

Turning for Home

Caren J. Werlinger



Ylva

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST RAYS OF the sun crept through the dormer window and hit the mica panels of the night-light on the bedside table. Becoming translucent as the beam of light hit the lamp, the paper-thin sheets of mineral glowed in amber shades of gold, with dark copper silhouettes of figures visible where a moment ago all had been dark. Smiling, Jules squinted at the familiar cowboy, slouched near his campfire while his horse grazed nearby. She reached out and twirled the lampshade on its base to the next panel with ducks and geese flying over a grassy marsh and then again to a fish leaping from a stream. One more turn of the lamp showed a panorama of foxes trotting through a meadow, hopping a fence.

Jules allowed her eyes to slide out of focus into a half-awake haze and put herself in the field with the foxes, feeling wet grass tickle her belly and long, fluffy tail as she hopped after mice and tumbled and played with the other foxes....

“Can’t you smell the earth, Jules? Look up and see the trees and bushes and the whole, wide sky over you...” She could hear Pappy’s voice, see his strong hands as he

twirled the lamp. “If you use your imagination, you can go anywhere, do anything. You’ll never be lonely again—”

CLANG!

Her eyes snapped open at the bang of a heavy cast-iron skillet being dropped on a burner. *More effective than any alarm clock.* She heard the familiar scuff of slippers and the sounds of the refrigerator door opening and closing. She reached for the cell phone next to the lamp and pushed a button.

“Hi,” came a sleepy voice over the phone.

“Hi,” said Jules, speaking low to avoid being heard downstairs. “Sorry to call so early.”

“I thought maybe she’d sleep in a little today.”

Jules snorted. “What, Mae Calhoon let a little thing like a funeral disrupt her routine?”

“What time’s the service?”

“Funeral home at ten, cemetery at eleven, and then everyone will come back here.”

“You okay?”

“I guess,” said Jules softly. “It’s not like I’d seen him much in the past umpteen years.”

“If that gets you through this, fine. But I know you don’t mean that.”

Jules swallowed hard. “I love you, Kelli.”

“I love you, too.”

“I’ll call you later.”

Jules rolled onto her back and looked up at the slanted ceiling above her, the wide white boards covered in faded posters. Smiling down at her were the eternally young faces of the Beatles, the Brady Bunch, and the Partridge Family.

On the other side were movie posters from *Dr. Zhivago* and *Love Story*.

“These were your mother’s, weren’t they?” Kelli had asked the one time she’d come to Aldie with Jules. “How old were you when you came to live here?”

“Three, I think,” Jules had said. “I don’t really remember living with my mother. I only have one vague memory of her; I think we were at a pool. All my other memories are of being here with Pappy and Mae.”

As if on cue, “Are you coming down, or do you expect breakfast in bed?” called Mae’s voice from the kitchen.

“Coming,” Jules called back. Sitting up, she quickly brushed her hair back into a tight ponytail and pulled on jeans and a T-shirt.

When she got downstairs, her grandmother was standing at the stove, wearing her blue-flowered housedress, her white hair up in curlers. She flipped the bacon as grease spit from the skillet and glanced disapprovingly at Jules. “That’s not what you’re wearing, is it?”

“Of course not,” Jules said. “But it’s only six and the funeral isn’t until ten.”

Cool air was coming in through the screen door opening onto the backyard, where birds were singing a morning chorus.

She got two glasses out of the cupboard and poured orange juice as Mae laid the bacon on a paper towel and cracked four eggs into the skillet, the grease sputtering and crackling madly.

“Coffee?” Mae asked.

As much as Jules needed a cup of coffee, she wasn’t sure she could stomach the boiled sludge coming from Mae’s old

Corning percolator. “No, thanks,” she said. “I’m trying to cut back.”

A few minutes later, they were seated at the 1950s diner table—“probably the only new thing Mae ever agreed to buy,” Jules often joked—the aluminum banding around the edge still gleaming and spotless even if the gray-speckled Formica on the tabletop was a little faded. The red vinyl on the chairs was cracked at the corners with little tufts of stuffing peeking through the cracks. They ate in silence, eyes focused on their plates.

No need for conversation.

Jules ate quickly and carried her dishes to the sink, where she washed them and placed them in the dish drainer.

