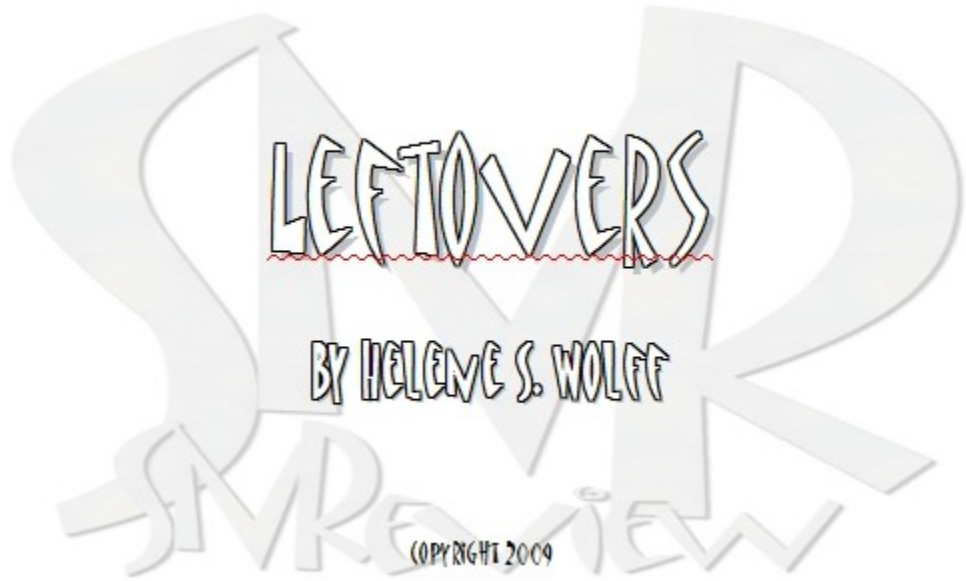

Looking out of my daughter-in-law's window, I saw Ida Feld sitting alone in her daughter's backyard. I knew she would be back. Returned like a package with the wrong address.

‘‘Ida's back,” I said.

My son Charlie, my daughter-in-law Vivian, and I were in the den. Since I had come to live with them, this had become our Sunday morning routine. We would bring our coffee mugs into the den, read the paper and maybe watch the talk shows if they weren't too boring. My 14-year-old granddaughter, Lisa, was away at camp.

I enjoyed sitting with them, happy to have the company. We looked like what a family should be, together and comfortable. I don't always sit with Charlie and Vivian because I don't want to intrude on their privacy, although they would never say anything to make me feel I was.

Charlie looked up from his crossword. “I'm sorry for Mrs. Feld, shuffled back and forth between her daughters”

Charlie is a good boy-no world-beater, I admit. Not only had he inherited his father's deep blue eyes and ebony hair-now turning a little gray--he had also inherited his father's inability to push himself to the head of the line. He was handing himself a congratulatory pat on the back with that expression of sympathy for Ida. Although I did feel a little pang at the implicit reminder to be thankful, I don't begrudge him that bit of moral preening. Charlie Kaplan never made a fortune, but he's done the right thing by his mother. Just your luck, Charlie, to be an only child.

‘‘I'm glad Ida's back,” Vivian said with her chronic cheerfulness. “You'll be able to spend some time with her.”

My daughter-in-law constantly concerns herself with the productive occupation of my time. What can you expect? She's a social worker, *a case manager* and she, in her benign, well-meaning way, is managing mine. She has filled out a mental assessment form, noting my frailties and needs, and drawn up the care plan I know I'm lucky that kindness, one of her natural attributes, and a home have been included.

When my husband, Mel, died, I wasn't left with a sheaf of CD's driven up by years of double-digit interest like some other widows. No. Mel, who ducked out of his Queens Boulevard vacuum cleaner repair shop everyday to place his bets at the OTB, willed me debt and a low-

level Social Security check. I was managing on my own pretty well, but Charlie and Vivian said they would worry less about me if I came to live with them.

