

Breaks by Jennifer Easler

After Korea he'd needed to sleep with a knife under his pillow, but now, more than fifty years after the war, Robert Vacek needed more than anything the scent of his wife in his bed. About two months after her death he'd taken to misting the sheets with her perfume whenever he changed the bedding and again whenever the scent faded, and though the fragrance of her perfume alone without her, Evelyn, wearing it was no more than a dull imitation, it let him at least slip into a doze. His sense of smell was fading fast anyway. It had been five years since her death. He didn't think he'd slept well one night since then.

But it was May now, late May, the day before Evelyn's birthday – she would be eighty-one, if she were still alive – and it was time to bake her birthday cake. Robert always gave it to the neighbors, to the Haas family next door with their seven-year-old handicapped son, but he always kept one piece for himself and ate it after dinner, slowly, as Lawrence Welk's accordion music played on the stereo system his daughter had given him when he turned eighty. Years ago, on one of Evelyn's birthdays, he had danced with her around the kitchen to this very song, as Lynn, who was twelve then and thought grown-up romance was gross, said *yech* as she did her math at the kitchen table. She had also asked whether dads were supposed to bake birthday cakes. "It doesn't seem very manly to me," she said. "The other dads *build* things."

"Your daddy's plenty manly," Evelyn said. "Don't you remember he was in the war? Besides, he can't cook anything else."

He still couldn't, and he lived now off frozen dinners and microwaved macaroni-and-cheese, but he still could make a gooey chocolate butter cake better than anyone in his family could, except maybe his granddaughter, Heather. Once a year he did make it, and even now he made it beautifully.

Now Robert wiped off the kitchen table with a dishrag, turned on the coffeemaker, and took out his ingredients: flour of course, cocoa powder, butter, eggs, cream cheese. He turned the radio to the classical station – they were playing Bach, not quite Evelyn's favorite, but close – and pulled mixing bowls, measuring cups, teaspoons and tablespoons from the cupboards and drawers. He mixed the dry ingredients with a spoon. The coffee finished brewing. He poured himself a cup and drank it straight, black, as he had since he joined the Army. He beat the cream cheese and added cocoa powder.

He cracked the first egg against the side of the bowl and mixed it in. Had he gotten eggshells in the batter? He lifted his glasses and peered into the bowl. He didn't think so. He cracked the second egg. His hands were still shaking a little, and the eggshell dropped on the table. A little piece fell onto the floor. Robert swore under his breath – never aloud, not since he had married Evelyn – and bent slowly, carefully, to lift it. It took a monumental effort to straighten again. He set the eggshell back on the table and wiped his eggy hand on his pants.

He measured out the vanilla, and then he put two sticks of butter into a bowl and set it in the microwave. As the butter melted, he put the carton of eggs back into the fridge. The microwave beeped. He took the bowl out from the microwave.

His fingers slipped, and the bowl crashed on the floor.

Robert swore, again under his breath. It wasn't the first bowl he'd broken even in the last month, but this bowl was part of the set Evelyn had picked out for their twenty-fifth anniversary. Lynn had bought them a new set for their fiftieth, not long before Evelyn died, but Robert liked the old dishes better. He hated to break them – but there it was, in two pieces, with butter spreading in a pool around it. He sighed, set one hand against the kitchen table, and bent to pick up the pieces.

He got the two biggest pieces up and tossed in the trashcan beneath the phone, and then he wet some paper towels to finish. He turned back toward the pool.

His kitchen wasn't very big. He stepped too far, and his foot met the melted butter.

He slipped through the liquid. He reached out for the counter as he fell. He couldn't grab it. His head struck the knob on the cabinet beneath the sink. The rest of him slammed onto the tile. He heard a crack somewhere in the vicinity of his hip.

Then the pain swallowed him.