“I’m going for a walk,” she said, heading for the screen door.

“Just don’t be late,” Mae called after her as the screen door slapped shut.

Jules stepped out into the yard. Funny how little it looked now. Except for the birds, all was quiet at this hour, but soon, garbage trucks would be rumbling along the dirt road that ran behind all these houses to the town dump.

Walking around to the garage and driveway, she looked through the overgrown hedge to the brick house next door. The shrubs and trees surrounding the little house had grown so that the house itself was almost engulfed. She walked down the driveway to the sidewalk and quickly passed the neighboring house, relieved to see all the curtains drawn and no sign of anyone peering through the windows.

The sun was just high enough to cast dappled shadows along the sidewalk as she made her way downtown. Sniffing, she could already detect the stink of the paper mill in

Chillicothe. She knew the smell would get stronger as the mid-summer day warmed.

“That will make the cemetery service lovely,” she muttered, but then, Pappy had worked at the mill for forty-five years, so maybe it was appropriate.

Ten minutes’ brisk walking brought Jules to Aldie’s tiny downtown, consisting of not much more than a couple of stores, a bank, “and the diner,” she muttered aloud. Craving coffee by now, she headed toward Sandy’s Diner. The counter seats, as always, were mostly full with locals visiting with one another. A few of the old men nodded as she entered, and she wondered if they recognized her as Carl’s granddaughter. She slid into a booth and flipped the upside-down coffee cup in front of her.

A waitress appeared almost magically with a pot of coffee. “What can I get you, hon?” she asked, one hand on her hip as she poured.

“Uh,” Jules said, remembering she had just had breakfast. “Got any chocolate pie?”

“Sure do. Be right back,” the waitress said, already halfway back to the counter, refilling coffee cups as she went.

Cradling her cup in her hands, Jules sipped the hot liquid. She savored the flavor, wondering again what they did to their coffee to make it taste so good. Outside, a few cars rolled by, people on their way to work, she supposed.

Diagonally across the intersection was the Aldie Five & Dime, where she had spent hours and hours—“and all my allowance,” she remembered with a wry smile—buying comic books and bubble gum and warm cans of grape pop because the cold cans cost five cents more. That store was where she

had first seen her night-light, not long after she had come to live with her grandparents. She remembered having to pull herself up on tiptoe because she wasn't big enough to see over the edge of the shelf. She could barely reach the light, twirling the shade to look at all four panels, around and around and around.

"You like this, Jules?" Pappy had asked, squatting down beside her, where she could smell his Old Spice. He lifted the light down so she could see it more closely as she nodded mutely, mesmerized by the copper cut-outs fixed to the illuminated panels. A few minutes later, she had walked out of the store, proudly carrying the boxed-up light in a shopping bag nearly as big as she was, but her happiness was short-lived.

"You paid what?" Mae had demanded angrily when they got home.

Upstairs, crouching in the door of her room, the bag next to her, Jules heard Pappy say, "But Mae, she's scared up there all alone in the dark. It'll help this house feel like home for her."

"You're going to spoil her, Carl, just like you did—" Mae said, still angry. "She's going to end up like her mother."

"Mae—" But there was only the sound of a door slamming.

Picking her bag up high to avoid thumping it on the stairs, Jules carried it back down to the kitchen.

Pappy looked at her. "What's this?"

"We should take it back," Jules said.

Pappy smiled, his eyes suddenly shiny, and said, "No. Let's plug it in and see how it looks."

Together, they went up to her room and set the night-light on the bedside table. Jules turned it on. They sat on the bed, Pappy's arm around her, turning the light from scene to scene.

"Can't you smell the earth, Jules..."

Jules blinked, and hot tears leaked down her cheeks. Keeping her head turned toward the window of the diner, she covertly swiped her hand across the wetness. She was startled by the clatter of her pie being set down in front of her.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

"Excuse me," said the waitress, "but aren't you Jules Calhoon?"

Jules glanced up. "Yes."

"You probably don't remember me," the waitress said with a shy smile. "I was a year behind you in school. I'm Trish Gregory. Well, Bayliss now. I married Gilbert Bayliss. You two were friends, weren't you?"

Jules felt her face get hot. "Kind of, I guess."

