**Hole in the Wall**

Elliot can’t help but notice that there is something in him that insists he break through walls. This is not just a metaphor in Elliot’s life, at some point, in every place he has ever lived; he’s poked a hole into a wall just to find what was on the other side. “It kind of drives me nuts.” He complains about his obsession. ”Because I have to spend a lot of time fixing these walls, that hide absolutely nothing, before the landlord finds out about the damage and kicks me out.” He stares into his coffee cup, which is empty, and turns it in his sensitive hands, hands that don’t match his Cro Magnon face. “Just because I’ve never found a treasure or a hidden passage, doesn’t shut up the voice in my head that directs me to open the wall and check it out.”

Elliot has, in his attempt to survive the devastation that has been brought into his life with the Greek earring case, reverted to his skills with electronics and TV repair. He had acquired these skills, as a teenager, in an attempt by the state to teach a useful profession to this throw away child in reform school.

He rents a shop in the once-industrial, down- at-the-heels, unfashionable area of Kendall Square, Cambridge. He doesn’t need much and it delivers just that. The room provides just enough space with a grimy window, a tiny, nasty washroom, a rough workbench and shelves for the stereos and TVs waiting to be fixed or being used as donors to the cause. Most of what he needs is in his panel truck that advertises: Elliot’s TV and Stereo Repair. Elliot has slept here in the shop when he wasn’t lucky.

Shortly after waking from a vivid dream, Elliot succumbs to his inner voice and breaks a little hole in the wall. He is amazed when he sees a giant, abandoned, and empty warehouse on the other side. He immediately increases the size of the hole so that he can climb in. As he walks around in it, he thinks it is like a dream… a repeating dream he’d had for years. It is a room that has been forgotten by the world. It is as big as an airplane hanger with a vast, mostly intact, glass roof coated in soot and stretched high over the space. His vision and desire for his family ignites a plan… a secret house. Right away he begins to construct a home in the warehouse. He brings wood salvaged from loading flats, a hose to hook up water, plastic sheeting for the dome, an extension cord, a camp stove, salvaged kitchen cabinets, and a refrigerator. Finally he brings in a table, chairs, a TV, and a mattress. He hangs an Indian bedspread behind the bed. He turns on the lamps, adjusts the bright pillows, and he smiles to himself. This is perfect. The only problem is convincing Beth that entering their home through a hole in the wall, via the TV shop, is cool.

Elliott is on a great romantic mission as he drives to Philadelphia. He will win back his young wife and baby from the comforts of her parent-subsidized apartment near Rittenhouse Square. He knows Beth and he knows she longs for an authenticity that scene doesn’t provide.

It is obvious when Elliot walks into the pretentious coffee house. The place is packed with the trust fund-supported, bearded beats sitting on their deceit. Elliot walks over to Beth’s table that she shares with Andre. Elliot is nearly growling at the weak pretender who trembles over his espresso. Elliot is what could be called a real man. He is here to make love to his wife and bring her back home to Boston.

The sheets are in a tumble. Elliot and Beth are embracing Liza from either side of the baby. She has finally fallen asleep after hours of sobbing. She was inconsolable, presumably in distress as her pretty new teeth cut their way through her gums to appear as pearls. Beth and Elliot are sleep deprived and exhausted when Beth’s own painful revelation begins. Fatigue can act as a truth serum. A person just doesn’t have the vitality it takes to further protect a lie.

Elliot realizes, after the teary truth telling, that living in a warehouse is not a solution. Beth feels guilty for her inability to be content with the charming and hip house. It is a matter, she points out, of location. Beth feels isolated living in the hole in the wall. She just can’t invite her friends to come with their carriages to the TV repair shop, climb through a hole and walk into the plastic sheeted dome in the giant old warehouse, in a manufacturing zone. It is not a neighborhood she wants. Beth needs to have friends. She needs to let Liza play with the children of friends. It is humiliating and depressing. She calls it the “hellhole”.

To Elliot, having his guy friends over is no problem. His friends think it is cool. But he understands how it is for Beth. She is from an upper-middleclass, mainline family. Although she is a Young Socialist, this is beyond her ability. Above everything else, he wants a happy family.

