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Calling Me Home

Written by Julie Kibler

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calling me home

Julie Kibler began writing *Calling Me Home* after learning a bit of family lore: as a young woman, her grandmother fell in love with a young black man in an era and locale that made the relationship impossible. When not writing, she enjoys travel, independent films, music, photography, and corralling her teenagers and rescue dogs. She lives in Arlington, Texas. *Calling Me Home* is her debut novel.

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calling me home

julie kibler

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For Grandma, for what might have been

*But all lost things are in the angels' keeping,
Love;
No past is dead for us, but only sleeping,
Love;
The years of Heaven will all earth's little pain
Make good,
Together there we can begin again
In babyhood.*

—from Helen Hunt Jackson's poem "At Last"

calling me home

Miss Isabelle, Present Day

I ACTED HATEFUL to Dorrie the first time we met, a decade or so ago. A person gets up in years and she forgets to use her filters. Or she's beyond caring. Dorrie thought I didn't care for the color of her skin. No truth to that at all. Yes, I was angry, but only because my beauty operator—hairdresser they call them these days, or *stylist*, which sounds so uppity—left with no notice. I walked all the way into the shop, which is no small effort when you're old, and the girl at the counter told me my regular girl had quit. While I stood there blinking my eyes, fit to be tied, she studied the appointment book. With a funny smile, she said, "Dorrie has an opening. She could do you almost right away."

Presently, Dorrie called me over, and certainly, her looks surprised me—she was the only African-American in the place, as far as I could tell. But here was the real problem: change. I didn't like it. People who didn't know how I liked my hair. People who made the

cape too tight around my neck. People who went away without any warning. I needed a minute, and I guess it showed. Even at eighty, I liked my routine, and the older I get, the more it matters. Picture me now at almost ninety.

Ninety. I'm old enough to be Dorrie's white-haired grandmother. And then some. That much is obvious. But Dorrie? She probably doesn't even know she's become like the daughter I never had. For the longest time, I followed her from salon to salon—when she wouldn't settle down and stay put. She's happier now, has her own shop these days, but she comes to me. Like a daughter would.

We always talk when Dorrie comes. At first, when I met her, it was just the regular stuff. The weather. News stories. My soap operas and game shows, her reality TV and sitcoms. Anything to pass the time while she washed and styled my hair. But over time, when you see the same person week after week, year after year, for an hour or more, things can go a bit deeper. Dorrie started talking about her kids, her crazy ex-husband, and how she hoped to open her own shop one day, then all the work that entailed. I'm a good listener.

Sometimes, she'd ask me about things, too. Once she started coming to my house, and we got comfortable in our routine, she asked about the pictures on my walls, the keepsakes I have on display here and there. Those were easy enough to tell about.

It's funny how sometimes you find a friend—in the likely places—and almost immediately, you can talk about anything. But more often than not, after the initial blush, you find you really have nothing in common. With others, you believe you'll never be more than acquaintances. You're so different, after all. But then this thing surprises you, sticking longer than you ever predicted, and you begin to rely on it, and that relationship whittles down your walls, little by little, until you realize you know that one person better than almost anyone. You're really and truly friends.

It's like that with Dorrie and me. Who would have thought ten years later we'd still be doing business together, but so much more,

as well. That we'd not only be talking about our shows but sometimes watching them together. That she'd be making excuses to stop by several days a week, asking if I need her to run any errands for me—wanting to know if I'm out of milk or eggs, if I need to go to the bank. That I'd be making sure when I ride the cart around the grocery store, after the Handitran drops me off, I put a six-pack of her favorite soft drink in the basket so she'll have something to wet her whistle before she starts on my hair.

One time, a few years back, she looked embarrassed when she started to ask me a question. She stopped mid-sentence.

“What?” I said. “Cat got your tongue? That’s a first.”

“Oh, Miss Isabelle, I know you wouldn’t be interested. Never mind.”

“Okay,” I said. I was never one to pick something out of people that they didn’t want to tell.

“Well, since you begged me . . .” She grinned. “Stevie’s got this concert at school Thursday night. He’s got a solo—on the trumpet. You know he plays the trumpet?”

“How could I miss it, Dorrie? You’ve been telling me about it for three years, since he auditioned.”

