

2 HOME

The old Bedford Nursing Home had an appealing facade. Although the building had always been a hospital of some sort, from the outside, it looked more like a stately home. Its two stories were built in the Georgian style, with red bricks, multipaned windows trimmed in white, and dormers in the slate roof. A veranda ran along the west side, easily accessible to patients seeking the afternoon sun. The grounds were parklike, with mature oak, maple, and pine trees on several acres of land.

In the 1920s, the Bedford was a children's hospital. Hundreds of kids with polio sought hydrotherapy here, and a world-famous surgeon transplanted cords and tendons to correct the deformities in their legs. After the discovery of the polio vaccine, the number of children needing a residential hospital decreased dramatically, and the state rented the facility to a series of agencies providing psychiatric treatment for disturbed children. In the late 1960s, the old Bedford was purchased and converted to a 179-bed private nursing home.

By 1996, the building itself was in a state of decline. The plumbing was bad, the roof leaked, and the old wards were too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer. After several months of deliberation, the board of directors decided to replace the building with a new complex to be called Bedford Continuing Care, reflecting changes during the 1980s and 1990s toward progressive care communities, which provided opportunities for residents over sixty-five to buy homes in an area where they could live independently yet take advantage of assisted-living services as needed. If their health declined further, they could move into a nursing facility on the same grounds.¹ The new Bedford facility would include a state-of-the-art nursing home, surrounded by condominiums. The new accommodations would be much more expensive, but all residents of the old Bedford would be grandfathered in under the current rates.

The director of nursing briefed me on the residents' feelings about the move, scheduled for September. Many longtime residents were having trouble with the prospects of leaving "home." They would miss their wardmates, their regular aides, their routines, and above all, the congenial atmosphere they had created in the public spaces of the old building. The new facility had much smaller spaces, and there would be no place for everyone to congregate on Friday nights to watch movies, a cherished ritual. The dining hall in the old Bedford was large enough to accommodate every resident. The new facility was designed to create a family-like dining experience, with small dining rooms on each wing. Residents who had brought furniture from home and tacked pictures up on the walls of the old Bedford would have to leave these things behind. The new building was fully furnished in carefully coordinated colors, complete with framed pictures that matched the decor. Residents who had toured the facility agreed that it was beautiful, modern, and efficient. But it felt like a hotel, not a home. As the facilitator of two writing group "interventions," my job was to encourage residents to talk and write about their fears and concerns about the move, as well as their curiosity

Home

and excitement. It would be like group therapy without a therapist. Previous research on writing groups in nursing homes had determined that participants were less depressed and better able to communicate their thoughts and feelings.²

When I arrived at 9:00 a.m. on that July day to meet the residents for our first session, it was already oppressively hot. The morning group was to begin at 10:30, but I had a lot to do before then. The social worker had given me a list of people who had either volunteered or been “encouraged” to participate, but I knew only their names. I still had to determine who they were so that I could plan the session accordingly.

On my ride up to the second floor, I noticed a drawing with a caption on the elevator door. A crowd of people strained against a rope tied to a huge boulder. Underneath someone had penned the words, “Thirty days and counting. When we all pull together, we can do anything!”

I found the director of nursing in her cinderblock office, surrounded by boxes half full of files and papers. She was very busy, as nursing home administrators always are (even when not in the midst of a move), so we got right down to business. I called out the names on my list, while she looked at their medical charts, reading off abilities and disabilities and adding other details she thought might be relevant.

Mavis Atchley, early seventies, stroke patient. Used to be a bookkeeper in a nursing home. Often critical of Bedford.

Alice Billings, heart disease and arthritis. Lame in one leg and used a wheelchair. Still sharp, with a good sense of humor, but suffered occasional bouts of depression.

Camille Forest, ninety-eight, Bedford’s oldest resident. Frail, with a long list of health problems, nearly deaf, but alert and sociable.

Eleanor Cohen, late sixties, multiple sclerosis. Chair of the Residents’ Council, active and outspoken. Moved to Bedford twelve years ago when her husband died.

Constantine Kraja, serious heart problems, hospitalized twice this year.

Very depressed since the death of his wife.

Paul Mason, early eighties, Parkinson's. Tremors and mobility problems, but "totally there." The "goodwill ambassador of Bedford."

Rose Atkins, late seventies, arthritis, heart and circulation problems. Has had trouble adjusting to institutional life.

Hester Wall, mid-eighties, Alzheimer's. Wanderer. Can't communicate much but enjoys social stimulation.

