

## GETTING NEAR TO BABY

adapted by Y York from the novel by Audrey Couloubis

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In a backyard, a cave, and on a roof in a small town in North Carolina in 1967.

Characters: Willa, 12; Little Sister, 7; Aunt Patty; Uncle Hob; Liz Finger, 13; Isaac Finger, 7; Cynthia Wainwright, 12; Lucy Wainwright.

### PROLOGUE

(Day three. Night. Willa and Little Sister stand on the roof of a small house. They are wearing t-shirts and shorts.)

WILLA

Careful now, don't fall...Look at them stars. Look at all that sky, Little Sister. I told you I'd find us some sky. Is that enough sky for you?

(Little Sister raises her arms toward the heavens in an embrace.)

### SCENE 1.

(Day One. An uncluttered backyard and porch of a simple but clean house floating in a blue sea of a sky. Seven gnomes arranged in a row. Aunt Patty enters from the street with suitcases and shopping bags.)

PATTY

Come on, girls, don't dawdle. Hob! Hob, we're home.

(Hob enters.)

HOB

I kinda thought you'd be home three hours ago.

PATTY

I had to feed them— then we stopped at May's. You can't believe their clothes—. (to off) Willa Jo, don't let her go in the ditch—. (Sighs.) Oh, Hob, you can't even imagine it. Noreen's gotten worse even than she was.

HOB

Did you bring her, too?

PATTY

...I didn't even think of it. All I could think of was getting the girls away. Truth be told, I think they were glad to leave.

HOB

What's Noreen going to do all by herself?

PATTY

She's going to get better is what she's going to do – Hush now.

(Willa and Little Sister enter; they are wearing clean but tattered dresses. Little Sister clutches a large rolled-up canvas painting. Her shoes have gotten muddy.)

Oh, Little Sister, look at your shoes!

PATTY

Why do you have a ditch?

WILLA

We got new neighbors. One of them's loopy as a bedbug. Larry Finger dug that ditch in the middle of the night. Says he's going to fill it back up as soon as the weather's right, whatever that means. I bet you end up doing it, Hob.

PATTY

It's not that bad.

HOB

Say hi to your Uncle Hob.

PATTY

Hi, Uncle Hob.

WILLA

Willa. Hey, Little Sister. You musta grown a foot.

HOB

We saw you two weeks ago. She couldn'ta grown a foot since then.

WILLA

...You girls go on in—Put on your new little outfits. (Hands them shopping bags.) Give me that picture, Little Sister—I'll take care of it—.

PATTY

(Little Sister clutches the painting.)

Okay, then, how's about I get you a frame for it? Won't that be nice?

(Little Sister does not reply)

Put on the new sandals—. You got your sneakers filthy.

(The girls head for the porch.)

Hey— hey. What do you think you're doing?

WILLA

We're going in the house like you said to.

PATTY

Go 'round through the garage.

HOB

...New carpet. Your Aunt's trying to keep it nice.

PATTY

You can't keep a carpet nice when you got children traipsing in and out all day long.

WILLA

We won't traipse. Neither one of us will traipse, will we Little Sister?

(Little Sister touches the gnomes as she passes.)

PATTY

Don't you be messing with my garden gnomes.

WILLA

She don't mean no harm. Come on, I'll help you take off your shoes... (They exit.)

HOB

Why didn't you bring Noreen, Patty?

PATTY

She'd hate living with me. It would never occur to her to put something back where it belongs, and I'd just be at her every single second—she'd never get well...Did I do wrong?

HOB

We can always go back and get her if we need to. Has she heard from Tommy?

PATTY

Not a word. And she makes all these excuses to the girls — “Oh, your father loves you so much, he just can't call because he's working so hard.” The girls know, they know. (MORE) They're children, but they are not stupid. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't gone back—. The Welfare would have taken them away. I don't think they'd bathed since the funeral. Dishes piled up— when they need a plate they use a dirty one. How can people live like that?

HOB

They're suffering in their grief, that's how.

PATTY

You can wash a dish no matter how sad you are. By the time I left, she wouldn't even look at me. All she does is paint. And not the greeting cards either, just enormous pictures she won't let anybody see—. That's what Little Sister's carrying—. She kept poking me in the head with it the whole trip.

HOB

I'm sure it was accidental.

PATTY

I'm not so sure—the whole lot of them—Noreen is going to lose her job if she don't shape up.

HOB

Did you tell her to call us if she needs money?

PATTY

...She knows that.

HOB

Still, it's nice to hear it.

