

“Departure”

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Fiction

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On her twenty-ninth birthday, Sidney Guthrie had her stomach pumped at the hospital. Of course, she was not conscious for the experience. Her driver Chandler gave her the low-down the next day when she woke up. He said that they stuck a tube deep down her throat and slurped the poison out with a machine that sounded like a dental suction device. He said that she gagged violently and that the stuff that came out was chunky and mustard yellow, which must be the color of tequila mixed with quesadillas. Sidney normally didn't eat quesadillas, normally didn't eat much of anything, but Juana had made them special for her birthday, and had stuck candles into the tortilla so that it looked like a celebratory pancake. Another year, another year.

Sidney's dad called early that morning and offered perfunctory wishes. He was in Maui, where he spent most of his time these days. Golfing, belittling his fourth trophy wife, pretending to care about his two spoiled toddlers, and fucking high-priced escorts who insisted that his potbelly and grey-haired chest were sexy. He was still the chairman of the board for the family business, but offered the enterprise very little of his energy. Barry – clever, reliable, chummy Barry who wore beige suits (never with a tie) and lived in one of those Colorado ski towns – was the CEO these days. They owned one hundred and forty-three Hip-Hop Donuts franchises in the

continental United States. Not a single one in Hawaii, however. Sidney's dad was never one to eat where he shits.

Sidney had spent the entire day drinking and bingeing episodes of *The Bachelorette*. No different than most Sundays, except she gave herself permission to pour her first cocktail before 3 PM – a special birthday treat. Sometimes she played a drinking game with herself: whenever the bachelorette started to blubber about how one of her suitors was not reciprocating her passion, not “trying hard enough” to win her affection, Sidney would take a swig from her tumbler of tequila and pineapple. That was a great way to get blasted in a hurry. She was three sheets to the wind by sundown.

Earlier that day, she had dispiritedly watched Rala eat macaroni and cheese for lunch. “Eat” was a generous term. For the most part, the two-year-old smeared the gooey substance on the tray of her highchair and threw handfuls of it onto the marble floor of the breakfast nook. Sidney was glad that she wouldn't be the one to clean it up. That's why Juana earned the big bucks. Okay, maybe forty-five grand a year wasn't exactly big bucks, especially with inflation where it was those days, but it was a lot more than she would bring in cleaning houses or doing whatever other unskilled labor people like her did.

Rala spent most of her time with Leah, the au pair. Leah was, shockingly, French, and, shockingly, youthful and stunning. The stereotypical kind of honey trap that breaks up reputable families. Sidney, of course, did not have to worry about that. She was knocked up in Santorini by some Greek dude who wore white linen pants and owned a yacht named *Dionysus and Me*. His name was Spiro or Gus or some shit like that, and when he fucked Sidney he thought that saying things like “you're my little whore,” licking her cheek, and groaning like a hyena in heat would

somehow impress the high-society American. She had just wanted to get her rocks off. That didn't happen because the experience was gross.

So Rala would never know her father. That was a good thing. She would hardly know her mother either. That was probably a bad thing. Sidney just wasn't jiving with the motherhood vibe. Her own mother had passed when she was eight years old – brain aneurysm – and the succession of vapid stepmothers that followed weren't exactly worthy of emulation. Sidney had never aspired to bear children, and, now that she had one, she felt as if she were chained to a whipping post. Rala's frequent temper tantrums were arguably worse than being lashed with a cat o' nine tails. Sidney had very seriously considered terminating the pregnancy, but decided not to because – to be quite frank – she was bored and lonely. She thought that having a child would somehow turn her into a chipper, gregarious socialite or whatever you would call the ladies that congregated with their jogging strollers at Nightingale Park. Unfortunately, it had pretty much the opposite outcome. Sidney was now a bona fide hermit. Thank the lord for Leah and thank the lord there was a separate wing of the apartment where Leah could keep Rala occupied and contained. But Sidney still felt a sense of maternal obligation, so made sure to sit with the child and talk to her during meals. She mostly talked about *The Bachelorette* these days. Rala didn't understand anything that she was saying and surely wouldn't give a flying fuck about it if she did.

When Juana found Sidney with her face in a puddle of vomit on the floor and her legs on the couch, she thought the girl was toast, finito. But Chandler came up and listened to Sidney's breath and detected a pulse. He slung her over his shoulder and carried her down to his Town Car. That's the story of how Sidney drank herself into oblivion, then blacked out, then woke up

in the emergency room around noon the following day with a pulsating headache and a gurgle of bile in her throat.

