

"Poverty Line" from "Alligator Stew." Originally appears in *The Writing Disorder*

by CD Mitchell

POVERTY LINE

by CD Mitchell Jenny sat in a chair positioned outside Mrs. White's classroom and waited for her conference with her daughters' teacher. She looked at her watch--five more minutes.

As her twins had grown older, they began to ask Jenny about things they didn't know or understand—things that Jenny could only try to explain: why do women wear bras and girls don't? Why are we the only twins in school? What's a tampon? Do you ever douche? Why is Mooney Jr. black when both of his parents are white?

But the question Jenny was most prepared to answer came early, and proved the hardest to explain.

"Why don't we have a daddy like everybody else?"

Jenny had paused for a moment before she answered, and then she forgot her carefully rehearsed words. "Of course you had a daddy, but he died before you were born."

"Were you married?" Dana asked.

"No. We never married," Jenny said.

"But you said we should wait till we're married before we have sex," Donna said.

"Yes, I did. But I didn't, and it was a good thing, because your daddy died before we could marry." Jenny cringed as she lied to her daughters. Their daddy never even knew he was to be a father, and the topic of marriage never came up on their only night together.

But the girls weren't old enough to know or understand what had happened. Her date with Randy White—the son of her favorite teacher—was a blind date, on Valentine's Day in 1978 that ended in casual sex. Eight weeks later Jenny had missed her period, and Randy White had died—electrocuted in a freak accident at the Marmon plant in Delbert.

A chair creaked as it slid across the floor from within the classroom, and moments later, the door opened.

"Come on in, Jenny. I've been waiting for you," said Mrs. White. "I'm surprised you came."

"I don't know why. I haven't missed one of these conferences since my girls started kindergarten," Jenny said as she sat in the chair across from Mrs. White. "No one ever went to mine."

"I was wrong to speak to you the way I did at Campbell's that day," Mrs. White said. "But that was a long time ago. Years ago."

"Fourteen years. But not long enough to forget. You scared me. I watched your husband in court for the Children's Home all those years. I knew I couldn't afford a legal battle with you for my girls."

"We didn't want the girls. We thought you wanted money, and we didn't believe the baby ... the twins ... were Randy's."

"I heard you got a million dollars when you settled the lawsuit over Randy's death. The girls are thirteen years old, and I haven't asked you for one penny."

"We didn't quite get a million dollars. But we know the girl's are Randy's," Mrs. White said. She sat with her hands clasped together, resting on the desk in front of her.

"I told you that at the café fourteen years ago. I thought we were gonna talk about school today."

"I want to talk about that, too," said Mrs. White. "But there's really nothing to discuss where school's concerned. They make A's in everything. Nothing in this classroom is even close to being a challenge for them. Since you took that Voodoo book away last spring, they have even gotten along better with Mooney Jr."

Both women laughed. During the spring semester, her daughters took to school a voodoo book that Jenny had purchased at the

Nu-2-U Flea Market. The girls, a pair of red-haired, green-eyed beauties, had cast a spell on Mooney Jr., and he went home sick. Of course it didn't matter to the Reverend Marrs and his wife that ten other students also complained of stomach cramps after eating the fermented pineapple served in the cafeteria that day. Mooney Marrs Sr. had requested prayer for Jenny and her twins the next Sunday in church and preached a fiery sermon about witchcraft and sorcery and Ouija Boards and prejudice, and Bull Anderson had refused to discipline the twins, so the school principal also made the prayer list at Mooney Marrs' church—out of alphabetical order and next to the names of Jenny and the twins.

"I never dreamed that book would cause so much trouble. I'm so sorry," Jenny said. She noticed a picture of a redheaded youth with dark eyes sitting on the teacher's desk.

"What are you doing with a picture of Dana?"

"That's not Dana, Jenny. That's Randy."

