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EL DORADO

Lynne Danley

Nine years old. Only one more year before ten, that magic place in the double-digits where the big kids got to go. A year ago, I peered down the dark tunnel of my future years and couldn’t envision ten at all. Today, if I squinted hard enough, it shone like a distant star, illuminating the way out of little-kidhood.

That’s when it all began — on my ninth birthday. Not that I realized it at the time, of course. All I could think about on that sunny morning was cupcakes. Today Mom would bring cupcakes for everyone in class and, because it was my birthday, the other kids would sing to me and maybe they wouldn’t chase me at recess and call me a nerd and run away from my cooties. Everybody liked you on your birthday.

“Ichabod! Get up! It’s late! You’ll miss the bus!”

The father-daughter morning ritual. I always got up. It was always late. I never missed the bus.

I could smell them even before I got to the top of the stairs. There they sat on cooling racks on the table, the Betty Crocker instant box-mix chocolate cupcakes, waiting to be coiffed with pink, sticky frosting and those little sugar balls. The oven was still warm as I brushed past it, balanced a bowl in one hand and, with the practiced dexterity of a concert pianist, poured cereal, milk and sugar into it with the other, procured a spoon and ate while I re- climbed the stairs and looked for something suitably birthday to put on. Nothing in my closet seemed right. The mirror failed me. There he was, Ichabod Crane, the bespectacled schoolteacher with the skinny legs and knobby knees — scabby, in my case, from falling off my bicycle — the dishwater-blonde hair hanging like a wet string mop around the pale face, the crossed eyes and crooked teeth. Hopeless. Nothing I draped on that frame would help. I squirmed into a blue and red plaid dress, snatched up the dog-eared notebook in which I wrote my diary, and scrambled down the stairs.

Mom, of course, was yelling in her usual Mom way,

“Elizabeth! The bus!”

“Yes, Mom,” I said, kissing her chubby cheek as I ran.

“See you later.”

Mom didn’t say, “Happy Birthday, Beth,” but she beamed at me as I boarded the bus.

“Good morning, Mr. Blumberg,” I said to the driver.

“Today is my birthday.”

“So? And you are getting to be quite a little lady, Beth,” said Mr. Blumberg through his gray mustache. He rubbed his bald crown. “Soon you’ll be fighting off all the boys who want to kiss you.”

“Yuck!” I said, giggling as Mr. Blumberg patted my head.

I was always very careful to call him “Mr. Blumberg” now. Since kindergarten I had called him “Mr. Kike” like all the other kids. Then one day in late October a new boy came to Miss Miles’ third grade class.

“This is David,” said Miss Miles. “Mr. Blumberg is David’s grandfather.”

My best friend Molly knit her brows quizzically. “Who is Mr. Blumberg?” she asked.

When Miss Miles didn’t get it, her own brows stood up on end on her forehead like brown caterpillars crawling up a birch tree.

“Why, your bus driver, of course,” she said.

“You mean Mr. Kike?” squeaked Tommy Pratt.

Miss Miles got something then. Wearing her thoughtful look, she put an arm around David and led him to a seat in the front row. Then she said very quietly, “Children, ‘kike’ is not a nice word at all. You must call your bus driver Mr. Blumburg.” We kids looked at each other, totally confused. You weren’t supposed to call someone a “nigger” or a “wop,” but “kike”? What was that? It sounded like a fish. And why didn’t the bus driver ever tell us we had his name wrong? But I’ll never forget the size of his smile when I got on the bus the next day and said, “Good morning, Mr. Blumberg,” and for the first time ever, he said, “Good morning, Beth.” We always said something to each other after that.

I stared dreamily out the window as the bus rolled
past Lincoln High School. Girls with their pony tails swishing, carrying their folders with pictures of Elvis or Ricky Nelson or the Everly Brothers, stopped to chat with pompadoured boys, their hair slimy with oil, posturing on the steps in their immaculate Levis. I sighed. Being a teenager had to be even better than being ten.

