

IN STONE SERIES

Energy
in
Stone

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CECILIA JOHNSON

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~ *Book one* ~

CJ ORIGINALS PUBLISHING



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DEDICATION

To my husband Mickey, a rare partner and playmate, with the soul of an adventurer and a heart like the sun.

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*Words, like nature, half reveal
and half conceal the soul within. ~*
Alfred Lord Tennyson

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements *i*

Prologue *1*

1	<i>Cottage on the Corner</i>	4	13	<i>Friendship</i>	95
2	<i>Cold's a Coming</i>	12	14	<i>Summer Extremes</i>	101
3	<i>Twelve Candles</i>	21	15	<i>Long Distance</i>	108
4	<i>Frozen</i>	31	16	<i>Back to Misery</i>	117
5	<i>The Letter</i>	37	17	<i>Forgotten Alliance</i>	125
6	<i>Finding My Way</i>	40	18	<i>Deer Friends</i>	135
7	<i>Pea Peckle</i>	43	19	<i>Still Undecided</i>	146
8	<i>Spirit Stones</i>	54	20	<i>Celebration</i>	157
9	<i>Not So Great Expectations</i>	61	21	<i>Taking Flight</i>	166
10	<i>Slumber Party</i>	68	22	<i>Darkness</i>	177
11	<i>The World Outside</i>	80	23	<i>Realms of Actuality</i>	184
12	<i>School's In</i>	87	24	<i>Nature's Choice</i>	191



PROLOGUE

I was digging in the dirt at the edge of the garden the first time I heard the tree whisper, “*Lily— Lily, come, play under my shade.*”

Following the musically hypnotic voice past the chicken coop, I stumbled through the apple orchard without giving anything else a thought. So enchanted was I by the whisperings the tree made, I lost myself as I explored and danced under its wide, constantly swaying canopy.

The willow’s branches were incredibly full and extended all the way to the ground. Under the tree’s green veil it was degrees cooler, and created a barrier that was impossible to see through or detect movement. The tree said, “You don’t have to tell anyone. I’ll be your friend and shelter.” Only four years old, I’d never had reason for secrets nor anywhere did I think of as my own. In fact, I had never thought of wanting a place to myself, but the willow was grand and held a magic I didn’t want to share.

When I heard my older brother Randy yelling out my name and getting closer to the willow, I ran through the tall grass as fast as my short legs would go. Racing to the apple orchard, I shouted breathlessly, “I’m here, Randy, I’m over here.”

~

I’d never forgotten the secret the willow asked me to keep, but it was quite a while before I had another chance to really investigate its sanctuary. The willow’s trunk was over four feet across, and its branches formed an umbrella about ten feet from its center for an enormous circumference. Absently I touched the huge roots, following the paths they made progressively inward, believing all the while I had imagined that the tree could actually speak.

When I heard whisperings, “*come—sit*” I quickly looked around to see if someone had followed me.

“Is anybody there?” No one answered or appeared out of the green foliage. Shaking my head, I continued exploring.

Moments later, I again heard a request, “*Come sit with me and enjoy the day.*”

Running around the tree, I was certain I would catch the one responsible for the prank. But no one was there.

I ducked back under the canopy and as I reached the north side of its massive trunk I heard it again, "*Come sit.*"

"What's going on here?" I said.

"Do not worry. It is I, the willow who speaks to you."

"What?" I croaked.

"You listened when I called to you before, so I speak to you now."

I stuttered back, "I didn't know if I imagined the whole thing, but you really talk."

"You are not the first I have spoken to, but you are one of the few who has heard."

Pinching myself first, *ouch*, I was indeed awake. I asked, "Where do you want me to sit?"

At once I felt a sensation that seemed to tug at me like a magnet. It pulled me to a not quite flat and somewhat rounded spot on one of the vast roots very close to where I was standing. Using my hands to balance myself, I slowly sat down. *Whoa— that was weird.* But immediately I felt the wellbeing of the seat, and leisurely I relaxed back onto the trunk.

Comfortable, I said, "Thank you, this is nice." Then I asked, "What's your name?"

The tree was very formal, "You are welcomed. I am called Willow."

I said, "Do you have a last name?"

"I have no need for a last name" was the tree's simple reply.

"But aren't the other trees here, called the same thing?"

The tree answered in a matter of fact tone, "Not all, there are also Apple, Oak, Birch, Poplar, and Maple."

"There are lots of willow trees what if one of them decides to speak to me?"

"We are all one, Lily. We all have the same voice."

The tree's vocalization was like a song filled with wind, echoes, and whispered squeaks, all blending into a musical sonata that I felt would be impossible to duplicate.

Puzzled I asked, "How can trees talk?"

"All living beings' spirits have a voice, and we are all connected." For the tree, no other explanation seemed necessary.

As time passed, Willow always greeted me upon my arrival, but the tree rarely spoke of anything other than the beautiful day or about the visitors that inhabited the surrounding area. To Willow every day was a delightful day, no matter how cloudy, windy, cold, or hot.

During my visits, I questioned Willow nonstop about all manner of things. But the tree seldom answered, Willow would instead counter with a simple, "It is not for me to say."

ENERGY IN STONE

Eventually I learned the tree's joy came from just being and sharing itself with the other creatures that lived there. As years passed I accepted Willow for what the tree was, a retreat, and a secret sanctuary where I could be no other than my true self. After a time, I offered the same to Willow, no expectations and few questions, just someone to share observations, space, and time.

~



I COTTAGE ON THE CORNER

Always smiling, Mrs. Harrison never checked the eggs I delivered to see if they were cracked or broken. I liked that she trusted me. Sometimes she'd bring out a glass of fresh lemonade and we'd have a short chat on her front porch. She seemed to be quite interested in me. For an older person, she was rather mysterious. With the others I delivered eggs to, I usually couldn't get a word in edgewise, but Mrs. Harrison was different. As my first summer of delivering progressed, I made my drop offs at the Radwell's and the Barney's as quickly as possible, and then I peddled as fast as the wind to get to the cottage on the corner.

Mrs. Harrison lived on the corner of Willow and Maple, and we passed her place every time Randy and I went to Shirkee's pond. She had the prettiest place I'd ever seen. It wasn't big, it was small actually, but it was perfect and we all called it the cottage on the corner.

Her mailbox was even perfect. During a visit she told me, "My Charlie made that just for me. He got more whimsical as he aged." Vaguely, I remembered Mom and Dad talking about her husband passing away a few years before. Never having met him myself, my oldest sibling, Shelley, said he was kind of quiet.

As I ran my hands along the spiraling rocks I said, "I've never seen so many pretty stones. Where did Charlie get them?"

Mrs. Harrison winked and said, "I collected them myself on some of my adventures." After saying that, she got a faraway look in her eyes that made them sparkle like diamonds. When she smiled at where those thoughts had taken her, she didn't look nearly as old as she had just moments before. Then she laughed, "Most people don't even notice the stones in that crazy creation."

Surprised, I said, "I don't see how they couldn't."

With a smile and a shake of the head she said, "Rightly so."

The next day as we passed the cottage on the way to the Everly's, to drop off some sewing, I asked my mother, "Don't you think the stones around Mrs. Harrison's mail box are beautiful?"

She said, “Really, I hadn’t noticed, Lily. They just look like rocks to me.”
Was Mrs. Harrison just bumoring me?

By the middle of the first summer delivering eggs to Mrs. Harrison, she told me I was to call her Colleen. I said, “What a pretty name.”

She said, “My mother had wanted to name me Lily. But my father had insisted on Colleen, to honor his grandmother. To keep the peace I was named Colleen Lily Johnston. But when my father wasn’t home my mother and sister both called me Lily. No one around here knows my middle name. We can be secret sisters, like Lilies blossoming side by side in the garden.”

I said, “Okay, but I’ll never be as pretty as a lily. Maybe my parents should have named Shelley or Abigail, Lily.”

Colleen just shook her head and said, “My dear, they got it exactly right. You are like the stones around my mailbox. Most people don’t notice, but you, like those gems, have a rare beauty.”

