

# The Seventh Day

The strange world of Adventism as seen through the eyes of a Methodist kid who's not sure whether her newly minted Adventist grandmother is crazy—or right after all.

by Beverly Coyle

*Beverly Coyle's new novel, The Kneeling Bus, recounts her childhood growing up in rural Florida during the 1950s as the daughter of a Methodist minister, "a liberal with advanced degrees." We here reprint one chapter.*

— The Editors

**T**HAT SUMMER I TURNED TEN AND BOUGHT A parakeet at Alma Turner's pet store in town. Before she started up the final transaction Miss Alma insisted on showing me a photograph of her granddaughter, Faybia.

"She looks like me," Alma said, leaning on her elbows, studying the likeness, "but I believe there's worse things in life." She held out a bleary photograph of a grown woman who I saw instantly would one day be me if I wasn't careful. The granddaughter looked to be forty,

but was wearing a child's necklace on a blackened chain. A small gold cross was stuck in the middle of her throat.

"She lives up north," Alma said, reaching insider her bosom for a handkerchief trimmed with crochet. It was Florida in August and all the women in Boynton Beach had hankies.

Alma Turner was the most forward-thinking woman in our town. When her TV set—a mahogany Philco—arrived from Miami, a photographer had rushed over to take a picture of Alma pointing a bony finger at the mysterious screen. I still had the clipping along with other special keepsakes—a lock of my own grandmother's hair and an abandoned collection of cigar rings from foreign countries.

Boynton Pets sold mostly tropical fish and kittens. Alma sold miniatures in the back as well—cups and saucers, teeny commodes, covered cake plates the size of acorns. Behind that was a set of rooms where she lived with a parrot she was willing to sell for fifty dollars. People thought she was kidding, but fifty dollars was a bargain, Alma said; she said folks

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around here knew nothing because they never traveled. She had taught the parrot to advertise. "I'm a bargain," the bird said.

"All the parakeets in this cage are my males," Alma explained. We stood in front of the special cages she'd made from chicken wire; the mesh tops sagged over branches strung on clothesline. "If you want yours to be a talker, you have to be sure to pick a male. They get a dark spot over their beak. It's the mark of intelligence."

Weeks before, she'd pointed out an ugly chartreuse lump of a bird who'd been hatched in July. I'd been in and out all month to see if the place above his beak would grow dark enough to distinguish him. Suddenly, in a matter of days, the spot had deepened to an ashy smudge.

"Yep, Carrie, he's going to be a real good one," she said, pleased for me. "When you get him home you spend some time now taking him on and off his perch. The trick is to put your finger in like this and let him walk right onto it before you lift him out."

My parakeet looked sideways and suspicious when she offered him a step-up. But then, just as she'd known he would, he put a foot forward, my heart swelling at the thought of him doing that for me. I watched him swaying dangerously, trying to balance himself on his fragile chicken tongs. As Alma passed her hand in front of my face, he crouched as low as he could and hung on for the ride.

"How long will it take him to talk?"

"I don't make prophecies."

Alma deposited the bird inside the brand-new plastic cage that came free with the deal. As I carried him



off, full of hope, she called out to me, "Just don't be asking for miracles."

The next day, a letter arrived from my grandmother. The envelope was so fat Grandma had used up a whole roll of tape to get the thing closed. I was in the mango grove behind our house, bent down over the cage, already coaxing my pet. "You silly bird, you silly Billy," I was saying over and over when Jeanie came out to break the news. "She's joined a Seventh-day Adventist church," Jeanie said. "Mom says they're more fundamentalist than anyone." My sister sighed wearily and knelt down beside me because she thought I wasn't listening, which was not the case. I felt sure something unusual was about to happen to our whole family this time, something I'd been waiting for.

Jeanie's voice went low. "They footwash," she said.

"They do not," I said.

"They do. They wash their feet right in the pews."

I closed my eyes and waited. "No they don't. You're making it up."