The luckiest teenagers had cars. Kids with cars were always popular. When I was seven, I decided that was my way in, to have a car. I hoarded my weekly allowance and any other money I got so I'd have enough to buy one by the time I got to high school. If I found a new book or record or movie magazine I couldn't live without, I saved up my lunch money and starved. My car would be a convertible with fins like Mickey O'Hara's brand new 1959 pink Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz. Mom said when I was ten I could start babysitting if I acted responsible, and then I would put babysitting money in with my allowance. I figured I acted pretty responsible most of the time.

Nobody, not even Mom and Dad, knew about my car money. I hid it in the bottom of my jewelry box, the one with the little plastic ballerina that popped up when you opened it and twirled in a circle to the tune of *Oh, What a Beautiful Morning!* I had to find another place soon, though. The money was beginning to bulge out the bottom of the box. I figured I had over fifty dollars in there by now. I never counted it. I preferred not to know exactly how much I had. That way I wouldn't be tempted to spend any or get discouraged if I didn't have as much as I thought. My biggest fear was that my stupid little sister Pam would find it and then I'd have to give her some to keep her from telling. It wasn't good to let anyone know you had a treasure.

I found Molly when I got to school and we bounced her rubber ball against the wall until the bell rang. Molly said nothing about my birthday. I tried to act like I didn't care as I walked to my desk, as if it were just another day. It wasn't time for birthdays yet, not till Mom came with the cupcakes. I squirmed through arithmetic -- the yuckiest part of the day -- and English and social studies. No one mentioned my birthday in spite of all the hints I'd been dropping all week. By lunch my stomach felt sick, and I fed my bologna and mustard sandwich to the pigeons on the playground. After art class Mom would come.

The best thing about art class was the smell. Crayons, paste, tempera paints and oilcloth filled me with the same thrill I saw in Mom's face whenever she went out to cut roses. Unlike some of my classmates, especially the boys, I took no culinary pleasure in consuming either paste or crayons. But I loved opening my art box, taking out my oilcloth and breathing in the fumes. I even got a tiny little high from it today, in spite of everything.

That's when it began.

I was engrossed in a futile attempt to make my Thanksgiving turkey look less like a porcupine. To my right, Tommy's Pilgrims came to life on the page. Impressive, but not as good as his Halloween monster had been. Takes one to know one, I thought. On my left, David Blumberg was struggling with what I meant to be birds flying over the Mayflower. They looked more like black pickles with propellers. Little wads of paper kept hitting me on the neck. I tried not to pay any attention. If I turned around, it would be me and not the pitcher who would feel the wrath of Miss Miles.

"Excuse me," said a woman's voice from the classroom doorway. The voice had an almost-familiar accent I couldn't quite place. It wasn't like Rosa the cafeteria cook's or Mr. Donatelli the owner of the milk store's, but I'd heard one like it somewhere.

As I turned with the rest of the class to face the door, a spit wad smacked me in the eye.

"Yes? May I help you?" asked Miss Miles.

The woman who strode into the classroom was handsome, energetic. She wore a coat much too heavy for the unseasonably sunny fall day and had the thickest, most beautiful black hair I had ever seen. In her hand she carried a report card, which she waved as she spoke. We all got report cards last week. After subjecting me to one of his tedious lectures on my lack of computational brilliance, my father had signed mine and I had thankfully returned it.

"So," said the woman, handing Miss Miles the card,
"you don't like my boy?"

Miss Miles glanced at the name scrolled in her elaborate handwriting at the top of the card.

"Why, of course I do," she said. "I like David just fine. Are you David's mother?"

The whole class turned to stare at David, who betrayed nothing. And then I realized that the accent was Mr. Blumberg's, but not quite. This voice sang, accompanied by its own percussion of thickly enunciated consonants.

"Ah, I am sorry. Yes, David is my boy." She paused for a moment. "Then he doesn't do his work?"

"Yes, he does," said Miss Miles. The caterpillars began to move.

"So maybe he doesn't return his homework on time?" She addressed her son without looking at him. "David, do you bring in your work every day?"

"Yes, Mama," said David. Back to Miss Miles. "But you don't like his pictures?"

"Pictures?" asked Miss Miles.

"So what is this? What is this 'C' for art? It says here that C is 'average.' My son is average. He does his work. He does it on time. So you don't like his pictures?"

Everyone gaped at David, whose face was only a few inches from mine. I saw his lips curl upward into the slightest, almost imperceptible hint of a smile.

