



VALERY VARBLE

## WILD CAMELS

It was a Thursday afternoon in September when Ardeth and Kendall Maitland got the news that the sum of their family—their only child, Lily, her husband, Jim, and their two boys, Trey and Matthew—had been killed in a small plane crash just outside of Olney, Illinois. “The sum of our family” was how Kendall put it, trying to express the extent of the loss, not “some of our family” as he was quoted in the local newspaper. Ardeth felt the reporter had taken advantage of how dazed and shaken Kendall was. She lay awake at night, heart pounding as she thought of the newspaper’s careless disregard of the facts, of people’s feelings, not to mention the sheer inaccuracy of the reporting. “Some of our family” made it sound as if there were others, extras in reserve. There weren’t. Lily was their only child. She’d come along just when Ardeth and Kendall had accepted childlessness as their condition in life. Lily, her husband, and their two sons were all there were, the sum total of their lives, hers and Kendall’s—that’s what Kendall had meant. All gone. She was going to write the paper and demand a retraction. She would insist they take it back.

Just before Ardeth and Kendall set out for Olney, they’d stopped at Cerutti’s Quik-E-Mart to fill up the car. When Kendall went inside to pay, he remembered to offer George congratulations on the birth of his first granddaughter and George broke down. A huge, gruff man, he vibrated with grief. He was so sorry for the Maitlands’ loss. He couldn’t for the life of him imagine. Was there anything he could do? He just wished he could *do* something. Kendall stood quietly as George pressed on him a pair of hotdogs—mustard? relish?—moist towelettes, a book of matches. Coffee. A free car wash. “I know it’s not enough,” George said finally, helplessly, his voice so low that Kendall had to lean forward to hear him. “How could it ever be enough?” His hands were still shaking.





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Kendall cleared his throat, glancing around the counter. He bought a map of Illinois, a Lions Club keychain, and a roll of mints for Ardeth.

They went through the car wash in silence. Torrents of water battered the car. Suds ran down the windows. The water went away and then returned with even more force, a rattling spray like hail on the roof. This violent drenching felt good in a way, Ardeth thought. A kind of momentary relief. Here we are, so dry, she wanted to say. They hadn't really cried yet because none of it seemed real. "We're in the eye of the storm," she told Kendall.

Olney was only about four hours away, on the other side of the state, but they'd never been there before. "It's a nice place to live but I wouldn't want to visit," Ardeth mused to Kendall as she looked out the window at the filling stations and fast food restaurants, a florist's shop, a tavern with a handpainted sign that said "Liquor and Spirits," but he nodded without smiling; he didn't realize she'd made a sort of joke. Ardeth wondered why she'd said that, if maybe she'd read it somewhere. They checked into the Bide-a-Wee Motel. It was a small place, nothing fancy, with a half-hearted Scottish theme. Ardeth wasn't crazy about the appointments, the plaid draperies, the way the bed was slightly sunken in the middle—"We'll be rolling toward each other all night," she told Kendall—but it was clean and AAA-approved. Ardeth drank a glass of water from the tap. Kendall looked at the plastic ice bucket and tapped it. He turned the TV on and then off again. There was a color brochure on the nightstand that explained that Olney, Illinois, was famous for being the "Home of the White Squirrels."

While Kendall read about the white squirrels, Ardeth got out her pad of paper and sat on the bed making phone calls. She took notes, jotting down information. Yes, she'd assumed Jim had been piloting the plane, a small Cessna. That was her son-in-law and he'd had his pilot's license for some time. Oh. The cause of the accident was yet to be determined but some kind of mechanical failure rather than pilot error seemed likely. The weather on Thursday had been clear and mild. Barometric pressure was normal for that time of year. The accident site was an alfalfa field about six miles from town. They'd recovered some of the family's personal effects, including one of the boys' shoes.





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“They’ve found the shoes,” she whispered to Kendall and then listened again. “Wait. One *pair* of the boys’ shoes.” She paused. “One shoe. One shoe that belonged to one of the boys,” she told Kendall. After a moment she said, “They think it’s probably Trey’s because of the size, but remember how much Matthew grew last year? I know for a fact Lily was amazed at the size of his feet. She just couldn’t get over it.”

