

Even Now

by Susan Kelly (<http://www.susanskelly.com>)

Chapter 1

I stretched a length of tape over the lid and nudged the box toward seven other moving cartons labeled TO GO. TO STAY boxes were stacked in our bedroom. Possessions to be thrown away didn't merit marking; they were accumulating in the hall.

There's something wholly satisfactory in packing. It had been seventeen years since I'd boxed and wrapped and crated everything I owned, when Hal and I returned from our honeymoon. The bulk of my belongings then were wedding gifts gleaming with newness, each present carefully recorded by my sister, Ceel, in a white leatherette album and checked off as thank-you notes were written. Everything was "to go" then, brass candlesticks and linen napkins and floral cachepots and casserole dishes, the few silver trays and bowls and breadbaskets I hadn't swapped for Lucite versions. My mother was dismayed.

"You'll want that silver," she'd said as a pitcher joined a gravy boat to be returned.

"For what?"

"Christenings," Mother answered, and I'd laughed. The concept was as remote as funerals. My son, Mark, was christened two years later, five more and Ellen was baptized. My father's funeral came three years after that.

No silver was going to Rural Ridge. I couldn't picture filigreed salt and pepper shakers anywhere in the single-storied stone-and-timbered house Hal and I had bought. One wing held a kitchen; the opposite arm comprised three small bedrooms. A step lower than the rest of the house, the entire midsection was a den with scarred wood floors, a rock hearth flanked by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and a gently vaulted ceiling of tongue-and-groove paneling. Built in the twenties as a summer home by a less advantaged relation to the Vanderbilt scions of Asheville's famed Biltmore Castle, the cottage was subsequently lost during the Depression, then defaulted, deeded, or sold to a succession of owners.

And it had been available, the scarcest and most precious of commodities in the alpine hamlet. While Rural Ridge year-rounders numbered only twelve hundred, summer residents swelled the population to five thousand.

As soon as our house in Durham sold we'd bought the cottage on sight; love at first sight on my part, from the moment I stood on the slate terrace snugged within the house's horseshoe shape. "Less space," Hal said about the square footage.

"More room," I contradicted him.

Below the terrace an inclined acre of yard sloped away. But it was what lay beyond and above, spanning the entire semicircle of horizon, that captivated me, dispatching any doubts about furnace age or roof condition or electrical inspections. In shades from denim to indigo, the ancient range of the Blue Ridge rippled in humped and overlapping folds one upon the other like carelessly unspoiled bolts of fabric. Gently undulating hollows cupped sunlight with such clarity that the trees massed within them

seemed perfectly separate, as if I might part them like hair, a Gulliver peering into Lilliput. Intersecting with forest and farmland were tiny houses with the diminutive perfection of model train settings. Tin roofs, clothesline poles, and heating oil drums were mica chips of glitter. The vista was vast yet comfortingly finite.

“Think of this view in the winter,” I’d sighed, hugging myself with contentment.

“You mean in autumn, with the leaves,” Ceel said.

“I mean in winter, with the snow.”

My realist sibling had snorted. “It’s North Carolina, not North Dakota.”

I checked my list, surprised by the difficulty in choosing what to leave behind and what to take along. I thought it would be simple: this for the old life, this for the new one. A college roommate had always packed in leaf bags, loading her car with bulky black plastic shapes, and I’d admired the economy of her system. Or perhaps it was only laziness, carelessness.

Hal stuck his head in the kitchen door. “The crawl space and the toolshed are almost empty.” He brushed cobwebs from his coarse light blond hair. “You sure you want to take all those clay pots? They’ll probably bust in transit.”

“I’m sure,” I said, thinking of Ceel’s horticultural bribe.

“Hannah, think of what you’ll be able to grow!” she’d said. “Fuchsia, asters big as plates. It’s cooler here. Tulips come back a second year.”

Tulips had been blooming the afternoon she called from Rural Ridge. It was a Sunday, and I’d been outside, regarding our sorry yard. Among the rampant ivy, the tulips I’d ordered especially for their rare color were just blooming. After a mild winter—no snow, not a single paltry flake—a series of killing freezes in early April crippled and stunted earlier varieties, sending flower freaks hustling to linen closets for sheets to protect budding camellias.