"We were all sorry to hear about Carl," Trish said. "He was a nice man." Her face brightened. "You should come by while you're in town. We live in Gilbert's home place. Bought it from his parents. Where are you now?"

"Virginia," Jules said. "Near Charlottesville."

"Couldn't wait to get out of Ohio, huh?" Trish joked and, suddenly, her smile faded. "Oh... um..." She backed away. "Well, enjoy your pie."



"Mae, you sit down," said an older woman, her beehive hair dyed an impossible shade of black—"country-singer

black,” Kelli would have said with a giggle—as she ushered Mae to the sofa and waved to another woman to bring a glass of lemonade. Fans were whirring from every available electrical outlet to move the air in the un-air-conditioned house.

The kitchen table and counters were filled to capacity with platters of ham and cold cuts and deviled eggs, casserole dishes filled with lasagna and potatoes au gratin and green bean casserole. There were bowls of pasta salad and chicken salad and egg salad.

“I don’t know what in the world she’s going to do with all the food,” Jules said to Kelli, stepping out onto the back stoop to call her as dozens of people, most of whom she didn’t know, snaked around the kitchen, filling plates.

“How was the service?” Kelli asked.

“It was okay,” Jules said, shrugging. “Typical Methodist funeral. Everyone in black. Everyone sings ‘Amazing Grace’ and recites the 23rd Psalm and then pats Mae on the hand...”

*...and goes to the cemetery, the place I haven’t been since...
That was the hardest part; only it wasn’t Pappy I was thinking of.*

Kelli chuckled. “And what would Pappy have wanted?”

Jules went around the far side of the garage and sat in the plastic lawn chair Pappy always kept there to hide out of view of the house and smoke his pipe, pretending Mae didn’t know. “He loved to dance, just jigs around the kitchen. I never saw Mae dance with him, but I did sometimes. And he loved musicals. He probably would have preferred ‘Climb Every Mountain’ to ‘Amazing Grace.’”

“I wish I could have known him before he got sick,” Kelli said.

“Me, too.”

“How much longer will you stay?”

“Only until tomorrow,” Jules said. “I want to get home.”

“Call me tonight?”

“I will. Kell?”

“Yes?”

“I love you,” Jules said.

“I love you, too.”

Jules clicked her phone off and slid it into the pocket of her black slacks.

“You’re wearing pants?” Mae had asked, glowering in her direction when Jules came down dressed for the funeral.

“Mae,” said Jules—“I knew this was coming,” she almost said wearily—“you haven’t seen me in a dress since the first day of kindergarten...”



“Here, here,” Pappy said when he found Jules upstairs, facedown on her bed, crying as if her heart would break. “What happened to my girl?” he asked as he rubbed her back.

Sniffing, Jules rolled over and looked up at him and said, “The other kids made fun of this stupid dress Mae made me wear. They said it’s about a hundred years old.” She got off the bed and yanked the dress over her head, standing there in her underwear and undershirt. “It was my mother’s, wasn’t it?”

“Well,” said Pappy slowly, scratching the cleft in his chin, the way he usually did when he was thinking. “Your grandmother thinks it still has plenty of wear left in it... and your mother did look awful pretty when she wore it.”

His eyes misted as they always did when they talked about Jules's mother.

"I don't care," Jules said, crossing her arms, her socks scrunched around her ankles. Her legs were so skinny, her socks never stayed up. Pappy stared at the large scab on one knee as she stomped her foot and declared, "I'm not pretty, and I don't want to be pretty. I won't wear it again or any of her other clothes. I'm wearing my own clothes, or I won't go to school."

Pappy's mouth twitched as he looked at her. "All right. I'll talk to your grandmother."

"But what will people say?" Mae asked a short time later. "They'll think we can't afford to dress her properly. She can't run around like a little hobo."

Jules lay on the floor at the top of the stairs, listening to their voices carry through the kitchen and up the stairs from the living room.

"Mae," Pappy said. "She's not Joan. We have to let her be herself."

"But they're still going to make fun of her," Mae said. "She's such an odd creature."

"She says if she's in her own clothes and they laugh at her, she can at least punch them in the nose," Pappy said and Jules could hear him laughing....



Jules blinked to clear her vision at the sound of more car doors slamming from the direction of the street. More food, more well-meaning friends or neighbors or church members. People would be coming and going all afternoon. She leaned forward in Pappy's lawn chair.

