

The Upright Piano

She was in the middle of her story about playing the piano throughout wartime Europe when Lydia interrupted.

"Okay, let's break up this story hour," Lydia said, handing each of the three nurses a clipboard. "I know Mrs. Hyde is entertaining, but y'all have others to attend to. C'mon, this is your last warning."

The nurses moved away quickly in opposite directions as if they had suddenly smelled something bad.

"Those are my nurses!" Mrs. Hyde shouted. "I pay a pretty penny for them."

Lydia puckered her lips. "Mmmm Hmmm. Of course you do. And so does every other soul living in this here place." She pointed a finger before she picked up Mrs. Hyde's breakfast tray. "You know that."

"There is no one else *living* here! I'm the only one!" Mrs. Hyde shouted at Lydia's double-barreled balloon of a rear. "Plus, they like the stories about my life. They give them hope."

Lydia stopped in the doorway and turned, with a hand on her hip. "I don't know about that, but I never said my nurses didn't like your stories. My point is, and you know this," she pointed again, "they're being unfair to the others if they're lollygaggin' with you. End of discussion."

Mrs. Hyde slumped in her chair and fiddled with her wedding band.

Lydia then popped her big shiny face back into the room. "You know your Kate is coming today?"

"Quite!"

Lydia left a trail of something coconutty. Mrs. Hyde tried to swat it away; she used her crossword puzzle booklet to fan the room. Why they wore that stuff, she

just didn't know. And what was it? A spray? A salve? Something for their hair? Didn't it attract flies?!

Speaking of flies! She checked on her growing stash of prunes—four in a plastic bag in her side table drawer. So far they were fly-and-ant free. From the pocket of her robe, she removed the one from the latest breakfast and quickly put it in the bag. Only two more to go!

Mrs. Hyde flipped through the channels with her remote and wondered about the salt and gumption of the staff nurses, the ones who had just been shooed away. Often, they were so engrossed in her stories, they even sat on the edge of her bed to listen.

"Tell us the one about how you moved moonshine across the border!" they urged or "how you got Nixon to resign!" But the stories they clamored for the most were of her travels in Europe, touring with her piano and playing to the music-starved soldiers. Mrs. Hyde would hum the Gershwin and Joplin tunes she had performed for the men in those days, just to acquaint the nurses with those classics.

But Lydia was too good, even for those patriotic tales. She would put up her hand up and say, "Mrs. Hyde, I have heard it before!" Even when she couldn't have! Even when everyone else knew that listening to Mrs. Hyde meant getting firsthand historical accounts of important female triumphs. It was clear that Lydia's colored life would never measure up—Mrs. Hyde's fantastic stories only reminded her of that fact. But so what? How much there was for her to learn about what could be accomplished with just a wee bit of imagination!

The staff nurses were certainly learning or else why would they come back for more? If they weren't enjoying themselves immensely, they wouldn't urge her to tell her stories and jab one another and laugh at the funny parts. And didn't they seem to resent Lydia too? Hadn't Mrs. Hyde seen a few roll their eyes just now when Lydia

demanded that they go back to work? Mrs. Hyde considered this. Perhaps she could depend on them for the little prune prank she had in mind?

So what if they, too, were colored? That shouldn't have anything to do with their abilities, right? At least they were trying, which was much more than Mrs. Hyde could say for Lydia. So what if they spoke of God so much you started to believe he was actually in the room? At least believing meant they had read the Bible. So what if their voices boomed? At least they were polite! They raised the window when Mrs. Hyde needed air; a five-letter word meaning perpetuate, they brought her dictionary; more water, they filled her plastic tumbler from the cooler down the hall; help adjusting a crooked picture, they'd follow her instructions until it was perfectly placed.

Mrs. Hyde thought about it, about how a new and wonderful story was unfolding. She could become the true heroine at the Haven Home! Like a union leader, she could incite the nurses and then represent them. Under her direction they could spend ample time listening to their elders in the name of edification and historical preservation. Once things had taken off at the Haven Home, she could take a few of the nurses (not Lydia!) and a few of the more robust elders and hit the road. In a bus across the country, they could start a revolution of storytelling from one generation to the other. Through oral histories, divergent age groups would begin to understand one another and the world better. There would be a book written about her life. She would be publicly thanked by President Bush and the First Lady for her help in "weaving a vivid tapestry of disparate voices across the land." She would be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. It would be a glorious legacy. Mrs. Hyde stopped—she felt her heart fluttering and so she decided to rest, her smile easing away as she dipped into sleep.

