GETTING NEAR TO BABY
adapted by Y York from the novel by Audrey Couloumbis

copyright Y York, ©2005
draft, NOVEMBER 2006
contact: Carl Mulert, The Gersh Agency, New York, 212-634-8102; cmulert@gershny.com

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.

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.
PATTY
Oh, Little Sister, look at your shoes!

WILLA
Why do you have a ditch?

PATTY
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.

HOB
It’s not that bad.

PATTY
Say hi to your Uncle Hob.

WILLA
Hi, Uncle Hob.

HOB

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

PATTY
...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—.

(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?

...She knows that.

PATTY

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.
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.)

LIZ
Hi.

WILLA
Hi.

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?

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

LIZ
Leave it be, Isaac.

WILLA
I’m Willa, and this is Little Sister. We’re visiting my Aunt and Uncle for a while.
(Little Sister holds up seven fingers.)

WILLA
She’s seven, too.
(Isaac holds up seven fingers.)

ISAAC
Together we are fourteen. Fourteen fingers, Liz!

LIZ
Yep, just like how many in the Finger family household if you count all the uncles.
There’s fourteen of you?

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

(to Liz) Can we?

Okay, but be sure to take the flashlight.

Wait— I mean—where is it?

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

It’s irresistible.

Is it safe?

It’s perfectly safe. My Uncle Larry made it.

Is he the same person dug the ditch?

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

Stop talking, and let’s go to the cave.

We have to stay here...

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.

I’m the oldest of two.

(Joking) Any on the way?

(Little Sister grabs hold of Willa.)

...No. None on the way.

(To Little Sister) Can I see your picture?
WILLA
She—. She doesn’t want you to.

(Aunt Patty comes to the door.)

PATTY
Well. What have we here?

LIZ
Hi, Miss Patty. We were just introducing ourselves.

ISAAC
Can we come inside?

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

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

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

WILLA
We just ate—.

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

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

ISAAC
Why?

LIZ
‘Cause I say so...Come on, we’ll go to the cave.

ISAAC
Yippee.

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

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

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

WILLA
...They came to play.

PATTY
There’s other children in town more suitable.

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

WILLA
But... (tentatively) I think they’re suitable.
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.
We’re not allowed to pinch.

WILLA

Or hold her upside down.

PATTY

For how long?!

WILLA

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

PATTY

Quieteness 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—.

WILLA

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

PATTY

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.

WILLA

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.

PATTY

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

WILLA

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

PATTY

I think it’s been a hard first day.

WILLA

I was being sarcastic.

PATTY

We’re not allowed to be sarcastic.

WILLA

Adults are allowed. Go on in. See to your sister.

PATTY

(Willia exits through garage. Patty snaps her shorts in frustration. Hob comes to the porch door.)

Don’t come out that door, Hob.

PATTY

I’m not going to. Honey? You alright?

HOB

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