She had a way of speaking to me that made me feel special. I loved to spend time at the cottage on the corner and Colleen seemed to enjoy my company. My mother thought it was a lovely idea when Colleen called on a delivery day to see if I could stay for dinner. And, it soon became a standing lunch date on Tuesdays during the summer months. I could stay three glorious hours before having to head back home.

With each visit, I’d park my bike at the end of the driveway because I didn’t like riding on the heavy aggregate rocks. That was okay though, because I loved to stroll up her stone walkway. The path meandered from the mailbox to the front porch steps, and then around the right side of the house, all the way to the backyard patio. Between each flat odd shaped stone making up the passage, the cracks were filled with short Corsican mint, making a green spider web of color that connected not only the stones of the path together, but also the patio stones in the backyard. Stepping on the plants released a sweet, refreshing peppermint scent and the green color reminded me of the new leaves of spring. When I worried about walking on them, Colleen assured me they did not mind too much.

On either side of her stone walkway were orange zinnias and purple ageratum, in drifts of beautiful contrasting color. There was very little lawn to be cared for because most of the space around Colleen’s home was filled with different tiers of colored leaf and flowering perennials. She’d said she had planted the flowers and bushes to encourage butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds to share her yard with her.

The cottage itself was a marvel of stone and wood. The exterior walls were covered in all different colored flat stones that fit almost perfectly together. It had a small rounded, winsome turreted section projecting out the left hand side of the house, also made of stone. All of the windows were rounded at the top, with thick wood trim, and the window on the turret, facing the road, had a window box filled with yellow and red Begonias.

There were cedar shake shingles on all of the roofs including the roof on the rounded turret, which reminded me of an upside down sugar cone.

The garage was set back from the house, a bit to the left and built with the same stone. It had two heavy wooden, rounded top doors and on each at about chest height were very large round cast iron door pulls. The garage's roof had the same pitch as the house and matching shake shingles. The driveway leading up to the garage was trimmed in delicate purple flowers that met the lawn.

The most amazing, and truly my favorite part of the charming cottage, was its front door. It was made of some kind of heavy, reddish honey-toned wood, rounded at the top like the windows, and edged with the same thick wood trim. On the door was a carving of a beautiful pair of male and female lions. They were so intricate; they looked like they were going to walk right out of the door, straight out onto the porch.

With a gleam in her eye, Colleen said, "The grasses and tree that are carved into the background can be observed on the savannahs of Africa."

I said, "I think it's the grandest thing I've ever seen."

She winked, and said, "Lily dear, you haven't seen anything yet." When she talked to me, she always hinted at more wondrous things, of magic that was just beyond my reach.

The backside of Colleen's house sported Lily of the Valley along with an assortment of trees, flowering bushes, moss laden stones, and crawling flowers that did well in the shade. From the front of the house, a person could not begin to envision the scope of the backyard. You could certainly imagine it was beautiful, but I don't think the wonderment it held could be conceived. I adored her back yard and told her, "Your yard is like a place from an enchanted story book. I've always wanted to believe in fairy tales."

Smiling she said, "Never stop believing. Enchantment is everywhere. All you have to do is truly see, not just with your eyes, but with your soul. Listen not only with your ears, but hear with your heart."

I said, "I'll try, but I'm not really sure I understand."

She said, "Someday you will."

Thinking of Willow, I knew she had to be right. Then I silently prayed that somehow, someday, I would begin to see the world the way Colleen did.

~

Although my name is Lily, my favorite flower has always been the daisy, and if I were to choose flowers that I could have in my bedroom or on the dining room table, it would be daisies. They held a charm that could make me smile even in my saddest moments. Sometimes, I swore, I could almost hear them giggling at a joke to which I had not been privy; like some marvelous story my Aunt Janet was telling my mother when I was out of the room, putting them both into fits of giggles.

ENERGY IN STONE

The pastureland across the road from Colleen's cottage was filled with daisies, and always gave me a smile. Randy was tolerant with me each time we rode to the pond. He always allowed me time to stop and pick daisies on our way home. That field always seemed to be the first place daisies bloomed in our area, and the last place of the season I would see their jubilant bonnets swaying in the wind.

The first time I brought daisies to Colleen; she clapped her hands with glee and whispered something unintelligible. Then I told her how daisies made me feel, and about the jokes they told that I couldn't hear.

She said brightly, "You're absolutely right. That's what I meant when I said you must hear with your heart. One day you'll understand the jokes the daisies tell and the stories of the daffodils."

~

So many of the details surrounding our lunches together were a ritual, like the picking of the daisies in the meadow, my walk up the stone path past the mailbox, and my first greeting from Brenna, Colleen's miniature schnauzer. Brenna always met me halfway up the stone path, yelped two jubilant hello barks, bounced against my legs, waited for an expected pat, and then she sprinted off ahead of me. Around the corner of the house and onto the back patio she leapt, with an exuberant anticipation of something extraordinary. By the time I made my way to the patio, Colleen would be coming out the back door with the serving tray and the day's meal.

It seemed as if everything was choreographed so as not to waste any of our precious time together, and yet the meals were never hurried. After setting the tray on the table, Colleen always welcomed me with a wide smile and a gentle hug. She then bowed formally, and accepted my daisy offering, pulled last week's daisies out of the vase from the table, and replaced them with the new bouquet. We always put the wilted flowers beneath one of the lovely trees in the forest, and then we said a prayer of thanks for the beauty that they had offered. Colleen explained to me how it was much more important than most people realized to honor what the earth shared with us.

Brenna watched our procession, following us around in quiet respect, until we finished with our prayer to nature. She then bounced, running to and fro, as if on cue, to bring us out of our silent contemplation. Her clowning always made us giggle.

Most of our lunches consisted of light fare. Sometimes we would have a salad of romaine lettuce from her small garden, cherry or plum tomatoes, sweet red onion, crisp cucumber, and diced celery. She would dress the salad with fresh, ground parmesan and pepper. Then she would top it off with a dash of olive oil and balsamic vinegar. With the greens, she might make a tasty egg salad or tuna spread she piled generously upon a thick piece of her homemade wheat bread. The drinks she would bring out

seemed to change according to the heat index. She served lemonade when it was really warm, fruity concoctions on more moderate days, and when the temperatures cooled off, she made hot chocolate or mint tea to help warm our bodies.

The meals were as much a feast to the eye as they were to the palette. Easily, I recognized Colleen's desire to enjoy every beautiful moment. She always brought out whatever we were to eat on a bright serving tray that danced with color. But the plates and bowls were pristine white showing off the food to its best. Thick, bubbled drinking glasses of orange or blue held the day's beverages, which sat beside simple silverware placed on solid-colored, bright, linen napkins.

Whenever I went to Colleen's, the weather was always wonderful in her backyard, and I never thought to question that sometimes the road was a bit muddy on my ride back home.

Although I was curious about the inside of Colleen's cottage, she never invited me in except to use the bathroom. It was just inside the backdoor off the patio, to the right of the mudroom where Colleen hung her jackets, and left her boots and shoes. At the end of the small hall-like entry was a beautiful wood door, with a rounded top and leaded stained glass window. The casement was oblong, with a picture of Trumpet flowers and two hovering hummingbirds created from perfectly chosen pieces of colored glass. The door was always closed, and I was unable see anything beyond that point.

It was spring, the year I turned eleven, before I asked what was inside of the odd-shaped building that stood in a small clearing in the back yard. It wasn't quite the octagon shape of a gazebo but it wasn't really square or rectangular either. Colleen never encouraged my curiosity about the building, nor did we dally long enough for me to see in through the low windows.

Instead of showing me when I asked, Colleen chirped, "There are more interesting things to see up in the Cherry tree."

Once I started to climb, the building was quickly forgotten. There was a nest of week-old robins a dozen or so feet from the ground. I never questioned how she knew they were there, the age of the chicks, or the number that had hatched. She couldn't have possibly climbed there. Even if she'd been out in the woods, it would have been difficult to hear the chicks' hungry peeping from the ground, especially with the constant chatter of birds and squirrels.

