

How Close We Come

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

Chapter 1

“No contest for *my* husband,” Ruth said. “Reed’s all-time favorite scene is the cowboys farting around the campfire in *Blazing Saddles*.”

I laughed. Side by side across my bed, Ruth and I were mourning the death and dearth of Great Cathartic Scenes in Recent American Cinema, but had gotten derailed in predicting our husbands’ hypothetical picks.

“Scotty’s would have to be . . .” I mused, tapping my fingers against my rib cage, “the Saint Crispin’s Day speech from *Henry V*. ‘We few, we happy few.’”

“I know, I know, Larry Olivier waxing eloquently about holding his manhood dear.” Ruth rolled her eyes at me. They were raccoon-rimmed with brown shadow and feathery, erratic streaks of black where her daughter’s aim with the mascara wand had erred.

My own four-year-old, Bethie, padded back to my side clutching bobbie pins and barrettes in her chubby fingers, as well as a baby hairbrush, whose soft, pliable bristles, useless as new grass, she pressed against my scalp.

“Or the universal default for most men, I’d bet,” Ruth continued, “the hospital scene from *Brian’s Song*.” She lowered her voice, aiming for husky emotion but achieving only hilarious throaty gruffness. “*I love Brian Piccolo*.”

“You are terrible.” I laughed. “Okay, where were we? *Kramer vs. Kramer*.”

“Close, but no cigar. Lacks that one wrencher scene.”

“Not even in the courtroom?”

Sloan yanked at her mother’s hair. “You have a rat’s nest, Mommy,” she said.

“Ouch!” Ruth winced.

We were lying across my wide queen-sized bed, though it wasn’t broad enough to prevent our legs from sticking awkwardly over at the side. Scotty was campaigning for a king mattress, but I was opposed, and cited Ruth as an ally. (“God,” she’d agreed, “they’re so vulgar-looking. Like having a trampoline in your bedroom.”) The horizontal position of our bodies allowed our hair to fall conveniently over the side of the bed so that Bethie and Sloan could comb and braid and part it, playing Beauty Parlor. It was a favorite game for all four of us, one we often resorted to on rainy afternoons. Even at their young age the girls were already savvy to the pointlessness of working puzzles or building wooden block villages: sooner or later the puzzles and blocks had to be knocked down, taken apart, and cleaned up. I don’t know where the boys were; probably holding farting contests of their own. Both seven, my son, Jay, and Ruth’s Grayson were ripe for bathroom humor. The day before, giggling and thyroid-eyed with suppressed glee, they’d summoned their younger sisters into the bathroom to witness a foot-long turd Jay had deposited in the toilet. They’d gotten the disgusted reaction they’d hoped for, and twenty-five minutes of punishment in time-out as well.

“*Summer of `42*,” I proposed.

“Oh, absolutely. Hymie at the window when she reads the telegram. Oldie but goodie. Obscure but not forgotten. *Steel Magnolias*.”

I frowned, but Ruth protested. “No fair disqualifying something just because it wasn’t a darling of the critics or doesn’t meet your superior literary standards.”

“Okay, you include *Kramer* and I’ll let *Magnolias* pass.”

“Hold still, Mommy,” Bethie commanded. Along with our hair styling came makeovers, compliments of eyeshadow, blush, and “lipcolor” department store freebies. The first time we’d played Beauty Parlor, I stood up and greeted myself in the mirror: blue shadow high as my eyebrows, perfect circles of red on my cheeks, a lipsticked mouth in clown proportions. A dozen primary-colored plastic barrettes were clamped close to my scalp and forehead. “It’s worse than inadvertently catching sight of yourself in that mirrored strip above the meat bin at the supermarket,” Ruth had said. But Sloan and Bethie had been delighted with their cosmetology results.