They take good care of me. Vivian makes sure I eat a bowl of 100 percent bran every morning, five prunes daily, decaf coffee, unsalted food and, above all, that I maintain an optimum level of productive activity. She buys me handicraft kits-stamped canvases to needlepoint into pillow covers or thick acrylic yarn to knit on number 10 needles into bulky sweaters.

She gives me A's on all my creations, praising my craftsmanship and especially the therapeutic value of my endeavors. “This handwork is very good for your arthritis,” she tells me. She places the needlepoint pillows prominently on the sofa and wears the cardigan. She's a thoughtful daughter-in-law. If only she wouldn't point out those news stories about the 85-year-old who organized an inner-city street gang into a champion basketball team or the grandmother who walked across America. Probably 30 years from now, when Vivian is my age, she'll be performing at peak productivity, a short, wiry dynamo, hair still dyed the unlikely shade of a Long Island sunset.

‘‘I'll go say hello to Ida,” I said.

‘‘Better take your cane,” Vivian advised.

‘‘I don't need it,” I assured her. Neither of them responded for a minute, weighing the infringement of my independence against my safety. They exchanged a significant look. I've seen that look between them when Lisa has announced an unwise intention.

Charlie said, “Better take it, the ground's uneven.”

‘‘I'll take it. I don't want you to worry. What did I do with it? I though I left it by the chair.”

Lifting his eyes above his half-glasses, Charlie scrutinized me, searching for that first sign of senility. “ Sure you didn't leave it in your room? I'll go look.”

‘‘Here it is! It fell behind the chair. When I put something somewhere, I remember where I put it.” An unnecessary comment, but at my age, one capitalizes on small victories.

Stepping out the back door, I could see Ida's daughters, Ruth and Elaine, sitting at the kitchen table, talking with that combination of belligerence and pleading, the way sisters do when each is desperate to make the other understand her point. The two houses, clapboard twins practically joined at the hip, are so close that when you walk out of Vivian's back door, your chin rests on Ruth's windowsill. Elaine's words marched over the table, out the open window. “I love Mom as much as you do, but you know this can't go on.”

‘‘You certainly have enough room,” Ruth said. “More than Bernie and me.”

‘‘It's not just a question of room. Mark and I want to visit the grandchildren in Seattle. We certainly can't leave her alone in the house. Besides, it's summer, you're not teaching. It makes sense for Mom to stay with you, until we work out some other arrangement.”

‘‘Mom wants to go home…unless Donnie…”

‘‘Donnie? Only in your dreams,” Elaine cut down Ruth's wistful hope with a strong wave of her hand, t setting two heavy gold bracelets jangling on her wrist. “You know she can't go home. She almost burnt the place down. She can't stay alone and she keeps firing the aides we get.”

They didn't notice me as I walked carefully onto the grass where Ida, small and thin as an underprivileged child, sat on one of the webbed lawn chairs. Her hair had been teased to a stiff silvery globe around her face and she wore crisp rose pants and overblouse, presents from Elaine.

‘‘Hello, Ida, good to see you again.” I eased myself into another lawn chair, holding the arms until my weight secured it.

She looked at me a minute, searching her brain cells for my name, gave up and said, “Nice to see you. Yes, here I am again, like a gypsy, moving from here to there. But if I stay awhile with Elaine, Ruth feels slighted. 'Momma,' she said. 'come stay with me' That's the way it goes,” she smiled.

‘‘Nice to have a change of scenery. Compared to you, I'm a stick in the mud. One child, one place to stay,” I said. “Of course, best is your own place.”

‘‘They won't let me go home. They got upset. I was frying some hamburger and I forgot to turn off the stove. There was a lot of smoke, someone got excited and called the fire department. It was really nothing with nothing, but you know how children are. They got this woman who was supposed to watch me, to help, they said. Lazy, she didn't do anything…sat around and watched TV. For that, she gets paid? I told her to go.”

