

Every day teenagers were coming in to volunteer for G.T.'s campaign, and we knew what to do with them.

Tell ten friends why you support G. T. Stoop and ask them to join you.

Make sure that people are registered to vote for G.T.

Write a letter to the Mulhoney Messenger telling why you support G.T.'s election.

Cecelia Culpepper published the letters and an editorial of her own demanding the opening of the tax assessor's office and insisting the mayor release proof that the dairy paid its local taxes.

"We are conducting an internal investigation," said the mayor in response. "The assessor's office will be closed to the public until the investigation is completed."

"Not good enough," Braverman fumed when he read it.

Back at the diner, G.T. was driving himself too hard. Twice I'd seen him steady himself against a wall when he was walking.

Once I saw the color drain from his face when he was

cornered by an irritated representative from Friends of Wildlife who said she could personally assure him of twenty-four votes, but he was going to have to “play ball with the animals.”

Sid Vole yawned, still in his decaffeinated state, and studied G.T.’s pale face. “We need to get you in front of people looking strong. Give a thumbs-up sign whenever you can. Voters love that.”

G.T. shook his head. “Let’s show the people what they’re really getting, Sid.”

You could feel the campaign heat build. Addie said it was like turning up the flame and quick-frying zucchini that could go from perfection to mush in a matter of seconds.

People were coming into the diner every day just to see what she had on the menu. A man laughed with pure joy yesterday after he’d finished his second bowl of split pea soup brimming with fat ham chunks and garlic butter croutons. That man was dining alone. I saw a marriage proposal take place at table nine. The first thing that happy woman said was, “Harold, it’s taken you seven years to ask me. Why now?”

Harold looked at his half-eaten plate of brisket piled with caramelized onions and said he wasn’t quite sure, something had come over him.

Addie had a mandate now. She raised a whisk and pointed it at Braverman.

“Now I believe that the way to anyone’s heart is through their stomach, and, my boy, I’m here to tell you, we are in the heart business. We’re going to reach deep past the menu and into the emotional power of food because a person comes back

to a restaurant again and again for one reason only—to feed their soul.”

She chopped an onion fast, weeping as the aroma hit her eyes.

Braverman said, “If you light a candle near the chopped onion it takes away the eye sting—that’s what I do.”

Addie wiped her face and said that weeping just added more passion to the menu.

But she and G.T. were having trouble getting used to each other’s ways. Flo said it was like watching two dogs mark off their boundary lines in a field.

The worst face-off was when Addie was trying out a new recipe called Big-Hearted Stew, which had veal and sausage in a tomato-garlic sauce with peas and sautéed onions. She thought she’d used too many onions. G.T. had a bowl of it and said it was perfect, just perfect. Addie said that she was just beginning to reach perfection in this kitchen and she assured him there was a whole lot more to look forward to.

“This is the best cooking this town has seen. And, Lord, people are happy when they leave. You’re too hard on yourself, Addie.”

“I’m hard on myself because that’s the only way food is elevated.”

“Maybe you’d have more fun if you backed off a bit.”

I tried to signal G.T. that this was the wrong thing to say. Addie’s definition of having fun is worrying herself silly over a recipe. She’d reached her fun apex with this veal stew.

Addie snarled, “G.T., there’s too much onion in this dish

and I'm not going to serve it until I've got it right. I'm putting something else on the dinner menu."

G.T. said he'd already written out the specials page for the menu for tomorrow and he'd rather not do it again.

"I'll do it then," Addie half shouted, and grabbed a pen and paper and started printing.

"Addie, that's plain wasteful. We can't afford to be throwing out perfectly good food."

Addie looked away. I prayed to God she'd hold it together.

But everything was unraveling.

Four burglaries occurred in town in the same humid, rainy week. One of them was at Adam's house.

"They pulled everything out of the drawers in my room," he cried. "They took my mom's antique clock. They took the stereo and the TV and my dad's campaign button collection that went all the way back to Teddy Roosevelt!" He stared off, shaken.

My hands turned to fists.

"When they come into your house, it's like . . . it's so personal." He was fighting tears. I put my hand on his shoulder.

Deputy Babcock said it seemed like the work of the same person, maybe two people working together.

"Not real swift ones either," she commented, drinking her second cup of coffee at the counter. "They were messy jobs. Whoever it was, though, knew people's patterns—when they'd be home, gone to work. Interesting that whoever it was only burglarized the houses of people who signed G.T.'s petition—or who worked with the campaign."

She adjusted her shoulder holster with the very real pistol. Flo told me that Deputy Babcock used to be a police detective in Minneapolis and moved to Mulhoney to take care of her mother, who lived here and couldn't get around by herself anymore.

"Brenda's got connections way up the pole," Flo told me. "Sheriff Greebs isn't too happy about that."

"Better get the word out," Deputy Babcock said to me and Flo. "Batten down the hatches."

Batten (from Webster's): *A thin narrow strip of lumber used especially to seal or reinforce a joint.*

Hatch: *An opening in the deck of a ship or in the floor or roof of a building.*

"I'd like to know what's being done to find those burglars!" G.T. shouted from the steps of Town Hall after Millstone refused to meet with him about the robberies.

"Sheriff Greebs is conducting a thorough investigation," said a spokesperson for the mayor. "We have no further comments."

"Well, I do," G.T. shot back. "Give the mayor a message for me. Tell him that lies and dirty tricks never win in the long run. Tell him that fear is no way to govern people. He can refuse to meet with me from now until Election Day, but *I will not be silent!*"

Cecelia Culpepper printed it word for word in the *Mulhoney Messenger*.

★ ★ ★

The next day the Real Fresh Dairy canceled all their advertising with that paper. A few other small businesses pulled their ads, too.

"That's going to hurt Cecelia financially," G.T. said to me. "The dairy was her biggest advertiser. She's had to run that paper on a shoestring since her husband died. My Lord, what we human beings do to each other in the name of politics."

We were out back by the flowering trees. G.T. was holding Anastasia, telling her how he'd prune back the branches so the lush leaves could grow. He told her a story about the mustard seed that was one of the smallest seeds in the tree family, but it turned into one of the mightiest. G.T. said you just never know what can happen when you start planting little seeds.

I went back in the diner to work. Lou Ellen was delivering orders and watching G.T. and Anastasia out the window. She was a pure mess of feelings—running herself ragged trying to work and take care of her child. I wanted to help.

"Lou Ellen, you want me to take table twelve so you can go out and—"

"I need the money, Hope."

"I wasn't doing it for the tip."

"I don't need charity, okay?"

"Lou Ellen, if I can do anything to help like baby-sit, whatever, just ask."

She looked down. "That's real sweet of you. Everyone here's doing so much for me. G.T. said Anastasia could stay here as long as I need." She gripped her order book. "I'm not used to people helping. Except for my mom."

I nodded. "It's good you've got her."

Her face just caved in. I grabbed her limp hand.

She was looking out the window at G.T., who was trying to get Anastasia to touch the flowers on the trees. He put her little hand on the leaves, but it just fell back to her side.

"I named her Anastasia because it was a really big name and I wanted her to do something big in the world. I don't know if she'll ever be able to do much of anything." A tear went down Lou Ellen's cheek. "She doesn't have a daddy either."

Poor kid.

"Neither do I," I said. "Some things you learn to work around."

Lou Ellen looked sympathetic. "Where's yours?"

"I don't know. Where's hers?"

"I don't know either."

I smiled. "Maybe it's some kind of virus."

"Yeah." She half laughed. "The jerk virus."

A man in her station signaled for his check. Lou Ellen steadied herself and wrote it up.

"I think you're real brave," I told her, and for a minute her whole face lit up. She was real pretty when the light went on inside.

"It is with great joy and honor that I announce my support for Eli Millstone, the only man for Mulhoney!" Cranston Broom, president of the Real Fresh Dairy, shouted this into a microphone at his factory as a sea of dairy workers applauded and cheered and several dairy workers draped a Millstone

banner across the entrance to the building. "Every dairy truck you see will proudly bear a VOTE FOR ELI poster. That's how committed we are to this mayor."

Braverman, Adam, and I were across the street watching. Braverman's face looked rigid. He sipped the last of his coffee; crushed the Styrofoam cup in his hand.

Braverman was becoming Caffeine Man. In his spare time he worked on the Students for Stoop newsletter and wrote articles for the *Mulboney Messenger* about the campaign that never got published. Cecelia Culpepper told Braverman that his articles sounded more like editorials. He needed to report the facts, be a "dispassionate observer of the political scene." Braverman said that anyone who was dispassionate about this election was brain-dead.

I was getting worried about him.

"That young man's got a deep relationship with G.T.," Flo explained to me. "It's killing him to hear the things Eli Millstone is saying."

It was killing all of us.

Now, I don't think G. T. Stoop means to be doing this town any harm, but I believe we need to let him know that running for mayor with no experience and leukemia is making a travesty out of the office and is insulting the voters. We all have to understand that this man is not only sick, he's deluded. Every one of his accusations is bosh.

But G.T. went for broke and challenged the people: "Eli's been going around telling you that everything I've said was false. Either I'm the biggest barefaced liar you've ever met or I'm not. You've got to decide."

Braverman started following Millstone's campaign everywhere after that, asking, "What about it, Mr. Mayor? Is G. T. Stoop the biggest barefaced liar we've ever met, or are you?"

The last hour on my shift and it had truly been one of those days.

Everything went wrong in the kitchen, my orders were backed up, I had hungry people glaring at me like I was personally responsible for their starvation.

At the galley window. "I ordered that tortellini sausage soup *twenty minutes ago, Braverman!*"

He slammed a pan. "It was ten minutes ago."

Oh, please!

I had a table full of gimmes ("Gimme water, gimme ketchup"). Mrs. Scarlotti was perched at the counter trying to set me up with her nephew Lewis.

"A nice, thoughtful boy," she said. "Wouldn't hurt a fly."

That means spineless in Brooklyn.

I delivered the world's best chef's salad with crumbled bacon and a large bowl of Too-Good Chili to the people on table seventeen who could see how busy I was and kept telling me not to rush.

Brenda Babcock was sitting at the counter drinking iced coffee. She was in street clothes today—white pants and a bright flowered shirt—she didn't look like she crushed bad guys under her heel in that outfit.

I placed a slice of Addie's fresh coconut layer cake in front of her. That's when we heard the bloodcurdling scream.

"Oh God! Oh God!" The pretty woman on table seventeen shrieked it, covering her face.

I ran over. The man with her looked furiously at me. "*There's half a dead mouse in my wife's salad!*"

This had to be a joke.

The restaurant went silent.

Deputy Babcock was there next to me.

I looked in the salad bowl—saw the top half of a dead, gross rodent, mouth open, covered with Roquefort dressing.

Lou Ellen screamed.

I backed away.

The man stood up. "This is the most disgusting thing I've ever seen!"

He took his soup spoon and held that thing up for everyone to see.

Wails of disgust and disbelief.

Braverman ran to help me from the kitchen. He looked in the bowl, stunned.

"I want to go!" the pretty woman cried. "I might have touched it. Oh, my God! It might be crawling with disease!"

Customers are beginning to gather around us.

"It's really a mouse."

"Don't look, Bobby."

"Inexcusable."

"Sir," I began, "there has never been anything like—"

"We'd heard this was a good, clean place," the man snarled.

"Believe me, you'll hear from our lawyer!"

Braverman took the salad bowl. "I don't know how—"

The man took it back. "I need that as evidence."

Brenda Babcock whipped out her deputy's license. "I'll be taking it as evidence. We'll keep it real safe for you and your attorney." She wrote something out on her official deputy pad. "If you'll just sign here."

Suddenly that sweet couple got nervous.

"What . . . do you want us to sign?"

"This just says you found the mouse in your salad."

The woman backed off. "I . . . I don't know if we should sign anything."

"Have you ever seen that mouse before?" Brenda Babcock asked. "Prior to it being in your salad?"

The woman looked down. "How . . . could I have seen it before?"

"Have you, sir?"

"Of course not."

"Then would you sign here, please?"

The couple looked strangely at each other.

No one spoke.

Then a nervous smile. "I think, officer," said the man, "we'd just like to forget the whole thing."

"You will not be pressing charges, then?"

"No," they said together.

"May I see some identification, please?"