Colleen always seemed to know what was happening nearby her place. She knew where the fawns lay when their mothers went off to eat, and where the fox hole was on the other side of the creek. She could even tell me how many pups had still not come out of the den. Every lunch with her was filled with intriguing glimpses into nature and its many miracles.

Sometimes we spent our visits talking about plants and their roots, and the ways they could be used to help heal a cut or be eaten in a pinch for survival. I enjoyed helping Colleen make tinctures, salves, and antiseptics. We even made liniment from willow bark she said helped to relieve her occasional sore joints. She taught me most plants, even the ones I always thought were just weeds, had a property in them that could be useful. Colleen was a wonderful teacher, and I an enthusiastic sponge who absorbed every lesson. My mind reeled with heaps of knowledge whenever I hopped on my bike and headed toward home.

The time I spent with her flew by so quickly. Though I wanted to spend more time, Colleen assured me, "It's essential to play and be curious on your own. Make everything you do as much fun as possible. It doesn't matter if it's washing dishes or cleaning the hen house, if you understand you can make an adventure out of anything, life is a marvelous ride." Tapping my nose with her finger, she added, "Life can either be an endless chore or an absolute adventure. The choice is yours, Lily."

Colleen shared an imagined adventure she had while washing dishes one night. She said, "It was a beautiful white sand beach. The silken shore felt warm under my bare feet and between my toes. And the sun was so soothing on my back. Imagine it Lily. I was washing dishes in the ocean's sea foam." Rubbing my arm, she added, "Now come with me. Pay close attention to all of the prismatic colors in the bubbles. In your mind, watch them blow through the air across the drifting sand. Can you hear the gulls' boisterous voices as they chase each other back and forth across the shore, trying to steal one another's food? The waves crashing onto the beach, a continuous thundering roll, as the breeze carries cool sea mist over your skin." Eyes closed, I shivered. "Listen and watch the frothy waves that thrust up onto the shore in a final rushing push from the sea. Countless bubbles explode as they slowly follow the waves back into the undulating ocean with a soft Tchshhhhhhhhhhh...." She took my arm. "Now, observe the salt water that soaks the sand as it drains, to slowly follow the waves back into the ocean, only to be pushed up the shore moments later as another wave bursts forth." Colleen exclaimed, "How wonderful it was!"

Never having been to the ocean, I treasured her description. It transported me to the beach, and in my imagination, I felt the warmth of that experience with her.

On another of Colleen's dishwashing adventures, she told me she imagined that it was magic liquid she used to make her bubbles. The magic shrunk her to a small enough size, so that she fit into one of the tiny, shining bubbles. Her mind floated in a beautiful transparent orb around the room, and watched her own body standing at the sink to see that she did a sufficient job washing her dishes. As her bubble continued floating from here to there in her kitchen, she noticed the top of her refrigerator

once again needed cleaning, and that a fly had gotten in when she opened the door. The insect watched the bubble with its, many-faceted, compound eyes as it floated by. As the glistening orb finally exploded, she once again returned to her now clean dishes and admired her sparkling achievement.

Colleen did admit, “I don’t always choose to venture away from my chores. Mindfulness has its own rewards.” With a girlish giggle, she added, “But sometimes an adventure is in order. Lily, learn to find happiness within yourself, and you will be at home in most any situation.”

~

Mrs. Harrison rarely mentioned Charlie. When I asked her what he had been like, she smiled brightly and said, “He was very understanding, terribly sweet, and for almost 60 years we had the most wonderful life together. Sometimes he comes and visits me in my dreams, and I’m certain he still tags along on some of my expeditions. I hear his mirth occasionally, and in that moment I can see his smiling face, and I know he is nearby.”

Sniffing hard, I brooded, “I think my heart would break.”

“I have the love of Brenna.” As she said that, she scratched her sweet little girl behind the ear. “She and I helped each other after Charlie crossed over. Together we grieved, remembered, and then let him go. All of those steps are important, but it is also important not to get lost in the grief, Lily. Letting go does not mean that you’re betraying their love. It means you are honoring your own love, to yourself, and the gift of your life.”

Speaking more softly, Colleen continued, “Time is an illusion that can extinguish itself in an instant or continue on into eternity. Someday you will learn time can fold itself into a million different facets. Things that feel like an end are only new beginnings. Even those who leave you are never really gone. Remember, you will carry a part of them with you always.”

We talked of these serious matters while cooling our feet in the creek that ran along the right side of her cottage and the edge of the woods. That afternoon we had found a dead baby squirrel in the backyard. She and I had wrapped it in leaves and took the small bundle into the forest, as we did weekly with the daisies, and said an appropriate blessing over its body.

Colleen said, “I have been doing this for nature’s lost for many years, out of respect for them, and the life they lived. Death is as much a part of nature as birth and celebrating life.” Putting her arm around my shoulder Colleen spoke to me in a gentle tone. “I do not fear dying, I believe in the truth of my soul, and the eternal quality it possesses. Fear of death holds many people back from really letting go, and enjoying so many of the simple pleasures in life.”

Releasing me, she winked, “Why always walk when we have the ability to run? Don’t put any limits on yourself, Lily. If you truly want something, and it is for your greatest good, there is always a way.” She chuckled, “The

ENERGY IN STONE

path you take might not always lead to the place or thing you think it will, but sometimes the surprises life hands you, along the way, are even better.”

~



2 COLD'S A COMING

Mom allowed me an hour visit at Colleen's on Tuesdays after I got off the bus, if I promised to finish my homework. We never missed a Tuesday until it was decided it was too cold for us to meet in Colleen's backyard.

Colleen had a winter home that she and Charlie had loved. She returned to it every year before the snow flew. She said, "The flowers bloom there all year, and I can still enjoy lots of sun and my flying jewels." As they had gotten older, she and Charlie had begun to migrate like the birds.

Colleen would call me on Tuesdays from late fall and through the winter at a specific time, but she rarely talked about what she was doing. She mostly questioned me on my comings and goings, always seeming to be most curious about how I was filling my days.

I had begun to write. The time I spent with Colleen and Willow had really facilitated my new perceptions of the simplest, yet most beautiful occurrences. Flowers, plants, and tiny creatures I had not paid much attention to before, now popped out at me and begged for individual notice.

As the temperature continued to drop, writing had become my favorite pastime, and I found I could lose myself in the smallest detail of a moment. When I informed Colleen, she asked me to share what I had written. At first, I was a bit shy; after all, I was only eleven. Colleen reassured me age had absolutely nothing to do with what I perceived and how I portrayed it on paper.

The first time I read to her about the falling leaves and the call of an owl, Colleen was very silent. I almost began to cry thinking maybe she was laughing while covering the phone, so I could not hear. Wanting to slam down the receiver, I questioned, "Colleen, are you there?"

She finally spoke with what seemed like some difficulty, "Dearest Lily that was truly lovely."

Tentatively, I breathed in a large gulp of air. "Are you okay?"

She cleared her throat, and said, "Quite well—Lily, could you write something every week to read to me?" She quickly continued, "I know you

have schoolwork and other obligations at home but it would truly be a treat if you could read to me more of these things you have been noticing.”

Feeling a rush of pure joy I said, “I would love to.” Colleen had never asked anything of me before. If I could finally give her something in return for all of the things she had taught to me, and all of the wonderful lunches, it would be an honor. I said, “Writing is more fun than schoolwork, and these things that pop out at me make me feel as if they are telling me something special, maybe only I can hear. Do you think that’s silly?”

Colleen’s assured me, “Lily, you have learned what it is to hear with your heart and see with your soul. That could never be silly.”

When she asked me to read her another of my observations, I recited one of my favorites about a small flyer that I thought was quite brilliant and funny.