She awoke to Kate with her skinny, freckly arms and her stylish haircut. She was opening drawers, then closing them; she was rearranging frames and knickknacks.

"It is all fine the way it is," Mrs. Hyde said.

"Mother!" Kate exclaimed, her arms open wide. She placed a kiss on her cheek. "You look well."

"You are a liar. I look like hell. They are trying to kill me."

"Fine, then. Look what I've brought you!"

Kate put a brown shoe box in her lap. "Go ahead," she said.

Mrs. Hyde threw aside the lid and the paper stuffing. A pair of Keds.

"They're sporty, aren't they? They'll give you confidence on the hallway carpet."

Mrs. Hyde looked at her daughter as if she didn't know she meant.

"So you can go to the cafeteria for meals. We'll throw away those crummy moccasins."

"What's crummy!?"

"Here," Kate said, removing the Keds from the box. "Try these on, at least. I also bought you some cute bobble socks."

Mrs. Hyde looked out the window as Kate fumbled with her feet. Mrs. Hyde splayed and stiffened them.

"You are making this difficult, Mother."

"Ow!" Mrs. Hyde said. "Be careful!"

"Oh, Mother."

Mrs. Hyde could predict the next two days. Sign here, drink this, do this, don't do that, try this on, and then, Mother, why can't you be pleasant? And if those two days weren't longer than any others picked out of a hat, then the phone calls

and letters that followed would be. At least with the secretly installed Caller ID, Mrs. Hyde could now control whether or not they spoke!

But the main problem with Kate was that the sign of her seasonal matching bag and shoes always meant change. No longer allowed to drink, drive or pay her own bills! She couldn't even go to the bathroom without permission! Whether she still owned that little blue Honda, she was afraid to ask. And where her antique gold davenport and pretty maple hutch were? Her library of literature? It was anybody's guess.

Whatever change Kate had in mind for this visit, Mrs. Hyde intended to see it coming from at least a mile away.

By dinner, things had not changed. As usual, Kate insisted on taking her out to the only decent place in town. She made her wear the Keds, which Mrs. Hyde secretly found agreeable. With them, she could depend less on Kate's skinny, freckly arm.

Once they were seated, Mrs. Hyde told Kate about Lydia's terrible behavior, about how she beat the nurses and the patients whenever she felt like it, about how she would never let anyone else speak. The nickname spoken behind her back was The Wicked Witch of Haven Home.

Kate took her mother's hands and shook them. "Mother, stop it. Lydia would never do that. You are at the best facility in all of Georgia." She then produced a packet of pictures. "Let's look at these, okay?"

Her grandchildren. The girl was on top of a mountain in California; the girl was with a dog in the woods; the girl was with Kate in a boat; the boy had won a golf tournament.

"I think Daddy would have been proud of his playing," Kate said, staring at the photograph and smiling. "Don't you see his resemblance?"

"William was never that good. You just think he was. Your memory is partial when it comes to your father."

"No, Mother, it isn't," Kate said, clearing the pictures away.

"Yes, Kate, it is."

"And so what if it is. So what?" Kate said, throwing up her arms. "It's my memory. Mine. It's the way things happened to me. You have nothing to do with it."

Mrs. Hyde reached for her water glass. "Fine," she said. "Fine."

The next morning, Kate tried to get her to the cafeteria for breakfast.

"You need to commune with the other Haven Home inhabitants more," Kate said. "Mealtimes are a good opportunity."

"You make us all sound like birds," Mrs. Hyde snapped.

Kate had rolled up her mother's blinds and was wiping her window sill with a wad of wet toilet paper. "You could make some friends here with just a little bit of effort, Mother."

Mrs. Hyde, sensing that the big change would happen at the cafeteria said, "I'm not going."

They had breakfast delivered and each read different sections of the paper in Mrs. Hyde's room. Kate sipped coffee and Mrs. Hyde picked at the eggs on her tray. How she would steal away the sixth prune with Kate there, Mrs. Hyde didn't know. Just then Lydia filled the doorway.

"Lydia!" Kate sprung out of her seat, as if greeting a long-lost sister.

"Kate, dear. How are you?" Lydia said. They embraced. "Mrs. Hyde," she said, giving a nod. "I've heard from the nurses that your new sneakers are working out well."

Mrs. Hyde moved her eyes and saw that the sneakers were on her feet.