There was a pause and then Kendall said, “In that case, it could belong to either one.” Ardeth shut her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, Kendall told her that the white squirrels had been in Olney since just after the Civil War. “They may have escaped from a traveling circus,” he said.

Ardeth nodded and suggested that he lie down for a little bit. He needed to rest. The drive hadn’t been long but it was tiring. And late last night before bed she’d heard odd, harsh sounds coming from the bathroom where Kendall was, and then the toilet had flushed, again and again. She’d wondered if Kendall was vomiting. Neither of them had been hungry for supper but she’d finally made them Cream of Wheat, just so they’d have something in their stomachs. Or maybe there was stoppage somewhere in the pipes. “Kenny?” she called through the door. Only later did it come to her that maybe he’d been crying and hadn’t wanted her to hear. As if by silent agreement, they turned out the lights a long time before bedtime, and then, later, felt their way to bed in the dark.

Ardeth had lain awake forever. She kept wondering if Lily and her family had been on their way from Missouri to visit them for a long weekend, a rare surprise. But she suspected they were probably going instead to visit Jim’s parents, Texans even though they now lived in Kentucky. Lily was quite fond of her mother-in-law, Honey. Honey called her “Lil,” as if Lily were someone with a sweep of hair dangling in her eyes, a cigarette holder, a slit in her dress, a rhinestone clip. Ardeth always knew when Lily had been spending too much time with Jim’s parents; her laugh was a little louder, flatter, almost a bray. Honey didn’t use cake pedestals or cloth napkins; she didn’t bother with tablecloths. “Well, I guess I’m still just a country girl,” Ardeth had overheard her say once to Lily, laughing, as if Ardeth hadn’t grown up on a farm, too, and during the Great Depression. Honey’s low, confidential drawl: “Tell me again what’s wrong with paper napkins?”





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One of the things Ardeth had come to understand about herself was that she tried too hard. She and Kendall sometimes loaded up the car and drove across the state to visit the kids just because Ardeth felt like it. Surprise! She always had the feeling, as they pulled into the driveway honking gaily and then climbed out, arms loaded, to ring the doorbell, that Lily's family had had to scramble into action, covering and straightening, pushing things out of sight. There was always an air of tenseness in their greeting, of dust settling. Ardeth had once found dirty dishes hidden in the oven and she'd laughed. What a smart idea for when company showed up unexpectedly! All the same, it made Ardeth sad. They didn't need to do things like that. It bothered her that it seemed she could only catch glimpses of Lily and Jim and the boys—their true selves, their real lives—out of the corner of her eye. Whenever she looked straight at them, they froze.

Ardeth always hated, too, the shrill breeziness of her own voice when she first arrived, exclaiming how rough and in need of repair the highway was or how long the trip seemed or how interesting Lily's hair looked in that new style. To stop herself talking, she'd get busy helping Kendall to carry in their overnight bags, the chocolate cake she'd baked, the frozen lasagna, the ham, packages of hamburger buns that had been on sale, homemade peanut brittle for Trey and Matthew, fresh corn and tomatoes from the garden. Everyone knew that the typical family's grocery dollar wasn't stretching as far these days and besides, it was practically impossible to keep enough food in the house for boys that age. She'd also bring Lily an envelope of articles she'd clipped on organizing the family finances, stain removal, making one-of-a-kind kitchen curtains from vintage aprons, and how a lot of common headaches were caused by simple dehydration. Ardeth would carry the food into the kitchen, making room in the freezer for the lasagna and the ham, putting the vegetables in the fridge, trying not to notice the processed cheese and yellowing celery, the expensive canned dog food, the open bottle of wine. Then she and Lily would collide in a tense hug.

