of course I have blamed them, the sisters who want me to call them Mom, for all my shortcomings. Not one of their other children got passed about. And if I ever take the high road and say my failures are my fault, I mean the opposite. No one who lays out grievances and then says "I don't really blame them," means it. No one.

Joy says driving out to the unknown with Kevin all those years ago was like flinging herself into cartwheels or backflips on the asphalt playground. Acts that begin with delicious fears mixed up with trust in herself.

Just great, Lee said when Joy phoned that first night, said she was headed to California with one of the water workers. Your decision making continues to amaze.

Kevin's mother, Honey Mama, on the other hand, said hooray, he was on his way to fame, and she called him Sweetie, and once he got to Hollywood, she wired him money so he wouldn't have to

suffer much while waiting for stardom.

During the four-day drive, Joy told Kevin that Lee counted calories for herself and her three daughters, marked them on a chart she kept on the refrigerator. No one was allowed more than 1300 a day. Lee told her girls they'd find better mates if they looked good because girls got to choose only from among those who chose them. Kevin's response was Lee had an eating disorder, and also some guys didn't like boney women.

Joy told Kevin the first sentence of the plagiarized paper, copied from an old textbook her father had left behind, was about the rise of fas-

cism in Europe in the ’30s being caused by blah blah blah and political upheavals. She remembered that phrase political upheavals because in catching her, the teacher had asked Joy to name at least one of those. Kevin called teachers trying to trap students a great sadness.
Joy told Kevin her family had not funny jokes about themselves, like that Kay Baby looked better in the dark and would have her best shot at finding a man in blackouts, that Sammie had a lazy streak and that if left to her own devices would sit in front of the tv all her life, and that Joy was stupid because she’d been dropped on her head as a baby, dropped on the concrete front porch at only six months old and lived, sustaining a concussion and what Lee said must have been brain damage. Kevin thought none of those were funny and said hers was a family of sadists.

Joy says surely I can see from that how wise Kevin was. The more he talked the more convinced she was that he could guide her through life. She tosses her frizzy head and giggles. And as always when Kevin’s name is invoked, she glows, not exactly blushing, but as if she’s wrapped in a shiny veil of happiness.

For the California Story, Joy does all that he said and she said, seldom varying the dialogue.

On the cross-country trip, she first told Kevin the story she often told me about the old priest who tried to frighten his congregation with talk of the end of the world, lingering over descriptions of the horrors of floods and fires and killings and people bleeding from their eyes. That old priest’s voice was wavery with age, and he stood high in the pulpit so that mostly his wattle was visible and said no one would get up after and say let’s roll up our sleeves, recover, get over it, for there would be no next day, an idea that gave Joy strength. Whatever was not the end of the world could be survived, gotten over, sadists and school suspensions included.

And she told Kevin part of Lee’s trouble was that her husband, a father Joy had not met, was not MIA in Vietnam, no matter that Lee flew the black and white flag. He was missing only from their lives. The truth was he’d decided to stay in a war-ravaged country and be part of a new family, this one gentle and kind.

Once in Hollywood, Joy learned few others were as good at getting over the bad stuff as she was, and Kevin explained that they clung to pain, believed their past hurts made them better actors. She also learned that having a part of another’s body inside hers was nearly miraculous, spiritual, she called it. She does blush when she says that, though she says it every time. That miraculous act proved that she was fertile and Kevin potent, for within a month she was pregnant. Cool, Kevin said. Welcome to the world, Little Dude, he said to her stomach.

After nearly a year of hoping and waiting, Kevin was offered a part in an experimental movie to be filmed in one of the Dakotas and told Joy he would be driven up to whichever one it was by a woman whose name he couldn’t say, but one Joy would recognize. He said Jeff was for sure a lovely baby and he loved him and Joy to bits, always would, but after the Dakota thing, he would leave them and live with the woman whose name he would not say because she played poker with

directors and producers and had a large home in the hills. He looked sad to go, and his dimples were dark commas beside his frown. He left behind his black Beetle and an unfinished treatment for a movie about aliens living in water pipes. And us, Joy says. He left us.

She tells me that was when she first felt her heart beat in her stomach so hard she couldn’t stand up. For hours, she says. No, more like days. Something had been lost inside her, something important, like an organ. But then she could and did stand, and she rolled up her sleeves. It had not been the end of the world.

