

CATHERINE RYAN HYDE

When You Were Older

The quickest decision you make could
be the one that saves your life ...



About the Author

I was doing my best to get out the door. And then the phone rang. I almost let it go.

New York, September 11th 2001

Russell Ammiano is rushing to work when he gets a phone call that saves his life. As the city he loves is hit by unimaginable tragedy, Russell must turn his back and hurry home to Kansas.

Kansas, September 14th 2001

Ben Ammiano is mentally disabled, and a creature of habit. Any change to his routine sends him into a spin. But now his estranged brother has reappeared, and Ben's simple, ordered world has turned upside down.

In a story as heartbreaking as it is uplifting, two brothers must bury their pasts and learn from each other, if they are to survive.

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About the Author

Also by Catherine Ryan Hyde

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WHEN YOU WERE OLDER

Catherine Ryan Hyde

For Dad and Monika

Part One
Tumbling Down

15 September 2001

IT WAS FOUR days after the towers fell, and I woke in the morning to see a giant standing over my bed. I was all set to scream a very unmanly scream, but it came out silent. I never managed any sound. Good thing, too. Because that would have scared this particular giant right under the bed.

It only took me a second or two to figure out who it was. And, worse yet, where I was.

Then, as I'd done every time I'd wakened from post-9/11 sleep - usually just a vague nap in somebody's moving car - I ran the list in my mind. What was lost, what had changed.

New York is over, the job is gone, Mom is gone, all my friends went down with the towers, all the work I did to leave Kansas behind for ever has come to nothing. I'm back in Nowhere-ville, right where I swore I'd never be again. And I'm stuck.

It was a perfect storm of nightmare scenarios. All was quite effectively lost.

I looked up again at the skinny giant, who was only my brother Ben. Not that I hadn't expected to bump into him, but ... I'd gotten in late the night before - well, late by Ben standards - and he'd already gone to bed.

He still wouldn't look at anybody. But it was nothing like that old business trick of focusing on a spot between the other person's eyebrows. Ben did everything big. He turned

his head away and looked off at a forty-five-degree angle, eyes turned down to the floor.

So there it was. Something that hadn't changed.

'Hey, Buddy,' I said.

'You have to take me to work. You have to get up.'

And those were the first words my brother Ben and I had said to each other in over six years.

I sat up in bed, in just my boxer shorts, blinking. That had not been nearly enough sleep. Not even close. My eyes felt sandy, my stomach borderline.

'Do you have a car?' he asked.

I could tell he was nervous about his ride.

'I don't.'

'Then how are you going to take me to work?'

'Mrs Jaspers said I should start using Mom's car.'

'Oh.'

'But she didn't know where Mom kept her keys. Do you know?'

'Yeah,' Ben said. 'I know.'

'Will you tell me?'

'Yeah.'

'Now? Or at least now-ish?'

'She keeps them on the hook by the front door.'

'Good,' I said. 'Progress.' I didn't say, Finally. 'So ... look ... do you know who I am?'

'Yeah,' Ben said.

'So you remember me?'

'Yeah.'

'So, who am I?'

'My brother.'

'Right. Good. Do you remember my name?'

'Yeah.'

'Why don't you say it?'

'You didn't say I should. Just if I remember it.'

'Actually, I meant, why don't you? Like, how about saying it?'

'Rusty.'

That old identity, so long left behind, sliced me like jagged metal. Jagged and, well ... rusty.

'I go by Russell now.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm all grown up.'

'I have to get to work. I have to be there by quarter to seven. I can't be late. Mr McCaskill wouldn't like it if I was late.'

'Sure. Fine. Let's get you to work, then. Have you eaten?'

'Yeah.'

'What did you eat?'

'I ate cereal.'

'How long have you been up?'

'I get up at five.'

'I didn't hear an alarm.'

'I don't have an alarm. I don't need an alarm. Every morning I just get up at five.'

'Why aren't you getting in?' I asked, raising my voice a little so he'd hear me, but keeping it down for the neighbors' sake at the same time.

Our mom's old Buick was running, warming up. I could feel the vibrations under my butt. It ran rough. I'd opened the driver's side door to lean out and talk to Ben, who was standing by the open garage door, not getting in.