Lily would offer iced tea while Ardeth and Kendall sat for a while in the living room, resting. The dog would come



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over and lap at Ardeth's ankles and she'd gasp, kicking at it. Ardeth had never pretended to be a "dog person" and didn't understand why they seemed to like her so much. She referred to any dog as a "he," although this one's name was Molly, the boys kept telling her loudly; *he* was a female golden retriever. "In other words, a bitch," Trey shrugged, his eyes bright, and Ardeth said warningly, "Trey." The boys laughed hilariously. For that whole visit, they referred to everyone as "he," muttering jokes to each other, snickering, kicking each other's shins. They'd always been such sweet boys, and exceptionally intelligent—Ardeth had spent time working with them on their reading long before they started school—but now they were at that age. Ardeth wouldn't have allowed it. No matter how big they were getting, she would've sat each of them down firmly in a corner. She told Lily so, when she brought in the tea, ice clinking in the glasses, and then felt a hot, immovable weight of despair, as if the dog had lain across her lap. She wondered if the boys mimicked her after she and Kendall left for home.

Why am I dwelling on the negative things? Ardeth wondered as she lay awake, hour after hour. There'd been good times, too. Not a single day of her life had gone by that she didn't think of Lily, that she didn't think of them all. "Do you believe they suffered?" she whispered to Kendall in the dark. Her throat was so tight she could hardly breathe. She felt a rushing dizziness, as if she were the one plummeting through the air. "It must have been awful. Do you think they knew what was going to happen?"

She could tell from his breathing that he was awake, that he was thinking about it, too. But he didn't get the chance to answer. The alarm went off, they jerked upright, hearts pounding, and got up to face the day. They dressed and brushed their teeth. Ardeth applied a little lipstick and rubbed some into her cheeks; she was so pale. She put Kleenex into her purse. Kendall counted the money in his wallet, checked to make sure he had the room key, and then he put the white squirrels brochure in his jacket pocket. "Do we have everything we need?" he asked Ardeth.

Everything looked nice for the funeral, quietly elegant. The four caskets were closed, of course, but the florist had done





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wonders with the armload of magnolia branches Ardeth had brought from home. There were no magnolia blossoms this time of year, but the florist had used pale pink and copper-tinted roses, unusual and striking against the glossy, deep green leaves. Because the sprays on the caskets were similar, the overall effect was unified, but the florist had made each arrangement slightly different at Ardeth's suggestion. Ardeth was pleased with the way everything turned out, as she remarked to the funeral director's wife at the house afterward. Mrs. Metcalf had made her way over especially to serve Ardeth a cup of coffee.

Mrs. Metcalf agreed that all the arrangements had been lovely and unique. "You're doing just beautifully," she murmured, nodding at the clusters of people talking, the buffet table full of wonderful food. "Why, you've got everything under control." Ardeth felt this was a real compliment. She was sure Mrs. Metcalf had seen a lot of people falling apart at the seams. Honey looked lovely, for example, in a powder blue suit, but her face was red and puffy and so was her husband Roy's. She kept belching softly as if she'd gulped down a soda. She'd hugged Ardeth before the funeral, then stepped back, dabbing at her eyes. "Wasn't sure you'd decide to come," she drawled, then burped, then burst into fresh weeping. Ardeth stood there stiffly until Kendall rescued her so they could be seated.

Then she was so upset she could hardly concentrate on the service. It wasn't surprising that Honey might have been drinking, but Ardeth was shocked at Honey's spitefulness, that she would deliberately dredge up old pain on this day. Why, *ages* had gone by since Lily and Jim had decided to elope. And she didn't need Honey to remind her of that day—as if she'd ever forget it! At the very last moment, the kids had gotten nervous and called them, the two sets of parents, shakily inviting them to the ceremony at the justice of the peace. Honey and Roy, despite whatever reservations they might have had, decided to drop everything and attend. It was clear to them, they always said later, that the kids were gonna go ahead regardless. But Ardeth refused to go. "That's not how I planned it" was all she could say. It was the truth; she couldn't help it. Lily was her one chance. "Mother, I can't believe you," Lily had said flatly, dropping the phone. Ardeth



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heard it hit the floor with a crack and then there was some murmuring on the other end. She was just about to call out to Lily that she'd changed her mind when Honey picked up the phone. "You're sure about this?" Honey asked and then said, "Well, suit yourself."

Now, after the service, Mrs. Metcalf patted her arm again and moved away to speak to other guests. Ardeth dumped out her cold coffee and poured herself another cup, telling herself she ought to mingle. But as she listened to the voices around her, something rose in her throat.

