

## *The Misfit*

*Judith Groudine Finkel*

Sundays I watched my friends in their white gloves and patent leather shoes walking by my home on their way to church. While they were gone, I entertained myself by hiding my brother's favorite toys or giving my Toni doll yet another Toni home permanent.

Starting at eleven o'clock, I became a sentry at my parents' bedroom window, looking for my friends' return. But even when I spotted them, my agony wasn't over. My mother, afraid I would disturb Sunday after-church lunches, wouldn't let me go to their houses. I had to wait for them to come to me.

"We can't offend our Christian neighbors," she said in a tone that made me afraid something terrible would happen if we did.

The one Sunday I looked forward to was Easter. That was because of Catherine May, who lived two houses away in our small industrial town of McKees Rocks, just outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Catherine had a back yard big enough for a swing set, went to parochial school and had long, gold-flecked hair.

She would come by after Easter church services with a chocolate Easter bunny and let me eat its ears.

When I was six, and about to break off my treat, she stopped me by saying, "You killed Christ."

"Who's that?"

"Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior."

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I searched my memory and then spoke with assurance. “I never even met the man. So how could I have killed him?” As Catherine pondered my logic, I chewed on a chocolate ear.

The holiday that was the most difficult for me was Christmas. In school I mouthed the words to the carols. The songs were about the beliefs of my friends, not mine. Then there was the Christmas tree on the stage of the auditorium. Other children brought lights and tinsel and ornaments for the tree trimming party. I stood apart, eating the cookies their mothers had baked, trying to be inconspicuous. I felt most isolated during the December nights. Every house in the neighborhood except ours had Christmas lights.

At some point those of us who are different make a decision to hide it, ignore it or celebrate it. Without realizing it at the time, I made my decision in 1953, in the third grade. My teacher that year was the imposing Mrs. Noble, who was tall and wide, had hair the color of my red Crayola and yelled a lot. Her reading from the Bible that morning had been about the birth of Jesus. At recess, while the other children drew pictures on the blackboard, I approached her desk. I blurted out what had been on my mind all morning. “Mrs. Noble, I know all about your holiday, and you know nothing about mine.”

She stopped grading our spelling tests and peered at me over her glasses. “What do you mean?”

“Chanukah starts tonight, and none of you knows about it.”

“Do you want to tell us?”

“Tomorrow,” I said.

After school, as I trudged through the snow up Wayne Avenue Hill and slid down it, I was worried. Not about telling the Chanukah story. I knew it by heart. I feared I had done what my mother had admonished me never to do – offended our Christian neighbors.

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When I got home, I took off my white rubber boots and red leggings and walked slowly up the stairs to our apartment. I went into the tiny kitchen where my mother was standing over a frying pan, making potato latkes for our Chanukah dinner. I begged her to let me eat just one of those special small pancakes. When she agreed, I felt even more guilty. So I confessed.

“I’ve got to call your father,” she said.

I’d really done it this time.

“Norm, you’re going to be so proud of Judy.”

The next day I was in front of the class with my family’s menorah, telling the story of how ancient outnumbered Jews defeated the Greek Assyrians and then experienced the miracle of one day’s worth of oil lasting eight days so that the Eternal Light in the temple never went out. I explained that’s why we lit candles on eight nights, and why I got a present on each of them. What I remember most about that day is how Mrs. Noble, whom I’d never seen smile before, smiled at me throughout my presentation.

When I finished, she said, “Next year I want you to tell the Chanukah story to the whole school when we’re all together in the auditorium for the tree trimming.” And so I did, year after year, until I graduated.

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## *Callers*

*Carl L. Williams*

We have more callers at the door,  
bringing cakes and hams and bowls of sympathy.  
Inside, the grateful others rise —  
“Oh, here comes someone, and really we must go —”  
from where they’ve perched on sofa edges.  
Impulsive hugs of commiseration,  
a sudden glance of trembling,  
a well-intentioned patting of the hand,  
provoking mutual tears, and then they’re gone.  
“We’re so very sorry,” say the callers,  
unsure of what will follow  
or where to set the dishes.  
So many have come to offer what they can,  
yet one dread visitor who came before,  
staying briefly, intently seeking,  
silently turned and took so much away.

