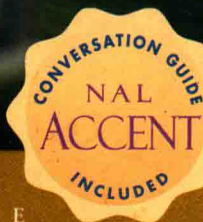
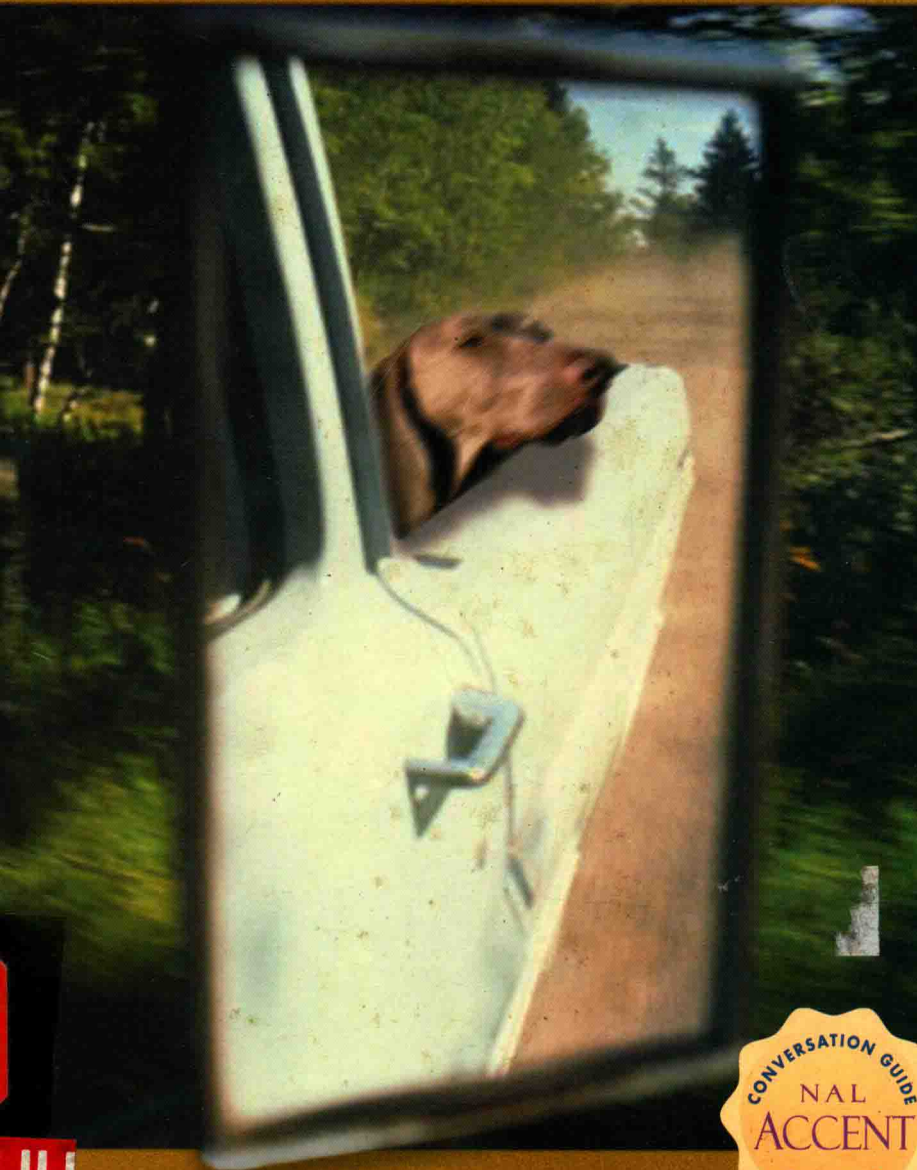


GOOD NIGHT, HENRY

JENNIFER OLDS

"A writer with a poet's eye, a philosopher's mind, and a mother's heart."—JO-ANN MAPSON



CTION FOR THE WAY WE LIVE

GOOD NIGHT, HENRY
JENNIFER OLDS

FICTION FOR THE WAY WE LIVE



Written by today's freshest new talents and selected by New American Library, NAL Accent novels touch on subjects close to a woman's heart, from friendship to family to finding our place in the world. The Conversation Guides included in each book are intended to enrich the individual reading experience, as well as encourage us to explore these topics together—because books, and life, are meant for sharing.

Visit us online at www.penguin.com.