"His pictures are just fine, Mrs. Blumberg," said Miss Miles.

"I like his pictures," said Mrs. Blumberg. "And who are you? Picasso? Do you make pictures like Picasso?"

I could not recall anyone ever rendering Miss Miles speechless, but there she stood, mouth ajar, the report card dangling from her limp hand as the caterpillars crawled up her forehead.

"I like David's pictures," Mrs. Blumberg repeated. And with that, she whisked and strode gracefully to the door, where she turned back and said before whisking out, "And my son David, he is not 'average.'"

You could slice the silence in the room. Kids squirmed. Every eye was on David's face. For the first time, I really looked at it, framed by thick, curly hair, with its full, large features. Not a wildly handsome face but a nice face. I decided I liked it.

David stared at the black pickles on the paper in front of him. I envisioned my father delivering Mrs. Blumberg's speech to Miss Miles and cringed. David must be crying with embarrassment.

Before I thought about what I was doing, I reached out my hand and touched his, the hand that was resting across the Mayflower in his drawing. David looked up at me then and my eyes met his -- clear, strong, beautiful eyes, almost liquid like a doe's, golden and intelligent. I caught my breath. I thought I'd choke on the lump in my throat.

As I recall it now, something like a tiny flame, an explosion of delicate sparks, went off in my brain and something happened that I couldn't articulate but I knew was very, very important. David was not embarrassed. He was proud, and I understood. Just for a second he covered my hand with his and smiled at me. I smiled back and squeezed his hand, then snatched mine away and buried my face in my arms. I couldn't look at him again.

Mom arrived, flushed and panting but only a few minutes late and with all of the cupcakes intact and sparkling in their box. Relief. Everybody sang "Happy Birthday," snatched a cupcake and began chattering through crumbly mouths to their friends, ignoring me.

David asked, "What will you do for your birthday?"

"Oh, I get to eat whatever I want for dinner and have cake and ice cream and open my presents. And I get to stay up late if I want," I said, still not looking at him. "I'm going to eat fried chicken and potato salad."

David said, "Cool." I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He wolfed down his cupcake and went back to his drawing. I broke mine into little pieces and ate them very slowly so I would look busy. Mom came over and kissed me on the cheek before she left. She looked startled when I kissed her back.

The afternoon raced by in a blur until the bell rang. In the hall, as I was struggling into my coat, David said into my ear as he passed me on his way out the door, "Happy birthday, Beth."
“Thanks, David,” I said. Deciding not to take the bus, I ran all the way home.

Everyone called Mr. Donatelli's corner market “the milk store.” Pam and I got to go there because we could cut through the vacant lot behind it and we didn't have to cross the highway. Every Friday I took the dollar Mom gave us, folded it up in my hand so no one would see it, and walked to the milk store, where I got a quart of milk out of the cooler and Pam got a loaf of squishy bread off the shelf. Then we waited while Mr. Donatelli sliced a half-pound of bologna for us and wrapped it up in white waxy paper.

Mr. Donatelli had a cash register but he didn't push the buttons to find out how much people owed. He wrote the prices down in blue ink right on the paper bag he put the groceries in and added the figures up. Then he added them up again just to make sure they were right. Then he took the dollar, pulled on the handle that opened the cash register and put the money inside the drawer. We got back ten cents, which he always took out in two nickels so he could give one to Pam and one to me. I usually bought a 3-Musketeers bar with mine, but sometimes I got M&M's. That's when I brought a dime of my lunch money to buy a Coke so I could pour the M&M's into the bottle and let them soak in the Coke. Later on, when I was in high school, I bought Teaberry gum so I could make a chain out of the gum wrappers. My seventy-five-foot chain was the longest in my class. But by then gum and candy cost a whole dime.

One afternoon right after the Christmas holidays, I found David waiting for me outside the big school doors. “Hey, Beth,” he said. “Wanna go to the milk store and get some ice cream?”

This struck me as a strange proposition as I slid across ground covered with January ice and felt the sting on my cheeks from the probably-below-zero air.

“Sure!” I said ecstatically. “But I don't have any money.”

“I've got some,” said David. “We can share.”