Our hair would be greasy tangled messes when the girls finished our “appointments,” but the game would have served its purpose—entertainment for the children, relative peace for us. And Ruth and I were doing what we liked best too: talking. As I miss Ruth, I miss those afternoon sessions, the tender tiny fingers of our daughters, whose clumsy touch was as soothing and relaxing as any skilled masseuse’s. My hair was, is, thick and heavy, but never styled—a result, I always claim, of having somehow missed that stage of adolescence when girls spend hours mirror-bound, figuring out how to use hot combs and round brushes and blow dryers to their best advantage. Versed in Gail Sheehy, Ruth always held that if you skip a stage in life you’ll have to return to it sooner or later, though I never asked her if the theory applied to grooming. I do own a hot comb, actually, stashed in the medicinal netherworld beneath the bathroom sink. The first time I tried to use the fiery wand I burned my neck so badly that it looked as though I had a hickey, and I was forced to wear a turtleneck to a no-excuses vestry function with Scotty even though it was April.

“Mom,” Bethie complained. “I can’t braid your hair. It’s not long enough.”

I pointed to my navel. “I used to have hair down to here.”

“No you did not,” Bethie countered with severe, run-on authority.

“Get that tall green book from the bottom bookshelf in the den and I’ll prove it.”

“Cheater,” Ruth said. Useless errands were another acknowledged time-wasting ploy.

Bethie returned with the leather volume, fanning its black-and-white pages. Ruth rolled over. “What *is* this?”

“High school yearbook.”

“Called *Quair*? I’m afraid to ask.”

“‘Little book’ in Latin.”

“Naturally. Why hadn’t I thought of that?”

I flipped through pictures of athletic teams and volunteer organizations until I reached the senior pictures. “There,” I said to Bethie, pointing to myself. My straight hair hung like a curtain to my waist. “Told you so. Nannie nannie boo boo.”

“Is that you?” Bethie squealed appreciatively.

Ruth sidled next to her, ignoring Sloan’s indignant “I’m not done yet!”

“‘Finished’ yet,” Ruth corrected. “Wow,” she said. “you *did* have some lengthy tresses.”

“I was convinced that if I cut it, my personality would vanish too. It took me until my junior year in college to work up the nerve. And only then, I might add, because I was secure that Scotty sufficiently adored me to risk cutting off ten inches.”

“And?”

“He didn’t even notice.”

Ruth ran her finger along the quotation beneath my name, reading aloud. “‘*The quiet watcher, observer always, in solitary shaded shadows.*’ Shaded shadows? Did you make this up?”

“Of course not; give me a little creative credit. It was the yearbook editor’s idea of sensitive haiku. Summing me up in ten words or less.”

“Ah, the soulful, sensitive seventies. But it’s not bad,” Ruth mused. “You *are* a watcher.”

Still on my back, I peered closely at her, gauging my reaction to her statement, her judgment.

“See?” Ruth said gently, deflecting. “You’re at it again. Watching me.” She let pages drift through her fingers, stopping finally at a two-page spread on the Danish exchange student. “Looks like the alien Pia was spared the haiku dictum. She picked her own quote. ‘*Don’t you know that people change, thus relationships change, and that pain is a sign of changes, not endings?*’” she read.

“Turn back over, Mommy!” Sloan yelled.

“Please,” Ruth responded automatically.

“Didn’t you have yearbook quotes in the sixties?” I asked.

“I refuse to answer on the grounds that it may incriminate me as a dork.” The girls tittered. At last, a conversation they could comprehend. Grimacing, Ruth confessed. “I am a part of all that I have met.”

I howled. “Let me guess. You also had a poster on your wall that said, ‘If you love something, let it go, and if it returns it is yours’ superimposed on a deserted beach.”

“Actually,” Ruth said, “I had a poster illustrating all the positions for”—she cut her eyes toward our juvenile hairstylists—“intercourse, corresponding to each astrological sign. In black light neons.” A fresh torrent of rain pelted against the windowpane. She sat up. “God. ‘The sun did not shine. It was too wet to play.’”

“I know, I know,” Bethie crowed. “*Cat in the Hat.* ‘So we sat inside that cold cold wet day.’ Can we get a kitten, Mommy?”

“No. They eat the birds.”

