

KEEPING FAITH  
By Jeanne M. Rideout

On an early morning like this in old Plymouth, Jill could hear the footsteps of spirits treading over the cobblestones. Crumbled brown shapes whispered outside her bedroom window, rising on the whirlwinds into the fall haze.

*They're coming.*

Jill shivered under the cotton quilt. He embraced her more closely, soothing her loneliness and grief.

A car door snapped shut. The door of a second car slammed, the sound ricocheting across the courtyard.

Jill left him alone in the bed, tying the sash of her chenille robe as she watched the trio striding up the walk. Missy, her one remaining sister, hurried toward the house with Faith in tow, clutching one of the toddler's hands. Faith cuddled her dead mother's silk scarf against her cheek with the other.

Madeline, the grandmother, or grand-monster, as Faith's deceased mother Julie used to call her, stomped behind them. Missy shot Madeline an angry look as the grandmother made a snatch for Julie's scarf.

"Leave her alone!" Missy cried, gripping Faith's hand more tightly, as if that could prevent Madeline from taking the little girl away.

Jill tried to remind herself that Madeline was grieving her son Duane. The same fiery crash on Route 3A that had killed Julie and Sam had also claimed Duane's life. Sam and Jill were newly engaged, but, instead of being united in marriage with Jill, Sam was united in death with Faith's mommy and daddy under the frozen cemetery earth.

A rustle sounded behind Jill, and a familiar wet nose touched her ankle. She plucked Mr. Schnookums up off the carpet. The tabby rubbed his head against her as she carried him out into the kitchen, closing the bedroom door firmly behind her.

Madeline barged in with a crash that rattled the Wedgewood teacups in the china cabinet. She tossed a court document onto the white linen tablecloth covering the pedestal table in the center of the kitchen.

"Explain this to me," Madeline demanded. She parked her wide girth onto one of the antique chairs clustered around the table, a middle-aged woman with scowl lines and frizzy red hair showing dark brown at the roots. Schnookums growled, his orange and white tale bristling. Jill let him hop down and reached for the ceramic coffee canister. Missy and Faith stood motionless in a corner.

"It's only 8:30," Jill said. "I'm going to make coffee." She beckoned for Missy to have a seat. "Have you and Faith had breakfast?" she asked. When Missy nodded, Julie suggested that Faith should go into the living room with Mr. Schnookums.

"We need to do something about that child," Madeline snapped. "The kid has been carrying Julie's scarf around since the funeral. That's not healthy."

"She misses her mother," Jill said, turning up the gas under the coffee pot, watching the shade of coffee perking into the glass bubble on the lid.

"What's not healthy is her dysfunctional family environment," Madeline said. "The court named you as Faith's guardian, God knows why, and you need to order Missy to give that child to me," she said, tapping the square of white paper with a condemning finger.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jill watched Faith cowering next to Schnookums on the braided rug in front of the fireplace, rocking back and forth, pressing the wrinkled pink silk scarf against her cheek.

“Faith belongs with Missy,” Jill said. “Missy has a loving husband who can provide for Faith. She can grow up with her cousins and have a normal family life. That’s what her parents wanted.” Jill placed three mugs on the table, filling each with the steaming brew.

“It’s what Julie wanted, not my Duane,” Madeline snapped, shoveling sugar into her coffee, splashing brown droplets. “Julie was a bad influence on Duane from the get-go. If it wasn’t for Julie, my Duane would still be alive. So would that boyfriend of yours, What’s-His-Name, that you say you loved so much.”

Julie had been Duane’s inspiration to resign from his accountant’s position in a clothing chain to enroll in divinity school in southern California, despite Madeline’s howling protests. Julie and Duane planned to leave Faith with Missy until they got settled into student housing and could send for her.

Jill turned her back on Madeline, staring out the bay window at the tendrils of ground fog creeping over the courtyard from the harbor. On the morning Sam had died, fog billowed over Plymouth, blanketing the trees, the courtyard, and the highway. Police reports and newspaper headlines, the bookends framing Sam’s death, crowded into Jill’s brain.