“I don’t think I can take much more of this,” she muttered, wishing she could leave for home this very minute.

“Pssst.”

She swiveled her head.

“Pssst.”

Craning her neck around, Jules realized the hiss was coming from next door. There, standing almost in the hedge, was the neighbor. She waved Jules closer.

Hesitantly, Jules approached. She nearly didn’t recognize her. The woman was thin and worn-out-looking, with bags under her eyes. Her scant, graying hair was greasy and lank as if it hadn’t been washed in a very long time, and her pale blue eyes were watery and red-rimmed. Silently, she held out a towel-wrapped object through the branches of the hedge.

Jules accepted it and could feel it was still warm. She peeled back a corner of the towel to reveal a fresh loaf of bread.

“Thank you, Mrs. Fahnestock,” Jules said, but the woman had already disappeared back to her side of the hedge.

CHAPTER 2

THE AFTERNOON WORE ON, and a handful of Mae's friends were still at the house, showing no inclination to leave anytime soon. Half of them were already widows, and, in a small town, drama provided the only relief from the sameness of the days. Carl's death and Mae's new widowhood would sustain them for weeks to come.

After changing back into jeans and a T-shirt, Jules called from the kitchen, "I'm going for a walk." When she got no response, she let herself out through the screen door.

"Do you think she loved him?" Kelli had asked once. "You know, romantically?"

Jules had stared off into space, trying to imagine an affectionate, loving Mae. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe early on, when they were young."

"Don't judge your grandmother too harshly," Pappy had said to her more than once. "Life hasn't been easy for her. I never amounted to much," and Jules remembered the sadness in his eyes as he said that, "and when your mother left..."

"You mean when she ran off," Mae would have said bitterly—her anger, her sense of betrayal over that disappointment never far from the surface.

“...well, it took some of the joy from her,” Pappy said. “She used to sing and laugh,” but Jules always frowned at him, having a hard time imagining her grandmother laughing.

Outside, Jules took a deep breath at her escape from the house. Retracing the path she had taken earlier that morning—*it feels like days ago*—Jules glanced at the Fahnestock house as she passed. She thought she saw one of the closed curtains twitch, but she couldn’t be sure.

Coming into town, she took a detour one block east of Main and came to Johnny Clem Elementary. She walked around the three-story brick building, still not air-conditioned by the looks of it as some of the old sashes on the upper floors were raised to let in some air. She tilted her head, trying to remember which window it was she’d broken with a baseball. She wandered around behind the school, to the deserted playground and sat on a swing. Swaying as she pushed off, she held her feet up and closed her eyes, enjoying the swooping sensation in her stomach.



“Hey, kid, throw me the ball.”

Joey Reynolds hollered to a chubby boy leaning against the school building where a foul ball had rolled to a stop. The boy, wearing a strange combination of too-long jeans rolled up several times at the cuffs paired with a too-small T-shirt that didn’t quite cover his white belly, retrieved the ball and threw it awkwardly. It sailed high and landed twenty feet short amid howls of laughter.

“He throws like a girl!”

“The fat kid can’t even throw a ball!”

Jules stomped up to Joey and shoved him in the chest with her baseball mitt. "I'm a girl, Joey Reynolds, and I throw as good as you. Good enough to throw you out from center field."

Scowling at the reminder, Joey picked up the ball and said, "C'mon. Let's get back to our game." The other boys followed, but he stopped after a few steps and called back to Jules, "You comin'?"

"You go on." Jules squatted down to tie up the laces of her sneakers.

As the sounds of the baseball game resumed, she stood and went to the fat boy, who was running a fingernail back and forth in a mortar line between two bricks. He looked as if he might cry.

"Hey," she said.

"Go away," he replied.

Stung, Jules waved toward the baseball game with her mitt. "I'm not like them."

"I said, leave me alone!" He turned his back on her.

"Fine."

Fuming, she stalked off and went back to the game. When they were called back inside after recess, red-faced and sweaty, she saw him lagging behind, making sure he stayed away from Joey and his gang.

Later that day, as she walked home from school, she noticed the fat kid walking ahead of her, tracing the same path she was. To her surprise, he turned into the driveway of the house next door. He paused, as if waiting for her to catch up.