1942. It was the summer before eighth grade. He had found the mouse nest in the church basement while his mom was at the Women's Auxiliary Meeting to knit socks for the war effort. There'd been no sign of the mother mouse – killed by the old bull snake that lived in the cemetery right by the church, Robert bet. He probably would've let the baby mice to themselves – maybe the mother would come back after all – but his farm cat, an old tabby named The General, sometimes wandered to the church for mousing. So he held out the bottom of his shirt like a little basket and plopped the mice in. But what could he do with ugly naked mice?

He saw Betty Voight and Evelyn Banes sitting on the steps in front of the church, huddled together in their sweaters and hats, and he knew.

"Wanna see what I found?" he said. "Look, girls!" He grabbed a baby mouse and held it up by its little tail. It squeaked miserably and tried to escape. "Naked and ugly! Better than frogs!"

Betty squealed, but Evelyn said, "Put it down! You're hurting it!" She caught the mouse as he dropped it. "There you go," she murmured, "nice mouse, Bobby won't hurt you any more."

"Don't touch it!" Betty said, "it probably has diseases!"

Robert ignored her. "I wasn't going to hurt it," he said to Evelyn. "I just wanted to play."

"Eighth graders," Evelyn said to Betty. "Boys. They think they're grown up but they're all dumb as posts. It doesn't have rabies, Betty, look?" She opened her hand to show Betty the mouse. Robert saw it snuffling about in her hand, trembling just as Betty was. "See how cute it is?"

"I was just trying to save them," Robert said to Evelyn. She rolled her eyes. "Really! From The General."

"You were probably going to feed them to The General."

"Was not!"

"That's just what a little jerk like you would do – feed poor baby mice to a mean old cat! You're like –" She paused, and then her face brightened. "You're just like the Germans!"

"Am not!" Robert said. He set the two other mice on the ground. Betty bit her lip.

Evelyn sniffed. "And my daddy's fighting the Germans, and he'll have to come home just to find another one here!"

"Your dad isn't the only one," Robert said. "And we – and we're *Czech!*" He pointed. "Betty's German!"

"My daddy's in the war –" Betty cried.

"Betty *Voight, Voight, Voight,*" Robert said. "I bet your dad's fighting – against Americans!"

Evelyn stood from the church step and shoved Robert to the ground. "You shut up!" she said. "God, Bobby! Can't you stop being such a – such a *boy!*"

"You called me a German first." Robert rubbed his backside where he'd struck the dirt. "That *hurt.*"

"I should smack you in the face for what you said," Evelyn said. "Just because Betty's last name is *Voight!* Stupid *Czech!*"

"Stupid whatever-you-are," Robert muttered. "God. I just wanted to show you the mice." He forced himself to his feet. The two baby mice hadn't moved since he set them on the ground, and he scooped them up in his hands. The third mouse he snatched from Evelyn. She tried to grab it back, but he pressed the mice close to his shirt. "Maybe I *will* feed them to The General," he said. "Just because you said I would."

He didn't, though – and he knew Evelyn and Betty knew he wouldn't. He gave the three mice to Betty's little sister, Becky, who loved gross little creatures like frogs and crickets, and asked her to tell Betty he was sorry. At church on Sunday he saw Evelyn sitting in Betty's pew, and though Betty smiled at him during the first hymn, Evelyn didn't even glance his way.

His rump still hurt from when she had shoved him.

When he was conscious again, after slipping through the butter, he found he was whimpering. "Oh God," he said, "oh God." He had bitten his tongue. His mouth was full of blood. Think, Robert, think, he told himself, but he could not think. When he shifted a little, pain cracked through his hip, and he gasped, and he couldn't quite breathe. He squeezed his eyes shut. Hold still, he told himself, hold still.

After a while, he opened his eyes. The shadows didn't fall in the kitchen the same way they'd done earlier, when he had fallen. All was a blur. He saw a shape that might have been his glasses lying a few inches from his face, and cautiously he reached out and took them and set them before his eyes. The frames had cracked, but the glass was whole. He peered through them, squinted at the clock on the microwave. 2:14 PM. He thought he had started making the cake in the morning. The butter sat congealed around him. He spat some of the blood from his mouth. It was May; why was he so cold?