“On a chilly, slightly soggy Saturday, as I sat absent of all thought, with my nose almost pressed against the window, and just far enough away from the glass so I would not cause it to fog, a quick flit caught my otherwise nonexistent attention. The movement came from a small bird. Although it was not easy to see through the smudged wet glass, I could still make out its wild antics. While watching the bird’s rather jerky quick progression up an average pine sized tree, I noted its black, elongated cap, slim beak, and white breast. The bird’s coloring resembled that of the Chickadee but it was more streamlined and didn’t wear a black chin strap. It was less rounded and fluffed, as Chickadees tended to become as winter’s inevitable cold closed in on all outdoors.”

“When the industrious little worker, which pried up bark to find whatever edible snack was lurking underneath, turned itself around and headed straight down the tree pecking, prying, and occasionally swallowing some tender morsel, I knew that most assuredly I was watching a nuthatch. Nuthatches are the only birds that will walk head first down a tree, as well as up it.”

“The small bird really surprised me when it used a piece of bark like a crowbar, wedging it under another loose piece of bark to afford itself more advantage. The clever use of this tool helped it to pry another chunk of exterior from the tree and snag another snack. As I watched, entranced by what I was seeing, the little dynamo flew up to a branch of the same tree, landed without effort, and began to swipe its beak back and forth across its perch. Wondering if this little acrobat was just cleaning the pine pitch off its beak, I noticed another nuthatch fluttering around from branch to branch on an adjacent tree. Faintly through the glass I heard, “Yank, yank, yank,” as one of the nuthatches vocalized.”

“Now, the nuthatch that had been swiping its beak across the branch, hunched its back until it looked like a miniature football player with a helmet sitting directly on his shoulders. As it hunched, it became more

bulky and much huskier looking. Then the nuthatch began to walk left five or six steps, then right five or six steps, in a funny little, tough-guy show that had me in fits of giggles. The nuthatch's antics reminded me of the penguins I had seen on Wild Kingdom. With their small bulk and almost waddling gait, they walked quite awkwardly on the ice.

If the bird was trying to impress, I hoped it worked on the other nuthatch because it just had me in stitches of laughter.”

~

It went from fall and family hikes in the midst of golden, red, and orange leaves, to rainy weekend afternoons of monopoly, and on to the adventure of picking out a costume for Halloween. The family never had as much candy in the house as we did after All Hollow's Eve. I'd swear, the twins, Andrew and Abigail were on a constant sugar buzz, and even more obnoxious all the way through Thanksgiving. They could have been quite adorable if only they were not such pests.

Randy and Andrew shared a bedroom, and because Shelley was the oldest, she had her own room. That left Abbey and me to share quarters. Sometimes she was okay, but mostly she really got under my skin. It did not help that she was almost always the one Mom sent to find me when I was trying not to be discovered. Abbey had some kind of radar that whispered in her ear alerting her of my need for peace. Something was backwards, though, because instead of leaving me be, she would come in our room singing or prattling on about something Andrew had done. It did not matter where in the house I chose to lose myself, there she was. Her cuteness had worn off, and she made me increasingly angry. That winter was the worst. We were not allowed to go outside very often because of the bitter cold, and when I wanted to write it was almost impossible for me to locate a quiet place to hide.

By the time New Year's rolled around, I was finally able to tune out the other kids on the bus, and do my homework as if I was sitting alone in my bedroom with the door closed. We did not live far out of town, but because we were almost the last picked up in the mornings, we were also almost the last dropped off in the afternoons. With no friends on our bus, I spent my time on the return trip doing homework with my legs up against the back of the seat in front of me, careful to keep my feet off the cold floor of the bus. Although I had learned to tune others out, it was not quite so easy with Andrew and Abigail. It bothered my mother that I mostly kept to myself. I liked to be alone. If I had to admit it, I didn't really fit in most of the time. Randy barely tolerated me, and I seemed to irritate Shelley as much as the twins annoyed me.

~

For Shelley's fifteenth birthday she was allowed to have one quest stay over. Randy was smitten with Connie Burns, and flirted like a silly puppy

when we all sat down to supper. Mostly, Connie and Shelley remained holed up in her bedroom with the door locked.

Having found a place in the attic I could lie down, I listened to Shelley and Connie's every word. It was freezing cold on the old dusty wooden floor, but I suffered in silence wanting so badly to be included in their secrets. Spying wasn't my strong suit. If it had been, I would have used the bathroom before sneaking up the attic stairs. It was all of ten degrees outside and not much warmer where I lay. As I shivered, my breath puffed out in moist vapors of white. The blanket I brought to wrap myself in was not nearly heavy enough, and my feet felt like icicles in my flimsy slippers. Every shiver put a spasm into my stomach, and made my full bladder cramp painfully.

Crap, I was going to have to sneak down pretty soon. *What was that?* It sounded like they were whispering...*maybe not.*

In sing song Shelley said, "Do you want to mess around with some makeup and do our hair?"

Connie said, "Sure, maybe we should ask your sister, Lily, to join us."

Shelley grunted, "If we can make her look good, we can make anyone a beauty."

Snickers and shuffling sounds followed Shelley's final jab. I heard a faint click down below, and then Shelley's raised voice outside the attic door. "Silly Dilly, you didn't really think we would let you be our practice dummy, did you?"

Their retreating giggles were trailed by footfalls on the stairs leading to the first floor. *Nooo!* Running down the attic steps I reached for the door handle, but as I suspected, Shelley had locked me in. Shaking and twisting the knob I cried, "Let me out, someone please let me out!"

Miserably, I huddled down onto the lowest step and sobbed quietly. Doubling up my blanket helped to stave off some of the cold, but I was still freezing, and was not sure how long I could hold my bladder. Resigned to my fate, I tried to imagine myself wrapped in the warmth of the sun. Floating on a cloud of cottony softness, I withdrew into a dreamy sleep.

~

In a warm meadow I was being cuddled by a huge black bear. She had dark compassionate eyes that saw my pain, and reassured me everything would be just fine. The bear said, "Your warmth and strength come from within. Just look inside your soul."

Answering numbly, I said, "I can't find it. Please help me find it."

~

Abbey woke me up as she ran along the hallway yelling, "Where are you, Lily, it's time for supper." Abigail's grating voice never sounded so wonderful to me before.

~

Willow slept through the winter, so I did not spend much time with the tree during the colder months. As with the years before, it was strange to sit on my cold seat under the bare branches, in the silence of the frost, with no words of welcome from my friend. Sometimes its hush brought tears to my eyes, and I stroked Willow's bark, speaking quietly to the tree, wishing it a good slumber. Occasionally I would remark at the birds that fluttered around its branches and about how the sun shone so brightly off the newly fallen snow as I tried to imagine how the tree would answer back. Afraid it would never speak to me again, the first year of the tree's silence was the hardest to bear. One of my greatest comforts was that I knew in the spring, Willow would once again greet me and make a remark about the beautiful day. Willow's quiet wisdom and simple joy of existence was a cornerstone I had come to rely upon. The tree helped me perceive the world more clearly, and when it slept, I missed its rare friendship and the extra balance it brought into my life.

~

With the warming of the days and the melting of the snow, the trees began to bud. The song of the robin greeted me on my race to Willow, and I felt excitement in my heart and freshness in the air. That morning had spoken to something deep inside of me. It told me Willow had awoken from its winter slumber.

Willow greeted me with a cherished "Welcome", and I ran throwing my arms around its bulk, and I hugged the tree like a long lost friend.

"I missed our visits."

Willow said in the tree's matter of fact way, "I have always been here."

"I know, but it's not the same when you sleep. I miss your voice."

The tree said patiently, "We have spoken of my days. They are not counted in the same way as yours. My entire day is the length of your year. In summer, I am awake as the sun revolves around the earth. My daytime lasts, until the night of winter begins and I again slumber."

Even these repeated remarks buoyed me, and I answered, "Yes, you have told me, but I will still, year after year, tell you how much I have missed you."

With delight, we talked of spring and all of the changes we had already seen. I reveled in the knowledge that I would again have many months to visit with my wise friend.