Jeanie shrugged her shoulders. "I'm telling you what's in the letter. Go read it for yourself. If you *can* read. Mom and Dad are having a fight. Mom is crying right this minute."

Billy fluttered inside his cage and hopped to the perch nearest Jeanie. His head feathers sat straight up with pleasure when Jeanie made a few *tuck-tuck* sounds with her tongue; when she whistled, the kindness made him quite mad. He began nodding from the top of his cage to his toes, turning round and round on his perch, saluting her first high then low until he almost fell on his face.

"Your bird is as dumb as you are," she observed.

But I saw the real truth immediately. Billy would go to anyone.

My mother sat at the kitchen table, the letter spread out before her. I couldn't make out her expression. Dad leaned against the drainboard and watched me hang the plastic cage

on a sturdy hook he'd put up in the corner.

"I certainly wouldn't have expected it," my mother was saying, expressing my thought almost at once. This thing had happened to her mother, but we all knew the dark weakness for fundamentalism came from Dad's side of the family.

The letter lay in two piles. Half of it was anchored with a saucer. Grandma had typed out every moment leading to her decision—the complicated details of her conversion. She'd used a two-toned ribbon so that words and whole sentences would stand out in red like the red words of Jesus in my Youth's New Testament.

I saw my mother thumb the pages and then give up.

"Do they wash their feet in church?" I asked.

She looked at me. "It's just a ceremony, sweetheart."

I imagined all their feet exposed and a pile of socks and shoes on the floor of some little brown church in the wood.

"What else do they do?" I said. (They would sing "Bringing in the Sheaves" for one thing.)

"Noel?" Mom said.

Dad took a pen from his shirt pocket and bided his time. He was a handsome man with a strong jaw who did nothing to set himself above his flock. Sundays and funerals, he stood naturally and gracefully as if he were standing on his own front porch. "It's their belief that we should worship on Saturday instead of Sunday," he said. "That's why they call themselves Seventh-day Adventists."

Mom stared at him as if she were having to take this in once more and just could not.

"But *Sunday* is the seventh day," I said,

counting from my thumb, starting with Monday. I was a Monday's child.

Dad pointed to a calendar hanging by the phone. When I looked, all the Mondays in August had suddenly moved over. Four Sundays, at the head of each week and busy with penciled reminders, pushed everything down one. I saw, for the first time, that Saturday stood all by itself—extreme and final—as far away from us as it could get. Why had I never noticed this before?

Mom took my hand and turned away to look at Dad. "Mama's lonely. She's looking for a family with these people, don't you think? Noel?"

"Maybe you should invite her here."

Mom got up and put the letter in the sink. She hadn't intended this to be funny, but Dad gave a laugh, and it made my mother turn huffy.

"I have no idea what I should do," she said.

My grandmother wasn't lonely. None of us

had ever seen her so pleased with herself. She said she'd talked to a lovely woman all the way down on the bus.

She began right off the bat. "It's one of the Commandments, darlin'," she explained. This was the simplest explanation for what

she'd done, she said. "The seventh day is the Lord thy God's," she sang, lifting a pale pink corset from her suitcase and placing it flat in the top drawer of my dresser. I'd be staying in Jeanie's room, and I'd lined the drawers in gift wrap for Grandma—ironed Christmas paper with green and silver bells. "The seventh day is the Lord thy God's," she said.

There was a radiance in her face in spite of her fleshy nose and her wisps of dry fine hair. Mom came into the room with ice water. "Here we are!" she breezed.

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*I saw, for the first time, that Saturday stood all by itself—extreme and final—as far away from us as it could get. Why had I never noticed this before?*

The tray was too small; the glasses clinked sonorously together. Grandma patted my mother's arm. "Sunday is *not* the Sabbath day." She spoke in a new kind of voice, low and masculine. "Sunday is the wild solar holiday of pagan times."

There were things on the stove and Mother excused herself.

"They let the pagans keep their sun gods so they would convert easier. Maypoles, nakedness, graven images." Grandma clutched a gigantic brassiere in her arms. "They made Sunday into a false Sabbath."