Jenny stood and leaned across the desk to get a better look at the picture. She sat back down with the picture in her hand. The picture wasn't of Dana--both girls had Jenny's green eyes. The eyes in the picture were brown

"James and I want to acknowledge the girls as our granddaughters. We want to become a part of their lives. We'd like for you and the girls to spend the holidays, Thanksgiving and Christmas, with us. We've set aside a substantial trust for their college, if you'll let them have it."

Jenny stood up from her seat and walked toward the windows. She could imagine her girls playing in the yard, creating mischief, sitting in the corner next to the fence and casting spells on Mooney Jr., then coming home to the Whites' mansion.

"Why?" Jenny asked as she continued to stare out the window. "Why now?"

"You're a parent, Jenny. Only a parent can empathize with someone who loses a child."

"That's not good enough. I don't want to lose my daughters."

"We don't want to be parents, Jenny. But this is our only chance

to be grandparents.”

“If I say no, you'll just go to court and take them.”

“After the way I treated you, you have every right to say no. But I believe you are a better person than that.”

“Oh, now you're gonna say I'm a good person? How about all those times you called me a money-grubbing tramp? When you said I was a piece of trailer-trash that saw a chance for a monthly check when Randy died? You said that at the café, the day Glen had to run you off.”

“Are you a perfect parent, Jenny?”

“This isn't about me,” Jenny said.

“I knew I had made a mistake the day I left the café...a bad mistake. I was to retire three years ago, but I stayed just to teach these girls. Let me show you something.” Mrs. White opened the bottom drawer of her desk and pulled out a large scrapbook with ragged edges that overflowed with papers and memorabilia. “Move around here,” she said as she pointed to a spot next to her chair. Jenny obediently moved her chair around next to her former teacher. Mrs. White opened the scrapbook to the first page.

Jenny looked at pictures taken of her twins when they were in kindergarten. Yellowed tape secured copies of their report cards to the opposite page. Mrs. White sat and flipped through page after page of the book, revealing to Jenny events in her twins' lives that happened at school—events even Jenny didn't know about.

“Here is Mr. Anderson's report from last spring when he talked to the girls about the spell they cast on Mooney Jr. He let me take this from his office so it wouldn't become a part of their permanent file. He wasn't gonna let me till I told him the girls were my granddaughters.”

“You told him that? What gave you the right?”

“I was trying to help them, Jenny. Bull already knew of the relationship, and I didn't want anyone to come up and say they had practiced witchcraft later. You know how ridiculous the Reverend Marrs can be. Especially when it comes to how the children treat Delilah's son. He's the only black student we have in the entire

county school system, and the children delight in tormenting him.”

“How did Mr. Anderson know?”

“Jenny, they've talked about me up here worse than a dog for not acknowledging those girls. But I didn't think I could face you again after I was thrown out of the cafeteria. My husband and I have talked about this for years now. We will respect your decision, whatever that decision is. But we know we've made a terrible mistake. We have nothing left of Randy and watching these girls grow up and knowing they belonged to him—”

“My girls belong to me.”

“I didn't mean that Jenny, I promise. I meant they were his biological children.”

“Why are you willing to accept this all of a sudden? Without even asking for a paternity test? You were worried about me asking for money before. Are you trying to buy me now?”

“Look at that,” Mrs. White said as she pointed to Randy's picture on her desk. “A paternity test can't give me proof any more positive than that. I don't think they could even do a test after all these years, and we don't want to know different. We want to take your word for it.”

“How the hell are you gonna do this? You can't just announce in class tomorrow that Donna and Dana are your grandkids, and they will call you Grandma from now on instead of Mrs. White.”

“No. I had planned to retire after this school year. But if you will let us do this, I will retire at the Christmas break. We would love to be able to spend Christmas with the girls.”

Jenny wilted in her seat. She felt her world imploding as she saw herself alone in her house at Christmas, with her girls at the White mansion, opening presents that Jenny could never afford to buy them. After a child reached a certain age, they could go before the court and ask to live with the person they wanted to be with. Jenny knew this from her youth at the Children's Home.