'It's not one of those doors that closes all by itself,' Ben said. Loudly, with no concern for sleeping neighbors. And impatiently. As if I should have known already. As if everybody in the world should be just as informed as Ben figured they should be. 'I wait here by the garage door till Mom pulls the car out. Then I close the garage door. *Then* I get in.'

I sighed, and backed the car carefully out of the garage. I hadn't driven in years. In fact, I no longer had a valid

license. But this was hardly the time to address any of that.

Ben jumped into the passenger seat and buckled his shoulder belt. I threw Mom's Buick into reverse again.

'You can't leave the driveway,' he said. Before I could even ask why not, he said, 'You can't leave the driveway till your seat belt is on.'

I nodded a couple of times, and put on the belt. It was the fastest, most stress-free way to settle the issue.

I glanced over at Ben as we drove. Gathering up six years' worth of changes. But as far as I could see, he just looked older. He was over six foot six, which of course I hadn't expected to change. Still lanky and skinny and long, with a looseness in his joints, like the world's weirdest example of a young horse; though Ben himself no longer looked young. His brown hair was longer, shaggy. Probably just a lack of maintenance, but it looked purposeful. It looked like a style someone would wear to seem unconcerned and cool. Girls and young women traditionally found Ben absolutely irresistible. Especially when he was silent and standing still. They thought he was being enigmatic. Fascinatingly reserved. Until he spoke. Then they hurried off to tend to some important business they'd only briefly forgotten.

'Turn here,' Ben said.

'Aren't you forgetting something?'

'No.'

'I think you are.'

'What, then?'

'To tell me which way I should turn.'

'That way,' he said, pointing right.

Every street, every building that rolled by, was a scene straight out of my worst and most common recurring nightmare: suddenly waking up to find myself back in this bizarrely tiny town where I'd been stranded for the first eighteen years of my life. So I tried to experience it that

way. As a bad dream. It was easier and less upsetting than accepting it as my actual reality.

Ben's voice startled me. 'You want to know ... what?'

'What?'

'You want to know ... something?'

'Oh. That kind of what. OK. Tell me something.'

'In this big city. There are these big buildings. And somebody flew a plane. Into them. I mean, two planes. And they burned up. The buildings, not the planes. Well, both.'

'I know, Buddy. I was there.'

'You were? You're not burned up.'

'I was close enough to see it, but not close enough to get burned up.'

'Oh,' Ben said. 'You want to know ... something else?'

'Sure,' I said, though it was not entirely true.

'Where'd you go, Buddy?'

I pulled in one long, forced breath and then slowly let it leave again. I knew sooner or later he'd have questions. But I really thought the first one would be about Mom.

'I went away to college. You knew that.'

'Oh. Did you ... what do you call that? When you finish? School.'

'Graduate.'

'Yeah. Did you?'

'I did.'

'When did you?'

'About two years ago.'

'Oh.'

A block or two rolled by in awkward silence.

'Then I went to New York.'

'New York! That's the name of that big city where the buildings ...'

'Right, Buddy. I know.'

'You want to know something else?' He didn't wait to hear if I wanted that or not. 'I know a lot about bagging groceries. It's not as easy as it looks. There's a lot to know.'

You shouldn't put too many glass bottles and jars together cause they can hit against each other and break. And no eggs on the bottom. And no bread on the bottom. You can put some fruit on the bottom, if it's hard like a coconut, but not if it's soft like peaches. And it all has to balance, otherwise it's hard for people to carry. And it can't be so heavy that it breaks right through the bottom of the bag. And I bet you didn't know there was so much to know about it.'

'I guess I didn't,' I said, suddenly thinking I would kill for a cigarette. I hadn't smoked in more than four years. And I had watched the towers fall without ever once craving a smoke.

'I bet I know more about it than you do.'

I couldn't tell if he was feeling petulant or proud. Or both.

'Definitely, you do.'

'I bet you didn't think there was anything I knew better than you.'

'You used to know everything better than me.'

'I did? I don't remember that.'

'Well, you did.'