The attending doctor was a Sri Lankan with an unpronounceable last name, who insisted that Sidney simply call him Doctor Dinesh. He explained flatly that, in addition to her disturbing level of intoxication, she was underweight, severely dehydrated, and experiencing an acute iron deficiency. He told her that they would be keeping her for a day or two to run some tests and bring her levels back to normal with IV treatments. Sidney had insisted that Chandler stay and listen to the diagnosis, and he did so with head bowed and service cap in hand. Despite their formal relationship, and despite the fact that Sidney knew fuck-all about his personal life, he was the closest thing she had to a parent. She felt that, somehow, having him there might serve a to-be-determined purpose.

Doctor Dinesh also expressed, quite directly, his concern that Sidney had a drinking problem.

“No shit,” she replied. “You didn’t have to spend four years in medical school to come to that conclusion, now, did you?”

He blinked his eyes a few times and replied, “You are right. It is rather obvious to everyone here.” Then he called over a woman named Yosi, who introduced herself as a social worker.

“The doctor believes that we should begin treating you for alcoholism right away,” she said with an accent that Sidney concluded to be Persian. “We are affiliated with an inpatient program in Bluffington, or, if you prefer and the doctor endorses it, you can join our outpatient program here. That would be a three-night-per-week, six-month commitment.”

“Jesus H. Christ,” Sidney replied, then glanced at Chandler, who offered a compassionate visage. “Do you have some pamphlets or whatever?”

“Sure,” replied Yosi. “I’ll go get those for you.”

They moved Sidney by wheelchair to a room on the third floor. Arriving, she was dismayed to see that she had a roommate. Two nurses were tending to a patient on the other side of a thick plastic curtain that divided the room in half.

“Move to your right just a little bit, Mr. Crossley,” said one of the nurses. “That’s good. Excellent job.”

“I’m not a trained seal, honey. You don’t have to tickle my dick every time I do something right.” It was a man’s voice, presumably Mr. Crossley. And, judging from the gravelly timbre of it, he was an old man. A very old man.

Sidney wondered what ailed the old timer and whether his condition would irritate or disgust her in some way. However, there was no way to get a look at him from her side of the curtain. Chandler took a seat in a chair near her bed and held his cap in his lap.

“Toss these,” she said to Chandler, handing him the brochures which Yosi had provided.

He took them, but hesitated. “Why don’t we hang on to these for a bit, Miss Guthrie? You might find them helpful down the road.”

“No, I won’t find them helpful. God helps those who help themselves.”

“But I thought you didn’t believe in God.”

“True, but the one-liners come in handy sometimes.”

Chandler stood up to leave after an orderly brought in a dinner tray for Sidney. Turkey breast in gelatinous gravy with a side of lima beans and a cup of apple sauce.

“Looks delicious,” Sidney deadpanned.

“Get some food in you, Miss Guthrie, no matter how bad it looks. You know they’re saying that you have problems with your vitamins, and they cleared out your stomach last night. You don’t wanna stay here longer than’s necessary.”

Sidney had to admit that Chandler was a good soul. An Eastern European immigrant (from what country, Sidney could not say), he was at least sixty or sixty-five years old by now, judging from the creases around his mouth and the thinning silver hair. Sidney made a mental note to ask him his age one of these days. But, at the same time, he had been her full-time driver for fifteen years. He might consider it strange that she would suddenly, now, take an interest in anything besides his punctuality and demeanor.

She gave the turkey a poke with her fork. “I’ll give you a call about an hour before I get out of here tomorrow,” Sidney said dismissively.

“Don’t you worry. I’ll be back in the morning either way.”

She said, “There’s no need for that, Chandler,” but she didn’t mean it, and she was confident that Chandler would know that she didn’t mean it.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied and, with a gentle wave, walked out.

Sidney watched him go, then forced herself to swallow a scoop of beans. Bland and overcooked, as expected. She pushed the tray aside and stared up at the ceiling. She felt a wave of dejection come over her, but only briefly, because she realized that this mishap, so to speak, was not out of character (nor even the first time she had had her stomach pumped). One should feel dejected, she felt, only if one fucked up in a massive way that didn’t reflect her normal state of being, or, more accurately, only if the fuckup did not reconcile with her self-esteem. Because Sidney had no self-esteem, or, at least, didn’t think self-esteem was a value worth worrying over, this mishap should have made her feel no more dejected than usual. But she was sad. Sad, and

not sure why. Perhaps because it was dinner time, and she was missing her ritual feeding of the baby. However, it felt like a deeper sadness than that would trigger. She had missed plenty of feedings before.