“Jenny, I meant with you...and the girls. We know you have no family. We don't just want to acknowledge the girls; we want you along with them. We thought we could all spend Thanksgiving

together ... spend some time getting to know each other, and then tell the girls at Christmas. If you've already made other plans, we can be flexible."

"I'd have to fix something to bring with us for Thanksgiving. I've always taught the girls you never go anywhere empty-handed."

"That would be fine. I'd love to try some of your cooking."

"You want a lot." Jenny sat and played with the hem of her blue skirt. She ran her fingers over the coffee stain from work that morning. "I need some time. I came today expecting trouble from you over the voodoo thing, but I wasn't expecting this. You were my favorite teacher, Mrs. White, but I've hated you since the day you came to the café."

"You had every reason to hate me then. You were about to pop from the pregnancy, working your ass off every day at the cafe, and all we were worried about was how you would try to get money from Randy's estate. I am sorry for the mistakes I made, and I have paid dearly for them. Randy was our only child. We realized a long time ago that you were being truthful."

"Truthful? About what? I didn't go around town telling everyone I was pregnant with your son's child."

"Small town, Jenny. You know how things get around. There isn't a positive pregnancy test in this county that hasn't been heard about before the mother makes it home."

"I know. I've listened to all the bullshit for years at the café."

"I guess you heard that Earl Montgomery was hit by a freight train this afternoon?"

"No. I haven't seen anyone since I left work early and went home." Jenny didn't know Earl personally, although she'd seen him directing traffic for years. But the old man never came into the cafe to eat, at least not on her shift. She felt sick as she bent over her seat to ease the pain in her gut. "I guess we never know when our time will come."

"We suspected that Randy was the father of the girls. He'd told us about his date with you before he died."

Jenny looked at Mrs. White. "What did he say?" Her words were

barely above a whisper.

“He said he'd had a wonderful time and was gonna bring you home to meet us.”

“We never got to talk after our date. I never knew how he felt. He died before I knew I was pregnant. I never went out with anyone else.”

“But James, my husband, he always sees the worst in people. He thought you wanted money. He thought you slept around with people from the café.”

“That son of a bitch. I've had one date with Archie Snell since the girls were born. I've kissed one man in thirteen years.”

“He knows that now, and I have made him miserable for it. I don't have much time left either. I have watched these girls grow up in this school, unable to hug them, or hold them, or even tell them how much I love them.”

“That's enough,” Jenny said. “I'll let you know what I decide. I will tell you personally.”

“Do you have any idea how—?”

“I'll let you know before Thanksgiving. That will allow you to make plans for us if we decide to come for dinner.”

“Thank you for listening to me.”

Jenny got up and walked out the door.

After leaving the conference, Jenny stopped by the Wallace and Owens to pick up a loaf of bread and some milk. For the first time since she'd left the classroom, she could finally breathe. Her food stamps were left at home, but she'd made almost thirty dollars in tips that morning, and she never spent her food stamps in Delbert. Groceries weren't any cheaper at Success, but she didn't have to look anyone in the eye and experience that condescending glance she had despised since her days at the Children's Home. Jenny never wanted anyone to feel sorry for her, and she had never wanted anyone to help her. Applying for food stamps had been the hardest thing for her, but Jenny knew the extra help made a huge difference in their lives.

The first application came in the mail after she'd called the Department of Human Services. Jenny always made it home an hour or so ahead of the twins, and the mail usually ran after the girls came home. Dana brought the envelope to her mother.

"What's this for?" Dana asked.

"I gotta fill this out and see if we live below the poverty line; they'll send us some extra money for groceries if we do," Jenny said.

"Can I help?" Donna asked. She'd come through the door just behind Dana.

"Get the calculator out of that drawer," Jenny said.