'But I don't remember. It's there. It's right there. Gerson's Market. Right there on the corner.'

I pulled into the parking lot. Stopped. Waited for him to get out. But he seemed to have lost his sense of rush. I glanced at my watch. He had three whole minutes to spare. He unbuckled his seat belt, but didn't otherwise move.

'Hey, Buddy,' he said. 'Want to know something?'

'Sure,' I said. But I already knew I wouldn't like it.

'When's Mom coming back?'

My lungs filled up with air all on their own. Not that they didn't usually. But in this case their capability surprised me. Did we really want to do this at the start of his work day?

'She's not.'

Ben shook his head. 'She always does.'

'And she would now. If she could. But she can't.'

'That doesn't sound right. You don't know Mom like I do. She always comes back. I only wanted to know when.'

He jumped out, slamming the door behind him.

I watched him move the long stilts of his legs toward the door as if they belonged to somebody else entirely. I'd had plenty of time to see that gait before going off to college, but I still hadn't shaken the image of the way he'd used to walk. So self-possessed as to be dangerous. A magnet for girls and trouble. And that was back when the girls never hurried away.

The market was only half-lit inside. Obviously not open. Ben rapped on the automatic sliding door, and in time a woman came and opened it with a key and slid it aside manually. Just enough for Ben to squeeze in.

And I thought, That's my older brother. What can you do?

I was cruising back slowly toward the house ... I still absolutely refused to call it home ... and I saw the kitchen lights on in a little corner bakery. I couldn't tell if the place was open or not.

The bakery was new. Or, at least, less than six years old. I was pretty sure there had used to be a dry cleaner's on that corner.

I pulled up and parked out front. The street felt weirdly empty for nearly seven in the morning. Like one of those old science-fiction movies where you find out you're the only person left alive. Whatever happened to the concept of Kansans getting up early? A lot of work shifts started at seven here, rather than the big-city nine. But if people were awake, they were hidden.

I read the name of the place, carefully stenciled on to one of the front windows. NAZIR'S BAKED GOODS.

So much for the idea that nothing ever changed around here.

The door was unlocked, and I stuck my head inside.

'You open?' I called.

I saw a young woman's head come up in the softly lit kitchen area behind the counter. She had jet-black hair, tied up in back, but not covered with a hairnet or a baker's hat. Her eyes were more black than dark brown, unless it was just the lighting. Her short white tee-shirt sleeves were rolled up almost to her shoulders. She was small. Thin and small.

'Not quite,' she called back. With some kind of accent, but I couldn't place it. 'We open at seven. But ... what do you want? The Danish are still in the oven, but the donuts are done. You just want coffee and a donut?'

Suddenly I wanted coffee and a donut more than I'd wanted to get out of this town as a kid. More than I'd wanted a cigarette while talking to Ben. It had been days since I'd enjoyed the smallest luxury or felt any pleasure at all. Coffee and a donut suddenly loomed like the promised land. I would be maddeningly incomplete until I reached them.

I wanted to say, You have no idea how much. But I didn't want her to think I was some kind of freak.

'That would be great,' I said.

I closed the door behind me and approached her counter. The display case was not yet filled with donuts. They were still on racks in the back, with her.

'What do you want?' she asked. 'We have glazed, crullers, powdered sugar, cinnamon twists ... no jelly-filled yet. I haven't had time to fill them.'

Again I struggled with her accent, but it just felt unfamiliar.

'What's good?' I asked, feeling about as adept at conversation as my brother Ben.

'It's all good. But the glazed are still warm. Something special about eating a donut when it's still warm.'

'Glazed, then.'

She pulled a little individual sheet of tissue paper out of a box and used it to pick up a donut without touching it. She placed it on a small paper plate for me, leaving the tissue wrapped around its sides.

'Help yourself to coffee. Oh. Do you need me to put out sugar or milk?'

'No. That's fine. Just black. Thanks. What do I owe you?'

'I haven't opened the cash register yet. You can pay on your way out.'

I'd actually intended to take my coffee and donut to go. But, since I couldn't pay for them until after seven, I sat.

