

A LIVING WILL

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Summary

The short story, "A Living Will", is a commemoration of the centennials of both migrant labor in the Hawai'i plantations and the forced exile of lepers to Culion Island under the American public health system in the 1920s. These two grand historical narratives are encapsulated in the love story of an elderly couple who are reunited through the efforts of a nurse. The story also covers the topics of the OCW phenomenon, the mushrooming of nursing homes, and the emotional penance that elderly persons carry in their psyche after having lived a life of choices. Although the plotline centers on the nurse's search for Ernesto, the inner story is about the nurse, who, no matter how pure her intention, inexorably triggers a process that may expose Ernesto as a fraud. When we commit ourselves to action, we unintentionally set off a chain of events whose end, for all the purity of our intentions, we cannot determine. This is the human condition that is revealed in Nurse Garcia's confrontation with her well-meaning but accidentally evil self in "A Living Will".

A HAPPY ENDING is brewing at the Home today. Nurse Garcia has called from *Tia* Choleng's village to announce that she is coming back with Choleng's long lost love Ernesto. The aides have looped red and white strips of crepe paper from the ceiling to the corners of the jubilee hall. Four sheets of soft cardboard have been pasted together into a huge, red cut-out heart and hung up on the wall facing the entrance. They have even turned off the television, although the resident who has been muttering back at it is muttering still.

The nurses and aides are already teary eyed when he enters through the door. One of them presses "Play" and Elvis Presley's "It's Now or Never" booms through the speakers. He still stands erect, which is good, because he is short, even by his generation's standards. But that is all right, because he and Choleng, whose spine

bends under the weight of a widow's hump, are now just the same height. He is wearing the last of his aloha shirts, this one of silk, with a constellation of red hibiscus flowers in eternal bloom. A beaming Nurse Garcia has to give him an encouraging pat on his back before he steps forward. The pronounced limp of an arthritic leg is the only visible price that he pays for a life led less than virtuously.

Choleng has insisted on meeting him on her feet, although it is with the aid of her walker, a trapezoidal metal frame that she leans on when she wants to get around on her own. She has taken to pushing it around again since Nurse Garcia's news a week ago that her Ernesto has come to claim her. She is stunning today. She has on a white dress with blue flower prints and puffed sleeves. She has taken her teeth out of the box and put them on.

"You have a lovely smile," he says to Choleng, for want of anything else to say. He hands her a corsage of fresh orchids, a perky contrast to the extravagant bouquet of faded shell flowers sprawling from a crock on the center table. The front teeth that flash at Choleng are his own. The gleam in his eyes hints that in his youth he was entirely likeable even when he was ignoring the conventions of decent, sober behavior.

Choleng is ecstatic. He has not forgotten. That was what he loved most about her, he had told her years ago. In his helplessness it was all he could arm her with against what was to come. He had said, Whatever happens, don't stop smiling. It's the most loveable thing about you.

Pushing her walker ahead of her, Choleng leads him toward the garden, where they can sit alone under a bower of bougainvilleas. Angry voices with an electronic timbre cut through the stillness, and one of them detaches itself and rises in a piteous wail. The television in the recreation room has been turned on again. Choleng tips her head sideways and gazes up at him coquettishly. He is staring at the murky green water of the lily pond with the look of someone worrying about dengue.

"Tell me everything about yourself," she says. When he hesitates, she assumes he is groping for a cue. "Tell me about when you were a child in our village," she prompts.

Memories of village rituals are what this elderly couple has in

common. Realizing he has found someone with whom he can share his boyhood stories, he begins to lower his guard. In June of the year that the recruiters for Hawai'i had come, no one in the village yet knew that the boys would be gone by August. He remembers the night when the village excitement focused on the hunt for June beetles, which first appeared with the first days' rains. Claspng branches of madre-de-cacao leaves, they trekked out in single file through the rice fields and to the bushes by the river's edge. This year no one except him had remembered to bury strips of madre-de-cacao bark on Good Friday two months earlier. Any dead thing buried on that day sucked in the rot of all the souls that were redeemed on the Cross. Today he had dug up his madre-de-cacao strips and laughed at their powerful stench. He hung them from his branch and knew for sure he would catch the biggest number of beetles. They all returned to the village, bags of beetles in hand, only when the last of these hiding in the bushes had been caught. The feast of roasted beetles was the biggest catch in the village elders' memory, thanks to his Good Friday bait.