"Who did?" I asked

"They did it in order to fool the pagans," she said.

She sat on my bed and opened her notebook. She wrote the words "Sun God" and "Son of God" so I could see, she said, how the pagans might get confused and be accidentally converted. As she wrote, she moved her arm in a cool circular motion, her hand never touching the page. The fragrances of her were like all the summers of my life. I leaned against her powdered skin and studied the moles along her neck. Translucent, they hung by delicate threads.

"We must never be counted among their number," she said. "We must never be counted among those who changed the Law."

Downstairs Mother was getting the noon meal on. It wasn't like Grandma not to be

down there helping—to be sitting instead with me in my blue-papered room. By now the casserole was on the table. Mom stood at the bottom of the stairs calling up to us. "Yoo-hoo!" she called. But Grandma seemed not to hear.

"We have proof they changed the Law," she continued, lowering her voice.

"Who *were* they?" I asked. "The pagans?"

"Oh, yoo-hoo!"

Grandma shifted to face me. This is why she'd come. She pressed my hand. ("Is anybody up there?") She whispered she had taken a long time figuring these things out. Hadn't it taken her all of her sixty-two years? She bent her big head to mine.

"Not the pagans, darlin'. It was the pope."

Mother walked around the table adjusting the forks. "Oh, there you are."

Grandma nodded at the birdcage in the corner. "What's his name, darlin'?" She was pleased for me.

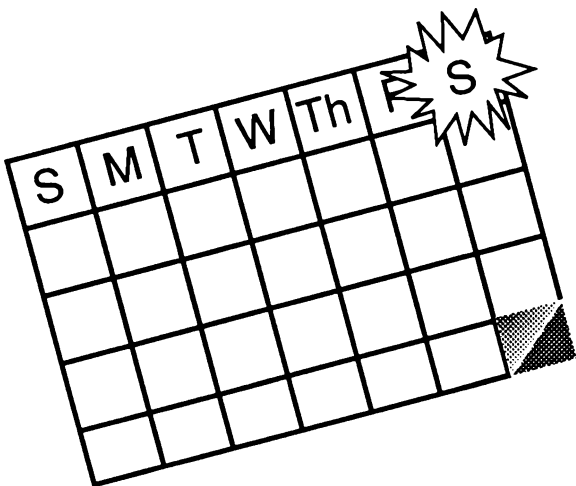
"Billy." Jeanie moaned, as if there were no hope.

"Billy Billy?" Grandma called, and her voice had the familiar pitch and timbre he knew meant love. He acknowledged her with his practiced bows, the obsequious ups-and-downs of his long chest. When I opened the cage and let him step onto my finger, he flew straight to the top of her head, and she folded her arms slowly, pretending parakeets landed in her hair every day of the week.

"He has to go back to the pet store tomorrow to have his wings clipped," Mom explained, "now that he's used to us." She motioned that I should put Billy back in his cage, please. She looked at Dad. "Noel?"

We bowed our heads and Dad asked that the food be blessed to the nourishment of our bodies and us to His service. Grandma murmured an extra amen and we all relaxed.

The rest of the family sent their love. They were all fine—Carl, Grace, Aunt Dove, and Rita. But the freeze had done such dreadful damage. Carl and the boys were having to sell



the fruit for concentrate this year.

"It's a shame," Dad said.

"And they're all upset with me, of course," Grandma said, patting Mom's arm. "Your Aunt Dove says I've broken her heart." Grandma sighed. "She's hoping you'll talk me back to my senses."

My severe great-aunt Dove, with her deep-set waves of pearl-gray hair. I couldn't imagine anything that could upset her more.

"Well, we want to hear all about it," Mom said. She smiled at Dad, at Jeanie. At me. "Have some of the ham, Mother."

"Oh, no." She shook her head. "I don't eat pork, Caroline."

"Oh?" Mom said, staring at Dad for a moment. "I didn't realize."

"No pork and no coffee."