Ruth flopped back down and tapped a comb against my rib cage. “Now, where were we? *Splendor in the Grass.*”

“*Funny Girl.*”

“*Ordinary People.*”

“*Camelot.* When Guinevere is leaving for the nunnery, and her nose is running, and she says, ‘Arthur, so many times I’ve looked into your eyes and seen love there.’” I sniffed sympathetically.

“*Prince of Tides.*”

“*The King and I.*”

“He may not always be,” Ruth warbled, “what you would have him be, then all at once he’ll do, something wonderful.’ Don’t you say that line to yourself at least once every day?” Sloan dropped an elastic to clap her hands over her ears. I laughed again. “Your turn,” Ruth said.

I considered a minute. “Can we count made-for-TV movies?”

“Depends.”

I whistled a tune inexpertly, and though I botched the haunting strains, it was melody enough.

“Ahh,” Ruth said softly, and sighed. “Meggie. Poor Meggie. Poor Ralph. Poor Father deBricassart. Yes. That counts.” She cradled her head in her palm. “You know why we love *The Thorn Birds*, Pril? I’ll tell you why we love it. Because it’s about yearning for and lusting after something you can never ever have. Denial. What a theme. Nobody gets the priest. The sperm but not the soul.” She sighed again. “Let’s do some subcategories. Cathartic superlatives. Saddest death.”

I heard the refrigerator slam. Jay and Grayson, foraging for food less than an hour after lunch. “Hey, Mom!” Grayson yelled upstairs. “I thought you were going to make meringues for us today!”

“Can’t make meringues on rainy days!” Ruth hollered back.

“Why not?”

“They won’t rise.”

“Why?”

Ruth exhaled a noisy sigh. “Ready?” she asked me. “Because I said so!” we sang out on cue. Without missing a beat, she continued: “*Out of Africa*.”

“Are you sure?”

“You got a sadder death?”

“Promise not to laugh?”

Ruth widened her eyes in feigned innocence. “Have I ever laughed at you?”

“*Love Story*.”

She giggled. “My, I don’t believe I da tole that. Ali McGraw was wooden, but Pinocchio was a better actor.”

“After I saw *Love Story* I bought a little knitted cloche so I could look like Jenny and have someone who looked like Ryan O’Neal fall in love with me.” I shook my head. “New category: biggest sob. And I know mine.”

“Which?”

“Heard of Loew’s Grand Theater in Atlanta?”

“Sure. The premiere of *Gone With the Wind*.”

“One afternoon in January while I was being paid to summarize depositions, I stood for four hours at my thirtieth-story window and watched Loew’s Grand burn to cinders. There was nothing firefighters could do. It was terrible, watching that grand old lady die. Such an ignoble demise.” I stared at the ceiling. “Scotty estimates that I’ve spent one hundred twenty-six hours of my life watching *Gone With the Wind*.” I sensed Ruth’s smile beside me. “The next morning on the way to work, my bus passed what was left of Loew’s Grand, nothing but charred, cindery black stalks behind yellow police ribbons. The rubble was still smoking, with long icicles hanging from the charred beams where dripping water had frozen overnight. Then I threw up.”

“On the bus?”

“Right there in the middle of the aisle. Scotty blamed it on the overheated bus, stinking of sausage biscuits, cheap perfume, and exhaust. I thought it was the sight of that pathetic, burned-out shell of a building.” I looked at Ruth. “But I was just pregnant.”

“*Just*,” Ruth enunciated dryly.

Sloan interrupted, shoving an eyeshadow container before Ruth’s nose. “What’s the name of this color?”

Ruth squinted. “Innocent Blue.’ Geez.”

“Geez, what?” Sloan said, stroking the powder from her mother’s eye to temple. Ruth looked like a Cleopatra clone who hadn’t slept for a week.

I fell silent, remembering my lingering melancholy for the vanished theater, and what it represented. Scotty had tried to understand my sorrow. And failed. Such attachment escaped him.