Just then Enid Barker came over and took Ardeth's hand. She'd been Lily's fifth-grade teacher. "Lily was such a bright, shining child," she said, her hearing aid whistling softly. "So accomplished, and at such an early age. I'll never forget how much you"—she paused—"encouraged her." Ardeth nodded, but she was watching Kendall as he stood there with a punch cup in his hand, making conversation. "It might seem like a freak accident, but it isn't," he was saying, and the blood dropped from Ardeth's head. What could he mean, to describe their loss that way? "Apparently," he went on, "it's not a mutation at all, at least not most of the time. Maybe the ones in Olney are true albinos, but from what I read, the white squirrels in a couple other places, like Marionville, Missouri, and someplace in Tennessee, have dark eyes. It's adaptation."

Oh, the white squirrels. He was talking about the squirrels. Ardeth's head ached; the blood thudded in her ears. Someone murmured a question and he said, "Well, the story I like is that they were left behind by a gypsy caravan in 1869." He gave Ardeth a bemused smile across the room.

A sudden decision flared in Ardeth like a struck match, the first clear thing she'd felt in days: she and Kendall would move out of Illinois, away from the Midwest. She couldn't stand it here anymore, and there was nothing to keep them. Kendall would agree. As soon as they could, they'd move to another state, another part of the country, a different place altogether.

They bought a house in Mesa, Arizona. In the photographs it looked small and lacked the character of their old house, Ardeth thought, but that was okay. Kendall was so thin that





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with winter here, he wanted to be someplace warm. Most of their things, the furniture and clothes, they sent ahead in a moving truck, but Ardeth thought it would be nice to drive the rest of their belongings out to Arizona themselves and make an adventure out of it. Christmas was finally over and it was a new year. "It'll be so fun, Kenny," she said. They'd load a truck and pull their old Airstream trailer behind, traveling through the southwest at their leisure.

The truck was partly loaded with last-minute odds and ends from the empty house, things too good to put out with the trash: garden hoses, the artificial Christmas tree, plant pots, a metal file cabinet Ardeth had bought at a sale. The rest of the load was what Ardeth thought of as "the good stuff": the nicer antiques she'd picked up at sales, her favorite heirloom-quality dishes, family pieces like her grandmother Ma MacWhirter's blue coin spot pitcher and the Seth Thomas clock Kendall's parents had received as a wedding gift. All the things she had planned on bequeathing to Lily.

They had many of Lily's things, too, of course, some of which Ardeth had chosen simply because they surprised her so much: Lily's oil paints and brushes, her guitar, some bright Mexican pottery, old high school compositions, a history she seemed to have been compiling of the Missouri mule, of all things. There was also Trey's plaster of paris handprint, when he was four years old. A picture of a Thanksgiving turkey that Matthew had filled in with different colors of seeds and beans. A shoebox full of their old Matchbox cars. The cutwork linen tablecloth Ardeth had made herself for Lily and Jim's first anniversary.

Honey and Roy had taken the dog without any discussion, even though Ardeth had seen the way Kendall patted and stroked it, even kneeling to hug the dog's neck. He'd stayed there for a long moment, breathing against the animal's fur, fondling its ears, until finally he gave the dog's trembling haunches a good-bye pat and let the gently wagging tail slide through his fingers.

Kendall had sunk a little low. Ardeth tried to perk him up whenever she could. She read the local newspapers aloud to him as they drove along; she looked out especially for the cafeteria-style restaurants Kendall liked so they could take their meals there. "Make sure you eat a lot of this good food,"





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she urged him, spooning things onto his plate. “You’re disappearing, Kenny. Look, here’s corn pudding—you love that.” She’d ask him questions about his meal choices just so he’d talk a little. Were the green beans overcooked? Did he like the seasonings okay? Her mashed potatoes were a little dry and when it came to the gravy, she believed the cook must’ve stubbed his toe with the saltshaker. But that rhubarb pie looked wonderful. Was he going to take some for dessert, with ice cream?