‘‘Maybe it's not so good for you to be alone”

‘‘ I think that too sometime, especially at night, Esther,” she said. My name seems to have slid back into her memory bank. “I get frightened. A woman in my building…She had wealthy children, with big houses. The super found her, on the floor, dead.”

‘‘How old was she?” As if the answer would explain it all.

‘‘She used to say she was in her eighties. I think she was in her nineties.”

Once four score had seemed a generous allotment of life. “When your time comes, it comes.”

Ida's face screwed up in disgust. “Her children shouldn't have left her to die alone. One mother can take care of six children, but six children can't take care of one mother. In my day . . .”

‘‘Dear Ida,” I sighed, “it's not our day anymore.”

‘‘ I can't remember so well anymore.” She bent her heard toward me, lowering her voice, “I never told the children this. One day, Elaine dropped me off in front of some stores and drove off. I started walking. I know I'm going somewhere, but I can't for the life of me remember where. I'm very upset, so I go into a coffee shop, sit down and order a cup of coffee.

‘‘All of a sudden, this girl comes over to me. She's holding one of those paper cups with coffee and was about to go out the door, when she saw me. She says, 'Mrs. Feld, I've been waiting for you. Your appointment was at 10 and it's 10:30!' I was supposed to be in the beauty parlor, next door, right next door, and I didn't remember.”

Her pale eyes filled with tears. “My life is going away from me.”

‘‘Ida, we all forget things sometimes. Even younger people. They call that senior moments.”

‘‘No, I can feel it here,” her hand goes to her bouffant hair and to her chest, “and here. My life is going away from me.”

‘‘You could live another 20 years. That woman in France, she lived to the biblical 120.”

‘‘God forbid! I've lived longer than my parents did. My David's been gone 16 years. My sister and my brothers, all gone. At night alone in my bed, I think I might die and strangers would find me. That's what happened to a woman in my building. The super…”

‘‘I know, you just told me.”

‘‘Yes, the children tell me I repeat myself. My mother died in my house. She was with family. I didn't push her off on strangers.”

She sat silently, nodding her head. Suddenly her face brightened. “This back and forth is not going to last,” she said, patting my hand. “Donnie will take care of me. He's married again. They're buying a house, something over a million, way over a million, he says. Can you imagine? He's a very big man on Wall Street.”

‘‘This is his third wife?”

Practicing the selective hearing of the old, she said, “A lovely girl, much younger, pretty, a blonde. She has a little boy from another marriage.”

‘‘What's her name?”

Ida paused. “It's hard to remember because it's a boy's name. I always liked Carol, Donnie's first wife. No so glamorous, more down-to-earth, but…Tom!”

‘‘Tom? His wife's name is Tom?”

Ida nodded hesitantly. “I think her real name is Sarah but they call her Tom. As soon as they move into their new house, which will be much, much bigger than Ruth's, even bigger than Elaine's, I'm going to live there.” She lifted her head, daring me to contradict her. “There will be a place for me. That's what Donnie told me.”

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‘‘I never said that!” Don laughed incredulously into his phone.

‘‘Well, Don, then you better set Mom straight,” Ruth said angrily.

‘‘I might have said *something* like that, joking, but not serious.”

‘‘In a three million dollar house, I should think you could find room for Mom.”

‘‘Three million! Gimme a break. It's a nice house; it's not Versailles. Ruthie, Sam and I are trying to put a life together. We need a room for her kid. And I want to have space when my own kids come to visit.”

‘‘*You* can explain that to Mom.”

‘‘We're willing to take our turn with her,” Don said. Sam (neé Samantha) looked up from the

Lego barn she was building on the floor with four-year-old Dylan and mouthed a narrow-eyed message that screamed, “No. We. Are. Not.”

I wasn't there to hear all that. But when you get to be my age, you've learned a thing or two and you don't have to hear every word to know what's been said.