Joy stayed in L.A. a few more years and found work in an art gallery, cleaning in the mornings and after shows. Her job allowed her to bring Jeff along, and Honey Mama quilted a harness and leash-like thing that would keep him close as Joy vacuumed. Twice, for extra money, she shared her furnished studio with women who were hoping to be discovered, one so thin Lee would have loved her even though her long dark hair stopped up the shower drain, and the next one a grandmother-looking woman with a pink wart beside her left nostril who auditioned for character parts. Joy gave each boarder the bed, and she and Jeff slept in the recliner, but neither stayed more than a few weeks, both saying a crying child ruined their sleep and interfered with their art.
The wart woman said her mother had been like Joy, had fallen for a bit of good looking, and had been abandoned to raise a child on her own. Of course, her mother was poor and hungry. Hunger's not a bad excuse for stupidity, she said, adding Joy looked as if she'd never been hungry. But Joy had been hungry back in the pink house where Lee forbade second helpings. She remembers hiding in the pantry, stuffing pieces of bread into her mouth as fast as possible.

After Kevin left, Joy depended on Honey Mama for news about him—he had indeed had a small but not speaking part in that Dakota movie not even Honey Mama had seen. Honey Mama said Kevin wanted to come back to Joy, but movie business, chances at roles, always got in the way. He'd been offered a major part once, but for some reason having to do with nepotism had been cheated out of it before shooting began. Joy sent photos of Jeff to Honey Mama, a few of which Honey Mama varnished onto wood and sent back as gifts that still hung on the walls wherever Joy lived.

If I turn my head, I'll see Jeff in a sailor suit as he hangs over the stove, cooking oils and old varnish having turned his skin yellow.

She sent photos of Jeff to Lee, too, but Lee did not respond.

As Jeff grew into the loveliness of Kevin with dimples in his fat cheeks and round, sparkling eyes, people, even strangers, said Jeff was meant for the large screen or at least should be in commercials for baby food. But Joy said no. All the tabloids called baby stardom a sad life, and she wouldn't take a chance with her Jeff, with Kevin's child. Instead, she protected him, vowed never to teach him about getting over it, never hinted the world would end, never called him stupid.

That black and white thinking about the end of the world is childish, I say to Joy, even the decision not to talk about it. The world can not end but go so awry it is hard to find hope in it, and we can do things that make us feel wrong. Get over it is the wrong response unless you know what you are getting over. Joy seems never to have wondered what pain or regrets I have had in my thirty-eight years. Instead, she waves my words into the sour smelling kitchen, talks over me.

Get over it was what she first told herself that long ago evening Jeff whined that the food was too hot and then too cold, and finally resorted to the all-purpose yuck. He didn't want to sit on her lap, but each time she put him down, he climbed on her, even stepping on her face, and she noticed, not too late she hoped, he was hot. Burning she thought. He will die. He will die at thirty months.

He will be brain damaged. She emptied ice trays into the tub while he hung on her, his whining growing faint. When she had all five trays in the tub, all of them making little difference, she ran cold water in, then lowered Jeff into it. He cried, he screamed. She carried him to the phone and called 911, then dragged the phone with the long cord into the bathroom and lowered him into the cold bath again. Her stomach flipped, her heart in it beat out doom,

doom, doom. Help, she said over his cries. My baby is burning up. This would be the end of the world. The EMTs, two smiling young men and one older woman, took them to the hospital, and on the ride, the woman sat in back with Joy, stroked her hand and said Jeff was a beautiful baby, and Joy had done the exactly perfect thing with the ice and bath, had helped bring the fever down. The exactly perfect thing.
When Jeff was three, Joy gave him me, a girl she had all by herself in an empty campground in the Angeles National Forest, Jeff sitting quietly in the back seat of Kevin's Beetle. She hadn't wanted this one, me, and Jeff often said "no no sister," which she found adorable. She'd considered getting rid of me early on, had had to restrain herself from walking through the protestors in front of the clinic who carried tiny coffins and played dirges on keyboards, called women baby killers. But the father of the mass of cells that would end up being me was in love with her. The father was Gerald, the owner of the art gallery and an artist himself who did installation pieces made of chicken wire and paper mâché and car windshields and pieces of rusted rebar. Their titles were Hope and Sunrise and Peace in a rotation of sorts that led to a Hope III and a Peace V, but they looked to Joy like end of the world warnings. Gerald explained it to her once as they lay on the hide-a-bed that came with her apartment. Art must be disturbing. It should create an emotion, make the viewer uneasy, maybe even a bit blue.