Sometimes when Ardeth heard herself, she couldn’t believe it, but she went on talking. She suggested they linger over coffee so they could sit and watch people. She watched people, murmuring commentary, while Kendall stared at his folded hands. She was glad when strangers struck up conversations with him at the KOA campgrounds as he unhitched the trailer and took care of the hook-ups. When he talked to them, he seemed fine. People often stopped him at rest stops or filling stations to ask questions about the Airstream or whether there was road construction up ahead, and Ardeth listened as he responded with his old warmth and humor. That was good, Ardeth told herself. She didn’t mind. She was glad. Sometimes it was just easier to talk to strangers.

At the same time, she wondered if she might start screaming, as suddenly and simply as taking a breath. As the landscape stretched out, so did the silences between them. They weighed as much as the sky.

Ardeth herself had slipped a little sideways, too, she knew. She couldn’t stop buying things. It started with a green tin bread box, the kind Lily had always wanted for her kitchen. She spotted it in an antique shop window in Arkansas as they headed south. “Vintage English Enamelware Bread Box,” the tag said, and Ardeth was staggered by the price: \$125. Still, she found herself taking it up to the counter. When she showed it to Kendall out in the truck, he nodded and said it was nice. Ardeth decided not to tell him how much it had cost. She’d expected to feel a little sick over the whole thing, but instead she was elated.

She bought all kinds of things after that, from antique shops and flea markets and even garage sales, if they passed one that looked good. For Jim, she bought some nice all-cotton shirts and a wool suit jacket she knew would fit him





beautifully. She bought loads of books for the boys, some brand-new swim trunks, and an old coal miner's lunch pail for Matthew. And for Trey, just for fun, she bought a pair of real bullfrogs that had been stuffed and outfitted in little straw hats. They were smoking cigars and playing cards. She hesitated at first since, of course, she didn't condone either activity, but then she went ahead. Both of the boys would get a kick out of that one. Yes, she knew they were gone—of course she knew—but for minutes, hours, sometimes whole afternoons, it didn't feel that way. And anyway, how could she leave that Navajo blanket or deep purple carnival ware bowl behind when she knew these things were exactly what Lily had been looking for, what she would've loved? Ardeth just couldn't do it. She tried once or twice, but then she made Kendall turn around and go back. He never said anything about what she bought or put his foot down. He usually just stayed in the truck.

By the time they got to Quartzsite in Arizona, they had a full load.

"Well, obviously you two are here to sell," a woman next door to them at the rv park said, stopping by to introduce herself and her husband. "I'm Jackie and this is my husband, Marv, and we hope you'll come over to our place for cocktail hour."

"*Hour?*" Marv grinned, nudging Kendall. "Is that all? We'll have to drink fast, buddy."

"We're way ahead of you already," a woman's voice called. Ardeth could see a whole group of people over there next to the Winnebago, sitting in lawn chairs around a small fire. The desert air was cool with an odd, sharp scent. A radio was playing country music over in the direction of the shower rooms and laundromat.

"No thank you," Ardeth said, "We're what you might call teetotalers," but Jackie was already introducing Lucille and Bob, Scottie and Dick, Marge and Frank, and their dear friend, Babette—"We call her Baby, poor thing, because she's younger than us"—who'd just lost her husband. The couples waved and said hello. "That's the whole gang," Jackie said. "We come just about every year and run around together. We sure hope you'll feel welcome to join us, if you want to."

Ardeth tried to smile graciously, but her lips were numb,





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her neck stiff. She shook her head. “We’ll only be staying in Quartzsite a night or two,” she said, although later Kendall asked her, “Why? What’s our big hurry?” It only took a day or two for Ardeth to have the answer. These women were like a pack of Honeys, that was why—tan, freckled, wearing big flashing rings and pink or orange lipstick. Their hair, Ardeth thought privately, though attractive, always looked styled by a dog groomer. They wore Keds in all different colors to match their short outfits, and peds with pompons on the heel. Jackie wore an ankle bracelet, a fine gold chain. They drank scotch and martinis; they played golf and bridge, the women making sly, deadpan jokes at the expense of their husbands. “Why shouldn’t the jokes be at my expense?” Bob boomed. “I pay for everything else!” He was the kind of man, Ardeth was sure, who said, “What can I do you for?” and “Absitively posolutely,” although underneath all that, he seemed kind. He complimented Ardeth’s cooking, the little snacks and canapés and cookies and finger food she started contributing. No one could believe she could cook food like that in just a little Airstream, and Scottie even announced she was going to start garnishing all her dishes, too, whether Dick liked it or not. Dick said she’d have to actually cook something first. Everyone laughed. Bob clapped Kendall on the back and called him a lucky man.

