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WITNESSES

Norma should tell this story, but I don't think she will. So I have to do my best, though I might not tell it exactly as it happened. My story is this. Norma called me to say that her friend Patsy had died. I'd met Patsy once when she'd come to Dallas to collaborate with Norma on a book about quilting.

I told Norma I was sorry to hear about Patsy. "I know you must be devastated," I said. "You were friends for such a long time."

Yes, said Norma. "Since we were twelve." They'd grown up in New Mexico together, got married and divorced in tandem, stayed cross-continental pen pals for forty years. Patsy, childless, was godmother to Norma's daughter.

Was it cancer?

"Her heart exploded," said Norma.

You know Patsy, she went on, how she kept really fit and ran three miles a day --

It was like Jim Fixx? No warning at all?

"Well, she'd had a leaky heart." A congenital condition. The doctors had told her she was at risk in jogging, "but she wanted to take care of her problem this way." And she'd been doing fine.

It happened while she was running?

No, it was like this. Patsy was coming out of a supermarket. She was carrying a bag of groceries in her arms. A woman walking into the store happened to look at Patsy's face and saw her eyes roll back. She realized Patsy was passing out, so she stepped right up to Patsy and hugged her. The woman struggled to hold Patsy upright until a second woman, then a third, saw what was needed and rushed over to help the first woman lay Patsy back onto the floor. The second woman took off her gray cardigan, folded it, and slipped it under Patsy's head. While the third retrieved cans of cat food that had spilled from Patsy's sack, the first woman told a checker to call an ambulance. She pressed her fingers to Patsy's wrist but didn't feel a pulse. A fourth woman with wild red hair and paint-dabbed jeans went to her knees, loosened Patsy's concho belt, then blew into her mouth, over and over, and massaged her chest. Meanwhile, the second woman looked into Patsy's purse and located her home phone number, but when she went and called it, of course all she got was Patsy's machine. With nothing left to do, the other three knelt beside the woman doing CPR and waited.

The paramedics arrived but couldn't bring Patsy back. When they had put her on a stretcher and slid her into the ambulance, the first woman took out a business card, wrote on the back of it, and slipped it inside Patsy's purse, which the red-haired woman was holding. She in turn put the purse into the ambulance, and the third woman sat the groceries by Patsy's side.

The first woman's name is April Yuan, and she is a buyer for an import firm. When the ambulance left, she and the other three women stood at the curb for a minute, not knowing what to do. April Yuan had gone into the store to buy pantyhose because she had a 2:30 meeting, and it was already 3 o'clock. The second woman draped her gray cardigan over her forearm and stroked it as you might a cat.

The other woman who had helped lay Patsy back, who had retrieved Patsy's cat food and had put Patsy's groceries in the ambulance, said, Well, I've got to go back to work now. It's a day-care center, couple blocks up that way. She looked to April Yuan and the others as if for permission to leave, and they shrugged and murmured that they understood. But then the day-care worker, a care-giver, made no move to go. The woman with the cardigan said, "I'm just visiting Berkeley, and I don't know anyone here." The woman who had tried CPR said, "I need to sit down and have some tea." The visitor with the cardigan looked relieved and said, "Me too."

They all four walked down the street a way until they came to a cafe none had ever been inside. The tables were of plywood with glossy, lacquered tops, and the menu said, we serve no caffeinated beverages. April Yuan, who

has since been back to the place twice with Rachel, said the lunch crowd had cleared out. The place was quiet and empty but for one waitress who was wiping tables with a natural sponge the size of a bread loaf.

The four women ordered orange-cinnamon tea. The waitress brought a tea-pot with a blue glaze and four matching mugs on a tray. Then after a moment the waitress brought, unasked, fresh hot blueberry muffins for them to sample free. They didn't talk much at first. The red-haired woman lifted her mug high enough to peer at the bottom of it. Somebody said, "Poor woman." The visitor's hands were trembling, so her tea got cold before she could drink it. The red-haired woman said this was the only time she'd ever used her CPR training, and the others said don't feel bad -- it was good that you tried, it was more than we did. The woman who worked at the day-care center asked, "I wonder if she had children?" April Yuan had noticed Patsy had no wedding ring.

They stayed for about an hour. The funny thing was, said April Yuan later, "We didn't talk about your friend Patsy very long." They didn't know what to say about what had happened. They all talked for a while about being parents and having them. The visitor with the cardigan said she had two teenage sons back home in Michigan. April Yuan has a grown daughter, but she told the others only about her mother, who has Alzheimer's. Then the visitor from Michigan asked the day-care woman how she put her hair in those corn rows. It takes days, answered the other. You got to wait until you want to punish yourself. They all laughed. They talked about the tea, the crockery. After a bit, April Yuan got up to go call her husband even though she knew he was busy at

work, and when she came back to the table, the others were standing over the bill and chatting while they dug change out of their purses and pockets.

April was the last to leave the cafe. The woman with the teenage sons was already striding far up the street. A breeze had come up while they were in the cafe, and, while walking, the woman slipped her cardigan over her shoulders. Beside her, the day-care worker was gesturing in a way that meant giving directions. When the two reached the corner, they both looked back and waved good-bye. Then they disappeared.

The red-haired woman in the paint-smearred jeans had been lagging behind, letting the other two outpace her. She stopped and waited for April to catch up to her. "I'm Rachel," she said, and stuck out her hand. "I saw what you wrote on that card about being with her when she died. I hope someone from the family calls you."