~

Spring brought more than rain, warmer weather, and my birthday. Everything awakened, as Willow began its long summer's day. Many people cleaned out and cleared away the debris of winter's hibernation, finally deciding to let go of things they had been holding onto for far too long. As a new year advanced, my siblings and I looked forward to the wealth of

thrift sales that popped up around the area, like the mushrooms in the forest.

On a mid-May Friday, we all packed into the car at seven a.m. and headed for Ellington and our first thrift sales of the year. Pooling my resources with the two dollars Grandma Patty gave me for my birthday, plus the money Aunt Janice awarded me, I had a grand total of sixteen dollars and seventy-five cents.

Excitement thrummed through us all as we headed toward the first thrift sale of the day. Sitting quietly, I listened to the others rattle on about what they hoped to find. My anticipation made the short ride through the countryside seem like an eternity. Fidgeting, I wiggled in my seat until I spotted a majestic bald eagle out the car window. Mesmerized by its slow spiral as it casually drifted upward on unseen currents of air, when the eagle disappeared from sight I imagined that its helix took it far past the highest clouds and up into the stars, as it hardly flapped its wings, and just continued its steady rise into an unknown infinity.

Mom brought me back from my daydreaming with words we had heard many times before, “No running, and absolutely no raising your voices. Stick close, and let me know if you are going back to the car.” After Mom said the last few words, she pulled the car alongside a front yard, which advertised a large thrift sale. As the doors on the car crashed open, and we all spilled out, Mom said, “Remember what I told you.” Immediately we all stopped what was surely a run and walked as fast as we could toward the opened garage door.

My preference was this kind of treasure hunt verses shopping in the store, because I never knew what I might find at the bottom of a pile or tucked deep in a box. Mom was a veteran of thrift sales, and methodically worked her way from one end of the sale to the other. Occasionally she would call one of us over, and hold up a shirt or a pair of pants. She folded any chosen items over one arm with a satisfied nod, and once again moved deliberately forward through the paraphernalia, always being careful to inspect the desired items. Shelley enjoyed thrift sales so much that when she was finished looking at items for herself, she helped Mom to look for things the rest of us needed. It was rare, but on thrift sale days, she was actually nice to me, too.

On a table covered with small animals, a glint of brightness caught my eye. As I stepped closer, among the plastic cows, pigs, and horses, I saw a small bear carved from stone. The bear obviously did not belong among the synthetic menagerie but the discrepancy was never a surprise at a thrift sale. As I examined the small bear, once again I thought I could see a flash of illumination sparkle from its center.

For some odd reason, as I held the tiny bear, I felt an immediate bond, and decided it should be mine. Strange, I felt instantly protective of the

petite stone sculpture. Afraid there had been a mistake, I thought someone might come out of the house saying, “There you are...you aren’t supposed to be out here.” Worrying ridiculously, I brought the bear up to the woman sitting at the pay table. Grudgingly, I handed the bear over and the woman took its price tag off, and stuck it onto a piece of cardboard.

She then held out her hand, and as I dropped fifty cents into it, she smiled, handed the bear back and said, “Thank you, have a nice day.”

I said, “You too,” as I stuffed the bear into my shorts pocket with an odd kind of relief.

By the time we headed to the park for lunch, there were few sales left to see before returning home. We were all thrilled with our accumulated treasures and chattered loudly between bites of tuna sandwiches and pickles, sitting at a picnic table under the shade of a large maple tree. Those outings were among some of my favorite memories, because the family all worked together to get going in the morning, and the camaraderie ran high through the rest of the day’s adventures.

~

At one of the last sales of the day, I happened upon a pile of leather-bound journals. When I opened them, I was excited to find pristine pages. There were five in all, and I thought they were a great find. I had been filling up page after page of loose-leaf paper with things I had noticed, or just wanted to write. Rubbing the buttery-soft leather cover of the journal I held, I realized these were a treasure beyond any expectations I could have conjured.

The journals measured about eight inches wide by ten inches long, and were approximately three fourths of an inch deep. Excitedly, I figured there must have been about three hundred pages in each of them. The front and back cover was dark honey tone and so supple. Along the binding, the leather was much sturdier, darker-rich in color, and it looked hand tooled in an ornate leafy design. The only other adornment was the word “Journal” in very heavy bronze script. Eleven dollars and twenty-five cents was all I had left, if I could get all five, it would be a windfall.

I hovered over the stack of journals until Mom said, “It’s time to settle up.”

Deciding it was now or never, I screwed up my courage, picked up the heavy stack, and marched up to the pay table. In my most matter of fact tone, I said, “I’ll give you two dollars for each of them.”

The woman looked at me, pulled the corner of her lip over to one side of her face and said, “I don’t know. I’d like to get five dollars apiece. They’re probably worth more.”

Losing my composure, words rushed out of my mouth, “I know they probably are, but I’ll write in them. They are so beautiful I promise I will

use them.” Then I added, “Pleeease” lifting my eyebrows, tightening my lips, and staring at her with my most beseeching look.

Finally, the woman smiled and said, “Because you promised to use them, I’m going to let you have them all for just ten dollars.” She laughed as she took my money, and said, “You, my dear, are one tough little haggler.”

Almost squeaking, I said, “Thank you so much. I absolutely promise to use all of them.”

Randy helped me haul them back to the car, and I skipped happily in my excitement. My siblings thought I was crazy for buying “dusty old journals.” But I didn’t care, and it did not matter how long it took me to save up that much money. The journals seemed so special; I thought that if I was lucky enough they would eventually contain magic, if they did not already.

The station wagon was full, but Mom thought because we were already in Ellington, why waste the opportunity to pick up groceries. The twins both yawned drowsily, so Mom suggested they stay in the car and take a nap. For a change, neither of them argued. Randy volunteered to stay with them so he could sort through the fishing tackle he had purchased.

While in Ellington Bros. Grocery, Shelley ran into a classmate so she stayed behind, and they animatedly played catch up. In my head I cataloged the things I had bought earlier, while fingering the small stone bear, as I followed my mother around the store. Loving the way it felt, I rubbed its smoothly polished body. It had a small rounded head and tiny ears, a larger rounded rump and four thick, nicely shaped legs. In the bright lights of the store, I could see what had caught my eye in the first place. Truly dazzling, the bear had red, green, and chocolate colors that swirled around in a mesmerizing way, and they all met at its shimmering star fire center.

As I stared at the bear, I remembered a few of the dreams that I had had lately. One dream was of different colored bears dancing in a circle, first on all fours, then on just their hind legs. As I watched them, I felt a need to dance with them and share in their happiness. In another, there was a black bear walking beside me on a path through the woods. As we walked, I stroked the coarse fur behind its ear and as I did, I could clearly sense the strength and power emanating from the huge mammal. In my last dream, I was walking through a town where black bears were coming out of doorways, and brown bears were walking around corners, and then passing right in front of me. In all of the dreams, I was not afraid of the bears. Instead, I felt comfort from their presence, and I wondered what they were trying to communicate.

It’s odd, but as I picked up the bear earlier at the sale, I could have sworn I heard the small figure whisper to me. For a while, everything else around me went out of focus, and things got very quiet. When I had touched the tiny bear, it felt as if it gave off warmth, and yet it sent a chill up my spine. *Did I only imagine the whispered words? “Keep us close.”* What did

that mean, and how could I forget that until just now, here in the cereal aisle? The memory seemed more like a distant dream, not like something that happened just hours ago.

The realization slowly dawned that my mother was talking to me. “I’m sorry Mom, what did you say?”

Chuckling she said, “Lily, maybe you should have stayed in the car with the others. You seem to be daydreaming. I asked you— Rice Krispies or Cheerios?”

A bit chagrined, I answered, “I think we are out of the Krispies.”

Holding my palm up, so she could see the bear, I said, “My mind was wandering because I was looking at one of the things I got today. I forgot I had put it into my pocket after paying.”

She glanced down at the relic, and said distractedly, “That’s sweet, but maybe you should put it back in your pocket so you don’t lose it.”