“I was served better meals as a P.O.W.,” Mr. Crossley suddenly grumbled, then coughed hoarsely with a wet rattle that made Sidney gag.

“You were in Vietnam?” she asked, without really caring about the answer.

“Vietnam? Do I sound like a whippersnapper to you? I’m ninety-eight years old, darlin’. I fought in one of the *real* wars. Against the Nazis and the Japs!”

Sidney was taken aback. She didn’t realize that veterans of World War II were still alive. She did some quick mental math. If he was ninety-eight, then he was born in 1924. So in 1942 he would have been eighteen years old. The arithmetic checked out. “That must have been a wild ride,” she said.

“A wild ride is right, missy! You and your whippersnapper friends wouldn’t know the half of it. That’s the problem with America today. Easy times make soft men.”

That sounded about right to Sidney. Most men she knew were ultra-superficial metrosexuals who would soil their capris at the first sign of an armed confrontation. “Where were you held?”

“Come again, dear?”

“Where were you held?” she asked loudly.

“Held? I wasn’t held.”

“But you said you were a P.O.W.”

“Oh.” He giggled. “That’s just a figure of speech. I was on a cruiser during Guadalcanal. It got hairy but the Japs never laid a hand on me.”

“You know, they don’t say Japs anymore,” Sidney said, not because she was put off, but because she wanted to get a rise out of this fogey.

“You think I care what whippersnappers say nowadays? I’m ninety-eight years old. Did I tell you that?”

Sidney smiled to herself. “Yes you did.”

They both sat in silence for a few long moments. Sidney could hear the click of silverware as Mr. Crossley sliced his turkey.

“What brings you here, dear?” He asked.

“Oh, I have something wrong with my iron levels.”

“Ah, yes. Iron is one of the tricky ones. But diabetes is worse.”

“You have diabetes?”

“No, my wife did. She lost a leg from it about thirty years back, God rest her soul.”

“Hmm,” said Sidney sympathetically. “What brings you here?”

“What does who what?” Mr. Crossley asked.

“I said, What brings you here?!” Sidney asked again, doubling the volume of her voice.

“I’m ninety-eight years old! Didn’t I tell you that? They bring you to the hospital if you got the sniffles.”

“The sniffles? That’s all?”

“No, dear. I broke my hip. I’m too old and frail for the surgery. Say I’ll never walk again.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Sidney. And, unexpectedly, she *was* sorry to hear that. This was the first very old person she had ever gotten to know, even if briefly and separated by plastic sheeting. All of her grandparents died relatively young – sixties and seventies – and her father

was currently only sixty-two. Mr. Crossley, as spritely as he seemed, was not selling old age very well. She imagined a shriveled, loose-skinned, skeleton of a man with liver-spotted arms, and knobby, veiny legs.

“I’m not going to make it to ninety-eight,” said Sidney.

“Now, how do you know that?”

“I just know it.”

“Well, with that mindset, you’re probably right. People dig their own graves, if you ask me. I, on the other hand, am aiming for one hundred and one.”

“Why a hundred and one?”

“Because old Bill Currie lived to one hundred, and I want to show him what’s what.”

This made Sidney chuckle.

Two nurses entered the room, a short Hispanic man and a taller, sturdy white woman. The woman changed Sidney’s IV bag while the man stepped over to Mr. Crossley’s side of the curtain.

“Do you have to do number two, Mr. Crossley?” he asked.

“You mean, do I need to take a shit?”

“Sure. That’s what I mean.”

“The answer is yes.”

“OK. I’ll get the bed pan.”

In a few moments he returned with the pan and the female nurse stepped over to help get Mr. Crossley in position for his bowl movement. Sidney covered her ears while this transpired, but was still able to hear the nurses barking instructions and Mr. Crossley cursing and grunting.

Chandler returned at 8 AM on the dot as Sidney was finishing a breakfast of limp scrambled eggs, limper bacon, and a cup of peaches.

“Your appetite is back,” noted Chandler.