What we shared was a chocolate dipped ice cream cone with nuts on it. Mr. Donatelli presented it to us with a solemn flourish. “It's better in the winter,” said David. “You don't have to worry about it melting and having the chocolate fall off in pieces all over you.” I nodded in admiration as I took a nice, firm bite.

We finished the ice cream cone and cut through the lot with David chattering about a book he'd just read called *Man's Search for Meaning*. He said it was kind of a hard book to understand but his father answered his questions about it. It was about the war and people who were put into terrible places with barbed wire around them because other people didn't like them. They were starved and beaten and left to freeze without any clothes. Some of them were led into ovens and got burned up. But the man who wrote the book tried not to think about how bad it was and made himself think about how he was going to help people when he got out. That kept him from giving up. He told other people they had to think about what they had to do when they got out so that they wouldn't give up, either. He was some kind of a doctor, I think. David said he must have been very brave. I said I would have been really scared.

Since he hadn't finished telling me about the book when we got to my house, we walked around the block.

“My dad was in the war,” I said. “He was on a battleship and shot big guns at other ships. But he never told me about those people. He doesn't like talking about the war.”

“That's okay. Maybe he didn't know about the camps,” said David.

“Was your dad in the war?”

David got quiet for a minute. “He was in the camps,” he said. “But he thought about taking Mama and me and my brothers and coming to America. See, his papa was here. And he got out.”

“Wow,” I said. “I'd sure like to read that book.”

David promised to loan it to me. We had ended up back at my front door. “Wanna come in?” I asked David.

He retreated a step. “Better not,” he said.

I took his hand and dragged him up the icy steps.

“Come on!” I said. “I want to show you something.”

I raced up the stairs to my room, discarding gloves and hat along the way, with David at my heels. He stopped at the
“Come in and close the door,” I said. “No, wait. I’ve gotta make sure Pam’s not around.”

As usual, Pam wasn’t. She lived at Francie’s house, which eternally endeared me to Francie. I pulled David into my room, closed the door and, with his help, dragged my reading chair in front of it.

“Now, David,” I said, “you’ve got to swear you won’t tell anybody about this. If you don’t swear I won’t show you.”

“I swear,” said David.

“Cross your heart and hope to die?”

David solemnly crossed his heart.

I opened my jewelry box, removed the bottom and reverently lifted out my life savings.

“Wow,” said David.

“You’re the only person in the universe who knows about this,” I said. “Not even Molly knows.” I thought a minute.

“Guess that makes you my best friend.”

David beamed. That made me beam, too.

“How much is there?” asked David.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve never counted it.”

That seemed to impress David. “I’ll bet there’s a hundred dollars there! What’s it for?”

“It’s for my car,” I said. “For when I get to high school. A convertible.”

“Wow,” David said again.

I heard footsteps on the stairs. I tried stuffing the money back into the box but this time the bottom arched over it.

“Beth? You’re late! Is that Pam up there?”

“Sorry, Mom. No, Mom. It’s my friend David. From school.”

“David? I don’t think I know David. You’d better come out.”

I slammed down the lid of the box, threw my paltry jewelry collection on top of it, and motioned to David to help me move the chair away from the door so Mom couldn’t hear. We lifted it and got it across the room all right, but then I tripped on the throw rug and my end crashed to the floor. David covered his eyes.

“Elizabeth, what are you doing in there?”

I opened the door and sauntered out, followed by David. Mom looked him over with her critical Mom look. This was followed by an all-out frown.

“Hello, Mrs. Copeland,” said David.

“Boy, dinner sure smells good,” I said. “Can David stay?”

“Good heavens, no!” said Mom. This was a Mom tone you didn’t argue with. She mostly used it when what she said didn’t make any sense. “I mean,” said Mom, tugging at her skirt, “his mother will worry. Does she know you’re here, David?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said David. “I mean, she knows I went to get ice cream at the milk store. But I should be getting home.”

“Ice cream?” she said as David raced past her down the stairs and barreled to the front door, calling behind him, “Bye, Beth! See you in school. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Copeland.” He flung open the door and threw himself headlong into my father, whose hand still pointed the door key at the lock.

“Sorry, sir,” gasped David breathlessly.

