

Passing Through by Charles Coleman Finlay

Nearly a year has passed since we last published a story by Mr. Finlay, so a word or two is in order for all you readers who have joined us recently. From his home in Columbus, Ohio, Mr. Finlay has been sending us unpredictable stories for most of this current decade. Sometimes his tales are purely fantastic (most notably in his stories about the human boy raised as a troll). Other times, he takes us into space, as he did with "The Seal Hunter" and "The Political Officer."

With his latest story, Mr. Finlay stays closer to home--specifically, the locale for this one is Little Limestone Island, a small town in the Great Lakes region of the U.S. Other stories set here have appeared in Strange Horizons magazine and in his story collection, Wild Things. This story offers an interesting look at a woman haunted by the past.

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Roberta Bumgardner didn't like the look of the young couple standing on the front porch. He was a black man, or an African-American as she was supposed to call them these days, though his skin was more of a nutmeg brown; slender and small-boned, he had delicate hands and round glasses just small enough by a hair to avoid being comical. His golf shirt was casually unbuttoned at the throat. The woman with him--she had to be his wife, Roberta supposed, given the matching wedding bands, hers paired with an engagement ring containing a garish marquise diamond--was a cheerful, chubby woman, white, with curly shoulder-length blonde hair. Her skin was reddened by a day or two in the sun, and it looked like the sort of skin that stayed red or turned pink instead of tanning. Roberta didn't like the woman's cheerfulness. Nor the man's either. There was an impertinence in cheerfulness she found off-putting.

She pushed open the screen door, taking one small, deliberate step down to their level on the porch. The door slammed shut behind her. Pasting on her second-best smile, she said, "Welcome to the Sullivan House Museum."

"Is there still time for a tour?" the man asked, half-opening his hand at the laminated white sign tacked up by the door. "You close in half an hour, right?"

"Don't fret yourself," Roberta said. The door creaked as she reopened it for them. "That's plenty of time to do the whole tour. Twice, if you like. Watch your step."

The man stood aside, gesturing his wife ahead. Their eyes met, and the sparkle in his eyes reflected in hers like stars shining on Lake Erie on a clear night. Roberta started her speech before he finished entering the hall.

"The Sullivan mansion was originally completed in 1853, of limestone quarried here on the island. During the Civil War, it was part of the prisoner of war camp for Confederate officers and the rear section burned down in 1864 from a kitchen fire. Colonel Donegal Sullivan, who served with 123rd Ohio Volunteers, rebuilt it after the war."

While the cheerful couple poked around the foyer and the parlor--bending over to ooh at the antique doilies covering dark end tables, touching the wood railing on the center stair as if it needed all the delicacy of a baby's skin, and leaning back to gaze at the wood vault of the ceiling as if it were the Sistine Chapel--Roberta rushed through her spiel: the history of Little Limestone Island as an Indian--or rather Native American, she quickly corrected herself--hunting ground; the arrival of the Sullivan family in 1832 when they were looking for a place to escape the cholera epidemic in Cleveland; the story of the house, from mansion to hotel to its rescue from the wrecking ball by the formation of the island historical society. She showed them all the open rooms downstairs and had twelve minutes to spare. The upstairs wasn't suitable for showing yet.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked, and was annoyed when the couple laughed.

"So is it true that the mansion was a stop on the underground railroad?" the man asked.

"Yes, they would hang a light down on the dock," she said, with a vague wave of her hand toward the aged boathouse across the road from the front door, "if it was safe to cross over. Then the runaways would be taken north across the lake to Pelee Island in Canada."

"Are there any stories about those runaways?" the man asked, and the woman chipped in with, "Are there any ghost stories?"

"She likes ghost stories," the man explained.

"No," Roberta said brusquely. "The runaways didn't leave any stories behind. And there are no ghost stories." She clapped her hands and held them to her chest. "So. What about the two of you? Where are you from?"

Their names were William and Carol Hughes, "Like Langston Hughes," William said, as though that should mean something to Roberta, "only we're not related, as far as I can tell." They were from Columbus. He was an engineer. She was a kindergarten teacher. They were celebrating their anniversary with a weekend getaway. There was something so perfectly ordinary about them that Roberta almost began to like them.

"And what brought you here?" she asked.

"Oh, we were just passing through," William said.