Sam had fifteen minutes left to live when he pulled his Honda behind the moving van with a jaunty wave toward the cab where Duane and Julie sat, Duane at the wheel, heading for El Cajon. On Route 3A, the back of the van disappeared into the fog, and Sam stepped on the gas to catch up.

Suddenly monster eyes glowed in the fog bearing down on the van. A sports car materialized, driving on the wrong side of the road. A sickening squeal of breaks, the screech of metal on metal... the van fishtailed and overturned, skidding over the pavement toward Sam. The Honda burst into flames on contact, the impact throwing Sam through the windshield.

The EMTs scooped up as much of Sam as they could.

Mist shrouded the cemetery on the day that Jill watched three coffins resting on the frost-rimmed leaves, three burnt empty husks within.

Mist still covered the bay window of her kitchen that afternoon, as she sat crying at the table, a pile of crumpled tissues around her. The door rattled in rhythmic thumps, as the ocean wind blew, ebbed, and blew.

Blow, rattle, blow, rattle.

Blow, rattle, blow, rattle, scratch.

Blow, rattle, blow, rattle, scratch.

Jill lifted her head, snuffling.

Blow, rattle, blow, rattle, scratch, scratch, scratch.

Jill stared in the direction of the sound.

She slowly pushed away from the table. The doorknob trembled under her hand as the determined scratching continued. Something was trying to get into the house.

For a moment she wondered if she should let it in. Then the pain of losing Sam cut into her again. What else did she have to lose?

An orange tabby cat straddled the threshold, his fur ruffled. He gave her an “It’s about time” look and swaggered inside.

“Look what the wind blew in,” Jill quipped. A strong gust exhaled over her, raising the hair on her arms. The damp tissues flew off the table, cascading onto the floor. The cat pounced on the rumpled balls, filling the air with shredded white bits.

Jill hoisted the tabby up. He smelled like candles and incense, and something unidentifiable that made her body tingle.

*What does heaven smell like?*

“Hello, Mr. Schnookums,” Jill murmured.

Schnookums jumped down, strutting toward the bedroom, looking over his shoulder for her to follow.

Jill stepped inside her room. She gasped, shock barbs prickling her body.

He lay on the bed, waiting for her, holding out arms, arms that were not Sam’s, to embrace her. Hesitantly, shyly, she went to him.

Madeline grabbed Jill’s wrist so tightly that Jill knew she was going to have a bracelet of yellow bruises around her wrist tomorrow.

“Listen to that child,” Madeline hissed.

“Do you have my mommy?” Faith had draped the scarf over Schnookum’s back. She crouched over the tabby, whispering in his twitching ear.

“Did you hear her?” Madeline demanded.

“She’s just talking to the cat,” Missy said.

“She’s talking to herself, like some kind of lunatic!” Saliva dotted the table as Madeline spit out the words. “She does that all the time. She thinks she’s talking to *Julie*.” Madeline’s mouth contorted as she said her daughter-in-law’s name. “That kid is a space shot, just like her mother.”

“Maybe she’s talking to her guardian angel,” Jill said.

“Jill, Julie, and Missy, the Bozo Trio. You girls are cut from the same cloth, and it’s a piece of work,” Madeline said. “Julie was always stuffing Faith’s brain with that New Age nonsense.”

“Julie has nothing to do with this,” Jill said in a dry tone. “Julie is dead.”

“I look at you and I see Julie.” The corners of Madeline’s mouth turned down, as though she tasted something bitter. “Julie was always spouting off about divine spirits. There’s nothing divine about where she is now, or about what she did. My Duane is six feet under, thanks to her.”

“It’s not Julie’s fault that Duane is gone,” Jill finally said in a soft voice.

“He never would have got into that van if Julie didn’t talk him into leaving me,” Madeline said. “Duane had a great job right where he was, and a future. Julie was the one who had pipedreams about living on the West Coast and being a Malibu girl, and she used Duane to try and live out her sick fantasies. Julie never cared about Duane, any more than you cared about Whoozit, that boyfriend of yours.”