Ardeth kept saying to Kendall, “Hadn’t we ought to move on?” but they stayed a week, then two. There was plenty to do. In January and February, as it turned out, Quartzsite was the world’s biggest flea market and rock and mineral show. In these months of the year, the little town swelled to almost a million people. Kendall visited the tomb of Hi Jolly—Hadji Ali, really—and was so excited about the piece of local history that he bought a booklet about it. “Turns out Hi Jolly was a camel driver here in Arizona,” he told Ardeth, looking up from the book. “It was an experiment by the U.S. Army back in the 1850s to use camels. They brought over some seventy camels for the Beale expedition, to open a wagon trail from Fort Defiance to California. Jefferson Davis, the secretary of war, was the one who approved the plan. It says here that those camels could carry a thousand pounds of freight sixty-five miles a day.”

Ardeth said she was thinking about opening a booth at





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the flea market, as long as they were going to be there for a little while, to see if she might sell a few things. But Kendall was still reading about the camels. “Well, the army eventually abandoned the experiment,” he said, and Ardeth noticed how absorbed he was. “I guess most of the camels got auctioned off to circuses and zoos and mining companies. But the sign at Hi Jolly’s grave said that some of them were just left out there in the desert to shift for themselves.”

“All that stuff, I thought for sure you and Ken were dealers,” Jackie told Ardeth. “You might consider it anyway. We’re not professionals, but a couple of us sell a little just for fun.” She and Lucille sold small antique pieces and Depression glass. Scottie was their “picker”—she’d look for bargains in other booths and then bring them back for Lucille and Jackie to fix up and sell. Ardeth went around with her a couple of times, wandering up and down the endless aisles of goods. She liked the serious dealers, even though they all seemed to be chain-smokers. They sat in folding chairs in the shade, hats pulled down, observing everyone with what struck Ardeth as a quiet, canny gaze. They were knowledgeable. Sometimes they roamed among each other’s booths and Ardeth sensed a suppressed energy; a spark that lifted her spirits. There were wondrous things for sale here: old western saddles, Indian rugs and pottery, cow skulls, antique glass, geodes and gemstones, packages of brand-new tube socks, cacti and succulents, painted wooden pieces from Russia, fry bread, funnel cakes, even necklaces a woman made out of beads and tiny turkey bones.

Babette—Ardeth just couldn’t bring herself to call her Baby—had a booth, too. She sold hand-painted clothing she made herself, mostly jackets she sewed out of old pants. The pant legs became the sleeves of the jacket. They were certainly unusual. The workmanship was a little loose, and they weren’t the kind of thing Ardeth would ever wear herself, but she admired Babette’s creativity. There was also a big rack of afghans Babette had crocheted while her husband was in the hospital.

Whenever the women showed snapshots of their children and grandchildren, Ardeth excused herself, her heart thumping in her chest. And while she was sorry to hear about the





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death of Babette's husband, Ardeth fervently hoped not to hear the details. It set her a little on edge that Babette sometimes teared up for no reason, and one evening, there was simply no escape. Babette's grief came on like a summer storm. Before anyone knew it, she was crying, sobbing, gasping. And then it was gone. Ardeth gathered up dishes as she watched how Babette's friends encircled her, rubbing her back, plucking Kleenex from a box and pressing it into her hands. A few of them had cried as well. When Babette finally gave a weak smile and blew her nose, they began teasing her, gently. "Maybe we ought to issue a flash flood warning," someone said. Lucille lent her a lipstick. Jackie gave Marv a look and he brought over some kind of drink for Babette, with slices of lime and ice cubes. They all said things like "don't feel bad" and "it just takes time."