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Saturday night a few weeks later, Ida slipped out the door. Alone in the deserted street, she felt uneasy in the darkness and threatened by the shadowy trees. Funny, she thought, on such a warm night no one was sitting out on the stoop. She crossed the street. No cars. No people. No children. Silence. She stopped at the next corner. Which way? Ma had sent her to get something. What was it? Where was the store? She looked down the street. Her sister, Molly, was running toward her, calling.

‘‘Mom, thank God I found you.” Ruth cried, hugging her. She wore a raincoat over her nightgown, a scarf bulged over the rollers in her short gray hair. “Come home.”

‘‘Molly, Ma sent me to get something. I can't remember what she wanted.”

‘‘We have to go home.”

Ruth tried to pull her hand. “No,” Ida shouted. “I have to go to Katz's to get what Ma wants.”

‘‘I already bought it. It was milk and bread. You don't have to go. Ma told me to bring you home.”

Ida looked at her suspiciously. “You're lying, aren't you? Just to get me in trouble with Ma.”

‘‘Ma needs you at home now. C'mon, let's go. Please.” Ruth put her arm around her mother's shoulders and took her hand.

Ida stood on the sidewalk in her nightgown. A car with its headlights on stood at the curb. The driver looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. She turned to Ruth, reached over and stroked her daughter's cheek, wet with tears. “Yes, I do want to go home.”

Slowly, gently, in the stillness of the night, Ruth helped her mother into the car where Bernie waited, wearing a white t-shirt and pants pulled over his striped pajamas, bare feet thrust into open back slippers. Muttering to himself, he drove home.

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‘‘Finally, finally we got her home and into bed, but I didn't sleep a wink,” Ruth told Vivian the next morning, sitting at our kitchen table shredding a paper napkin. She ignored the low-fat Entenmann's and decaf Vivian had put in front of her. “We were frantic. It was a nightmare. There she was standing in the Miller's driveway, yelling, just in her nightgown. I don't know what the neighbors thought.”

‘‘You can get special locks for the doors,” Vivian said.

‘‘Two days ago, she forgot to turn off the water in the tub. Good thing I noticed it or the hall carpet would have been soaked. I'm afraid to go out. I'm snapping at Bernie. He's getting headaches.”

‘‘Think about getting some help,” Vivian offered.

‘‘This is supposed to be my vacation….I don't know how much longer I can take it.”

‘‘Or maybe, you should start thinking of some other kind of living arrangement…”

Ruth sighed. “I don't mean to bother you with all my problems. You've got your own…”

Seeing me standing in the doorway, they gave each other that “let's not talk about this in front of the children” look.

‘‘Mother, come sit down. Have some coffee cake.”

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Later that day, I saw Ida putting napkins and plastic silverware on the picnic table covered with a red and white checked plastic tablecloth. Paper plates in wicker holders were stacked at one end of the table. Napkins, plastic, and plates all matched. That was the way Ruth did things, just so, even when it was all disposable.

‘‘Donnie and his wife are coming,” Ida said happily. “Bernie's going to barbecue. To me, they gave the children's job of setting the table.”

I offered to help. “It's done. I've done harder work in my life,” she said, with a little dry laugh.

Nothing left to do, we sat down in the shade of the only tree of any size in her daughter's yard. From outside, we could hear the bustling kitchen sounds of Ruth preparing food.

Ida said, “Ruthie told me last night I walked out of the house only in my nightgown. I don't remember. I bet, next thing they'll lock me in, like in a prison.” She looked at me with apprehension.

‘‘They worry about you.”

She nodded. “It's such a small house. I can tell I get on their nerves. I'm in the way. It'll be different when I'm settled with Donnie.”

‘‘Ida, a bride isn't eager for her mother-in-law to move in,” I warned.

‘‘Bride?” she laughed. “Blondie's not exactly what you'd call a bride. She and Donnie were living together for a year before they got married. He promised me. He did.”

A silver Mercedes slid into the short driveway. Ida's face lit up. “Donnie,” she announced.