But my tulips were a failure all round. The foliage drooped limp as noodles; the cupped petals opened bright orange instead of the expected pale pink. At the nurseryman’s urging I’d purchased a drilling device to corkscrew through the drought-dense autumn dirt and had planted the bulbs too deeply. The blossoms opened a scant four inches from the ground, with stems barely long enough to pick, much less arrange in a vase.

“What are you doing?” Ceel had asked, her standard opener.

“My tulips are orange. Pumpkin orange.”

“Let Ellen take them to school like you used to, you teacher-pleasing suck-up.” Mother’s daffodils had sprung from a bank of periwinkle outside the kitchen, and every spring I begged to pick a bouquet wrapped in a dripping handle of crumpled tinfoil for my teacher’s desk.

“Easy for you to say.”

Ceel laughed. She’d gotten through school on sheer personality. “The child charmed the teachers,” Mother still claims. Ceel would pick Mother’s flowers without her permission and smuggle them onto the bus. She rolled up jeans under her skirts to circumvent Mother’s “no pants to school” rule, later stuffing her skirt unto her gym bag. She’d sneaked out so often in junior high that in a last-ditch effort to keep Ceel home, mother had taken away her shoes every night. Four years earlier the two of us had returned to Cullen for a wedding, and Ceel, who was driving, had taken an unfamiliar route into town. “What road are we on?” I asked. “I don’t know this shortcut.”

“You’ve forgotten,” Ceel grinned. “While you were at home doing your first child thing, I was on the road to Chesney to buy beer.”

“You’ll never believe why I’m calling,” she’d said over the phone that April Sunday. “The Academy has an opening for an upper-school social studies teacher.” Ceel’s husband, Ben, was head of a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade Episcopal day school in Asheville.

“You’re going back to teaching?” I asked. Ceel had taught fourth grade for six years, before trying to have her own child became more important than teaching someone else’s.

“Not me. *Hal.*”

“Hal?” I parroted.

“Isn’t he sitting there with his business sold, waiting for something to grab him? He’s talked about teaching for years, the way other people talk about opening a bar, or going around the world on a sailboat. This is his chance.”

“Hal doesn’t have any teaching background or certificate.”

“We’re talking about a private elementary school here, Hannah. You could move this summer after Ellen and Mark are out of school,” Ceel went on. “It’s just for a year, while Ben looks for a permanent replacement. Hal can get his ya-yas out teaching—before he finds out what academia is *really* about. You could live up the mountain in Rural Ridge, far from the madding crowd. I’ve even found you a house.”

I smiled, tempted. “With room for a garden?”

“Shade and sun. Plus there’s a university in Asheville, and you know what Mother’s always said”—Ceel’s voice had risen in mimicry—“There’s always something going on in a college town, speakers and seminars and whatnot.’ Now don’t tell Hal I called. Let Ben offer the position first. Act surprised.”

I stood up as Mark walked in wearing a thick braided silver choker of mine. “Look what I found. Ugh,” he grunted, straining his neck muscles against the metal twists. “See how thick my neck is?”

“Put that back.”

“I’m bored.”

“Obviously.” Were we ever bored in Cullen? I thought, walking outside. I wedged my toe beneath a tree root that had surfaced through the dropped soil line. As a child, my closest friend and I constructed entire villages within knotty tree roots in which to steer our Matchbox cars, earnestly debating who would drive the milk truck or the police cruiser, who would deliver firewood with the pickup truck. While Ellen, who apparently inherited Ceel’s hostessing genes, used the weedy produce of our yard—crumpled violet blooms and wild strawberries—to accessorize her dolls’ tea parties, I’d never seen either of my children spend an entire afternoon contentedly entertaining themselves outdoors. They were too busy with lessons and sports and organizations. Overinvolved, overentertained, with karate, cotillion, guitar.

But that was all going to change now. “Haven’t you and Hal discussed moving?” Ceel had asked.

We had. Idly, ideally, hypothetically. Even before Hal sold his grocery cart manufacturing business, whenever our Durham lifestyle seemed stressful and scheduled and superficial. A small textile town like dozens throughout the South, Cullen had had no social echelons, no pecking order. No country club or swim teams, no team sports at

all but for boys' Little League. Summer evenings, while twilight deepened and small children scrabbled in the red dust, I'd watch Geoff from the rickety bleacher with the O'Connors. Everything in Cullen was public: pool and school and single tennis court.