The sound of bickering erupted from Jay’s room. He and Grayson were fighting over who deserved to be the Architect in a game of Life. “Now, *that’s* pathetic,” Ruth said. “Two seven-year-olds who already know which career card in Life produces the highest salary. Quiet!” she barked. Sensing more interesting commotion down the hall, and nurturing a futile hope that the boys would let them join their game, Bethie and Sloan skittered from the bedroom. “*Casablanca*.”

“*West Side Story*.”

“*Love in the Afternoon*.”

“Oh, Audrey imploring Gary at the train station! Every Audrey Hepburn movie.”

“But we’ve left out *numero uno*, the all-time weeper great. Or just saved it for last.”

I watched her pull a skewed barrette from her hair, and knew. “*The Way We Were*. At the end, when Katie and Hubbel accidentally meet outside the Plaza. When she brushes Hubbel’s bangs out of his eyes, like she’d done a thousand times before. Then.”

Ruth shook her head. “No, no, no. It’s when Katie says, ‘Wouldn’t it be lovely to go back the way we were, when everything was easy?’ And Hubbel says, ‘Oh, Katie, it was never easy.’”

“No, no. It’s the scene when he says, ‘You want too much!’ and Katie says, ‘Oh, but look at what I’ve got.’”

One by one, I unclipped the diminutive barrettes from my hair. “You know what?” Ruth said, her painted lips twisted in a rueful smile. “It’s the women we cry for in all those movies. Jenny and Katie and Meggie and Anna and the rest. Ever noticed? The women, always the women.” She curved herself close and cozy and fetal, and pulled a small pillow beneath her head, a baby gift whose creweled linen pillow slip hadn’t looked crisp since the moment I’d opened it. “Do you see the common thread in all these cathartic scenes?” she asked me. “Don’t you see what happens in every one, Pril? They’re all about departing. About leaving. About separating. Those are the stories that make us cry. They’re the only stories worth telling, or writing, or reading, or watching. Worth remembering.” We lay there, curled and stilled, until shrieks snatched us back.

“Mommy! Grayson put shredlocks on my Barbie! He ruined my Totally Hair Barbie!”

“*Dreadlocks*,” came Grayson’s withering reply. “*Dreadlocks*, dummy.”

“He called me a dummy!”

And so Ruth and I, mothers, rose reluctantly to intervene and mediate. Behind us on the quilted white coverlet were left the faint impressions of our bodies, and smudges of Innocent Blue.

It is laughable now, the Beauty Parlor game, our list of movies that dreary, rainy afternoon. Laughable and ludicrous that we cried or agonized over scenes and plots and characters meaningless beyond what they had once meant to us, during some bygone phase of our lives.

But there’s another movie I’ll forever associate with Ruth, though not for its story. It fits her formula, consists almost entirely of departures and separations. But it’s a mere line of *Doctor Zhivago* that captures my intricate, indissoluble connection to Ruth. Whenever I think of movies, of the two of us together, and of Ruth now alone, that spare single line comes back to me: “*I suppose I was a little in love with her myself.*”

Synopsis of HOW CLOSE WE COME

HOW CLOSE WE COME is the story of Ruth and Pril, next door neighbors and intimate friends, whose children are close friends as well. The two women share every detail of their lives, from gossip to parenting advice to keeping secrets from their husbands. Then, after ten years of remarkable intimacy, and without letting Pril know, Ruth leaves. She simply packs up her children for a vacation out West and never returns. Pril is bewildered, and angry, and most of all, terribly lonely. When Ruth's husband Reed sues for custody, he names Pril as his witness, and her impending testimony is a terrible dilemma, a painful test of her loyalty. She's torn between the friend who has deliberately abandoned her, and her duty and obligation to truth. Matters are worsened by Pril's husband Scotty, who firmly sides with Reed. Husband and wife argue bitterly over responsibility and compassion and morality and the nature of love: conflicts and issues mirrored in their own marriage.

HOW CLOSE WE COME is an examination of the expectations for intense friendships. The novel portrays the pain of love and dependency and the terrible losses within marriage, and the story's final question asks how much we can truly know the people we love the most.