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## *An Evening With the Jersey Boys*

*Ann Reisfeld Boutte*

When my husband and I bought tickets to *Jersey Boys*, the Tony-winning musical about Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons, I knew we were in for a nostalgic review of the fabled quartet's hits of the Sixties. But when the curtain rose, the lights dimmed, and strains of "Silhouettes" filled the theater, I was transported, as though tapped by a wand, back to my youth.

I am standing in the gym which is decorated in green and white crepe paper and balloons, slow dancing with my ninth grade boyfriend, Louis. Cheek-to-cheek, fingers entwined, moving to the harmonies of "Earth Angel," I am on fire with the thrill of his touch, aching to melt into his arms, and so much more.

After this night, we will eat brown bag lunches together in the school courtyard. He will ride his bicycle to my house in the afternoons. On weekends, we will spend hours together gazing at each other adoringly and just as many talking to each other on the telephone when we are apart.

As Frankie launches into his falsetto rendition of "Sherry Baby," I am distracted by the woman seated next to me who is swaying to the rhythm. She even sings a few bars. In the dark, she could be my best friend, Ilene, a skinny girl with a Buster Brown haircut, a big smile, and an easy laugh. She is at my house for a sleepover, and we are upstairs in my bedroom wallpapered in lines of yellow rose buds. We eat salted popcorn

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that we've cooked on the stove, drink cokes, and pour over the latest edition of *Mad Magazine* which has us in hysterics. After we've read the issue from cover to cover, we spend hours composing what we consider to be clever letters to the editor that we hope he will publish. The records on the turntable play "My Boyfriend's Back" and "Big Girls Don't Cry."

Or my seatmate could be my other best friend, Jill, another long-legged, skinny teen with dark, wavy hair. Jill's home life is troubled. Her mother is bed-ridden with heart disease and her father gets angry when he drinks. So she often spends a weekend night at my house on Walnut Street as we chat about classmates, clothes, and music. Hours into the evening, Jill will telephone her boyfriend, Joe, who she has wrapped around her little finger. Joe has a car and a little cash, so at Jill's request, he will drop by our favorite pizza parlor, pick up a medium with pepperoni and mushrooms, and bring it, puppy-like, to the front steps. My father will be delighted, as always, to see Joe make his delivery.

Teenage angst is in the air, too. And we suffer from it in varying degrees. We strive to be popular, to be accepted into the in group. We wonder if our clothes are cool, and if we have enough colored Capezios. We have science projects, term papers, and book reports to finish. Grades are a constant challenge. And our parents are impossible and don't understand us at all.

But we are in bloom. Our hair shines. Our skin is tight, and our cheeks are pink and glowing. We have energy, flexibility, and endurance. A banquet of possibilities lies before us and we dance happily to "Let's Hang On to What We've Got," "Stay," and "Bye, Bye Baby."

But, as quickly as time flies, the show is over. The curtain comes down and the lights go up. It's 2008 again.

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The woman sitting on my right is not like Ilene. Her hair is brown, but it has gray roots. She is ample armed and pear-shaped. She is wearing a Chinese red sparkly jacket and black pants, an outfit she might have picked up at Chico's. She's no doubt a grandmother.

But then, Ilene is a grandmother now, too. And so is Jill.

A bittersweet sensation sweeps over me. My husband and I file out of the theater with other time travelers, The Four Seasons' music still stirring feelings and memories.

It's true, *Jersey Boys* has the magic to transport. But the trip backwards grows ever longer and on the road ahead, the horizon looms. It may be magic, but it only lasts two hours.

## *Paradise Born*

*Barbara B. Rollins*

Meredith drifted to paradise  
leaving a shell to be born,  
to be mourned.

Meredith's milestones are  
would-have-beens.