Do you remember that night? He asks, gathering all the stored-up words of sixty-seven years to boast that that was the night when he had held his own among the men, drinking coconut whiskey and singing bawdy verses to one another until dawn ... when Choleng suddenly reaches out and clasps his hand to her breast and laughs. "That was the night we slipped away. I took you to a shed I knew about, in my father's rice field."

It was an abandoned watchman's hut, the only place where they were sure no one would come upon them. She had almost ruined the mood because she had looked up at him and giggled when his head hit the doorjamb. But when he stooped to avoid hitting the roof too, their lips had met.

"And the inside of your mouth tasted like fresh roasted corn." Choleng's voice takes on the wondering tone of one who has just had her first kiss.

Nurse Garcia eyes them from the balcony as Choleng chatters away, touching his hand with a fingertip at every pause. On his face there is bewilderment, wariness, interest, and finally curiosity. But there is no excitement over recollections, whether sudden or

nourished all these years. If there is a settling of differences between them now, it does not include a reconciliation of memories.

He had come too early into her life. Now has he come too late? She wonders.

Nurse Garcia has been reading the books in the Home library. They are donations, most of them romance novels. The librarian has folded white bond paper over their covers to hide the pictures of half-naked men and swooning damsels. In the pages Nurse Garcia reads of lovers whose proud hearts strike a flame that would consume them both in the blaze of a love and a passion that neither can deny. She knows that lovers who have been parted by time and circumstance will always find their way back to each other. It is the way of love. She is unaware that she has just strung together the blurbs on the back covers of romance novels.

In Tia Choleng's file is a sheet, signed and notarized, that instructs that she is not to be resuscitated nor attached to tubes when her moment comes. It is in her handwriting so that no one will read ambivalence where there is none. Her signature, "Soledad Gomez," is imperious. She had made the decision to move to the Home when she had started to lose her common nouns, the proper ones having been the first to go. After she had settled into her room, she steered her two daughters out the door, even as they pleaded to let them care for her. She smiled, kissed them on both cheeks, and promised not to die without their knowledge. She knew enough about her condition to discern that it was the Home, not she, that would see to that.

But that was twelve years ago. Now, Nurse Garcia only wants to give her charge some measure of hope that would make her spoon her porridge into her mouth herself. Happiness that prolongs a life does not contradict the terms of any living will.

In the year that Nurse Garcia has been in the Home, she has seen the different ways that the residents try to fend off death. *Tio* Duardo wakes up every Monday morning to a voice that warns him that this is the day he is going to die. On these days he ricochets all across his room with broom and scrub and rag and soap and water, because cleaning his room turns death away. For Tia Amparo every insect is an omen of death, so she sticks eucalyptus branches all

over her wheelchair, transforming herself into a gliding olive-colored bush. Everyday Tia Ason bickers with Tio Paco over the hidden dangers of a walker with wheels and the merits of a walker without. There is no end to this debate, for each day gives them reason to test the strength of their arguments.

But the ones who sit immobile are the ones whose interiors are the busiest of all. Blood runs frenziedly through capillaries to outwit blocked arteries and stiffened heart muscles. One blind eye or one deaf ear opens up skin pores to light and sound. And messages that the brain cells are trying to send to extremities are getting snagged on fragments of time, nebulous and dim. “Ernesto.” All of Choleng’s spirit gathers itself together in this one word. “Ernesto,” she pronounces steadily, as if in answer to someone’s question. It is all that Nurse Garcia has ever heard her say.

* * *

Last week Nurse Garcia shut her book on its rapturous last page and resolved at last to find Tia Choleng’s Ernesto. It wasn’t fair that hundreds of ladies so young had found their happy ending, while here was this woman still hanging on by the thinnest thread to her beginning.

It shouldn’t be too hard, this project that she was taking upon herself, although it might be slow going. She could not ask the daughters; Ernesto was not their father’s name.

“Be careful you don’t get caught in something more than you’re bargaining for,” one of the nurses had warned her as they sat around their lunch.

“I’ve learned that longing for the one you love isn’t as bad as having him.” This one from their head nurse, who had had twenty-three years of marriage. Marriages, she had decided, survived or collapsed for the same reason, that the couple went on living after the love had run its course.