NAL Accent

Published by New American Library, a division of

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto,

Ontario M4V 3B2, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,

Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,

Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,

Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by NAL Accent, an imprint of New American Library,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Printing, July 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright © Jennifer Olds, 2005

Conversation Guide copyright © Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2005

All rights reserved

Grateful acknowledgment is made for use of the following:

Lyrics from "When Those Tears . . ." and "Red Light" by Jeffrey J. Olds,
copyright © dinobugmusic., are used by permission of Jeffrey J. Olds



FICTION FOR THE WAY WE LIVE

REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Olds, Jennifer.

Good night, Henry / Jennifer Olds.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-451-21518-4 (trade pbk.)

1. Women farmers—Fiction. 2. Brothers and sisters—Fiction. 3. Mothers and sons—Fiction. 4. Separated people—Fiction. 5. Missing persons—Fiction. 6. Horse farms—Fiction.

7. California—Fiction. 8. Boys—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3565.L337G66 2005

813'.54—dc22

2004024978

Set in Stempel Schneidler

Designed by Elke Sigal

Printed in the United States of America

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party Web sites or their content.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

PART I

Too many secrets since you've gone away,
I feel like I've got a foot in the grave,
And I'm a mile away from a collision with my heart.

—*"When Those Tears . . ."*

Words and music by Jeffrey J. Olds

I wasn't going to sing you this one, baby.
I was going to fold it into a fish,
tear it some gills to breathe with
and swim it over the wild, cold sea to your door.

—*"Going Back (Can't Do It)"*

Jennifer Olds

CHAPTER 1

THE MAN WHO HUNG THE MOON

It is like this, Henry. I am walking our sister out to the car, her son skipping ahead of us. Boydie is a child who attracts light, all light; even the moon makes a distraction of his pale silvery hair. "We're leaving you, Auntie Mel," he shouts, "leaving, leaving, leaving."

"He's four," says Belinda.

This kind of love is easy, Henry, sure as gravity.

"Good-bye," Boydie singsongs in his shrill, piercing voice. "Good-bye, good riddance, and so long, sucker."

"God, Boydie," Belinda mutters as she buckles him into the car seat placed in the backseat of her three-year-old Volvo wagon. "Must you?"

It is a rhetorical question. Boydie, however, informs her quite seriously that he must, he absolutely must say so long, sucker because Jamal, who is his new best friend, says so long, sucker all the time. He rolls his eyes to indicate his disgust for us, the twins, the older generation of mom-type people. Belinda cuts him off before he can shift into full descriptive mode, a process that once started can only be stopped by narcoleptic napping or frenzied eating. "We'll talk about this on

the way home," she says, and closes the door on his protesting yell.

I laugh. "You look long-suffering. Maybe you should have several more children."

She slaps me lightly on the arm. "One child is quite enough, Mel, quite enough."

We lean against the car, which rocks madly as Boydie pitches a force-10 fit. Behind us, the two-story Victorian house stands solid, its wraparound porch a clutter of preteen sports gear and informal groupings of comfortable wooden chairs. The austere gray of the wooden clapboard and the bright white gingerbread trim is gentled by soft squares of light falling away from each window, making patterns on the lawn and driveway. The drive, which is about a quarter of a mile in length, bumps along in sensible pea gravel, bordered on each side by white wooden fences enhanced by chain-link to keep the horses in the pasture. Impatiens and sweet william perfume the El Dorado air.

Nestled in the California foothills halfway between Los Angeles and Palm Springs, El Dorado is an anomaly of rural and urban living. Spread over forty square miles, it can be effectively quartered into parcels of industry (northwest), urban community living (southwest), agriculture (northeast) and the in-between agri-urban area in the southeast sector. On the edge of the agri-urban area and the town proper is a minimum-security prison complete with helicopters, electrical fences, and guard towers. The northeast is an agricultural preserve, home to horse ranches, dairies, and open farmland owned by the first families to settle in the area. This is where my sons and I live. El Dorado's gold is not in nugget form, nor does it have anything to do with the mythical gilded king in the Amazonian city of Manoa. El Dorado's wealth lies in its

rich soil, pleasant climate, and the beauty of its low hills and undulating fields.

The Brown family settled in the agri-urban area, purchasing a one-acre ranch just below the agricultural preserve. Residents of these miniature urban farms have just enough land and permission from the planning councils to keep livestock (a maximum of four large livestock, such as horses or cows, and up to six dogs) and grow produce for their own consumption. The houses are far enough from each other to ensure a pleasant privacy, but close enough to allow a sense of unified neighborliness.