"Hmm," she said.

"Why not come with me, Kate? I have to pick up something at the other building," Lydia said.

Kate turned to her mother who immediately said, "Go, go. I do fine without you most of the time anyway!"

The coconut stink made Mrs. Hyde sneeze. She peered out the window to make sure Kate and Lydia were indeed walking away. She added the sixth prune to her bag and went back to reading the news. It was an election year and—it was strange—she was feeling more liberal than she ever had before. If only William had stuck around long enough to witness that! Hoo-ha! She laughed.

When one of the nurses came to take her tray, Mrs. Hyde said, "Something has just reminded me of the many New York City nightclubs where I would play—"

"Oh Lord, Mrs. Hyde. I haven't got the time." She wiped the television table off with a wet rag and stored it behind her chair. "Lots of people here got the flu and, bless their hearts, they need tending to. Maybe some other day," she said and then waved goodbye before Mrs. Hyde could respond.

"Well!" Mrs. Hyde said and brushed some muffin crumbs from her lap. "It seems Lydia is having her way!"

She then thought perhaps it would be unwise to wait until she had collected all seven prunes. Perhaps the same effect could be achieved with six and she could do the deed as soon as tonight? She quickly turned her head toward something she detected beyond her window, but saw only that the spring sun had rounded out the leaves and the flowers and fluffed up the grass. How lucky to come back so alive each year and so free!

There were fingerprint smudges on the glass. She wiped them away with her handkerchief and remembered that Kate would still be lurking tonight and not the

500 miles north where she lived her busybody, power-suit life. No surprise there. Kate had made a career out of getting in the way. When she and William were having a rough go of it, Kate stepped between the two of them to suggest a therapist. "All couples are doing it," she said and she wasn't even married yet! She could have no idea what it took to make a marriage work. And now she was some hot-shot lawyer, getting in the way and getting paid for it!

Mrs. Hyde decided to stick with her original plan, remembering a crucial fact: that Lydia didn't work the station on her own until the following night.

When Kate returned, she was not alone. Mrs. Hyde tried to absorb herself in the last few clues of Sunday New York Times Magazine crossword puzzle and not look up to see out who owned the white bucks parked on her rug.

Into the magazine, she asked, "What is a four-letter word for busybody?"

"Mother, Ralph has some documents for you to sign."

"Anyone know another five-letter word for thief?" Mrs. Hyde asked, dabbing her chin with the pencil's eraser.

"Mother, your house has sold. You did well on it. Ralph just needs a few signatures."

There was whispering, but Mrs. Hyde kept her eyes on the puzzle. The glare made the glossy page difficult to read, but she would rather not look Old Ralph in the face. It was so pockmarked as to be like a mass of dripped wax. She needed no reminding of that. A furry hand put several stapled pages in her lap and then she heard Kate and Ralph walking out.

Her house?! Sold?! So this was the long-awaited change! It occurred to her that she hadn't even thought of the sweet little yellow clapboard in so long and if she signed these papers it would be lived in by strangers?! They would probably remove the wallpaper or the walls or both. They would add rooms and extra doors. How

could she misplace the memories of the house where she and William entertained traveling diplomats on their way up the coast to Washington, D.C., where famous chefs came to show her culinary short cuts, where she kept up with her practicing, though her touring days with the piano were through!

She drove her fist into the side of her chair. I am wasting away here, forgetting the details of my life! She looked out a window again and thought she glimpsed a bee the size of a bird.

Later, Kate threatened that Ralph would come by every single day and sit on her bed until she signed the documents, so Mrs. Hyde scratched her name on all ten of them: Lorraine Eugenia Hyde. She did not weep, but found the letters of her name hard to recall.

"Meddler," she muttered after Kate gathered the papers and walked out the door.

"I heard you, Mother." She turned. "You can thank me for getting a price good enough that you don't have to worry about money for the rest of your life."

Mrs. Hyde was not consoled. She began to add up the things she no longer had. If only William were here, he could prevent these changes, like he did when they tried to build another development inches from their home. He would say, "You have taken enough! You cannot have these last two things: Lorraine's home, Lorraine's stories! They are hers and without them she will die—"

Mrs. Hyde was in the middle of her thoughts when Kate entered her room again. She was all buttoned-up, her car keys in hand, her face a million miles away.

"I have to get back. Jeff needs me," Kate said and tapped an icy hand on her mother's arm.