Questions for Susan

What was the genesis for HOW CLOSE WE COME?

As with most of my writing, several factors coincided. One of my sons was attending a boarding school that placed a great deal of emphasis on an honor code, and “choosing the hard right over the easy wrong.” I kept thinking, yes, but suppose there are two hard rights--then what? Too, the novel grew out of a laughed conversation in the park with a friend who said, “You know, one morning my husband is going to turn over in bed and I’ll be gone.” Never mind her husband’s reaction; I thought about how *I’d* feel if she suddenly vanished. And finally, I’d written along, descriptive, never-published family saga that was moldering in the attic, and I wanted to write a short, conversation-driven novel as an experiment.

So it isn’t autobiographical?

No, the story itself isn’t autobiographical. I’ve never had a friend who left. I’ve never been a witness at a custody dispute, or even been inside a courtroom except on jury duty. To learn about a custody hearing I took a lawyer to lunch, and spent some time in the legal section of the public library. If I have a friend who’s had an abortion, she hasn’t shared the details with me. I called a gynecologist friend of mine and asked him the tough questions (after which he requested that I *please* not thank him in the acknowledgments!). On the other hand, nearly every domestic detail is true. I do, in fact, have a friend who told me she didn’t consider it a day unless she made someone cry. I do, in fact, have a friend who stuck her hand down the commode of a chartered bus to fish out her daughter’s dropped glasses. And the pillowcases with the orange crayon streaks? They’re in my hall closet.

Is Ruth a lesbian?

Though I have a friend who maintains to this day that Ruth is a lesbian, she’s not. I included that implication for three reasons. First because I had (another) friend who was working toward her PhD in Women’s Studies, and I once asked her if there were lesbians in her classes. She brought me up short by replying, “You know, Susan, you can be a feminist without being a lesbian.” Second, I wanted to illustrate the insidious nature of female gossip. And third, the dialogue exchange provided an opportunity to show how very much Pril wants and needs to be first in Ruth’s heart.

How about that horse scene? Where did *that* come from?

At one point my father-in-law raised Arabian horses. When my husband and I were dating, I asked if we could go to the farm and watch a breeding. We did, and like Pril I was fascinated and horrified. Afterwards, while standing in the kitchen with his family talking about the experience, my husband-to-be began neighing and pawing at my back,

laughing. I was furious. I didn't find the imitation funny at all, and never forgot either the breeding, or his jokey antics (but I married him anyway).

Do Ruth and Pril ever get back together?

When *HOW CLOSE WE COME* was first published, I had no idea. I had to "age" to experience first-hand how I'd feel. But now I've written a sequel titled *COME TO THIS*, and the answer is yes. Ruth and Pril are reunited, but not without pain for both of them, tough choices for both of them, and surprising revelations about the lives they've led during their decade-long separation.

Susan's questions for Reading Groups

The title HOW CLOSE WE COME can be interpreted several different ways with regard to the story. What are they?

In answering the attorney's question, "Was Ruth a good mother?" does Pril help Ruth's chances for custody of her children, or make the situation worse?

Who is the weaker of the two women, Ruth or Pril? Why do you think so?

Ruth and Pril grieved for Roslyn when she committed suicide, but I deliberately made them deeply ashamed as well. Why should they have been ashamed? Psychiatrists often state that those traits we dislike in other people are often the traits we dislike in ourselves. Does this tenet hold true for Ruth, Pril, and Roslyn?

Ruth was motivated to leave by several catalysts. What were these catalysts, and do you think they were valid?

I've lived my entire life in the South, but I don't intentionally write "Southern" fiction. Some readers have been surprised, in fact, to learn I wasn't Midwestern after reading HOW CLOSE WE COME. Another reader said slyly to me, "You know and I know that this is a very Southern novel." Is it? Why? Why would readers think the novel was Midwestern?

One reader has declared that HOW CLOSE WE COME is a fictional version of the nonfiction book MEN ARE FROM MARS, WOMEN ARE FROM VENUS. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Bonus question: Did I leave out any movies that should have been on Ruth and Pril's list?