I sipped the coffee. It was dark and strong, and made from some kind of good quality imported beans. Definitely not gas-station coffee, which I'd been subsisting on for days. I took a bite of the glazed donut, and my eyes literally tried to roll back in my head, it was that good.

I looked up to see her watching me.

'You've created magic,' I said.

'It's just fresher than you're used to.'

Then I sat in silence for a minute or two, looking out the window. A few cars rolled by, but it didn't seem like enough. I drank and wolfed, treating the food and drink like a lifeline. I consumed them like a dying man who thinks he might still, just barely, be able to save himself.

And then, predictably, they were gone. And I missed them.

I got up and poured myself a coffee refill.

'Another one?' she asked. 'You seem hungry.'

'That would be great.'

'I have some cream-cheese Danish just ready to come out.'

I watched her pull on a long hot-mitt and slide a tray out of the oven. She set the tray on her wooden work table and

levered a spatula under the biggest, nicest Danish. I brought her my paper plate, so as not to be wasteful, and she tipped the Danish on to it.

'Careful,' she said. 'Hot.'

I sat back down with it, watching her roll out a big piece of dough and then cut it, with quick motions of a knife, into pieces whose purpose I didn't understand.

I was wondering if she was younger than me - and if so by how much - when she spoke.

'You're new in town,' she said, with the accent that I still hadn't figured out.

'No, I'm old in town. I was born here. I went off to college six years ago and never came back.'

'Until now,' she said, looking up from her work.

'Yes, until now.'

I wasn't going to answer any more questions unless asked.

'Why now?' she asked a moment later.

'My mother died.'

'Oh. I'm so sorry. I should never have asked.'

'No, it's OK. So I promised myself I was done with this place for ever. And I built a whole new life. And now all of a sudden the new life is gone, and I'm back here, and I'm stuck.'

'Why stuck? Why can't you go again, after honoring your mother?'

'Because somebody has to take care of my brother. And nobody else wants the job.'

'Is he much younger, your brother?'

'No. He's older, in fact. I think he just turned thirty. Unless I'm off by a year. No. I'm not. He's six years older. So he just turned thirty. Last month.'

And I hadn't so much as sent him a two-dollar card.

'If he's older, then ... Oh!' she said suddenly. 'I know who you are. You're Ben's brother.'

Small towns. Gotta love 'em.

'You know Ben?'

'Sure, everybody knows Ben. The bag boy. Over at Gerson's Market. He's very sweet. Everybody likes him. I heard about his mother. Your mother. Very sad. She was very young. I'm sorry for your loss.'

I had no idea what to say. So I said nothing. I watched her load tray after tray of donuts into the display case. But then, when she was done, I decided it didn't look like enough donuts. Not for a thriving bakery on a Saturday morning. Then again, based on the number of customers she had at opening - and it was by then a minute or two after seven - this was hardly a thriving bakery.

'You don't look like Ben,' she said, without looking up from her work. 'He's so tall. And you're...'

'Puny?'

'I was going to say, compact.'

'We're only half-brothers. We had different fathers.'

She leaned her bare arms on to the clear glass counter and looked right into my eyes. I looked away. I'm still not sure why.

'I heard a rumor about Ben's brother, but maybe it's one of those things that people say in a small town, and maybe it's not even true.'

'That's all very possible,' I said. 'What did you hear?'

'That you worked on the one-hundred-and-fifth floor of one of the World Trade Center buildings, and so I thought probably Ben's brother is dead.'

'That last part didn't quite pan out.'

'The rest is true?'

'No. I worked on the one-hundred-and-fourth floor.'

'Seriously?'

'It's not the kind of thing people joke about these days.'

'So you weren't at work when it happened.'

'I was trying to be.' I stopped dead for a minute, gauging how much of this I was really prepared to tell. Testing it like an old manual dipstick in a gasoline tank. 'I was doing

my best to get out the door. And then the phone rang. And I was late. And so I almost didn't get it. I almost let it go. But then for some reason I did. Get it. And it was my old next-door neighbor. Telling me about my mom. Telling me he had Ben, and he wasn't willing to have him much longer. So I called in to work and started booking a flight. Of course all the flights were grounded before the morning was half-over ...'