He knew, after a time, that he had broken his hip. He could feel the fracture running through the bone. He tried not to think about it and wondered if he could ignore the pain long enough to get to the phone – to call his neighbors, the Haas family, or even Lynn in Chicago, or 9-1-1. The phone wasn't too far away. He was lying between the sink and the microwave, half under the kitchen table. The phone was by the fridge.

If you went three days without water, you died, didn't you? Robert thought. If he didn't get to the phone, he'd die long before anyone thought to check in on him.

Even the thought of moving made his breath quicken. Robert, he thought, Bobby, don't panic. Just a few moments of bad pain. Evelyn endured worse before she died, didn't she, lying in bed, and you went through worse in Korea. Think of Korea. He pushed himself up – just a little – but the broken bones scraped against each other, and he cried out, and he fell. Don't move for a while. Don't hurry. He heard himself babbling – or was the house silent? God, God. He was senile; he was senseless; he needed to think.

1951. "Stupid Czech," Evelyn said. She was crying. "Why on earth did you have to go join the Army?"

They were sitting together at Dotty's Diner, late at night. Robert had finished his chocolate shake what seemed like hours ago, but Evelyn's was melted in her glass. Robert said, "Our boys are dying over there, and –"

"Shut up already." She pushed away her milkshake. The table wobbled on its uneven legs. "That's what your dad says. Damn it, Bobby!"

He had never heard her curse before. He reached for her hand and she snatched it away. He folded his hands on the table. "I'll be all right," he said. "I'll come back safe and sound."

"Like my dad did, right?"

Robert winced. Evelyn's father had lost both legs from the knee down. "Better than that." He managed to get hold of her hand, and he held it there. She had such thin, long-fingered hands. "I won't even get wounded."

"You won't lose an arm, a hand? This hand I'm holding? Even just an eye?" Her voice was bitter.

"Won't get a scratch."

"Liar."

He sighed. "Are you going to drink your milkshake?"

"No," she said. He took it and drank it like water. "That's disgusting," Evelyn said.

"It wouldn't have melted if –" Robert began, but Evelyn's eyes were still puffy and red, so he fell silent.

They were quiet for a while. The diner was nearly silent. Robert shook salt absently onto the table. Evelyn began to wipe her finger around the edge of the cup, to lick the remnants of chocolate off.

"And you say I'm disgusting," Robert said at last. Evelyn gave him a tired smile and squeezed his hand. "You will write me, won't you?"

"Every day," Evelyn said. "*Dear John* –"

"Hey!"

She laughed. "Darling Bobby, then," she said, "I am simply *madly* in love – unfortunately with a stupid Czech who thinks he has to go gallivanting off to Korea –"

"You are a terrible woman."

"Only a girl, Bobby."

"A woman," he said.

"You had better come home safe," she said. "You had better not be lying to me. Not even a scratch, or I'll – I'll break up with you. I swear it."

"Not even a scratch," he said.

Evelyn was there.

Night had fallen. Robert's mouth was dry with thirst. Otherwise he was curiously calm. The shock had worn off, and only the occasional sharp stabbing feeling gave cause for distress. Even that did not concern him much. He had wanted to get to the phone – he remembered that from the last time he was conscious. Now he wanted only a cup of water and a blanket. Did he want a doctor? No, that would hurt. If he didn't move, it didn't hurt much. He ought to want a doctor. Lynn would yell at him for not wanting a doctor – but Evelyn was there now, and it would be all right.

He didn't know how she was there, but he knew she was, somewhere behind him, at the sink, maybe washing dishes. He wondered why she wasn't paying attention to him. He wanted to turn toward her – he moved his leg – he cried out. An animal cry. He tried to breathe.

Evelyn spoke to him. "Hush," she said, "don't cry. It's all right."

He couldn't see her in the darkness. "Evelyn?" he said. His hip was in agony. "Evelyn, are you there?"