Smiling, I did as she suggested, but I continued to finger it, pondering why it was she did not recognize something exceptional in the tiny, stone bear.

It was tricky fitting the provisions in with all the other articles we had already bought. Randy, Shelley, and I each held groceries on our laps, and tucked some around and under our feet. Mom slid into her seat with a satisfied smile when she saw that Andy and Abigail were still asleep.

Laying my head against the window, I gazed out at the passing scenery, still rubbing the smooth body of the stone bear. After supper I planned to write in one of my new journals all about this almost perfect day. At the time, I thought the only thing that could possibly have made that day better would have been if Dad were with us, although I was not quite sure where he would have fit in the car.

Mom smiled slyly as she turned the station wagon into the driveway, and we all whooped loudly at the sight of Dad’s semi-truck and trailer. He was standing on the front porch waiting for us when we pulled in. He was already showered, shaved, and eager to hear all about our day. Mom had not told us he would be coming home that day, so it felt like Christmas in May. It ended up being one of the best days I could ever remember.

~



3 TWELVE CANDLES

After a quick breakfast I fed the chickens and collected eggs. It was Tuesday, so I loaded my bike basket with the cartons that needed delivering, yelled to my mom that I was going, and hopped on the silver slider. The day started out dewy so my sneakers were soaked through.

It was only nine o'clock but it was already hot. It was going to be a steamer. Glad I'd tied my hair up off my neck, I was already looking forward to the cool shade of Colleen's backyard. The gravel road was dusty and my shoes quickly took on the color of mud. After a few polite words with Jenny Radwell we exchanged money for goods, and smiling said our farewells. As I peddled toward my next drop-off the wind picked up and the sky darkened in the direction of town.

By the time I'd reached the Barney's drive the wind was gusting and I could barely make headway. I was glad our house was in the opposite direction. Olivia Barney didn't want me to get caught out in the storm, so we hurriedly made our exchanges and she said, "I'll call your mother the minute you leave and let her know you're on your way."

The storm was building but I rarely felt threatened by nature's ill temper. Nature made no excuses for its behavior and it did not apologize. Its anger was honest and to the point. I respected its raw strength and dark beauty. With all things in nature, including human nature, Colleen told me there's a shadow side. She said, "For you to truly love yourself you'll have to learn to accept your own dark side the way you have embraced nature's tempest." When dad was home, during a real howler, we'd sit on the porch together and watch its escalation. We were both thrilled when the clouds threw bolts of lightning and wind pulled at our clothes.

Hopping back on my bike I whooped as I raced out onto the road. The air was cooling as the rain drew nearer. My adrenaline pumped and my excitement was building. Heat lightning blazed in the sky overhead, and the hair stood up on my arms and legs as the temperature continued to plummet. Glancing down I grinned at the huge goosebumps on my skin.

The atmospheres changes were quick and dynamic. Soon the sky had lost all its color.

The wind was at my back and the gale held me in its powerful clutches, pushing me toward home. Laughing crazily I pumped my legs, trying to keep up with the storm. *What a rush!* As I sped around the corner, turning into the driveway, the wind blasted me and I almost toppled. Still upright I giggled and raced into the carport skidding to a stop just as the first drops of rain pelted the tin on its roof.

Mom watched me from the porch. Skipping up the stairs I handed her the day's egg money and said, "It looks like a lulu!"

She said, "You sure live a charmed life don't you Miss Lily?"

Slipping off my muddy sneakers I said, "Do these look like glass slippers to you?"

Mom rolled her eyes and said, "Smarty. Go ahead and put your glass slippers under the rain spout. Quick before the real light show starts."

The storm rushed through like a freight train, leaving a soggy world in its wake, and the damp air steamed up quickly as the sun found its way out again. A little before eleven I prepared to head to the cottage on the corner. I had my tiny stone bear securely in my front pocket and two of my journals in a paper sack in my bike basket along with Colleen's eggs. Excited to show Colleen a few of my new favorite treasures, first I cleared my departure with Mom, slipped on a pair of flip-flops, and then I hung my sneakers on the clothesline.

Taking a right out of the driveway, I slowly peddled down the road, breathing in the freshness of the still wet earth. Though my bike fenders helped to keep most of the mud at bay, I still became speckled by the same colored earth my shoes wore earlier. Some of the mud got rinsed off as I waded through the field to retrieve a perfect bouquet of freshly laundered daisies. I air dried as I headed up the walk to greet Brenna.

Turning the corner into the backyard, I was transported by the smell of mint and the sweet aroma of plant life that the canopy held in its tight grip. As we exchanged greetings, I noticed that Colleen had already dried the table and chairs and had, as usual, set the table to perfection. She made no comment as I set the eggs on top of the bag that held two of my new journals. Our weekly ritual commenced, and then we sat down to enjoy the wonderful lunch of fruit salad, with Ham and Swiss sandwiches that Colleen had concocted.

The last two weeks I had missed Colleen. Since she had several engagements she could not avoid, we were unable to get together. During our meal, I complimented Colleen on how good everything was, and then I politely asked if she had finished with her appointments.

She said, “Not quite, but don’t worry yourself with my details. Alright, out with it. I can tell you’re busting at the seams, and don’t think I didn’t notice the bag you put on the table.”

After taking another bite of my sandwich, I dug the miniature stone bear out of my pocket, and set it down on the table beside her plate. Watching her carefully, I saw the smile leave her face as her mouth turned into the shape of an O.

A tiny gasp slipped out, and then she excitedly asked, “Where did you get this?”

Quickly, I asked, “Do you see it?”

Colleen forgot the rest of her fruit as she picked the relic up, and peered at it very closely. She stared quite intently without saying anything, but the smile crept slowly back onto her face as I saw dazzling light reflected in her eyes. Her expression became radiant, and I questioned, “Colleen?”

She hastily pulled the bear from her vision, and handed it back. *What was that all about?* I said, “You looked a million miles away.”

“Did I?” She picked up her fork, stabbed a piece of pineapple, and then before putting it into her mouth, she said very casually, “Where did you say it came from?”

“I got it at the very first thrift sale we went to last Friday. You saw something, didn’t you?”

She was noncommittal, but asked, “What did you see?”

“The light at its center— well, did you?”

She must have seen something with the way she reacted. It seemed as if she was choosing her words carefully, as she said, “Yes, I believe I did.”

“Good, because Mom just glanced at it and said it was cute, as if there was nothing really very special about it at all. I have been carrying it in my pocket since I got it.”

“Out of curiosity, how much did you have to pay for the bear?”

Proudly, I beamed, “Fifty cents.”

Colleen giggled, and sat back in her chair with her hands over her mouth rocking forward and backward, in a giddy thrall. I was becoming exasperated with her behavior. Her quick change of mood was confusing. Normally, she was a lot easier to understand. As she continued her giggling, several times I heard her say, “fifty cents,” and each time she giggled a little harder. Finally, she settled down and said, “That felt good, I needed a good laugh. I’m sorry if it seems like I’m acting like a crazy person.”

Colleen inhaled, and sighed deeply before she said, “I guess it’s time I show you something.” Reaching down into the top of her blouse, she pulled out a leather pouch that was connected to a medium weight shiny silver chain. Tipping the pouch over, she shook its contents out into her hand, and then beheld the object with absolute reverence. It appeared to be

a small bird. As she handed it to me, I recognized it was a hummingbird made from stone.

As I slowly turned it, I saw a tiny spark of light burst from its center, and I smiled with awe. “Wow— It has light too! It’s so beautiful, and yet its colors are so different from the colors in the stone bear.” Colleen didn’t comment. She just watched me examine the relic. Very carefully, I handed the tiny bird back to her, and asked, “Where did you get it?”

“There is not enough time today, but someday you will learn all about the origin of the tiny stone bird.” Like Willow, I knew no amount of cajoling could get her to give me more information on the subject.

Nodding, I said, “They are special, right?”

“Lily, they are very special. It is important that you keep the bear close and guard it well.”