Meredith lives like the perfect dream  
vanishing as I wake.

*Meredith Rollins Warren, – May 29, 2000*

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## *Message for My Family*

*Diana Raab*

The day after I die  
and hours after my ashes cool,  
find a purple urn with a window.  
Purple nurtures my spiritual strength  
and windows keep me alive. Remember  
I'm claustrophobic and the thought  
of being stuck inside a box frightens me,  
since I must indulge in my favorite hobby  
of people-watching, which sends me to my journal where I  
find joy and solace.  
Remember writers need time alone —  
once a day my window should be closed,  
just once a day after I die.

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## *I Must Go Down to the Sea Again*

*Barbara B. Rollins*

I could sit and look at the ocean forever. Never living closer than an eight-hour drive, I've visited from time to time. As a child with my parents and two sisters then years later when my own sons were quite young, then during conferences and meetings, on two ocean cruises, and flying over the expanse of the Atlantic – I've savored it. Occasionally I've waded, probably never more than knee deep. Until now.

Far too often I've stood on the beach, the sideline of life, afraid to get into the game. I'm available for commentary, ready and eager to direct or describe the action, but the *mêlée*? I leave that to the actors. Conversation? Let me talk to the group. One on one? Too scary.

I snuck up on my fear, buying a swimsuit in May, carrying it to a June retreat but didn't dare to swim. Carrying the garment from Texas to Wisconsin, I never removed it from the suitcase, ignoring invitations and the pool beneath my window.

Today – September – the suit got wet. With salt water. I announced I intended to play in the surf, but over the swimsuit donned shorts and a shirt, for the trip across the street from the hotel. I carried my driver's license, credit card, cell phone, and new fancy camera. Did I really expect to get into the surf? Probably not. I did wade at the water's edge, as I had before. The strap of the camera bag encircled my neck, fear of falling

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paralyzing me. Sand eroded under my feet with surging and ebbing water. I ventured a few feet further, anxious, nervous.

I scanned the beach for an acquaintance attending the same conference, somebody I knew but had never conversed with, of course. Maybe I would ask them to watch the camera. Should I take it back to the hotel? Could I leave it with the desk clerk? Three strangers sat in lawn chairs on the beach. Were they trustworthy? Better to disguise it as clothing piled, invisible among other piles.

There weren't other piles. Did I trust a family playing together? On a wave of courage I put the bag on the concrete base of a pier, far from the water, close enough to the seawall few people walked up there. Resting on sandals, wrapped in the clothes, perhaps the large camera became innocuous enough. In my untried suit, wearing trifocals, I ventured into the surf.

I resolved to get the suit wet. Finally water splashed the garment. Mission accomplished! I could return and retrieve the camera. No. Not enough. I went further out, and further, and further, surprised when a wave splashed on my face. I took off my glasses, held them tight, and moved further yet, marking my progress by the nearby pier. It would be marvelous to stand even with the building spread out near the end. I got close, about three feet from the goal, but the waves were covering my head, the sun long since down, and I was swimming alone, though the family of four were within sight, paying no attention to me.

I didn't need to prove anything – more. I was far enough. Standing and relishing long enough to soak in the moment, I worked my way to shore, dressed, and climbed to the top of the sea wall where on a bench I pulled out the camera to take pictures of the area. In the darkness the quality suffered.

It's okay. The images in my head will remain pristine. I have dared to live in tomorrow. Life begins at forty? I must be slow, for mine peeled off the beaten path with a roar at sixty.

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## August 1, 1966

*Janis Hughen Bell*

This is a story from long, long ago. Before cell phones, personal computers, or fax machines. It was an innocent time.

It was a wonderful summer day. Things were going so well for me – spending the summer working and going to school at the University of Texas. What a lark.

I was in Austin for the summer to take six hours credit. I needed to lower next year’s course load so I could be editor-in-chief of the 1967 *Cactus* yearbook.