“Yeah, betcha that Ernesto turns out be some scumbag who’ll be in it just for her last will and testament.” They were deliberately learning all the American idioms from cable TV while waiting for the call from the placement agency. Ireland was the newest destination where, the agency assured them, the people spoke English and were

Catholic. But for the luckiest of them, it would be California, where every Filipino had a cousin.

“You don’t really know what goes on inside these old people. For all you know she may be finding him in her head every time she calls out his name. For all you know she may be cavorting in seventh heaven with him right now,” added another nurse.

“Well, I’d just rather she did it on solid ground,” Nurse Garcia said.

“Just don’t get too involved with their lives. You won’t be doing them any favor when the time comes for you to leave them.” Like everyone else, Nurse Garcia had an application at the placement agency too, but she wasn’t sure that she wanted to leave. This she kept to herself because it would only confirm that she was crazier than they already thought she was.

Nurse Garcia discovered that all it took to find Ernesto, after all, was a mere call to the municipal hall of Choleng’s village. She had asked the clerk to find the birth certificate of an Ernesto, family name unknown, born in the same village and the same year. The year of birth would have been 83 years ago. “Hold on,” the clerk said.

His fingers skimmed the surface of her breast and pulled lightly at her nipple . . . she was reading when the clerk’s voice came through the phone. “Here it is. And there’s a note that says ‘A copy has been furnished the undersigned, Ernesto Cortez, for purposes of work in the United States.’” The date that was stamped on the note was faded but readable: July 15, and the year that was given was sixteen years after his birth.

Being also a fan of mystery thrillers, Nurse Garcia wanted to make sure she would not be detoured from her hunt with wild goose chases, such as different people happening to have the same name. She asked the clerk to look up other birth certificates with the surname of Cortez. There was only one other born in the same generation, and he was a cousin—Juan. There was no record of a copy ever being requested.

Ernesto Cortez would not be impossible to find. A legal emigrant to the US would leave a paper trail behind. If he had left the country as Ernesto Cortez, Filipino citizen, and then came home as an American citizen, so much the easier for Nurse Garcia. She

asked the clerk for the names of other boys who had applied for their birth certificates for the same purpose. The next day he emailed her a list with the helpful note: “No one named Ernesto Cortez lives in this village now. But there could be others in the list who do. The person to ask for people’s whereabouts is Filomena Velez, the village mayor.”

Choleng’s province was a narrow ribbon of land wedged between the sea and a mountain range that was a giant purple wall. It was a country uncommonly dreary, occasionally interrupted by low-lying hills browned by a ruthless sun. The mere sigh of a farmer’s wife would have stirred dust into the air. The fields were cracked and dry, and Nurse Garcia, gazing out from the bus, thought she could make out the image of Choleng’s face etched in them.

The house of Filomena Velez and her husband was big, compared to the thatch-and-bamboo houses that Nurse Garcia had seen from the bus. On the balcony of the house, with a glass of Coke and a packet of crackers on the table before her, she learned that Filomena was the owner of a small tobacco plantation. Her mother had bought the land with the money her father had sent from Hawai’i. Others of course engaged in the same trade, Tia Filomena continued, but she was doing better than any of them because she had a white *duende* who whispered sage advice into her ear.

Both her sons were merchant marines, “seamen” the local people called them. Filomena invited her into the house and showed her the postcards from Havana, Amsterdam, New York, and Panama sticking out of slits between the wooden posts and walls. She pulled out the pictures one by one so she could show Nurse Garcia the backside of each. It was where her sons had scribbled notes, and their handwriting proved to guests that Filomena’s own flesh-and-blood had actually been to such places.

But it was a makeshift altar in another corner that drew Nurse Garcia’s attention more. Four electric candles flickering in a parody of real flames stood around a picture of a youth, tied to a tree, pierced with arrows. The colors of the picture had faded, although it was framed, and so the blood oozing out of every wound had turned a friendly pink.

“San Sebastian,” said Filomena.

Nurse Garcia knew it was San Sebastian, for he was the patron saint of contagious diseases. San Sebastian's hands were tied above his head, his body naked save for the perfunctory white sheet over his genitals, his face frozen in some mysterious rapture that she would begin to fathom only years later, when she finally discovered what her novels meant by naked bodies writhing on satin sheets, breaths stopping, eyes rolling upward.