I mumbled, “It told me to keep it close.”

Colleen looked at me sharply. “What did you say?”

Grinning, I said, “Nothing.” She was keeping things from me. Well, fair was fair.

After telling Colleen about my bear dreams, I asked, “What do you think they mean?”

She said, “You are the best person to interpret your dreams. I do believe that they have something to do with the new treasure you now hold.”

Sighing with disappointment, I said, “I kind of figured that.”

“Right now, I’m not the best person to explain about the bear, but soon enough I am certain you will understand more about your new talisman.” As if to stop more conversation on the topic, she slipped her adornment into its pouch, rocked back and said, “What’s in the bag?” She then pointed at it, and raised her eyebrows with a big Cheshire cat grin. She seemed as excited, to see what was inside, as Abigail waiting to open a Christmas present.

“You haven’t finished your lunch yet.”

“You little whelp. I’m not going to finish it. Now, give or you don’t get any cake!”

“We get cake too!”

“Not if you don’t show me, this minute, what is in that bag.”

Hoping she wouldn’t be too disappointed, I said, “It’s not that big of a deal, really.”

She was having none of that, and scolded with one word, “LILY—”

Smiling, I reached for the bag and removed the books. There was no despondency from Colleen. Her face immediately lit up as she reached for one of the journals. “May I?”

Without a word I handed her the top one, and watched her stroke the cover and ooh over its soft texture. She chuckled, “Don’t tell me you got these at the same thrift sale!”

I bragged, “No, but I got all five of them at a different thrift sale on the same day.”

Her eyes widened with the word, “Five?”

Gushing, I divulged how I had bartered with the woman at the thrift sale. Then I disclosed that I convinced the woman to sell them to me for a mere two dollars apiece. She laughed at the cow eyes I gave the woman as I begged pleecease.

“Lily, you are a little imp, but a very clever one.” She examined the journal more closely, while feeling the texture of the binding and admiring its beauty. “Maybe I should have gone to more garage sales.” She spoke, and motioned her head toward the other journal. “What’s in that one?” Flipping quickly through the one she was holding, she had seen my careful handwriting. I had only written on a few pages, so she guessed rightly that the other one held something more.

Biting my lip, I was a little nervous to show her the other journal. Deciding to get it over with, I picked up the book. Handing it to her with a big inhale then exhale, I traded for the one in her hand. Watching me with a quizzical expression on her face, slowly she opened it to the first page. Seeing my worry, she gently smiled at me before she looked down. In but a breath’s time, she tilted her head to the side, and whispered, “Oh, Lily.”

Being the only journal without lined pages, I had decided to use it for drawing. On the first page I had drawn a picture; I had in my head, of Colleen holding a large bouquet of daisies. She wore the same smile I remembered so well, from the first time I brought her a spray of our favorite flowers. Colleen reached for me. Standing up, I stepped toward her, and she instantly wrapped me in a tight hug. She said my name so quietly, I almost didn’t hear. While she held me, Brenna bounced first against my leg, and then she stood against Colleen’s in concern. Ignoring her dog, she just continued to hold me for a while, stroking my hair. When she finally released me, she wiped her eyes with the palms of her hands, and swiped at her nose, sniffing loudly. Lifting her eyebrows with a questioning look, she asked, “Can I see the rest?” I just nodded, not wanting to break this marvelous spell. As she slowly turned each page she shook her head back and forth, absently scratched behind Brenna’s ears, assuring her all was fine. On the next page was a picture of a chickadee on an apple tree branch, then after that, Randy fishing on the shore at Shirkee’s pond. The last one was of my mother, her hands deep into a large bowl, kneading bread.

Colleen looked up, and said, “Well, you have been busy since Friday.” With a look of true sincerity she continued, “These renderings are absolutely wonderful.” She reached out with her warm right hand, held the top of my arm, and said, “I mean that. The detail is amazing. You have some rare talents Lily, and you are only twelve years old. You will only

become better at writing and drawing, and who knows what else. I am so excited for you, and whatever your future holds.”

Embarrassed, I looked down at my feet, not sure what to say. Colleen tipped my face back up so I was forced to look into her eyes. “Don’t hide these talents. You are worthy of anything you believe. Never be afraid of the power of who you are or what you can accomplish. You are so young, yet I can see who you are and the light you carry. Don’t hide it.” She let go of my face, beamed, and then sat back, slapping her hands on her knees and said, “You’ll be just fine. I’ll be right back.” Very quickly, she grabbed the eggs from the table and scurried into the cottage.

While I waited, I stroked Brenna’s tummy after she rolled onto her back. After a while the door bounced open, and a smiling Colleen came out carrying a good sized package wrapped in homemade paper, which appeared to be fashioned from multi colored maple leaves. Sitting on top of the box was a small two tiered German chocolate cake with twelve glowing candles.

Giggling, I said, “It’s not my birthday, anymore.”

We had never celebrated my birthday in the past, so it was an unexpected surprise. Not envisioning a present from her, I had never told her the day on which I was born. All of the time she spent with me was worth more than any old present. As true as that was, I was still very pleased and excited she had gone to the trouble. “How did you know German chocolate is my favorite?”

“I didn’t, it’s my favorite too.” Impishly she set the cake down on the table, and said, “Blow out the candles before they drip and ruin the frosting.”

I didn’t know how many birthday wishes I was supposed to have, but thought as long as there were candles, why not? Formulating my wish, I blew as hard as I could, and easily extinguished the flames. Colleen clapped her hands, and picked one of the candles off the top making an “*hmmmm*” sound as she sucked at the frosting. We removed them, and then cleaned all twelve of the candles with noisy pleasure.

After knocking bread crumbs off our plates, Colleen placed a piece of newly cut cake where the sandwiches sat earlier. There were a small pitcher and two small mugs, I hadn’t noticed, sitting to the side of the table. Colleen filled each mug from the pitcher. She handed me one, then raised hers toward mine to meet with a satisfying clink.

“To you, Lily, may all of your days be filled with magic and on even the saddest, may you find a reason to smile.”

We each sipped from our mugs, and I felt buoyant, filled with the charm of the moment. Embarrassed, I said, “Thank you, this is so thoughtful.”

We ate our cake in silent pleasure, and although it was sweetly moist, it was all the more wonderful washed down with each creamy sip of milk. As

we finished our treat, we both sighed with delight at the same moment, and then laughed at our identically timed appreciation.

“Would you like another piece of cake, Lily?”

“No way, I’m full, but thanks. Everything was so good. How did you know when my birthday was?”

She winked, “I’m really smart.”

“Ha, ha, yes, I know, but how did you really find out?”

She reached for the beautifully wrapped gift and said, “I asked your mother earlier this year; she told me.”

Careful not to destroy the unusual wrapping material, I asked, “How did you make the paper?”

“Well, I used last year’s fallen leaves.”

They held together so perfectly, I wondered how they had remained so pliable. “No really, how did you make it?”

She smiled wickedly. “I am allowed some secrets, now go ahead and open it.” Tearing the edges of the leaves so they wouldn’t be destroyed elicited loud encouragement from Colleen. “Rip it open. Come on, you’re supposed to shred wrapping paper with enthusiasm.”

Smiling toothily, I tore at the paper with genuine excitement. Gasping, I beheld the exquisite beauty of my gift. “Oh gosh— Colleen, oh, this is too much. It’s so— Is it really mine?”

Her eyes brimmed, and she nodded. “Yes, of course.” Quietly, she allowed me time to absorb and really examine the fine carved detail of the two Calla Lilies and the hovering, intricately scribed hummingbird that graced the wooden box in incredible relief. The winged figure was so delicate that I could actually see the tiny lines in the feathers. Running my fingers over the etchings, every subtle line on the silken wood felt almost alive. The patience and skill it must have taken to carve the top of the amazing box left me in awe.

Turning my prize from side to side, I thought I could see a lid, but it fit so perfectly it was difficult to distinguish where wood met wood. Only the hinges which were embedded into the wood so they almost disappeared, and the hasp on the front, proved my notion. The sides and back of the box wore only a few Calla Lily leaves, meant to complement, not to overpower.