Rural Ridge offered more than a career change. More than adventure, yet less. The move seemed a beacon to me, an opportunity to restore and reclaim what once had been. Some simplicity and sweetness I'd lost, left behind, or cast off in the intervening years no different in some ways from clothing my leaf-bag roommate had left with a shrug in dorm room dresser drawers.

I wasn't so naïve as to believe our moving could duplicate or re-create for Ellen and Mark the benevolence of my small-town childhood, but debate had evolved into longing, and with the decision made, longing had become excited anticipation.

"There's nothing in the house to eat," Mark complained from the door, and I automatically waved my hand at him in family code. A directed complaint required some corresponding gratitude, no matter how trivial: a parental system of checks and balances that amused my friends.

"But," Mark conceded, "you took me to the mall to get a CD."

The CD was the one item on his recent birthday list that had failed to materialize in the stack of wrapped gifts. My list-making gene had been inherited by Mark and Ellen, who routinely typed out their birthday and Christmas requests, lists I sentimentally saved along with drawings and report cards. For this birthday, his fifteenth, Mark's list had been a comical compendium. A new putter and as many used golf balls as twenty-five dollars would buy at Play It Again, the used-sporting-goods store. A five-foot down body pillow: cuddling company, no doubt, to melon-breasted models in the Victoria's Secret catalog I'd found poorly hidden beneath a beanbag chair. At the other end of the teenage spectrum, Mark asked for a computer game called Blood Bath. A gooseneck lamp he could clip to the headboard for homework. A waffle maker, of all things, because a friend had one, a friend with a mother apparently more inclined to special Saturday breakfasts than I. At least the list was, in a favorite phrase of my mother's, "well-rounded," covering sports, sex, cooking, technology, education. And of course the battery-operated fart machine with remote control, guaranteed to embarrass anyone within twelve feet. There was the child I knew and loved, the one who hadn't yet outgrown the useless but intriguing items that resist categorization—faucets that run into a never-full beer stein, lava lamps, fake arms to dangle from car trunks.

"Heat up some of that turkey tetrazzini Martha Dawson brought over," I suggested.

"I want something *new*."

"There's bologna."

"But no white bread."

"Fry it."

"Huh?"

"How has a child of mine lived so long without eating fried bologna? Denied a delicacy all these years." I peeled red strips from three slices, slapped them in a cast-iron frying pan, and turned on the stove eye. The fleshy pink circles ballooned obscenely, sizzled and blackened at the edges.

"Good," Mark mumbled between bites. "How'd you know about that?"

“Mark,” I said with mock weariness, “I know everything.” Mark rolled his eyes at my ritual response, coined by my father some Sunday night as he walked through the den, where I sat rapt before *Lassie*.

“Watch,” he’d said, “Lassie’s going to pull that badger away from the trap.”

“But how did you know?” I pestered, awed, after the plot had transpired exactly as he’d predicted.

“I know everything,” Daddy had said, laughing. Though dead for seven years, small things—a phrase, a song title—could resurrect him and pierce me with fresh loss.

“Friend showed me,” I amended my answer, thinking of fried-bologna Saturday lunches at the O’Connors’, forked straight from pan to mouth and washed down with Tab colas in pebbled bottles. “Next time,” I told Mark, “eat it right from the frying pan. Tastes even better.”

His eyes widened. This from a mother who required glasses for orange juice.

I glanced out the kitchen window. Styrofoam packing peanuts from a neighbor’s overturned trash can littered the yard. “I’ll pay you a penny apiece to pick those up,” I proposed, pointing. “Same offer Mother made me and my friend after storms, for fallen sticks.”

“Please,” Mark said. “Times have changed.”

I thought of our moneymaking childhood industries: sticks and lemonade stands, a handwritten neighborhood newspaper. “We bought an Illya Kuryakin briefcase with our earnings. *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*”

“Who’s Illya Kuryakin?”

“Never mind. Have you finished packing your room? All those—*things*—on your bureau, and your bookshelf, and your desk, and—”

“Mom. It’s my stuff.” *Muh stuff*, I heard, a gruffness to my son’s voice that wasn’t merely pride in ownership, but maturity.