Poppa, a widower, still lives in the same house that he and Mom shared during their whole married life, a sturdy Spanish ranch house on Hidalgo Street. It was there I learned to love horses: Mom always kept a pretty Arabian or two for trail riding and the occasional horse show. To the immediate west of the agri-urban area lies the town proper: smaller homes on smaller lots, schools, community center, and city hall. El Dorado has two main grocery stores, a movie theater, several eating establishments, and assorted fast food restaurants. Manufacturing, industry, and shopping malls are just to the north, including the El Dorado Citrus Plant, a telephone and cable company, a feed and grain manufacturer, and numerous other smaller concerns. Henry, Bel, and I grew up on the edges of the preserve, racing through the land on horseback or careening down the long country roads on bicycles.

"I love it here," says Bel after a comfortable silence, "but I must get the little man home." She tilts her head back to look at the stars that seem to disappear as she approaches home, outshined by the fluorescent glow of El Dorado's city lights. "Where's Walt?"

Walter Beech, who grew up in the neighboring city of

Vallejo, is my steady date, and has been for the past three years. Although our paths brushed several times during our childhood and teens, we didn't meet formally until we were grown. "Working a double shift. Tonight he's training a couple of new engineers in the switch room."

"El Dorado Telephone Company's finest is overscheduled again. Is he the only electrical engineer there?"

"Nope. But he's the only one they trust to train employees."

"His name should be Stalwart instead of Walt."

"I'll be sure to tell him. Would the abbreviation be Wart? The boys already call him Walrus—don't encourage them."

"Walrus," she repeats, giggling. "Bet he *loves* that."

Inside the car, Boydie is kicking the driver's seat with enthusiasm, still exploring the linguistic delight of shrieking "so long, sucker" over and over and over.

"Sheesh. I've gotta go. Thanks for watching Boydie." She walks around the car to the driver's seat. "I'm sorry he cried so long."

Boydie is experiencing a delayed separation anxiety, the one that usually sets in at two years of age. Quick to walk, quick to speak, he suddenly cannot stand to have his mother out of his sight. Bel, who had attended a much-needed yoga destressing session at the community center, is frazzled almost beyond endurance. Once Boydie had realized she was actually going to abandon him to the ministrations of the dreaded Auntie Mel, he began a thirty-minute litany of glass-bending shrieks so loud they frightened the horses, who are more than three hundred feet from the house. The memory makes me grimace. "What's twenty-eight minutes and thirty seconds between sisters?"

We laugh.

She leaves. I can hear the television roaring inside the house. My sons are watching a PBS documentary called *Animals of Africa*. Later, they will cry for the lovely antelope devoured by lions. For now, I stand outside and watch Bel's taillights disappear onto the main highway back into town. I savor this pure moment, suck in the El Dorado air, the moist dairy smell of manure and old milk. Home. The moon is a flash of brilliance against the cupped dark hand of the sky. I say "Walt" so low that it is a vibration, a promise, then I flap my hand at the sky and wish you good night, Henry. Sleep tight, wherever you are.

At eight o'clock, I put the boys to bed and read them a chapter from *The House at Pooh Corner*, which has never failed to soothe. Not tonight. We give in and cry about the antelope and the lions.

"It was evil," sniffs ten-year-old Archie, "evil and cruel."

I am helpless before him. "The lions would die if they didn't eat."

"But why did they have to eat the pretty antelope?" howls Theo, who is nine.

Everyone cries again. There is no consoling them, but eventually their breaths lengthen and they sleep. I bend down to each child, kissing Archie's forehead, Theo's cheek. I kiss Theo's stump, too, because I think it needs more love.

"Why do I have to have a stinking stump?" Theo asked when he was four.

"Because you are so strong," I told him.

"No," he said, flapping his stump, the arm that ended just above where his elbow should be. "I'm out of balance all the time. I want a new arm."

I was sitting on the front porch, stripping corn ears. It was late July. Tucker, my absent husband, had been gone for so

long that the hurt had evolved to a weary shrug. "If I could, I'd give you perfect arms, honey, but I can't. We all have what God gave us."

"Archie has two long arms," he observed, white-blond hair flopping down over his forehead.

