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ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

FOR SEVERAL YEARS in her twenties, Ruth lived with a man who did not believe in happiness. When she thought of Edwin later, she remembered him in motion: pacing the uneven floors of their studio apartment, slamming cabinet doors, frying eggs, spattering oil. Always espousing various theories of living, his red hair meringue-like above a densely freckled face. He had been her boyish, restless sprite, short and sharp-boned, lean muscles working in his arms as he lifted secondhand tomes of Schopenhauer from the counter to the floor so he could cook. Ruth had thought, during those years, that his seriousness was a game—that all young men were dreary, to various degrees. She had assumed there was all the time in the world to wait around for the dreariness to wear off.

“Stability, commitment, life’s work, sure,” Edwin said on a summer night, slamming cabinet doors, looking for the flaking Teflon pan. “But happiness? What is it? You can’t make it, and therefore should not aspire to it. And the line between what most consider happiness and hedonism is thin. So I prefer to live my life by other standards.”

“Do I make you happy?” Ruth asked. She was curled on a thrifted kitchen chair, painting her toenails the orange of a polluted sunset.

“Like I say, happiness is beside the point. You and I are compatible. We live well together and we could live well together for a long time.”

“Well, you make me happy,” Ruth said, not so much because it was true but because his view of things seemed like the slabs of smoked salmon behind glass at the deli where she worked—cold and dead, waiting to be sliced into something more palatable.

They had moved in together quickly because they wanted to leave Texas behind. Alone, neither would have been able to afford New York—even together, they could barely afford Queens. Their sex had always been quick and consistent. He was the first man to give Ruth an orgasm, and at twenty-one that counted for a lot. They had built in their studio a small fortress, and like a fortress it was clammy and drafty, inviting claustrophobia.

She left him when she was twenty-four and hadn’t doubted herself. She lived alone, found better work, married Martin.

But she was almost forty now. Her marriage had collapsed in on itself at the beginning of spring like a tent buckled by high winds. And she found herself ruminating about Edwin for the first time in fifteen years. Edwin and his philosophies. And she wondered, for the first time, if—in his austerity—he had been right.

She found him online one insomniac night, scrolling to distract herself, surrounded by her moving boxes. His social media account was devoid of many photographs; it indicated only that he lived on Long Island and that he had married the year after she had. The message she sent was simple, professional. She wondered if they could meet for dinner. She wondered if they could catch up. Her heart youthful and thrumming in the empty early morning hours.

THE EVENTS of spring had given Ruth little time to contemplate her marriage's end. She and Martin had signed divorce papers in March; in April, Ruth's mother had died. She traveled alone to the outskirts of Austin to clean out the camper where Sadie had spent retirement. Sadie had worked at the university for decades, as a secretary in the women's studies department. Ruth's biological father had been a tall, soft-spoken, odd man in art history. In childhood, he would come by the house for an occasional coffee—never dinner, never spending more than an hour or two. Ruth never knew if Sadie and Al slept together, or if the insemination had been removed, scientific, some sort of agreement. Al was twenty years older than Sadie and died when Ruth was in college. She hadn't known what to feel, and so she simply tucked this new ambivalence into her core, out of sight. She'd taken up with Edwin that year, and the courtship left little room to look back.

Sadie had never been talkative or emotional. She lived by her own interpretation of second wave feminism's strictures: she was proud of her house's disarray, the newspapers strewn on the kitchen table, the dust accumulated on the back of the sofa, all markers of her concern for bigger things. She conducted her personal life with a neat and business-like self-denial. When she retired, she spent three years renovating the old camper and the rest of her decades living in it, painting watercolor landscapes and taking solitary hikes at dawn.

To go through Sadie's things—it was a transgression Ruth had always craved. She hadn't realized, until she was sorting her mother's scant belongings, that she was looking for answers about Al. But she found no piles of letters, no secret diaries, no gifts risqué or sweet. Sadie had been reticent,

unsentimental about words and possessions. A typist, not a dreamer.

Only on the last day did Ruth discover something that surprised her. It was a printout of an email. The page was folded in upon itself many times, wedged into the change purse of an old wallet. The email was from someone named Julius Minor. It said:

I have been thinking lately like a teenaged romantic. I have been thinking that I should like my ashes to be scattered across your lawn, and your ashes across mine. What do you say?