Later that afternoon, when she'd had her nap, I took her out to the mango grove. I'd pulled old wicker chairs out there by then. We sat down, and I got her to tell me what else the Seventh-day Adventists did. Well, they gave a tenth of all they earned; they refused liquor and stimulants. When she sat back, the late afternoon light cast leafy shadows on her face and arms. They never went to movies; they wore no jewelry; teenage girls didn't ever shave their legs.

Once in a while she leaned down to Billy's cage, repeating his name while he watched the brilliant, iridescent flies crawling in and out of his view. She told me how she feared the idea she might have died not knowing what she knew about the Sabbath. There would have been nothing worse than that.

"Do my parents know?"

"They don't know about the pope."

"Are you going to tell them?" I knew I wouldn't tell Mom if I were her.

Billy suddenly sang out something between a note and a word. Grandma took a stick and dug an old measuring spoon out of the sand. "It's my duty before I go."

When she said "go," I knew she meant her duty before she died. And yet I imagined it as

a real journey, away from everything dear and familiar: the Methodist Church, her sister Dove, her children. Us.

For a moment I saw myself walking with Grandma along miles and miles of sandy road on a mission. Neither of us had a pocketbook.

The next morning, the wood shavings at Alma Turner's filled the air with a clean smell; her birdseed always made me think of spices from the Orient—caraway, cardamom, and anise.

And yet my grandmother didn't take to Miss Turner. When the two of us came into Boynton Pets, hauling Billy in his plastic cage, Alma asked a simple question Grandma refused to answer.

"Did you come on the train, Mrs. Jamieson?"

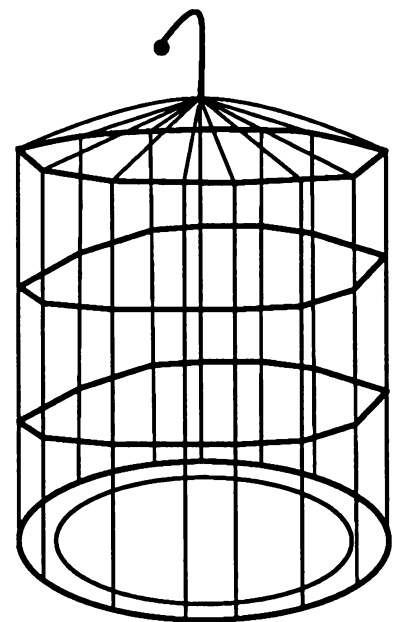
"No, I didn't," Grandma said, squaring off in front of the hamsters. And when it was clear she wasn't going to say how she came, Alma's hands fluttered to the back of her head to see if anything had come loose.

I blushed and had Billy walk onto my finger just the way she'd taught me. Alma smiled at my progress and let me know she was prepared to accept some people's ways. She was a business woman and had seen all kinds. We heard Grandma call out, "And what are *these*?"

"Why, those are True Gold guineas, Mrs. Jamieson."

"And you sell them to people?"

Alma gave me a sharp look. "Yes, ma'am," she answered, and, though she continued to stare at me, she removed a pair of scissors from under the cash register. She was an expert who,



in an instant, had my parakeet spread out in her palm like a hand of glossy playing cards—the sharp edges of his wing repeating over and over a simple pattern of color. Until now I'd never seen these intricate shades. Someone had hidden them there—this ribbed and rigid array of unnameable greens.

Billy looked quite content before the blades began to come together and my grandmother had rushed to us. “Oh, please. Please don't.”

Alma met no one's eye when she put the scissors down on the counter and tapped her finger to make her point. If the Lord hadn't wanted us to have these birds as pets, she said, He wouldn't have given them the gift of human speech. She looked at me; wasn't she right?

“He hasn't said anything yet,” I said.

And then Alma knew she'd been betrayed. She touched a spring somewhere that collapsed my parakeet to the size of an onion bulb. I saw his smooth ball head pop out from under a thumb. He gave us all an encouraging chirp, but Alma thrust him back in his cage and handed me the whole shebang. “You said you weren't asking for a miracle.”