Ronald Gray, late fifties, cerebral palsy, confined to a wheelchair. Likes to talk but difficult to understand. Longtime resident of Bedford.

I left the director's office and made my way to the dining room, where our group was scheduled to meet. It was a large, echoey rectangle with high ceilings—woefully inadequate for interacting with a group of people who couldn't see, hear, or speak very well. On this morning, air conditioners blasted ineffectually from every window, making it impossible for even the able-bodied to hear above the roar. As the aides wheeled in residents, Shelly, the graduate student volunteer, and I moved tables around to form a conversation area. We introduced ourselves and made name tags, more for us than the group members, since many of them already knew each other. At the last possible moment, I switched off the air conditioners. We were immediately engulfed in sweltering air.

Even under the best conditions, the initial mood of a nursing home writing group is usually subdued. Here, as in every other home I had visited, residents operated with major sensory deficits that made communication difficult. Wheelchairs, too, put them at a greater social distance from each other. I stood amid the tables and chairs, speaking as loudly as possible without shouting.

I lay out the plan for the next four weeks and distributed a list of writing topics. At the beginning of each session, I would read aloud a short passage on the day's topic to get them thinking. Then the volunteers and I would move around and assist whoever needed help with their writing. At the end of each session, I would read aloud

Home

what everyone had written. I explained that I had learned this format from social workers who conducted writing groups in other nursing homes, and that it seemed to work well. Those who were unable to write could talk to the volunteers, who would take dictation.

Our topic that day, “my childhood home,” generated quite a bit of interest. Alice, with Shelly’s help, wrote about her father, a traveling salesman and a gambler, and her mother, whom he left alone to raise the children. Her mother bought coal on credit and baked pies to pay the bills. Rose, who wrote on her own in a flourishing hand, produced a full-page description of her mother’s kitchen stove—a clunky, cast-iron monstrosity—in contrast to the parlor stove—a new, sleek, silver model that her mother kept polished to a sheen. Eleanor scribbled out three rapid-fire pages, describing how jealous she had been when her parents brought home a baby sister. Hannah remembered only that she had lived in New York City and that her mother had been a good cook. Paul recalled the noon whistle in the Michigan village where he had lived with his grandmother. Whenever she went to town, she would leave a plate lunch in the icebox for him. When the whistle sounded, he knew it was time to eat. “That whistle always sounded like picnic to me,” Paul said. Camille remembered her grandmother’s house, with the homemade lace curtains that had to be washed by hand and put on stretchers to dry. Horse-drawn carriages would zoom past the house and ride up on the curb as they turned the corner. Constantine summarized his entire life in two pages: kayaking on the river as a kid, joining the merchant marines, getting married, the death of his wife, and now, his own declining health. He informed us that he probably wouldn’t be back next week, since he had already written everything important about his life. Ronald talked about his younger sisters and the duplex they had lived in on Twenty-third Street in Detroit. He got tears in his eyes when he described his stepmother, who had been too upset to visit when he first moved to Bedford. Ronald had known then that he would spend the rest of his life in a nursing home, and he had decided to make the best of the situation.

I read all of this aloud at the end of the hour, rushing over the last few. Everyone was getting restless from the heat, and the aides were already starting to wheel in the lunch crowd.

“Well, thank you, everyone, for coming and sharing your memories with us,” I said in a wilted voice. “Next week, we’ll talk about your first home-away-from home, when you got married, joined the service, or went off to school or work.” An aide cranked up the air conditioners again, and the room was filled with a mechanical roar.

Paul Mason motored up to me in his battery-powered scooter and said, “What outfit are you with again?”

“Wayne State University,” I responded.

“Well, you did a good job. That was very interesting,” he said and spun away.

IN THE following weeks, Shelly and I circulated among the group members, getting to know everyone better. We arrived early each week to set up and assist the staff in getting residents to the dining room. When we came in the third week, we discovered that several aides were out, and everything was off schedule. At 10:25, only half the group members were seated in our little conversation area. I checked the roster to determine who was missing and headed for Paul Mason’s room.

I met him in the corridor. It was the first time I had ever seen him standing, and it occurred to me that he didn’t take up much space. He was a very small, quiet man.

“I’m walking today,” Paul said. “I need the exercise, but I’m slow.” He spoke softly and selected his words carefully, as if to conserve energy.