Dad held David at arm’s length and surveyed him. “And who,” said Dad, “are you?”

“Blumberg?” asked Dad. He glared at me. “Blumberg? You must be a long way from home.”

I wondered how Dad knew that.

“Yes, sir. I’ll take the bus,” said David.

Dad released him and he skidded down the stairs into the darkness. Mom was frowning as she went into the kitchen. “Blumberg,” said Dad. “What was he doing? Selling something?”

“No, dear,” said Mom. “He ran into Beth at the milk store. He’s in her class.”

I wondered how Dad knew that.

“Well, I don’t want him in this house again. And I don’t want you,” roared Dad, shaking a finger at me, “hanging around with him.”

I nodded. No point in arguing with Dad. He didn’t use a special tone when he didn’t make any sense. He seldom made
any.

The next day at school, I opened my desk top to find a well-worn copy of *Man’s Search for Meaning* inside a beautiful blue and gold tin box. The box had a very clever false bottom and was twice as big as my jewelry box.

David and I ate lunch together every day for the rest of the winter and into spring. We always divided whatever we had and shared it between us. We are fast so we could go out on the playground and talk. David liked to talk about so many things. We talked about *Man’s Search for Meaning* a lot. I didn’t understand anything about anything in that book, but David explained it all. And he talked about poetry and animals and space ships and history. He told funny jokes, too. I talked about my stories and living in old houses and drawing and growing flowers. We both talked about music. We made up names and formed a book club. We each took a book out of the library and read it and then we exchanged books and read them. Then we talked about them.

At first, Molly didn’t like it that David became my best friend, but then she started hanging around with Beverly Johnson and got okay about it. We still bounced her ball against the wall every morning before school started, but it was getting hard to talk to Molly. We didn’t have anything to talk about.

One particularly beautiful spring day, David got sick. During recess, I went to the nurse’s office, where David sat forlornly in a chair with a thermometer sticking out of his mouth. He looked terrible and didn’t feel like talking, so I just sat down in the chair next to him and tried to look cheerful. It didn’t work.

Then David’s mother came to walk him home. She still had the most beautiful hair and striking face I ever saw even though her dark skin looked paler than I remembered. And she still sang when she spoke. Mr. James the music teacher wouldn’t have liked it -- he would have told her not to sing through her nose -- but I loved listening to her. She sang like that with the nurse for a few minutes and came back with the bad news. It looked like measles, she said, and David was going to have to stay home for several days until he got well. David and I groaned in unison. David had taught me a new word. He called it “hootspa.” He said that’s what somebody has when they have a lot of nerve. I never had much hootspa, but that’s when I got some from wherever hootspa comes from.

“Mrs. Blumberg,” I said, “may I come with you and stay with David so he won’t get lonesome?”

Mrs. Blumberg said nothing for a minute, then she stroked my cheek. “You,” she said, “must be Beth.”

“Oh, Mama, can she?” said David.

Mrs. Blumberg smiled and the smile stretched all the way across her face. “But what about school? And what will you tell your mother?”

I deflated. Mrs. Blumberg looked thoughtful. “Come,” she said. She strode down the hall toward Miss Miles’s classroom, with David and I waddling behind like ducklings. Suddenly, she turned around and cocked her head, looking at me. “Have you had this measles, Beth?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” I said. “Pam and I -- that’s my sister -- we had them last year.” Mrs. Blumberg just nodded, opened the door to the classroom and sailed in.

“Good morning, Miss Miles!” said Mrs. Blumberg, cheerfully. Miss Miles stood upright and braced herself. Mrs. B. went on, “I see David is now ‘B’ in his picture drawing. This is good, yes?” She didn’t wait for Miss Miles to make a reply. “Now David has this measles thing. We will need to take home some work for him to do. And Beth is going to help us carry it. I will see Beth gets home in safety.”

David tried to look as weak and fragile as possible and I stood sentinel. To her credit, Miss Miles decided not to engage Mrs. B. Together, they retrieved David’s schoolbooks, workbooks and pencil box from his desk and deposited them into my outstretched hands. Miss Miles explained to David’s mother what he had to do and Mrs. B. jotted down a few notes. Then we all paraded out and walked the few blocks to David’s house without saying a word.