Mrs. Hyde flinched. "Jeff?"

"You son-in-law, Mother." She rolled her eyes. "You are in good hands here; I know you don't believe me, but you are." She kissed her forehead and then she was gone.

Well, good, Mrs. Hyde thought, now she can meddle in Jeff's affairs, and not mine. Mrs. Hyde drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. Her paper had been read, her crossword puzzle done enough, and nothing good on the television. What else was there to do? She buzzed for a nurse to open her window very wide, explaining that she needed the smell of spring immediately. She did not offer a story and the nurse did not ask. She closed her eyes before she could admit any thoughts of loneliness.

In the wee hours of the following morning, Mrs. Hyde slid out her window. The stars were gone, which meant she mustn't dally. She hurried to the parking lot. Under the lights, she took one last peek at the route drawn on her hand. In less than 20 minutes, she would be sitting on her porch, in the crook of William's arm, smelling his cherry pipe tobacco.

She'd remembered to put on her Keds. She took the driveway to the end. It was quite long and rather well lit. She kept to the sycamores along the side where the shadows were. Before scooting across the street, she wiped perspiration from her hairline and looked right, then left. Hoo-ha! She laughed. A car on the road at this hour? Not a chance.

She entered the golf course by way of the cart path. The gravel was loose and her sneakers made a chomping sound that echoed, as if a large creature was eating unpopped popcorn in her head. After twice thinking someone or something was following her, she threw up her hands and moved to the grass. It was uneven, but her sneakers were sturdy where she was not. Confidence on the golf course

grass was not what Kate had envisioned! Hoo-ha! The dew soaked right on through the light canvas, but two wet feet were better than her imagination running wild!

What she'd forgotten to do was swap her white satin gown and robe for the forest green jogging suit she'd hidden under her pillow. Her idea had been to blend in with the landscape. Green grass, green trees, green shrubbery, a green Lorraine Eugenia Hyde. But she laughed a big Hoo-ha when she imagined Lydia mistaking her for a wandering snowy egret.

She'd not been on this grass for some time now. A year, maybe two? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that the tee behind her looked like a mountain and the green she remembered being somewhere at the end of the fairway was far beyond where her eyes could see.

How long had she been this old?

Long enough that Kate had taken her golf cart away, the one thing she'd liked about living at the country club, and the one thing that could come in handy today. She'd even give up her Keds to drive it now! It wouldn't be wise, of course, with all the people sleeping in their houses just feet away from the course, but oh, it would be fun!

She recalled that those sleeping people knew her as The Zipper. At first, they thought the name referred to her swing or the path her ball took in the air, but no. William had dubbed her The Zipper because she loved to zip around in her cart. She'd zip right up to where his ball had landed. She'd mix Bloody Marys, hand him the clubs he asked for, and then zip up to his next ball. If things like that were timed, she would most definitely have won.

Anything else having to do with game, she hated. The shoes clunky, like ski boots, the clubs too long every one of them, and her shots landing consistently in the sand traps or the rough—what a chore! All of it sealed her theory that golf discriminated against petite people.

But not her golf cart—it was equipped with custom-designed pedals, so no one else could drive it, not even William.

By her watch, she was still on time to meet him. The heavy air was not a cinch after the temperature-controlled stuff she breathed in her pitiful little room, but she did not let the humidity slow her down. Nothing would keep her from William—no heavy air, no Kate, no Lydia. He had finally come to call on her after too loud and long a silence. He'd said they should meet at the house—they had important things to take care of. His timing had been impeccable. Kate selling their house had obviously spurred him to come calling.

Just imagining strangers in her house made Mrs. Hyde want to tear something up as a dog might. The ground, a ball, something! What would they do with the thoughts she had there? Would they mock her? What would they do with the private moments she and William had shared? What color would they paint the clapboard?

She closed her eyes and sighed, trying a meditative thing she saw Kate do in the mornings. She removed all expression from her face and just walked. That's better. Then she smelled something familiar. It reminded her of the day she and William had arrived. She'd stared at her wardrobe box and cried while William filled his lungs with air from the marsh. Not for any reason would she need her nice woolen suits again, her patent leather heels or her floor-length fur. No weather demanded them or any important social events. No meetings with the Buffalo city planning board to build the park, no fundraising efforts for the theater, no literacy program to manage. Retired now. What to do?