“I'm not,” I said. The exotic smells had suddenly made me lightheaded. Grandma had already left the store.

“Well,” Alma said, pointing the scissors at me, “maybe you just *better*.”

I found Grandma not far off, sitting on a bench in front of the post office. She was fanning herself with a piece of newspaper and breathing hard. The day was too warm and we'd walked too far. She said she had to be still for a minute. We sat together, watching the

slow cars in town. I remember the Florida towns in that time well, so sleepy and ringing with no sound at all. Men and women lingered like drugged bees in the intense sun. You could sit and wait for an unlikely breeze to start up, high and out of reach, in the tops of the royal palms.

“It's such a long journey and I'm worn out,” she finally said. “I should never have let myself get fat. It was wicked of me.”

“Oh, Grandma,” I said. I looked down at her swollen black shoes and studied the tiny perforations over the toes. We were in the Last Days, she murmured; that was certain.

“What will happen to you?” I said.

“The Lord will come for me in the clouds of heaven.”

“Oh, Grandma.” I hadn't meant to sigh, but I couldn't help it. I knew now why she'd broken my aunt Dove's heart.

After dark, after the family had gone to bed, I lay on the rollaway they'd set up in Jeanie's room, unable to sleep, imagining her journey. Once in a while

I could hear Billy, ruffling the paraphernalia in his cage downstairs. Once, he sounded as if he were flying up to the blue-papered room where Grandma's whistles and rattles of breath took off like spirits out the windows.

And in the middle of the night I woke up thrashing, and Jeanie sat right up. “You want me to get Mom?”

“No,” I said. I went into the hall and crept downstairs. I took Billy's cage and slipped out the back door despite his objections. His feathers had slicked down at the inconvenience of being jostled in the middle of the hot night.

Even in the dark, he recognized the mango

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*“I want you to write the mark of the beast down at the bottom of this page. Then I'll show you something interesting.”*

grove, and, once settled there, he took in the drama of the tropics. He shook himself out and sidled up to his tin mirror to practice what he knew while I sat back in one of the wicker chairs and tried to imagine myself—grown, gone, and seriously counted. I'd be wearing a jungle helmet at the time I let myself be hurled into some latter day when I'd be old enough for courage.

For Africa.

My parakeet chirped and talked on to himself in the mirror and ignored me.

Africa was my push from the swing and into the wild blue yonder of all whooping confusions—"Red and Yellow, Black and White" we sang in the song about the children of the world. The fire dancing and grassy legs and the lawful bones in their noses. I began to hum. "They are precious in His sight . . . They are precious in His sight."

The next morning I went downstairs and confronted them before she woke up.

Mom folded her hands in her lap and waited for Dad to say something.

"It's true that the day was changed, Caroline," Dad finally told Mom. "It was done in the third century."

"Well, I never heard that before and I think it's all very interesting," Mom said, "but what matters is that we worship every week. Mama knows we believe in a Sabbath as much as she does."

"Why did they have to go and change the day?" I said.

"Who?"

"The Catholics."

"Who?"

"The pope."

Mom looked at Dad. "Do you know what this is all about?"

"One of the popes, I don't know which one," Dad said, smiling. "It's in the recordings of Eusebius."

"That's right," I said. "He changed the Ten Commandments." I raised my voice. "We should be worshiping on Saturday."

"Maybe we should be," Dad said. He winked at me as if we were in cahoots.

"Well," Mom said, "maybe he thought it was better to pick a day to distinguish Christians from the Jewish people. Saturday is *their* Sabbath."



(We knew about Jews the way we knew about Sir Isaac Newton. They were discoverers. They had discovered that God was One, and *no* one would have figured it out for a long time if it hadn't been for them.)

"Well, I wouldn't mind worshiping on the same day as the Jews," I said.

"Well, of course, I wouldn't either, sweetheart. My point is, back then people felt differently. It's important to try to appreciate why they might have thought it was all right to have a different day."