I was careful not to look at her as I spoke. I looked down at my Danish, touched it. It had cooled to eating temperature. I wolfed it down in six bites. It was incredible.

When I finished, and looked up, she was still leaning on the counter watching me.

'So your mother saved your life,' she said.

'Not purposely. But yeah.'

'How do you know not purposely?'

'She couldn't have known.'

'How do you know what people can know? People can do all manner of things if it's important enough. If a mother can lift a car off her son, maybe she can die at just the right time to save him.'

I didn't like talking about my mom. To put it as politely as possible, I hadn't broken through to any kind of acceptance in the last four days. I was still firmly planted in the initial stage of grief: denial. Her death was still something I was dreaming. A bad dream. But a dream, nonetheless.

'You really think that's possible?' I asked, and then slugged down the last of my coffee.

She walked around the counter, and for one awful moment I thought she was coming right at me. That she might touch me, try to comfort me. Some kind of unbearable human interaction like that. Instead, she flipped on the lights in the seating area. I winced, and covered my eyes with one hand.

'Sorry,' she said. 'You never know. In a world like this, you never know what's possible. So I figure, don't say it's possible, because you don't know. But, then again, don't say it's not possible. Because you don't know that, either.'

Suddenly, I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

'What do I owe you for all this?'

'On the house,' she said, walking back to her own side of the counter.

'Seriously? Why?'

'Because your mother just died, and you came home all the way from New York to take care of your brother, Ben. And so I say the least somebody can do is give you coffee and something to eat.'

I thanked her and ran. Or nearly ran. I wondered if she was as aware as I was of my sudden desperate need to get away.

I looked back through the window and saw her looking out at me. Watching me go.

I read the name of the bakery again. Nazir's. That and the accent came together in my brain. And it answered a question. It explained why nobody else but me had come in for coffee and a donut that morning.

I stuck my head back in the door.

'Where are you from?' I asked.

'Wichita.'

'I meant originally. Not that I care.'

Her black eyes burned right through me.

'You care.'

'Not in a bad way, I don't.'

She turned her eyes back down to her table again. 'Egypt,' she said. 'We are Egyptian. Naturalized. We are not terrorists.'

I didn't ask who the other part of 'we' was.

'I'm sorry. I really wasn't meaning to pry.'

'What did you do there?'

It was too out of context. It sailed right over my head.

'What did I do where?'

'On the one-hundred-and-fourth floor of the World Trade Center.'

'Oh. That. Advertising. Hatcher, Swift & Dallaire. It's an ad agency. Or ... I guess it was an ad agency. A good one. I was lucky to work there.'

'You're young to be a New York ad man.'

'That's why it was lucky.'

I drove home - back - thinking that, in New York, people would get the difference between a terrorist and a naturalized Egyptian. And maybe even care. But this was not New York.

I was guessing Nazir's Baked Goods had been having trouble with cash flow for ... oh, about four days. Assuming they hadn't been all along.

When I got back, I found myself curled in the middle of the living room rug. Literally. I don't remember getting there. I just found myself there. I just came to awareness on my side on the rug, in a fetal position. I don't think I fell, because nothing hurt. I think I climbed down there. But I have no memory.

I shook, and I sweated, and at one point I buried my face against my own knees and let loose a throat-straining scream. One good pull-every-muscle-in-my-body scream.

Call it a delayed reaction.

14 September 2001

IT WAS THREE days after the towers fell, and I'd been half-walking, half-hitchhiking for about an hour. I mean, since my last ride had dropped me off. Not in total. In total I'd been hitchhiking for most of three days.

Three days ago, when I'd been closer to New York, my thumb and I had been greeted like a civilian survivor of an honorable and justified war. But I was very far from New York by now. In fact, I had only about five miles left to go.

It was also nearly nine o'clock, and dark. People don't like to pick up male hitchhikers after dark. Doesn't let them get a good look at the hitchhiker first.