I let it go, content that Mark had been willing to undergo a seismic change in school and friends. An August move had advantages. Summer vacation had grown stale for both children, yet school, with its social and academic whirl, was still distant enough to forestall separation pangs. Mark would be a high school freshman, and while Hal and I had discussed boarding school with him, the move had postponed any decision. Mark’s only real regret about leaving Durham was not being able to complete his driver’s ed course.

“You’ve been great about all this, Mark. Seriously, I really admire your attitude.”

The compliment flustered him, but only momentarily. “As a reward can I get a car when I turn sixteen?”

“Don’t push it, pal.”

“Would you settle for not having to write thank-you notes for my birthday presents?”

“No bargains.” I dried my hands. “My father made a deal with me. He said if I didn’t drink or smoke before I was twenty-one, he’d buy me a car. How’s that for a bargain?”

“Did you get it?”

“Hardly. I need to finish packing.”

“Would you settle for takeout dinner tonight?” he said, wandering from the room.

I knelt before the bookcases. At least these were easily packed items, easily chosen or disposed. There were few volumes I couldn't live without, and some that were downright embarrassing. To go were the books I hadn't read but meant to. To throw away were the encyclopedias, made obsolete by on-line information and out-of-date before I'd even been born. They'd originally belonged to my mother, and though as a schoolgirl I shunned the volumes, with their black embossed covers and flimsy yellow pages, Mother maintained that as long as Abraham Lincoln stayed dead, the set was perfectly fine. I'd longed for a set like the O'Connors', luscious red-and-blue *Encyclopedia Britannica* with glazed pages and colored illustrations bought from a door-to-door salesman. Out too went dog-eared copies of *Sweet Savage Love* and *The Flame and the Flower*. A coffee table book on interior decorating. Nor would I need Spock's *Baby and Child Care* any longer, I thought, with a twinge for myself and for Ceel.

Pushed behind the taller books, the way my children used to destroy the neat shelving during library visits, was a small paperback that stopped me. Titled *Letters to Karen*, the cover pictured a young woman whose face was hidden by falling, golden-lit hair, madonnalike. The book had been a premarital counseling gift from my minister. I fanned the stiff pages bound within an uncracked spine, wondering if Hal too had failed to read his corresponding volume, *Letters to Phillip*, and what had become of it. "You hang on to things too long," Ceel has told me, and true to form, I boxed it with gardening volumes, ones in which I could finally consult the cool-weather chapters.

Ellen came in as I was leafing through a yearbook, and I beckoned to her. "Come over here. I need a you fix," I said, family shorthand for a hug. She leaned over my shoulder, arms around my neck, enclosing me in her sweet scent of shampoo and skin.

"Who's that?" she asked, pointing.

I laughed. "Me."

"You look awful."

I couldn't argue. My ninth-grade smile was obliterated by braces, the most obvious feature in a face half-hidden by chin-length hair. "My best friend told me a thousand times that parting my hair in the middle looked terrible, but I didn't listen to her."

"What are those stripes on the sides?" Ellen asked.

"I slept in bobby pins so my hair would curl, and all I got was those dents."

My daughter's fingers traveled down the page. "But someone scratched out your name and put Angela."

"My friend did that, too. She was making fun of me."

"Weren't you mad at her?"

"Oh no. When we were little girls playing pretend-like I always wanted to be called Angela instead of Hannah. She could do a perfect English accent, like Mary Poppins. Ahn-je-luh," I imitated.

Ellen giggled appreciatively. "I like your name."

I turned to kiss the smooth cheek warm against my own. "Thank God for small favors."

"Let me see her picture."

"Who?"

"The friend." I obediently flipped to the Os. "Her hair looks good."

"Yes." I sighed. "It always did."

“I would’ve hidden if I were you,” Ellen said with nine-year-old confidence and four-year-old tactlessness.

I laughed. “In a way I did. I went to a different school the next year.” Seeing an opportunity, I seized it. “Like you are. Where your daddy will be a *teacher*.”

“Was she your best friend?” Ellen persisted.

“Yes, she was.”

“Did you cut yourselves and press your fingers together? Were you best friends like that?”