I was twenty, but after three years at Texas, I still felt like a kid. Of course, school was hard work, but there was so much else going on to make life exciting. Student life was easy-going. There was an innocence and peacefulness you could feel about campus.

My second class had finished and as I walked across campus that Monday, it was unusually pleasant out for almost noon. On that sparkling, perfect day, students who usually scurried to class were more relaxed than usual. Even with the heat of the day approaching, campus denizens seemed fresh and alive.

I crossed the South Mall with its carnival spirit and its vast openness. A crowd grew as I leisurely passed the Journalism Building. I thought about stopping at the *Cactus* office, but decided to go on early to my job as student counselor at Kinsolving dorm. Today, I would work lobby desk duty.

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Besides, this would give me another two blocks to enjoy the beautiful day.

But as I continued my walk down the tree-canopied sidewalk, something suddenly felt strange. People started walking really close to me then passed me by. I was walking at a good pace and this surprised me. People were hurrying past me, but not really hurrying. They seemed to be gliding, as if in slow motion. They were so close for a moment and then they seemed to vanish ahead. It felt almost dreamlike. The sun was shimmering and people were floating by. Probably just a part of the magic of this beautiful day, I thought.

A student on a bicycle brushed passed me and I was startled. Looking up quickly, I saw him suddenly jump off his bicycle and leap into the air. I thought, what a crazy thing to do. But I never saw him hit the ground as I was suddenly shoved to the side and someone whispered to get down. Someone else said, “Be quiet and head for those bushes.”

Flat on the ground, piled under a hedge with others, I heard: “Shooting is coming from the Tower in all directions.”

A boy near me said, “Stay down until the shooting starts on the other side. Then run as fast as you can until they start shooting on this side again.”

I ran for cover like this three times before I made it up the front steps of Kinsolving dorm. Inside, I heard the word “snipers,” and about the dead on the ground. I thought of the kid on the bicycle. My life was changed forever.

My part in this day was small. I was assigned to the exit door closest to campus. The campus police instructed me to lock the door and not let anyone enter when the snipers were shooting on our side of the Tower.

“You must be crazy,” I said. “I was out there and I know these girls need to get inside. How can I lock them out?” I was told to do this to keep them from running up the steps to the

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door and exposing themselves to gunfire. I had a megaphone to shout out when I was locking the door, but this didn't work, as the girls would not stop coming. And I could never be sure that the firing had stopped.

The task was the most traumatic I would ever face. Girls would run up the stairs and scream and cry when they reached the safety of inside. It was worse when they pounded on the locked door. I soon stopped locking the door. If a girl made a run for it, I sure wasn't going to be the one to lock her out.

The siege seemed to go on forever. I never knew how long. Someone came and got me and told me it was over and I was urgently needed for phone duty at the lobby desk. Parents were calling in hysterics to find out if their daughters were alive. We had a list. This list was of the few girls who had checked in at the lobby desk. Everyone living at Kinsolving dorm was told to come to the desk and tell us they were safe.

The scene was still chaotic and not many had come forward by the time I arrived. The phone circuits were jammed but the phones rang non-stop. "Handle the calls quickly. If the girls are not on the list then tell the parents to call back. Try to calm them," the officer said. It was awful trying to console the parents. They cried whether their daughter was on the safe list or not. It was so long before I could match a parent with a girl on the list. It was odd to have so many phone calls. Our means of communication was limited then and most families only traded weekly letters. Few indulged the luxury of long distance calls.

I worked the desk late into the night and well past my normal shift. Part of me wanted to go to my dorm room and cry too, but I knew I had to stay. Kinsolving dorm had been my college home for the last three years and I knew how much the staff needed my help this day. Many of the residents camped in the lobby all night – no one wanted to be alone. Besides, the only

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TV was in the lobby and we wanted to see the news. We had heard only scattered information from the radio and the parents who called.