"It was my mother's," Filomena explained, following Nurse Garcia's gaze. "She got them from nuns who would come visiting every time there was an epidemic." The *duende* of Filomena's mother had taught her what herbs to use, and St. Sebastian had taught her the right spell to chant for every illness. "But there was one epidemic that happened around the same time the boys left for Hawai'i. No herb or spell could cure it."

There were always those diseases spreading around during that time, Filomena said when Nurse Garcia asked what that epidemic was. Cholera, smallpox, malaria. But leprosy, Filomena's mother had said, had been the worst because the constabulary simply came and took away those who were stricken with it. "Why, there were those from this very barrio alone who were caught and shipped to that leper island . . . ah yes, Culsion it's called. Some of them had been all set to go to Hawai'i too." Filomena's voice was full of compassion as she told of that night of panic and despair. "There was no escape, actually. If they'd made it to Hawai'i, Father wrote there was a leper island there too, called Moloka'i."

But, for all the peripheral details that Filomena had about her father's era, she knew as little about Ernesto Cortez as she did about her own father, who himself had never returned from Hawai'i. She looked at the list of names that Nurse Garcia held out to her and said, "There's only one person here who's still around. Teodoro Guevarra. We call him Tio Doro. Oh, you'd have enjoyed his stories if you'd caught him before he had his stroke. But at least I can give you directions to his house."

Nurse Garcia was surprised to find that the Guevarra house was made of bamboo and thatch, because it was well known that the men who worked in Hawai'i came back to build two-storied houses of cement and hardwood, painted in pure, undiluted colors

transferred directly by brush and roller from the paint can: fuchsia, ochre, burgundy, tangerine, chartreuse. Junior Guevarra, in spite of his nickname, was sixty-eight years old. His father Tio Doro, eighty-nine, lay on a bamboo cot behind a flowered curtain that was strung across the interior of the hut. The odor of dried urine, excrement, and drool was a fetid sweetness hanging heavy in the air. Nurse Garcia would have gagged if her sense of smell had not already been dulled by her year's work at the Home.

The year that the recruiters had come was how Junior kept track of his own age. "I was one year old when Tatay left, four when he returned," Junior said. He was garrulous, like Tio Doro must have been. He recounted the stories that his father had told him. Life was even harder then. When the plantation recruiters told them of the money they would make in Hawai'i—a dollar a day—they signed up.

"But *Tatay* couldn't stay any longer after his first contract," said Junior. "He was so lonely and homesick. I guess it must've been harder for him because he already had *Nanay* and me."

Soon after Tio Doro came home, a local recruiter came round the villages, this time for the plantation just a bus ride away. Tio Doro went with him, though for a mere fourth of Hawai'i's wages. He passed on his travel papers to someone else, who went to Hawai'i in his place. It was Ernesto who'd planted that idea in his head when he'd get extra lunch rations in the field by joining the line of Chinese coolies and then hopping to the Japanese line. He'd joked, "To the whites, all Asians look alike anyway."

Junior laughed. "So somewhere in Hawai'i there's a very lucky Teodoro Guevarra. Or a gravestone with his name on it."

For all his talkativeness, Junior's father had also been reticent about some things. He did not speak, for instance, of the humiliation they suffered in the hands of the *luna*, the foreman in Hawai'i. "I guessed it, though, whenever he talked about Ernesto. Ernesto was full of jokes and tricks, he said, and Ernesto would use them to distract the luna, who was always in an angry mood."

But random details from the past and Tio Doro's tall tales had come together in a mishmash of myth, history, and fantasy. Ernesto was the underground giant who shook the earth to remind

the luna of his manners. During the Big Strike Ernesto turned into a python and swallowed the scabs whole. He could change his skin color whenever he wanted a woman. And when he fell ill he traveled in other people's bodies.

"Ernesto?" A quavering voice came through the curtain. "*Hijo de Juan!*" A chuckle. "You're back!"

Nurse Garcia peered round the side of the curtain at the small, wizened man on the bamboo cot and tried to ask him about Ernesto. When the old man only smiled, she asked him who was Juan. He smiled even more widely, displaying mottled gums, as if proof that confession by torture was futile with all his teeth gone.