Neither Ardeth nor Kendall would ever say anything about their own loss; she was resolved about that. They couldn't bring themselves to mention any of it. Strictly speaking, it was no one else's business. And anyway, Ardeth wouldn't know what to say. Even if she did say something, there would be that awful pause. How would she arrange her face? No. She and Kendall had already come through the worst; somehow, they'd managed beautifully. They didn't need a thing now, and besides, she didn't want to take anything away from Babette.

So she couldn't believe it when she heard Kendall say slowly, "We suffered a loss a few months ago ourselves."

"Kenny," she said, her voice bright with warning. "Tell them about the camels." He gazed at her for a moment but then cleared his throat and repeated some of what he'd read about Hi Jolly and the abandoned experiment. "No one knows for sure why the government stopped fooling with the camels," he said. "Some said the desert country was too rocky and hard on their feet. Someone even invented a special shoe for their split toes, but I guess it didn't work out too well. In the end, whatever camels the government couldn't sell, they just turned loose out into the desert."

"You know," one of the men said, "that they're supposedly still out there. There are prospectors and hikers, people like that, who come out of the desert claiming they've seen camel tracks."





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“Is that right?” Kendall said, his voice quickening. “You mean recently?”

Ardeth sat there, flushed with a curious ache as if she had a fever. Before bed she looked in the back of the truck, trying to remember where something of Lily’s was. Anything of Lily’s. Where had Ardeth put her paint box? If she could find it, she’d read the names of the colors Lily had chosen to use. Cadmium, Titanium, Cobalt. Weren’t those minerals like she’d seen at the flea market? She’d take the tiny lids off the paint tubes and smell them; she’d brush away the little crusted rings of dried paint. There were tubes of paint that still held the press of Lily’s thumb. But the truck was so full, there was no way she could find that particular box. There was nothing to do but go to bed. Kendall was already in his pajamas, brushing his teeth, his mouth full of foam. “Kenny?” she said, desolation filling her mouth. “How long has it been now?” She already knew the exact answer: three months and twenty-seven days, but she wanted him to be the one to say the words out loud.

“Well, since 1857, however many years that is,” Kendall said, and spit into the sink. He rinsed his mouth.

Ardeth looked at him for a moment. “I meant the kids,” she said.

“Oh,” he said, and was silent.

In the morning, Ardeth asked Kendall to back the truck into the booth she’d arranged at the flea market. At first she just put out odds and ends like the old garden hose, the artificial Christmas tree. She sold the shirts she’d bought for Jim, the brand-new swim trunks, and the miner’s lunch pail, for pennies on the dollar, but that was okay.

Jackie and Babette and Scottie came by to browse. “We’ve just come from the Naked Bookstore in town,” Scottie laughed. Ardeth had heard that the bookstore’s owner went around the shop in nothing but sandals and a cowboy hat. “Jackie’s becoming quite the reader.”

“*Nude* Bookstore,” Jackie said. “Not *naked*. There’s a difference. That man’s definitely nude.” They all laughed. Ardeth laughed, too, an artificial laugh, despising herself for being so stiff and prim. She remembered with a sudden stab of pain how when she was a girl, she used to wish she’d be teased, her hair ruffled; she’d desperately wanted someone



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to give her a nickname. Not *Ardie*, though; that was ugly. *Ardeth* sounded like a lisp, but it was soft.

When she saw Babette looking at the cutwork tablecloth she'd made for Lily and Jim's anniversary, she felt a fleeting panic. She hadn't meant to leave it out; things like that were strictly not for sale. "What beautiful work," Babette said, stroking the linen, examining the stitchwork. "Why, it's impeccable. I'd give anything to do work that fine."

"It was my daughter's," Ardeth said, and after a moment, "I made it myself."

Babette said she couldn't get over that, and then Ardeth was surprised to hear herself say, all in a rush, "I'd love for you to have it."

Babette blinked. "I'll buy it from you," she said, "I hope you didn't think . . ." But Ardeth said no. No. No. Just take it.

There was a silence and then Babette said, "Well, thank you, Ardeth. I hardly know what to say. It's absolutely beautiful. Thank you." She hugged it to herself. Jackie had ambled across the way and was peering into a box of fifty-cent items. The women were about to move on. "Do you want to get some lunch?" Ardeth heard Scottie say. Ardeth hesitated and turned away, pretending she hadn't heard, not sure if she was invited. After a moment, they walked away.