“It must be, if I’m eating this gruel.”

Chandler took a seat in the chair and opened a book entitled *The Art of Living*. He began reading as Sidney scooped peaches into her mouth and eyed him.

“What’s that?” she asked, still chewing.

“Oh, it’s a book about mindfulness.”

“Like yoga?”

“Well, I don’t think you have to do yoga to be mindful.”

“Any good?”

“So far, so good. It’s about living in the present moment and not getting caught up in all kinds of crap. This guy knows what he’s talking about.”

“Who is he?”

Chandler flipped to the cover. “I don’t know how to pronounce his name.”

“Hmm,” said Sidney.

“How ya doin’?” Mr. Crossley shouted from the other side of the curtain.

“Are you asking me, sir?” Chandler inquired.

“Absolutely!”

Chandler stood up and walked to Mr. Crossley’s side of the room. It sounded to Sidney as if the men shook hands.

“I’m doing well, sir. The name is Chandler.”

“Chandler, eh? Unusual name. A bit of a girl’s name, is it not?”

“It could be I guess.”

“Either way, I’m Aaron,” said Mr. Crossley.

“That could be a girl’s name, too,” Chandler teased.

Mr. Crossley chuckled and said, “You got me there, big fella!”

When Chandler returned to Sidney’s side of the room, she said, “I need to get out of here. Let’s go for a walk.”

“Certainly, Miss Guthrie.”

They walked down a long, white hallway, Chandler rolling the IV rack alongside Sidney, who was still attached to it by a long tube. They took the elevator down to the ground floor, then walked into the courtyard. Sidney pointed to an unoccupied bench, and they took a seat. It was cool, but not intolerably so. Nonetheless, Chandler took off his lightweight coat and wrapped it around Sidney’s shoulders. The sky was cloudy, and drained of color.

“Do you have a cigarette, Chandler?”

“Have you ever seen me smoke before, Miss Guthrie?”

“I guess I haven’t. Would you do me a favor and go ask that guy for one?”

Chandler looked across the courtyard and spotted a thin man in a v-neck sweater, nervously dragging on a cigarette. He sighed, then stood up and approached the man. In a moment, he returned with two cigarettes and a pack of matches.

“Generous fellow,” he said. “One for now. One for later.”

“Thank you,” said Sidney. She popped one in her mouth, struck a match, and lit the tip. She took a deep drag, then exhaled through her nose.

“That guy’s damn old.”

“Who? Aaron?” Chandler asked.

“Who else would I be talking about?”

“Yes, he’s quite old. But in good spirits, which is the important thing.”

“I’ve never seen someone that old.”

“You’re only as old as you feel, they say.”

“Then I must be an Egyptian mummy.”

Chandler tittered politely.

When Sidney finished her cigarette they went back inside the hospital and down a hallway that led to the west wing, which was named after George and Edna Weissman, whoever they were (or had been). They arrived at the cancer ward, which made Sidney pause. Her grandmother had died of blood cancer, but Sidney could hardly remember her. She had an image of an old woman wearing a head wrap, slurping a bowl of soup, but she couldn’t be sure if that was actually her grandmother or some other person or a figment of her imagination.

Suddenly, the door to the ward popped open and two orderlies pushed a gurney into the hallway. On top of it was a young woman, perhaps a bit younger than Sidney, wrapped tightly in blankets. The men positioned the gurney against the wall, then hurried back into the ward. The woman was shivering so hard it seemed that her bones were clacking. She was bald except for a few wisps of hair on the sides of her head. Her eyes looked as if they had receded into her skull.

Sidney stared at the woman, which she knew was rude and even a bit inhumane, but she couldn’t turn away. The woman began coughing, a weak dry cough, the kind of cough that someone who has surrendered to her illness coughs. She stopped and began shivering again, then looked toward Sidney. They made brief eye contact before Sidney averted her gaze.

“Hi,” the woman said in a voice so small that it seemed to disappear down the hallway.

Sidney looked at her. “Hi. I’m sorry for staring.”

“It’s OK. I am a bit of a spectacle.” She coughed again. Her teeth chattered. She pulled an arm out from under the covers and extended it toward Sidney. “Will you hold my hand for a moment?”

Sidney’s mouth opened. She turned and eyed Chandler, who held onto the IV rack with one hand and had an inscrutable look on his face. He neither reacted to the woman’s gesture nor said anything.