"Hey," he said as she drew near.

She started to walk by him, pretending he hadn't spoken, but then stopped and said, "Now you'll talk to me?"

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “But, at my old school, whenever someone seemed like they were being nice, they were usually just tricking me so they could play some kind of joke on me.”

“That’s awful,” Jules said.

The boy just shrugged.

“My name’s Jules Calhoon,” she said. “I’m in Mrs. Davies’s third-grade class.”

“I’m Hobie Fahnestock. I’m in third grade, too. Mr. Black’s class.”

Now that he was looking at Jules, she realized he had the prettiest eyes she had ever seen, light blue with long, black lashes that made it look as if he had makeup on. He had dark hair and a pale face that made his eyes stand out even more. They lit up as he asked, “Jules? As in Jules Verne?”

She just looked at him blankly. “Who?”

“The writer,” he said. “You know, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea? Journey to the Center of the Earth? Around the World in 80 Days?*”

“No,” said Jules, staring at him. She made a pained face. “Jules as in Juliet. Like *Romeo and Juliet*.” Her fists balled up. “But don’t you tell anyone.”

Hobie backed up quickly as if he expected to be hit. “I won’t. I swear.”

Jules looked toward the house and noticed several cardboard boxes piled on the front porch. “Did you just move in?”

He nodded. “Two days ago. Me and my mom. And you live there, with your grandparents,” he said, pointing. “My mom asked the mailman about some of the neighbors.”

“Where’s your dad?” Jules asked.

“Dead.”

“Oh.” Jules didn’t know what to say. She’d never known a kid who had a dead parent. Her mom was still alive, somewhere, even if Jules didn’t live with her. “Is that how come you don’t know how to throw?”

Hobie shrugged again, scarlet patches rising in his pale cheeks.

“Want me to teach you?” she asked.

He nodded, his expression brightening.

“But we’ll have to do it here, where no one will see,” she said, knowing Joey and the others would make fun of Hobie while he learned.

“Okay,” he said.

“Hobie?” called a woman’s voice.

Jules looked over to see a pretty, brown-haired woman on the front porch.

“I better go,” he said.

“Okay. See you, Hobie.”

“See you, Jules.”



Jules opened her eyes and dragged her feet to stop the swing. “Why are you doing this?” she asked herself harshly, getting up and leaving the schoolyard behind.

The schoolyard maybe.

It was almost five o’clock, and most of the downtown businesses were closing. Jules headed toward the diner. “With all the food in this house?” she could hear Mae bristling.

Glancing around as she slid into a booth, she was relieved to see that Trish wasn't working. Gilbert Bayliss. She rested her forehead on her hands. She hadn't thought of him for as long as she hadn't thought of Hobie.

"God, why did I come back here?" she mumbled.

"Excuse me?"

Jules looked up, embarrassed to realize a waitress was standing there, an older woman with a voice like a bullfrog and a face lined with fine wrinkles. "Um," she stammered, flipping open the menu. "I'll have a burger, medium-well, fries, and a chocolate milkshake."

She grinned as she imagined Kelli's reaction to that. "Your life insurance is all paid up, right?" or some such quip would be typical.

As the waitress left to place her order, Jules was hit by a strong wave of homesickness. Not for Aldie, not even for Pappy. For Kelli, for the million little things she did to make their house feel like home—baking Jules's favorite oatmeal cookies, arranging unexpected vases of flowers, leaving a card at Jules's place at the table to find after Kelli had gone to work—little reminders of how much she was loved.

Again with the stupid tears.

With a disgusted sigh, Jules went to the restroom, where she slipped into the only stall and dabbed at her eyes with a length of toilet paper. She heard the bathroom door open and close, and then open and close again almost immediately. She pulled off more toilet paper, blew her nose, and threw the used tissue into the toilet. She pushed the handle to flush and reached for the bolt on the door.

Her eye was caught by a piece of paper lying at her feet. She bent over to pick it up, certain it hadn't been there

when she entered the stall. It was a blank diner check. Turning it over, she read:



Below was scrawled an e-mail address.