"They were trying to trick the pagans," I said.

"What?" Mom said.

I had always suspected she was gormless.

"Well, I certainly don't believe that anybody was trying to trick anybody," she said, getting up to put the milk away. "If we all go around thinking everything is a trick, where would that leave us?"

None of us had expected Billy to take that moment to speak—to say "Silly Billy" in the clearest of human voices.

"Listen to that!" Mom said.

And he'd even spoken with all the self-deprecation I'd been counting on, though I was in no mood to be pleased. Everything *is* a trick, I thought.

Out in the grove several days later, Grandma showed me something she'd pasted

in her notebook. It was a color photograph of the pope, and I knew this was no good. If she was hoping to get them to listen, she would have to be more careful. She couldn't go showing a thing like that round the house—a color photograph of the pope clipped from *Life*.

"Now, then," she said, pulling her chair a little closer to mine. We were like girls doing homework, heads together, arms entwined. "I want you to look very closely at his crown. Tell me what you see."

On the pope's crown I could just make out the letters of VICARIVS.

"That means 'the substitute,'" Grandma said. Then she slowly turned over the picture to show me a Latin phrase she'd written in a white space on the back: VICARIVS FILII DEI. She pointed to each word and read, "The Substitute for the Son of God."

Grandma and I had been reading Revelation for several days. There was nothing to match it in all of Methodism.

"I want you to write the mark of the Beast down at the bottom of this page. Then I'll show you something interesting that happens when we add up all the Roman numerals in the pope's title."

Right away I told her they would never add up to anything in the six hundreds!

"Maybe not," she murmured, "maybe not." But she began putting down letters anyway—just the I's and V's, etc.

V	5
I	1
C	100
I	1
V	5
I	1
L	50
I	1
I	1
D	500
I	1

"How did you get a *five* hundred?" I asked, startled.

"From the D, darlin'. From the D!"

My knowledge of Roman numerals did not extend to five hundred. I began to add the column expectantly, thinking how it was just like my teachers to leave me unequipped for anything serious. In a matter of minutes, when I began to bring down one perfect six, then a second, and, finally, a third, I gave myself over bodily to what had happened before my eyes. Three perfect sixes had shot up like cherries. I added the whole thing again to make absolutely sure.

Grandma tore the sheet from her notebook and gave it to me with a little flourish.

But by then I'd thrown myself against her, in love and astonishment.

Mother wept.

She hugged me against my will, saying she had to take back what she'd said the other day. This really *was* a trick, she said.

Somebody had really been trying to trick Grandma. She pushed the paper away and put her head in her hands, exasperated. "Sweetheart, we don't believe in things like this. These are numbers. This is a coincidence."

I pulled the paper toward us and added up the column again. Already I'd adopted the urgent pencil scrawl of an adult. "This number is in the Bible!" I said.

Dad covered his mouth and got up from the table.

"I don't see what's so funny, Noel."

"I'm sorry, honey. I was thinking of something else."

"I wish you'd tell us what."

"I was remembering a few of the fellas in seminary. The more conservative boys used to talk about the Beast. It was surprising—the ideas some of those boys came up with."

"Well, I think it would be helpful if you'd tell us about that right now."

Dad hesitated. "This was during the war. Some of the boys worked out the numbers to explain Hitler. They found out Hitler's mother was born on the sixth of June in 1860. If you wrote it out GI style, you got six, six, six, zero,



which was close enough for them.”

Dad wrote down 6/6/60.

“I don’t think that’s very close,” I said. “Besides, Hitler’s dead.”

“True.”

“But that’s not the point, is it, Noel?”

“No. It’s not.”

“Talk to her, Noel! Explain it to her.”

“Okay, one edition of the *Communist Manifesto* had six hundred and sixty-six pages,” Dad recalled. “That sort of thing.”

I was getting mixed up. Mother had her head in her hands again, but now *she* was trying not to laugh.