“The smell of the old petroleum and oil…it stinks in here. The weirdness of this place is beyond hip, cool, and experimental. I need a real house Elliot.” He gets a hanky and hands it to her. She wipes her tears, blows her nose and tries not to be too loud and wake up Liza. ”I know how hard you worked fixing up this shack. You were so clever… but I can’t. I just can’t do this.”

Beth’s girlfriend Jane sits in the Bickford Cafeteria with her gorgeous baby Nadia in the stroller. They are having a late coffee. Jane‘s long, wavy dark hair is not straight but on Jane it looks sexy and hip. She pulls the antique fringed amber, wine, and emerald, paisley wool shawl around her finely chiseled, ivory shoulders. Her dark eyes twinkle. She is so fashionably thin… although flat chested. Jane is very envied. She is drop-dead gorgeous without even trying. Every woman who looks at Jane desires her artistic, elegant and hip style. Nobody suspects the Madonna of pill popping.

“Have you heard that Ella’s moving to Fort Hill?” Jane speaks very softly and slowly. She never goes on and on. That is one reason no one ever imagines she is speeding.

 “Fort Hill in Roxbury? You are putting me on… in the black ghetto? Wow. That’s outrageous. Why? What’s going on with her? I thought the South End was as far as people were going into the ghetto.”

“A lot of people are into that scene. You know, the Jug band? Well, they bought a bunch of houses up there. It’s very funky. People are moving in with no money but they work on the property. Prices are low for these old abandoned houses. It’s kind of a commune. The wiring is all outdated. The plumbing is frozen and broken. The peeling paint and ugly wallpaper is nasty but the view is great. You can see all of Boston from up there… right out to the harbor.” Beth interest is apparent.

“I don’t get it. Who’s in charge? How do you get a house?”

Jane pulls a packet of Zwieback teething biscuits from her purse and hands one to each baby.

“Mel Lyman. He’s the leader. He is supposed to be very groovy. He was a banjo and harmonica player for the Jug Band. They made millions. A couple of years ago he quit. Now he’s put together a community with his ideas of the way the world should be.”

Jane crosses her legs adjusting the long suede skirt. “His wife Jessie has a lot of money too. Her dad is a really famous American artist. Her dad was this midwestern master. He hated New York. His work is rather rude. Oddly enough, the Missouri State House is covered with his murals. Whenever she needs to buy a farm or something, she just sells one of daddy’s paintings. It’s all very hillbilly… Ozark. The Jug Band and Daddy’s paintings of the Midwest morality are very middle American in a sexually confronting, supercilious way.”

Beth is so curious. “They’re all hippies right?” Jane enjoys being the cognoscente.

“Not exactly, from what people say. I mean they smoke a lot of weed. They trip. They’re into growing their own morning glories. They do acid, mushrooms a little, mostly acid and seeds. I don’t know about speed. Probably they do it. Everybody talks so much and works so hard. They are beyond normal. They are completely into astrology. They are super hard workers. Everyone’s kind of normal looking; they don’t get into long hair. I heard they all practically worship Mel. The scene is far out. They are all heads. Hey! Maybe you and Elliot should check it out. I could be mistaken but I think it’s kind of interesting what they are doing up there.”

Two weeks later, Beth and Elliot are moving the last of their belongings out of the hole in the wall. They maneuver their Danish modern dresser and the foam mattress through the hole in the wall, out of the TV repair shop door, into the truck. They drive down Mass Avenue, turn to drive under the elevated train tracks on Washington Street and dodge pedestrians. The train tracks come to a terminal. The sky is suddenly above them with no gloomy train track overhead. The rows of the forlorn, bow-front, four-story brick tenements of Roxbury come to an end. Hulking, wooden, three-family firetraps replace them. Beth is delighted when they pull the van into the tree-lined private way.

The crumbling asphalt dissolves into a dirt road. It almost looks like Vermont. A long-legged, brown hound dog lopes along side the van barking a greeting as his tail wags. Chickens scatter as the van moves cautiously into the dead end street and on the high point of Boston City. The houses all look like Andrew Wyeth had designed them. The Victorian farmhouses are weathered-grey clapboard or cedar shingled. The sagging porches and wilting rafters give all four houses an air of other worldliness. It looks like a stage set rather than a place to live.

Elliot is happy to tell Beth all about the Fort on Fort Hill. “A huge water tower had been built in the 1800’s to provide for Roxbury’s needs as the city of Boston expanded. Water access was the initial reason that Roxbury was asked to join Boston. The water tower soared at the apex of the historic hill where Washington’s troops evacuated the Brits in the siege of Boston. The tower was designed to resemble a giant minaret. Later, about 1900, an observation balcony was added.”