Sadie, with her typical brevity of expression, had replied with a single word:

Lovely.

Ruth folded the email quickly away. It sat heavy in her coat pocket, like something shoplifted.

A WEEK LATER, Ruth was back in New York, having a drink with her friend Cam.

"I mean, what do I do? Do I take the ashes thing seriously, as a real last wish?"

"Well, clearly your mother wouldn't have expected you to find this piece of paper," Cam said. "But Ruthie—you haven't said anything about how *you're* doing. With—you know. Everything. It's a lot to deal with alone."

"I don't always want to talk about divorce."

"Well, but—the confluence of losing Martin and losing your mom—I mean, I haven't heard you talk about either loss."

"I've been thinking about both for weeks, and I don't know what to say. What should I say?"

Cam looked away, sipped her drink.

"When I found these emails—I just kept thinking that I'd never heard my mother use the word *lovely*. She never talked about things being *lovely*. Things were what they were. So why was this morbid fantasy about the ashes 'lovely' to her? And who is Julius Minor?"

"*You* talk like that all the time," said Cam, her tone not entirely fond. "Lovely, beautiful, fantastic, delightful."

A waiter dimmed the lights as the sun dipped. Ruth was aware that Cam had arrived at the bar with an internal script—comforting the mourning, divorced friend. And Ruth was ruining the conversation by deviating from the script. This realization made her crave further deviation. Under Cam's presumption, Ruth wanted to cause a deeper disappointment.

"You know, I sent Edwin a message this week," Ruth said. "I'd like to see him." Cam was one of her few remaining friends from her twenties, and it was why she was the one Ruth had wanted to see upon returning from Austin.

"Oh, Ruthie, why?" Cam said, tilting her forehead into her palm. "Edwin? That's very midlife crisis."

Ruth opened her mouth and found she had no explanation. What she had wanted, when she moved to the city with meringue-haired Edwin, was a serious life. When she left him, she had wanted to believe wholeheartedly in pleasure. She quit the deli job and started photographing food. That was how she'd met her husband—at a small food magazine that folded two years after its inception. She took up wedding photography to pay the bills while Martin lost their savings opening a small café, cheating on Ruth with one of his employees. Ruth had picked over the story of their relationship, rummaging for flashes of happiness, stacking them up. The more she sorted and stacked, the more dead the exercise seemed, like arranging femurs in a catacomb. Her compulsive remembering was a way of making a monument, not a means of recovery.

She didn't know how to answer Cam, and so she said:

"From my understanding, my mother lived by one rule, and that rule was narrowness. To get through life, keep it tidy and narrow. But now, finding these emails, I have to think maybe she had different rules, and I want to know what they were."

"But you know there are no rules, in an essential sense," Cam said. Her brow furrowed but she was looking away from Ruth, folding her straw wrapper into an accordion. Her manner was one of bored concern. "People just do what they can."

"Of course," Ruth said, satisfied that she'd cornered Cam into a platitude. Platitudes were easy to dismiss. She flagged the waiter for the check. "Yes, of course I know that."

THE RED-EYE to Los Angeles landed at six in the morning. By eight, Ruth was arriving at the address she'd found for Julius Minor in her mother's day planner. She had tried contacting him in advance, writing to the address on the printed email, but received no reply. She figured it was best to discuss the matter of the ashes in person anyway.

Julius Minor's residence was a bungalow in Westwood, its skirt of lawn unfenced and browning in patches beneath an orange tree. The stucco was a tired pink, like a conch shell's interior worn rough by sand.

When she rang the bell, no one answered. So she walked to a Baskin Robbins in the strip mall across the street, from which the house was visible.

Her mother had not liked sweets. Ruth had learned early that birthday cakes would be shunned. Their important conversations—the few there had been—took place over bowls of homemade sourdough crackers. Baking was a talent of Sadie’s—Ruth would have called it *lovely*. The crackers were always cut into perfect squares, their edges pleasingly crimped, their middles fork-pricked, sprinkled with salt and rosemary from the plant outside. The night before Ruth moved to New York at twenty-one, the kitchen had been fragrant with salt and rosemary.

“Once you run away,” Sadie had said, her voice a warning, “you will always be running away.”