‘‘Mom, you're looking great.” Don swooped his tiny mother into a hug.

‘‘Hello, Ida,” Don's wife bent, a shimmering curtain of blonde hair cascading over her shoulder, and pressed her cheek against Ida's. They smiled and nodded to me. Sam wore sleek white pants that started at her hipbones and extended to her thonged glossy toes. “Dylan, say hello to Grandma Ida.”

Dylan studied Ida for a minute. “I have four grandmas,” he said, holding up four outstretched little fingers. “Grandma Ida, Grandma Roz, Grandma Marilyn, and Grandma Carrie” He went on with his childish garrulousness. “They're not all really grandmas. Grandma Carrie is really

a great-grandma, but I call her Grandma," he explained with earnest precision.

‘‘That's a lot of grandmas for such a little boy," Ida said. But he had lost interest and followed after his mother, who was pouring herself a diet soda.

‘‘So, when are you moving to the new house, Donnie?"

‘‘About a month, Mom. But there's still a lot of work to be done. We're renovating the kitchen and bathrooms, expanding the closet in the master bedroom and other things. It takes time you know. The place will be a mess for months. I won't even be able to have the girls stay for the weekend till probably September…what am I talking about? Probably October, November."

‘‘Girls? What girls?" Ida asked.

‘‘Stacy and Dana, my daughters. My daughters, Mom."

‘‘Where are they? I haven't seen them?"

‘‘They're on a biking trip through Ireland, which costs me a few thousand. I brought them over before they left. Remember?"

‘‘Sure I remember. Why shouldn't I remember?"

‘‘Anyhow, it will be a while before the house is ready."

Sam came over to them, carrying a red paper cup. "Ida, have some lemonade. It's awfully hot." She looked meaningfully at Don, searching his face as if some scraps of the conversation with his mother might be stuck there like bits of egg.

Ida took the drink reluctantly. "Thank you," she said with the gratitude of someone who suspects she's being slowly poisoned by the beneficiary of her will.

She sat in the lawn chair, taking little sips of the lemonade. Bernie was grilling chicken on a domed grill. Ruth carried a platter of corn on the cob to the table. Don and Sam stood talking above Ida's head, while Dylan ran a toy motorcycle around the perimeter of the picnic table.

Ida looked around. Not seeing anyone she knew, she said, "Thank you," and handed her drink back to Sam.

‘‘You don't want any more?"

‘‘It was nice, but I have to leave now, "Ida pulled herself up. "My mother is waiting for me."

Ruth rushed to her side. "C'mon, Mom We'll go in the house. It's too hot for you out here.

‘‘No! No!" She struggled as Don and Ruth took her arms, lashing out and knocking the lemonade out of Sam's hand onto her immaculate pants and pedicured feet. "I have to go home!"

‘‘You are home," Ruth cried.

‘‘I am not,” Ida shouted, her voice taking on the power of the dybbuk that possessed her. “I...am…not! Let go of me.” Her fists beat into Ruth's shoulder. Bernie grabbed Ida's hands.

‘‘Mom, I don't know what to do anymore,” Ruth sobbed.

Ida looked quizzically at Ruth, put her hands down, silent tears draining out of her eyes, down her flushed cheeks. Don put his arms around her.

Dylan stared in astonishment at something he'd never seen a grown-up do. Pee pee was running down Grandma Ida's leg.

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‘‘That settles it,” they told each other. “We need to find a place for her. But,” they emphasized, “it has to be a really good place, a top notch facility, a well run residence.”

They couldn't quite bring themselves to say “nursing home.”

‘‘We'll ask people. I mean almost everyone I know has a mother who…”

‘‘My friend's mother is in….”

‘‘Vivian Kaplan's a social worker, I'll ask her.” Ruth said.

Ruth also asked my daughter-in-law, “Am I doing the right thing?”