Roberta's second-best smile flipped instantly into her best frown, and she checked her watch impatiently. Regrets were offered, apologies exchanged, and she showed them out the door and locked up.

From the back door, she watched them stroll hand-in-hand down the street toward the restaurants downtown. She wondered what they were trying to hide from her. As if anyone since the runaway slaves passed *through* Limestone Island! It was a cul-de-sac, a crawdad trap, someplace people found themselves stuck in. A place people ran away to, to hide from something. Even time didn't reach the island as fast as it did other places. When she came there in the 1950s, it was still like the 1920s. The '50s didn't arrive until the '70s, and there was still some bit of the '70s clinging around yet.

"Passing through," she said to herself. "That's just a bunch of damned foolishness."

If she weren't already wearing her best frown, it would have shown up then, as an expression of her sharp disapproval of herself. She wasn't the sort of lady who swore. Not much, anyway.

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The ghost was waiting for her when she drove up the short driveway and parked outside the too-small garage attached to her house.

The Sullivan mansion, with its Confederate deaths, stillborn babies (to Colonel Sullivan's second wife, after the war), and the hotel guest who committed suicide, didn't have a single ghost; but Roberta's house, a two-bedroom ranch that she and her husband Walter built in 1981, did. The ghost wasn't there when they built it, but showed up a year or two before Walter's mother died, about the time all their friends' parents were passing on, about the time that Walter and Roberta noticed they were now the elder generation. Which might have been enough in itself to make anybody see ghosts.

As soon as Roberta opened the car door, she felt an electricity in the air that made the hair stand up on

the back of her neck and arms. The muscles knotted in her shoulders. Ignoring the presence so as not to encourage it, she marched around the yew bushes, almost in need of trimming, and into the front door, which, for once, she bothered to lock. She waited a moment, holding her breath, but nothing happened. Which was often the case. The ghost bided his time.

She unlocked the door again. Betty Frary was coming over, and they were going to go do some work at the church.

After hanging up her scarf and jacket, and exchanging her shoes for slippers, she made herself a piece of toast so lightly browned it was scarcely toast at all. She tidied up and hurried into the safety of her bedroom, where she sat at her vanity.

She took a jar of the pearlized face powder and dusted a thin line of it across the doorway to keep the ghost out. She wasn't sure why it worked, but it did.

She sat down, dabbed moisturizer at the corners of her eyes to fight the crow's feet, and reapplied the Revlon heather eyeshadow that drew the most attention to the flecks of blue in her brown-blue eyes. Her eyes were her best feature, especially now that her blonde hair had gone completely gray. It had been more brown than blonde anyway, the color Walter disparagingly called dishwater blonde, though he liked it just fine and didn't mean to hurt her.

Out in the kitchen, a cabinet door opened and closed. Then another opened and slammed, hard enough to rattle dishes.

Roberta tilted her head side to side in front of the vanity's mirror, touching up her eyebrows and adding blush to her cheeks.

Then a drawer creaked open in the kitchen over in the corner where she had her desk. She paused to listen.

The vanity was part of a three-piece bedroom set that she'd bought with money she saved up from working cashier at the Water Street Market back in 1966. It was early in the year--after the race riots that summer, Walter refused to take her back to Cleveland again, "them people are *animals*," he'd said, and they went to Toledo to do their shopping instead. Walter developed a deep but casual hatred of blacks, especially after the Civil Rights movement started. She sat beside him on the day that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and heard him say, "Well, he got what he deserved." But she'd seen the bedroom set at Higbee's Department Store before all that, when she and Walter went to downtown Cleveland for the Christmas displays, and she made him borrow Whitey Dunn's truck to pick it up for her. He'd balked at first, but once she set her mind to something she was too stubborn to change course and he'd given in. The vanity was her pride and joy, even though it wasn't solid maple, only covered with a thin veneer.

More drawers slid open in the desk. Roberta had been going through her papers and keepsakes. Without any children or other family, there was no reason to keep most of it, and she'd been systematically throwing things away. The ghost was looking for something around her desk.

She jumped up and ran to the doorway in spite of herself.

"Now you knock that off right now!"

Everything fell silent.

When she sat down again, pulling her seat up to the mirror, she glanced over to the door and noticed the

powder across the entrance was scattered.