"Of course not. Silly!" She laughed. "I've been dead five years."

"Then I'm senile."

"No, dear. Not senile." She might have been bending over him. "Just hurt rather badly, and dehydrated. It does things to the mind. You mustn't look at me, you know. Now listen. You must get to the phone."

"Must?" he said. "Why?"

"Because I won't have my idiot of a husband dying of thirst on a hard floor!" she snapped. "Do you remember what you told me about Korea? When you were shot?"

"It hurt like hell?"

"Like the dickens, you said – but that isn't what I'm talking about. No. Do you remember – you crawled half a mile with a bullet in your leg to get back to your men. Don't you remember?"

"I don't think I ever told you that."

"Bobby, Bobby, Bobby." She sighed. "You do realize I'm not here, don't you? I don't have to be telling you what I actually knew. Now you have to get to that phone. You crawled half a mile with a bullet buried in your thigh; you can crawl across the kitchen. Are you ready?"

"No. God, no!" He wiped tears from his eyes. "I want to see you. Five years without you – five years –"

"Bobby," she said gently. "I'm not here."

He lay unmoving. He was still crying.

"Listen to me," she said. "I want you to grab that table leg. See it there? Right in front of you. Grab it."

He reached out in the darkness. His hand brushed the table leg. He grasped it.

"Now you're going to pull yourself – both hands, now! – across the floor. Under the table, see, straight toward the phone. It's going to hurt a lot. But you crawled half a mile –"

"That was almost sixty years ago."

She ignored him. "All right, Bobby. Are you ready?"

He pulled himself forward at least a foot before he screamed. The cup of coffee he had been drinking that morning fell off the table and shattered a foot from his arm. Cold sweat broke out on his face, under his arms. "God!" he cried. "God, Evelyn!" The coffee flowed toward him and soaked his shirt.

But Evelyn was gone again.

1962. When Robert woke from his nightmare, Evelyn was on the other side of the room. She was holding Lynn. Lynn was screaming. Robert shied away from them and saw he was holding a knife in his hands. He dropped it as though it were a snake. "I didn't –" he cried.

"No," Evelyn said. "Thank God." She clutched Lynn close to her chest. "She just wanted a drink of water. She wanted her daddy to bring her a drink –"

"I'm sorry," Robert said. He was soaked in sweat and shaking. He made himself get out of bed. "Evelyn, I didn't mean –"

"Don't you come near us," Evelyn said. "Don't you dare come near us."

"I didn't mean –"

"I don't care whether you meant it or not!" she shouted. "You just threatened our five-year-old daughter with a knife! Our daughter! A butcher's knife! I thought you weren't sleeping with it under the pillow anymore!"

"I can't sleep without –"

"It's been almost ten years! Can't you forget about the war?"

Robert was still shaking. His skin was clammy. He pulled shoes on. "I'm going to go walk," he murmured. "Go walk the perimeter."

"The perimeter? This isn't some camp; *this is your house!*"

"I'm just – I'm sorry, Evelyn, I'm sorry –"

She threw a glass at him – the same glass they used to bring Lynn water when she was thirsty. Robert hit the floor and covered his head. The glass shattered against the wall. Lynn shrieked and buried her head against Evelyn's shoulder. Robert lay there, shaking. The glass had flown with the same arc as a grenade.

For a while they were silent.

"Bobby?" Evelyn said at last. "Bobby, it's all right. You can get up."

Robert remained where he lay.

"Lynn," Evelyn said. "Lynn, darling, go back to your room. It's all right. Mommy will bring you some water soon. Go back to bed." She set Lynn down. "Go ahead. I'll be there soon."

Lynn scampered off to her room. Evelyn knelt at Robert's side. He felt her hands on his head. He flinched; he didn't mean to. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry."

"You scared the living daylights out of me."

"Out of me too," Robert said.

She began to rub the puckered scar on his arm, where a bullet had gone through in Korea. "If you sleep with that knife ever again, you're sleeping on the sofa."