Junior was eager to compensate for his father's inhospitality. "It's an expression he brought home from Hawai'i," he said. "*Hijo de Juan*. Son of a gun, maybe?" But he was not about to meander, like his father, so he went on, "Yah, I remember Tio Ernesto's homecoming. It was my forty-seventh birthday and he gave me \$20."

No, he did not know if Ernesto was still alive. "He married someone in the next village and moved there. Until now the people there still boast that they hold the record for the most lavish wedding in this part of the country."

The Cortez mansion was easy to find, famous as it was for its walls the color of mango yellow, with avocado green window frames and grape purple posts. It was like a giant bowl of plastic fruit. On the wrought iron gate the names 'Ernesto & Perlita Cortez' burst out of the multitude of filigrees and tendrils wriggling in many directions. The gate's two halves were hinged to a Grecian pillar on either side. Sitting on top of each pillar was a human-sized gargoyle baring its fangs at the visitor standing at the gate. Undaunted, Nurse Garcia ignored the smaller replica of the gargoyle's face that was meant to serve as the knocker. She tapped the gate with her nurse's ring instead.

Perlita was delighted to receive a guest who showed genuine interest in her life with the man whom she had married. She became even more excited when Nurse Garcia explained that her quest for him was in fulfillment of Choleng's dying wish to see her childhood playmate. "Do stay the night," she pleaded so fervently that Nurse Garcia knew that her visit was just as much for this woman as it was

for Choleng.

After supper the three of them watched his favorite TV channel, *National Geographic*, where Hawai'i was sometimes the night's feature. Nurse Garcia was careful not to annoy him and spoke only during station breaks. "Tio Doro told me stories of your heroic exploits in Hawai'i," she said. "He said you saved them from the luna's cruelty."

He shrugged. "Doro was a softie. That's why the luna liked to pick on him."

"But he said that the one you had was a real bully. Your luna was always cursing and shouting and he carried a whip."

"Ah no," he said. "A luna's just the same as any foreman in this country, except a little crazier." When she only stared uncomprehendingly, he added, "Because of what they're called—luna." And he chuckled at the joke. He had not cracked that joke in years—decades—and he was amazed that it was still as funny as when he had first thought of it. They always laughed in their barracks when someone repeated it. No one had seemed to have enough of it.

It all came back to him again, as sharp and quick as the luna's whip striking the ground. God knows how much they had all needed some amusement in their lives, the luna most of all. Lazy Filipinos! he'd shout and the whip would go Crack! on the ground. Goddam lazy Filipinos! And before the luna could pick on any of the others again, he'd take the luna on and fling his machete down, making sure to hit a rock with a clang, and give the luna a toss of his head toward the other side of the cane field and lead him into it, there, where the cane rose above their heads and the razor-edged leaves stung through his shirt, and the pebbles on the ground between the rows of sugar cane felt like the *mongo* seeds that Mother had made him kneel on when he'd been stealing the neighbor's chicken again. That night there'd be slapping on the back and exclamations of *hijo de juan* you did it again, you showed him what's what, as he bent over the iron stove, washing his mouth off with ashes, and he'd shrug it all off and lie on the cot with his face to the wall, wanting only sleep, knowing that at least tonight there'd be some relief from Doro's sobbing and nobody thought to ask what he'd done with the luna in the cane

field. For the rest of the week, the luna would leave them in peace, dragging his whip on the ground to draw figure eight's over and over again, giving a little smile and raising an eyebrow whenever their eyes would meet

"Ah." Nurse Garcia gave a little laugh that she hoped did not sound too polite. "He said you could always make people laugh when things got too tense."

He sighed. This woman had an answer for everything.

"I've never seen the city," Perlita said helpfully. "I hear the most beautiful people live there. They have corn hair and transparent eyes and white skin. C'mon, hon, I can sit in the restaurant there while you have your reunion with your childhood sweetheart." She giggled. It was she who had made her husband's US pension grow, trading in garlic and dried fish, and keeping a discreet money lending business on the side. She was not threatened by this sudden entry of another woman in her life. Tia Choleng was a full forty or so years older than her and sat in a wheelchair and was out of her mind.

Between the nurse's fulsome flattery and the wife's amused cooperation, they had worn the old man out by the following day.