Gerald and his wife owned the gallery, and for more than a year he'd been saying he would get a divorce and marry Joy. She liked that Gerald loved her, but he would never replace Kevin in her life. He was not a beautiful man like Kevin, his face long and thin, his arms too long for most sleeves, the wrists sticking out red and bruised. On the plus side, he kissed like time had no meaning, and laughed at what he called her middle of the country innocence, her not knowing, for example, that no one wore socks with boat shoes. He taught her to like wine and raw fish. He smiled when he saw her. If he'd noticed her expanding middle, he'd not said. One evening, as they lay on her hide-a-bed, the bottom bar hard through the thin mattress, his juices dripping from her onto the beige sheets and the mattress, each of them getting their breath back, he said Joy, joy, joy. Did she know she was his joy? He promised it would be just a few more months, maybe six, certainly by the end of summer, until he asked for a divorce, just after the next big show his wife had planned. As usual he'd come by at nap time when Jeff slept in a playpen in the kitchen area. As Joy laughed at him going on about her name, she heard Jeff awake, and knew reality couldn't be ignored. She may have four months but not six, so she told Gerald the good news. I was on the way.

He rolled away and sat up, rubbed his hands together as if wiping dust from them. Then he said a funny thing. His saying he would divorce his wife was merely talk encouraged by his therapist, a way of mentioning the unmentionable, just pretend. It was how Gerald gained strength in his marriage.

His voice grew thin, higher pitched. Here in L.A. girls were given birth control pills with their raisin bran. What did they do in Missouri, cross their fingers, pray to Mary? She'd been on the pill, free ones from the clinic where she'd had Jeff, but as Gerald talked, she thought maybe free ones

weren’t as good. Each time Joy tells this part she says she’s still mystified by my conception. She didn’t cry about Gerald, though. His ranting was not the end of the world. Lee would call her stupid. The wart woman would call her stupid. She wanted to provoke more reaction, so she said her high school teachers called birth control a sin. Missouri Catholics, he said, were like peasants from the Middle Ages. A joke she says that

made her laugh. She laughs now.
Often after telling the Gerald story, she shrugs, says she must've been afraid of Gerald's reaction. She can't remember fear, but why else hadn't she announced me right away. Then she laughs again and says the reason is lost to time. It couldn't have been fear, she says now. Surely I know she's never been afraid. So many, like her two sneaky sisters, pretend toughness, but Joy is the real thing. She's never pretended one thing, not in her whole life. I don't contradict her.

In some versions of her past, there is no Gerald. Kevin is my father. In other versions, Joy left California nearly a year earlier than she did in the Gerald version, and my father became some guy who raped her at a rest stop, some guy who chewed tobacco and is the reason she cannot stand the smell of chaw. In that version she lived in a New Mexico town for a while, a town she forgets the name of. In another version, two men, Gerald and someone called either Reggie or Tucker, loved her and she never was sure which was my father. Sometimes Gerald was not an artist, but the owner of a string of carwashes, but then sometimes Reggie owned the carwashes. The most consistent version is the one in which Gerald was an artist and is my father and she had no doubt. Gerald Stiffel, or Striker as she sometimes says. I've searched in vain for an artist with those names, for a gallery or carwash owned by him.

Kay Baby and Sammie say no one ever believes a thing Joy says. Accept the unknown. The past is no more valid than the vivid dreams you have after too much wine.

Joy spent the months after Gerald left and before I showed up driving about the L.A. area, watching spring arrive, then summer. Fields of poppies and sunflowers added to her strength. She and Jeff hit the playgrounds and then the beaches and played in the waves. His courage in rushing into the surf and getting knocked down astonished her. He laughed after being tossed. Even his eyelashes would be coated with sand when he surfaced. They ate burgers and fries for lunch and dinner on the beaches and in parks, and she drove the Beetle up into the hills and along the coast where they stopped at diners for root beer floats and sushi. The Beetle was black with red interior and no air conditioning, and as summer came, she and Jeff sweated, but laughed. She was Joy the strong, driving all day, and out into the nights, radio blasting, Jeff in the back seat cooing along and talking nonstop. Except for missing Kevin, it was the happiest time of her life, one she relives on nights she can't sleep, her love for Jeff overwhelming.