Sidney looked at the woman’s outstretched hand, then stepped forward and took hold of it. It was icy, uncomfortably cold, as if the lifeblood had been completely drained from her body.

“Your hand is warm,” said the woman. “Feels good.”

“People have told me I’m the coldest woman they know.”

The woman chuckled, a sort of laugh-snort, then coughed a few times. “That’s because you’re beautiful. Society tells us that beautiful women are heartless.”

Sidney half-smiled, gave the woman’s hand an extra squeeze, then let go.

The woman smiled and tucked her arm back under the covers.

The door to the ward popped open again. The two orderlies emerged, followed by a short, male doctor. Without a word, the orderlies took hold of the gurney and began pushing it up the hall.

“Bye,” the woman said to Sidney.

“Bye,” said Sidney.

Chandler and Sidney made their way to the elevators and went back to her room on the third floor. Mr. Crossley was snoring, so they stayed quiet.

Less than an hour later a doctor came in and explained to Sidney that she had to improve her diet or she would find herself back in the hospital in short order. She provided a stapled

packet that described what sorts of food to eat and how much. Then she handed Sidney a prescription for an iron supplement that she could buy over the counter.

As Chandler piloted the Town Car up Bayside Avenue, Sidney thought about the cancer patient. She wondered how much time the woman had left. Weeks? Days? Hours? She was shocked at what the disease had done to the poor girl. It seemed to have flattened her, turned her into a husk. Sidney never understood how tumors could cause such agony and decay. Weren't they just small clumps of cells? It was as if they were poisonous, like cyanide capsules.

"That was very nice, what you did," Chandler said, making eye contact with Sidney in the rearview mirror. He was referring to the hand holding.

"It wasn't nice," Sidney snapped. "It wasn't anything. The woman was dying. I don't deserve a fucking pat on the back."

Chandler nodded quietly.

When they arrived at Sidney's building, Chandler put the car in park and looked back toward Sidney. "Miss Guthrie," he said, "I have to ask you a favor."

"OK. What is it?"

"A dear friend of mine passed. The wake is today. I was wondering if you might accompany me."

"What are you talking about, Chandler?"

"A wake. My friend's wake."

Sidney looked out the window. Something about this request made her feel like crying.

"I don't think so. I think I need to rest."

"Yes, ma'am. You surely do."

When Sidney got up to the apartment she had to knock because she did not have her key.

Juana opened the door and gave Sidney a hug.

“Oh, it is so good to have you back, Miss Guthrie.”

“Thank you, Juana.”

“We were all so worried about you.”

“Well, there’s nothing to worry about now.”

Rala came running into the room, shouting “Mommy! Mommy!”

Sidney picked her up and gave her a kiss on her chubby cheek.

“Hi, baby.”

Leah appeared as well. “She’s been asking for you, Miss Guthrie. She really missed you.”

“Has she eaten lunch?”

“I was just about to make it.”

“I’ll take care of it, Leah. Why don’t you go relax?”

Leah hesitated, nonplussed. “Um... sure. I’ll do that.” Then she left the room.

Sidney heated up some frozen peas and seared a chicken breast. Juana walked into the kitchen when she was half done with the cooking.

“I should do that, Miss Guthrie,” said Juana.

“You think I can’t cook a chicken breast?”

“No. I think you can.”

“Then chill out, Juana.”

Rala dumped half of the peas onto the floor but, will wonders never cease, found her mouth with most of the little pieces of chicken that Sidney had cut up for her.

“I was in the hospital, Rala,” Sidney said.

Rala chewed slowly and uncouthly and stared back at her mother.

“I drank too much booze.”

Rala smiled and showed Sidney a mouth full of masticated peas.

Sidney sighed. “Adorable.” She ran her hand gently over Rala’s soft head, her featherlike crown of hair. “Your mama has problems. Worse than the bachelorette’s problems, I’m sad to admit.”

Rala said, “chinka,” ostensibly referring to the chicken, then pushed another piece into her mouth with small, dimpled fingers.

“One day you’ll have problems too, sweet girl. But I’ll try to help you with that, if I’m around. I haven’t been at my best, but I’m going to try to figure this shit out.”

Rala kept chewing and swallowing.

After lunch, Sidney called Chandler and told him she’d join him for his friend’s wake. Chandler texted when he arrived thirty minutes later. Wearing a black, ankle-length dress and a black shawl, Sidney got into the car.