"Why," asked the man, "would you want to see that?"

"Because I maintain the peace in this town."

Hard to argue with that.

They took out their driver's licenses. Deputy Babcock wrote down the information.

The woman gulped. "What are you going to do with the mouse?"

"I'm going to have the crime lab check it."

"For what?"

"How long it's been dead. Is it native to these parts. I see you're from Michigan."

"We're traveling through," the man offered quietly.

She handed their licenses back to them. "Enjoy your stay."

The man put a twenty on the table and they walked quickly out the door.

Deputy Babcock turned and addressed the diners. "Go back to your meal, folks. I think we had some visitors who were trying to shut this establishment down."

A collective gasp.

And Deputy Brenda Babcock, crime-fighting ace, raised a humble hand like it was no big deal that she'd just saved the Welcome Stairways from scandal, asked me to keep her cake for later, and marched out the door holding that salad bowl that was sure to reveal major mouse tampering and God knows what else.

12

G.T. and I were in his truck heading off to a day of political campaigning. He'd asked me to come along and be his right-hand person. I couldn't have been more proud.

I checked the schedule that Adam had put together. How he expected two human beings to accomplish all this was beyond me.

"G.T., this is going to be a beast. In eight hours we're supposed to stop at a cheese factory and talk to the workers, hit the commuter train terminal and pass out literature. Meet with leaders of the Small Businessman's Association for lunch. Speak to a parents' meeting about overcrowding in the kindergarten. Go to the Tick Tock Clock Shop for a coffee in your honor. Stop by a bingo game at BVMRCC. I don't even know what that is."

He chuckled. "Blessed Virgin Mary Roman Catholic Church."

I shook my head. Some things shouldn't be abbreviated.

"And Adam made up a list, G.T., of the people who have

contributed to your campaign so far and what they gave. He said we should go over it.”

G.T. shook his head. “I never want to see that list.”

“Sorry . . .” I put the paper away.

“You can get so messed up learning who gave what and how much that it’ll change your opinion of people.”

I’d peeked at the list earlier. The biggest contributor was Slick Bixby; the cheapest was Mrs. Scarlotti of Scarlotti’s World of Cheese, who gave a measly five dollars with that thriving cheese store of hers. Some people.

“I can’t imagine you’d change your opinion of people because of a list, G.T.”

“I don’t want to take the chance. We’re running for everyone. Whoever gives, I’m grateful. Whoever doesn’t, has a right. I’ll talk to Adam.”

G.T. pulled his truck into the parking lot of the Wisconsin Cheese Company, parked by a big trash compactor, said, “I’ll be with you in a minute,” and bowed his head.

I waited.

A few minutes passed and his head was still bowed. I figured he was praying. I checked my watch. We were already fifteen minutes late.

I wasn’t sure what to do.

I coughed to remind him I was present.

Cleared my throat.

Yawned pretty loud.

Finally, he opened the truck’s door and headed toward the factory.

“My name’s G. T. Stoop, folks, and I’m running for mayor.”

The midnight shift was just getting off. G.T. was standing in the cafeteria shaking as many hands as he could get to. Men and women in white coats and white hard hats were pressing in to see him the way you’d look at a curiosity. Weird cheese posters lined the walls.

CAN’T MISS SWISS

FETA? YOU BETA

PARMESAN POWER

I was doing my best to hand out the Students for Stoop newsletter and smile with flashing intensity. This was politics up close and personal.

Down the line he went asking people how they felt about things.

When a man said he didn’t think politics could help anyone anymore, G.T. said one person can make a difference, two can lift a burden, and more than that can start a revolution.

When a woman said she hadn’t voted for years, G.T. asked her why.

“There hasn’t been anyone I trusted.”

“I know what you mean,” G.T. told her. “Trust doesn’t always come right away in life, it has to be earned.” He asked if she’d come to listen when he spoke; talk to people who know him. “If I can earn your trust in the next few months, will you vote for me?”

She was surprised at first, but met his gaze. “Yes, I will.”

A man said, “I vote because I have to, not because I want to.”

“I’ve felt that way in plenty of elections, too,” G.T. admitted.

"Once I didn't vote. I learned I always felt better voting even if I wasn't happy with the choices."

Person after person. He dealt with each one like he or she was the only one in the room. This audience, I can tell you, was moved. Faces pressed in around him, open and smiling. People who looked like they'd just had a good meal.

I walked behind him passing out newsletters.

"Thank you for coming out to see G.T. today," I said over and over. "I hope you'll give this a read. We really need your support."

A short woman muscled through the crowd, stuck her hand out at G.T. "I'm voting for you, Stoop. Go out there and kick Millstone's butt."

G.T. shook her hand, laughing. "I appreciate it."

Then a few men in the back started shouting, "Kick Millstone's butt! Kick Millstone's butt!" And soon most of the crowd was hollering it.

Kick Millstone's butt!

Kick Millstone's butt!

The cheers swept us into the parking lot.

"Kicking butt wasn't the rallying cry I was going for," G.T. said as he drove to the commuter train terminal. "I'm non-violent."

"I think they know you'll fight for them, G.T. Those cheese people need a warrior."

"Hope, why do you think people need a warrior?"

We got to the train terminal late and missed the 8:53. There was no one on the platform.

"I'm not sure, really . . . I think people are looking for someone who's strong to fight for them."

"But I'm not strong."

"You are in what you believe."

"But not in my body."

"Well . . ." I wanted to change the subject.

"We have this need, Hope, for leaders to look good, sound good, and be perfectly healthy. But life's never been more clear to me than when I got this cancer."

I looked at his face, so determined, so tired. He was fighting for strength—pushing, straining to make this day count.

I slapped away the fear I had for his health and tried to enter into the courage.

What else can you do when you're spending the whole day with one of the finest men on this planet?

We survived the irritated kindergarten parents.

Managed to down the rubbery chicken in lukewarm white gravy at the Small Businessman's luncheon.

Headed off to the Tick Tock Clock Shop.

"What's your mother like, Hope?"

I sure wasn't expecting that question.

I squirmed. "You know Addie's not my mother."

"She told me that."

What else had she told him?

"My mother's a waitress, G.T."

I let that hang there between us, but it didn't quite tell the story.

"She's a much better waitress than she is a parent. She doesn't know how to be a mom, I don't think."

G.T. stopped at a light. "That's a lot for you to deal with."

"I've gotten pretty good at it."

Driving again.

"Your mother's missing out not knowing you as a daughter."

I'd never once thought of that.

I don't know why, but I almost started crying.

"You know what I've found out about disappointments?"

G.T. asked.

I sniffed. "No."

"I think that if we face them down, they can become our strengths."

"Is that what you're doing with your cancer?"

"I'm trying, Hope. I'm sure trying."

Drinking weak coffee at the Tick Tock Clock Shop.

Six cancer survivors present, invited there by the owner, Beth Wisocki, who had breast cancer four years ago. This was her support group.

No handshaking here. Survivors hug.

"I've been clear of cancer for seven years," said a woman. "Faced death, bought my cemetery plot. They're going to have to wait awhile to bury me."

"Tell people," said a tall, thin woman with fiery eyes, "that life's being lived powerfully by many people with cancer. You tell this town that there's all kinds of things that make us sick. Disease is just one of them." She handed him a little

card with flowers on it that read LIVE THE DAY, NOT THE CANCER.

As if on cue, every bell, gong, and cuckoo went off in the shop. It was three o'clock.

"This is my favorite time of day," Beth Wisocki shouted.

"Well, I sure know where to come if I'm ever feeling discouraged," G.T. shouted over the dings and dong.

But he was doing too much.

I could see it on his face—it was drawn; gray; and stayed like that all the way to BVMRCC.

The intensity in this church basement.

Women had ten bingo cards going at once.

"We get a roomful of committed people like this behind us," G.T. whispered to me, "we could change the world."

An old woman said to him, "You don't look well enough to make it home, much less be mayor."

That cut deep.

"Do I look that bad?" he asked me.

I gave him the short-order truth. "You look like a plate of cold fried eggs. No offense."

"Lost my appeal, huh?"

"It's best the customers don't see the food in that condition."

"You don't mince words."

"Just garlic," I reminded him and led him to the truck.

13

We pulled into the Welcome Stairways at 8:45 P.M.

G.T. said he thought he'd stop in the kitchen and see how things were going and I said, while still being respectful, that from what I could see he needed to take care of himself and that did not include a stop in the kitchen. You'd think a man running for elected office would have the sense to listen to his body.

"All right. All right." He climbed the stairs slowly up to his apartment. "Thank you for coming with me today, Hope. You're a fine companion."

"I loved every minute of it, G.T."

I heard him unlock his door; shut it.

I went into the kitchen, planning to ask Braverman to make me a pork-chop sandwich. He tenderized the chop better than Addie did, and believe me, I would take that fact to my grave. He was working nights all this week.

I saw Addie at the grill instead, putting up orders.

"Where you been?" she asked, keeping her eyes on the food. Good cooks have eyes in the back of their heads like vampires.

I started telling her all the places G.T. and I had gone to, but she cut me off.

"We've got a situation here, Hope."

She was working in choppy, harsh movements. Addie only cooks like that when something's wrong.

"What . . . ?"

"It's Braverman." She took a deep breath. "He got beat up."

"What?"

"He's going to be okay. They broke a couple of ribs. He got some stitches over his eye. When he didn't show up for work, I just kept cooking."

I felt a chill in my spine.

Addie flipped three burgers, piled garlic mashed potatoes on a plate with balsamic chicken. "It's Brenda Babcock's day off. Flo said she took her mother into Milwaukee for hospital tests." Addie slammed a sauté pan. "What do you think of that coincidence?"

I closed my eyes.

My breath came out like it had been trapped.

I called Braverman's house, but his mother said he was sleeping. I called Jillian because I needed to talk to someone. I started crying over the phone and kept saying I didn't know what was wrong with me. I'm *not* a crier.

"You care for him," she said.

I bristled. "We *all* do."

"But I think, Hope, you care for him in a deeper way."

That's not what I needed to hear, even if it was, just possibly, true.

Batten down the hatches. That's what Brenda Babcock had said. I felt a huge wind picking up everything that wasn't nailed down.

8:35 A.M.

The wind beat strong.

G.T. was just leaving Braverman's house when I got there—worry and anger carved in his face.

I was holding the cactus I'd gotten for Braverman—\$3.95 at Glugg's Grocery. Flowers didn't seem right; a cactus was manly.

I felt stupid holding it.

"He looks pretty bad, but you'll cheer him up." G.T. patted my shoulder. "I'm going to do everything I know to do to stop this madness." He marched down the walk, but he didn't seem strong.

The house next to Braverman's looked abandoned. A broken-down car without rear tires was across the street.

I rang the bell.

Braverman's mother answered, let me in. She was tall and looked scared. She walked with a cane.

"I'm Hope from the—"

"Oh, yes," she said, smiling. "He's talked about you."

He has?

I saw his twin sisters, Heidi and Hannah.

"Are you his girlfriend now?" Heidi asked, giggling.

"No." I felt my face get hot. I put the cactus behind my back. "We work together. That's all."

Hannah skipped off, shouting, "Eddie, your girlfriend's here."

Eddie?

I smiled dumbly at his mother.

"Eddie, your girlfriend's here!"

I've always appreciated being an only child.

A door down the hall creaked open. In the shadows I saw Braverman.

His face was swollen, he had a large bandage over his left eye. He stepped out into the light.

My heart broke for him. "Oh, Braverman . . ." I held out the cactus. "How do you feel?"

"Like three guys beat me up."

I walked over to him.

"There were three?"

He nodded.

"It must hurt a lot."

"I don't recommend the experience."

I almost took his hand, but didn't. We walked down the hall. All the furniture seemed old, not much on the walls. I didn't picture him living in a place like this. The nicest thing I could see was a big wooden case filled with books. The small, cramped kitchen had dirty dishes in the sink, a milk carton on the counter, cereal boxes lined side by side. He motioned me

out onto the porch. It had two plastic chairs. I sat on one. He stood before me stiffly like Frankenstein.

I looked down at a little garden. The morning sun shone bright. It seemed to dance across the yard, touching the flowers.

No matter what happens, girl, remember the power of the light.

"Do you know who beat you up?" I asked.