We were stunned as we watch the TV that night. Our beautiful campus looked like a battlefield as image after image showed the massacre. There had been only one sniper and the rampage had lasted 96 minutes. The madman-shooter was a UT student, Charles Whitman, 25 years old. He looked like the all-American boy. Slowly, the facts unfolded. We would hear the final toll –16 dead and 31 injured. Awful details. The worst was the senseless shooting of an un-born baby carried in his eighteen-year-old mother’s womb. She was the first person hit and lay unaided on the South Mall with the other dead and wounded until the siege was over.

The injured were terribly maimed. Several were paralyzed for life. The Drag (our name for Guadalupe Street) would claim the most victims killed. I am not sure if classes were held on Tuesday. They probably were, as everyone wanted things to return to normal. We kept our vigil in silence.

We had been taught to get over things we could not change and we desperately wanted the return of our innocence. People didn’t talk about the terror of that day. We were in shock. How could this happen to our wonderful lives? The authorities were worried about copycat murderers so the tragedy was not discussed much. The last weeks of summer were haunted as we dealt with our pain. Finally though, the fall semester came with its normal distractions. We could begin again and put the summer behind us. Football games, outdoor fun, and the start of fall classes occupied our days. But most of all, new students arrived who had not been on campus the first day of August. I stayed busy with studies and work on the *Cactus*. “The Tower Tragedy,” dubbed by National TV and magazines as the worst homicidal incident in recent history, received the briefest

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mention – almost an afterthought in the yearbook’s Chronology section. But since that horrible summer day, August 1, 1966, I felt unprotected walking between classes, on the Drag, and even on the streets around campus. I did not walk on the South Mall until my graduation ceremony the next year. I never talked about my role on that sad frantic day until now, but the horror followed me all these years.

The suddenness and closeness of death stayed with me. I no longer feel safe in open spaces and I no longer trust strangers. I still circle around the South Mall now when I visit campus. I know the terror that happens when a madman takes the Tower. I remember a day forty years ago when the Forty Acres changed for me forever.

## *Great Aunt Pearl*

*Becky Haigler*

Unlike the oyster,  
which covers intrusion  
with soothing layers  
to create a gem,  
since childhood  
she has added offense  
to irritation, complaint  
to grief, to form a knot,  
accreted misery, polished  
with self-righteousness.

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## **A Maze**

*Jim Wilson*

All my life  
Trying to manufacture  
An awesome personal destiny  
I wake up  
In the same dream limitations  
Seeing no door  
I have enough nerve to open  
Deep knowing  
That if I do choose, open —  
Walk through and close  
All other doors in this room  
Disappear  
And in that new room of life  
As I focus  
Twice the more doors  
Will be crying  
“Open me! Open me!”

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## *Colors of War*

*Pat Capps Mehaffey*

We walked the drab halls to green-walled classrooms in the red brick high school building. In the study hall, one wall of windows offered yellow sunshine filled with dancing beige dust motes. Framed faded prints of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln furnished our art education.

Washington, with his crowded mouth of false teeth and his powdered hair clubbed into a ponytail, offered little inspiration. Lincoln appeared equally depressing in his black suit, with sad eyes and lines of affliction carved into his face. We viewed these paintings every morning during assembly in the auditorium.

The burgundy draperies with golden fringe opened to reveal the Stars and Stripes swaying from a gilt pole on the stage. With hands over hearts, we recited the solemn words of the Pledge of Allegiance and sang the soaring notes of “The Star Spangled Banner.”

On the first floor, near the front door, crouched the sinister offices of the principal and the superintendent. Lined with ancient brown paneling, these offices personified fear and despair. On one wall of the principal’s office, suspended on a nail from a short leather strap, hung a pale pine paddle. Two feet long and an inch thick, it had a row of holes drilled in one end. Boys whose skin displayed fiery red welts from whippings with this paddle starred as heroes.

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For serious crimes such as skipping school or failing grades, a student, accompanied by his parents, could be summoned to the superintendent's office. Only the picture of a smiling Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the pastel fabrics of the shirtwaist dresses worn by the school secretary lit up this room.