I offered my arm, and he put a thin hand on it. I noticed, too, that he walked much slower when he was talking. At one point, he stopped completely. “Move, dammit!” he said to his feet. “I have to remind myself to walk,” he apologized. “It’s Parkinson’s.”

“That’s all right,” I said. “Take your time.” But I was feeling anxious about getting back to the group.

Home

“I’ve had this cane for years,” Paul said. “A friend of mine in South Carolina made it from a live oak root. See? The handle’s in the shape of a duck’s head. It provides a steady understanding.”

“Very nice,” I said, looking at the knobby black stick. I liked the way Paul oriented himself around small details. I had observed this in his writing, too; it set him apart from the other group members.

When we got to the dining room, Paul apologized for making me late. After my opening comments, I sat down next to Camille, who was sitting next to Paul. As we talked, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Paul was looking distressed and had risen to leave.

“You’re not going already, are you?” I asked.

“I forgot my glasses,” Paul said. “I can’t see a thing without them.”

“But you’ll miss the session if you have to walk all the way to your room and back.”

“I guess this just isn’t my day,” Paul said, his voice faltering.

Ronald, who was sitting nearby in his motorized chair, offered to fetch Paul’s glasses.

“Should I let him?” Paul asked.

“Yes, let’s, since he’s willing.”

“They’re on my dresser, Ronald,” Paul said.

While he waited for his glasses, Paul closed his eyes and listened as Camille described the band concert she had attended the previous night on the Bedford lawn. She spoke in an almost ethereal voice about the balmy evening, the music, the company of her daughter. “When you hear music, especially outside on a beautiful evening, it’s heavenly, it really is,” Camille said breathlessly. “It was just the right time to hear it, too, after dinner.”

“She’s getting excited about her own memories,” Paul murmured to himself.

By the time I had finished with Camille, Paul had his glasses on and was feeling more like himself.

“Who is that woman?” he asked, as I scooted my chair around to face him.

“That’s Camille Forest.”

“She seems like a very nice person.”

“Yes, she is.”

“I’ve had the benefit of knowing many good people in my life,” Paul said. “My mother died in the great flu epidemic of 1918. They couldn’t get her into the hospital fast enough, because all the beds were full. I watched them take her out the front door on a stretcher. It affected me deeply. I was five years old and the baby of the family. My grandmother had made a promise to my mother, and she was loyal to that. She took me into her home and treated me like her own. I called her Mama. After my grandfather died, it was just us two.”

I nodded and wrote everything down.

“It was a delight to live there, and I liked to do what I could for my grandmother. She had a rusty old wringer-washer in the basement, and every time she went down the basement steps, she’d say, ‘I’d sure like to get that thing out of here.’ One day, when she was on one of her shopping trips to town, I figured out a way to move the washing machine. I wasn’t even tall enough to see over the top of it, but I found a couple of board planks in the shed, and I rolled the washer over the planks, end over end, up the steps and out the back door. When Mama came home and saw it in the yard, she got all misty-eyed and said to my Aunt Martha, ‘I *told* you he was the man of the house!’

“My aunts and uncles were good to me, too. My Uncle Bob was quite a character. There were some legal questions surrounding him, something about embezzlement, but I was too young to understand it. I didn’t think my Uncle Bob liked me much, but he was smarter and more thoughtful than I knew at the time. One day I came home from school, and he and my grandmother and my aunt were standing in the middle of the sidewalk with a little bay pony. He’d brought it for *me*! He didn’t say a thing, just watched my face. I’m sure I lit up like a firefly. I had that pony for four years, a chubby bay mare. Then I came home one day, and Uncle Bob had taken her away without an explanation, just the way he had brought her. I was one sad little boy.

Home

But a year later, Uncle Bob came home with a malamute, a stray he had seen several times around town. He had watched the dog cross the street and was impressed at how smart and self-sufficient he was in traffic. So he brought him home to me. And it was true, he was one smart dog. He could ride a horse, just hang over the side like a sack of grain. All I had to say was, ‘Leo, come on!’ and he’d jump up and hang on. He seemed tickled to do it, too.”

I was delighted by these stories, full of sensory details and memorable characters, and utterly charmed by the little boy Paul.

“Are you married?” Paul asked, as we finished writing.

“No, I’m not.”

“How can that be, a beautiful girl like you?”

“Ah, well, a good man is hard to find, I guess.”

“Yes, I imagine you’re right,” he said, looking at me closely. “You know, you’re making me remember a lot of things.”

“That’s good, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so,” Paul said.