"They didn't introduce themselves. They said I had a big mouth about the campaign and I'd better shut it." He looked at his feet. "I don't know which was worse—getting hit or not being able to hit back."

I swallowed hard.

"I was really worried about you, Braverman."

"Thanks."

A weird silence.

"For the first time in my life, Hope, I think I could have killed somebody. If I'd have broken free and gotten one of those guys I don't think I could have stopped hitting him."

"I think you would have stopped." I hoped he would have.

He clenched his hands. "I'm scared at how angry I feel. I'm yelling at my mom and my little sisters. I keep seeing those guys in ski masks holding my arms and I couldn't break free!"

I wasn't sure what to say. A big part of me wanted to hug him. "I know all about anger, Braverman." I told him about my boxing.

He was quiet.

"And sometimes," I added, "I have to remind myself who I'm mad at so I won't take it out on the wrong people."

"Like the cook," he offered.

We laughed.

He looked down again. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

He stood up straight, closed his eyes at the effort that took.

"Millstone's speaking at the Methodist church picnic on Saturday. I need you to help me get there."

He had to be kidding.

"I just need a ride. I'm not supposed to drive until the bandage comes off my eye. I don't think my mother will . . . you know . . ."

"Braverman, did they give you strong painkillers, or is your brain just naturally impaired?"

He thought about that.

"Both," he said.

A rash of teenagers signed up to work on G.T.'s campaign as news of Braverman's beating hit the streets and Jillian spread the word on-line.

G.T. stood on the steps in front of Town Hall. "I will not allow this evil to prosper! I demand a full investigation by Deputy Babcock to bring those criminals to justice!"

Sheriff Greebs strolled out the front door. "I'll be handling any investigations around here."

"I do not believe, Sheriff, that will lead us to the truth."

"That's your problem," snarled Greebs as he walked to his squad car.

On Thursday the *Mulboney Messenger* carried this on the front page:

A POLITICAL LESSON

by E. A. Braverman

This week three men dragged me into an alley and beat me up. They took turns holding me down. They took turns hitting me. I didn't owe them money. I hadn't done anything to hurt them. They didn't take my wallet. All they tried to take was my right to support G. T. Stoop's candidacy. They told me I'd better shut my mouth about politics in this town.

I don't know their names or where they live, but I would like to say something to all three of them.

It didn't work.

Oh sure, you broke three of my ribs. I have stitches in my forehead and I won't be able to work for a while. But you've only made me more determined to speak out and find the truth about the corruption that has a hold of this town.

For a few days after the beating, I told myself that if I'd been stronger, I could have pushed you away. The truth is, you are the weak ones. And you've made your cause that much weaker by showing how low you would sink to get Eli Millstone reelected.

I hope the sheriff's office catches you, but even more than that, I hope that people will see the fear that's really behind your actions. You're afraid of the truth.

You know what?

You should be.

Saturday morning. The teenagers of Mulhoney had had enough.

I got Braverman his ride to the Methodist church picnic. Fifty-seven kids decided to join us.

My heart was thumping with anger and deep caring as Braverman dragged his bruised self into the big tent set up on the front lawn and stood smack in front of Eli Millstone, who was droning on about truth, justice, and the American way.

"Mr. Mayor! Could you explain what the sheriff's department is doing to find the three men who attacked me?"

Millstone was shocked at first, but looked at Braverman with fake compassion. "We're going to get to the bottom of what happened to you, son. I give you my word."

"Your *word*?" Braverman hobbled closer. "Mr. Mayor, your *word* isn't worth anything."

Adam raised his fist in the air and started the cheer.

"Tell the truth! Tell the truth!"

We screamed it loud until the tent poles shook.

Until finally Eli Millstone stormed out, fuming.

You think all teenagers care about are musicians and movie stars?

Spend some time in Wisconsin.

We'll blow your socks off.

On the mouse front, we had big news. The *Mulhoney Messenger* carried it on the front page. The paper was down to eight pages now; it used to be twenty, but Cecelia Culpepper vowed to keep publishing it no matter what.

The lab report showed no rodent hairs in the Welcome Stairways kitchen. The mouse had been dead for at least a week. It couldn't have come from our diner. That sweet couple had been arrested twice for passing bad checks.

"And the corker," said Deputy Babcock, sipping coffee at the counter, "is that couple said a man in Milwaukee paid them to do their mouse act in the Welcome Stairways."

"What kind of a person would do that?" Flo asked.

"I don't know," Brenda Babcock replied. "But I'm going to find out."

Days passed. Hot, muggy ones. Not that I've ever expected much else from July.

Braverman was in direct contact with his inner porcupine. He'd become consumed with "getting" Millstone.

Revenge of the Giant Grill Man.

He'd become a symbol of public outrage, walking around town with his bandage over his eye and his black-and-blue face. But, as Sid Vole said, it sure was a good reminder to the voters. "STOOP FOR MAYOR" was showing up on more and more lawns and bumper stickers, but the juggling, joking Braverman was gone. He was serious and fuming, morning till night.

I mentioned it to him gently after a campaign meeting.

"I swear to God," he vowed. "I'm not going to let Millstone win."

"I just don't think you should carry the whole campaign on your shoulders."

"Just lay off, Hope."

It really hurt me when he said that.

Braverman's injury was wreaking havoc in the kitchen. He couldn't work a whole shift. Addie was pulling killer hours. She tends not to suffer in silence. Once, G.T. rolled up his sleeves to help her, and in twenty minutes of them working side by side my whole future in Wisconsin could have gone up in smoke. Thankfully, G.T. saw it, too. He backed out gracefully and said, "Well, Addie, I sure don't want to ruffle your feathers any more than I have."

Addie muttered that if she had any feathers left it was only by the grace of God.

Out at the counter G.T. said to me, "You got any advice on how to get along better with your aunt?"

I looked at his determined face; felt he could take it. "G.T., truth is costly. You've got to give her full reign in the kitchen. There's no other way."

"Hands off, huh?"

"Completely."

G.T. looked at his hands and put them in his pockets.

G.T.'s energy was up and down. His fever had risen slightly, and his doctor said he had to avoid most people until his white blood count went higher. That scared all of us. G.T. said this would be part of his life for a while, but he was like a caged bull waiting to get free.

I was standing in his apartment, which was across the hall from ours. I'd brought up some of Addie's disease-fighting chicken soup with egg noodles. I'd triple-washed my hands

with antibacterial soap and sprayed Lysol disinfectant on my sneakers.

I could tell he was hurting.

"How's Braverman?" he asked.

I kept it light. "He's healing. He's working things out."

A huge sigh. "How's it going downstairs?"

"Good. We're staying busy."

He slapped the table, stared at the oil painting on the wall of a little sailboat riding the waves of a choppy ocean, its sail puffed full with the wind.

"That's where I want to be," he said with irritation.

"You're a sailor?"

"Not much of one. I want to be out in the thick of it, Hope, not stuck in here like some *patient*."

I looked at the painting. "I feel like that boat sometimes."

"How so?"

"Well, sometimes I feel pretty small and the waves around me are big, but I still have this feeling that I'm going to make it to shore."

Harrison would have loved that.

G.T. smiled. "My mother painted it."

"She's good."

"She said it was how she saw troubles. A good sailor knows how to steer into the wind, to use the power to his advantage. You don't become a real sailor until you sail in a storm. Then you test what you know, you see what you and the boat and the wind are made of."

I looked at that painting for the longest time.

Thought of the high waves of my mom leaving me.

The big winds of Gleason Beal that almost capsized me.

"I wish there was another way to learn, G.T."

He flopped on the couch. "I don't like the process either."

He picked up a beautiful piece of dark wood that was sitting on the coffee table; held it out to me. "Feel that."

It was smooth like glass.

"That piece of mahogany came from a ship that sailed the seas over a hundred years ago. See how deep the color is? It didn't start out that way. It was the pounding of the waves and the stretching of that vessel by the sea over the years that helped make this wood so beautiful."

I held the wood. Didn't want to put it down.

"I know how hard it is sometimes to be strong, G.T."

He looked at me with such kindness. "I know you do."

I covered the soup to keep it warm and hoped with all my heart that he'd get well.

Losing G.T. seemed like the worst thing that could ever happen.

We lost Sid Vole instead.

He'd been called to Virginia to provide mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to the campaign of a congressman who had visited a school and announced that Abraham Lincoln was the thirteenth president of the United States instead of the sixteenth. A little kid had corrected him and then the whole class started laughing. A TV camera had been there to capture the drama. The press was crucifying that man.

It was, Adam said, the ultimate test of the ultimate spin doctor.

But it meant we were down a consultant in G.T.'s campaign.

Not to mention an adult.

I was trying to write this all in a letter to Harrison and Miriam. Trying to explain my life up here with G.T.'s campaign and how important it was. Trying to explain why Braverman got beat up and the depth of our non-relationship.

There's this guy that I told you about before—I'm kind of interested in him, except we work together and we're really just friends. Sometimes I think he likes me and other times I don't think he does and I'm finding the whole thing really irritating.

Miffed in Mulhoney.

I walked over to my Replogle globe, which was sitting on my dresser. I gave it a slow spin, stopped it at Wisconsin.

Put my finger on Milwaukee. Moved it slightly to the left. Mulhoney, of course, was not on the globe.

Such a small, hidden place in the world.

"I'm here, Dad." I said it louder than I'd expected.

I waited, listening.

Life has too many unsolved mysteries.

Some things become a mission, and Mr. Woldenburg became that for me. Every Friday he'd plunk down at the counter and order the same thing—grilled American cheese on white. I tried not to shudder.

Tried to introduce him to new food experiences, like grilled Swiss on seven-grain bread with sliced tomatoes.

"Had a grilled American on white every Friday for as long as I can remember." Hands on hips. Mr. Impatience.

I tried to get him to talk about anything.

He grunted instead.

I always tried to put in a few good words for G.T.'s candidacy, but he never responded. Once when people at the counter were talking about the election he announced, "I don't vote. Never have."

Never?

"I don't vote, the wife don't vote either. All politicians do is mess up the world."

Adam was sliding in for the kill, holding a Students for

Stoop newsletter, smiling like the Cheshire Cat. But Mr. Woldenburg waved him off. "Not going to read any propaganda."

He ate his sandwich and left a fifteen percent tip (fifty-seven cents).

You should vote, Mr. Woldenburg.

It might expand your world.

G.T.'s fever was down, but boy, was he dragging.

A few reporters got wind of G.T.'s campaign and came to town to interview him. A human interest story, they called it. Sid Vole had called a few newspaper editors that he knew. It was his parting gift to G.T.'s campaign—more publicity.

Braverman watched and listened like a sponge.

"What has the cancer taught you?" a reporter asked G.T.

"It's never too late to do the right thing," G.T. answered.

"Great," Braverman said, and wrote down the exchange on his pad.

There were MOS interviews (man on the street).

TOS interviews (teen on the street).

Some people, like Addie, refused interviews. I never did. I had a secret hope down deep that with all this media exposure, my father would somehow recognize my face, my name, *something*; jump into his Jaguar sedan and drive fast, but not recklessly, through the night to find me.

I was in the back office taking my break and feeding Anastasia. She'd been here for over a month and not much had

changed. Her little mouth would start sucking, then she'd let the bottle drop. I'd put it back in her mouth; she'd try again. She sure was small and skinny.

"Okay," I told her, "you're real lucky I'm here because I had the same problem eating as you did when I was a baby. Sucking for food isn't a concept every baby gets right off and you've got to just deal with the stress because people are going to put their stopwatches to you and expect you to be doing things you're not ready for." I put the bottle near her mouth. She took a few more sucks, and couldn't hold on.

"Now the best thing you've got going for you is that your mother really cares about you. I know this is true because she's making the rest of us half nuts with all her worrying. My mother couldn't have cared less, and I bet that affected my eating in the beginning, so you're way ahead of the game in that department, Anastasia. I think you should feel pretty good about that."

I rubbed the bottle's nipple over her lower lip. I'd seen a veterinarian do that once at Miriam Lahey's house to get her dog to eat. Anastasia opened her mouth a bit.

"Suck," I said.

She did a little. "Not bad. I'm telling you, you get this eating stuff down, lots of things are going to fall into place. At some point, you might want to talk to your mom about your name because Anastasia is almost as big a challenge as the first one I got slapped with. But first things first. Eat, baby. You need the energy. Come on."