Her heart began to pound. A wind, smelling like her father's boot polish, swept through the room. Something took Roberta by the collar and tugged her gently toward the door.

She twisted frantically until she got away from it, falling on the floor, yelling, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" or possibly "Go to hell, damn you, go straight to hell!"

The presence let her go.

Out in the living room, the front door opened.

"Hello!"

Roberta's heart beat even faster. "Good evening, Betty," she said, grabbing a rag and quickly wiping the powder off the floor. "Make yourself at home. I'm just freshening up."

Her hair was in disarray, curled into tangles. She brushed it out quickly, smoothed out her clothes, touched up her face. She found Betty in the kitchen, at her desk. Betty was a few years older than Roberta, almost eighty, a few pounds heavier, her hair a few shades grayer. Her rounded shoulders were warmed by a navy blue sweater she wore even in summer.

"What's this?" Betty asked. Roberta's metal box, the one that held her valuable documents, was sitting open. The key she kept hidden in the sugar bowl lay beside it.

"That's nothing," Roberta said, rushing over to close it.

Betty said, "No, I mean this picture. It was sitting out on your desk." She held up a black-and-white photo that was almost sixty-five years old. Roberta stopped, reached for it, pulled her hand back. It showed a family of blacks in front of a farmhouse, a mother and father and four children, ranging in age from about ten to teens, all in bare feet.

"Oh, that," she said. "It's something for the museum. Somebody found it. We're trying to determine its place in island history."

Betty snorted. "That's not from the island. You remember when that woman had her house for sale out on the point, and she had all those pictures and statues of little black children, those--what do you call them?"

"Pickaninnies," Roberta offered. The picture bobbed in Betty's hand, just out of her reach.

"Yes! The whole house was decorated in pickaninnies and watermelons. She had the watermelon rug, and the watermelon pitcher, and all those cute little children--"

"I remember." She aborted another grab at the photograph.

"And the realtor from over in Sandusky, he told her she had to redecorate if she wanted to sell it, 'cause it was too offensive." She tossed the picture down. "I didn't see anything offensive, just country decorating. It's all that political correct B.S., pardon my language. You ready to go?"

Roberta put the picture back in the box and locked it, then slid the box back in its drawer. On Friday evenings, she and Betty stuffed the weekly church announcements, run off on a photocopier, into the standard, preprinted bulletins.

"Yes," she said, touching her hair, smoothing her blouse. "I'm quite ready."

* * * *

Of course, there was no ghost.

Ghosts were just stories. Walter never believed in ghosts. The only time he thought he saw the ghost in the house, it turned out he was having a stroke, a bad one, and during the winter, when the ferries weren't running but the lake ice wasn't thick enough to drive on yet either, and they had to bring a helicopter over from the mainland just to get a doctor to look at him. He was never really all there again after that, those last couple years.

By Saturday morning, Roberta convinced herself that Betty had found and opened the box. Betty always was a bit of a snoop. But no harm done. Besides, it was a beautiful Saturday morning in July, with the breeze off the lake blowing fresh air through all the open windows in the house. Roberta would not believe in ghosts on such a perfect day.

After breakfast, and a load of laundry, and straightening up around the house, Roberta prepared to take her daily walk. She wore a long-sleeved white shirt, buttoned at the cuffs and collar, tucked into her khaki pants. When she looked at the liver spots on the backs of her pale hands, she missed the days when a lady could still wear cotton gloves in public. Instead, she slathered them with sunscreen. SPF 50. Not all progress was bad. She adjusted her wide-brimmed straw hat and tied it firmly under her chin, checking it twice in the hall mirror. She left the house with a smile on her face.

Every day, Roberta walked a 3.1-mile route that started and ended at her doorstep. Turning right, she set off down Church Street, passing the plain whiteboard Catholic church across from the town playground and going all the way down to the big stone Methodist church where the street dead-ended at the corner of Market. Turning right again, she headed up the hill, past the cemetery, toward the island's school.