The water tower was rundown now. It was an exotic leftover from an era when Roxbury was a fun getaway from Boston. It became a hundred and twenty foot high pigeon coop. There is a dilapidated, rusted, iron fence and a weed-infested park at the base of the curious landmark.

Some strong, wiry guys help Elliot unload the truck. They carry the meager battered furniture up to the slanting porch of the middle house. Beth and Elliot are some of the first recruits into the community. They are not close friends to Mel and the Jug Band family.

“My name’s Carol but everyone here calls me Bitsy. I’m Jessie’s best girlfriend. This family is a gas. Jessie is Mel’s wife. We went to Bennington together… way back then. I moved in about a year ago. Here, this is your place.”

Bitsy opens the squeaking door to a horrid set of rooms. “You don’t need a kitchen up here. We all eat together and you can use the kitchen. We can always use a good cook or a good cleaner.” Beth was in shock. This place looked like it must have been condemned. The plaster walls are smashed in places exposing the old lathing structure. The ugly, mustard wallpaper is peeling off and hanging in sheets. The ceiling is blackened by mold or fire. The windows are so dirty they look like frosted glass and some panes are missing. The floor is covered with dirty, sticky, brown linoleum and a rug printed with big, yellow, mustard roses, and a tangle of bile-dark vines.

There is not one thing Beth can feel happy about in the first room. She opens the door to the adjoining bedroom and realizes it can get worse. The wallpaper, what is left, appears to have been chosen by a mad person. The pattern is a tortured maze of thorny, wilted, mauve flowers on a background that appears to resemble dried blood. The neighborhood vandals had their weekly parties here, she guesses. The room is littered with stinking, damp mattresses displaying stains of every color. The walls are covered with graffiti and the big, double window at the far end, is missing the glass. As she walks to the window, she understands why this is the party room. The window looks out to the edge of the cliff and there are no houses to see any lights or activity in this room. In the distance, through a missing pane, she can see the cathedral on Mission Hill and lights from the apartments that adorn the Hill like a mosaic.

She crosses her arms over her chest and makes an internal estimate as to how long it will take Elliot and her to make these nasty rooms habitable for their family.

“Hey Beth, I can guess what you’re thinking. What you have to remember is, you are not alone. Dig it. We are a family and we will all bust our asses to get this place ready. The reason it’s such a wreck now is, everything was like this.” She gestures with her thin, red, worn hands. “We fixed up every place but this one. This is the last available cell. You know, like a beehive cell. Not like jail. Don’t get bummed out. Come on over to my place. We’ll have a cupa’.” Beth has been struck dumb.

Elliot is out on the porch holding Liza and having a grand time with the guys. Elliot was supposed to have checked out this place. What was he thinking? Beth is exhausted and disenchanted.

The dog tries to nuzzle his nose into Beth’s crotch, aggravating her further. “Elliot, have you seen this place?” He shakes his head meekly in the negative to her snapping accusations in the form of a question. He runs for cover.

”I was up here and saw other houses. Not that one. They looked great. I’m sorry babe.” Beth is so angry she almost sputters.

“Well, take a look at this before you put any of my furniture in that room. There are probably bugs, fleas, and bedbugs. Go look. Give me the baby.”

She marches off with Bitsy. The porch floor is level. The posts are plumb, although there are chickens roosting on the rails. Three rocking chairs and a wood bench create the clue to jovial evening conversations and banjo music.

Bitsy is perfectly named. She is a bone and a hank of hair. Her long, burnt-butter hair hangs in a thin, wispy curtain down her back to her hips. She isn’t dressed like a hippy… more like a thrift store mod. A skimpy, green paisley dress brushes the tips of her fingers. Her overbite is considerable but she wears eyeliner that draws attention up to her big, sad, brown-liquid eyes. She smiles with pride as she invites Beth across the threshold into her parlor.

The room is romantic Victorian. Plum-red velvet covers the curving, rosewood-embellished love seat and two, almost-heart shaped, side chairs. The walls are stark white. A deep plum-red Persian carpet covers the center of the waxed hardwood floor. Tall and sensuous Tiffany lamps, of the wisteria pattern, sit as a pair, on a long, art- nouveau library table below a gilded morning glory mirror. A caned, bentwood rocking chair dominates the far corner, below another fabulous Tiffany floor lamp that depicts a flirting peacock in a lush garden.