David lived in a tiny apartment in a part of town I’d never been in before. The living room was bursting with so much heavy wooden furniture that I had to sidle sideways to get
to the hall that led to the bedrooms. A wonderful pendulum clock, its base carved into birds, vines and flowers, dominated the mantle over the fireplace on the far wall. Something that smelled heavenly simmered away on a two-burner stove in the miniature kitchen, and two loaves of fresh, homemade bread cooled on the counter near the sink. Everything in David’s house looked worn, even shabby, but it sparkled immaculately. I felt like Alice in Wonderland, shrunken down and wandering through a doll house.

David had to share a room with one younger brother in the upper bunk above his bed and a baby brother in a crib wedged into the corner of the room, and all of them shared one dresser. From the scuff marks on the lid, the two older boys obviously used the wooden toy box under the window for climbing up and looking out.

David, who really was sick, crawled right into bed. His mother tucked him in, kissed him and left quietly. I took his hand and he smiled weakly at me, then closed his eyes. I sat very still on the edge of his bed, holding his hand until I was sure he had fallen asleep. Then I climbed onto the toy chest and pulled back the blue curtains that covered the window.

I drew in my breath. A tree stretched its pink-blossomed arms across the middle of the little yard, and all along the fence the most incredible tulips and daffodils nodded their heads in the breeze. Some little white flowers covered the ground in front of them like snow, trimming the edges of the velvety green lawn. Flowers in cobalt blue pots and terra cotta planters peeked out from among the beds and a stone bench under the tree beckoned the reader. Birds fluttered happily around the cottage-shaped feeders. The doll house sat on the edge of a fairyland. I wanted awfully to climb out the window and sit in that magic place, but instead I closed the curtains and wandered into the kitchen to find Mrs. Blumberg.

She really was singing now, in a strange language, while she stirred the aromatic concoction on the stove. I hid in a corner and watched her for awhile, fascinated.

"Hello, Beth," she said without looking up. "Is David sleeping?"

"Yes," I said, coming sheepishly out of the corner. In
was thrashing in his sleep and looked awful. I ran over to the bed and kissed him on the forehead, which was like kissing a hot oven.

“Poor David,” I said.

When I looked out the back window of the bus, Mrs. B. was waving at me, wearing her big, wide smile.

I went to the Blumbergs the next three days after school. I told Mom I was going to Molly’s. It felt bad to lie, but I had to see David. I saved some of my lunch money for the bus and dropped Mrs. B.’s dime back into the jar when she wasn’t looking. I didn’t think the Blumbergs had very much money. I helped Mrs. B. set the table the first two nights, and we talked a lot about how important it is to learn and to be yourself and not care about what other kids think. Mrs. B. told me not to worry if what you did didn’t turn out perfect. What mattered was that you tried and did your best and that you kept trying till it got better. The thing she told me the most, though, was that you have to have faith. I didn’t know why she said that but she said it about five times. *You must have faith, Beth. God knows everything you need.*

I thought she worked too hard. She seemed so tired. I told her I would come over after school and help her, but she just hugged and kissed me.

The last day I didn’t see Mrs. B., but David’s little brother Eli let me in. David was pretty cheerful for someone who looked like a spotted corpse. I told him about all the nerdy things that were going on in school and we talked about the books we’d finished reading. I brought him *Kidnapped* from the library. That looked like a boy’s book.

I couldn’t get away on the weekend. Monday took months to arrive, and arithmetic class lasted a week. But the last bell finally rang and I ran all the way to David’s.

Something felt wrong before I ever rang the doorbell. It gave me butterflies in my stomach. When nobody came to answer, I stretched up on my toes and looked in the front window, which was open a little. I couldn’t see anybody, but I could hear voices through the crack.

“What can I do?” said a man’s voice. “She will not go.”

“She must go!” said the voice of an old woman. “She could die!”

“Esther,” said the man, “we have no money for Dr. Baumann. How can we pay the hospital? He has been good. He comes for nothing. But she cannot go to the hospital for nothing. How can I get one hundred dollars? The rent has taken everything.”