The bottle slipped out again.

I put my finger in her mouth to see what would happen. She grabbed on, started sucking.

"That's the stuff. I'm going to make the transfer now."

I moved my finger out of her mouth, brought the bottle in. Not much better.

"It's okay. We're just going to practice it. Do you know your mother loves you so much she lugged a collapsible crib to the diner so you could be here while she worked?" Anastasia was watching me now, smiling a little. "Another thing about your mom—do you know she can carry four captain's platters on her arm and not drop an orange slice? You've got an excellent person fighting for you. That's about the best thing a kid can have in life—somebody out there fighting for them. Try this bottle again." She didn't hesitate this time, took the bottle, drank longer than I've ever seen her.

She kept drinking, looking at me. I took a chance, put her little hands around the bottle, pressed them firm so she'd get the idea.

"Come on, Anastasia. Hold on." All of a sudden there was nothing more important to me than this baby holding this bottle herself.

There was a sniff behind me. I looked up to see Lou Ellen standing in the door, tears streaming down her face.

I wasn't sure what to say.

"You're a good mother, Lou Ellen."

She shook her head.

"You are. Believe me, I know the difference."

I took my hand off the bottle and for a few magic seconds

Anastasia was feeding herself. Lou Ellen was standing there by the door grinning through tears.

I was smiling at Anastasia and trying not to cry myself.

The thought kept hitting me over and over.

I wonder if my mother ever cried for me.

I walked slowly up the back stairs and crashed in the apartment, exhausted from everything. I never take naps, but I was going to take one today. I headed for my room; my soft, clean bed. I kicked off my shoes, getting ready for the experience.

"Brace yourself," Addie said to me from our kitchen.

"What?"

She appeared in the hall, stone-faced. Bad sign.

"No way to tell you except straight-out, Hope. Your mother's coming to visit."

"*What?*"

"She read about what's happening in town and she's coming up from St. Louis."

I felt this heavy cloud fall in the room.

Could see Deena filing her nails, telling me she loved me.

"I don't really want to see her now, Addie."

"She doesn't tend to ask permission. You know that."

"You know how weird those visits are."

"She's driving up, honey. She'll be here in a few days."

I flopped down in despair, chilled to the bone in the middle of summer.

It was my father who was supposed to be coming, not *her*.

★ ★ ★

I slammed plates the next day at the diner. Braverman was back at work. It was good to see him until he called me "Sunshine," and then I told him to back off.

I'm doing all I can to avoid stress. Ask Flo to take the six-top of truckers telling dumb-blonde jokes.

Tell Lou Ellen I'll pay her to wait on the young mother at table ten with the five children all under the age of seven.

I've got one hour to go on my shift and I have not committed murder in any form. I'm squeezing my hands and releasing them to get rid of the tension. I want the gloves on bad. I really want to hit the big bag.

That's when this hotshot reporter swings into the diner like he's God's gift to journalism. Adam Pulver is covered in STOOP buttons on his way out the door. The guy stops Adam and tells him he wants to talk to "some average Americans working on this campaign." Adam points to me and says, "Hope is average."

Gee, thanks.

This reporter saunters up and asks me how I, an average all-American teenager, feel about the campaign. I try to look distinctive, tell him how G.T. wants to bring the town together by telling the truth and not playing favorites.

"G.T. isn't fake like so many politicians, he really wants to help people, he's not in it for the power or the glory."

"Where is he now?" the reporter demands.

I know he's upstairs taking a nap because he's not feeling too well, but I don't think that's the right thing to say. Then I think that G.T. would probably want me to tell the truth, so I do.

"And *how*," the reporter asks, smirking, "do you expect a man who isn't feeling too well to run this town, or any town?"

My mind closes up.

The reporter asks me if I understand the question. I pour coffee into a man's cup instead of answering.

"*Why* would a teenager want to spend so much time on this campaign?"

I feel the heat on my face.

Point my number-two pencil at him.

"Because I never thought about what it means to be a citizen before working on this campaign. I just took it for granted. Now for the first time I see how I need to take a part in the process, I need to think about my place in society, I need to say no to corruption even though there's so much of it around. When you listen to G. T. Stoop, you understand the importance of being a honorable person, you get charged to fight for the truth, you get angry that so many politicians are playing games with people's trust."

"Are you old enough to vote?" he asks.

"No. None of us kids are."

Braverman's loud ahem from the kitchen.

"Except him."

I focus in on my order book like I'm figuring a check. I don't like this man. Don't trust him.

"What if he dies?" the reporter asks like he couldn't care less.

I don't want to think about that.

The reporter stands there waiting. He isn't going away.

I hold my order book tight. "Then everyone here, everyone

who's known him, will have seen that there are people who aren't trying to sell us down the river, aren't being dishonest behind closed doors. I don't know where you come from, mister. I don't know what kinds of people have let you down. But for me, *an average American teenager*, knowing there are real people in the public eye or anywhere who are trustworthy and kind makes the whole thing worth it."

The reporter writes down what I said.

"I hope you get it right," I tell him.

He smiles—not a mean one. Surprise.

"He's lucky to have you fighting for him. Can I use your name in the article?"

I tell him my name.

"Hope," he says, writing it down. "There seems to be a lot of that around here."

From the kitchen I hear the sound of clanging pots. "You've got that right!" Braverman shouts.

I was closing up the Welcome Stairways with Braverman, cleaning the ketchup and mustard bottles, filling the sugar bowls. Braverman put on his Brewers cap and asked if I was okay.

"My mother is coming to visit me."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Bad . . . some of each, maybe. I don't know."

Braverman sat at the counter, folded his big hands in front of him. His bandage was off his forehead. The long scar would take time to heal. "I've got a father like that."

"I'm sorry."

"I handle it. What else can you do?" He squeezed his hands when he said it.

"I guess I handle my mother, too. She's got some good qualities."

"I saw my dad just before you and Addie moved up here. He came into the diner, and I made him a pork-chop sandwich. He loved it; asked how it was made. We sat in a booth eating and talking about all kinds of things. I think meeting him here where I've really succeeded made a difference."

"I don't know where I'm going to see my mom."

"You should see her right here, Hope. Let her see you doing your job. You're the best waitress under thirty I've ever seen."

"Braverman, thank you."

I had to tell him. "She named me Tulip."

Braverman cocked his head. That didn't register.

"Tulip. Like the flower. It was my name for twelve years. I hated it. She'll probably call me that when she gets here."

Braverman looked like he was going to start laughing.

"I can't laugh about it yet, Braverman."

"Is it all right if I do?"

He didn't wait for permission. He lost it right there.

"*That's the worst name I ever heard in my life!* Tell her, Hope," he said between guffaws, "to never call you that again."

I looked down. He didn't know my mother, Deena the Mouth.

"*Tulip!*" he gasped. "*What was she thinking?*"

I started laughing now, too. I'd never laughed about the absurdity of it.

"I used to get nauseous in the spring when the tulips came up. There I was, walking through beautiful gardens, wanting to puke. Easter was torture."

Braverman was holding his side, laughing. He pulled himself together finally. "But you're over it."

I looked at him.

"You're not Tulip anymore, no matter what she says."

He was right.

He took off his cap and bowed. "I think Hope is the perfect name for you."

And with that he walked out the door.

My heart flipped at that one.

I saw my mother before she saw me.

Saw her walking up the welcome stairways, tossing her long, straight hair that was black like india ink. She was wearing tight jeans, heels, a beaded T-shirt, and sunglasses. She had a big canvas bag that read MIAMI MADNESS. Between her too-big earrings and the collection of bracelets on her left arm, she made quite a racket, which caused most people in the place to look at her as she made her way to the counter. She plopped on a counter stool, took off her sunglasses. Her eyes were heavily made up with the kind of mascara that “extends and magnifies.” I stood off by the coffee urn feeling a primal pull to the woman who gave me life and no connection to her whatsoever.

From the kitchen, Addie raised a spatula—the cook’s hello. My mother waved excitedly.

My turn.

Remember, I told myself. The well is dry.

I grabbed a coffeepot so I’d have something to hold on to,

walked to the counter, and wasn't sure how to get her attention because she was reading the menu like some people read a good mystery novel. So what do you do when your own mother who you haven't seen for three and a half years is sitting there at your counter not even looking for you?

She'd come for lunch, I guess, not me.

"Hi, Mom."

Her head cocked at the unfamiliar word—*Mom*, not *bi*—her eyes got big and excited, she grabbed my hand with her too-long ruby nails. "Now don't tell me this is really you!"

Deena Does Motherhood.

"It's really me," I said, smiling weakly.

"Tulip, I can't tell you—"

I put my hand over hers. "My name is Hope now, Mom."

"Oh well, I know, but I'll just never get used to—"

"I need you to get used to it."

Deena didn't like that.

Her light-blue eyes lost their sparkle.

She took her hand away.

She smiled fake. "I'll *try*."

You do that.

I'd read a book about anger once and how people can have it but deny they do, so it comes out in other ways. Passive-aggressive behavior, the book called it.

Now Deena was back to reading the menu like I wasn't there. I wanted to start screaming, *Why did you bother coming back? Why don't you just go for good?*

She ordered a grilled-chicken sandwich (semolina roll,

avocado, mango mayonnaise) with sweet potato chips and iced tea. She ordered it like I wasn't her daughter.

I walked to the galley, fighting tears. I had to pull myself together.

There's no crying allowed at lunchtime rush.

I called in her order to Braverman and Addie. As I said, "Mango mayo on the side," I almost keeled over in grief.

Addie leaned forward. "You want to take a break?"

I shook my head. I didn't want to be alone.

I just stood there holding on to a big refill jar of sweet pickle relish. Every time my mother moved, I could hear her clatter.

Braverman said, "You want to be a clown?"

"What?"

He took out a red sponge clown nose, put it over his nose, and raised one eyebrow.

He looked completely absurd.

I started giggling.

He took it off, handed it to me. "Wear it for a while."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

I held the red clown nose; stood there for the longest time with the flurry of lunchtime pounding all around me.

I put the nose over my nose and stared at Braverman, who started laughing.

Addie cracked up, too.

I turned around as Flo was coming round the corner. She stopped dead in her tracks, stared, and grinned.

My heart was breaking, but this nose had power.

I hit the counter, nose and all. And you should have seen those people's faces, including my mother's. Everyone was laughing and pointing and my mother started chuckling. I did a little twirl getting someone ice water—you can do things like that in a red clown nose.

I felt my gestures getting broader and kids were pointing and laughing and all of a sudden I heard the two dings from the galley—my signal. I went to pick up my mother's order with the mango mayo on the side. I stood in front of her, first flicking off the counter before her with a towel, like she was really important. I placed the dish dramatically in front of her and bowed.

"That's my daughter," she said to the man next to her. "Her name is . . ." She caught herself. "Hope."

"Good name," the man said.

Well, that got me flying.

I topped off coffee for the people at the counter, suggested dessert to a couple in the corner booth, blasted through some takeout orders, gave a teething baby an ice cube to suck on, which shut it right up. Mom was watching me and I was glad because I didn't drop anything, didn't spill, didn't get upset when Yuri cleared away plates before the people at table six had finished their lunch. And when I grabbed my heart and leaned into their booth begging for another chance, I'd bring them more food, they laughed and said sure, they weren't in a hurry.

Everyone was watching me and leaving big tips. A little boy said, "I didn't know there were *girl* clowns."

Stick around, kid, you might learn something.

I did a funny walk to the ice cream serving area, lifted a maraschino cherry from a dish, waddled back to his table, and plopped the cherry on *his* nose.

Little kids were coming up to touch the nose and I gave every one of them cherries. They were all walking around trying to hold the cherries on their noses. Sucking in the glory of being a clown.

That's when G.T. walked into the diner looking tired as anything, but he took one look at me and started laughing, too.

I bowed low to the crowd, who applauded. Then I took the nose off and gave it back to Braverman.

"You keep it," he said.

I stood there feeling the spongy red ball that had turned discouragement into hope.

I was sitting with my mother in the corner booth. Addie had sat with us for a while, but she had entrees to get ready for dinner. They sure had a funny relationship. I could tell Deena looked up to Addie—she was always searching Addie's face for a response to whatever she said. I could also tell that Addie would never, ever believe that.