She and Walter didn't have a church wedding when they married back in 1953. There hadn't been time. In fact, their whole courtship had lasted less than six weeks. She told Walter she was twenty, but she'd barely been eighteen. He was twenty-three, and had come to Cleveland looking for work in the factories. Roberta was working in the Mendlsohn and Newman Cigar factory, pasting labels onto boxes. Walter had come to the city to try to get a job at the Ford factory in Brookpark, but he'd ended up doing masonry work instead. The two of them met at a dance club on Euclid, where neither of them was interested in dancing, Walter because he was shy and self-conscious and Roberta because she didn't like the way it made people lose their self-control. When Walter told her he was going back home to the island to take a job that had opened up in the quarry, she asked him to marry her. She told him she had a problem that meant they could never have children, and he had wanted her to go see doctors, but she said she already had and smoothed it over. They were married by the end of the week.

Walter's family hadn't approved at first, since they'd never met her, and it was all done in a hurry; after ten or twenty years they came to tolerate her well enough. Roberta visited Walter's mother every day right up until the morning she found her cold in bed instead of brewing coffee for breakfast. Roberta's family wasn't an issue. She had moved to Cleveland to get away from her family, and marrying Walter took her even farther away, where she'd never have to see them again. It worked out well for both of them.

Or at least it worked out. Walter was moody, downright gloomy, didn't talk to anybody much except when he was drinking and then only about two-thirds into a drunk, because after that he grew sullen again. But he was a hard worker, and an honest man, and he didn't drink often, and when he did he was a good time from maybe his second beer to around his eighth or ninth. Just the best. He could make her forget everything bad in the world and be happy then.

If she went on straight past the school, the road would curve around by the beach and go on to the remains of the quarry where Walter worked. But she had never had children with Walter, and she didn't want to go past the school. So she crossed over to Rosey. She was halfway down the road, lifting her hand to wave at the approaching car, a gray Lexus she didn't recognize. Limestone Island was small town; everyone pretended they knew each other even when they didn't.

The car slowed as it came beside Roberta, and the window rolled down. It was the couple from the mansion.

"Hello," the husband said, still smiling that unsettling contented smile.

"We thought we'd take a drive around the island," the woman said, leaning across her husband's lap.

"Well, that'll take you all of five minutes," Roberta said. "A day as pretty as today, you should've walked."

They both laughed, and the wife patted her stomach and said, "I'm due in two months. My feet hurt too much to walk that far." She smiled.

Roberta took a step away from the car, stopped, turned back. She frowned, and started to say, "Won't that be a burden for the child?" but what came out of her mouth was, "Well, congratulations to you. Have a good day."

Then she hurried on. She had to finish her walk. Those people really had no excuse for coming to the island and interrupting her perfectly good day.

She made it all the way back into town without her mood improving, along Water Street, and even up the single row of stores, past the Island Market where she worked on and off as a cashier from 1963 to 1986, when Denise Schott sold it to Allan Dunn and his wife after her husband Rod had a heart attack while he was fishing and fell off his boat and drowned.

Glancing at the glass windows, taped over with their sun-faded ads for Pepsi and ice cream sandwiches and lottery tickets, Roberta saw a shadow reflected in the glass a half step behind her own image. She jumped, startled, heart pounding, spinning around, but there was no one nearby on the sidewalk beside her.

The ghost had never left the house before. There was no ghost.

Nancy Younts, standing behind the register, gave a tourist his change, brushed the hair back from her forehead, and waved through the glass at Roberta. She waved back. Before the tourist could come out the door, she started walking again.

She saw the shadow jump after her in the reflection, and she felt a shove in her back. The bell on the door jingled as the tourist stepped out and paused to stare.

Roberta pressed her hand over her heart and continued walking. She hadn't reached the second house past the miniature golf course when she felt the shove again. Then invisible hands were tugging at her hat, trying to pull it from her head. She spun, but no one was there. She thought it was the wind, but the flag hung limp on the pole outside the city building. The hands began to fumble at the knot under her chin. She squeezed it tight in her fist, just before it came undone. Hat askew, she hurried toward her house only two blocks away.

The hands clutched at her arm, and she tried to slap them away. The button tore from the cuff of her left sleeve, pulling it halfway to her elbow.

She ran inside, not even sure if she'd completely shut the front door once she retreated to the bedroom and locked herself in. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she smoothed the front of her pants over and over again until her hands stopped shaking.

There simply was no ghost.

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On Sunday morning, Roberta drove out to the point and picked up Betty Frary. They made it to the Methodist Church a half hour before the ten o'clock service so they could get a good parking space out in front.