“His name was Sam.” Pain teased up Jill’s midsection, a hot pain fed by her longing.

“Yeah, well, I’ll bet you already got another man lined up to take his place,” Madeline said.

“I don’t see any point of continuing this conversation,” Jill said, her fists clenching. “Missy, just take Faith home. She belongs with you.”

Madeline slammed her palm on the table. “That’s right, Jill, send Faith back home with the Wacko family, where they can all live happily after in Never-Never Land. That’s my son’s

kid, and she's rightfully mine. Julie is dead, and Faith needs to accept that, and getting rid of that scarf she's carrying around is a good place to start. That kid needs to shake hands with Mr. Reality, and I'm just the gal to make the introduction."

Hoisting herself up, Madeline marched into the living room toward the fireplace. The ocean wind rose, rattling in the chimney. Schnookum's whiskers drooped.

Madeline swooped down, snatching the scarf.

"No, no, Nana Madeline!" Faith grabbed the silk in both hands, tugging. Madeline's hairline lowered and a vein throbbed in her temple.

"Give that rag to me, you nasty little girl!"

"It mine!" Faith wailed. She wound her chubby fists around her end of the scarf. Schnookums growled.

"Madeline, don't do this," Jill said. Missy clutched her shoulder.

"Make her stop," Missy said.

"What can I do?" Jill cried. Madeline's hatred riveted her to the floor. She willed her body to move, but her muscles wouldn't obey. Grief welled within her, a tsunami of grief for Faith, for Julie and Duane, and for Sam.

Wind rushed across Jill's cheek. Schnookums arched his back, his tail bristling.

Faith sobbed, clutching the scarf as tightly as she could.

"Let go," Faith sobbed. "It my mommy's, it mine!"

Madeline yanked, puling Faith over the rug on her knees.

Jill made helpless motions with her hands. She rushed over, grabbed Schnookums, and tossed him at Madeline.

Schnookums landed on Madeline's forehead, his stomach plastered over her eyes and nose, muffling her screeches. He dug his front claws in behind her ears, gnawing at her hair. His hind claws dug into her throat. Madeline let go of the scarf and grabbed at the cat, tumbling onto her back. Schnookums bounded off her chin, landing on the telephone stand, glaring.

Faith cringed, winding the bit of silk around her hands. Jill scooped her up, cuddling her, murmuring a promise that somehow, someday, everything would be all right.

"And how do you know that?" The stark edge of Missy's voice startled Jill. "How can anything ever be right again?"

"I just know," Jill said. "Sometimes, all you have in life is faith."

"I'm calling animal control," Madeline shrieked. She scabbled onto all fours, her wide backside sticking up in the air, and shoved her bulk upright. "I'm going to have that cat put to sleep for attacking me."

"You call animal control, and I call the police," Jill said. "You just assaulted a child in front of two witnesses." She held the phone receiver in one hand, jabbed 91 and poised her thumb to punch the second 1.

Madeline stared at Jill. The lines around her mouth turned down like hardening lard.

"You can leave now," Jill said crisply. "And don't you let me hear anything about you bothering Missy and Faith again, or I'll file a complaint and you'll have the boys in blue at your door."

Madeline stalked out of the room. Missy, with shaking hands, wiped the tears off Faith's cheeks with the edge of Julie's scarf.

"Take your little girl home," Jill said gently.

And so the contingent exited. Jill drew the bolt firmly shut. The hope and the hate were again out in the courtyard. Missy, with Faith securely tucked in her arms, walked in an aura of hope. Madeline clambered toward her car wrapped in a tightening ball of her own hatred.

Jill stood quietly watching until she was certain they were really gone. She padded across the floor into her bedroom, with Schnookums bobbing along beside her.

The coverlet was turned down on the empty bed. Schnookums leapt onto the pillow. A golden haze surrounded him, and he dissolved into an expanding mist. The mist sparkled and coalesced and the angel appeared.

He had been with her since the birth of her soul, faithfully watching over her long before she knew he was there. He reached out her hand to draw her to him, and the shining of his wings enfolded her with the promise.

Someday, everything will be all right.