

Lois suggested that they move to the screened-in sun porch. It was summer. Hot and humid. The dining room they'd been in was paneled with dark wood. That, along with the heat, made it particularly oppressive. They sat side by side in dusty rocking chairs. Lois set herself to a slow rhythm of back and forth. Constance sat still.

"Why would he make it a point to tell you? That doesn't make any sense," Constance said.

"He called to ask for money. He's given up the bookkeeping business, apparently. The moment I agreed, his mood improved. He went on and on. Your mother was just one of many things he mentioned."

"But why are they even in touch? They've been divorced for years."

"I guess they ran into each other. He was a bit vague about that."

The new husband owned a grocery store, Lois said. Constance's mother went in to buy a loaf of bread. One thing led to another, as it does with lonely people. The husband was a widower. He had no children. He wanted children.

"Which brings me to the second bit of news. You have a baby sister. As of about two weeks ago," Lois said.

Constance did the math. She was twenty-six. Her mother had had her before she was even twenty. **b. But she** was still pretty old to have another baby.

"It doesn't seem like it would have been possible," Constance said.

"She's not young, it's true. But the baby's healthy. It's really a miracle, when you think about it," Lois said.

The tone in her voice made Constance see how much she must have wanted a child once. Her late husband—Constance's grandfather—was said to be a cold person. Yet he required

Commented [A1]: Starting a sentence with a conjunction (though technically against the rules) isn't always wrong, but I made the change because it didn't seem to actually be contributing to the tone in any significant way. Still, feel free to disagree; just wanted to point out why I changed this one and didn't touch many others.

companionship. After his first wife died, Lois was the answer, especially when Edgar, Constance's father, grew up and went west. Lois was a widow in her forties when they met and married; he was at least fifteen to twenty years older still. A child wouldn't have been a good idea, even if it could have been possible, physically.

So many solitary people, and now this baby, this sister! Constance didn't know how she felt about it.

"I got the sense that your father hoped you would see him—all of them—once you get yourself settled in L.A.," Lois said.

"I can't imagine why I would."

Lois closed her eyes for a moment, as if fatigued.

"Just try to remember that family is family," she said.

"I don't think of them as family at all."

"No. I suppose not."

Constance remembered being very young, holding her mother's hand, having her hair brushed, her face washed, her feet helped into socks and shoes. Her mother's touch had been soft. Then it turned rough, and then was absent altogether. She tried to imagine the woman her mother was now. Did she look at her baby's face and remember Constance at that age? But there was no point in thinking about any of that. No point at all.

A blue jay soared from the top of a pine tree at the edge of Lois's yard. Its color was startling, and caused a sudden surge of joy in both women. They watched the bird light on one branch, then another, then lift off and disappear into the stand of trees separating Lois's yard from her neighbors. Neither was thinking any longer about Constance's mother and father, or of

Los Angeles. They were firmly in the present, wishing for the bird to return, then resuming other trains of thought when it was clear that it would not.

“Do you ever think about visiting England again?” Lois asked.

“I’ll be able to, when I get my first sabbatical.”

“You enjoyed your summer there.”

“I did.”

“Your letters were amusing, all about that horrid little Frenchman, and Professor Spalding.”

Constance cast her mind back. She’d wondered from time to time how Jean-Phillipe was getting along. He’d promised to write and never did. She never wrote, either.

“I enjoyed the story about getting a fancy piece of needlework from that old woman.”

“It was a nice surprise.”

“Do you still have it?”

“Yes.”

“Here, with you?”

“Yes. Would you like to see it?”

“That would be splendid.”

Commented [A2]: Just want to make sure this wasn't supposed to be a question.