At the time, this statement had seemed cryptic and inconsequential, one of those assertions parents make out of a sense of obligation, an adherence to form rather than sincerity. Ruth never thought to ask what Sadie herself might have been running from when she moved from California to Texas as a young woman. But it stuck with Ruth, that sentence—as if Sadie’s platitude had not in fact been hollow but rather a sea-weary bottle with a message just barely visible inside. Sadie had been right about Ruth, in the way mothers are often right about their daughters—vaguely, obliquely, cruelly. Ruth never did move back to Texas, but even as New York’s thrum wedged itself into her sense of the everyday, the city never had a home feeling. Even when Ruth married Martin, she never had a home feeling. She and Sadie had grown increasingly distant. That had been the price of running away.

But if, behind Sadie’s judgment, there had been a message for Ruth—something Sadie was revealing about herself—what had it been?

TWO HOURS and two Baskin-Robbins coffees later, Ruth rang the bell of the bungalow another time. A woman her mother’s age answered. This woman looked nothing like her mother had, either during her life or at its end. The stranger was tall and robust, gray hair twisted with neat elegance at her nape. Her shoes were lavender suede and heeled; she looked as if she’d just returned from some sort of meeting. Ruth said she was looking for Julius Minor. Before the woman could assume Ruth was selling something or proselytizing, Ruth said,

“He was close, I think, with my mother, Sadie Ellsworth. She died this month.”

No recognition stirred on the woman's face. Ruth was aware of the urn's heft in her canvas tote, its weight against her hip.

"Are you Julius's wife?" Ruth asked.

Something like a confused revulsion briefly moved the woman's features, but she composed herself rapidly.

"I don't see why I should give that kind of information to a stranger," she said. "And I don't know how you got this address. Now, you have a nice day." She closed the door gently, sealing Ruth away from her.

RUTH DIDN'T KNOW what to do, so she waited. At the Baskin-Robbins she bought herself an elaborate concoction of vanilla and peach and fruit and sprinkles, and then another, and then coffee with cream. She thought about happiness and hedonism and Edwin, who responded to her message in her third hour of waiting, suggesting they meet at an Italian restaurant near his house on Long Island. After the fourth hour in this strange teal-and-pink purgatory, she began to wonder if waiting for Julius Minor was unhinged, a degree removed from stalking. The smooth-faced teenagers behind the counter did not notice her. They had been flirting for hours, cheeks flushed behind the rows of freezers, playing with one another's hairnets. If Ruth were to have a heart attack at the table, who would they call? Martin? Cam? How long would it take them to decipher the scant web of relationships that barely bound her? She had expected to have more binding her by now.

She stayed because she wanted to figure it out, this single aspect of Sadie's life. This single aspect that might reveal the organizing principle.

And suddenly, as she contemplated her own death, there he was: Julius Minor in the soft haze of dusk, head down as he limped up the walkway to the bungalow. His name, when she first encountered it in her mother's house, sounded like a constellation: grand, eternal, contrived. She had imagined, given his name's grandeur, a man silver-haired and straight-backed, with a purposeful stride. This Julius was the opposite—small and balding, his remaining hair dyed black, hunched in sweat-stained exercise clothes, one ankle in a soft brace.

She stayed in her seat, trying to understand Julius Minor's marriage by watching the yellow-lit windows of the bungalow. They were half-obscured by peach drapes, which became membranous in the light, like eyelids. Julius and his wife sat catty-corner at the table like honeymooners. They talked and touched each other's hands for emphasis. Much of what they said seemed to warrant emphasis. The woman had dropped

her doorway sternness, and her hair was loose around her collarbone. When she reached over to pick a dried leaf out of Julius Minor's cloud of thinning hair, Ruth was overcome by longing and guilt. She did not want to make a problem in their happiness.

In her rented car she drove to Malibu and scattered a portion of her mother's ashes from a cliff. *Darkness into darkness*, she thought. *Dust to dust*. This had been how Sadie and Ruth had loved each other: climbing to some overlook in the hill country, hands on hips, panting from the hike, regarding the landscape, which was never as they expected.

When the night was deep enough, she drove back to Westwood, where the Baskin-Robbins was closed, bright inside, the freezers shut and wiped clean, resting from their delivery of small pleasure. The teenagers were gone. Julius Minor's bungalow windows were opaque, and she crept onto his lawn with her mother's urn.