Beth sits, awestruck, in a velvet chair, an oval Carrera marble tea table just to her right. Bitsy ducks into the kitchen and emerges in minutes with a silver tray laden with a china teapot hand-painted with red and golden roses, along with a supporting cast of a creamer, sugar bowl, two matching tea cups, and a plate of brownies. Beth feels much better after sipping the orange spice tea. Maybe it was low blood sugar or dehydration that sent her off on a temper. Bitsy recommends only one brownie and no brownies for Liza. She gives Beth a knowing wink and brings out an emergency oatmeal cookie to hush the disappointed baby.

Beth gets a house tour. “So, you and Elliot can sleep here in this room if you like, until you get your own place set up. This is my crasher room.” Giggling, Bitsy opens the waxed, dark wood door to an impeccable, cool Victorian bedroom. A tall Jacobean bed and dresser, with the elegant full-length mirror, are painted glossy white. The walls are electric blue. The diamond paned, leaded, clear, windows are open. The spring wind blows the blue and white Indian print curtains into the room like flags of exotica. The massive bed wears a blue and white china-plate patterned quilt. It is handmade in Appalachia, Bitsy informs the stunned Beth. Over the bed is a framed poster of Klimt’s Kiss. The art nouveau frame is white. Again, this room has an elegant, caned, bentwood rocking chair. This one sits on a zebra skin rug. “This is too much.” Beth uses the popular slang in a completely correct manner. ”Far out!” “Wow, you did all of this in only one year? Was it really as awful as my place in the beginning?” Bitsy pulls her self up with pride. “Even worse. I can’t begin to tell you about the squalor. After the wiring, plumbing and windows were re-glazed, and the men repaired the plaster, bless their hearts, us ladies got to work doing our thing. Jessie and Edith both helped me clean. We selected the paint colors together. We shopped the used furniture shops down on Washington Street, Morgan Memorial, Salvation Army, and Saint Vincent DePaul - or as we call them, Morgie’s, Sally’s, and Vinnie’s. I love this style. It really is what I feel most comfortable in.” She licks her swollen lips and smiles with her overbite framed in pink gums.

 “I’m a Libra, sun in the seventh house, moon in Leo. In my past life I was into a grand life, royal. Lucky for me, I used my position well. This time around, I am surrounded by brothers and sisters and all this grace from the mind and hand of man.” Beth blinked. She has no idea of her house or her planets. She did remember she was a Leo. She read it on a Hallmark birthday remembrance chart. What was her birthstone and birth month flower? She forgets. “Could I get my chart done? Who does that?” Bitsy is like a Duchess. “Well lucky you. You’re in the right place. I’m the collector of data for Jimmy, James… our astrologer and Chief of the Karma Police. He‘s cool. He’s my ol’ man.” All of this past life stuff is very fascinating. Beth is curious to discover new things about herself and this new avenue has appeared just in time to distract her from desolation row. She cheerfully volunteers information on her birth and Liza’s. Elliot is a different kettle of fish. Although he is a Pisces, his time of birth is not known, being that he was an orphan. He never asked his mammy. Beth would have to get his birth certificate. Suddenly, this became an important document. “I mean, like Jimmy has to check you all out before you can be here permanently. I’m sure you understand. We all have to fit together in a family. If somebody has a really bad aspect affecting their moon- or a dangerous Saturn, they couldn’t stay. I mean we have to consider everyone’s safety. We need good karma around here. Are you hip?”