"I won't," he said. "I swear."

"Will you tell me what you were dreaming about?"

He shook his head. "No," he said. "I can't. I'm sorry."

She stood. "I'm going to bring Lynn her water," she said. "Do you want me to clean up the glass on the floor? I'm sorry I threw it at you."

"I'll clean it up."

"And put the knife away?"

"I will," he said.

He didn't touch her as she left. He swept up the glass, put the knife away, and took a blanket from the closet. He slept on the couch that night. He didn't trust himself to be anywhere near Evelyn or their daughter.

Dawn came, gray light against the tile. The coffee staining Robert's shirt was cold and wet. A pool of it lay around him. He touched his hand to the pool and sucked the coffee off his fingers. It tasted of dirt. He sucked it up all the more eagerly.

Then Evelyn was there again. He couldn't see her, but he thought he could smell her perfume. "Evelyn," he said.

"Bobby, dear," she said, "you still need to get to the phone."

"There's coffee here. I'm thirsty."

"You need more than coffee. You need a doctor."

"Evelyn," he said, "please, please don't make me move again."

"You are getting to that phone."

"Please –"

"Bobby, you are getting to that phone and that's all there is to it."

"But it hurts."

She was silent. Robert heard it as an accusation. What good was it, she seemed to be saying, for you to go off to that war and get yourself all shot up if you can't even do what I say?

"All right," he said.

"If you grab the next table leg and push yourself as far as you can, you'll be to the fridge. Then it's just a little further. Can you do that?"

"God, Evelyn, I don't know."

She was silent again. He took a deep breath and grabbed the table leg. He couldn't bring himself to draw himself forward. He already hurt enough. "Bobby," Evelyn said.

"I can't."

"Robert William Vacek, you are getting to that phone and that's that. Ready?"

He shut his eyes. He forced himself forward. His bones seemed to tear apart. This time he couldn't even scream in words – just one long howl, like the cry of a dog. His back was against the refrigerator. He couldn't breathe.

1973. Lynn hadn't turned off the light in her room yet. Robert paced the hall in front of her door. At last he knocked. Lynn didn't come to the door. "Lynn," he said. "Lynn, open up."

She did. She was wearing blue striped pajama pants and holding a notebook in one hand. A pencil was behind her ear. "What?"

"Why aren't you in bed yet?"

"Dad." She shook her head. "I'm doing homework." She held out the notebook for Robert to see.

"Homework? You're not on the phone with that Davids boy?"

She sighed. "Yeah, earlier, because I had a question about math."

"That's all?"

"I couldn't remember how to find the angle of – you wouldn't care. It was a geometry question."

"Well," he said.

For a long time neither spoke. At last Lynn said, "Can I get back to my homework? I have a math test tomorrow."

"Yes. Yes, of course. Goodnight, sweetheart."

She let him kiss the top of her head, and then she wriggled away and shut the door behind her. He stood there a moment, and then he turned and went back to his and Evelyn's room.

Evelyn had paused halfway through undressing and now was lying across the quilt in her slip. She was reading a romance novel. Her dress lay in a heap on the floor. When Robert came in, she glanced up at him and said, "Is Lynn in bed?"

He sat on the bed. It creaked. "She's doing math. She says."

"She probably is. She's worried about her math grade."

"I thought she was good at math."

"She's better at algebra than geometry." Evelyn licked her finger and turned a page in her book. "She got an A minus on her last test and she isn't happy with it."

"Evelyn," he said, "listen. I saw her kissing that Davids boy the other day."

She didn't look up from her book. "Alan Davids? He's a nice kid. Respectful."

"Did you hear me? They were kissing!"

She sighed, earmarked her book, and set it aside. "Bobby," she said, "she's sixteen."

"She's a kid!"

"Bobby, let her be."

"But she – "

"Do you know what she's worried about?" Evelyn said. She sat up and met Robert's eyes. "Do you want to know? In a year and a month Alan will be eighteen. If we don't get out of Vietnam, he might go."