“I know, Miss Isabelle. I’m kind of over-the-top proud when it comes to the kids. Anyway, would you like to come with me? To see him play?”

I thought about it for a minute. Not because there was any question whether I wanted to go, but because I was a little overcome. It took too long for me to find my voice.

“It’s okay, Miss Isabelle. Don’t feel like you have to. My feelings won’t be hurt and—”

“No! I’d love to. In fact, I can’t think of anything I’d rather do Thursday.”

She laughed. It’s not like I ever went anywhere, and Thursday was a boring night for television that year.

Since then, it hasn’t been uncommon for her to take me along when the kids have special events. Heaven knows, their father

usually forgets to show up. Dorrie's mother usually comes, too, and we have nice little chats, but I always wonder what she thinks about my being there. She studies me with a shade of curiosity, as though she can't fathom any reason for Dorrie and me to be friends.

But there's still so much Dorrie doesn't know. Things nobody knows. If I were going to tell anyone, it would likely be her. It would definitely be her. And I think it's time. More than anyone, I trust her not to judge me, not to question the way things happened and the way things turned out.

So here I am, asking her to drive me all the way from Texas to Cincinnati, halfway across the country, to help me tend to things. I'm not too proud to admit I can't do this alone. I've done plenty for myself, by myself, as long as I can remember.

But this? No. This I can't do alone. And I don't want to anyway. I want my daughter; I want Dorrie.

Dorrie, Present Day

WHEN I MET Miss Isabelle, she acted more like Miss Miserabelle, and that's a fact. But I didn't think she was a racist. God's honest truth, it was the furthest thing from my mind. I may look young, thank you very much, but I've had this gig awhile. Oh, the stories they tell, the lines around my customer's closed eyes, the tension in her scalp when I massage it with shampoo, the condition of the hair I wind around a curler. I knew almost right away Miss Isabelle carried troubles more significant than worrying about the color of my skin. As pretty as she was for an eighty-year-old woman, there was something dark below her surface, and it kept her from being soft. But I was never one to press for all the details—could be that was part of the beauty of the thing. I'd learned that people talk when they're ready. Over the years, she became much more than just a customer. She was good to me. I hadn't ever said so out loud, but in

ways, she was more like a mother than the one God gave me. When I thought it, I ducked, waiting for the lightning to strike.

Still, this favor Miss Isabelle asked me, it did come as a surprise. Oh, I helped her out from time to time—running errands or doing easy little fix-it jobs around her house, things too small for a service person, especially when I happened to be there anyway. I never took a dime for it. I did it because I wanted to, but I supposed as long as she was a paying customer—even if she was my “special customer”—there might always be some tiny sentiment it was all an extension of my job.

This? Was big. And different. She hadn’t volunteered to pay me. No doubt she would have had I asked, but I didn’t have any sense this request was a job—simply someone to get her from point A to point B, with me being the only person she could think of. No. She wanted me. For me. I knew it as clearly as I knew the moon hung in the sky, whether I could see it or not.

When she asked me, I rested my hands on her shoulders. “Miss Isabelle, I don’t know. You sure about this? Why me?” I’d been doing her hair at her house going on five years, since she took a bad fall and the doctor said her driving days were over—I’d never have deserted her because she couldn’t come to me. I’d become a little attached.

She studied me in the mirror over her old-timey vanity table, where we rigged a temporary station every Monday. Then Miss Isabelle’s silver-blue eyes, more silver every year as the blue leached out along with her youth, did something I’d never seen in all the time I’d been cutting and curling and styling her hair. First, they shimmered. Then they watered up. My hands felt like lumps of clay soaked by those tears, and I could neither move them nor convince myself to grasp her shoulders a little tighter. Not that she’d have wanted me to acknowledge her emotion. She’d always been so strong.

Her focus shifted, and she reached for the tiny silver thimble I’d seen on her vanity as long as I’d been going to her house. I’d never thought it was especially significant—certainly not like the other

keepsakes she had around her house. It was a thimble. “As sure as I’ve been of anything in my life,” she said, finally, tucking it into her palm. She didn’t address the why of it. And I understood then; small as it was, that thimble held a story. “Now. Time’s wasting. Finish my hair so we can make plans, Dorrie.”

She might have sounded bossy to someone else, but she didn’t mean it that way. Her voice freed my hands, and I slid them up to wrap a lock of hair around my finger. Her hair matched her eyes. It lay upon my skin like water against earth.