The car was more like a Jeep or a Land Rover, very old and hulking. I turned when I heard the poorly muffled motor, and stuck my thumb out. The headlights nearly blinded me. I squinted into the light, and watched him roar by without even slowing down. Then, a split second later, the brakes squealed as the monster skidded to a stop. While I was wondering what to make of this, the driver threw into reverse and backed up to where I was standing.

I waited while he leaned over and rolled down the old-fashioned, low-tech crank window.

'Rusty?'

'Oh,' I said. 'It's you. Larry.'

Larry Del Veccio was one of the guys I'd gone to high school with. This may sound like a remarkable coincidence.

But in a town with a population of 2,250, not so startling.

'I go by Russell now,' I said. Which *so* did not matter in that moment.

'Sorry about the headlights. Have to keep 'em on bright because one of the low-beams is burned out. Get in, man. You're going home, right?'

'I'm going ... yeah. To ... the house. My mom's house. You know.'

I refused to call it home.

'Get in.'

I observed myself, as if through someone else's eyes, as I got in, levering my huge backpack over the passenger's seat. My lack of sleep was catching up with me big.

'Really sorry about your mom,' he said as he gunned the big beast back out on to the little highway.

'Thanks.'

'So unexpected.'

'It was.'

'She was so young. Or at least she seemed pretty young.'

'She was fifty-four.'

'That's young. I mean, to die.'

'It is.'

Larry pulled a pack of Marlboros out of his shirt pocket, and pressed the dashboard lighter in with a click. I think he was trying to keep busy. I think conversing with me was not soaking up enough of his evening.

'Vince and I went by and saw Ben,' he said, gearing up for another try.

'That was nice of you. How does he seem?'

'I don't know. The same.'

'Does he seem to even get it? About our mom?'

'Hard to say with Ben. If he does, we didn't see it. So, listen. You were in New York, right? I heard you were in New York. I heard you work in one of the World Trade

Center towers, but I'm guessing that's one of those small-town, get-it-wrong things.'

'No, that was true. Past tense, though. I *worked* in the towers. Nobody works in them now except forensic specialists and fire crews. And even then it depends on your definition of the word "in".'

'Right. I knew that. So ... where were you? When it happened?'

'Home. I was a little late getting out of the house.'

'Whoa. So you would've been ...'

'Yeah. I would have been. But, as it turns out, I'm not.'

'So, did you hear it, or turn on the TV, or ...?'

'I live right across the river from lower Manhattan. I had a perfect view.'

'You watched it?'

I didn't answer. It wasn't a decision so much. More an absence of emotional fuel. Instead I watched as Larry pressed the lighter to the end of his cigarette, then puffed until it was drawing well. He cracked the window to draw out some of the smoke.

'How'd you feel?' he asked.

And I thought, Oh, crap. Now I'm on a therapist's couch? And then I thought, You really need an answer to that? Like you're thinking I might say great? I watched it and felt great? But I knew it was just my exhaustion, and really not so much Larry's failing. So I said nothing at all.

Larry took a long pull off the Marlboro, tucked high in the crook of his first two fingers.

'Christ,' he said. 'That must've been something.'

'Look. Sorry. I'm just really tired. I haven't slept in days. I mean, maybe an hour once or twice, but nothing really. I've been on the road this whole time. We'll get together. Catch up. I just need a couple nights' sleep.'

'Have to be soon, though. I'm shipping out.'

'To ...?'

'Don't know yet. We'll see. I'm National Guard. I been National Guard six years, man. Nearly as long as you been gone. We been ready for six years. Three of us from Norville: me and Paul Kager and Vince Buck. You remember them, right? The National Guard Three. We'll be the first to ship out. First, I think they'll put us on defending some key US targets. But if we go to war the Guard'll be the first ones over there. You know. Afghanistan. I hope so. I'd like to give 'em a fresh look at what they started.'

'Sounds pointless,' I said.

I didn't mean the part about defending. I meant the part about what he wanted to give them. I actually hadn't mean to say it at all. Any of it. I'd thought I'd only thought it. But then I heard it in my ears.

'What?' Larry asked. 'What'd you say, man?'

It was clear, in the way he said it, that he'd heard me just fine.