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The aides have taken their charges back to their rooms for their afternoon nap. Nurse Garcia is pleased to see Ernesto taking it upon himself to escort Choleng to her room. When the old woman clings to his hand, he promises her that he will still be there when she awakens.

Nurse Garcia takes him into the lounging room where he can stretch out on a divan. But opportunities are meant to be seized and this is one of them. "There's no need to be modest, you know," she tells him. "Go ahead and tell her all about your life in Hawai'i. Your Choleng can only love you more if she learns why you couldn't come back to her."

He has lain back on the couch and shut his eyes in the hope that Nurse Garcia will leave him alone. It is a common trick of the elderly, this pretense at exhaustion or befuddlement or deafness. But nothing he can tell this nurse or that queenly woman with the adoration in her eyes can fall within the realm of acceptable morality.

The kindest thing he thinks he has ever done for anyone is his marriage to Perlita. But even that is contaminated, simply because it was his making, with the help of a matchmaker and a dowry of five hundred dollars. The brothels of Hawai'i and the purchase of Perlita, what the hell was the difference, except that with the first, there was the added thrill of knowing he was breaking their law every time he consorted with their women. Finally, still keeping his eyes closed, he tells Nurse Garcia, "I'm not who you think I am."

And he shuts her out again, knowing now there is no end to it, whatever it was that was begun.

* * *

"Here," his uncle had said, thrusting Ernesto's travel papers into his hand. When he resisted, the older man closed his fingers around the papers. "Take them, Juan. For your mother's sake." And for that poor girl Choleng. Better for her to think Ernesto was in Hawai'i and had forgotten all about her than for her to discover that she'd been holding hands, or even worse, with a leper.

The American health inspector came to the village, with the police constabulary, his mother had written, in a letter that reached him long after his shoulder had stopped bleeding from the weight of the sugarcane and his heart had stopped quickening at the sound of his name 'Juan.' They rounded up everyone with the disease and put them on a boat that took them to an island called Culion. No, she didn't know if Ernesto was among them; but she'd seen the constabulary dragging out the ones who were hiding in the rice fields. It was just so confusing with all the wailing and the pleading and everyone running around, like the whole village was under attack. Choleng, at least, was spared of all that horror. Her father had already sent her to school in the city, to distract her from her broken heart.

Now he opens his eyes, looks at the nurse who at last has nothing to say, and he enunciates each word very clearly, a habit he has developed with the young, who can never seem to catch up, or on. "The Ernesto that she knew then is not the Ernesto I am now."

Nurse Garcia is used to elderly people speaking very slowly, filling in the few seconds to discard similar-sounding words in their head before deciding on the likely one. And she is used to elderly

people needing a few moments when they are spoken to, to pick their way through the confusion wrought by dementia and the ordinary confusion that is the residue of their youth. This time it is she who needs the few moments before it finally comes to her, a sudden stab of something physical, not pain, but close to it, a familiar unease, something she hasn't felt in a long time, not since she was eight, when she, too, had had to make a choice. And she'd been paying for it since.

* * *

She'd been hurrying home from playing at the park because the rain had begun to fall in tiny drops, and just when the clouds finally burst open and she had to run in earnest, she came upon the kitten, with the face and body of a bat, mewling desperately, its hind legs jutting out sideways. She had bent to pat it and say soft, pitying words to it, with the rain pelting her head full force, before she ran off again, but the kitten loped after her, hopping on its butt and dragging its twisted legs, its mewling now sounding hideously human, and she ran even faster because she wanted only to lose that kitten, didn't want to be responsible for it. The next morning, full of remorse, she'd gone back to the park and searched in the grass and under the benches and behind the fence. But it was gone.

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Nurse Garcia senses a strange, new element to this moment, and she realizes it is fear, because she is suddenly seeing herself at eighty-three when, despite having healed hundreds of festering wounds and given hope to the dying, she will have led her own life of guilty secrets, and she knows, inevitably, that this will be one of them.

Rotten to the core, he is thinking, that's all I've been. All that Uncle had asked for in exchange was some share in the dollar remittances and I couldn't even keep those up, not even for my mother. And I'm supposed to rescue that lovely woman who everyone thinks just needs humoring because all her life she's never had to be anything but honest and good. And she *does* have a lovely smile. . . Ah hell—heck—her teeth are false, aren't they?

