My Most Beautiful Gorgeous Aunt

I hadn't thought she'd want to go out. She's seventy-eight years old, so you never know. It's cold even for early November, and bleak as hell. There's no color anywhere.

I pull up to the one-story senior housing complex. A couple paper pumpkins still flutter from a bulletin board in the hall above the row of mailboxes. I wonder whose grandchildren put them there.

Aunt Faye lives in a corner apartment, down at the end of the hallway on the right. She was lucky to get this apartment, rather than one of the middle ones with views on only one side. Hers looks out on a birdbath, squirrels and deer.

. "You should keep your door locked," I say as I push it open.

"Yeah yeah yeah," says Faye.

She's bundled up in a pair of beige pants and a white winter coat, with all sorts of scarf stuff going on around her head. She's got big plastic glasses.

The apartment is cozy, bright; homey. Aunt Faye's collection of animals lines the shelves under the window. Tigers, deer, eagles, a 3-D paper leopard I bought her and a carved wooden piglet complete with a little spiral tail.

"It's a hundred degrees in here," I say.

"I know. I can't get the heat down. Pfft!" She waves at her parakeet, trying to shoo him into his cage. The bird's on crack. She gets a box of Tic Tacs from her purse and shakes one into her palm. She shows it to him.

"Here Charlie, come and get your egg," she says.

The bird's on sugar.

"Is he going to eat that?" I ask.

"No, he's going to sit on it. He thinks it's an egg."

"Doesn't he know he's a male bird?"

"Male birds sometimes protect their eggs, you know."

I make cooing gestures at him but he won't play. He zooms out past me and then back to the cage in a flurry of hysteria, back to the eraser-sized green candy on its nest of shredded newspaper and seed hulls.

Faye goes into the bedroom to get her gloves. I get up close to the cage and whistle to try and get him to sing. She's taught him a few songs but he sings in minor notes, making it hard to determine the tune. It's as if he's from a foreign land, and though he speaks English, the accents are on the wrong syllables.

"You are one crummy pet," I say. He is. Not because he's a bird, but because he's pissy and skittish. Plus he shits while he's flying. She yells something from the bedroom. He won't come near me.

. "Asshole," I whisper. She pinches the back of my arm.

"Are you insulting my bird?"

"Nope."

"Do you want a Pepsi?"

"No."

"Take a Pepsi. I have a whole twelve pack."

"It's too cold for a Pepsi," I argue, putting one in my backpack.

We head out on foot behind her building where the woods starts. A couple big big piles of leaves have been raked but not bagged, and are slowly eroding in the wind. When we've cleared the yard she glances back to make sure we're out of earshot.

"Do you know Donny Mullins is on disability?"

Donny lives in her building. He's younger than me. He has to be on something to get an apartment in the senior's building.

"How do you know?" I ask her.

"He's proud of it. He told me himself. He sits in the laundry room all day talking to Sally Messer. I think he flirts with her. And she likes it!" She punches the air for emphasis.

"Isn't she seventy-five or something?"

"Seventy-*six*," she says.

I mull this over. "What's disabled on him?"

"His back, his leg, his arm, you name it. You'd think he was an old man!"

I grunt. I think his disability is between his ears.

"He's as dumb as a pork chop," I say.

"You got that right!"

"Yeah," I say.

She's still pretty jaunty, walking fast enough that her glasses are slipping down her nose. She has looked exactly the same since I was a kid. Thirty years of hoisting lumber in the local mill has kept her in good shape for almost eighty, and sometimes I have to remind myself she's elderly.

In warm weather we walk the county road that loops around the village, but when it's cold and windy we take this route. It's close. There's a cabin back in the woods where we hang out. We don't know who owns it, but whoever they are, we think they wouldn't mind.

"Francis Ranke died."

"Mom told me."

"I could not stand that woman, dead or no. She had heart problems."

Bitched herself to death, I'm thinking. And it's not like she started bitching once she got old. She was always like that. It's a wonder Faye's got any humor left, living next to Francis all that time. We gossip about it for a while and then switch to relatives. Faye tells me the stuff I'm not supposed to know until I'm sitting in the big chairs at the family reunions.

She used to be simpler, talked about trees and birds, and the red squirrels she shot with a BB gun because it ate the bird's eggs. The senior housing complex has wound her up with its petty dramas. I think she doesn't like people as much as animals but didn't find out till it was too late, when she'd sold her A-frame in the woods by the river to move in here.

This new woods will have to do. We reach the cabin, *our* cabin, we call it. It's got a deck, and there are rusty old metal chairs on it. They're cold. Faye wonders why anyone would buy metal chairs. She's right, they're hard and unwelcoming, but it's warmer in the leafy woods than in the open.

We sit for a while. It's the kind of woods we like. Even in the summer there isn't much undergrowth; you can see all its underpinnings. Nothing hiding in it, Faye says.

It looks like a painting of a forest, the ground covered with orange and russet, tree trunks black.

I wish I could do better for her. Better than a walk in her backyard. She's always wanted to go to Ireland, and rumor has it she'd pay my way. Of course I couldn't accept such a huge gift from someone on Social Security. But my own finances fall a bit short of the goal at the moment. And what would I do if she got sick there? Or scared? Am I underestimating her?