I couldn't tell him that Archie did not have Theo's stunning good looks, that Archie was cursed with uneven features and far too much sensitivity. I held out my arms, hoping he would bury himself against me and let me absorb his angry pain.

"So do you." Theo stared at my arms with absolute, wretched loathing. "God sucks," he said, then spun and ran away, a hoarse cry winging out of him. My hands fluttered in midair, reaching for nothing. I recognized the sound Theo had made. It was the sound of his heart cracking in two. My hands slowly lowered. I reached into the bag of corn, pulled out a new ear, and grabbed the yellow silk, fine as Theo's hair. When I ripped it down to expose the golden corn, three fat green corn worms tumbled down my arm to the ground. I couldn't even scream, the lump in my throat was that big. I squashed each worm with my bare feet, rubbed them into the dirt until they were less than a paste, wished I could get rid of all of my problems that easily.

Walt calls while I am still full of the children and the moon.

"Hey, Mel Brown," he says. His voice is a pleasant rumble, a blur. He sounds like early morning just before coffee. He sounds like himself, Walt Beech. I ask him if he has seen the moon and he says no, he hasn't been outside. Do look, I tell him. It's magic.

"Is it?"

"Yeah." I pause. "I think you hung it there."

I put down the receiver then, Henry, because that is as close as I can come to saying how I feel. That's it. Of all the things that were damaged in my other life, the silence is what remains. Walt is still talking when I hang up. I bumble outside again and stare at the moon. The shadows on its surface shift into a pattern shaped like a man's left hand, Walt's hand. Everything about Walt seems solid. Knowing that, I stay a while, watch a white owl unfurl from the pine and flap away. I steady myself on the front porch rail and think that something is waking up inside me, something small and insistent. Even the dreams have dimmed like sun-bleached curtains swaying in an old summer breeze, the breeze that came up from the east before you went into the water. Before all that, Henry, when the future hung soft and low ahead of us, soaring like the sound of a mouth harp hooting in the night.

CHAPTER 2

HOW I GOT MY BROTHER'S MIDDLE NAME

"W

hat color is this?" Belinda holds up a tiny bottle of fingernail polish. She is lying on her stomach on my new hand-tufted rug, a riotous mosaic of blues and reds. Small brown and gray horses are woven in and among standing warriors and huge, out-of-place flowers and vines. First seen through the window of the antique shop next to the feed store, the rug seemed to whisper my name each time I passed, until yesterday, when I bought it.

"Ice blue. It matches my new varicose vein—this one"—I stretch out my leg and wave freshly painted toes in her face—"right here on the ankle."

She grabs my foot, intently surveys my ankles and calves. We are vigilant to all signs of aging, we two—both involved with younger men. She is married to hers, Boyd, the concrete-pouring man, staid and balding.

"Actually, the vein is kind of purplish-green," she says. "Use the self-tanning spray. It'll look better when your legs are dark."

I yank my foot back, twist to look at the offending vein. "You mean the stuff that streaks and turns lemon yellow on me and glowing bronze on you? I think not, Smelly Belly."

"Snake." She swats me with her magazine.

"Freak of nature."

"Freak of freaks."

I hang my head down, dark red hair nearly touching the floor. "See any rabbits?" That is the twin code for gray hairs.

With her fingers, she parts my hair near the base of the skull. "Here?"

"Yep. I read an article that says gray hair often sprouts around old scars."

"Is this where your skull was fractured?"

"Sure is. Both times."

Bel yawns, sinks back to the rug. "You're imagining things."

"I'm sure as hell not imagining these veins." At thirty-two, I am noticing little differences in my body. It takes longer to run two miles, I can't post the trot without feeling it for the first couple of laps, and my breasts can no longer be referred to as perky. She doesn't answer, but flips through her magazine again. A light snore escapes Boydie, sleeping precariously in the fat leather wing chair. He is upside down, head dangling over the seat's edge. I shove the ottoman closer with my heel. Without looking, Bel gently lifts Boydie's head and settles the ottoman beneath it. Whizzer, my cat and companion, lies luxuriously next to him, flat on his back with all four paws waving stupidly in the air. They doze on, belly up to the world. I remove the cotton from between my toes and stand gingerly.

"Where are you going?"

"I need a cup of tea."

"Me, too."