Robert said nothing. He tapped his foot against the side of the bed.

"She's not such a kid," Evelyn said. "She does everything we ask her to do and she gets good grades, and she has good friends. And she's worried about a boy she likes a lot. She doesn't want him to come back like –" She took a deep breath. She opened her book again. "Let them kiss if they like. That's all they're doing anyway."

"How do you know –"

"Bobby," Evelyn said. She rolled onto her stomach. The straps of her bra slipped over her shoulders. "She talks to me."

She was silent then. After a moment her eyes turned back to her book, and her finger traced the words on the page. Robert got up from the bed. He swallowed. He unbuttoned his shirt and went to brush his teeth.

"You aren't to the phone yet," Evelyn said.

The sun had risen perhaps an hour ago. The light of it shone into Robert's eyes and made a halo around the kitchen windows. He turned his head toward the tile. He said nothing.

"Bobby," Evelyn said. "Bobby, dear. You aren't to the phone."

He gazed at the dried coffee lying around him like old blood.

"This isn't about what you want," she said. "This is about what you have to do."

Again he was silent. He heard Evelyn sigh. His tongue was thick and heavy in his mouth. The pain in his hip jabbed him with nausea.

"Bobby," Evelyn said. She was very near to him, he knew, but he couldn't look at her, he couldn't see her. "You have a little strength left. Just enough to get to the phone. You have to do this."

"Hurts."

"I know it does, dear. I know."

He shut his eyes.

Evelyn fell silent.

He began to cry again, but as he did, he braced himself against the fridge behind him. And he pushed himself forward.

1993. Lynn and Alan and the four girls were going to drive out from Chicago for Evelyn's sixty-fifth birthday. "I don't want a party, dear," Robert had heard Evelyn say on the phone to Lynn. "No, nothing fancy. But I would love it if you would come out for dinner. Can Alan take time off work? We could make it for the weekend – and the girls have finished school already, haven't they? Of course Natalie's too young for school. Oh, lovely. I'll make – no, really, let me make dinner, I love to cook, you know I do. You want to bring the cake?" She cast a glance at Robert. "I don't know – Lynn, dear, your father always bakes the cake."

"I don't mind," Robert said.

Evelyn covered the mouthpiece of the phone with her hand. "Are you sure?" she whispered.

He nodded.

"Well then," Evelyn said to Lynn, "if you really want to bake the cake, it's all right with your father so it's all right with me. But you'd better make the same cake! Goody chocolate something. No healthy stuff."

"Does she have time?" Robert said. "With all those girls?"

Evelyn shushed him. "I'm on the phone!" she said. "Yes, Lynn, I'm still here. No, that would be lovely. Really. Yes. Around five? We'll see you then. Love to all the girls!" She hung up the phone. "Stupid Czech," she said to Robert. "I was on the phone!"

He wrapped his arms around her. "You don't mind."

"Maybe not," she said. "Are you sure it's all right if Lynn makes the cake?"

He shrugged. "It's fine. I don't mind."

And when Lynn and Alan and the four girls showed up that weekend for the birthday, they had forgotten the cake. "I'm so sorry, Mom," Lynn said as she hugged Evelyn with one arm, "Natalie had a playdate with one of her little friends today – I didn't get a chance –"

"Don't worry about it," Evelyn said, and she kissed her daughter's cheeks. "Alan! What have you brought me? How lovely!" She took the yellow roses from her son-in-law's hands. "I'll get them in water right away. Look how pretty they are, Bobby!"

"I'll take them," Robert said. "You all keep visiting." He gave Lynn a quick hug, shook Alan's hand, and took the roses from Evelyn. He left them standing on the front porch as he went into the kitchen. He took a vase from the cabinet and filled it with water, and he set the roses in them and put the vase on the table. He could hear the others outside. The girls were shrieking with laughter.