Her heart thumped as she re-read the note. She listened, but the restroom was empty. She folded the paper and tucked it into her pocket as she left the stall and washed her hands. Her face staring back at her from the cracked mirror was ashen. She returned to her booth, where her heart rate slowly returned to normal. *Relax. You don't live here anymore. It doesn't matter if somebody guessed.* Her meal arrived a moment later, and Jules looked at her waitress as she thanked her, but there was no sign of recognition there.

Glancing around casually as she munched a few fries, she saw no one who looked obvious. No one who seemed to be watching her covertly. No one who looked like a dyke. "And what does that look like?" she could hear Kelli say, laughing.

She ate the rest of her meal, watching people come and go, and still could not tell who had slipped the note under the door. She paid her check and stepped out onto the

sidewalk. The sun was still high in the sky, and she wasn't ready to go back to the house, where she was sure Mae's friends would still be keeping her company. She began walking aimlessly and found herself several minutes later at the entrance to the cemetery.

The cemetery was built on the town's highest bluff, where the early residents had figured it would be safe from the occasional flooding of the Scioto River, flowing in a lazy arc below the cemetery's far side. It had been a favorite place to play twilight games of hide-and-seek, and the hill was a great place to go sledding in the winter, but this afternoon, in the back of the limo with Mae, was the first time Jules had been there since she was seventeen....

"There's a place, but you have to swear never to tell..."

"Down a hidden trail on the back side of cemetery hill..."

"It's only for us. No one else can know..."

But there had come a time when Jules had had to take other people there, police and firefighters and—"Stop," she said, screwing her eyes shut and turning away.

"Surely, they can't still go there, not after..." She pulled the scrawled note from her pocket and stared at it. *I'm like you...* Suddenly angry, she crumpled the paper and hurled it as she stalked away. "No one helped us!" she yelled, punching the sky. "No one told us it would be okay." She stopped after a few steps, her jaw working as she fought with herself. "Damn it." She shook her head and stomped back to pick up the little wad of paper. Carefully, she smoothed it on her thigh and refolded it before slipping it once again into her pocket.

CHAPTER 3

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO stay with me,” Hobie said.

He and Jules were inside, drawing, while outside, they could hear the squeals and yells of a furious snowball fight beyond the school library windows. Despite months of coaching from Jules, Hobie could still manage only a mediocre throw—“you’ll never throw someone out from the outfield,” she’d said, shaking her head—and though she had managed to get him into some of the games when they were short a player or two, she always arranged for him to play right field, where he rarely had to worry about a ball coming his way. But a snowball fight... That would be asking for trouble.

“What do you mean?” she asked as she shaded in the horse she had copied from a library book. She wasn’t as good a drawer as Hobie, but he was teaching her.

“I know you want to go outside with them,” Hobie said. “It’s okay. You don’t have to play with me all the time.”

She looked at him and thought again that one of the things she liked most about him was the way he could read her mind. That, and he was always honest. Hobie, for his part, had quickly learned to appreciate the protection his

friendship with Jules gave him. The other kids—especially the girls—didn’t always like her, but for some reason they didn’t pick on her, either. She wasn’t like other girls. “Other girls don’t give you a black eye,” Joey Reynolds could have told him.

There were places Jules couldn’t protect him, though, and sometimes she could tell Hobie had been roughed up in the boys’ bathroom or in the hall.

“They make fun of me, too,” she had told Hobie. “Because I don’t have any parents.”

“Where are your parents?” Hobie asked. “Are they dead?”

Jules shook her head. “My mom ran away with a boy she wasn’t married to,” she said matter-of-factly, “and then she dropped me off with Pappy and Mae when I was three, and we haven’t heard from her since.”

“Why do you call her Mae?” Hobie asked. “Why not Grandma or something?”

Jules shrugged. “Dunno. It’s what I’ve always called her. I don’t think she wants to be a grandma.”

Listening now to the noise of the snowball fight outside, Jules shook her head and said, “No. I’d rather be here with you.”



Jules blinked as she came back to the present and, seeing a sign for Staunton, realized she had no recollection of the last fifty miles. “Pay attention to what you’re doing.” She couldn’t help feeling the car was more crowded now than it had been going to Ohio.

Kelli was at work when Jules finally got home at the end of a very long seven-hour drive. In the backseat of her Subaru, carefully tucked into a box and cushioned with wadded-up newspapers, was her night-light.