LATER, IN MY shop, I paged through my appointment book. I took inventory, checked what kind of week I had ahead. I found a lot of empty space. Pages so bare, the glare gave me a headache. Between silly seasons, things were quiet. No fancy holiday hairstyles. Prom updos and extensions for family reunions were still a month or two down the road. Just the regular stuff here and there. Men for brush cuts or fades, a few little girls for cute Easter bobs. Women stopping by for complimentary bangs trims—it made my life easier when they left the damn things alone.

I could postpone my guys. They’d drop twenties still crisp from the ATM on the counter like always whenever I could get to them, happy not to explain to strangers how they wanted their haircuts. I could even call a few to see if they’d come by that afternoon—I was usually closed Mondays. The nice thing about leasing my own little shop the last few years was I made the rules, opened on my closed days if I wanted. Even better, nobody stood over my head, ready to yell or, worse, fire me for taking off without notice.

Surely Momma could handle the kids if I went with Miss Isabelle. She owed me—I kept a roof over her head—and anyway, Stevie Junior and Bebe were old enough all she really had to do was watch their steady parade in or out of the house, call 911 in case of a fire on the stove, or send for the plumber if the bathroom flooded. Heaven forbid.

I ran out of excuses. Plus, if I were honest, I needed some time away. I had things weighing on my mind. Things I needed to think about.

And . . . it seemed like Miss Isabelle really needed me.

I started making phone calls.

Three hours later, my customers were squared away and Momma was on board to watch the kids. The way I figured it, I had one more call to make. I reached for my cell phone, but my hand stopped mid-air. This thing with Teague was so new—so *fragile*—I hadn't even mentioned him to Miss Isabelle. I was almost afraid to mention him to myself. Because what was I thinking, giving another man a chance? Had I misplaced my marbles? I tried to scoop them up and dump them back into my stubborn skull.

I failed.

Then the ring of the shop phone yanked me from my thoughts.

“Dorrie? Are you packing?” Miss Isabelle barked, and I snatched the receiver away from my ear, almost flinging it across my tiny shop in the process. What was it with old folks shouting into the phone as if the other person were going deaf, too?

“What’s up, Miss Izzy-belle?” I couldn’t help myself sometimes, playing with her name. I played with everyone’s name. Everyone I liked anyway.

“*Dorrie*, I warned you.”

I cracked up. She breathed hard, like she was leaning on her suitcase to zip it closed. “I think maybe I can clear my calendar,” I said, “but no, I’m not packing yet. Besides, you called me at the shop. You know I’m not at home.” She insisted on calling the shop’s land-line if she thought I’d be there, though I’d told her a hundred times I didn’t mind her calling my cell.

“We don’t have much time, Dorrie.”

“Okay, now. How far is it to Cincinnati anyway? And tell me what to bring.”

“It’s almost a thousand miles from Arlington to Cincy. Two good

days of driving each way. I hope that doesn't scare you off, but I hate flying."

"No, it's fine. I've never even been on an airplane, Miss Isabelle." And had no plans to change that anytime soon, even though we lived less than ten miles from the Dallas–Fort Worth airport.

"And what you'd wear anywhere else will do, mostly. There's just one thing. Do you even own a dress?"

I chuckled and shook my head. "You think you know me, don't you?"

In truth, she'd rarely seen me in anything besides what I wore for work: plain knit shirts paired with nice jeans, shoes that didn't kill my feet when I stood in them eight hours a day, and a black smock to keep my clothes dry and free of hair clippings. The only difference between my work and not-work clothes was the smock. Her question was valid.

"Surprise, surprise, I do have one or two dresses," I said. "Probably wrapped in cleaner bags and mothballs and stuffed way in the back of my closet, you know, and maybe two sizes too small, but I've got a few. Why do I need a dress? Where are we going? To a wedding?"