He didn't want to go outside again. He sat at the kitchen table and sat gazing at the roses. The girls stopped shrieking, but he could still hear them, running around and yelling. The front door opened. Evelyn and Lynn were talking as only they could talk, fast as could be, about cookies this time, and how Melissa wanted to learn to bake. Alan was trying to get the girls calmed down. Robert remained where he was.

Soon Evelyn had the girls quiet and coloring in new coloring books she had bought for them the day before. Robert heard her say, "I'll be right back, girls – Alan, Lynn, do you want anything to drink? We have cranberry juice, orange juice, water, iced tea, lemonade, wine – two iced teas? Great. I'll be right back."

She came into the kitchen. Robert glanced at her. She said, "I thought I might find you here."

He shrugged, then looked back at the roses.

"You're not upset she didn't bring the cake, are you?"

"No," Robert said. "Not really. We have ice cream in the freezer."

"I know the girls are noisy, but – " She was quiet for a while. "You all right?"

"I'm fine."

"I didn't think loud noises had bothered you for years – "

"I'm fine."

"Bobby –" She went to him and squeezed his shoulder. "You're moodier than I ever was, you know that, right?"

"I'm sorry, love."

She kissed him, and then she got two cups from the cupboards. "You want anything to drink?"

"Maybe juice, in a bit. Not yet, love. I'll pour it."

At that moment, Heather came in.

She was five years old, and she was wearing pink overalls, and she was frowning.

"Grandma," she said, "Natalie wants to eat the crayons."

"Did you tell your mother?" Evelyn asked as she poured the iced tea.

"Yeah, but Natalie – Natalie still wants to eat the crayons."

"I'm sure your mother will stop her," Evelyn said. "Do you want to stay in here with your grandpa for a while? I'm going to take this to your parents and then I'll be right back."

She left. Heather stood staring at Robert with her head tilted a little to one side. Robert gave her a half-smile. "Hello," he said.

She said, "I want cake. Mommy forgot."

"I know she did," Robert said. "But we'll have ice cream later. Is that all right with you?"

She sighed. "Yeah," she said. "But cake is better." She went to the table and clambered up onto a chair. "You have a line on your face."

He pointed to his cheek. "This line?"

"Yeah."

"It's a scar."

"Someone hurt you?"

"A long time ago," Robert said. "A very long time ago. Before your mom was even born."

She nodded and kicked her legs beneath the chair. "I'm thirsty."

Robert stood. "Do you want some water? Some milk?"

"Chocolate milk," Heather said. "Lots of chocolate."

He made her chocolate milk in a plastic *Go Army!* cup and sat with her as she drank it. Evelyn came back into the kitchen. "Your sisters are playing with dolls now," she said to Heather. "Do you want to play?"

Heather nodded and went back into the living room. She was so calm, Robert thought. Not like her sisters. Evelyn picked up the half-empty cup of chocolate milk from the table and asked, "Does that child's mother know you're giving her chocolate?"

"No."

"They're plenty wild as it is."

"I know, love." He took the cup of milk from Evelyn and put it in the fridge. "She asked me about the scar."

"That old bullet-mark?" She kissed his cheek. "You lied to me about it, you know."

"I did?"

She edged past him to the fridge. "You said you'd come home whole. Not even a scratch, you said." She rummaged around until she emerged with the cranberry juice. "And you came home with two bullet holes and one heck of a scratch. You looked like a skeleton."

"I'm sorry," he said.

She poured two glasses of juice. "You came back, though. As whole as you could."

"I did my best."

She nodded. "I'd better go back out to Alan and Lynn." She took his hand. "Come with me? Sit in the living room? You've barely said hello to your daughter." She handed him one of the glasses. "You don't have to talk. You don't have to be social. Lynn and me will do all the talking for you."

He nodded, and she led him out to the living room.

~

He was beneath the phone.

He had been unconscious for a while, he thought, but he wasn't sure. He was lying curled up against the trashcan beside the refrigerator. He looked up through his broken glasses at the telephone. It was right above the trash. He knew he was supposed to get to the telephone – so he had succeeded, hadn't he? Now what?