The moon was high so she stayed out of sight beneath the orange tree. What an act, this scattering—in the end, so quick and without ceremony. When the urn was empty she sat with her back against the tree. She shut her eyes and tried to feel *lovely*. But the dry grass of the stranger's lawn prickled her palms. She kept her eyes shut and tried to hear the ocean. Only the gentle roar of the highway came to her, lulling and constant.

She was shaken awake in the pre-dawn darkness. Above her was the hunched outline of Julius Minor, the rims of his glasses gleaming in the porch light. In an impatient and half-frightened mutter, he was telling her that she had to leave, and asking if she was all right. She handed him the folded-up email to puncture his muttering. For a moment he said nothing.

"I'm Ruth," she said. "Sadie's daughter. I tried to get in touch—"

"When did she die?" he said, his eyes a boy's eyes, vulnerable and demanding.

Ruth explained the death in the terms she had been using for weeks. As she spoke, he collected himself, and his face betrayed nothing. Then he picked up the urn from where it lay on the grass and gazed into its empty interior.

"What will you do with this now?" he said. "May I keep it?"

His tone was timid, adolescent, as if he had been transported. He cradled the urn—not like a baby but like a precious state fair prize—something cherished and superfluous, unexpected, marvelous in an insignificant way.

"I suppose you can keep it," Ruth said. "But I'd like to know—I mean, I'd like to know—" but she faltered, unsure, after all this waiting and searching, what her question was.

"Let's go to breakfast," Julius Minor said. "I'll tell you what I can."

THE DINER was imitating another time. They sat in booths under matte globes of light, drinking coffee. They were the only ones. Julius had brought the urn inside with him—it seemed disrespectful, he said, to leave it in the car. Occasionally, when he spoke, Julius would rest his fingertips on the urn for emphasis. He watched Ruth intently, as if willing her to understand some meaning beyond what he was saying aloud.

Julius and Sadie had been born on opposite ends of Fresno three days apart. Sadie's mother worked at the dry cleaner's where Julius's mother took her shirts. So Julius and Sadie had been embedded in each other's consciousness from childhood, each registering the other's minute evolutions. Each had been withdrawn and cautious in high school, eating alone in parallel library carrells until, tentatively, they began to eat together. Each was the other's first confidant.

"You know how it is when you're sixteen," Julius said. He had cut his syrup-saturated pancakes into neat tiles. "You want to bare yourself. And you want the other person in their entirety, and you don't see any problem with that. It's possible I knew Sadie at sixteen better than I've known anyone since. That doesn't mean we were happy. We thought loneliness could be erased from our lives, which is of course a fool's errand."

"So what was she like then?" Ruth said.

And Julius unfurled to Ruth her mother as the girl she could never have known. In Julius's telling, Sadie was restless and confiding. She was athletic, always moving, always pacing when she did her homework. Always she did her homework with a tasseled pen; the beaded tassels made a particular sound when she wrote, an anxious clattering. She made the tassels herself and gave Julius a tasseled pen when she left California. Sadie had left as her mother's alcoholism and violence—and her father's attendant passivity—escalated. It had all happened very fast, according to Julius: he asked Sadie to marry him, and she accepted. And one morning he found an envelope on his doorstep containing the ring, a tasseled pen, and an address in Texas. She had hoped to go to college in Austin—the job in women's studies was supposed to be temporary, a way to save tuition money.

They wrote each other with the tasseled pens for years. In the begin-

ning Julius used to ask her to come home and marry him, but eventually the asking stopped. Their letters became filled, instead, with minute details and painstakingly rendered emotions. Each vowed to destroy the letters—their contents were intended only for them. They had switched to email only during Sadie's illness, when she found it impossible to write by hand.

Ruth listened, making herself eat mouthfuls of pancake to avoid tears. It was moving—he had designed the story that way. But she was thinking of his wife at the door of the bungalow, and she was thinking about Sadie, who had died in the company of only a hospital nurse.

The correspondence seemed like a way of mummifying some overpowering adolescent feeling of Julius's. It had a possessive ring to it; she didn't know if it had anything to do with love.

"What you're saying is that it was a decades-long emotional affair," Ruth said, her voice flat.

He was tracing his fingertips across the urn's surface again.