When I finally found my voice, I asked what I already suspected. “Did you do this?” Colleen nodded, “This is one of the blessings of my life. I was given the ability to carve new life back into wood. It has been a way to grace, and it even helped to bring me to Charlie.”

“Why didn’t you tell me it was you who had carved the front door?”

“Because it didn’t matter who carved it, as long as it was appreciated. I didn’t want you to dwell on things I’d done in the past. I only want you to live in the now, to find your own gifts and never ever compare yourself or

your talents to others. I want you to be happy within yourself. You are the only one who can do that, never think that someone else can make you happy.”

Looking down, I opened the box. Inside, lying on the bottom was an identical pouch to the one she wore, attached to an identical chain. Tilting my head, I asked, “How?”

Patting herself where her pouch lay, she said, “I made an extra one.”

“Why would you do that?”

She winked, and said, “Let’s just say I had an idea you might need one, eventually.”

Not wanting to wait, I dug into my pocket and retrieved the bear. First, I kissed the tiny relic, and then I placed it into its new, secure home, pleased I wouldn’t have to worry any longer that it might slip out of my pocket. Guiding the chain over my head, I quickly tucked it under my shirt and patted it in the same motion Colleen had, and said, “So cool, this is so cool!”

Glancing down, I stopped short when I noticed the carving on the inside of the box. Bending over to get a closer look, I could see that the center of the inside top of the lid was filled with intricate scroll work. The design was incredibly elegant, and the lines all appeared to run together somehow. I squinted, but I found it impossible to decipher what it was supposed to be.

Colleen winked and said, “Don’t try to figure it out now, you’ll have plenty of time, later.”

There were seven names carved below the scroll work. All of them had one common denominator, the name Lily. The last two names were the only two I recognized, the order gave me a stab of fear, and I looked sharply at Colleen. Presenting me with a gentle smile, she reached under the table, and picked up a wooden box off the stones of the patio. Motioning me to set my box on the table, Colleen handed over the one she had retrieved.

She said, “Charlie and I never had children, and I have never talked to you about the rest of my family. I have a niece who has always cherished this box. Because I had the ability to carve a new one, I decided to do just that. It touched me that you had drawn the picture of me holding daisies because it was that first time you brought me daisies when I decided that I would like to carve you a box.”

My lip quivered as I examined the box. Afraid I might cry, I remained silent.

Colleen’s box was made in much the same shape and size, but the hinges were not so cleverly disguised, and the hasp was crudely designed. The wood looked to be the same, though the patina was much darker, and the carved areas were worn down a bit more from handling. The ability of

the master who had carved this box could not be diminished, just because I loved mine more. The design on the top and sides of the box were the same, except for one glaring difference. There wasn't a hummingbird on Colleen's box. That made mine all the more special.

Opening the box, I saw the same scroll work inside the lid, and was amazed that Colleen could have copied the graceful etching so precisely. There were only six names on the inside of this box ending with Colleen Lily Johnston. When I unlatched the box, I thought I felt it vibrate in soundless quick bursts of energy, almost like the electric razor my mom used on her legs.

Setting Colleen's box on the table beside mine, I rushed into her arms and held her close. Squeezing her tightly, I said, "I love you. This is the best present I will ever have. You're my very best friend, and I think you're the only person who really understands me. Your box is beautiful, but mine is perfect and could never be matched."

Colleen gently held me at arm's length, and wiped away the single tear that had slid down onto my cheek. Looking deeply into my eyes, she said, "I love you very much, and we will always be friends of the heart, and sisters of the earth."

When I sat back down, she said, "I need to tell you a few very important things about both boxes before you go home. You must have suspected the box that I have has been passed down for many centuries. Some of the people who have cared for the box have been related through blood, and some have not. All have been connected in a way that transcends just a name. Although it is not a coincidence that all past caretakers of this box have the name Lily, be it first, middle, or last. There is more to who they are than just that name. With their distinctive talents, abilities, heart, and nature's approval, the benefactors of the box are connected as surely as if they are all sisters and brothers. I did create this box especially for you, Lily. It tells a story of my soul's love for you, but someday, when the time is right, there will come into your life another Lily. This person will share a part of your soul, and you will again pass this most precious box along. It is not a possession; it is a gift to be cared for like the tiny stone bear you now carry over your heart. There are no possessions when your body is returned to dust and your soul is free to fly."

"The Lilies on the top of this box, the carving on the inside, and the names of the ones who hold the box, all serve to create an enchantment that is beyond your wildest dreams." Holding both of my hands, she looked directly into my eyes. "Lily, there is incredible magic in this box."

"What do you mean? What kind of enchantment and magic?"

Just then, out of the quiet of the day, a hummingbird buzzed by with another in hot pursuit. They were always constant visitors in the back yard, and they continually flew closest to Colleen. At times it appeared they even

teased Brenna, buzzing her back, or flying past her nose. Usually, she walked away grumpily, trying to ignore their sassy goading.

After a moment, one of the tiny flying jewels came back to put on a show. The tiny acrobat flew straight up into the canopy, only to dive down at a daring speed and swoop back up like a pendulum swings, around and back up again several times in succession. In a high pitch whistle and buzzzzz, buzzzzz, buzzzzz, repeatedly, the tiny bird captivated ours and even Brenna's attention, as her furry head followed the bird's progress.

Giggling at the tiny 'Teo,' the brilliant hummingbird that had us spellbound with its dazzling display, Colleen uttered, "This is enchantment, this is magic."

Her knowledge of the world was magical. Colleen had names for all of the wildlife surrounding her home. It always amazed me that she recognized at the slightest glance, which furry inhabitant had come to call, or who's voice it was that sang an afternoon ballad.

"Lily, I am afraid it's time for you to go home."

We hugged then, and I picked up my journals. After glancing at them and the box lying close by, my heart skipped merrily. Opening its lid, I set the first journal inside and found that there was room to spare. Stacking the second book on top of the first, I closed the lid and said, "Cool."

"That is too perfect, just a minute." In a flash, Colleen rushed through her back door. When she returned, she was carrying a very small paddle lock just a shade different from the hasp affixed to the front of the box. In its locking mechanism was a small key. Opening the paddle lock, she slipped it through the hasp, clicked it shut, handed me the key, and said, "I've had that little lock for the longest of time. What a wonderful surprise."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cecilia Johnson lives on the wild rivers coast of Oregon with her husband Mickey and their two furry companions, Leroy and Gracie. Her family, nature, exploring, and creating beauty are among her greatest passions. Writing is Cecilia's favorite way to tap into the universe's warehouse of magical ideas, but walking the beaches or hiking the many spectacular trails of the Oregon coastline with her family keep her grounded in Earth's grand realm.

On any given day you might find Cecilia picking up garbage on a road, beach, or with the Trash dogs, a local cleanup crew that is very enthusiast about a healthy and beautiful environment. Cecilia encourages each and every one to take the time to watch a bird, the stars, or an ant on the sidewalk. Even the blades of grass beg your notice. The World awaits.

My imagination does not rest when I close my eyes to sleep. Most nights I am fortunate enough to have a vivid recall of my twilight life. Luckily, the realm beyond our everyday lends me a creative hand with storylines, dream sequences, and even characters. For me the splendor outside my home is a privilege and inspiration to behold.

I hope you enjoyed reading 'Energy in Stone' as much as I did writing it. If so, you might be interested in the other two books in the In Stone Series. In book two, 'Secrets in Stone', follow along on Lily's odyssey into nature and her first blush of love. 'Name in Stone', book three, is the final novel in the series. Lily's challenges mount. In her last stand she leaves you with a closing revelation and a sense of wonder. You can find links to all novels on my website at CeciliaJohnsonAuthor.com.

Wishing you much laughter, and the good fortune to find magic and wonder wherever you may be.

Cecilia Johnson

Reviews are always appreciated.