They sit in the astrologer’s office. The oak roll top desk dominates the center of the room. Stained glass windows, salvaged from church demolitions, hang on chains from the elegant coffered ceiling, over the wide, double-hung windows. The walls are painted royal purple and the stars of the zodiac are painted in gold on the nocturnal walls. A massive, Chinese, ceramic umbrella stand holds a display of peacock feathers. The chair in front of the desk is, apparently, it’s original mate. It is on wheels and it swivels on the glowing oak floor. There are two other chairs for interviews. They are hard backed with straight legs. The kind of chairs you see in old courtrooms and lawyer’s offices. They have no cushions. A really marvelous lamp sits on the mahogany worktable. It is stain glass and depicts *The Book of Hours*. The famous, medieval, French illuminated prayer book displays graceful ladies and handsomely dressed men, performing the tasks of the day, in a feudal farm fantasy. The stars of the zodiac are painted cobalt. Blue skies arch over the figures on panels around the lamp. The fine, stacked bookcases, that hold the ephemeris and other astrological books, are glass fronted with up- tipping doors. The oak cases were collected from an old legal library that was installing melamine shelves. Bitsy explains, “Jimmy loves to discover the past lives and karma of new people. He really enjoys the unearthing of the future.” The room is so impressive in its details. It isn’t until much later that Beth remembers she once read that bringing peacock feathers into a house is supposed to bring very bad luck. At least Persians believe that and weren’t Persians the first astrologers?

Elliot goes right to work. He was never lazy. In less than a week he and the other men have rehabilitated the suite so Beth and Bitsy and Edith begin the woman’s work. “Mel doesn’t like us ladies doing construction. He says if women don’t behave as women, how can a man be a man? Mel is so far out.” Bitsy lowers her thick lashed eyes modestly.

“We like having a peaceful, old-fashioned life here. The rest of the world is just insane, uptight. I don’t want to mess around with messy plaster and all. I’d rather just do the decorating.”

Edith holds pins in her lips as she speaks. She is sewing curtains on an original Singer sewing machine, without electricity. The foot-shuttle flips back and forth rapidly. “Not to be harsh, but you have a badly aspected Mercury in Virgo, Beth. It can come out and get the better of your happy Leo personality.” Beth blushes as she presses the steam iron along the seam. “I don’t understand what you mean.” Edith is, somehow, able to speak as she holds the pins in her lips. “I mean, like, we love you. We really do. But, dig it. You are very critical of Elliot. He is doing his best and you have promised to obey him.” Bitsy tries to elucidate. “I’m just letting you know that we don’t like to hear a woman being severely critical with her man. It is so uncool. Your Virgo Mercury needs to be chained in the basement.” Bitsy and Edith laugh at Bitsy’s allusion to the Quiet room.

Beth feels embarrassed by her nasty Mercury, which she has, unwittingly, allowed to run free willy-nilly, offending Elliot. She has never thought of it that way before. Beth burns with humiliation. It must be my Leo pride. She chides herself for those feelings also. She turns her mind to tucking the orange-stripped Marimekko fabric around the pillow on the Danish modern chair.

“I’ve got to sew a cover for this pillow. The FBI destroyed the original cover.” Remembering Athens Street was part of her curse.

“Come over tomorrow. I’ll help you.” Bitsy suggests. Beth could feel the vibes in the room had changed and, shame faced, she headed to the door.

“You remember when you said Elliot is a Pisces? Well, I thought, that he is a weird Pisces, not very spiritual. When Jimmy drew the chart it turns out Elliot’s an Aries. Your big ego Leo wants to be queen. But, he’s a real man, a Mars ruled man. You have to learn to be kind to him or you will never have peace. Leos can be very kind and protective. You should focus on that.”

“Bitsy, come on. It’s time to start cooking the evening meal. Beth, when you’re done here, stop over. We’ll just be cooking up a storm. We can always find a job for you.”

Elliot is soon working on new sound systems in the family’s houses. Music is such a founding element on Fort Hill. It is the spring from which all wealth springs…like a fountain. Elliot was trained in woofers and tweeters, not only in reform school, but also at Cambridge Sound by the MIT sound geniuses.

The family unity is expressed with many daily tasks. It is not just a neighborly friendship, but a real concern and attention to each other’s well being, that Beth and Elliot enjoy. They both want a loving family above all else. Each had been deprived of this. Beth seemed to have a loving family but she knows now that her Mother’s selfish desires and her father’s blind, lethargic complacency had developed an emptiness, a hunger for an authentic family in her and her sister Connie.

The mealtimes are preceded each day with a flurry of the women in the main house’s long bright kitchen. Sometimes dishes are prepared in the other houses and brought over to the big house, but only for holidays. Generally, Donna the head-coordinating cook would direct the others. “Bisty, I need you to wash the rice, about 8 cups. Be careful. I don’t like muddy rice. Beth, you need to wash and prep the veggies in the box on the counter. I need the squash just cut in halves and seeded. The onions need to be finely chopped and the cabbage cut in about one inch squares. Cut the carrots into matchsticks. Laura, you take care of the lentils. Don’t forget the bay leaf.” The meals are served on three ten-foot long tables. The children are fed, at their own table, first. It is a lot more relaxing to do it this way. The older girls help with the clean up as the adults sit in the adjoining rooms, eating the healthy, international foods.