I dashed along the side of the building, praying the gate into Fairyland was unlocked. It wasn’t. I shoved against it but it wouldn’t yield. I crawled on my hands and knees along the fence, looking for a way in. A hole at the bottom of one section, big enough for a rabbit to get through, led into the flower beds. I stretched the wire as hard as I could, parting it just enough to wriggle through, but not before I had torn my shirt, skinned my knees again and made a dreadful mess of the tulips. I ran to the back door, which I knew was kept unlocked, and quietly let myself into the kitchen.

In front of the sofa, a man with dark, thick, curly hair stood with his back to me. Seated in front of him was a beautiful old woman wearing a gray fringed shawl. I crept along the stairwell, chose a moment when both of them decided to talk at once, and bolted up the stairs. First I peeked into David’s room.

David slept soundly. He looked much better and the spots were almost gone. His deep skin tone had returned. That gave me a brief second of joy. Then I tiptoed across the hall and looked into Mrs. B.’s room.

David slept soundly. He looked much better and the spots were almost gone. His deep skin tone had returned. That gave me a brief second of joy. Then I tiptoed across the hall and looked into Mrs. B.’s room.

I had to cover my mouth to keep from crying out. At first I thought she was dead, a statue with her ankles and arms crossed, her white face surrounded by a halo of black hair. I crept to the side of the bed. Even when I put my ear near her mouth I could not hear her breathing until I listened for a minute. I didn’t even need to touch her to feel the heat radiating from her forehead.

I snuck back into David’s room, climbed up on the toy box and squirmed out the window. It was just a short drop to the bottom, where I fell — not too hard — on my own bottom. I don’t think I ever ran as fast as I did to that bus stop. I thought
the bus would never get me home.

"Please, God," I prayed. "I know You don't always answer the way we want but I know You always answer." Mrs. B. taught me that. "Please don't let Mrs. B. die. And please tell me what to do!"

I hated to cry, but tears blinded me as I burst through the door of my bedroom, wiping snot on the cuff of my sleeve. Opening the bottom drawer of my dresser, I withdrew the beautiful blue and gold box with the false bottom. Tucking it under my arm, I fled down the back steps, out the back gate into the middle of the street. Which way to go? I decided to trust my feet, which led me to the milk store and the old wooden phone booth in the corner.

I did not know how to spell "Baumann," and when I looked under "Doctors" I couldn't find anybody listed, not even my own doctor, Dr. Cross. Then I remembered about calling the operator. She said she would connect me to Dr. Baumann. When he came on the line and said hello, he sounded just like Mr. Blumberg the bus driver. I told him that Mrs. Blumberg was very sick and she had to go to the hospital and that they didn't have a car and would he find somebody to take her there? I said all of this in one word without taking a breath. Then I said not to ask them about the money because it was already at the hospital. And then I hung up.

I sat in that phone booth until I got my breath back, never taking my eyes off the lid of the box. Then I walked to the hospital. It wasn't far and I didn't have to run. In the lobby, I took a card and the stubby, chewed-up pencil attached by a string to its holder and wrote "For Mrs. Bloomburg" on the back of the card and put it inside the box. I had to stretch my arms as far over my head as I could to push the box onto the counter where the nurse was. And then I ran. I ran all the way home, climbed into bed with my clothes on and pulled the covers over my head.

I was scared because I didn't know how much money was in the box. And I didn't know if it was enough.

I shivered. It was so cold. I imagined the tears running into my ears and the snot running down my nose turning into icicles. I thought maybe I was going to barf, but when I tried to get out of bed to go to the bathroom I couldn't move. Maybe Mom and Dad would just find me there, frozen in the bed, curled up into a little snowball.

And then something wonderful happened. From somewhere above me, I heard Mrs. Blumberg singing. She sang in her funny language, but I understood the words. "You must have faith, Beth." That's what she sang. "God knows everything you need." And God must have sent me some faith from the same place where hootspa comes from, because I went right to sleep.

David came back to school a week later. He didn't say anything to me at all. He just opened his desk and started putting his stuff back inside. But when I opened mine, I saw another tin box on top of my arithmetic book. This one was red and silver. I slid it onto my lap and pulled off the lid.

There, in a ball of tissue paper, nestled a little metal model of a 1959 pink Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz with the top down.