Walter had been Catholic, and Roberta had gone to mass with him at St. Michael's for the forty-one years of their marriage. She never claimed to be Catholic, and never converted, but most of the priests seemed to recognize her as one of their congregation, and Father Timothy offered her communion during the 1970s and '80s. As soon as Walter died, Roberta went down the street to the United Methodist Church. It was nearly the same as the Methodist Church she grew up in as a child, and she wanted to make peace with her faith as she saw her own death approaching.

After the service, when she and Betty were cleaning up the discarded bulletins from the pews, Betty said, "Did you see that couple in here this morning?"

Roberta said, "What?"

"That couple. You know, what do they call it, jungle love? Sitting in the back."

She had seen them, and pretended they weren't there. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair they kept showing up wherever Roberta went. "Oh. Them. They came by the museum when I was volunteering there on Friday. He's an engineer."

Betty leaned over and whispered. "Women like those men because they have the big--" She nodded meaningfully.

"Betty!" Also a whisper. Roberta glanced up, but the minister was still shaking hands with stragglers in the narthex.

Betty snatched the stack of bulletins from Roberta's hand and crossed over to clean the last few pews on the other side of the aisle. "That's why that pretty blonde girl married what's his name, the one that killed her. O. J. Simpson."

Roberta followed Betty. "They're just a regular couple. She's going to have a baby."

"I don't think they ought to mix that way. It's such a burden on the children." She shook her head. "But some women like jungle love, that's all I'm saying."

Roberta crumpled a bulletin in her fist. She was angry at the couple for coming to the island and disrupting the careful pattern of her life. She was angry at Betty for talking about them. Lips tight together, voice hushed, she said, "That's just prejudice."

"It's not prejudice if it's true. Hello, Pastor Kelley, how're you this morning?"

Roberta jumped, put on her best smile, and hid the crumpled bulletin at her side.

"Bless you for a kind heart, Betty," the pastor said, smile forming deep grooves in his cheeks. "And you too, Roberta. Thank you, ladies, for all the good work you do."

Roberta said it was nothing and they told the pastor they'd see him next Friday. He exited the door behind the altar, and Betty and Roberta stepped out the front of the church. Tall green trees lined the street, and the houses on either side behind the trees were all eighty or so years old. Aside from the air, which smelled like the lake, it reminded Roberta of the town she'd grown up in.

"Colored people is still just people," she said, more than half to herself, and surprised to hear herself saying it.

"My father called them Coloreds too. He knew Colonel Sullivan, I ever tell you that? He said the Colonel wore a white carnation in his lapel, every day. Well, except when he called them niggers, but that's just what people called them back then."

"I've heard all that before, about a thousand times," Roberta said sharply. She still had the crumpled bulletin in her hand. She flung it down.

"When they were in season, I mean," Betty said. "The carnations." She hobbled down the steps and over to Roberta's car, leaving Roberta stranded on the church steps.

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Little Limestone Island was a cul-de-sac, a dead end. No one ended up there by accident. Not even a ghost.

Roberta dropped Betty off at her house and made excuses not to stay for lunchmeats because she didn't feel like fighting Betty's horde of cats and the smell of all those litterboxes turned her stomach. She drove once around the island, without finding a reason to stop, before she went home again. She went around to the back door and let herself in, leaving the screen door open to cool the house.

The metal box sat open on her desk. The photograph sat beside the box. Nothing else was disturbed.

The photograph was the oldest thing she owned. She had never shared it with anyone, not even Walter, who had only seen it once, by accident, just before his stroke.

She picked it up and walked over to the sink. Opening the cabinet door beneath the sink, she slowly and deliberately tore the picture into tiny pieces and dropped them into the trash. Her hands were trembling by the time she was through.

Making a pot of coffee to calm her nerves, she discovered she was out of half-and-half. She poured a cup and reluctantly sipped it black. When she turned to lock her box and put it safely away, she saw the photograph.

All the pieces had been reassembled and left there on her desk, among the bills to pay.

For a moment, she thought she too was having a stroke. Her heart pounded as if it were being pulled apart, and pain threatened to split her head. She sat down at the desk and leaned her face on her hand, pinching the bridge of her nose. A sigh fell out of her mouth, almost like a sob, and the worst of the pain went with it. She straightened her back and wiped the edges of her eyes with her fingertip.