When William came in and found her in a rut, he scooped her right up and made her breathe with him out at the marsh. He made her breathe until she thought she'd faint, and then he explained that all humans had evolved from a place just like

this, a place dank and slippery and smelling of hard boiled eggs. "We're born again, Lorraine! We're starting anew!" he said. She hadn't seen him so happy in years.

Mrs. Hyde found a smile twitching at her lips as she walked toward the smell. After 35 years of selling insurance, William could think that way if he wanted to. The fountain of youth, he'd called it. She breathed a lungful. Low tide had left the spongy ground exposed and reeking. The smell was more alive than anything she knew. She could almost smell the life in it, squirming around, bubbling, morphing, and blooming. The closer she got, the warmer she felt and soon her veins made ridges under her skin. After years of William thriving on it, she finally understood. It was like the scent of his aftershave that she discovered on the necks of her clothing—rejuvenating and hopeful.

Seeing the tops of their prized dogwood to the right, Mrs. Hyde quickly crossed over into the rough. The grass was longer there and tickled her ankles. Spanish moss drooped from the live oaks. On a humid breeze, she heard their porch swing creaking. Was it William? She hoped.

She stopped to pin some wisps of hair back into place. Perspiration had popped up above her lip and she wiped it away. Her Keds were heavy with dew and covered with mud and blades of grass, and she did what she could to clean them, but her gown and robe were remarkably fresh.

Daybreak had opened the mouths of the chickadees. Mrs. Hyde stopped fussing. She began walking again and reached her lawn. From the looks of it, the yard boys had not been around to gather the winter debris. She feared they were one of the bills she'd not paid. Phooey! Well, there were plenty of other people to blame that on. Then she noticed a gutter hanging from the porch roof and the old dogwood's growth spurt over the driveway. Were these the important matters William wanted to discuss? She was hoping for something more.

The porch swing sat completely still and empty. William's timing wasn't always impeccable. She opened the screen door and hoisted herself up onto the swing. It was clean and covered in the sunflower pattern she'd chosen with Kate. She remembered that shopping day as being a nice one, in the coolness of late fall with Kate needing her to drive because the baby in her belly wouldn't fit behind the wheel. Carefully, she reached down, untied the laces of both her Keds, and let them drop on the painted cement. Then she leaned back, swung a little, and breathed the marsh that was carried in on the breeze.

She used the edge of her robe to wipe perspiration from her behind her neck. Doo, doo, doo, she fidgeted and then got an idea. She imagined her assistant wheeling in her upright. She cracked her knuckles and blew on her hands. She nodded to her audience of hungry soldiers and began her favorite song, Joplin's *Mapleleaf Rag*. Her fingers felt buoyant and knew perfectly where the next note lay. The song rollicked like a full dance hall. When she was finished, there was cheering and roses. She imagined Lydia there among the uniformed men, her hands in prayer and her heart lifted.

I told you I could play! Mrs. Hyde said.

She swung some more, enjoying the rhythmic creak. Then the song of the finches and the wrens close by made her want the swinging to stop so she could hear them better. Undeniably sweet, they seemed to wish only goodwill. Then she listened past those for the bigger birds—the blue herons and the cormorants—way out on the marsh. She heard them together, the small birds' chirping and squeaking against the bigger birds' crowing and squawking. She tried to place why the chorus was so familiar. No, why the whole scene was so familiar?! The birds, the swing, the porch, the morning marsh air, being there alone without William.

William! She cried and rubbed her face with her hands.

William! She cried again.

She was about to cry out yet again when she heard a match being struck.

Oh, William. I thought perhaps I'd lost...

She searched the porch. Then she smelled the smoke of a cigarette.

Who's there?!

Is it you, Lydia? Kate?

With her eyes wide open, she slowly lay down on the sunflower slipcover and curled up her feet. She lay there for some time imagining what the smoker looked like. She wondered if William had moved on from the pipe. Then she was asleep.

Mrs. Hyde awoke to sun on her face and the sound of squirrels fighting. She stretched and then put on her Keds, which were now only damp.

She walked down the middle of the road toward the mailboxes. Many people owed her letters. She could expect one from Kate, the handwriting looking just like her arms. Surely, the latest *Gourmet* magazine would be there, too—half-rolled and reeking of printer ink.

Suddenly, the screen door of a house to her left opened with a whine. A woman she recognized as Ruth Beardsley came out. Mrs. Hyde covered her mouth to keep down the rising giggles. Big purple curlers should never lead a public life! That has always been true.