Donna retrieved the calculator and they sat at the table together as Jenny tried to recall and list all the money she'd made from her tips. Then she stood and pulled the utility bills from the wooden mail-holder that hung on the wall next to the refrigerator. Flipping through the bills, Jenny noted the monthly amounts for Southwestern Bell, Arkla Gas, and Craighead Electric. They didn't have a cable bill. Cable was a luxury they just couldn't afford. She almost forgot the water bill. She'd paid that a day ago and still had the receipt in her purse.

"Well girls. It's official. We are below the poverty line," Jenny said.

Donna whooped and hollered, and Dana hooked her fingers inside her mouth and whistled.

"Can we get some good cereal now? And some chocolate milk?" Dana said.

Donna elbowed her sister. "I want some chocolate covered raisins and some of that Jimmy Dean Sausage Mr. Campbell serves at the café. Or some chocolate covered cherries."

"We'll all go to the store together and get whatever you want when they come in. But we need to try to make them last. They only come once a month."

"Can we get cable with them?" Dana asked.

"No, and we can't buy tampons with them either." The girls giggled along with their mother. "We can buy food, and that's it. But, after the first month, we'll see if we can save enough money to get

cable. Now git. I gotta fix supper.” The girls jumped from the table and headed for the door when Jenny stopped them.

“Listen. You don't need to tell anyone about this at school. Someone might make fun of you,” Jenny said.

“They know better, Momma. We're twins,” said Dana. She wrapped her arm around her sister, and they slid sideways through the screen door.

Jenny smiled. Life as a twin guaranteed at least one back-up in a scrap.

That started a monthly ritual. Since Jenny worked as a waitress and received tips for her wages, she had to complete a worksheet each month to qualify for assistance. At the end of each month, she and the girls sat and figured their income and expenses and toasted their poverty with a trip to the grocery store at Success where they stocked up on food and bought ice cream, or candy, or whatever treat they had craved for the past month.

But the conference with Mrs. White reminded Jenny that poverty was no laughing matter. She needed a better job. As Jenny walked through the aisles of the Wallace and Owens and looked at the items she couldn't afford or that she refused to buy until her food stamps came in, she thought of how helpless she'd be if the Whites' suddenly decided to seek custody of the children.

At work every day customers talked of how a man couldn't win a custody battle, of how the courts almost never took a child away from its mother. But Jenny had seen more than one child removed from its parents and placed in the Children's Home. As one of the older children, Jenny became a big sister to the others who lived there. Every six months the cases of the children came before the Juvenile Court where Bill White, Randy White's father, represented the Children's Home in seeking continued custody of the children placed there by the state. Most of them came back from their court dates, but occasionally parents appeared in court with attorneys and took their children home with them. And Jenny never got to say good-by.

She'd attended court more than once and watched the parents

show up and tell the judge why their child should be allowed to come home. The ones with attorneys almost always won. Jenny didn't know how much an attorney cost, but she knew she couldn't afford one. Of course, she could always fuck Glen at the café. Her boss had always promised he'd give her anything if she would. And Jenny would do anything to keep her girls.

Jenny knew never to mistake sex for love. Jenny's mother, who couldn't stand the way her latest lover looked at her daughter, gave Jenny to the Department of Human Services, where Jenny celebrated her twelfth birthday as a ward of the State of Arkansas. Jenny never felt love until she had the twins, but sex was available at every foster home. Sometimes the advances came from an older sibling in the home, or from a neighbor, or relative. Twice the advances came from the head of the family that sheltered her. She knew not to complain about what happened. Complaints only caused problems, with the accusations always falling on her. Sex was the price she paid to live with her foster families. Jenny discovered she could survive by allowing the men or boys to do with her what they wanted.

She would not allow her daughters to experience that kind of life.

The advances came from the father at her last foster home. Steve Finnegan had started by coming into her room at night and masturbating as he lay on the floor next to her bed. That went on for weeks before he finally stood over the bed and ejaculated on her while he thought she lay sleeping. The night his wife caught him, they transferred Jenny to the Children's Home in Delbert. That was Jenny's fifteenth birthday.

