

Independent Living

by Lauren Becker

When her friend Jenny died, Rachel got smaller. Her bones, already curved and soft, dipped her closer to the ground. Her fingers, long-swollen with arth-er-itis, as she called it, swelled more and she could no longer get the three large rings she had always worn past her oversized knuckles. She removed her wedding band for the first and last time in seventy-one years.

Rachel's husband, Isaac, died fourteen years earlier. She mourned him, of course, but he had been sick and she had been younger. Now, relatives and friends, interchangeable in age and malady, died like dominoes, one then the other, falling in rows of blurred identities. She and Jenny kept each other distinct in their similarities. Both were child-sized with ashy blonde pageboy haircuts and wore fashionable costume jewelry purchased by their daughters-in-law. Though both in their early nineties, they referred to each other as "best friend," an endearment neither had used since high school.

Rachel and Jenny were popular at the independent living home where their children had placed them, safe and separate, in expensive, lovely apartments sparsely decorated with things salvaged from the places where they had raised those children.

"Everyone wants to sit at our table at lunch," Rachel complained to her two sons, delighted. She had resisted the move from Pittsburgh to Los Angeles. The months before Jenny arrived from Chicago were punishing. Jenny's presence quieted Rachel's complaints and evoked a sweetness like newly ripened fruit. The transformation in their domineering, sour mother revised her children's memories of their childhoods.

Jenny had an excellent walker with wheels, rather than one of the unwieldy contraptions most still used to clunk slowly along the extra-wide halls. Rachel had her sons purchase her one immediately. The walkers had attractive plastic seats for resting

when they grew tired of wheeling. They often parked themselves apart from the others, engrossed in the girl talk of old ladies.

They gossiped about the would-be friends who crowded them at their lunch table. The one with the gay grandson, the one who didn't wear a brassiere, the one who always ate two desserts. The one whose daughter had lymphoma, the one who wore girlish plastic barrettes and a stained yellow housecoat, the one with a car who would not let anyone ride. They held each other's knotty, misshapen hands. "We are peas in a pod, Rachel," Jenny declared in her loud, crackled, cigarette-stained voice.

For fifteen months, they talked about their children, their grandchildren, their husbands, their lives. They spoke quickly, needing each other to know these things for reasons they did not acknowledge.

They celebrated their birthdays and ignored obituaries and emptied apartments. Rachel had a minor heart attack that kept her in the hospital for five days. She asked her sons to check on Jenny, to make sure her friend knew that she was coming back. While she was gone, Jenny died.

Rachel had not finished telling Jenny things. She did not care to tell anyone else. She put the useless rings in a drawer for her granddaughters to fight over, and waited.