It was almost time for Mom to leave. She had to drive back down to St. Louis to meet her new boyfriend, Eduardo. Mom liked men who had names ending in vowels.

"What happened to Dino?" I asked. He was the last one she had mentioned.

She flicked her fingernails on the table. "Old news."

Twice I'd felt like putting the clown nose on again.

The first was during the boxing exchange.

MOM: "Are you still boxing?"

ME: "I gave that up a long time ago."

MOM: "Thank God, I was so concerned that you were doing that, I can't tell you. You were such an angry child."

She always brought things back to the past. "I worked it through, Mom."

The second was during her fond farewell when she kept telling me how she hated having to go, it was wonderful to see me, and we'd have to do this again real soon.

The best part was when she gave me waitressing tips. I wrote them down on the back of my order book. I'd write them in the Best of Mom book later.

Keep cut lemon wedges under the counter so you don't have to go to the kitchen for them—saves time.

Keep a bottle of Tylenol in your pocket in case a customer has a headache. You get rid of that headache for them, you'll see it in your tip.

Don't just ask people what kind of dressing they want. Tell them what you've got—they might try something new and be grateful.

She gave me a quick, flimsy hug that people give when they're not sure about themselves or you. She hugged Addie the same way.

Then she said to me, "You're quite a waitress now." And she left in a cloud of too much perfume.

I wish like anything my mom would treat me as well as she treats her customers.

Ask me what I need.

Take the time to see how I'm really doing.

See that I'm hungry to know my real parents.

But that word *real*—it makes it seem like Addie hasn't done much, and that's a lie. She's done everything. I need to say my *biological* parents. But when you're in food service, you understand that sometimes you're making up for people in your customers' lives who haven't been too nice. A lonely old woman at the counter just lights up when I smile at her; a tired mother with a screaming baby squeezes my hand when I clean up the mess her other child spilled.

You know what I like most about waitressing? When I'm doing it, I'm not thinking that much about myself. I'm thinking about other people. I'm learning again and again what it takes to make a difference in people's lives.

I watched Deena sashay down the welcome stairways; I felt sad and free at the same time.

Welcome, friend, from whichever way you've come. May God richly bless your journey.

I pulled the clown nose from my pocket, stuck it on my face, and headed up the back stairs to the apartment.

August was upon us. Hot, sticky, just like New York.

I was in the kitchen, about to go on my break. Braverman was working the grill.

Addie and G.T. were there, too. They were getting along a whole lot better now that G.T. had stopped interfering in the kitchen. G.T. was eating a hunk of her meatloaf and a piece of her prize apple pie, which looked like excellent break food to me. I sliced some of each as he said, "Addie, this is the finest meatloaf in America."

Addie waited for the next part because people were always saying something even greater about her apple pie.

"This is my favorite thing of yours," he said, cutting another slice of meatloaf.

If this were a cartoon, steam would have come from Addie's ears.

"What about the pie?" she asked loudly.

"Oh, it's fine pie. I like your pie. But, Lord in heaven, woman, I *love* your meatloaf."

I was trying to gesture to G.T. to say something better about the pie.

"Most people feel the pie is the standout dish in my repertoire," she snarled.

"They haven't had the meatloaf."

Addie said, trust her, they'd had the meatloaf.

G.T. laughed. "Oh, there's plenty of apple pies in this old—" and thankfully he realized the error of his ways. "But your apple pie is the finest of them all."

Addie said it was nice of him to say so, but it wasn't either.

"Oh yes," G.T. declared. "It is the best."

Addie said, well, she appreciated the compliment, she'd had her share of apple pie compliments, certainly, but it wasn't anything special.

And that was when G.T. said kind of quiet, "Addie, I don't mean to put you on the spot, and you can say no if you want to, but would you like to have dinner with me?"

Braverman froze.

Flo stopped making coffee.

Addie looked right at him and said they had dinner just about every night.

"I mean," G.T. said, laughing, "in another restaurant."

Addie asked what was wrong with her cooking.

It had been a while since she'd been asked out. Longer than me even.

G.T. said there was a place in Redding a half-hour away that had terrific lamb shanks—not as good as hers, of course, but what about it?

"I've got three pies and hash browns that aren't done yet

and two roast chickens with wild-rice stuffing that still need heavy butter basting.”

“After that, then.”

Addie said all right. She’d meet him at eight o’clock in the parking lot and he said he’d be happy to come to her door—it was only across the hall.

“The parking lot or nothing,” said Addie.

G.T. nodded and headed out the back door.

Addie walked into the walk-in cooler and shut the door.

I stood there not moving.

“It’s about time,” said Flo from the galley window. “Those two are made for each other.”

I’d never once thought of that.

I caught up with Flo at the counter. “*How* are they made for each other?”

She laughed. “They love food. All they do is work. They both have strong personalities and they’ve learned how to enjoy each other’s ways. Where have you been?”

“Took him long enough,” Lou Ellen chimed in.

Not that anyone asked me, but I wasn’t sure if this was a very good idea.

For starters, there was the cancer.

I went back in the supply closet to get mayonnaise because I needed to be somewhere to think.

I was looking through the sauces and the mustards wondering how all this started.

Maybe it was just a friendly gesture after all her hard work, but something told me it was more than that.

And Addie’s face had gotten all pink like an out-of-season

strawberry and she'd looked, briefly, kind of feminine when he asked her.

Addie's had her share of heartache with men. A few years ago, when she found out that her no-good husband, Malcolm, who deserted her, had died, she cried her heart out, not from love, but from all that got wasted between them. She'd been thinking about getting a divorce, but didn't know where he was for thirteen years—she thought about getting him declared legally dead, which, she said, wasn't much of a reach if you'd watched him slumped in his Barcalounger in front of the TV watching football. Addie said she once stuck her compact mirror under his nose to see if he was still breathing.

I didn't want anyone to get hurt, and I didn't want anything to be more complicated than it was.

Braverman came into the supply closet looking for something. I knew he'd heard the whole thing.

"I don't want to talk about it, Braverman."

Braverman cleared his throat like he was choking.

I checked his face for signs of distress like they taught me to when I learned the Heimlich maneuver. I used it once at the Blue Box on an Iranian cabdriver who was choking on a chicken bone and probably would have died if I hadn't stepped in.

Braverman was breathing fine; just acting strange.

Finally he said, "Hope, do you want to have dinner with me sometime?"

I dropped a plastic bottle of Gulden's.

We looked at it on the floor. Neither of us picked it up.

"I mean, I know we have dinner a lot when we're working.

I meant out someplace. Together.” Braverman picked up the Gulden’s bottle, handed it to me. He coughed. “A date.”

I said, “What is this, an epidemic?”

I backed out the door and left Braverman in the supply closet.

I don’t get asked out too much either.

It was 1:00 A.M. when Addie swung in from her off-the-premises dinner with G.T.

Not that I was waiting up for her or anything.

I thought 1:00 A.M. was a little late for older people to be coming in.

“Was it all right?” I asked her.

“It was fine.”

“What aspect of the definition of fine was it?”

“We had a decent time.”

I’ve been to Walgreen’s and had a decent time.

“Give me something here,” I demanded. “A crumb.”

“Does it bother you that we had dinner?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it bothers me, too. I’m going to bed.”

And she did just that.

I was living in a world of mixed signals.

Braverman said everything was fine, but everything had changed.

He didn’t even make eye contact with me at the diner. He muttered things that only applied to my orders.

Mayo on the side, right?

Medium rare on the burger?

G.T. and Addie were impossible to read.

Once I saw him hug her in the kitchen.

Twice I saw them have enormous fights over Addie's attempted change to the pork-chop sandwich—putting it on a semolina roll instead of the traditional hard roll. G.T. won both times. Some things, he said, could not be made better.

I sure needed to make something better.

10:30 P.M.

Braverman was cleaning the grill.

Flo filled the last saltshaker, waved good-bye, and headed home. I took the clown nose from my pocket, put it on, tiptoed into the kitchen, and said to Braverman's back, "I owe you an apology."

He stiffened slightly, turned around.

I gave him my toothpaste-ad smile.

Tension left his face. He started to laugh.

I grinned. "This really great guy I know gave me this nose to help me put things in perspective."

"It works," he said.

I took a breath.

"I need to tell you that I would love to go out with you, Braverman, but I'm scared to do it. That's why I acted like a jerk when you asked me."

"Because we work together."

"Yeah."

"I'm worried about that, too."

I took the nose off, trying to be more attractive. "How worried are you about it?"

He sighed. "It could be a problem."

I moved a step closer.

"You could start thinking that I'm always going to cook your orders first."

"And you could start thinking that I wouldn't bug you when things are backed up."

Braverman laughed. "I'd never think that."

We stood there grinning at each other.

Braverman looked out at the empty diner. "We could have a trial run. Are you hungry?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Pork-chop sandwiches for two?"

My heart did a back flip. "Perfect."

He got the chops from the refrigerator, put them through G.T.'s old tenderizer, sprinkled them with seasoned salt and pepper, turned up the grill. He didn't say anything, just moved with the rhythm of the short-order dance.

My heart was beating fast. I couldn't stop smiling. I got two salads, put Addie's special mustard vinaigrette over them, piled on extra tomatoes.

Braverman took two clean dishcloths from the shelf, went out on the floor, and put them over table two in a diamond pattern like they were a fancy tablecloth. He walked to the register, rang up the meal, put money in the cash drawer, took the little vase of flowers by the cash register and put it on our

table. He came back to the kitchen, toasted two hard rolls, put them on plates with lettuce and orange slices, and assembled the sandwiches. He layered the two plates on his left arm, grabbed his candle—the one he used when he sliced onions—and brought everything to the table. He lit the candle and grinned at me.

I got two 7UPs and walked over.

We sat down.

Braverman raised his glass and clinked it with mine.

I might as well have been in a prom dress, I felt so special.

We talked and laughed until midnight right there in the Welcome Stairways. And when dinner was over he said, “Hope, would it be okay if I kissed you?”

“You mean now?”

“Well, yeah. Did you have something else to do?”

I stood up fast. “Not a thing.”

It was an excellent kiss—the kind where you feel your stomach burn hot and you know it’s not from indigestion. We stood there for a while, arms around each other, not saying anything.

Then we looked at the dirty dishes on our table. Jarred back to reality.

I sighed. “I’ll wash.”

He blew out the candle. “I’ll dry.”

We cleared the table and walked back to the kitchen.

This is the downside of food service.

“Must be something in the water around here,” Flo said the next day when she saw Braverman and me holding hands in the supply closet.

Addie pulled me aside. “What’s going on with you and Braverman?”

I told her.

Well, Addie said, she’d been expecting it.

“What’s going on with you and G.T.?” I asked.

She was saved from answering by the sound of the kitchen timer. “My hazelnut pound cakes are ready,” she announced and left me standing there.

“It’s a fair question,” I shouted after her.

School.

It came up on me like indigestion.

I wasn’t ready to go back, not even to be a junior.

Unfamiliar halls.

Unfamiliar teachers.

I'd been feeling so at home in Mulhoney working at the diner and being involved in G.T.'s campaign. Now suddenly I felt new and odd again.

I was ahead in math and English and behind in science and history. I had to take sophomore ethics class as a *junior* even though I'd taken it in Brooklyn. Wisconsin ethics takes a year to go through. Brooklyn's Type A—you only need a semester.

I slogged through my first week and managed to find all my classes. My English teacher liked my writing. She said I had "creative boldness." My history teacher said I had yet to "grasp the value of stating a clear thesis." I've always been a person who meanders around to find truth. This is death in the five-paragraph essay.

In political science, my best class, Mr. Sage said, "We're living a political science lesson right now in Mulhoney. We're going to examine this local election and see how it speaks to us on a larger scale."

That sounded interesting, but I wanted to be back full-time at the diner working with Braverman instead of only part-time after school and on the weekends.

We were having the best time working together, too, except when he'd make a mistake on an order and I'd have to be an advocate for my customer. I always mentioned it sweetly.

"You didn't say hold the bacon, Hope."

"Braverman, I said it twice."

"You must have said it to someone else."

"I said it to *you*."

Clang.

"Don't clang pots at me."