“Well, I don’t suppose you’ll be back until my funeral,” Mae had said when Jules finished loading the light and her suitcase into the car.

“Don’t be silly,” Jules had said. “I’ll be back,” but, as she drove, she tried to imagine what could possibly draw her back. There had been no tearful hugs good-bye, no promise to be back soon or call often—not as it used to be with Pappy.

“I know you have to go,” he’d said in a choked voice the day Jules left for Ohio State on a hard-won scholarship. “You’re better than this place.” She had clung tightly to him, wishing she could tell him all the reasons she had to leave, why she could never come back. She knew he would go upstairs and sit in the empty bedroom both his girls had abandoned, nothing but an old night-light and faded posters left behind to remind him of them....

“Hello, girls,” she said as she opened the door and was vocally greeted by two kittens, an all-gray named Mistletoe and a gray-and-white named Holly.

“They have to have Christmas names,” Kelli had said when she brought them home last Christmas Eve. “Someone dropped them by the dumpster. I couldn’t leave them.” Jules had peered into the box at the two mewling kittens, their eyes barely open. Between Kelli’s imploring eyes and the kittens’ pitiful cries, “How could I say no?” Jules had asked in her most Scrooge-like voice, but her heart had melted as

soon as the kittens, their little bellies full of kitten formula, had curled up on her chest and fallen fast asleep.

“Oh, you look so skinny and neglected,” she said now as they wound around her ankles, complaining loudly that it was past their dinnertime. She went back out to the car to get her suitcase and the box containing the night-light and took them upstairs. She was back down in a moment, saying, “Come on, let’s get some dinner while we wait for your mother to get home.”

“Oh, my gosh, it smells so good,” Kelli said an hour later when she came in the door.

Jules rushed to her and held her tightly. Kelli returned the embrace as Jules mumbled into her neck, “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too.” Kelli kissed Jules’s cheek and then worked her way to her lips.

They stood, locked in a kiss for a long time, until Jules jerked away.

“Ouch!” she exclaimed as Holly stretched up on her hind legs, kneading her front claws into Jules’s thigh. “Dinner’s ready,” she said, rubbing her leg. “Hope you don’t mind tacos. We had all the stuff, and it’s simple.”

“Sounds great,” Kelli said. “Let me wash up, and I’ll be right down.”

Though Kelli changed into and out of her ICU scrubs at the hospital—“you don’t even want to know what they’ve been exposed to”—she always showered as soon as she got home.

She was back in ten minutes, smelling of soap and shampoo, her short, blonde hair dark now while it was damp.

“So,” said Kelli as they sat with plates filled with a couple of tacos each, “tell me all about it.”

Jules shrugged. “Not much to tell.” She took a crunchy bite.

Kelli watched Jules’s face closely. “I notice there’s an addition to our décor upstairs.”

“Oh, that,” Jules said sheepishly. “I hope you don’t mind. It was mine. Pappy bought it for me.”

Kelli reached for her hand. “Of course I don’t mind. I remember it from your room. How old were you?”

“About four, I think,” Jules said. “Not too long after I came to live with them. Mae had a fit that he spent so much money on me.”

“She does love you, you know. In her way,” Kelli said.



“Why does Mae hate me?” Jules asked Pappy one day. “All the other kids have mothers who bring cookies or cupcakes to school for their birthday.” She sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “I’m going to be nine this summer. The teacher said we could do a party for all the summer birthdays, and when I asked Mae if we could make cupcakes, she said it was the silliest thing she ever heard of.”

“Oh, sweetie,” said Pappy, handing her his handkerchief while he puffed on his pipe behind the garage. “She doesn’t hate you. She loves you. A lot. She’s just not real good at showing how she feels. She shows it in other ways. Like when she patched your overalls.”

Mae, having long since accepted that Jules would wear what Jules would wear, no longer tried to get her into Joan’s old dresses, but she couldn’t help complaining about some

of the things Jules did wear—like her old, faded overalls. They had been big on her when she was little, like seven, but they fit fine now—“except for the holes in the knees,” Mae pointed out.

“I don’t care,” Jules said, crossing her arms. “They’re all broken in. I like them this way.”

But even Jules couldn’t keep wearing them when she was climbing a tree and a branch caught in one of the back pockets, ripping the material away from her backside, letting everyone see her underwear. Joey and his gang of boys had roared with laughter as she climbed back down from the tree.