PAUL STOOD in the doorway of the dining room, leaning on his cane. I had already begun reading aloud a short story called “The Dining Room Table,” about a woman who had decided to sell the table around which she had fed her many children, now grown and moved away. Some of the group members were wiping tears from their eyes.

“Hello, Paul,” I said, nodding at him. “Come in and join us.”

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Paul said in his small voice. “Someone volunteered to cut my throat, and it took a while.” He had a piece of toilet paper stuck to his neck. Paul made a forward motion, but his feet seemed to be glued to the floor. Shelly went over and gently nudged him toward a seat.

The day’s topic was “transitions to new places,” and we spent some time discussing the move, now only three weeks away. Group members were worried about whom they would have for roommates

(they could choose, but many hadn't), what their rooms would be like, and whether their belongings would fit into the smaller spaces. They had been asked to clean out their closets and drawers and dispose of things they didn't absolutely need, a nearly impossible task for some. They had no choice about the location of their new rooms, which was a source of great concern.

"What if we don't like where they put us?" Eleanor said. "They're making that decision for us, and I would have liked to make it for myself, and others would, too. We're not senile, you know."

Even Camille, who always saw the positive side of things, was reluctant to leave her room in the old Bedford. "I have a very nice, cozy corridor," she said. "There's a window here and a window there. It's very pleasant. It makes me feel good in the morning when I wake up and ask the aide to open the blinds. When I look out the window, I see the sky and the top of the trees. To me, that's beautiful. I asked my daughter if I could see out the window of the new place. I don't think she knew how to answer. I'm in doubt. If something in life happens that you can't help, that's God's will. But I don't look forward it."

Alice was particularly emotional, sniffing during my reading of the short story and crying outright during our writing period. She had spent the previous day visiting her daughter and was feeling melancholy. The family had gone shopping at a local grocery store, where Alice was amazed to find a hole in the wall where you could put your plastic bottles for recycling. "Time has passed, and civilization has made some progress since I've been in here," she said. "I didn't want to come home from my daughter's. I wanted to stay overnight. I thought I was up to things, but my daughter didn't agree. I guess I don't have any patience any more. I'm getting old. I feel like I'm breaking down, and I get angry at having no self-control. Nobody can do anything about it. It's nobody's fault. Maybe I've been too lonesome, I don't know. They asked us to pick a partner. The lady in the office was really nice about it, but I haven't picked anybody yet. I like Victoria, who eats with me. There are quite a few

Home

people I've been with. I stop and say hello to people, but to pick someone, it's difficult. I really admire this lady Eleanor, who takes care of all the bingo."

Alice reached for a tissue. "What we just did, writing all that down, would cost me fifty dollars at a therapist's."

When I read aloud what they had all written, many nodded at Eleanor's final words: "I'm just taking it day to day. It has to be done, and I have to get used to it. It's hard for me, but I just have to do it. When I've had to deal with these kinds of things before, I dealt with it the same way—just work to hold it together. People have to pull themselves up to keep from feeling sad. After this hour, I'll go play cards. There are positive things, too."

Since this was our last session, I left time for them to evaluate the group experience. I had prepared a little survey, and the volunteers went around asking the questions: How satisfied were they, overall? Had they felt comfortable talking and writing? Would they do anything differently? Since we were short-handed, I sat down to help the nearest person complete the survey. It happened to be Paul.

"You sure are pretty," he said, as I pulled up a chair.

"Thank you," I said, getting down to business. "Now, we have this form to fill out. We'd like to know what you thought of the group sessions and how we might improve them."

Paul was silent for a moment. "You've got me way back in my childhood, thinking about dogs and ponies, and now I feel like you're pulling away, and I'm standing on the dock, waving goodbye."

"Oh," I said. "I can just see that little boy standing there all alone!" His sadness had caught me off guard.

"I'd like to continue with what I wrote," Paul said. "There's so much more to tell. It's like opening an old chest in the attic, and then closing it up tight, before you've taken everything out and examined it."

"Maybe I could—" but I stopped myself. I was thinking that someone needed to work with Paul individually, do an oral history or sit and write with him every day for a while. But I didn't want to

make promises I couldn't keep. And there was the research project to think about. It would be inappropriate for me to spend extra time with him while the study was going on, and the researchers would be collecting data for the next couple of months.

"I'm sorry we couldn't stay longer," I said.

"I've enjoyed our time together," Paul said. "I'm sorry to see you go."