Then she called after them, "Wait." The women turned, Jackie rummaging in her big purse for something, Scottie shading her eyes from the glaring light. "I want to tell a story on myself about that tablecloth," Ardeth said.

The women came back and circled around her. She told them about Lily and Jim's last-minute wedding, how she'd refused to go. "I don't know why I did that," she said. "Even now I can't say why I dug in that way."

Why, you wanted the best for your daughter, same as any mother would, the women exclaimed. Of course you did. You wanted her to have a real wedding.

Ardeth told how she'd made the tablecloth for them as an anniversary gift, to make up for everything. It had taken her months practically—"I can sure believe that," Babette said—because she wanted the cutwork to be perfect. But somehow the gift had fallen short; you could buy tablecloths like that in department stores now, made overseas. The moment Lily had held it up to show everyone, her face hidden behind it, Ardeth knew that it hadn't been enough.



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She gave Scottie the green English bread box. For Jackie she rummaged around until she found Ma MacWhirter's blue coin spot pitcher. When she put it into Jackie's hands, Ardeth heard a gasp. She thought it was Jackie for a moment until she realized she'd made the sound herself.

"You don't have to do this," Jackie said quickly, and Ardeth was surprised to see tears in her eyes. "Honestly, Ardeth. These are your lovely things."

Ardeth emptied the truck. It took all afternoon. Some of the people, some of the dealers who came around, were reluctant. They insisted that she take *something* for the books and dishes, the demi-lune table and primitive mule-eared chairs, the Navajo rug, the Seth Thomas clock, the carnival glass bowl, the quilts. Are you sure? they kept saying. Are you sure? Ardeth's blood sang under her skin. Whoever would've guessed? It was like exhaling when you didn't know you'd been holding your breath. It was like filling with air. Or something even lighter than air. It was like rising.

Kendall would kill her.

"Kendall's going to kill me," she told Jackie and the rest of the women when they wandered back down the rows from their flea-marketing to check on Ardeth. Twilight was coming on. She was just closing up the truck. "No, he won't," she said and surprised herself by laughing. She felt dizzy, light, floating. Of course he wouldn't.

"Oh, my God," Marge said, looking around. Her arms were full of bags and packages, and she was wearing a hat she must've bought that afternoon, made out of soda can pieces crocheted together with thick red yarn. "You mean *all* that stuff is gone? Just since noon? You must've made a killing."

Ardeth cleared her throat. "We suffered a loss ourselves a few months ago," she said, just like that. She told them about Lily and Jim, Trey and Matthew. At first her bright, rushing voice didn't match the story, she could hear that plainly for herself, and she saw the women exchange quick glances. A pulse beat under her eye.

But little by little, her throat eased. She told them how poor Matthew'd had the exact same cowlicks as his great granddad, her own father, and that Trey loved cars, anything to do with cars. Jim had been allergic to nuts. If he ate





*Varble*

any kind of a nut, it could kill him. All except sunflower seeds. He could eat those. Lily. Her only daughter, Lily. When Lily was a child and people asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, she always said, "A mermaid."

She stopped. There was the sound of traffic far away on the interstate. Ardeth could hear laughter and somewhere nearby, someone was grilling hamburgers.

One of the women stepped out of the dimming light and gave her a swift hug.

By the next morning, many of the things had been returned. Ardeth wasn't surprised, not really. She put bread slices in the toaster and poured coffee for Kendall and looked out the window. It was as if an invisible tide had gone out, leaving these things behind. Even the stuffed bullfrogs were back, on a slightly tipped chair. Dishes sat in small piles, as if beached.

No, what surprised her, what she hadn't expected, was the emptiness.

"Kendall," she said, because she saw that he was reading about the wild camels again and suddenly she was glad. The emptiness was expanding in her chest, vaster already than the desert, an ache without horizon, without end. "Where do you think they are now?"

He looked up from the book in surprise. She held her breath, waiting for him to say it. "I believe they're still out there somewhere," Kendall said, and touched her hand. "I really do."