'Oh, crap, Larry. Look, I'm sorry. I'm just like the freaking walking wounded right now. I don't know what I'm saying at this point.'

A long silence. Then I felt his hand clap down on my shoulder.

'Yeah, well. Look. We got you home.'

I looked up to see him pull into the driveway of the house I'd lived in for eighteen years. From the day I came home from the maternity hospital to the day I went off to college, believing in my heart that I'd left Nowhere-ville for good and for ever.

I still refused to call it home.

I went first to the Jesperses, next door, thinking they had Ben.

I stood in front of their door with my oversize pack at my feet, and knocked, expecting Phil to answer. Instead I got his wife, Patty. She looked pretty ruined, not to mention

more than six years older. Her long hair was uncombed, and she brushed it off her face with her hands. I was pretty sure I saw some gray I'd never seen before.

'Oh, my God,' she said. 'Oh, thank God. You finally made it.'

'Yeah. Sorry it took so long.'

'Well, honey, it's not your fault.' She moved in and trapped me in a bear hug I'd have been happier without. 'I mean, no planes. I heard all the rental cars in the country were rented out, even.'

'Yeah. I heard that, too. From every rental car company I called.'

'Well, we're just so relieved to see you. And, first of all, before I say another word, we are so, so sorry about your mom. Poor baby, you must just be devastated. I didn't want to miss saying that. But ... and please don't take this the wrong way, honey ... we love Ben. No way we'd let him be on his own, even for a couple or three days. But, honestly, honey, we had no idea. We really don't have the patience for it. Not at all. We raised two of our own, and that's enough for the whole "Are we there yet?" thing.'

'Yeah. How *is* Mark, anyway?' One of the other guys I'd gone to high school with, not to mention a same-age next-door neighbor for eighteen years.

'Oh, fine, but now he's talking about enlisting, and I'd like to wring his neck.'

'Lot of that going around,' I said.

'Well, I guess folks figure something needs to be done.'

That's when it hit me that I had no energy for digressions. Even though this one was my own fault. I'd have to be more careful.

'But ... back to Ben. You told him about ...'

'Oh, sure, honey. We told him everything, as nice as we could, we even took him in to your mom's doctor so he could explain to Ben all about what an aneurysm is. And then on the way home he asks, for about the hundredth

time, when she's coming back. We're just about running out of ... well, we just can't take much more.'

'Send him out, then.'

'Oh, he's not here.'

'He's not? Mr Jespers said—'

'We tried, honey, God knows we tried. But you know how your brother is. Everything's got to be familiar. Got to be his own little routine. So we've been putting him to bed in his own bed, and then the last few nights Phil slept on the couch over there, case he needed something in the night, or got scared. But tonight we figured, from when you called and all, that you'd be in soon enough. Ben goes to bed at eight. Every night. Eight. Not a minute sooner. Not a minute later. Wait, let me get you the key.'

She disappeared from the doorway, and I stood, shivering slightly. I looked up into the yellowish, bug-repellent porch light and squinted. I was so tired that just for an instant I lost track of my surroundings. Things whited out, the way they do in that split second just before you lose consciousness.

Part of me was wishing she wouldn't come back. Because I didn't have the energy for her. But that was stupid, of course. I needed the key.

A second later she reappeared, and pressed it into my hand.

'You'll have to take him to work in the morning. He goes in early.'

'Ben has a job?'

'Oh, yeah. Sure, honey. You didn't know? Ben's been bagging groceries for near on to two and a half years. It's working out real good. Everybody likes him. Somebody has to drive him there and pick him up, though. He can't ride the bus. Your mom tried to teach him to ride the bus, but he got lost every time. Every damn time. One time it took her half the day to find him again, even though the whole damn town was on alert to be looking out for him.'

Mom's older son got a job bagging groceries right around the time 'her baby' got a job with one of the best ad firms in New York. Much as I was accustomed to Ben's condition, this seemed weird.

I needed to get out of this conversation. I needed sleep.

'I don't have a car, though.'

'Take your mom's car.'

'Oh. Right. Do you know where she keeps her keys?'

'No. I don't. Sorry. But maybe Ben does.'

Sure. Cling to that, let's.