Jenny walked past the Wonder Bread and the French rolls to the end of the aisle where the Best Choice loaves were signed "3 For a Dollar." She picked up a loaf and looked at the package. The plain bread sacks did not have an expiration date stamped on them. She put the bread back on the shelf. Backing up the aisle, she stopped in front of the Wonder Bread. The expiration date read "Nov.3rd" in bright red letters. The sign tagged on the shelf read "\$1.00." Jenny

grabbed two of the loaves and placed them in the child's seat of her cart. Then she walked to the dairy section, bought a gallon of chocolate milk, and went home.

November fifth of 1990 was Election Day. Jenny worked her shift at the café and came home. As she waited for the girls to walk home from school, she thought of Thanksgiving. Her food stamps would come in the mail later in the week, and she'd use them to buy a turkey and all the trimmings for the traditional feast. But as she kept looking down her grocery list, she knew she had forgotten something. Mandarin oranges.

The girls came in like a rush of wind through the door, laughing and giggling. They never seemed to fight, or even argue. Jenny never had a sister. The kids at the Children's Home had always seemed to be fighting—but not Donna and Dana.

"You two get in here and get something to eat. We gotta get down to the firehouse so I can vote."

"Do we have to go, Momma?" asked Dana.

"You need to see how simple it is," Jenny said.

"Why don't we ever have anyone over for the holidays? Sarah always goes to her grandmother's for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Don't we have any relatives?" Dana sat at the table with her mother while Donna went to her room.

"Did Mrs. White say something to you about this?"

"No," Dana said.

"We have some relatives, somewhere. But we have each other. We don't need anyone else," Jenny said.

"Sarah wants us to go to her grandmother's for Thanksgiving. We wanna go," Dana said.

"You just gonna leave me alone? Besides, we have some place to go for Thanksgiving."

"I don't wanna go to no employee dinner at the café. Mr. Campbell's dressing sucks," Donna said. She stormed out of the kitchen to her room.

"Watch your mouth, young lady. We have relatives to go see this

Thanksgiving," said Jenny.

"You're too embarrassed to go around any of our relatives. Mooney Jr. told everyone at school we were on welfare and that you were a whore and didn't even know who our daddy was." Dana's eyes glistened.

Jenny got up and walked over to the filing cabinet. With her keys, she unlocked and opened the top drawer and reached inside. She tossed her daughter a box of Kleenex. "There," she said. Then she leaned over the file and continued her search. Dana blew her nose and wiped her eyes as her mother slammed the drawer and came back to the table. Jenny tossed the Voodoo book down in front of her.

"When you go to school tomorrow, you cast a spell on that black bastard that'll shrivel his pecker," Jenny said.

"Momma." Donna had re-entered the room in time to hear her mother's words.

"Sit down here." Jenny directed Donna to the chair that sat next to Dana. "His mother is white, and the preacher is white. But he is black. That means the reverend cannot be his daddy. So he has no room to talk. If that fat little ... boy says anything else about us, you go tell Mrs. White. In fact, you go tell her what he said when you go to school tomorrow."

"She's not our teacher anymore. We got a new one today."

"She has cancer," Donna added. "I'm gonna miss her, too. She always uses our papers as the best papers in the class." Now Jenny understood.

"Let's get in the car and go vote," Jenny said.

"If the damned thing will start." Jenny didn't know which girl had muttered the words, and she didn't care. The old Monte Carlo might not start after all.

They pulled into the Delbert fire station just as the sun added mauve and orange hues to the horizon. The Union Pacific tracks created a meridian through the town, a de-facto demarcation from pole to pole between the haves and have-nots. A large crowd milled around in front of the station that served the wealthy side of the

town. Sheriff Wilson Underwood and Buck Donnicks, his opponent in the election, both stood on the sidewalks, shaking hands and soliciting votes for the last time. As Jenny and the girls walked up to the firehouse, a white truck with "Jester County Animal Control" painted on the door pulled up to the curb and parked in front of a fire hydrant. Jenny ran her arms through the arms of the twins and scurried off down the sidewalk.