“Thank you for doing this, Miss Guthrie. He didn’t have any family and not many friends. The more people that attend the better.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy, if I’m being honest. What was his name?”

“Joe.”

“Joe. Simple enough.”

There were seven people in attendance when they arrived at the funeral parlor. Joe’s casket was open, and there was a modest bouquet of lavender flowers on a stand next to it. A tiny, ancient woman with an orangish perm sat in a chair nearby.

“Is that his mother?” Sidney asked Chandler.

“Yes. She’s ninety-two.”

Another one from the “greatest generation,” Sidney thought. They must be utterly befuddled by what this disgusting country has turned into – by people like me who do nothing other than befoul the air and bitch.

She and Chandler approached. Joe’s mother stood and gave Chandler a bony embrace, then turned to Sidney. They hugged as well, and Sidney felt as if she had just wrapped her arms around a coat rack.

“This is my friend Sidney,” Chandler said.

“Oh, how lovely,” Joe’s mother responded.

“I am very sorry for your loss,” Sidney stated.

“Yes. He was a good boy. He lived longer than we expected. I am grateful for that, but we’re always alone in the end, aren’t we.”

Sidney pursed her lips and nodded, then looked to Chandler, who made the same facial gesture.

They stepped over to the casket. Joe was as bald as Telly Savalas with a scrunched up, fat face that made him look like an idol of the Buddha. He wore a grey checkered suit, a baby blue dress shirt, and a yellow tie with little frogs all over it. Sidney imagined that he must have been quite the character before he passed. Now he was a waxen carcass.

Chandler reached into the casket and patted Joe’s hand. Then brought his hands together and recited the Lord’s Prayer. Sidney put her hands together, too, out of respect.

On the way out of the funeral parlor, a woman in a sharp pantsuit approached Chandler.

“Oh, my dear,” she said with pained eyes.

They hugged for a long moment, then Chandler introduced Sidney.

“Sidney, this is Meena.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Sidney. Chandler has mentioned you many times.”

Sidney found that strange because Chandler had never mentioned this woman, who was tall, in her fifties, with a lion’s mane of sandy hair and modelesque features. Come to think of it, Chandler had never before this day mentioned anyone in his life. That was most likely because Sidney had never inquired.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you as well,” Sidney said.

“Meena was Joe’s sponsor,” Chandler pointed out.

“And close friend. Very close friend,” Meena noted. “I just wish I could have gotten him over the hump.”

“It was out of your hands.”

“Of course. But you know how I am.”

Chandler nodded. Sidney was at a loss for words. Something about Meena mesmerized her: the woman’s vitality, her sophistication, her deep empathy. She seemed to be someone who had pulled it all together, had grabbed life by the ends and tied it into a neat bow. This Sidney judged with certainty in under a minute of interaction.

“Did you know Joe well?” Meena asked Sidney.

Sidney opened her mouth, but faltered.

“No,” Chandler interjected gently. “She came as a favor to me.”

“Oh, how generous! Joe would have been so touched to know that a wonderful young woman like you cared enough to remember him.”

“It... it’s my honor,” Sidney stammered.

Then Meena stepped forward and gave Sidney a warm hug, rubbing her back. She turned to Chandler and did the same and said, "Please don't be a stranger, Chan. I'm always available."

Chandler smiled and said, "Of course."

When they got back in the Town Car, Chandler inserted the key into the ignition then put his face in his hands and began sobbing. Sidney leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder. He sobbed for a long while, then said, "I'm sorry, ma'am."

"I understand. He was your friend."

"He was like a brother."

Sidney thought of Barry, who was her brother, but, in a way, was *not* like a brother. She thought of her father, who was *not* like a father. She thought of her mother, who was a plume of dust. She thought of Rala, who, like all people, would know suffering her whole life, who would have to find a way to transcend that suffering, who wouldn't make it on her own.

Chandler stopped in front of Sidney's building, got out, and opened the door for her. He walked her to the entrance, which was unusual. Then he turned and gave Sidney a tight, bear hug, which was *very* unusual. Unprecedented.

"I love you, Miss Guthrie." He said sweetly.

"I love you, too, Chandler," Sidney heard herself reply.

He then reached into his inner jacket pocket and produced the brochures for the alcoholism treatment programs. He held them out for her. She took them, stared at them through bleary eyes, then walked inside.