“I see London, I see France. I see Jules’s underpants,” they chanted over and over as she ran from the schoolyard.

“Oh, no,” she wailed when she got the overalls off and inspected the damage. She sat up in her room for hours, tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth in concentration as she tried to sew the ripped fragment back down. It looked awful, the stitches all puckered and uneven, “and it feels funny,” she said when she tried to put them on and realized the ripped leg was now much shorter than the other.

She draped them carefully over the chair in her room when she went to bed that night, only to wake and find them missing. Scrambling out of bed and down the stairs to the kitchen, she was already hollering when she stopped short. There, on the kitchen table, were her overalls, tiny neat stitches replacing her jagged ones, with fresh patches on the knees.

“You fixed them!” Jules cried. She hugged Mae around the waist and ran back upstairs to try them on.

Jules looked at Pappy's smiling face as he puffed rings of smoke from his pipe. "I forgot about that."

The next Monday, Mae showed up at school with two large Tupperware containers of chocolate chip cookies.



"She does love you, you know. In her way."

Jules smiled and nodded as Kelli squeezed her hand. "You're right," she said. "Neither of us has ever been very good at showing how we feel about each other."

Kelli turned back to her taco, now falling apart where the grease had soaked into the tortilla. "She's going to be lonely now, even if she won't admit it. You'll need to call her more often."

"I guess."

"And maybe we could go visit in a month or so," Kelli said brightly.

"Oh, that'll be a joyful visit."

"And to think I used to wonder where you got your sarcasm from," Kelli said with a shake of her head.



"Hey."

Jules looked up from a student file she was going over.

"Hi, Donna."

"You're back at work already?" Donna asked, pulling out a chair and sitting.

"Just looking over the list of students I'll be testing in August," Jules said.

Donna reached forward and laid her hands over top of the file, blocking Jules's view. "I'm not talking about work," she said. "For a psychologist—"

"School psychologist," Jules interrupted. "There's a difference."

"Whatever," Donna said with a wave of one hand. "I'm talking about family. You just lost your grandfather, the man who raised you."

Jules tugged the file out from under Donna's hands. "He was sick for a long time. It's not like this was sudden or unexpected."

"That doesn't make it any easier," Donna said.

"What are you doing here in July?" Jules asked. "I have to work twelve months, but you're supposed to have the summer off."

Donna gave her a sardonic look, and Jules knew that she'd recognized the abrupt change in topic.

Sitting back, Donna said, "We got our shipment of new textbooks. I was counting them to make sure the order's complete."

"Oooo, new history textbooks." Jules grinned. "Can't wait to get ahold of one of those."

"Smartass." Donna got to her feet. "You and Kelli still coming to Elaine's birthday party this weekend?"

"Yup. It's on the calendar."

"Good," Donna said. "Elaine went to a lot of work putting her party together. She'll be pissed if people don't show up."

"She's throwing her own party?" Jules asked.

Donna rolled her eyes. "You think she'd trust me to get it right?"

Jules chuckled. “Well, we’ll be there, and we promise to be properly impressed.”

“That will make my life much easier,” Donna said with a smile before she disappeared through the door.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

TURNING FOR HOME

via
Smashwords
amazon
Bella Books
Kobo
Apple
and many others.

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com

About Caren J. Werlinger

Caren was raised in Ohio, the oldest of four children. Much of her childhood was spent reading every book she could get her hands on and crafting her own stories. She completed a degree in foreign languages and later another degree in physical therapy. For many years, her only writing was research-based, including a therapeutic exercise textbook. She has lived in Virginia for over twenty years, where she practices physical therapy, teaches anatomy, and lives with her partner and their canine fur-children. She began writing creatively again several years ago. Her first novel, *Looking Through Windows*, won a Debut Author award from the Golden Crown Literary Society in 2009. In 2013, *Miserere*, *In This Small Spot*, and *Neither Present Time* all won or placed in the 2013 Rainbow Awards. *In This Small Spot* won Best Dramatic Fiction in the 2014 Golden Crown Literary Awards.

Connect with Caren online

E-mail her at: cjwerlingerbooks@yahoo.com

Visit her website: <http://www.cjwerlinger.wordpress.com>