I returned two weeks later to distribute their writings, which I had typed and bound in spiral booklets titled "Reflections of Home." I had spent a lot of time putting these together, and I hoped the residents would like them. I was afraid some of them wouldn't even remember me, much less care about the booklet.

It took most of the morning to find everyone. They were scattered about the old Bedford, watching TV or napping in their rooms, getting their hair done in the beauty shop, exercising in the therapy room, playing a trivia game called "What Do You Remember?" with the activities director. Constantine and a woman from the afternoon group had been admitted to the hospital. Another woman from the afternoon group had been released and sent home. I passed by Paul's room several times, but I didn't see him. I finally found him at lunchtime in the dining hall.

"I've been looking for you all morning!" I said, taking a seat at the table.

"I'm a hard person to catch up with," he said, chuckling. His hair was tousled, and he looked as if he'd just gotten up from a nap. He was wearing a flannel shirt, despite the summer heat. When I took his hand, it was cool.

There was another man at the table who seemed to be in a trance.

"That's Morris," Paul said. "He can be very congenial, but he's having a bad day."

"I brought you this booklet," I said, pulling it out of my bag.

"Oh, that looks nice," Paul said warmly. "It's good to see you again. I've been thinking about all the letters I need to write to friends

Home

and family in South Carolina. All this correspondence. I feel bad that I haven't kept up with it."

"I'm sure people understand. Have you thought about tape-recording?"

"Yes, but I haven't done it. I can't find my tape recorder, for one thing."

I opened the book to the first page and showed Paul his name in the table of contents. My name was at the bottom of the page, along with the project staff and our university affiliation.

"I didn't know you were associated with the university," Paul said. "What do you do?"

"I'm an English professor. I spend a lot of my time doing research and writing."

"I just feel trapped here, like I'm in a cage. All the things I can't do, places I can't go. Do your writing while there's still time," he said with emphasis. He reached over and put his hand on top of mine. I found myself leaning down and rubbing my cheek gently over the top of his hand.

"Don't," Paul said. "Don't do that."

I didn't say anything.

"You don't know what I mean, do you?"

"No."

"I don't want you to go away wondering what I was talking about. I mean, don't look that way."

"What way is that?"

"Perfect. Just perfect. You are as pretty as I remembered."

I smiled.

"I love you," Paul said. He looked straight into my eyes.

"I love you, too," I said, looking right back at him.

The other man didn't seem to be paying attention.

"How are you getting around today?" I asked, surprised at myself and not knowing what else to say. "Can you carry this book back to your room, or shall I deliver it?"

"You could walk me back after lunch."

“That won’t work,” I said. “I have to talk to some other people.”

“Oh,” Paul said. He looked down at his hands. His nails were yellow and hadn’t been trimmed in a while.

“Well, how long will lunch last?” I said, reconsidering.

“Three quarters of an hour or so.”

“OK. I’ll go see these other people and come back when I’m finished. If you haven’t left by then, I’ll walk you back.”

“That will be fine.”

When I returned half an hour later, Paul had already finished eating, and the other man had left.

“I’m ready,” Paul said, picking up his cane. “Since your hands are clean, how about if you carry the book?”

“What’d you have for lunch?” I asked, as we inched our way through the dining hall.

“Liverwurst.”

“I didn’t know people still ate liverwurst,” I said. “I’m a vegetarian myself.”

“So if I asked you out for a steak dinner, you wouldn’t go?”

“I’d eat the salad and the roll. And the dessert. I love dessert.”

“It used to be that if you didn’t buy a *steak* dinner, you were considered cheap.”

“Yeah, well, it’s maybe a little easier to date these days. A lot of women pay their own way.”

“I can walk faster, you know,” Paul said. “You’re babying me.” He began to speed up. “I could run to the end of the hall if I wanted to.” He took three or four big strides.

“Hey, that’s pretty good!” I said. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

Paul slowed down to his usual pace. “It’s just that sometimes I fall into a deep exhaustion. Just fall into it. That’s when I shuffle.”

We passed his room.

“Shall we walk some more, Paul?”

“Yes, why not?”

Home

We walked to the end of the hall and then back to his room. Paul tossed his cane into the corner with several others. “The woodpile,” he joked.

“I apologize for this room,” Paul said, surveying the clutter. “I’m not much of a decorator.” He reached for the remote and turned the blaring TV down to a drone.

“I think it looks homey,” I said.

“Homely is more like it.”

“How’d you manage to get this room all to yourself?” I asked.