"No. I don't know what it was. Sometimes I was her mother, and she was my father. You know, I didn't have a father, and she barely had a mother. Sometimes she was my sister, and I was her brother. We were both only children, you know. We didn't get too mushy, and we didn't talk about sex. Sometimes we argued and we were like strangers to each other. The letters were vague and boring then. We wrote about the weather and sent each other clippings from the newspaper. But we always wrote. That was the point. We always wrote, and it was only for us."

"But your wife doesn't know about it."

"The letters were for Sadie and me," he said.

Ruth took the urn from him then—placed it out of his reach.

"I fiddle with things, don't I," he said, and for a moment she hated him, this usurper of her mother's inner life. And she found herself asking what she wished she'd asked Sadie on those few serious evenings when they'd eaten sourdough crackers and talked about things.

"Are you happy?" she said to Julius Minor. "I mean, have you been happy?"

He let out a shout of laughter. The waitresses, clustered behind the counter, turned their heads.

"Of course," he said. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"But what do you mean by it?" she said.

Behind the diner's picture window the gray sea met the brightening sky, the line between them hazy. In a day, Sadie was scheduled to photo-

graph a wedding between two New Jersey accountants, and in two days she would eat dinner with Edwin on Long Island. Time was running out, and she knew Julius Minor couldn't tell her anything she wanted to know. He couldn't tell her Sadie's organizing principle. He couldn't tell her whether the organizing principle had brought happiness. And so he couldn't tell Ruth anything about herself and where she was to go from here.

Seeing her disappointment, Julius rambled on.

"I mean, here I am. I'm having coffee at sunrise with Sadie Ellsworth's daughter. Later I'm going golfing and to a nice dinner with my wife. What reason do I have for despair? Now listen. I never had children. I got married too late. So when I'm dead, I'll have my lawyer send you some of my ashes for Sadie's lawn in Austin. Will you disperse them for me?"

"I'll probably sell her land," Ruth said. She heard the bitterness in her voice.

Julius's eyes came alive, and she could picture him at sixteen: the rich family's son from the other side of town, drawing her mother out of her melancholy shell.

"Well, clearly you have no qualms about trespassing," he said. "I'll trust you to do it one more time."

"That was for her. You're not her," Ruth said in the voice of her own long-gone adolescence.

He looked at Ruth with his boy's eyes.

"I don't know what to call what Sadie and I had," he said. "But I hope you have it too. Above my marriage, above my work—it was something that felt close to the sacred."

The sun was up now, the sea and sky an uncompromising, cloudless blue, a blue that could swallow a city. The diner had filled with tourists and construction workers, and the waitresses completed their choreography. She did not know what to say, so she gestured for the check. In the sedan he put on the radio, a baseball game, and was engrossed, or pretended to be. When she left him at the bungalow they did not embrace.

SHE MULLED OVER his last proclamation the whole flight home. Her anger escalated. What had the supposed sacredness of the correspondence meant in the real world? She remembered a winter storm that had hit Austin when she was thirteen. Their power had been out for

three weeks. Sadie rotated through the houses of various friends, wary of imposing on anyone for too long. Too frequently she had glimpsed the depth of her mother's loneliness—that much she knew. And being the witness had eaten at her. Being the witness had shaped everything. But Julius Minor had been in California, in his pink bungalow with his wife, telling himself that his correspondence with Sadie was sacred.

At the wedding in New Jersey, Ruth's photographs of the couple's vows came out flawlessly. The bride had stepped on her train, tearing it, and the muddled edge was just visible in the corner of the frame, the sort of lovely imperfection that made Ruth good at what she did. The next night, she met Edwin at the pasta place on Long Island, where he lived with his wife and three children. He was thick and solid, his hair no longer a meringue. It had grown shoulder-length, slicked back over his ears.

She was sitting when he entered. When he saw her—in the instant before the required mutual smile—he flinched. Their embrace was warm and familiar—he didn't let her go as quickly as he should have. He talked in a stilted, even tone, as if to correct the familiarity. His daughters had been caught in a loop of minor illnesses—stomach bugs, sneezing fits, rashes. His wife had been laid off from her marketing job. As for Edwin himself, he was teaching history at a Catholic high school, which was rewarding but monotonous in its way.

"They become the same," he said after his third glass of wine. Ruth had not yet said almost anything about her life. "The students. Year after year, the same. Different individuals, of course, but all the same types. You recognize them."