"Is it you?" she asked, not looking around for the ghost. She placed her fingertip on the father's face, his eyes turned half away from the camera toward his children, and moved that crumpled square apart from the others. "Is that you there?"

The silence that answered her was like the silence that answered her parents' letters when she moved away to Cleveland.

She put her finger on the mother's face. The two older sisters. The brother. In the black-and-white photo, their features looked unmistakably black, no matter how light-skinned they were. Back in the day when "one drop of blood" made you a full-blooded Negro.

She waited for the touch of the ghost. But there was nothing.

Her fingertip edged the piece with the youngest girl, her features blurred, away from the others. Her father's eyes had been turning toward her, she realized, warning her not to be so restless, telling her to be patient.

Her father was a deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal Church over in the Union County seat. They lived outside the tiny town of Jefferson Corner, Ohio, where he was a farmer and a mechanic, but he'd gone to Wilberforce University for two years, and prided himself on being an educated man. He used to read to her from W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folks*.

"How beautiful he was," her father read, "with his olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets, his eyes of mingled blue and brown, his perfect little limbs, and the soft voluptuous roll which the blood of Africa had moulded into his features!" DuBois's son had died from a treatable illness: the black doctors in Atlanta wouldn't treat him because he was too white, and there were laws against that, and the white doctors wouldn't treat him because his parents were too black.

Her heart beat at a normal pace again. After another sip of coffee, her head throbbed less. She scooped all the pieces of the photograph into the cup of her hand and went over to the sink. She flipped the switch for the garbage disposal, turned the faucet handle, and dropped one piece after another into the drain, listening to the grind and rush of water until she was sure they were completely destroyed.

She poured the rest of her coffee after it.

When she was sixteen, she had taken a fourth of the money from her parents' mattress. Blacks still couldn't keep money in banks in those days. Her rightful inheritance, she told herself. And then, like a prodigal daughter, she ran off to Cleveland to pass for white, because Columbus was too close and her brother worked there. When even Cleveland seemed too close, she'd married Walter and gone to the island with him. In her own community, Walter would have been below her--in looks, intelligence, prospects. But he was her one-way bridge across the color line. If even one person found out her secret, everything in her life would've come to ruins. That was why she never dared have children with him, in case they looked too black. She remembered what a relief it was when she finally hit menopause, and how much she had cried.

"It's not fair," she said aloud, in case the ghost was listening. She sounded petulant, even to herself, like the ten-year-old girl in the photograph, too restless to sit still while the picture was taken. "It's not fair for the world to change that much."

She went and sat in the living room, waiting for the photograph to reappear, for something, anything. What did it mean that her whole life had been lived as a lie? In a marriage she didn't have to make, in a place she didn't need to live, with the children she didn't dare to have?

The photograph was the last link to her past. With the photograph destroyed, nobody would ever be able to find out. Not Betty. Not anyone.

When nothing happened, and no ghost spoke to her, she said, softly, "Well, go to hell then." Or, possibly, "I'm sorry."

* * * *

It was late afternoon when she roused herself for her daily walk. Long sleeves, hat, and sunscreen, same as always. She was on the stretch of Water Street between the mansion and the docks when she saw a gray Lexus waiting in line for the ferry. The couple sat on the rocks beside it, looking out over the water, holding hands. Roberta felt a gladness they were leaving, that she'd never have to see them again.

But then the ghost put a hand in her back and shoved her gently off her well-worn path. He took her hand in his, and led her along like a little girl. Her hand lifted, in a way that might be mistaken for a wave. Before she knew exactly what she was doing, she heard herself saying, "William, Carol. Mr. and Mrs. Hughes."

They stopped mid-laughter, turning, looking up at her in surprise. She felt the ghost shove her one step closer, and then, with a cold shiver, like wind off lake ice, it was passing through her and gone.

What she did next, in this moment, the next time she saw Betty, the rest of her life, was up to her.

"Yes?" William said, and Carol said, "What's up?"

The orange bulk of the ferry was just leaving the Sandusky shore. It wouldn't reach this side for twenty minutes. "I remembered a story to tell you, about a runaway and a ghost," Roberta said, and sat down on the rocks to tell it for the first time before they could say no.