“I have no idea how I could be so lucky,” Paul said. “Dan negotiated it. He never explained how he did it, but I’m grateful. We’re trying for the same setup in the new place, but I haven’t heard anything yet.”

“Dan is your son?”

“Yes, and he’s a good boy.”

There was a single hospital bed in the corner next to the window, covered with a homemade afghan. Paul had brought his own dresser, the glass top of which was covered with items: a can of Barbasol shaving cream, Old Spice deodorant, a dusty bottle of nonalcoholic beer, a Detroit Tigers cap, piles of cards and letters, a fingernail filing kit. Several pictures were stuck around the edge of the mirror. Paul with a baby. A side shot of Paul wearing glasses and looking twenty years younger. A man with a graying beard holding the same baby. A collie dog. Paul and a silver-haired woman in an etched plastic frame that said “Aloha!” An older Paul, considerably depleted, in a baggy green sweatsuit, dancing with an aide. A portrait-size color photo, framed, of Paul and the silver-haired woman was centered on the wall next to the bed.

Across from the bed sat a 13-inch TV. Wedged between the wall and the bed, facing the TV, was a motorized recliner, the kind that tips the seat back to a recumbent position and forward to a standing position. A small lamp sat on a bedside table, along with some large-print Reader’s Digests. In the corner next to the tangle of canes, Paul had parked his battery-powered scooter.

I peered at the pictures on the mirror. “Is this Dan?” I asked, pointing to the man with the graying beard. “He looks very kind.”

“You’ve hit it right on the head,” Paul said. “Dan is the kindest person you’d ever want to meet. He’s a small businessman, just like his old man was. That’s my grandson with him.”

“Where’s his wife?”

“I don’t know. Her picture’s around here somewhere—his second wife. This is his second family. The first one’s pretty much grown up.”

“My, you used to be much heavier, didn’t you?” I said, surveying the picture of Paul and the silver-haired woman in Hawaiian shirts.

“Parkinson’s. All that shaking makes you skinny.”

“And this must be your wife?”

“That’s my girl!” Paul said. “She was a teacher. When we retired, I wanted to take a mobile home and go all over the country. She didn’t want to do it at first, but then she agreed. After we got home, she said, ‘I’m glad you made me do that.’”

“She was a homebody sort of person?”

“Not exactly. She had traveled all over the world before I met her. China, Europe, Taiwan. Just when she got older . . .”

“How long has she been gone?”

“She died two years ago on my birthday, shortly before I moved in here.”

“Oh, that must have been hard!”

Paul had been standing in front of me as we talked. I noticed that he was only a couple of inches taller than I, but he stooped a little. His left foot lifted up off the floor just the slightest bit as he leaned on his cane. He was wearing leather slippers with no socks.

And then he was standing next to me, one hand on my back. His fingers, cupped together, had landed in the middle of my spine, like a small bird come to rest for a moment on a branch.

“I guess I should be going,” I said, clearing my throat.

“Do you have any more work to do here, now that the writing group is over?” Paul asked, keeping his hand in place.

Home

“I’ll be back in a month or so to conduct a follow-up meeting with the group members. We can talk then about how you might continue your writing, if you like.”

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about what else I want to include,” he said. “And how to make some continuity out of it.”

“It’s not often that I meet a fellow writer,” I said. “You seem,” I hesitated, “to have the soul of a poet.”

“Be careful. You’ll lift me right off the ground with those words,” Paul said.

I kept my voice casual. “Anyway, I’m glad you were in the group. I’ll miss seeing you each week.”

“It was nice to be there,” Paul said, dropping his hand. “Stop by whenever you’re here.”

“Thank you. I’ll do that.”

I walked out the door and took a few steps down the hall.

“Ruth?” Paul said quietly from the doorway.

I turned. It was the first time he had ever spoken my name. Paul met me in the hallway, and we walked toward the front door together.

“Hey, you’re moving really well now!” I said. He was standing tall and striding forward.

“It takes effort and concentration, but I can do it sometimes,” Paul said.

We passed the receptionist in the lobby, a stern-looking woman with a German accent. Paul gave her a friendly salute. Her eyes followed us to the door.

“Thank you for seeing me out,” I said, turning to face him. He was standing very close. There was a light breeze coming through the screen door. Then he kissed me lightly on the lips. Without a second’s thought, I returned the kiss.

As I walked across the parking lot in the shimmering heat, my brain took over. What on *earth* was I doing? But I couldn’t stop smiling.