'Well, goodnight,' I said. 'Thanks for looking after him.'

'It was an emergency, honey, but thank God you got home. That's all I can say. Phil and I are just too old for the whole Ben thing. Maybe you'll do better, cause you're young. Good luck.'

'Thanks,' I said.

'You're gonna need some luck.'

I didn't answer that one. I just cut across the lawn to my childhood home, thinking, Don't you really figure that last comment would have been better left unsaid?

All the lights were off in the house, but when I opened the front door with my key and stepped into the living room, I could see everything clearly. Too clearly. The room was suffused with a sort of ghostly glow. In my altered state of exhaustion, it seemed nearly supernatural. But it didn't take long to figure out there was a night light in every room.

I wandered over to the mantel first, because the photos drew me.

My mom and dad at their wedding. My mom and dad with Ben and me, ages maybe four and ten. I looked at the sharp focus in Ben's eyes, the slight glint of defiance and mischief. I'd known Ben that way for the first eight years of my life. Then I'd lived with the changed Ben for ten. I wondered if I was really sure who I expected to meet again

in the morning, though my rational mind certainly knew what was what in that situation.

Then there was the photo of me winning statewide track in high school, and Ben at age twelve, holding a twenty-inch trout in a tippy canoe (the tippiness didn't show in the photo, but I remembered) on Council Grove Lake.

I looked again at the photo of my parents, and was hit with a strange and disturbing thought.

I'm an orphan.

Then I shook it away again. Orphans were little waifs, dependant minors. I was a grown man whose parents were both dead. Lots of adults fell into that category. Granted, most were older than me.

Oddly, that chain of thought did not bring me dangerously close to tears. The next one did.

I looked at the mantel itself, and got a sudden flash of our family's Christmas village.

Every year my mom would take down all the photos and knick-knacks and construct the village with decorations that spent the rest of the year hiding, boxed, in the attic, just waiting for their season to shine.

She used stacks of books for hills, then covered them with chicken wire and cotton batting. The little houses had holes in the back for the bulb of a Christmas light to be inserted, so the houses on the hills glowed with light, as though occupied. A little horse-drawn sled spent the whole season headed down a cotton hill toward a mirror lake it would never reach. On the lake, a tiny porcelain skunk ice-skated, and a family of inch-high deer drank from the silver water.

And that was the spot where I nearly lost it. But I held tight. I was too unguarded to let anything like real emotion happen now. It would flip me and pin me, and I would lose. Maybe permanently. I had to rest and be strong enough for that fight.

I wandered into the glowing kitchen in search of something to eat. But I only got smacked again. On the door of the refrigerator, held on with food magnets (an ear of corn, a strawberry, a carrot, an ice-cream cone, a banana), were all five of the postcards I'd sent my mom from New York.

First I was merely struck by their dullness and lack of imagination. The Empire State building. Rockefeller Center. The Statue of Liberty. The Brooklyn Bridge. Had I really put so little time and attention into my choices? Or had I thought my choices would seem appropriate from this end of the world? Now I stood on this end of the world with them, and they just seemed sad.

The fifth card was a photo of the World Trade Center. The Twin Towers. It zapped my body with a jolt of electricity. I could feel it buzzing for many seconds, eerie and slow to fade. I pulled the postcard off the fridge, dropping its ice-cream cone magnet on to the kitchen linoleum. I bent down and picked it up, feeling vaguely dizzy, and stuck the postcard back on the fridge with the photo side in. So I wouldn't have to look at it.

Of course, that left the message side out.

It was dated 30 April 1999. 'Dear Mom,' it said. 'Here it is, the job of a lifetime. I'm on top of the world. Wish me luck. Love, Rusty.'

Rusty? Why did I sign it Rusty? I'd left that name behind on my way to college.

Amazingly, none of that was the genuine zap I referred to.

It was the role reversal. The surrealistic role reversal. I'd sent those postcards from a place I viewed as the true world, the only important world, as if dropping them into a void. Almost as if the address on the card had never existed, or at the very least, was not entirely real.

Maybe that's why I had signed it 'Rusty'. What did it matter, in fiction?