(The girls enter from the garage; Little Sister still has the painting.)

PATTY

Well, isn't that better? A sight more comfortable than those dresses. Don't they look as cute as buttons, Hob?

HOB

Well. They look familiar.

PATTY  
Of course they look familiar. They're kin.

WILLA  
I think Uncle Hob means we're dressed like you.

PATTY  
Don't sass.

WILLA  
I didn't mean to—.   
(Little Sister has been poking a finger into her shoes.)

PATTY  
Little Sister, quit picking at your new shoes.

WILLA  
They hurt.

PATTY  
How do you know that? Did she say something?

WILLA  
No, ma'am. She didn't say something. I know it because mine hurt.

PATTY  
They do not hurt. They're very expensive. What did you do with your dirty clothes?

WILLA  
We left them in the bathroom.

PATTY  
Did you put them in the hamper?

WILLA  
I didn't know to.

PATTY  
Well, of course that's what you do with clothes when you take them off. I'll do it. I'm going to wash all your things anyway.

WILLA  
They're not dirty.

PATTY  
It won't hurt to wash them. And then I think we'll just pack it all back up in the suitcases and put them in the attic. And when the fall comes we can open up the suitcases, and it'll be like Christmas.

WILLA  
(small panic) Christmas? We won't still be here at Christmas?

PATTY  
Well, of course you won't. I'm just saying. Little Sister, you want to give me that picture now?   
(Little Sister clutches the painting.)

Right. Okay. (Heading in.) Hob?

HOB

I'll be right there.

(Patty exits.)

(Brief pause) Did you see how I fixed up your room?

WILLA

It looks real nice.

(Little Sister reaches into her pocket and shows a piece of candy.)

HOB

Well, now, we don't have to let your Aunt see that—I don't think I remembered to get her a piece is why. Just keep it in your pocket. And be sure to brush your teeth after you eat it.

WILLA

Thanks for the chocolate, Uncle Hob.

HOB

You're welcome, I'm sure. I'm going to go help your Aunt.

(Hob exits into the garage taking the rest of the suitcases.)

WILLA

Let me see the picture.

(Little Sister hugs it closer.)

Did Mom say you could take it?

(No reply.)

Which one is it?

(Little Sister looks up at the sky.)

What are you looking at--? There's nothing up there....Are you ever going to talk? ... Listen to me, it wasn't your fault. Even if all we did was get in the car and drive away, we still would have had to find water for Baby. It would have been the same.

(Little Sister walks away. Willa takes her candy from her pocket. Begins to unwrap it in a solemn fashion.)

Do this.

(Little Sister mimics Willa's actions. They unfold and flatten the paper, place the candy on the paper on the ground.)

I'm going to eat this chocolate, and when it dissolves into my mouth juices, I am going to remember something wonderful.

(Willa puts the candy in her mouth; Little Sister follows suit.)

Mmmm. I'm remembering something wonderful. Are you remembering something wonderful?

(Little Sister nods her head.)

You gonna tell me?

(Little Sister looks away.)

I'm remembering catching fireflies in a jar. I'm remembering opening the lid and fireflies flying away into the night.

(Little Sister counts on her fingers to eight.)

That's right! There were eight fireflies in that jar. I caught eight fireflies.

(Indignant, Little Sister gestures that she caught them.)

I don't think you caught them. I think I caught them.

(Little Sister stamps her foot fiercely.)

(Laughs) Alright, alright—you caught them.

(Liz and Isaac enter.)

Hi. LIZ

Hi. WILLA

I'm Liz Finger. We live across the street. LIZ

I'm Isaac Finger. I live across the street. I'm seven. We saw you playing in the ditch. Look Liz, yard fairies. (He speaks to the gnomes.) Hi, hi there, how you doing? What's your name? ISAAC

I don't know his name—(pointedly) He belongs to my Aunt Patty... WILLA

Leave it be, Isaac. LIZ

I'm Willa, and this is Little Sister. We're visiting my Aunt and Uncle for a while. WILLA

(Little Sister holds up seven fingers.)

She's seven, too. WILLA

(Isaac holds up seven fingers.)

Together we are fourteen. Fourteen fingers, Liz! ISAAC

Yep, just like how many in the Finger family household if you count all the uncles. LIZ

There's fourteen of you? WILLA

In the house across the street. (to Little Sister) Do you want to see my cave?

(Little Sister nods.)

(to Liz) Can we?

Okay, but be sure to take the flashlight. LIZ

Wait— I mean—where is it? WILLA

In the little rise behind our house. The entrance is all shored up with timbers.