There weren't many events these days where a nice pair of slacks and a dressy top wouldn't do. I could only think of two. Then Miss Isabelle's silence brought the foot I was gnawing into the spotlight. I winced. "Oh, gosh, I'm sorry. I had no idea. You never said—"

"Yes. There will be a funeral. If you don't have anything appropriate we can stop along the way. I'll be glad to—"

"Oh, no, Miss Isabelle. I'll find something. I was mostly kidding about the mothballs and such." While her packing noises continued in the background, I tried to remember exactly what I owned that would do for a funeral. Exactly nothing. But I had just enough time to run by JCPenney's on my way home. Miss Isabelle had done plenty for me—big tips every time I did her hair, bonuses whenever she could think up an excuse, greeting me with a pretty sandwich when I didn't have time to eat before her appointment, acting as a

sounding board when my kids were making me crazy—but no matter how close we felt, I would never let her pay for this dress. That crossed some kind of line. But why hadn't she mentioned we were going to a *funeral*? That was an important detail. Make that a critical detail. When she said she needed to tend to some things, I'd assumed she meant papers that needed to be signed in person, maybe for property to be sold. Business. Nothing as big as a funeral. And she wanted me to take her. Me. I'd convinced myself I knew her better than any of my other customers—she was my *special* customer, after all. But suddenly, Miss Isabelle seemed a woman of mystery again—the one who'd eased into my hair chair all those years ago carrying burdens so deep inside, I couldn't even speculate about them.

Miss Isabelle and I had spent hours in conversation over the years—more hours than I could count. But it occurred to me now, as much as I cared for her, as much as she trusted me to accompany her on this journey, I knew nothing about her childhood, nothing about where she came from. How had I missed it? I had to admit I was intrigued, though I usually left mystery solving to television personalities—figuring out how to pay my bills was mystery enough for me.

Miss Isabelle apparently got things all zipped up, and she startled me out of 007 mode. “Can we leave tomorrow, then? Ten A.M. sharp?”

“Absolutely, young lady. Ten A.M. it is.” It'd be tight, but I could manage it. Not to mention, what'd felt like technicalities before seemed weightier now.

“We'll take my car. I don't know how you young folks tolerate those tin cans you drive these days. Nothing between you and the road at all. Like navigating a ball of aluminum foil.”

“Hey, now. Tinfoil bounces. Kind of. But sure thing, I'll relish driving that big boat of yours.” Too bad CD players were still mostly options back in 1993, when she'd purchased her fancy Buick. I'd tossed all my cassettes. “And Miss Isabelle? I'm sorry about—”

“I’ll see you in the morning, then.” She cut me clean off, mid-sentence. She obviously wasn’t ready to discuss the details of this funeral yet. And me being me, I wasn’t going to dig.

“FUEL?” SAID MISS Isabelle the next morning as we prepared to pull out.

“Check.”

“Oil? Belts? Filters?”

“Check. Check. Check.”

“Snacks?”

I whistled. “Capital C-H-E-C-K.”

I’d arrived at Miss Isabelle’s an hour earlier than we planned to leave, so I could run the car by Jiffy Lube. They gave it a once-over; then I stopped for gas and other necessities. Miss Isabelle’s list of road snacks had been well over a mile long.

“Oh, shoot,” she said now, snapping her fingers. “I forgot one thing. There’s that Walgreens down the road.”

What on earth could she need so fast it required a detour before we ever left town? I shifted into reverse and eased the Buick down Miss Isabelle’s driveway and into the street. At the corner, I waited an extra long time, patiently allowing cars to pass until I had a long, clear space to enter.

“If you drive like this the whole time, we’ll never get there,” Miss Isabelle said. She studied me. “You think because you’re accompanying an old woman to a funeral, you have to act like an old woman, too?”

I snorted. “I didn’t want to get your blood pressure up too early, Miss Isabelle.”

“I’ll worry about my blood pressure. You worry about getting us to Cincy before Christmas.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I touched the tips of my fingers to my forehead and pressed down on the accelerator. I was happy to see she was as ornery as ever—death wasn’t a happy business, after all. She still

hadn't given me all the specifics—just that she'd received a call, and her presence was requested at a funeral near Cincinnati, Ohio. And, of course, she couldn't travel alone.

At Walgreens, she pulled a crisp ten from her pocketbook. "This should be plenty for two crossword puzzle books."

"Really?" I gaped at her. "Crossword puzzles?"

"Yes. Wipe that look off your face. They keep me sane."

"And you plan to work them riding in the car? Do you need Dramamine, too?"

"No, thank you."