“Oh no. We didn’t have to prove anything. We just . . . knew. Like you and Lila.”

Ellen’s brow creased. “Lila says she’ll write to me, but she said that when she went to camp and never did.”

“Don’t hold that against her. It doesn’t mean you aren’t still friends. Sometimes people mean to do things and don’t.”

“What happened to her?”

I stood up, surprised by Ellen’s interest. I forgot that about children, their intrigue with facts beyond their own timelines. It’s both fascinating and impossible to picture parents in any guise other than their grown-up roles. Hard to imagine that those giants of logic and imperturbability once wept over skinned knees and hurt feelings, schemed or cheated or climbed trees. Children long for access to those people they can’t personally know. “She always liked her name just fine. Isn’t that weird? Very weird,” I said. There, that was a fact.

But not enough fact for Ellen. “What happened to her?”

I scrunched up my eyes and forehead, pulling down the skin to make a gruesome face. “We both grew up and got all old and wrinkled.”

Ellen rolled her eyes. “*Mommy*. So?”

“So she moved. Like us.” I grabbed her bare foot. “So, so suck your toe, all the way to Mexico.” She giggled again, and I held up a sleek, also unread version of *The Velveteen Rabbit*. “Are you ever going to read this? Your godmother gave it to you.”

“Oh, Mom,” she said, breezing from the room, “I’m too *old* for that.”

I added the Wyndham Hall yearbooks to the TO GO box. Embossed on their covers was the school motto my classmates and I ridiculed in sonorous, melodramatic tones: *What we keep we lose, and only what we give remains our own*. Surrounded by years of accumulation, of possessions segregated into containers, it seemed that despite its intent, the motto fell short. What about those things we never intended to lose, yet never intended to keep, those things by our not deciding remain part of us through simple default?

It was near dusk before I finished. Hal found me outside, trowel in hand and knees buried in ivy.

“So it’s come to this,” he said, and pressed a cold beer against my temple. “Burying a time capsule.”

I smiled at his reference to a family joke. I’d been married and a mother before I finally relinquished a timeline I’d made for a seventh-grade history project, and only then because Mother herself was moving, six months after Daddy died.

“That was very important to me,” I said huffily, and tugged his pants leg. I’d liked the precision and detail required in creating the assignment, liked the pungent

chemical scent of Magic Marker, the bold black hash marks of history angling off the line of decades and centuries. Certain, definite, unalterable events both in history and immediate deed since a trembling stroke, an accidental omission of a single event on the unscrolling paper, and the entire project would be ruined. "You ought to assign a timeline to *your* seventh-graders." I wedged all ten fingers into the earth and carefully pulled out a crumbling chunk.

"What are you doing?" Hal said. "Taking dirt to Rural Ridge?"

I picked root threads from the moist handful. "This is a valuable plant."

"Oh, I see. Because it's invisible."

"It's arum. Just because it's vanished doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Arum dies back every year this time." I eased the invisible plant into a plastic sandwich bag for transporting to Rural Ridge. "You can't buy arum. Someone has to give it to you. This came from our house in Cullen."

The sky was deep violet. I sat on the top step, patted Hal to sit beside me, and took a long swallow of beer. Dark tufts of grass poked through cracks in the entrance sidewalk at my feet. "*How nice,*" Mother had said when she first saw our house, "*a brick sidewalk when so many homes just have concrete slabs.*" Bricked entrances were an amenity I hadn't known to appreciate. Hollow-core doors I knew. Our Cullen house had hollow-core doors, and Mother had often commented enviously on the solid wood doors at the O'Connors' older house across the street. I sat forward and wrenched free a clump of the wayward grass.

"All done?" Hal said.

"Just about."

"Good," he said. "Wouldn't want you to go to bed without closure."

Hal teased me about my need for closure, a term that, like the brick sidewalk, I'd never known existed before it was pointed out to me. It was true, though; I couldn't help it. I liked things tidied and completed. Open-ended decisions and circumstances left me floundering.

"Just think," I said softly. "This time tomorrow we'll be watching the sun set over the mountains."

From beyond the treetops, beyond our neighborhood, floated the familiar summer sounds of organ chords and muffled loudspeaker voice from the baseball stadium downtown. In two weeks the sound would change tempo and direction as a high school band began its nightly marching and practicing on the athletic fields in preparation for football season.