She then bit her lip and buttoned her hands behind her back. Why not be pleasant? Ruth Beardsley was merely a bore, nothing more.

"Ruth!" Mrs. Hyde yelled, reminding herself to sound overjoyed.

"Lorraine! What in God's name are you doing here? Why, you're barely dressed!" Ruth Beardsley peered through her side and back windows at the neighborhood.

Mrs. Hyde kept a lid on the boiling curler comment. "I didn't think anyone would be out and about at this hour, but it is just the best part of the day. You can smell the marsh."

"Indeed dear. I quite agree," Ruth Beardsley said. "So, where are you off to, Lorraine? Perhaps I could drive you?"

"Oh, now, that would be a hoot—driving me to the mailboxes when they are already within my sight. Bless your heart."

Mrs. Hyde patted Ruth Beardsley's hand as she walked past. "Have a nice day, dear."

She approached the cement slab beneath the rows of mailboxes, and smiled at the unclipped grass. Holding onto a lamppost, Mrs. Hyde pulled herself up onto the cement. She planted her feet until things in the landscape stopped colliding.

She squinted through the heavy streams of hazy sun to find her mailbox.

Twenty five. Number twenty five.

Aha! She reached up to pull on the round knob. She pulled. It would not open. She grounded her Keds, one in front of the other, and tried it that way, but found the box was truly locked up tight. She quickly looked around for Ruth Beardsley, but her car was gone. One more time, she turned around and pulled on the knob. Then, seeing the grooves of a lock, she realized she needed a key. A key! Well, of course! Now where is my key? She patted the pockets of her robe and found only wads of tissue. She fell to her knees and rested her forehead in the heel of her hand. What to do?

"Mrs. Hyde?"

She looked up, tears blurring the face of Lydia. Mrs. Hyde quickly wiped her eyes.

"Mrs. Hyde, I have the key," Lydia said and held out her hand.

She studied Lydia; the whites of her eyes like beams of light shining out of her black face; her hair pulled tightly back in a high ponytail. Not many people could do that and be so unashamed. She noticed an engagement ring on the hand that Lydia held out to her.

Spoken for? By whom? Mrs. Hyde did not know this. Why didn't people tell her these things? She gave Lydia her hand. She tried to stand but felt like plastic. Lydia held out her other hand.

"Square your feet, Mrs. Hyde. Square your feet," she was saying.

What's she got to be so cross for? Mrs. Hyde looked down and saw that her Keds were askew. She put them in order as best she could and found that she could stand quite well.

"That's it, Mrs. Hyde. Uh huh."

She looked up and Lydia reached in her pocket. She produced the key. She was not smiling, but there was a slight wrinkle in her forehead that seemed to ask a question.

Mrs. Hyde nodded and reached for the key.

Opening box number 25, she found stacks and stacks of envelopes of all different colors and sizes. There were slick, glossy magazines and rough newsletter print papers, too. It appeared she had neglected the mail for some time!

As she pulled out the pieces one by one into a pile in her arms, Mrs. Hyde thought of the hours she would spend laughing at stories of friends' and relatives'. Was there enough space on her refrigerator for all of the enclosed baby pictures? Was there enough time to attend the many reunions, weddings, funerals, and parties she'd been invited to? She would just have to see. Once the box was empty, she realized she'd not seen Kate's handwriting on any of the envelopes. Her daughter had always been such a good correspondent. Perhaps it was her turn to write?

"What is it, Mrs. Hyde?"

She turned around and faced Lydia.

"I can carry those, Mrs. Hyde."

Lydia was standing with her arms out. She still wasn't smiling, but she didn't look impatient.

"Lydia," Mrs. Hyde said. "Lydia," she said again, finding a kind of song in the name.

She handed her the mail. "I have my work cut out for me, don't you know. All those people who have sent something are going to expect a reply."

Lydia helped her into the front seat of the van and strapped the belt across her lap. She bound the mail with a rubber band and placed it in between them, with an admirable efficiency.

She and Lydia rode past number twenty-five, two down from the Beardsley's. She noticed that the boys were there now raking the yard. Good show! And too, she noticed that the porch swing was still empty. Oh, William, you silly bird. If it was only the mail that needed fetching, you could have just told me straight. She eyed the bundle for a particularly thick and colorful envelope, one that appeared to promise a rousing tale or a complex drama. Then she stopped herself and turned to Lydia.

"Hoo-ha! Tell this old lady egret something about yourself, why don't you?"