Vivian looked into her neighbor's anguished face with the dark pouches under her eyes and the guilt etched in the wrinkles on her forehead and told Ruth, “Yes, you are. Often people in your mother's condition do better in a residence, because there are stimulating activities for them, music therapy, exercise….And you have to think of Bernie…and yourself.”

Me, I would have told her, sometimes there is no right choice. But nobody asked me.

While they were looking, they hired a woman to come in a few hours a day to relieve Ruth. And they started talking about money. Elaine and Don were surprised and hurt-even a little outraged--to learn that while their mother intended to divide her money equally among her three children when she died, she had put Ruth, her first born, in charge of her finances.

‘‘There's no need for Elaine and Donnie to know about this,” she had told Ruth firmly. Quietly, she had added Ruth's name to everything, her checking account, her savings, her certificates of deposit, her stocks and bonds.

‘‘I feel a little uncomfortable not telling them, like doing it behind their backs,” Ruth had confessed to Bernie at the time. Yet, she couldn't deny the satisfaction she felt knowing that Mom had chosen her rather than the daughter who had made the most advantageous marriage or the son who was a big man on Wall Street.

Elaine and Don were also surprised at the substantial amount of money their mother had.

‘‘She never gave herself any luxuries, “ Elaine said.

‘‘What was she saving it for?” Don said.

‘‘She never wanted to have to ask anyone for anything,” Ruth said.

Their surprise was surpassed by their relief. At least for the present, she could pay her own way.

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Vivian told me the place they selected was one of the best. Green Hills Home for the Aged was bright and airy, overlooking Long Island Sound.

When Elaine and Ruth visited, they saw residents, most in wheelchairs, sitting outdoors on the well kept lawn. The director, a smoothly handsome man in his forties, exuded concern and understanding for their anxiety over doing the best for Mom and the difficulty of the situation. On the walls of his office were framed letters from grateful children extolling the care their parents had received there. Among the testimonials was one from an internationally renowned concert pianist and another from a baseball hall of famer.

Sitting on a burgundy leather armchair, he told the sisters sitting opposite him on the matching sofa about the full program of therapy and socialization activities that would help keep Mom physically and mentally stimulated, about the dedicated staff, how she would do much better here than at home, and how much it would cost.

***

‘‘$100,000 a year!” Elaine's husband, a corporate lawyer, said when she told him. Although the bills he sent his clients often reached six figures, he commonly reacted with shock when someone else's charges did.

‘‘If they have an opening for her. Her savings can cover the cost-at least for a while--but I think they would a find a place for her sooner if we made a nice contribution,” she said.

They were sitting on their patio, stretched out on cushioned wrought iron chaises. He considered a moment as he sipped his single malt scotch. “Are your brother and sister also making a nice contribution?” he asked, knowing his question was rhetorical.

‘‘Don? Oh, sure. I wouldn't waste my breath asking.”

‘‘And, Ruth?”

Elaine looked out toward her privet hedge. “ You mean my martyred big sister, 'who always has the responsibility.' She would probably come up with some money, but I want us to do it. I don't want Ruth to say we don't do anything for Mom.”

‘‘I never heard her accuse us of that.”

‘‘Maybe, not outright, but she hints at it. Certainly thinks that. Mark, I want to do this for my mother.”

Mark reached across and took her hand. “How much should I write the check for?”

***

Three weeks later, I saw Elaine's and Don's cars in Ruth's driveway. I knew why they were

there.

Ida Feld sat in the living room facing her daughters and son, her thin, veined hands in her lap, her heart beating apprehensively at the unexpected visit of all of her children on a Saturday morning. What was the bad news- divorce, cancer, death?

Elaine was the one who told her. She had volunteered because she was sure that Ruth would break down and Don would not say what had to be said.

Ida heard "…lovely place where you'll get the care you need…"As she grasped the enormity of what Elaine was saying, she stared at her circle of children like an animal who has just heard the gate of the cage clang shut.

‘‘…with lots of activities and beautiful grounds."

‘‘Activities? Is this a summer camp? I need grounds? I only need a little bit of ground-to put me in."