The family raises rabbits in hutches out in a garage. The chickens are kept there at night. The girls and boys carry the pails of kitchen scraps out to the chickens and rabbits. It is great fun to feed the bunnies. The oldest, biggest buck rabbit is called Vishnu-Hop-Daddy. He is an enormous brown rabbit. The cages are cleaned and the rabbits are let out into the “barn” every day. The dog is actually not a threat. The Colonel, as he is named, is afraid of Vishnu-Hop-Daddy. That buck rabbit is a fierce, bad rabbit. He had attacked the curious dog long ago and the dog had not forgotten his injury. Bitsy tells Beth, “you can laugh but a rabbit can do serious injury to an adult man. We think of them as bunnies, but that’s not the way they think of themselves.”

One evening, the children run into the dining room. Their faces streaked in muddy tears. “Vishnu is gone! He must have run off. We need to look for him.” The eldest girl, Maya, is jumping up and down. The reserved, older boy, Jason, looks on in silence. Donna, who is Maya’s mother, turns from the table, gets up and hugs Maya.

“It’s ok honey. All the rabbits run away. They just do. You can’t keep a bunny forever.”

 “I know other bunnies have gone away but Vishnu-Hop-Daddy is different. He loves me. He can’t be gone. He just can’t!” She is having difficulty breathing. Her sobs are so deep.

“I know Honey, but he is gone and he’s not coming back. They just don’t.” Jason speaks.

“That’s ‘cause he was just dinner. Maya, they killed him and everyone ate him.”

 “Liar! It’s not true. Is it Mommy?” Maya’s face is filled with fury.

“Everybody out side!” Edith stands up and starts herding the children out the kitchen door. “Go play, the sun’s still up. Have fun. Forget about the rabbit.” Maya is hysterical. She can’t stop. She refuses comfort from her mother. She pulls away from the consolatory, affectionate and calm hands. She abuses her mother by calling her awful, disrespectful names. Maya disappears that night. When Beth sees Maya three days later she has changed. There is something missing. Beth can’t put a name on it but something has left.

Donna won’t answer Beth’s questions. Beth does not want to accuse Donna and her husband Tom of anything. She is new in the family. She knows Donna and Tom love their beautiful Maya. They would never abuse her. As time moves on, Maya’s new demeanor becomes the new normal and Beth files away the questions.

The summer vegetables and fruits are reaching their peak production. Baskets and crates of tomatoes, peaches, blueberries, and cucumbers crowd the kitchen. The summer sun is also at its peak in the final days toward autumn. The ladies spend fifteen-hour days in the steaming kitchen. The screen door and open windows can’t bring in enough breezes. Little tabletop fans whir, and almost complain, with task of moving the saturated, humid air in the long sunny kitchen. The women look old fashioned with full-length aprons and scarves that wrap their hair. Tables of jars, red rubber rings, tongs, colanders, food mills and bright brass- colored rings are systematically arranged on all surfaces. Empty cotton flour sacks drape all tables, counters. Huge, enamel pots bubble on the stove, sending delicious vapors into the room. The women dance around each other like bees in a hive. Even tempered and focused, they move the cooling, covered jars into the dining room. They wait for the heat to subside when the vacuum created in the glass jars will pull the lid down with a metal pop, indicating a successful jar. The jars that don’t pop, God knows what went wrong, become lunch. Thick slices of homemade bread with blueberry or peach preserves, bread and butter pickles on bread with butter and a big glass of milk… these are the midday, and some of the evening meals, of early September. Beth is about ready to birth a new Virgo. She ducks outside with a glass of lemonade. The heat is intense in that kitchen. She seeks the cool shade outside. Her back is killing her. She presses the cold glass against her face. Her feet swell and she feels about ready to pop as the baby rolls and kicks. Too soon Beth is discovered and brought back to the steamer. She washes the wooden spoons and enamel pots, stained deep violet, in the sudsy warm water. She bends over her big belly, which has become drenched with splashing dishwater. She stands up straight, pushes her fists into the small of her back, and stretches her neck up. Jessie asks her to help carry a tray of labeled jars to the basement.