"You never hear children playing after-supper games anymore," I said.

"After-supper games?"

"Red Light, Giant Steps, Mother May I." A game called merely School, in which a small pebble was passed, or pretended to be, from one pair of prayer-clasped hands to another. Evening noises in Cullen weren't insect zappers and baseball announcers, but the calls of children and bobwhites. As he challenged me to make my bed tight enough to bounce a dime, my father would sit on the stoop and challenge me to count the bobwhite calls. "Listen," he'd whisper with cocked head, "they say their name," then whistle his own identical three-note plaint: *bob bob white*.

"Sad?" Hal asked, clasping my knee. "Melancholy baby?"

The chill stripe of his wedding band warmed against my skin. “You know, this spring was the first spring in five years that cardinals didn’t build a nest in the smilax.”

He gasped. “My God. Shunned by the birds. Good thing we’re leaving.”

“It’s not that simple, Hal.” But I smiled with him; after seventeen years of dailiness you know what can’t be explained, know that the insufficiencies of love can’t be punished. I leaned my head to his shoulder. If I was sad, it wasn’t about leaving. “Moving gets a bad rap in movies and stories. Packing is always associated with some kind of sadness. Change, flight, departure, death. This is different. This is hopeful. I feel as though I’m returning, not leaving. Going back to something I’ve always known.”

“How philosophical of you.”

I looked to see whether Hal was mocking me and decided it didn’t matter. “Maybe a little sad,” I admitted. “Sad to leave the driveway where I spent so many hours watching Mark and Ellen drive their Big Wheels.”

“I don’t think it’s the driveway or the Big Wheels you’re missing,” Hal said, touching his bottle to mine. After a moment he added, “It isn’t permanent, Hannah.”

I didn’t answer him. There is something attractive and irresistible in a limited arrangement, a plan with predetermined closure. Perfect job, perfect house, perfect small town. A perfectly clear path toward rediscovering lost simplicity, or whatever it was I’d lost. The move to Rural Ridge seemed ordained, fated. It had been a Sunday when Ceel called, and the eve of our leaving was a Sunday again. A godsend all around.

And thus does He arrange to give us what we want.

Synopsis of EVEN NOW

When her husband Hal accepts a teaching position at a private school in the tiny North Carolina town of Rural Ridge, Hannah Marsh views her family's move as a chance to return to a simpler, sweeter way of living. Contentedly married for seventeen years, and the mother of two children, she nevertheless has a nagging sense that something is absent from her life. Then, at a casual neighborhood dinner, Hannah encounters someone she believed she'd never see again: Daintry O'Connor, a ghost from her girlhood.

As children, Hannah adored and idolized the more worldly, daring Daintry, even envying Daintry's adoption into a large and lively Irish family. She believed, as they'd fervently promised each other, that they would be Best Friends Forever. But forever ended abruptly, leaving behind feelings of abandonment, betrayal, anger, and too many unanswered questions. Now, suddenly confronted with the adult Daintry -- a successful, stylish investment banker married to an Episcopal priest -- Hannah feels the old wounds painfully reopening.

As the two women become part of the daily life of the mountain village, Hannah struggles to understand why Daintry still exerts an extraordinary hold on her . . . even as she finds herself dangerously drawn to Daintry's husband, Peter. When Peter makes it clear that he shares the attraction, a chain of events is set in motion that will affect them all.

EVEN NOW portrays a friendship rooted in childhood yet eroded in adulthood. It examines the crimes for which we hold those we love liable, the choices that are given or required of us, and the consequences and accountability involved in each. A novel that explores the elusive mysteries of faith, memory, and trust, EVEN NOW asks whether a relationship can survive changes -- and the changing perspectives of time.

Questions for Susan

What was your inspiration in writing *EVEN NOW*? Is the inspiration for this book based on your own experiences or the experiences of anyone you know?