"Jenny," Steve Finnegan said. He jumped out of the truck and ran after them. She acted like she didn't hear his words.

"Jenny," he shouted again as he tried to catch up.

"Someone is yelling at you, Momma," said Dana as she planted her feet and looked back over her shoulder.

"I didn't think you were gonna stop," Steve said as he finally caught up with them. He panted like he was out of breath.

"You'd think running with the dogs would keep an old cur like you in shape," Jenny said.

"So these are the twins I've heard so much about. You two are even prettier than your mother."

Jenny stepped forward, so close to Steve that their noses touched.

"If you ever speak to either of these girls, I'll kill you." She spoke in a low voice with a deliberate pace as she emphasized each syllable of every word. "I'll cut off that dick that you are so fond of playing with and I'll stuff it in your mouth. When they find you, you'll look like one of those armadillos you're always propping up on the road with a beer bottle in its paws." Jenny turned and started walking on up the sidewalk. Donna and Dana stood looking first at the man who had provoked such a reaction from their mother, then at Jenny's back as she walked away. They trotted after her.

"I only did one armadillo, Jenny. Someone else is doing them now. I just wanted to say hi. I haven't seen you since you left the house," he said as he followed the girls up the sidewalk. "That's been nearly fifteen years or so. Marilyn and I are divorced now."

Jenny spun around and touched noses with the man again.

"If I even see that white truck in my neighborhood after school

lets out, I'll kill you, Steve."

"That's big talk for a bitch like you. You might wake up dead yourself," he said.

"All those nights I lay in that bed pretending nothing was happening. I don't play pretend anymore."

"I just thought we might go out sometime," he said.

Jenny laughed and turned to continue up the sidewalk. The twins stepped immediately to her side. They linked their arms through the arms of their mother and carried her as Jenny nearly collapsed.

"Momma, are you ok? What was that about?" Dana asked.

"We'll put a spell on that bastard, too. Same one we put on Mooney Junior," Donna said.

Jenny smiled. Apparently, being the mother of twins guaranteed two backups in a scrap. They got their red hair from their father. No one, not even Mrs. White, could deny that. But the fire in those green eyes belonged to Jenny. They'd learned the bad language while sitting in a booth at the café, waiting for Jenny to finish her shifts. Treating the girls as equals, whenever she could, had always been Jenny's way. She scolded them for their language at times, but their lives were not simple. She didn't expect the girls to talk like Harvard lawyers, but Jenny never wanted the girls to know or experience what had happened to her. Someday when they were older she might tell them. She taught her girls early about sex, explained the difference between a good touch and a bad touch, told them that adults did not keep secrets with children, and that they would never be punished for telling her if someone touched them in the wrong way.

But Steve Finnegan still wore a badge--even if he was just the dogcatcher.

After she placed her vote, Jenny took the girls home. Finnegan was nowhere around as they left the building. They sat up late that night and popped popcorn and watched a movie they'd rented at the video rental in the Wallace and Owens store. The next morning was still a school day, but that night, it didn't matter. Jenny didn't want to be alone, never again. After dialing Archie Snell's number, she got a

recording. She left a message.

"Hi. This is Jenny. I just wondered when we were ever gonna see each other again. Not in the café. Call me," she said.

She didn't understand how a person could live with thirty other kids like she had at the Children's Home and feel so alone. As she sat on the couch and laughed with her girls, she remembered how her life had been before Donna and Dana. She'd had no life. Her own mother's face appeared as a blur in her memory, surrounded by dark hair that fell over ample breasts. Doreen. At least she could remember her name. Doreen had called from Las Vegas after the twins were born. She'd called the Children's Home, and they gave her the number at Campbell's, and Glen, after being told Doreen was Jenny's mother, had told her Jenny was at the hospital with twin girls. When he answered no, Jenny hadn't married, Doreen hung up and never called again.