Faye's never travelled anywhere, except the Grand Canyon, and last year, New Orleans with our family. After a week she was exhausted by the heat, the sightseeing, the strangeness of a southern city, and she'd eaten nothing but burgers and hot dogs. Faye is not a foodie. The only seafood she'll eat is shrimp, and she's never had a fresh one, only the kind that's watery and homesick and ends its life perched on the side of a spotty glass in a supper club a thousand miles from home, hovering over a pool of canned cocktail sauce.

We walked around the French Quarter. The woman next to us wasn't a woman at all. I didn't say anything. There were Goths. I didn't say anything. Drunks. Bums. Women showing their breasts in upper story windows. By the time we got to the zoo-aquarium-whatever-it-is attraction, Faye had had it. She passed out in the jungle, which wasn't much hotter than her apartment but a hell of a lot damper, and the only way out was up an escalator, which she was afraid of.

I think about a trip abroad. If I could get her through the train ride to the airport, through eight hours in the air (and this for her first flight!), customs, and the taxi to the hotel, we'd be fine. We could stay in one place. Take short trips from there. Just a few

hours. I'd find her a burger to eat. I'd look up a heart specialist I know in Dublin, just in case.

It's impossible.

In lieu of Europe, we've been to see and experience the Bear Caves, the Stone Cottages and the Cathedral Pines. Actually, not the Cathedral Pines. She couldn't remember where they were and wouldn't admit it, so we drove the entire length and width of the Menomonee reservation, where we got pulled over twice. Lollygagging is not tolerated on the reservation.

She acted surprised. "I can't believe they'd cut those pines down. You'd think Indians would know better."

"Faye Faye Faye Faye Faye," I say as we pull away from the local sheriff. "They've got to be somewhere else."

We never found them. But we had a snack on the edge of the river and took each other's pictures with my cell phone.

Today the woods are quiet and dim. Soon we'll be taking drives instead of walks because it's going to snow in a few weeks. She's got to smell the cigarette smoke in my car, but she never says anything.

"It's getting cold," she says.

I wait while she gets down the cabin's steps and we head back toward the path. The sun's beginning to go down.

"It's going to be dark soon," I say.

No answer. I turn to look at her and there she is, face down on a lumpy tuft.

"What the hell?" I reach down and grab her.

I can tell she's trying with all her might to keep a happy face on but whoa, she's mad.

"*Man*," I say, trying not to look freaked out.

"I'm fine. I tripped on that branch," she says. She grabs the branch and twists it in half.

"Too late now," I say.

Her glasses have gotten jammed into her nose. She's bleeding.

"You've got blood," I say and make a slashing motion across my nose. "Are you going to make it?"

"If you'd stop trying to kill me."

"I'll have to try harder."

I'm kidding with her but the whole thing's got me uptight. She pulls some tissues out of her pocket. Old ladies always have tissues. It's smart, really, but maybe I should upgrade her to a first-aid kit if she's going to start diving into stuff.

"I'm fine," she says again, to no one.

She takes her glasses off, which is the only time she looks older than I remember. Her eyes are starting to get small and crinkled like my grandma's did. She dabs at the bridge of her nose, which is bleeding like nuts. Are there big veins up there? I can't remember. I guess it could have been worse.

"Look," she says and holds up her index finger. It's worse.

"Holy shit," I say. "Did you just do that? It wasn't like that before?" Seems like a stupid question, but arthritis has made her fingers gnarly. This one is bent at the top knuckle, and not entirely in the right direction.

"Does it hurt?" I ask, and reach for it but she pulls it away.

"No, not really. I'm fine."

I keep looking at her but she chats like nothing went on.

The apartment building smells like pork chops.

"It smells like pork chops in here. Must be Donny," I whisper.

"No, it's Runie Callan, she brought some over the other day and I couldn't eat 'em. That white gravy! She's a hillbilly. They put it on everything."

"Yuck." I say, and I shudder. We both hate white gravy.

She struggles a bit with the key since she can't use the finger. At least she locks the door when she leaves the place.

"You might want to get that looked at," I say. "Index fingers have a lot of uses."

"You sound like your mother!" she says, like she's accusing me of something.

"Seriously, you should see somebody. Why don't you get your purse and-"

She shakes her head.

"I'm fine!" she yells as she bangs the door open. Polly's sitting on his egg watching us. I ignore him.

I leave her there and drive home, and the next day I get a call from my mother.

"We had to take Faye in," she says ominously.

"What do you mean, in?"

I hate this *going in* phrase. So dramatic, so ominous. Why not just say we took her to the doctor?

"Turns out she sprained her ankle."

The future is looming; that day when Faye takes her last fall and loses her little apartment, when I can no longer come and pick her up and take her somewhere, anywhere, and we can both pretend she's only middle aged, with a heart like an ox.

"And that isn't all," Mom says, "she also has a broken finger, and one stitch to the bridge of her nose."

I've got no idea what to say.

"Well Christ, she said she was fine, like a million times." I say.

"You know Faye, she's stubborn."

More like afraid I won't take her out if she starts falling down, I think. I send her a card with a picture of a squirrel in a pile of autumn leaves eating a nut, addressing it the way she likes.

"To my most beautiful gorgeous Aunt:
I think we should go up to the animal farm near
Aniwa next time I'm up North so I can push you in front of
that zippy zoo train they've got.
Sincerely, niece."