“And don’t tell us the Communists are dead,” she said, letting go. “The Communists are everywhere.”

I stared at her.

Dad pounded his fist. “That’s right,” he said, pointing his finger at my nose. “It may turn out to be the Communists. But before them it was probably the pope.”

Mom sobered and lowered her voice. “Okay, enough,” she said. “Let’s not have anyone going around saying the pope is the Beast.”

“The Whore of Babylon,” my father whispered.

Outside the sun showed no mercy for the familiar objects simmering on our back stoop—Mom’s frayed laundry basket, her dirty work shoes curling in the heat. I let the screen door slam shut on them. I’d made sure to let Mom and Dad see me take down Billy’s cage and head off alone with him to the grove.

Mom rarely came out to the grove. Normally she stood at the edge peering in—oh, yoo-hoo. But in a few moments she had followed me and was entering from the far side, with her apron still on, her waist as narrow as a girl’s. I began to squint at her—to squint at her slender feet sinking into the sand. I felt lean rancor come into my throat. By the time she reached me, I’d almost become, in the fifty yards from her kitchen to the trees, a Seventh-day Adventist.

“Dad didn’t mean what he said about the pope,” she said when she’d settled in one of the chairs. “You know that, don’t you? He was joking.”

Just the easy way she sat down had meaning for me now—the way she crossed her smooth, shaven legs at the ankle.

“We have respect for the Catholics,” she said, “for all faiths.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“Yes you do. Right now you’re angry.”

“I am *not*.”

“Well then, I’m glad. Maybe we could talk about this.” She unfolded the torn sheet from Grandma’s notebook. For a moment Billy, uncertain of the bright paper, jumped around scolding the toys and little ornaments on the bottom of his cage. Mom waited until he was quiet again. “This *is* remarkable,” she said, ironing out the paper slowly, then running a stub of pencil down the column of numbers. “But you know, Dad was just saying when he looked at this that the first word doesn’t have two V’s. The second V is really a U. Vicarius. It means vicar. Like the Episcopal ministers.”

I watched dumbfounded as she gently crossed out the second V in the column.

“What are you doing?”

“There’s no second V here, sweetheart. The Romans used to print their V’s and U’s exactly alike to make things easier when they engraved.”

“Then why are you changing it?”

“I’m only trying to show you how some people can get numbers to work for them.”

But everything was getting clearer and clearer. I was a witness to how someone like my own mother could take a pencil and change the Law.



"Pretty boy," Billy said.

On her Sabbath, Grandma stayed more or less alone up in the blue-papered room. Downstairs, while Billy preened himself on her shoulder, my mother sipped her coffee and alluded to a larger view of things.

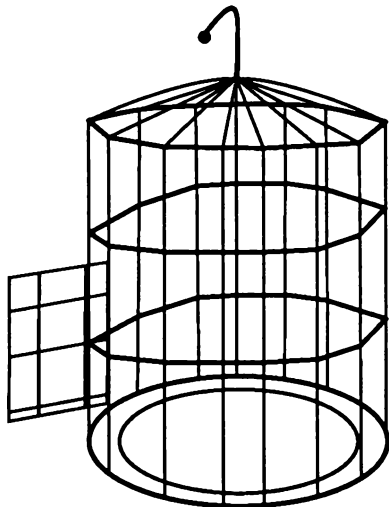
"She's an older woman now," Mom whispered. "You, you'll grow up and go off on your own. To college, Dad and I hope, where you'll learn a lot of new things you've never thought about before."

When she stood up to make her journey to the icebox, to put the milk back where she always put it—just to the side of the orange juice—all the college photographs of her appeared in my mind. In her first yearbook she'd started out as tiny as a postage stamp. And every twelve months after that they'd blown her up a bit bigger—to a calling-card size, to a shower invitation, to an extravagant full page of her own—my mother in a low-cut drape. An adjustment in the focusing had turned her into everybody's dream girl.

"I'm not going to college," I said. "I'm going to do something you'd never think of in a million years."