Inside, I surveyed the magazine racks and wished I'd asked for more details. To be on the safe side, I chose one puzzle book with large print—"Easy on the eyes"—and one regular. I figured I had things covered either way, and I'd only have to make one trip inside the store. Who'd ever heard of people actually buying those crossword puzzle magazines unless they were sitting around in the hospital? Though come to think of it, I remembered my granny working them when I was a little girl. I guessed it was an old-people kind of thing to do.

I carried them low, against my hip, as if I were toting a giant-size box of feminine products to the lone male checker in a grocery store. But the cashier didn't even look at the magazines as she slid them across the scanner. Or, for that matter, at *me*. I waved away her monotone offer to bag them. It seemed wasteful, in spite of my shame.

Back in the car, Miss Isabelle eyed my purchases at arm's length. "That'll do. Now we'll have something to talk about on the road."

I imagined the topics crossword puzzles might inspire: Four across: "a pink bird." *Flamingo*.

We were going to be on Interstate 30 a long, long time.

We were quiet on the road the first hour or so, though, me trying to navigate midmorning Dallas traffic without cussing too much, each of us a little awkward in this different environment, each of us still mired in thinking of other things, other places.

My mind was on the night before, right about when things had calmed down. My new dress, tags removed, hung in a clear bag on the door of my closet. Bebe had settled into bed with her book. Stevie Junior was keeping company with a video game, as usual, except when his fingers were busy texting his girlfriend a hundred miles per hour.

And my mind was on Teague—on why I’d felt so nervous about calling him. Maybe, just maybe, it was that little voice chanting in my mind, Teague, Teague, out of your league!

But my phone had gone off, the ringtone I’d assigned him a few weeks after our first real date. *Let’s get it on . . .*

Oh, yeah. Corny.

“How’s my special lady?”

I know, I know. With anyone else, I’d cringe and head for the hills. What a line. But with Teague? I could hardly explain how it made me feel.

Okay. I’ll try.

Special. It made me feel special.

“Doing good, doing good. Yourself? Kids all settled in for the night?” I said. I tried to be all chill whenever he called me, tried to let him know he couldn’t melt me with a few words, slurp up whatever he wanted from the puddle, then leave the leftovers for someone else. I’d kept men at arm’s length for years now after so many mess-ups—theirs *and* mine. But where other guys took my attitude as a brush-off and my reluctance to get physical as some kind of kinky game, eventually calling me a prude and running the other way, Teague kept hanging in there. And I’d let him see past my cool a few times. The littlest peek at the woman who longed for a real man in her life. Somehow, I felt like he was willing to wait for that woman to make up her mind.

When I hung up ten minutes later, I pinched my arms and slapped my cheeks. Was I awake or sleepwalking? “I understand,” Teague had said. “You’re doing the right thing, helping your Isabelle out this way. I’ll miss you, but I’ll see you when you get back.” And: “Give

your mom my number. I'm used to dealing with kid stuff." True! He was a single dad of three! "If she needs help with Stevie or Bebe or anything at all while you're gone, I'm a phone call away."

I wanted to believe he *would* be there if they needed something. I almost could. Almost.

I hadn't known what to expect when I told him I was leaving town out of the blue. I knew exactly how Steve, my ex, would react, even before I dialed his number. I had to let him know, in the event the kids needed something—in which case I wished them good luck. Steve whined. He berated me. Asked how I could up and leave my kids for days. Funny how he never seemed to take a good, hard look in the mirror, right?

And other guys in the past? When I left with the kids for a little visit somewhere, it was always "Oh, baby, I can't survive without you. Don't leave me." But as soon as I passed the city limits, I swear someone fired the starting gun: *Gentlemen* (in the loosest sense of the word), *start your engines!* Then they'd run to the nearest whatever to pick up a substitute girlfriend. When I got back, spied the lipstick on their collars, and smelled the knockoff perfume in their cars, they'd be all "I'm sorry, girl, but what am I supposed to do when you go and leave me? You know it's really you I want, but I just didn't know for sure."

Right.

But Teague had surprised me. Again.

There was something *different* about a man who called after a first date to see how you were doing and to make sure you'd had a good time. Now, not too desperate. It's not like he called five minutes after I turned the dead bolt, all pitiful because I hadn't invited him in, already shooting me signals I'd made Yet Another Bad Choice. No, Teague had waited a respectable twenty-four hours, and then he hadn't even acted like we had to set up another date immediately, though he'd said he wanted to see me again. And now, more than a month and several dates later, whenever I thought of him, a single word still came to mind: *Gentleman*. The real kind.