Jenny knew her life had been different because of her mother. The twins' lives were different because of her. But Jenny had no one. If Steve Finnegan ever made good on his threat to kill her, or if she ever had an accident like Earl Montgomery, the girls would go to foster care, or to the same home she had. Acknowledging the Whites' as the girl's grandparents would at least give them someone to care for them; but it would also give them someone who could easily take them away.

And if Mrs. White were to die of cancer, the girls would be devastated. But couldn't the love of a grandmother, even for a short time, compensate for the pain of such a devastating loss? Having never experienced such love, Jenny couldn't answer her own question.

A vehicle eased past the house; its lights crawling across the living room walls. Jenny refused to go to the window to look out. If it were Finnegan, he would want her to be looking for him.

She picked up the phone and left another message on Archie's answering machine.

Jenny took her turkey out of the refrigerator early Thanksgiving

morning. She stirred meal and eggs into a bowl to make cornbread for dressing. Donna and Dana had been quiet the past week, and they had repeatedly asked if they could go to Sarah's to eat. Jenny repeatedly told them no.

With butter she'd bought at Success with her food stamps, she prepared the turkey for the oven. She left big, yellow lumps under the skin of the breast. Then she slipped her fingers under the skin of the thigh and leg and left more. The butter would melt and baste the meat as the turkey baked, keeping the bird from drying out. Miss Grace, the cook at the Children's Home, had shown her the trick one holiday morning when Jenny woke hours before the other children and couldn't go back to sleep.

The staff and faculty at the orphanage tried their best to create a family atmosphere. When Jenny thought about her days at the home, she realized just how hard the staff had tried. But no matter what they had done, the holidays always seemed lonely.

Many times Jenny woke up early and went to the kitchen where Miss Grace let her help with the holiday meal, or the old cook would give Jenny an open can of Mandarin oranges--a special treat Miss Grace kept hid away in the cabinets for the times Jenny would come to see her.

"Why aren't you home with your family today?" Jenny asked her one Christmas.

Miss Grace continued to cut biscuits from the dough she had rolled out on the table in front of her. Holiday mornings kept her busy as she prepared the breakfast and dinner meals at the same time. Grace looked to be about sixty years old, although she never told anyone her real age. "The day I retire will be the day they place me six feet under," she always said, and Jenny was sure Miss Grace was still there. As broad as she was tall, she looked like a stump. Dressed in gray slacks, a blue flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, and a white apron and hairnet, Miss Grace always had a special treat for any of the children who wandered into her kitchen. Jenny never had a grandmother, but she always wanted one like Miss Grace. "My daughters cook supper for me the day before

Christmas," she said. "That way I can take care of you children. You need me more than they do."

Jenny walked to the phone and picked up the directory. She dialed the Whites' home number. Mrs. White answered the phone.

"I have a turkey and some dressing that I'm just now putting in the oven. We could be there about eleven. Do you need me to get anything from the store before we come over?"

"Could you get some cranberry sauce, Jenny? Get some jellied and whole berry if you don't mind. And a bag of ice," Mrs. White said. "The Wallace and Owens is open today. I'll pay you for it when you get here."

"I got cranberry sauce, both kinds. I can get the ice," Jenny said. The phone went silent for just a few moments before Jenny spoke again. "I'll tell the girls before we come over today."

"We'll be ready for you when you get here." Mrs. White could not hide the excitement in her voice.

"Why didn't you tell me about the cancer?"

"Would it have made any difference?" Mrs. White asked.

"No. Not to me. Not then."

After she placed the phone back on the receiver, Jenny put the turkey in the oven. She wiped down the table and opened a can of Mandarin oranges. She dumped the contents in a Tupperware bowl and tossed the empty can in the trash. Then she walked down the hall to wake her sleeping daughters.