Is he still in prison? I ask it only when I know the answer is yes.

She nods.

Stealing?

She says they persecute him. She cannot understand why.

Stealing, I say.

On one ride in mid-July, she drove seventy miles north and east into the Angeles National Forest to see the birds and maybe climb a few hills. Jeff slept better after climbs. Just before sunset, though, the contractions that meant birth came a few weeks early but fast, and she found a grassy spot in a campground. She told Jeff to stay in the car and used the grungy floor mats to cushion her back as she lay in the dirt and grass. Kevin, she called out as she pushed me from her body. Oh Kevin. After, she drove to a Mobile station and cleaned up. She christened me in the restroom, named me Blue O'Malley, then wrapped me in paper towels.

Guess you wish you'd had a soft blanket for me, I say, the heat in this stifling kitchen making me needy.

Wish I had a million dollars, too, she says.

I was six days old when she headed back to St. Louis.
It was a slow journey because she hit rain and the Beetle's wipers didn't work when she accelerated, because by the second day, the clutch stuck, and for whatever reason reverse disappeared. And I needed to eat often, my hunger cries the shrill kind that went right through Joy's brain and landed in her eyes. Jeff got cranky sitting too long and spent his bored time hitting me and making me cry more. That horrid cry, she says, shaking her head and staring at me as if I could remember it, the one that went right through her brain. We spent nights in inexpensive motels, napped at rest stops. She forced herself to eat.

We arrived at the hot pink house on an early evening, the air hot enough to choke the petunias, the west wind hotter than the air. No one answered the bell or the knocks, so Joy and Jeff and I rested on the hot concrete stoop in the shade of the sugar maple, and she wished she'd at least carved one of those silly hearts with Joy and Kevin into its trunk. The heat in St. Louis and the sunlight were different than that in L.A., harsher, angrier. Two children seemed like ten. Joy looked to her side and saw the hot pink house, wavery but whole, reflected in the neighbor's front window, and wondered how that was possible. The hot pink house should've been reflected in the windows across the street, not next door. She wished she'd gone to her science classes more often and remembers thinking what an odd wish that was. She saw curtains move behind the reflection, saw a face that seemed superimposed on an upstairs casement window. The face belonged to a neighbor who eventually opened her door, called out. "If you're looking for the Morgans, they're gone." Joy knew by the voice it was Susy Williams. Like her vocal cords are made of barbed wire, Lee used to say. Susy remained in her doorway and shouted across the tiny yard. She shouted that Kay Baby had been married a few months earlier, had married a man who owned a restaurant in Wolf Pass, Illinois, and lived in a fancy house up on the bluffs above town. Lee had moved to Wolf Pass, too, and was managing the restaurant.

That Lee would move without even a postcard didn't hurt Joy. She wants me to know that. It was merely the surprise that made her gasp, that briefly opened a hole in her. Others more important than Lee had left her already.

Are you Joy? Susy finally asked and came closer.

Susy described Kay Baby's wedding that included a carriage pulled by a white horse, a champagne fountain, napkins at every plate with Kay Baby's new monogram. Susy Williams was just a bit older than Sammie, but she had babysat for the three girls. She looked down at Jeff and me crowded on Joy's lap. She said no one spoke of Joy at the wedding. She then offered to ride with Joy to Wolf Pass, show her where to go, clearly wanting to be in on the reunion. Come to think of it, she added, she wasn't surprised to see Joy was the mother of two bastards, for Joy never had been known for her intelligence. Oh well. It was almost the new millennium after all, and everyone knew it was possible to be too smart, to think too much. Something to be said for acting without thinking, she said. She knew Joy agreed. And no one cared about those old traditions; no one said bastard anymore.

Joy asked if people still said busy body. Joy is so proud of that line, we’re all sure she didn’t say it.

Susy sniffed but got in the car. The church says we’re supposed to help the least of our brethren, and you seem to be one of those least. See, Joy says. She just couldn’t help being mean.

As Joy drove the forty-something miles north to Wolf Pass, her heart beat wildly in her stomach.