I was interested in depicting the darker aspects of friendship between women: competition, jealousy, exclusion, accountability. These issues begin on the playground and continue into adulthood. Some women never escape them. I didn't have a particular "Daintry" in my life, but she represents every charismatic girl who had something you wanted, or was someone you longed to be. (I gave her everything I lusted after as a child — long hair, bunk beds, a lazy Susan, an older sister who knew everything, and a mother who let her do anything.) So often, there's a later feeling of self-loathing, that you *needed* her so, which can generate the desire for revenge. Daintry has generated a lot of discussion among readers. To the people who say to me, "I didn't have a Daintry in *my* life," I say, "Then you probably *were* one."

Do you feel a particular attachment to any one character in your novel? Would you consider including any of them in future novels?

As a married mother of three, I identify most closely with Hannah. She's suffering from what I call "Just a Mother Syndrome," questioning her role, her regrets, her worth. ("Me? Oh, I'm just a mother.") But while Hannah is the more sympathetic character, she isn't wholly innocent. Neither is Daintry entirely guilty. It's very important to me that Hannah and Daintry are understood as both victim and villain. I've written a sequel titled *COME TO THIS* in which Pril and Ruth, the intimate friends from *HOW CLOSE WE COME* are reunited, but the friendship between Hannah and Daintry is over. That complete severance permits Hannah to reconcile, put the past behind her, and mature in a new way.

How long did it take to write *EVEN NOW*? Did it come faster than *HOW CLOSE WE COME*?

I wrote *HOW CLOSE WE COME* literally in about three months. That fast. *EVEN NOW*, in its entirety, took about two years. Generally it takes me about eighteen months to write a novel (though I may have been thinking about it, or taking notes on it, for years before that.) My publisher purchased *EVEN NOW* in a quite different guise, after asking my agent, "How open is Susan to changes?" The "changes" took another eighteen months of back-and-forthing. Another story in itself! Initially, the novel was titled "Interim."

Was Hannah and Daintry's childhood relationship based on anyone you knew?

No. Everyone wants to know this, and it's a logical question, one that comes with the territory of writing first-person fiction. Daintry's a composite, like all my characters. She represents any woman in any woman's life whom she envied or imitated. She is

confidante and mentor and nemesis. She represents any woman who is so certain of herself that you yourself begin questioning the choices you've made (and up to now, been content with) for your life.

EVEN NOW is both apology and eulogy. Apology to friends I somehow hurt, or intimidated, or lorded over, however unconsciously. In those respects Daintry is me. And eulogy for those friendships that died for reasons beyond my control, or that I let lapse with inattention. I don't view Daintry as evil. Hannah's last line, after all, speaks of an ongoing love for her, "even now." We're all victims, and all villains, we females. We hurt each other.

What about the quotes? Did you keep a quote book?

I'm a quote freak. The bulletin board at my writing desk is covered with them, from A. A. Milne to the bible, including Faulkner's "If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the `Ode To A Grecian Urn` is worth any number of old ladies." Like Hannah, I did have a quote book all through high school and college, and I laugh now at the incredible number of song lyrics I wrote down! Unlike Hannah, though, I wouldn't dream of discarding it.

Susan's Questions for Reading Groups

I maintain that every woman has a Daintry in her life. If she doesn't, she probably *was* a Daintry." What does that statement mean?

The ways in which adolescent girls are vicious to one another is a topic that's receiving a lot of attention. But female "meanness" isn't limited to teenagers. How are both Daintry and Hannah intentionally and unintentionally "mean" to one another, in both their past and present lives?

The original title for *EVEN NOW* was "Interim." How does the original title fit the story? And as with *HOW CLOSE WE COME*, the title *EVEN NOW* has several interpretations relating to the story. What are they?

I believe that Hannah's sister Ceel functions as "the conscience" of the story. How?

The quote before Chapter 9 reads, *Not happiness, but intensity, was what she craved.* What does that line mean, for Hannah?

The term "mid-life crisis" has nearly become a cliché. Is Hannah having a mid-life crisis? If so, what are its causes? Is it resolved?

When asked about the genre of my novels, I reply that I write "domestic realism." When asked what I write *about*, I always say, "necessary sadness." What is necessary sadness?

Daintry is a villain, but she's also a victim. How? The same statement applies to Hannah. How?

Though its narrator is several decades past adolescence, *EVEN NOW* is in many ways a coming-of-age novel. What are the elements of a coming-of-age novel, and how does *EVEN NOW* fit that description?