Well, okay, two more words—Wayne Brady. Because Teague reminded me of the *Let's Make a Deal* game-show host with his goofy smile and sense of humor and hot-in-a-geeky-hot-kind-of-way looks.

Other men had held doors for me on first dates. They'd even offered to pay, though I always insisted on splitting the check—me and my independence, we are joined at the hip, the shoulder, and the elbow. But this went beyond the basics. We were well past first-date status, which I'm pretty sure surprised both of us, and the new had worn off some. Yet he still held doors, still picked up the check unless I managed to snatch it first and hold on tight. Still treated me, in every respect, like a lady.

With Teague, I suspected, the gentle went all the way to the bone.

But I wasn't sure I trusted myself. Could I recognize a real man? A trustworthy one? Like they say, Fool me once, shame on you. . . . Fool me ten times and I am plumb stupid.

ON THE BRIDGE over Lake Ray Hubbard, we were still crawling through heavy traffic, but Miss Isabelle finally piped up. "You met Stevie Senior in your hometown, right?"

He was just plain Steve, but I never bothered to correct her. And I tried to remember what I might have told her. Steve was forever calling me at work, interrupting my appointments, and if I didn't drop everything, next thing I knew, he'd show up in person. How well that went depended on his mood and choice of beverage the night before, so I tried to keep him on the phone and out of the shop. I figured a customer came in for a nice, relaxing getaway along with a hairstyle, even if only for an hour. I made every attempt to keep my personal history and problems low on the radar, but it didn't always work. And, because things with Miss Isabelle were different—she'd listened to me gripe about my kids' dad for years—she had at least a piecemeal picture of him. It seemed she would have picked up all the details in the process, but maybe not. After all, I'd been

surprised to realize how little I knew about her childhood, right? But I didn't really want to start over at the beginning.

"Yep. High school sweethearts," I said, hoping my simple answer would refresh her memory.

"And you married right out of high school." She paused expectantly, as though she wanted the whole enchilada all over again. I scraped a fingernail back and forth across a tiny rough spot on the otherwise-cushy armrest.

"What's three down, Miss Isabelle?"

She fumbled to bring her readers back to her nose and peered at the puzzle she'd started. With a triumphant smile, she read the clue. "It's a seven-letter adjective for 'much adored; favorite.'"

"Uncle."

"*Uncle?* That's only five letters."

"By 'Uncle,' I mean I give up."

"You can't give up. You didn't even try."

"Trying to drive is what I'm trying to do."

"*Beloved.*"

"Beloved?"

"Yes. That's the answer. Used in a sentence—Stevie Senior was your high school beloved."

So much for the crossword puzzle book steering us away from uncomfortable topics.

"Maybe Steve was be-loved at one time. Now he's downright be-noying."

"That's so sad."

"Tell me about it." I sighed, and I felt my resolve to keep it simple weaken. "I always thought he'd be the steady one. A good husband and father. He was our school district's star athlete, racking up touchdowns in the fall and three-pointers all winter. And championships. Everyone figured he'd go off to college on a scholarship and make something big of himself. And I figured after he graduated, we'd get married and ride off into the sunset. House, babies, picket

fence. Everything.” My voice trailed off, and I listened to the echo of my disappointment.

“Things don’t always work out the way we expect, do they?”

“Shoot, Miss Isabelle. You know how it turned out. I got the babies. I have the house. But I figured wrong on the picket fence. And Steve.”

A little later, I said, “What about you, Miss Isabelle? Did you have a high school sweetheart? Your husband—was he yours?” I knew folks back in her day usually did marry young and stick with it for decades. I wondered if the men were different back then, or if the women were just more patient with them when they acted like idiots.

Her answer just then was a sigh, and it seemed filled with pain. Rib-cracking, chest-expanding, larger-than-life pain. I felt I’d said the wrong thing, but I couldn’t take it back.

She flipped to a new page in the crossword puzzle book and proceeded to fill in answers as though her life depended on it. Presently, she said, “My high school sweetheart . . . that’s a story.”

It all started and ended with a funeral dress.