I would have given a good deal for the courage to walk to the icebox and pour the whole bottle of milk over my head.

"You can do whatever you want to do; that's my point," Mom said.



I spun around in the direction of Africa. I saw my dad standing on the other side of the screen door, squirting the family car with a hose. For a second I imagined he was trying to put out flames. "In a trillion years," I said, jerking around again and startling Billy into

flight. He alighted on the screen door, then craned his head around to look forlornly back at me the very moment Dad bounded onto the stoop to tell us something, opening the door wide and flinging Billy's two or three ounces into the air.

"Whoa!" Dad shivered as if some invisible soul had passed right through him. Mom gave out a cry and Jeanie ran in from the living room, thinking someone had gotten burned on the stove. By the time Dad recovered, a little furious at his own part in the accident, he was accusing us all of carelessness and stupidity. His anger fell on Jeanie, who burst into tears, saying she didn't even know what he was talking about.

"Something made Billy fly to the screen, Noel," Mom explained. but she was as upset as he was. "It's no one's fault. He's never done that before."

Dad turned and ran into the yard. "Well, that's just great!" he shouted back at us. "And now he's gone."

I ran upstairs to my room, not expecting to find Grandma dozing, not hearing anything. Meanwhile under my feet things were already calming down to Dad's deep drone and Mom and Jeanie's quiet reconstruction of what had happened. For a moment, I stared out a window, blinded by the afterimage—Billy's green wings blackened in the sunlight. I thought I heard the delayed report of the snap he'd made, vanishing without me into the world.

I shook Grandma's arm. "Billy flew away," I said.

"Oh, dear," she said, sitting up and taking my hand. She had fallen asleep reading, still dressed in her thin nightgown because of the heat.

But she was listening to them below. "You should go back down there," she said. "They're upset."

I sat beside her on the bed. "No, they aren't."

"Yes, they are," she said. "I'll get dressed."

Go tell your mother everything's all right. She's all upset down there."

When I turned in the doorway, she was kneeling in her thin gown. She hid her big nose in her hands and let the tangled wisps of her head fall low. I didn't want to look at the enormous flesh on her upper arm as she knelt alone at the side of my bed. Her arms pressed oddly against her breasts; the bare bottoms of her feet appeared swollen and shapeless. I hurried away, embarrassed, and found Mom sitting by herself at the kitchen table.

"Carrie, we're so sorry," she said.

None of them had closed the screen door. It stood open as if they thought there was no point in closing it again. He'd so completely flown the coop.

"I'm going out to look for him," I said. "Grandma's praying."

"Oh, sweetheart," Mom said, the defeated sigh in her voice too familiar for me to bear.

I took down the cage above her head, lowering it slowly until she and the table slid to the other side of a deep divide that must always be there now. My life would start from the opposite edge, and as I left the house with Billy's cage I finally asked for a miracle.

Please let me find him, I said when I looked over my shoulder and saw Mom following me out the screen door in her black high heels. I

took a good look at her standing there, slender and lovely in the yard, looking up at the window of the papered room. I heard myself offer up a silent deal, a real bargain: If He'd just let me find Billy, if He'd let me bring him back and put him down before her very eyes, I'd go and *do* something. I saw myself rattling along with an empty cage—rattling myself down the highway and right out of town and on my way—when what really happened was that I nearly stepped on that almost invisible char-treuse onion bulb, about five minutes later, out in the mango grove, which was as far as Billy or I managed to go.

I put out my finger and watched him climb up, one chicken foot and then the other. In all that time, he'd been poking around beneath the trees—that silly bird, that talker—scaring the brilliant flies.

And I wondered, suddenly, what I would do without my wicker chairs, or the box of cigar rings and the trees and all of Boynton Beach. They hung like miniatures above the funnel that would suck them to the bottom of everything. If He'd just let me find him, I'd prayed, if He'd just let me bring him back and put him down before her very eyes, I'd go ahead and believe He was real and coming soon, out of the blue, to take me from her and break her heart.