Other than that, hope was in the air.

Addie introduced the Keep Hoping sandwich and instantly it became a comfort-food classic.

Anastasia started holding her bottle like a drowning person clutching a life preserver. Even when it was empty, she wouldn't let go.

Flo said it was what we all had to do to get G.T. elected. Hold on to what we know is right and not let anyone take it from us.

And then, on September 29, we got the news we'd all been waiting for.

G.T.'s doctors declared that he was in remission.

You have to understand the full light that was released in G.T.'s face when he came back from the hospital with Pastor Hall and gave us the news. It was the kind of light that could open a daylily in the middle of a long, cold night.

He walked into the kitchen, walked up to Addie and told her.

She started crying.

"Okay," he said. "I think we need to get married."

We all froze at that one.

Addie looked right at him. "You don't have enough to do these days? You need something else on the schedule?"

Everything I am I owe to this woman.

The news of G.T.'s remission swept through town like a whirlwind that couldn't be stopped.

Then we got more good news.

Brenda Babcock arrested the two thieves who'd burglarized Adam's house. They were found at a pawnbroker's shop in Madison trying to sell Mr. Pulver's campaign button collection. Both thieves had the same name, too.

Carbinger.

"She's closing in," Flo said to me. "And we've got ourselves one nervous sheriff."

Three days later we had a blur of misinformation.

The sheriff said he was releasing the Carbingers—there was no evidence linking them to the crime.

Brenda Babcock said the Carbingers had agreed to a plea bargain with the district attorney to tell what they knew. They knew a lot. They said they were paid by the Real Fresh Dairy to frighten people who opposed the mayor, like Braverman. They claimed the sheriff had been paid off, too, to turn his head while they robbed houses.

Sheriff Greebs denied everything.

Cranston Broom from the dairy said he was appalled, disgusted, and very, very innocent.

Mayor Millstone said it was all a trick by the opposition to hurt his campaign.

TELL THE TRUTH, blared the *Mulhoney Messenger*.

The polls showed G.T. pulling seven points ahead of Eli Millstone.

We got revved like the Gospel of Grace van that had just gotten a new carburetor for the occasion.

It's interesting how polls take over a campaign. My politi-

cal science teacher, Mr. Sage, said it was part of our society's need to know the score before the game is over.

G.T. put on a full court press to convince Addie that they should get married ASAP.

"I've got six chickens to roast, pies that need to be baked."

He laughed. "Can't you put your to-do list down for anything?"

But now the rightness of them getting married seemed to be hitting me from everywhere. I'd been so afraid, deep down, that G.T. would get sicker. I'd been afraid to think about what it could mean for me personally if he married Addie.

He would be my father, sort of.

Everything in me wanted to start dancing around the room at that thought, but just as fast, another one hit: What if G.T.'s not thinking of it that way?

That would be all-out awful.

I was in my room leafing through *The Dads*.

I'd always thought my dad was going to have a trench coat and thick hair and be pretty young and healthy. But that's the problem with fantasy, when the thing you want shows up, you have to regroup visually because it's never the way you picture it. A skinny bald guy in remission would not have made it into this collection.

But G.T. was better than all these trench-coated fantasy fathers put together.

I held Edgar, my pelican, smoothed back my hair.

"Well, Dad, it's sure taken you long enough to find me, not

that I'm complaining, but now I'm expecting you to do the right thing." I said the last part pretty loud.

I waited.

And hope fluttered in the room like a butterfly getting ready to light.

Braverman and I were driving home from the Octoberfest held in the little park off Grimes Square. Octoberfest is a German celebration that gets a lot of play in Wisconsin. It has real pluses and minuses. Pluses: sausage, coarse-grain rye bread, and apple strudel. Minuses: two guys playing an accordion and a tuba.

Braverman touched the back of my neck in that way that made me shiver. He smiled at me, turned on the radio in his old Toyota, and we couldn't believe what we heard.

Why can't G. T. Stoop tell the truth about his health? An unidentified, high-ranking hospital administrator verified that Mr. Stoop's leukemia has gone into his brain. It's just a matter of time before we all see what the doctors already know.

Is your future worth that risk?

Vote for Eli Millstone if you care at all about the future of Mulboney.

Braverman pulled over on the side of the road. We sat there stunned.

It was a lie as sure as anything.

And that lie played three times an hour on radio and TV until people were saturated with falsehood.

G.T. denied it.

His doctor denied it.

But it kept pressing the deception over and over.

My teacher Mr. Sage said if you hear a lie often enough, it begins to sound like the truth.

Why can't G. T. Stoop tell the truth about his health?

Why?

Why?

Why?

My head pounded with fury. I couldn't focus. Blew off my homework three days running.

Cecelia Culpepper screamed for fairness on the front page.

Braverman and I went knocking on doors to try to calm the storm and saw firsthand how frightened people were. Jillian went on-line to alert the teen troops.

We hit the phones and called voters.

Braverman put out a new issue of the Students for Stoop newsletter with the headline ANATOMY OF A LIE.

But it was like watching floodwaters rise. There didn't seem to be anything we could do about it.

Al B. Hall drew his church together to pray.

G.T. started losing points in the polls.

Sid Vole was calling from the road, saying the only thing to do was hit back hard. Blow for blow.

"No sir," G.T. said. "I don't play like that."

G.T. kept his grueling schedule, talking to people until he was ready to drop.

People with STOP STOOP posters followed him everywhere.

We were working as hard as we could to get the truth out. The hospital even denied the report, showed G.T.'s medical records.

But the lie was everywhere and it was winning.

He called upon everyone to read his doctor's report, but what you didn't read was how his brain has been affected by the cancer.

He called upon churches and civic groups to support him knowing full well that he only has a few more months to live.

G. T. Stoop wants to be our mayor so much, he will lie, cheat, and misrepresent himself and his condition to get a few moments of glory.

On Election Day, vote for truth and health.

Reelect Eli Millstone.

The polls had G.T. neck and neck with Millstone now. One poll showed him three points behind.

"You going to listen to a *poll*?" Al B. Hall shouted from his pulpit. "Or your *soul*?"

Election Day.

Close to the longest day of my life.

We were everywhere.

Making last-minute campaign phone calls, passing out newsletters and buttons, cheering on the Gospel of Grace Evangelical van that shuttled back and forth bringing G.T.'s supporters to the polls.

Shouting foul when big groups of Millstone supporters went through town tearing down G.T.'s posters.

Hoping with all we had that we'd done enough.

"We're going to make it," Braverman said, and kissed me on the forehead, and went off to vote.

I sensed the hope building.

We all did.

I'd never been part of something so important before.

When I left Brooklyn I would have paid money to get out of making this move. Now, here I was, working with other kids to help get a good man elected. Here I was with the greatest boyfriend of the twenty-first century.

The polls closed at 9:00 P.M.

It was going to be close.

But we could feel the victory in our hearts. We hung on to that faith and wouldn't let go.

Back to the Welcome Stairways to wait and eat and wait some more.

Addie served us light and fluffy Victory Waffles with butter and warmed maple syrup.

We told ourselves how G.T. was going to pull it off.

How sweet it was going to be and we weren't going to be bad winners.

At 11:23 the results finally came in.

G.T. had lost by 114 votes.

There were simply no words.

Only tears.

You don't understand the power of loss when it first hits you like a baseball coming fast from an out-of-control pitcher. You reel back stinging from the blow.

It's the third day after an injury when the pain really starts to throb.

I'd known enough blows in my life, but this one had a special sting.

When a good man gets beaten by a bad one it makes you not want to get up in the morning.

It makes you hate the whole world.

"Well, we sure gave it all we had," G.T. said. "We made an inroad in people's consciences."

But I didn't think we'd made enough of one, or we'd have won.

I wasn't accepting Miss Congeniality for anything.

Lots of people were having this problem.

Adam was bitter about everything. "Millstone stole this election! We should have fought dirt with dirt!"

Sid Vole, whose candidate in Virginia had won, had per-

sonally called the governor of Wisconsin to see what could be done about it. After two weeks of intense checking, the official word was out: There were no signs of election tampering.

The results stood.

G.T. seemed a little lighter without the burden of campaigning on his shoulders. Addie said she had never much wanted him to be mayor anyway.

"Losing," G.T. offered, "isn't anything to be ashamed of." He told every campaign worker personally how much he appreciated how we'd worked for him. When he came to me he said, "Hope, I want you to know how much your strength supported me these many months. You've got an inner courage that is a powerful thing to witness. I thank you for bringing that up here. I really needed it."

I didn't know what to say.

Pastor Hall said this was one of those times when we just had to trust the Lord's ways.

I wasn't trusting anything.

The few reporters left in town had done what they called "postmortems" and moved out because we weren't important anymore.

I tried to pull from the power in my name, but everything hopeful in me was dead.

We limped through November, having a depressing Thanksgiving even though the food was brilliant.

"You can't enter a political campaign without accepting the fact that you might lose," Mr. Sage told our class.

He had gotten a copy of the voting statistics from the

election, which showed us who voted and who didn't, not who they voted for. Eighty-five percent of the adult population in Mulhoney voted. "I want you to be proud of these numbers. You were responsible for the highest voter turnout this town or any town has ever seen.

"I want you to think about all the people who registered to vote that probably wouldn't have if you hadn't been involved. I want you to try to recognize how you all learned to have a voice in the system."

And you could have knocked me over with a cheap tip when I saw the name of my cranky customer, Mr. Woldenburg, there on the voting roster. He and his wife. They'd voted! They'd taken part in the process.

We had to write a paper on what we remembered most about the campaign, what we thought our biggest contribution was. I wrote about passing out brochures and campaigning with G.T. I wrote about Mr. Woldenburg and how you never really know sometimes when you're making a breakthrough with certain people.

Mr. Sage wrote in the margin of my paper, "One person touching many."

"What kind of a world is this when Gleason Beal gets away clean and free and G. T. Stoop gets beaten by a crook?" I asked Braverman.

He hugged me hard. "I'm the wrong one to ask, Hope."

We spent lots of time hugging. At least something felt good.

I was in the A & P, looking for boxes of macaroni and cheese that I hid under my bed and made on the sneak when

Addie wasn't home. Addie *never* cooked from mixes. That's when I saw Mr. Woldenburg, my best success of the whole election. He hadn't been in the diner for a few weeks. I looked in his shopping cart. He had two packages of cheddar cheese, no American. Will wonders never cease?

"Hi, Mr. Woldenburg. Remember me?"

His eyes squinted. "You harped on me to vote more than a human has the right to."

I laughed. "I'm sorry it seemed that way, but I'm glad you and your wife voted, Mr. Woldenburg. That's terrific!"

"What in the world are you talking about, girl?"

"You voted, Mr. Woldenburg. I don't know if you voted for Eli Millstone or G. T. Stoop, but you took part in the election process, and that's a really good thing."

He looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

"I wasn't checking up on you, sir. I was just looking at the voting records and your name was there along with your wife's. It made my day, I'll tell you, when I saw you'd done it."

"That's the biggest fake I ever heard. I didn't register. I didn't vote. And neither did the missus."

I looked at his stern face.

"Mr. Woldenburg—you're not just kidding me?"

"I work two jobs. I don't have time for kidding or voting."

I tried to process this.

"Mr. Woldenburg, your and your wife's names were on the official election list as having registered and voted."

"Don't care if you saw it written in the sky. *We didn't do it.*"

My heart was in my larynx. "Will you tell what you just told me to the Election Board?"

He said he wasn't going out of his way.

"They'll come to you!" I didn't know if they would, but I was willing to drag them.

The Election Board sent workers out to get the truth—covering Mulhoney like cockroaches in a cheap fourth-floor walk-up, checking every registered voter's vote against whether they actually voted or not.

Braverman was doing big-time spatula tricks in the kitchen again.

At the end of ten days, we had a new ball game.

One hundred and twenty registered voters on the official books claimed they never registered, much less voted.

Eli Millstone was political toast.

A few reporters proclaimed us a hot spot again.

Then Braverman and Adam led the students of Mulhoney High to circle Town Hall with banners and posters, shouting down dishonesty in government. It was the third week in December, and Wisconsin was a vast, frozen tundra. My screaming taunts turned to ice crystals the minute they left my mouth. I mentioned to Adam that it would be warmer protesting *inside* Town Hall, but he said we needed to be poised against the pureness of the freshly fallen snow to make the point that we, the teenagers of Mulhoney, were not going to take this anymore.