Susy said she was getting a migraine from riding in the bumpy car without air conditioning, and guessed Joy must be poorer than she'd first imagined. She herself was good with money, bragged that she'd saved enough to have a wed ding as fabulous as Kay Baby's. Yes, that was the news she wanted to share. Susy was getting married soon and was using Kay Baby's wedding planner and wedding diary as a guide. She said Kay Baby had worn a strapless satin gown, a style Susy couldn't wear because she was too freckled. Susy said her fiancé was a floral designer, so at least the flowers would be exquisite.
Joy knew neither Susy nor Kay Baby would ever be loved by anyone as beautiful as Kevin. She said my husband is in the movies. He'll be famous someday.

You don't have a ring, Susy said.

It's where Jeff gets his good looks, Joy said. And we had two white horses for our wedding.

Susy turned around, said he's not that cute. I mean, all kids are cute, but he's nothing special. Sorry to break it to you.

Joy was twenty-three but felt ancient. Isolated. Would her life have been different if Angus Dei hadn't reacted so vigorously to that fascism copying stuff? And what kind of silly topic had that been for high school girls in the middle of the US? Could she blame Europe for its political upheavals, or her father for not coming back? Or should she blame the sweet Vietnamese girl and her kind family? Or could she blame the water company for having pipes that needed so much work? Or that she could drive a stick shift? She laughed at herself then, laughed out loud and interrupted Susy who was saying sit-down dinners were not as much fun as many tables of different kinds of hors d'oeuvres.

Her stomach heart beat out run, run. She crossed the Missouri River, wanting to turn around. She's blessed that way, she explains to me, like ESP or something, premonitions.

She'd decided on my name, Blue, even before Gerald's desertion, not only because Kevin used to sing that Dylan song about Baby Blue, but also because she knew this one would make her blue. Perhaps, she jokes, she should've called gutless Gerald to say his daughter was like art.

Lee dropped me on my head, Joy said out loud to Susy as they crossed the Mississippi. At least I haven't done that with either of mine.

Susy shook her head and said the value of the past is it lets you see where you took a wrong turn. Like reading a map backwards. Now you just must shape up. But first, find your fault lines.

Joy's stomach heart pounded.

Susy kept talking. Fault lines. That’s a metaphor from a book I’ve been reading. The book’s called Creating Your Best Life. Joy stops here, says she doesn’t remember the real name of the book, but it was silly like that.

Whatever its name, Susy’s fault line book calmed Joy. Her heart went back to her chest where it belonged. Imagine taking life lessons rom Susy Williams. She remembered Susy as a babysitter, remembered Susy locking them outside so she could raid the refrigerator in peace. Once, the three sisters had looked in through the kitchen window and watched Susy eat an entire frozen pepperoni pizza that had been meant for all of them.

Joy knew Lee and the others would see her with two children and at first, like the wart woman, would think she’d not been wise enough. Soon though, she believed, they’d see she was the same Joy. Strong as always. Let’s see Kay Baby drive a junker across the country with two children, she said to Susy. Let’s see her smack her soft baby head on concrete and keep living. Let’s see her or Sammie clean a building to get enough money to feed her child, or give birth in the wilds all alone. Let’s see them empty ice cubes in a tub with a two-and-a-half-year-old hot as a

burning cinder in their arms. Joy sighs, finishes her ice water, and stands up. Her story about audacity and hope is over. She did it all by herself. No help at all, she reminds me. The California story is the highlight of her life, and like for all of us, has become the highlight only after subsequent failures. In Wolf Pass, Lee eventually ripped me from Joy and gave me to Kay Baby. Ripped is Joy's word, but no one else recalls she fought hard or at all. In Wolf Pass as it had been in South City, Joy once again became the stupid one, and lest she forget her sins, the words loose and immoral were added on, remained with her for decades. In Wolf Pass, Joy was allowed to work chopping veggies and cleaning the kitchen in Kay Baby's restaurant, Lee sure she was not smart enough to be a server or cook. As I stand to go, the way the sun hits the side of her face, makes her look much older than sixty, beaten down and frail. What I feel is merely pity. Someday I may tell her I gave up hating her for Lent, Jeff, too. It took three Lents, I'll say. But now, I tell her what she went through is fascinating. I make the mistake of adding the word unbelievable and can see her muscles tense. Let's see you or any of them do what I did, she says, the exactly perfect thing. She says it a few times, continues even as I walk down her rickety wooden steps to the street and climb into my oven of a car. You could never do it, she calls from her porch. Not you, she shouts. The exactly perfect thing.

Revision #5
Created 2026-05-12 15:37:56 UTC by Michael Guthrey
Updated 2026-08-04 20:29:55 UTC by Michael Moore