Because they were talking about high school—and because she was tiring of Edwin's monologue—Ruth brought up Julius. She narrated her discovery of the email, her impulsive cross-country flight, and the breakfast as if these events were a series of light anecdotes. She didn't specify the time frame; she made herself into a sort of questing Don Quixote, looking for something she wouldn't find. As she spoke, the old Edwin began to excavate himself from behind the solid, paternal exterior of the present-day Edwin. There he was, Edwin with the meringue hair and freckles, rapt and intense, poised to retort. She did not have any interest in his retort, and kept talking as if she didn't notice his mouth opening and closing, attempting to speak.

"The whole thing made me think about what you used to say, about the uselessness of happiness," said Ruth.

“The uselessness of happiness,” he repeated. “What do you mean by that?”

She stared at him. “You used to say you didn’t believe in happiness,” she said. “It stayed with me.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Listen, Ruth,” he said. “I’ll be the first to admit, I live a very conventional life, and I have for a long time. I wanted a lot of freedom when I was younger, like everyone does, and I wanted more for myself than other people got. But that was a long time ago.”

Across the restaurant a waitress was progressing carefully toward an eight-person table, holding a candle-spangled cake aloft. There was a low ripple of delight among the diners in that corner of the restaurant. Ruth was suddenly mortified, seeing herself reflected in Edwin’s eyes, the caricature he was likely making of her: recent divorcee seeking out old flame. She had dressed too nicely, her lipstick was too dark, her dress too fitted. She had only meant to look like herself. But she realized he was suspicious of what she wanted from him.

“Can I take your picture?” she said. She didn’t have her cameras with her. “This is part of a project, I should have said when I messaged you. I’m a wedding photographer, but I do some of my own art on the side. I’m interested in the loose ties in our lives. That’s why I went to California, and that’s why I’m here. I want to capture the loose ties. You know, the people we sort of—who we leave behind.”

He shook his head. “I’ve never liked my appearance, and I prefer that you don’t.” She could see he didn’t believe her bumbling, improvised explanation. What did she want from him? She already imagined the scolding she would get from Cam for keeping the meeting at all.

“What was I like, back then?” she said. “When we were together.”

And his face was so expressionless that she felt, then, the full force of grief that had been lingering just out of her reach—maybe for the loss of Martin, maybe for the death of her mother, but really for closing of a decade in which she had allowed herself an unblemished happiness, when she believed it could go on and on like that. What a decade it had been: the steady immersion in her photography, the marriage’s slow unfurling, the luscious coming into her own, and then the swiftness of the collapse. Oh, Edwin. He had not been important at all. She had placed the proclamation of a pedantic young man in the position of a koan. It had been simpler to think he had understood all along—understood something she hadn’t. When really, the joke was that neither of them knew a thing.

"Your hair was very long and dark," he said finally. "And you would bring home day-old bagels from the place you worked, and saw them in half, and put them in the freezer. You always cut toward your palm, and I always told you not to. But you never cut yourself. You worked fast, and we never had any room in the freezer for anything else. And you would leave poppyseeds all over the counter. We would argue about that."

In the opposite corner of the restaurant the eight-person table was singing. The cake was placed in front of an old man, candles reflected in his bifocals. The celebrants looked as if they were from another era, in multicolored polyester suit jackets, the women's tall hair sprayed into place. They clapped bejeweled fingers and sang. It went on for a long time, and other tables nearby joined in, and Ruth looked away from Edwin, delivered from saying anything else. She hadn't remembered the day-old bagels, her skill—or foolishness—with the knife. It was not what she wanted: an image of her young self, quick and practical, like Sadie. It occurred to her that when she died, the images of her would be all wrong. Each person would say their piece: Cam and Martin, the other photographers she sometimes met for lunch. Who else would keep her memory? The old man was blowing out the candles, specks of spit visible above the candle glow. And this unknownness—maybe it was not loneliness after all but the opposite. She decided to write to Julius Minor in the morning and tell him she would scatter his ashes when it was time.

Edwin's hand lay like a dead white fish on the red tablecloth. And for a moment—as the family of strangers broke into applause, as the waitress reappeared to cut the cake—Ruth grasped his fingers. She squeezed, quick and sure, with as much fellowship as she could muster. And thought she glimpsed something like his old knowing smirk before he pulled away.