We stood firm, 297 frozen teenagers dressed like Eskimos it was so mind-numbingly cold, and held a candlelight vigil outside Town Hall singing "We Shall Overcome." And as our

united voices rose in force, Adam Pulver marched through the crowd, stood at the door of Town Hall, and shouted, "Mr. Mayor, we, the teenagers of Mulhoney, demand to live in a town that is not governed by lies and deceit. *We demand your resignation!*"

Adam raised his hands, embracing the spirit of the season, and started shouting, "Time to go! Ho, ho, ho!"

We shouted it into the night until we thought our voices would give out, but they didn't—we were too strong and too fed up.

You don't understand the power you have until you use it, that's what my boxing coach used to tell me.

Finally, Eli Millstone's spokesperson came out as dawn broke against the sky. She read a statement from the mayor.

"I have served this town faithfully as mayor, but it appears now that I cannot finish my third term because of the dissension of certain factions. I am resigning. I pray that Mulhoney will continue on in the great tradition I have set."

"We might change it a little bit!" Braverman shouted.

The whoop that went up from all of us was great and full. Al B. Hall showed up with seven GOG members, and they began serving us hot chocolate and doughnuts from the Gospel van. We stayed there shivering and savoring the victory.

Pastor Hall said we had shouted down the walls of Town Hall just like Joshua shouted down the walls of Jericho.

It happened finally on January 12 at high noon.

G. T. Stoop stood on the platform that Eli Millstone had

built for himself, put his hand on the Bible, and took the oath of office. He swore to uphold the laws of Mulhoney to the best of his ability, so help him God. Everyone there knew we'd heard an honest man make a pledge that he would take to heart every day he was mayor.

Al B. Hall stood before us, his wool coat blowing open in the winter wind, and offered the prayer.

"Lord God Almighty, bless your servant, Gabriel Thomas Stoop, with the fullness of your wisdom, strength, and courage. Give him a fierce faith to lead this town and let the love and kindness you've placed inside him pour out toward all."

Snow started falling like a promise, dusting the streets with anticipation of good things to come.

Everyone there felt the hope.

Addie said it was like the thrill she got shoving a raw plucked chicken into the oven and knowing that in a little while she'd have a soul-satisfying entree.

It takes a great cook to pull life truth from poultry.

19

The first thing G.T. did as mayor was appoint Brenda Babcock as sheriff. Ex-Sheriff Greebs was up to his earlobes in corruption charges courtesy of the state's attorney. The second thing G.T. did was to slap a fat fine on the Real Fresh Dairy and give them sixty days to pay their back taxes or the town would take them to court.

The third thing he did was marry Addie.

It was a simple ceremony with breathtaking food.

Addie cooked everything, even though people said she shouldn't. It was her day to shine. I was the only person who understood fully that Addie only half shone if she wasn't cooking.

She was a bear to live with during the last week because she'd put together a four-course dinner for over one hundred people and she hadn't gotten her wedding dress yet. I tried mentioning this to her and didn't get far.

"The bordelaise sauce is in the toilet, Hope, because I can't get decent mushrooms. You want me to think about fashion when my sauce is at risk?"

I went out, found her a dress, and dragged Braverman with me.

I held it up for him to see. "What do you think?"

"It's a dress."

"Right."

"It's not white."

"Wedding dresses aren't always white."

"Since when?"

Males can be so dense.

I dragged Addie to the store to try it on.

"Buy it, Addie. You can't get married in your apron."

She bought it and on the day of the wedding was running around in the kitchen in that rose-colored dress with a big white apron tied around her, screaming at everyone that the whole meal was going to be awful, wearing a very big smile. When she got to the church, she forgot to take the apron off and Flo ran to her and set things right.

At the close of the ceremony, Pastor Hall said an extra long prayer for Addie as first lady.

We all knew it was going to be a rough ride.

It was a whirlwind thirty-six-hour honeymoon back and forth to Milwaukee, where Addie said the food at the hotel was "passable, if you were close to starvation." She and G.T. stood in the entrance to the Welcome Stairways smiling at the white helium balloons that Flo and Yuri had decorated the place with.

"Happy life!" Yuri cried.

Addie gave herself a full fifteen seconds of back-home celebration and then marched into the kitchen and told Braverman that she'd thought of a new veal shank recipe that would get the locals going.

Only Addie would think about veal shanks on her honeymoon.

G.T. had been thinking, too. "Hope, I was wondering if you'd consider letting me adopt you, because I'd like more than just about anything to do this father thing officially."

You could have knocked me over.

Then he said he wondered how the best way to start with all of that was, and I smiled really big, because I didn't have to sit there like a dumb cluck.

I piled all my scrapbooks on the desk in the back office in chronological order. My heart was beating so hard and happy I could hardly stand it.

"These are all my significant life moments, G.T. You want the in-depth tour or the Cliffs Notes version?"

He sat in a chair. "I don't want to miss a thing."

That's *exactly* what a father should say.

I took out the baby animal book that showed my and Addie's life together reinforced through the animal kingdom. I showed him all my report cards and the photos of all the schools I'd attended. I showed him my thoughts on food service in three time zones. I showed him all the menus from all the places Addie worked at. I showed him a piece from my cast when I broke my leg in fifth grade; I showed him the first

dollar I'd ever gotten as a waitress, plasticized right there by the picture of me standing at the counter of the Rainbow Diner with Spiro, the owner, doing his Greek dance by the decaf urn.

"I've been keeping these for my real father, who I've never met, G.T. But you're as real and true a father as a human being will get in this world."

He grinned so big. "That's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me."

I showed him my mother's Christmas letters. He put his hand over my hand when I told him about Deena. I showed him my savings account book with all the money I'd saved for college. It took a while to get through the scrapbooks because you can't just rush through a life. I decided not to tell him about Gleason Beal—passed over the letter I wrote to Gleason before we left Brooklyn. I didn't want to sound stupid.

He listened and listened and when I was through he said, "I am so glad you did this for me."

All along I was keeping these for G.T., I just didn't know it.

Then G.T. got up and walked over to two little trees that were growing in pots under special lights in the corner by the window. They were a wedding gift from Pastor Hall. G.T. was going to plant them out back in the spring. He lugged them over to where I was standing, knelt down, took out his Swiss Army knife and sliced a branch off one tree; he sliced a bit off the other tree. Then he held the cut branch over the other tree's cut part.

What was he doing?

"Get me that twine, Hope, over there on the table. Get the scissors, too, and that tape."

I got everything.

"Hold this branch on there with your hand."

I held it as he cut a piece of tape, cut a piece of string, and taped that small branch to the other tree, cut parts touching. He tied it with twine to make it sure.

He stood up, put the tree back under the grow light. "There. That's what's going to happen to us. It's called grafting. Taking something from one place and fixing it to another until they grow together. We didn't start from the same tree, but we're going to grow together like we did. You watch it in the next month or so and you'll see."

I don't think there was a better thing a father could have done.

I watched that plant in the office every day.

Watered it; misted it. I loved thinking about it like G.T. said, but part of me was worried the tree surgery wouldn't take. Something would go wrong and then I'd be stuck with a metaphor that couldn't go the distance.

"Don't kill it with fretting," G.T. said.

February hit hard; I felt like I was in Alaska. Snow two feet deep; wind chill put life in the deep freeze. But slowly, surely those two branches knit together, and when a month was up, G.T. pulled the bandage off and said, "There. That's us now."

I stared at the branch that had grown into the other tree. Here all along I'd thought I was going to get a father in a

completely different way. But that's the lesson of the Welcome Stairways—you don't know which way a thing will come at you, but you need to welcome it with your whole heart whichever way it arrives.

The best thing about having G.T. as an official grafted father was that he lived each day to the full.

The worst part was that we didn't know if he would stay in remission.

Leukemia can come back, the doctors warned. You live with that.

Addie helped me deal with the uncertainty. "We're going to get as much as we can with the time we've been given. We're going to be grateful for whatever time that is."

I was used to living with unsureness, but it's so hard when you love someone so much and you want them always to be there no matter what.

It made the days extra special somehow—everything we did was heightened. Every day after school G.T. would ask me, "What's the best thing that happened today?" Some days were completely without meaning, but it got me thinking about the little surprises the days hold that sometimes we pass over.

It's a complete rush to get what you've been hoping for—to get it so full and complete that it fills your senses. I'm not saying it was perfect. I'd lived all my life having to contend with only one full-time adult, and now I had two stubborn ones trying to steer my life and they were getting used to *each other* in the process. We were also trying to merge two apartments and make them one. G.T. put in a door connecting the

adjoining walls, but Addie thought the door looked out of place. G.T. mentioned that it was too late to change it now. They both looked at me.

I backed out of the room.

I wasn't walking through that minefield.

Last week I looked up the word *father* in my dictionary. Here's the definition: *A man who has begotten a child.*

But I think Mr. Webster didn't get it quite right.

A father isn't just woven from strands of DNA. A true father is dedicated and unshakably there for his kid every single day.

So, if you ask me what it's like to have G. T. Stoop as my father, I'll tell you: It's like having a huge tree sprout up almost overnight on your lawn. Even though it showed up quick, the steadfastness of it is going to last through the storms and the winds and the seasons.

G.T. was making a real difference in Mulhoney, too.

He began in several places all at once.

Opened the tax assessor's office.

Appointed Adam Pulver head of Students for Community Involvement—an action group that looked at the problems in the town and determined how teenagers could help make things better.

Appointed Mrs. Pettibone to head up a committee to plan a geriatric wellness center that would improve the quality of people's lives.

We had town meetings and people left not hating each other.

Brenda Babcock had slapped another stiff fine on the Real

Fresh Dairy for disturbing the peace with their big bruiser milk trucks. She had investigations going round the clock on Eli Millstone's financial schemes, too. She was redefining honor and professionalism in the sheriff's office.

As the days went by, the Real Fresh Dairy paid their back taxes and G.T. used that money to help the schools, repair the community center, and fund programs for the poor.

"What's the best we can be?" G.T. asked an assembly of teenagers, me included. And together we came up with a plan to do volunteer work for people who were short on cash.

We helped at the expanded day care facility. Anastasia was there now, learning to eat with a spoon. She'd hurl applesauce in our faces and start laughing.

We manned the Gospel of Grace's new twenty-four hour family shelter. Braverman and I tried to work there on Friday nights.

We fixed fences, mowed grass, and painted houses. We were only okay house painters. Jillian said it was good we weren't charging.

But we kept trying.

And we learned that you don't have to be famous or rich or physically healthy to be a leader. You just have to try to be a true person. We learned that helping other people brings out the good in everybody.

G.T. had figured out the big concept in government. "Politics," he kept telling us, "isn't about power, control, or manipulation. It's about serving up your very best."

I love the fact that it took a short-order cook to get it right.

20

The summer I graduated, G.T. started slipping.

Two years from when Addie and I had arrived in town.

One and a half years since he had become mayor.

I'd been accepted at Michigan State for the fall term. Squeezed in with my grades. Wowed them with my personal essay on life and food service. Braverman finally was going to college with help from a town scholarship G.T. had set up. Combined with the money he and his mother had been saving, it was just enough. The University of Wisconsin was the lucky place.

I was going to miss him like crazy.

In early July, the leukemia came back at G.T. with a vengeance, like a huge wind toppling a small boat.

The doctor said it was doubtful he could pull out of this one.

I told myself it wasn't true.

The thing that had been stalking us from behind was now in front.

My father was dying.

Addie sat with him round the clock except when I relieved her, which I tried to do often. I couldn't seem to sit in the room with him as long as she could. I needed to go outside, feel life on my face, feel winds of healing.

Braverman seemed ever-present—a huge tree himself; someone to hold on to. He was broken at the prospect of losing G.T.

For four awful weeks we watched him slip a little more each day.

I didn't think I was strong enough to handle this.

I couldn't stand the thought of this loss.

I was sick of life being so impossibly hard.

I started sitting with him for longer stretches. When I had to cry, I'd leave the room. But one day he said to me, "I don't mind if you cry, Hope."

Well, I lost it full right there. And I said something I hadn't planned.