Not one teacher under the age of fifty presided in our classes. The Selective Service drafted the young men, and the young women learned they could earn more money and help their husbands and sweethearts win the war by working in defense plants. They preferred serving as Rosie the Riveter to being stuck in a classroom. Now, grandmothers who appeared cut from the same pattern taught every subject. Each had steel-gray hair arranged in tight marcelled waves or screwed into a bun at the nape of the neck. They wore sensible big-heeled shoes that announced their approach and ugly tan cotton hose. Nylon hose, obtainable only through the black market, had no place in our lives. The resolute replacement teachers stood before the blackboards writing wisdom with white chalk to a group of bored, disinterested teenagers.

One room on the second floor presented some sparkle – the chemistry lab. Here the glass test tubes and petri dishes, reflecting the glow of the overhead bulb, and the hot blue flames from the Bunsen burners brightened our days.

World War II cast its gray pall of anxiety and worry over every aspect of life. The homes of many classmates displayed the Mother's Gold Star in its red, white and blue frame in front room windows. The war took the lives of several hometown boys – some only four years older than I was.

By collecting green ration stamps for shoes, families bought school shoes for each child by order of age. Due to strict rationing of gasoline, we all walked everywhere we could, and shoes wore out early.

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My mother said, “When you get off the school bus every day, tie the strings of your shoes together and loop them over your neck. By walking home barefoot, you can save shoe leather.”

No longer did the high school marching band, resplendent in crimson and black uniforms and carrying gleaming musical instruments, perform on the clipped green grass at football game halftimes. Suspended for the war’s duration were all athletic competitions. Since tires played a vital part in the wartime effort, rigid rationing applied to those for civilian use. Without extra tires, the yellow school buses could not transport teams from town to town. Retired teachers drove the buses for pickup and delivery of children in rural areas and applied recycled patches to punctured inner tubes and tires.

Mr. Lee, the principal, substituted as our typing teacher until a replacement was found. He surprised us one day by escorting a young war bride into the room, saying, “Students, meet Mrs. Lambert, your new teacher. Please make her welcome. Her brave husband is serving in the Marine Corps in the Pacific Theatre, and she’s living here with her mother until he comes home.”

Into our dreary existence Mr. Lee had delivered a beautiful miracle. With quickened interest, we absorbed the look of her long brown hair, her snapping dark eyes, and her wide white smile. She wore an orange (of all colors) twin sweater set over a rust tweed skirt and a strand of milky pearls at her throat. She had turned-down ankle socks with white and brown saddle shoes – just like every girl in the room. We almost swooned with pleasure. Anxious to please her and bring out her radiant smile, we learned to type with speed and talent. That was October 1944.

In February 1945, as we sat before our Royal manual typewriters pounding with efficiency, the preacher from the Baptist church knocked on the door and came in. Right behind

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him stood Mrs. Lambert's mother, wearing a ghastly paleness and wringing her hands. They took Mrs. Lambert into the hall and closed the door. That didn't keep out the purple bruising sounds, however. We heard Mrs. Lambert screaming and sobbing. "No, No! Not Mark! I cannot live if Mark is dead. He can't be dead."

But he was. Totally and irrevocably dead – one of the 6,825 U. S. Marines killed in the battle for Iwo Jima. As the first troops landed on the island, they instantly learned the volcanic ash of the beaches afforded no cover from enemy fire. With no trees, no grass, no boulders, they were exposed. The Japanese didn't fire at once, however, but allowed the fighters to move closer to the entrenched artillery. At a covert signal, the red blood of American Marines flowed out onto the black mounds of crushed lava. Rows upon rows of the best of America's young men were mowed down by machine gun fire. Mark Lambert fell among them. His wife, our beloved teacher, would never see him again. How could she bear it? How could we?

Mr. Lee returned as our typing instructor. Every day, we looked at his thick, black-rimmed glasses and his black bow tie, at his white hair receding from his shiny pink forehead. His colorless voice droned in the room and disturbed the sandy dust motes. We faced a bleak, desolate landscape and yearned to see an orange sweater set and milky pearls.

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