Evelyn was gone.

But there was something she had wanted him to do, wasn't there? He couldn't remember. *What good was it for you to go off to that war and get yourself all shot up if you can't even do what I say?*

He wanted to ask, But what are you saying, Evelyn?

Get to the phone.

But how? I don't want to get to the phone, love. I'll die right here if that's all right with you.

He thought he could hear her accusing him: *Lynn needs you still, and the girls need you, and even Alan.* They don't need me that much, he thought. I want you, not them. But Evelyn was silent; she was gone. And why in the world did he need to get to the phone if Evelyn was gone?

He'd once held a dying soldier in Korea. Donald Jones was his name. Robert hadn't known the man well – a kid, really, with wild curls and an ugly round nose – but when Donny was shot in the chest, Robert held him as he twitched and the blood bubbled out. In seconds Donny sighed and was still. And Robert – still kneeling there, with the bullets zipping by – had thought calmly, I want someone to hold me when I die. I want Evelyn to hold me. I'd better get back to her soon.

He'd never told Evelyn about Donny Jones.

If he didn't get to the phone, he would die alone on his kitchen floor.

You aren't dying alone, Robert William Vacek – he could almost hear Evelyn now, even if she wasn't there – and I can't be with you as you were with Donny, as you were with me, so you'd better get to the phone so Lynn and the girls can.

You aren't dying alone.

And he heard his own voice: the trashcan is sitting right beside you.

He tried to get hold of the trash, but he couldn't grasp it and it came crashing down beside him. He flinched when it struck the tile with a noise like a shot. Garbage spilled out onto the floor.

If he could only knock down the phone –

Lying near him, fallen out of the trashcan, were the two buttery halves of the bowl he had broken the day before. He reached for one of the halves and weighed it in his hand. It was heavy. The phone seemed high above him.

He lobbed the first half up towards the phone.

He missed, and the half-bowl came flying down and struck the tile. Fragments scattered across the floor; one struck his arm, just below the scar from the bullet, and he started bleeding. The blood trickled down his arm and stained the sleeve of his shirt. It isn't bad, he thought. You went through worse in Korea. You went through worse in Korea.

He reached for the second half of the bowl. It was heavier than the first. But couldn't he once throw a pineapple grenade farther than any other soldier he ever met? What was a little piece of a bowl? He took a deep breath. It rasped in his lungs.

He tossed the bowl up at the phone. The bowl met the phone, shattered, and dropped to the floor. The phone fell from the wall and struck the tile. It slid along the floor and stopped.

Robert stretched out his hand and took the phone.

He was supposed to call someone now, he thought, and he dialed the only number he could remember.

"Dad?"

It was Evelyn's voice. He knew it was Evelyn's voice. "Evelyn," he tried to say, but the name stuck in his dry throat.

"Dad, are you okay?"

He tried to swallow. "Evelyn," he said, "Evelyn."

"What? – Dad, it's Lynn. Lynn."

"Evelyn."

"I'm not Mom. Dad, it's Lynn – your daughter – Lynn."

"Lynn?"

"Dad, what's wrong? What's going on? You haven't called in weeks – I know it's Mom's birthday today, I should have called – Dad, what's wrong?"

He said, "I fell." She should have known that already, he thought. Evelyn knew he had fallen, and she was dead.

"You fell – Dad! Are you okay?"

He said nothing.

“When did you – listen, I’m going to call Debra Haas – she’s still your neighbor, right? – and I’ll call Alan’s brother, and someone will be right over to check on you. Okay? Dad, are you still there? Dad?”

His tongue was so heavy in his mouth.

“I’m going to call Debra now – and I – I’ll come as soon as I can. I’ll be there in a few hours. One hour, if I speed. Dad, it’s okay, we’ll be there soon.”

“Lynn,” he tried to say, but he couldn’t speak. After a moment he heard the click of the phone. Then all was silent.

“Lynn,” he said.

Someone was pounding at the door.