I totter into the kitchen, careful not to stub my toes on the hardwood floor. Ice blue polish doesn't go well with pale pine floorboards. I pour water into the kettle and set the burner to

high, mesmerized by the leaping blue flames. Overwhelmed with loneliness, I ache for Archie and Theo to barrel through the French doors screaming "Did not!" and "Did so!" and "Ouch, I'm telling!" I wrap my arms around myself, hanging on.

The boys are with their father for the weekend, doing San Diego in style. They are headquartered at the Hotel del Coronado in a sixth-floor suite overlooking the ocean. It is an experiment, the first time Tucker has been alone with the boys since his recent reentry into their lives. Archie has called twice, swearing with all his ten-year-old fervor that Tucker is a jerk, a putz, a weirdo. Tucker actually sits there with Theo, Arch complained, watching *Bambi* and crying, for crying out loud.

"It's OK," I told him. "Tucker isn't going to go off and leave you in San Diego. He's trying to get to know you. Try and think of him as a sort of uncle, like Uncle Boyd."

"Uncle Boyd's a dick."

"Archie, stop. You know the rules."

"Yeah, yeah. Every swear word is a day without PlayStation."

"Right."

"Mommy?" His voice is very small. "I miss you."

"God, Arch. I miss you, too."

Two months ago, Tucker Twist-Black limped back into our lives and turned them inside out.

Walt and I were settled deep in the comfort of the family room sofas, a late-afternoon baseball game blaring from the television. I was hemming a pair of Archie's shorts, Walt was ruffling happily through the sports pages, and Theo was nap-

ping contentedly across the room. Engrossed in the game, neither one of us heard the car approach, the passenger step out, or his tentative footsteps as he made his way across the gravel and up the front porch steps. The knock at the screen door, which was just behind us, startled us completely. Walt moved swiftly to his feet, and I jammed the needle into my left thumb.

"Who are you?" Walt's voice was an ominous rumble through the screen door. I dropped the shorts, sucking on my bloody thumb and swearing under my breath.

"I want Mel," said the intruder. "I need to see Mel."

It was Tucker. I hadn't seen him in nine years, although his support checks arrived regularly on the first of the month.

"She might not want to see you," said Walt.

"It's none of your business."

Walt bristled. "Mel will always be my business."

Just then, Arch careened around the corner of the room with his basketball under his arm and shoved by both men. "Jeez, do you have to hog the doorway, Walrus?" As he cleared the doorframe, he glanced at Tucker and started to dribble the basketball down the walk, whistling. He paused midstep. The ball bounced away to die in the grass. He stiffened, shoulders back. "What are *you* doing here?"

Tucker, who had lit up like a Christmas bulb at the sight of his eldest son, recoiled from the bitterness in Arch's voice. "Hey, Archie," he said softly, taking a half-step toward him. "It's me, Tucker."

Archie was tuned to Tucker's voice like a border collie at a sheep trial. "Go to hell, Tucker," he sneered, stooping for the basketball. "You probably only know who I am because I don't have a stump."

He resumed dribbling with hard, angry pumps, rocking up

on his toes to sight the basket and let the ball fly. Swish. He raced down to rebound, set, and fire a fadeaway jumper at the hoop. Swish.

"Please let me come in," whispered an anguished Tucker.

"These boys are like glass in earthquake country," Walt said coldly. "One good shake and they'll shatter."

"I'm their father."

"Biologically." Walt did not take his hand from the door.

"Well, who the hell are you?"

"I taught this one"—he nodded at Archie, who was angrily heaving shot after shot from the three-point line—"how to do long division and that one"—he jerked his head at Theo sprawled sleeping on the couch—"how to tie his shoes with one hand." Walt measured Tucker through the screen door, noting his height, his pallor, the cane he was leaning on. "I don't much like what you taught them."

Tucker stood there, stunned.

"You taught 'em how to hurt," he said. "Mel, do you want him in this house?"

"No," I muttered. "Maybe," I said, and "Damn you, Tucker, damn you to hell."

Last year, Archie was stuck indoors for a long, rainy week-end. Theo was spending the night at Bel's. Walt entertained Arch, playing endless rounds of Monopoly, Mille Bornes, Clue, and poker. "Even I have to rest," he told Archie after six hours of games. "I worked all night last night, and I have to do the same tonight. I just can't play anymore."

"That's not fair."

"Life isn't," Walt agreed.

"Then I'll just watch television until my eyes pop out," Arch grumbled.

"I think you've been watching too much *Ren and Stimpy*."