It's irresistible. ISAAC

Is it safe? WILLA

It's perfectly safe. My Uncle Larry made it. LIZ

Is he the same person dug the ditch? WILLA

Yeah, but he didn't get to finish that—Miss Patty made him stop. LIZ

Stop talking, and let's go to the cave. ISAAC

We have to stay here... WILLA

Oh. Okay. (Brief pause. Trying again.) How long is your visit? I hope it's all summer. I have to stay nearby so I can help Mama and there's no other kids except the ones I'm related to. I'm the oldest of five, and one on the way. LIZ

I'm the oldest of two. WILLA

(Joking) Any on the way? LIZ

(Little Sister grabs hold of Willa.)

...No. None on the way. WILLA

(To Little Sister) Can I see your picture? ISAAC

She—. She doesn't want you to.

WILLA

(Aunt Patty comes to the door.)

Well. What have we here?

PATTY

Hi, Miss Patty. We were just introducing ourselves.

LIZ

Can we come inside?

ISAAC

Well, now. Wouldn't your mother worry if you went into a stranger's house?

PATTY

You're not a stranger—you're our across-the-street neighbor.

ISAAC

I think your mother might worry. Come on, girls. Time for dinner.

PATTY

We just ate—.

WILLA

Your Uncle Hob didn't eat. We have to go inside now.

PATTY

(Realizing they are not wanted.) Come on, Isaac. Time to go home.

LIZ

Why?

ISAAC

'Cause I say so...Come on, we'll go to the cave.

LIZ

Yippee.

ISAAC

(Liz and Isaac exit. Aunt Patty comes down the stoop.)

(Innocently) How come you get to use the porch door and we don't?

WILLA

Because I can come out as long as I go back in through the garage. Were they here for handouts?

PATTY

...They came to play.

WILLA

There's other children in town more suitable.

PATTY

(Little Sister gestures toward the Fingers; she likes them.)

But... (tentatively) I think they're suitable.

WILLA

PATTY

It's not suitable when dozens of people live in one house.

WILLA

There's only fourteen.

(Little Sister gestures the number fourteen.)

PATTY

Fourteen people! They're going to turn the street into a junkyard. What's she doing?

WILLA

That's the number fourteen. This means ten, plus four fingers equals fourteen.

PATTY

...Go 'round to your Uncle, Little Sister.

(Little Sister exits. Patty attempts to be calm and rational.)

PATTY

Now, if you encourage her to be silent, she'll never talk.

WILLA

I don't encourage her.

PATTY

When you go out of your way to understand her hand signals, you encourage her.

WILLA

I don't mean to encourage, but I can't leave her alone in her silence. She would get lonesome.

PATTY

Willa Jo. ...Do you know why she stopped talking? ...If you know you have to tell.

WILLA

(Lying) She's just sad, that's all.

PATTY

I'm sad, too. We're all plenty sad. I think it's high time she started talking again.

WILLA

She can't.

PATTY

She's willful like your mother.

WILLA

Mom's not—

PATTY

Don't tell me about Noreen, I've known her a sight longer than you have. Have you tried to make her talk?

WILLA

I try every day.

PATTY

You should just pinch her.

WILLA  
We're not allowed to pinch.

PATTY  
Or hold her upside down.

WILLA  
For how long?!

PATTY  
Until she gives up. She's doing it to get attention.

WILLA  
Quietness don't get attention. I don't even know when she stopped talking that's how much attention she didn't get. You and Uncle Hob were there—you didn't notice—.

PATTY  
Your Uncle and I were very busy taking care of other things.

WILLA  
Everybody was. Everybody was busy and she just got quiet. Not for attention. She's too sad to talk, and that's the truth. And I hope nobody holds her upside down.

PATTY  
Alright, Willa Jo, nobody's going to hold her upside down. I just want her to talk. It's so nervous-making when she don't talk.

WILLA  
I want her to talk. Mom wants her to talk. She can't talk. When she can talk, she will.

PATTY  
(brief pause) Well, hasn't this been a fine first day.

WILLA  
I think it's been a hard first day.

PATTY  
I was being sarcastic.

WILLA  
We're not allowed to be sarcastic.

PATTY  
Adults are allowed. Go on in. See to your sister.  
(Willa exits through garage. Patty snaps her shorts in frustration. Hob comes to the porch door.)

PATTY  
Don't come out that door, Hob.

HOB  
I'm not going to. Honey? You alright?

PATTY  
Oh, Hob. They hate me. They just hate me.