The two women descend the old wooden stairs, taking their time, one step at a time, into the stone-walled, gloomy, cold cellar. There are a couple of bare light bulbs hanging close to the low, shadowy, wood ceiling. Stringers that support the house are like rafters down here. They carry the trays to the far north corner. Here the cellar has been tamed. A glass-mullioned door opens to the clean, illuminated keeper room. New, wooden shelves have been built. The sheetrock ceiling is painted white. The floor is clean with a ceramic tile. It seems to draw even more coolness from the earth. It is chilly and tidy. The silent coolness of her task of stocking the shelves, as others bring hundreds of jars down to her, is the most pleasant way to spend a day. Liza sits with her dolly on the clean tile floor close by. Beth organizes the pickles, jams and the pretty jars of green beans, red tomatoes and golden peaches.

Beth hums, “and the doctor said give her jug band music. You know it makes her feel just fine.” The basement is now her favorite room. At least this revamped keeper room is her favorite. The rest of the huge space remains shadows and mystery. Maya carries a trembling tray of jellies down the stairs. The metal ring lids make a dull ringing sound as they clink against each other. She brings the jars of bright red jelly into the keeping room. Tears run, unhampered, down her pale cheeks. She is shivering. Suddenly, Beth feels unpleasantly cold too.

“What’s the matter Honey? Are you scared of the dark? Come here.” Beth takes Maya’s tray and sets it on the bare, wooden table. She puts her arms around Maya. They both feel the baby in Beth’s belly pounding with tiny fists. Liza imitates her mother’s emotion by hugging Maya’s knees. “You’re okay Maya. We’re here. There’s nothing here to be afraid of.” Liza mimics her mother with a lisp.

“It’s okay Baby. We love you.” They all laugh at the toddler’s kindness and wipe away tears. Maya looks into Beth’s golden brown eyes, takes her hand, and squeezes it. Maya bends down and tenderly picks up the toddler. The children lead Beth into the darkness, across the basement. There are no light bulbs to reveal reality. Maya touches the raw stonewall. Her fingers move to a black switch on the wall. The wires are exposed. Beth sees, when the harsh white light blows open, the grim space. Maya opens the black door that has a printed sign on it that reads: KEEP DOOR CLOSED. The light floods into the wide-open door, revealing a ghastly cell of stone and cement block. The floor is dirt. It may have been a coal bin once. There is a dingy chamber pot of chipped enamel. There is nothing else in the cell. Beth gasps and embraces Maya. Beth understands. The three of them hold on to each other and weep. Liza doesn’t know why is sad. She only knows it is right to be sad here. Questions and accusations are fruitless. The karma police are in charge. When Beth finds Bitsy, she appeals to her.

“Bitsy, you should talk to Jim, I mean it’s so foul in there. It’s like Hanoi. She’s a kid. It’s wrong.”

Bitsy, thin and cold, stares deep into Beth’s frantic red face. Beth’s desperate, illogical, love for children, and thinking children are blameless, better than adults, and not deserving of discipline. Beth is foolishly sentimental and pregnancy, coupled with Leo’s childish aspect, can twist a woman. Bitsy forgives Beth for fostering rebellion and distrusting her husband’s judgment.

Threats have been issued from both ends of the table. Elliot, who had been abandoned as an infant, is the first to stand up to the karma bullies. It is futile. They have no real proof for the authorities. Elliot knows, all too well, the State is no better than these nuts. He knows the system that Maya would enter, if they are able to make a case, would be no improvement over what exists here. The karma police just have different suits.

Beth and Elliot pack their van and carry Liza away from the Hill. The rank disappointment with humankind spreads through the couple as they look down on to the bench seat and see Liza, runny nose and all, safe for the moment. As the van goes into reverse, and turns to leave, Beth pulls Liza to her breast.

Maya watches from a dark attic window. Unrestrained, her forbidden tears run down and drop on the windowsill. Elliot’s TV repair van rolls down the dirt driveway and onto the asphalt street and its red taillights blink at the stop sign. Beth hugs Liza to her body, as the new one turns summersaults of joy, making a ripple across Beth’s belly that Liza feels.

“Baby tickles me.” Liza laughs.