Elaine persevered, "Someone's watching over you all the time."

‘‘Good, so they'll find my body right away." Her mouth set in that tight, straight line of rebuke they always dreaded. She looked at them, reducing each one to the child whose life had once centered on earning her praise and pride.

Ruth gasped. Don stared down at his shoes. Elaine could not go on because her throat had constricted so she couldn't swallow.

‘‘I never wanted to be a burden on anyone," Ida said.

***

The next day I was helping Vivian clean her kitchen cabinets, while my granddaughter, home from camp, rummaged in the refrigerator for something to eat. Dressed in tattered, chlorine spotted jeans that she had spent good money for, she sang to the music coming out of the button in her ear.

Vivian's cheerfulness had slipped. She moved like a robot, taking pans from the shelf, putting them on the Formica counter. She looked worried. The night before, she and Charlie had held their monthly confrontation with their bills. Even through the closed door of my room, I could hear their anguished murmurs as they subtracted their income from their expenses.

I take care of my expenses and insist on contributing to household costs as much as I'm able, which isn't much. Still I was painfully aware of being an item on that budget that barely makes it. I enter those "set-for-life" newspaper contests and buy a lottery ticket once a month, but my numbers have never come up. They never will.

‘‘Mom, where's the sliced turkey?" Lisa whined.

‘‘You finished it, remember?" Vivian answered shortly. "There's some tuna salad."

‘‘OK. OK. Don't get excited. What happened to that good rye bread?"

‘‘Sorry, Lisa, I finished the last slice," I admitted uncomfortably. "I didn't know you…"

‘‘No problem, Gramma,” she assured me, but looked hopefully in the freezer.

‘‘Take that whole grain organic bread,” Vivian said.

‘‘That tastes like shit,” Lisa said.

Vivian turned on her daughter. “What did you say?”

‘‘Nothing,” Linda muttered.

‘‘It had better be nothing, because I don't like that kind of language. Maybe it's time you learned some respect for other people.” She turned back to the cabinet. Lisa rolled her eyes at her mother's back.

Above the clanging pots, I could hear Vivian mumbling. “Too fresh…I never would have talked to my mother that way…” Suddenly her monologue broke off.

‘‘Mother, what happened to this pan?” Vivian cried, holding up a dark blue skillet, the last straw of aggravation.

What she meant, of course, was, Mother, what did you do to it? “What's wrong with it?”

‘‘I just bought it and now it's ruined.”

‘‘How is it ruined? I scrambled an egg in it. It's a frying pan, isn't it?” Why did I ever touch that pan?

‘‘It's a special skillet. You're supposed to use only this wooden spatula with it. The whole bottom has been scraped. The finish is ruined. It was an expensive pan. Now, I may as well toss it in the garbage.”

‘‘Mom, you are losing it. You can still fry in the stupid pan,” Lisa said.

‘‘That's not the point,” Vivian insisted.

‘‘The point is I won't ever touch anything in this kitchen again.” Throwing down the dishtowel I had been using, I walked out the back door.

Ida was sitting outside with Jean, the Jamaican woman who came in to help care for her. As soon as Ida saw me, she cried, “My children are sending me away somewhere.”

‘‘Mrs. Feld, I keep trying to tell you,” Jean said. “You're going to live in a nice place where you'll get good care.”

Ida's fingers circled my wrist, “They don't want me.”

‘‘They don't want any of us. We're leftovers. And there's nothing worse than living where you're not wanted.”

Vivian came out of the house, walking toward me, to make peace. I went back into my daughter-in-law's house. I never use that pan.

Helene S. Wolff is a writer and editor living in New York City, working primarily with health care and human services organizations. Professionally, she has written and edited journals, newsletters, annual reports, brochures and other publications for about 20 non-profit organizations. She has also ghosted a yoga book that was published in hard cover and paperback. Her fiction recently appeared on *42opus*. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan's English Honors Program.