"G.T., I need to read you something."

I sat on his bed and showed him the letter I'd written to Gleason Beal after he took our money. I couldn't mail it, of course, since he'd skipped town. I'd sealed it up in an envelope and on the outside I'd written, *To be read at another time.*

I opened the envelope slowly and remembered crying so hard when I was writing it, saw some of the tear-stained ink on the paper. I read the first line, "To Gleason Beal, who I once trusted." I stopped, looked at G.T.

"Go ahead."

Big breath. "I think I want to change my name back from

Hope to something else because what has happened has made me not believe in things to hope for like I once did. Gleason, I want you to know that I hate you for taking our money, but mostly I hate you for pretending to be a different person than you were. You stole from everyone who trusted you here.

"You took Addie's savings and her dream. You took my trust and I believed that you were my friend, but I will never be dumb enough to do that again.

"You took Charlene away from her husband because you got her to run away with you.

"You did all of it for money, but I want you to know something. I never want money to be that important to me that I would hurt someone else. I don't believe that down deep you'll ever enjoy that money just like I don't believe that people who lie or cheat or get away with things really enjoy themselves because there's a price to pay in this world. You can have the money, Gleason, but I've decided you can't have my name. I don't know how long it's going to take, but I'm going to get the feelings back about being hopeful again. I don't have them now, but I'm going to get them again. I hope you get caught and thrown in jail. When I find my father . . ."

I couldn't read anymore.

"Go ahead," G.T. said. "Finish it."

I was crying good now. "When I find my father I know he's going to do something to get you what you deserve." I looked at G.T. "That's all I wrote."

He looked pretty gray but he asked me, "How do you feel about that now?"

"I feel stupid about it."

"Why?"

I shrugged.

"Is it because you wrote the part about your father coming to give him what he deserves and I'm not looking much like I can do that for you?"

Now I felt so bad I'd bothered him with this.

"Tell you what," he said. "If you stick that anger behind you, one day you're going to turn around and find it's gone."

"I'll try."

He smiled at me with such promise; I felt at that moment he was going to rise up from the bed all well, but he didn't.

"I've got to tell you selfishly, Hope, if Gleason Beal hadn't done what he did, you and Addie wouldn't have come up here and I can't imagine what my life would have been like without the two of you."

I took his hand; it felt cold.

I was crying so bad I couldn't say anything, just squeeze his big cold hand.

He died the next day.

Addie was with him. I was in my room getting dressed. But somehow I knew.

I closed my eyes; felt in my heart a brush of angels' wings, and sensed those angels coming up the welcome stairways, one from the left and one from the right, to guide G.T.'s spirit on the flight up to heaven.

21

I will never forget the flowers.

Mounds of them everywhere in heaps and piles circling the diner, lining the welcome stairways. Notes plastered on momentary cardboard frames telling of how much G.T. meant to people.

Adam's: *I don't understand why we lost you so soon when we still need you so much.*

That's the question. The worst kind, too. There isn't an answer.

The loss rolled over me like waves.

I moved in a blur of strength and sadness.

Addie closed the diner.

She had a right.

It sat there darkened like a shut-up tomb, lifeless without G.T. walking through it.

We should board up the windows, I thought. Batten down the hatches. This storm has taken too much.

But Mrs. Pettibone came with vases and vases of flowers.

"Put them inside," she said. "Turn on the lights. Let people see."

And we did. Lined the counter with them three deep, put some of the flowers from outside in water glasses, clustered them on the tables. Braverman brought his candle from the kitchen and lit it; we got more candles and lit those, too. I got the prism Harrison gave me, put it by the cash register. As the sunlight hit it, dozens of rainbows appeared on the walls.

People stood on the porch pressing their faces against the windows to see the memorial to the man we all loved.

Braverman held on to me, I held on to him. Anchors in the storm.

Addie got through it, stiff faced, trying as best as she could to hide her broken heart.

People clogged the Gospel of Grace Evangelical Center.

Al B. Hall stood by G.T.'s open casket and declared with all his might, "G.T., my good friend, how on this earth can we thank you for the life you lived to the fullest measure? Let our memories of you stretch us every day to live with all we've got and everything we know to be true."

The Gospel of Grace choir started singing something slow and bluesy that made you sway. People walked past, touching G.T.'s folded hands for one last time.

I stood by the casket with Addie and Braverman. I don't know how long I stood there. I don't know what was going on around me. All I know is that in the midst of the biggest stabs of loss, I realized that I was the perfect daughter for him.

Everything in my life had prepared me for it.

I knew firsthand about life being hard.

And I knew about being strong.

★ ★ ★

In the weeks following G.T.'s funeral, I learned how memory hides in the craziest places. Some days I'd be just fine, on others I would see something—anything. A plate piled with hash browns, a man with a bald head—and the mounds of flowers would stream back again into my mind and I'd start sobbing like Bambi Barnes losing it by the decaf urn.

Then I'd pull myself together and take another order.

The sad heart needs work to do.

But through it all I held Mrs. Pettibone's words in my heart—the ones she spoke to me after the funeral when she took my hand, looked into my face and said, "You've got your father's eyes."

I was leaving for college in three days. Part of me was happy to be going, the other part never wanted to leave this place. Braverman and I decided to leave for school at the same time. Neither of us wanted to be the one left in the diner waving good-bye. Adam had already headed off to Northwestern University. Jillian had left for Purdue.

We were all going to be scattered.

I hate leaving places I love.

I was standing behind the counter getting things ready for the dinnertime crowd—filling the salt and pepper shakers, getting the good grainy mustard in the little glass jars, putting the sugar in the canister, setting places so I wouldn't have to do that when the customers showed up. Lou Ellen waved good-bye. She was going to pick up Anastasia at day care. Anastasia could say mama and bye-bye now. Lou Ellen said she was learning at her own pace and that was just fine.

I was moving in and out with the grief these days, not crying every day like I had been in the beginning.

I had a few more things to pack before I left. Addie had given me the painting of the little ship on the choppy ocean that G.T.'s mother, my grandmother, had painted. My grandmother. I loved saying that. I was going to put it right above my bed in the dorm. I was wondering about everything, like who my roommate would be, would I do well in school, what was it like to be in college?

So much had changed here. So much was the same. Brenda Babcock was appointed the acting mayor to fill out G.T.'s term by the new Town Council. She was the best choice in the world, too. Like Flo said, she'd protect all the paths G.T. had laid, but would also leave her own footprints. Eli Millstone had his share of things to explain. He was letting his big-deal lawyer do most of the talking. So far he'd managed to stay out of jail. I heard he had a talk radio show and was busy running seminars for people who wanted to get into politics.

"Lord, preserve us," cried Flo when she heard *that*.

Day after day people poured into the Welcome Stairways talking about G.T. and what he'd meant in their lives. It was a privilege to know how many people had loved my father.

I knelt down, looked under the counter for just the right place. I took out my blue marker and wrote HOPE WAS HERE in small letters right above where we kept the honey jar. I'd taken my mother's advice—a small bowl of lemon wedges sat next to the honey; I kept a large bottle of Tylenol there to refill the small one I carried in my apron in case a customer

had a headache. A good waitress has to be ready for anything.

I looked at the HOPE WAS HERE, so different from the ones I had written before. This time, I was coming back. This was really home.

Then the front door of the diner opened. A sea of people filled the window booths. More came in, sat at the counter.

I look at Flo and grin.

We're in the weeds.

"Look sharp now," Addie shouts from the kitchen.

Michael, our new busboy, rushes with menus and setups. Yuri, now a waiter, bows to the two women at the corner table.

"I am pleased to serve you tonight."

Those women grin so bright.

Flo's running past me saying we'll split the window booths.

More people crowd the tables. A bus must have pulled in.

I'm cutting a wide berth around Yuri—he tends to veer left before he makes a right turn like a bad driver.

"I shall now bring to you the coffee, ladies. This is all right?"

I'm at the six-top near the window. Everyone has ordered except the big man in the yellow shirt. He looks tenderly at Addie's chicken pot pie special and sighs deep.

"I haven't had chicken pot pie since my grandmother made it. Is it really good here?"

I lift both hands like, *Are you kidding me?* And right there two people from different backgrounds and generations find connection in this crazy world.

That's the power of comfort food at work.

I'm at the galley calling in orders. Braverman and Addie are

moving like machines. I'm back to the first day I saw G.T. flipping eggs.

Come get this miracle breakfast, Florence, before I eat it myself.

Braverman raises an eyebrow, throws his spatula and catches it behind his back. Addie smiles at me. I grin back.

I'm rushing back and forth with coffee, tea.

Sweeping through the counter, getting orders. Adrenaline pumping. If you want a thrill there's nothing like in-the-weeds waitressing. You never know what's coming next. You could wait on a maniac or a guy passing out twenties.

I deliver buttermilk fried chicken with biscuits and warmed chunky applesauce to the couple on table five. The man grabs a drumstick, takes a bite and says, "Ohhhhh. I'm in heaven."

I grin. "That's what we aim for here."

I hear the two dings.

Going to miss that sound.

I run to the galley. Joy and sadness mix together like cream in coffee.

People say it's so awful that I only had a real father for less than two years and then had to lose him.

I wish like anything he was still here, but it's like getting an extraordinary meal after you've been eating junk food for a long time. The taste just sweeps through your sensibilities, bringing all-out contentment, and the sheer goodness of it makes up for every bad meal you've ever had.

TURN THE PAGE
FOR A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

Hope
Was
Here

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Titles always hold special significance to the story. For example, how does the title *Hope Was Here* focus your attention as a reader? Other than the literal reference, what else does the title suggest about the book? Does it tell you the truth?
- Hope's name is pivotal to the development of her character and to the development of the story. How do the various definitions of the word "hope" add to the story?
- There are other important symbols in this story. What roles do Welcome Stairways (p. 14) and the daylily (p. 83) play in terms of developing character, advancing the plot, or serving as foreshadowing? Are there other symbols essential to the story? If so, what are they?
- In each of Bauer's works, it is important to the main character that she provide some sense of comfort to the people she encounters. How does Hope provide that measure of comfort? What does this tell you about her character?
- Ultimately, all characters leave their mark on us as readers. How does Hope leave her mark literally and figuratively?
- Why does the main character choose the name Hope? How does this name affect the way she lives? How different is it from the name her mother chose? What name would you choose for yourself, given the chance?

- What lessons does Deena teach Hope about waitressing? Do these lessons have any bearing on real life?
- What makes Aunt Addie a better guardian than Deena? Does Hope lose anything by being raised by her aunt?
- What does having a father mean to Hope? Does G.T. fulfill these requirements?
- Why does wearing the red clown nose make Hope feel so much better? Is there anything else in her life that serves this same purpose?

JOAN BAUER'S APPLE PIE RECIPE

FOR THE CRUST:

2 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups flour
1 stick butter or margarine
1 tsp. salt
4 tablespoons Crisco
Ice water

Combine flour and salt. Cut in butter and Crisco with two knives or a pastry blender to make tiny crumbs. Add 3 tablespoons of ice water (or more, if needed) to form a ball. Put in a plastic bag and refrigerate for one hour. Roll out crust for top and bottom layers.

FOR THE FILLING:

8 Granny Smith apples
1 cup white sugar
1 cup brown sugar
2 tablespoons lemon juice
3 tablespoons Minute Tapioca (a bit rounded)

Mix filling ingredients. Place bottom layer of crust in pie pan and fill. Dot with butter.

Place top crust, crimp edges to seal, and cut 4–5 slits in the top.

Bake in a preheated oven as follows:

12 minutes at 450 degrees
12 minutes at 400 degrees
45–50 minutes at 350 degrees.

Remove from oven and let cool for several hours before cutting.

Enjoy!

Photo by Jim Lundquist



JOAN BAUER is the author of thirteen books for young readers, including critically acclaimed *Almost Home*. She received a Newbery Honor Medal for *Hope Was Here* and the *L.A. Times* Book Prize for *Rules of the Road*. The Christopher Award was given to both *Hope Was Here* and *Close to Famous*, which also received the Schneider Family Book Award. Joan is the recipient of numerous state awards voted by readers.

School Library Journals says, "When it comes to creating strong, independent, and funny characters, Bauer is in a class by herself."

Joan Bauer lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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