

2002 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Moonstone Winner

A LEAF, A BOWL, AND A PIECE OF JADE

By Joy Robinson



CARA NELSON'S HUSBAND WAS DEAD. THERE WAS no doubt about it. Cara was a nurse, and she knew. The doctor had come when she called, verifying that the lung tissue was almost completely solidified. Rob could not live through the night.

"Do you want an ambulance to take him to the hospital? I'll order one if you like."

"No," Cara said to the doctor who was her friend. "A lot of fuss for no reason. I've taken care of him alone for a year. He may as well die peacefully in his own bed."

Jim Knight looked around, feeling the quiet emptiness of the house. "Is there someone you can call to stay with you?" He asked.

"Yes, there is," Cara said, knowing she would not do that. *I should wake Josie, ask her to come hold my hand while I watch my husband die? I don't think so.*

After the doctor had gone, Cara went to Rob's bedside. She straightened the sheet across his chest. His breathing was barely perceptible. The oxygen canula had slipped to one side. She righted it and readjusted the elastic. She fluffed the pillows under his head. She chose a music tape from the stack on his bedside table and inserted it into the stereo.

Strains of sweet music drifted into the room. His favorite tape. Barbra Streisand's voice began to blend with the jazz instruments Rob loved. *People who need people, are the luckiest people in the world . . .*

Rob had slipped into a coma about half an hour before the doctor came. He did not respond to the doctor's voice or touch. At the sound of the music, his expression changed. Muscles twitched around his mouth. There was movement behind his eyelids.



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The last sense to go is the hearing—one of the important things nurses are taught. Keep your voice calm when caring for terminally ill patients. Don't say anything negative. People have awakened from deep comas and related conversations overheard while they were thought to be dying.

Cara slipped off her shoes and positioned herself on the bed, on top of the covers beside Rob. She did not touch him. She adjusted pillows behind her back. She sat quietly, aware of the music, but not listening. Her mind was ticking off things she would need to do after he took his last breath.

Suddenly—so unexpectedly that Cara's heart leaped and fluttered—Rob sat up. He looked wildly around the room. He stared intently at the foot of the bed. He turned his head toward Cara. There was a stunned look on his face. He lay down. His eyes closed. After a few quavering breaths, it was quite plain that his body no longer housed his spirit.

The oxygen canula began to hiss. Cara reached over and removed it.

So, she thought, *you couldn't accept it. You wouldn't talk about it. You refused to believe that you would die. "I'll beat this," you said. "I'll beat it." Who came for you? Who was it that startled you so? Your mother? She was a sweet soul. It surely wasn't your father—that self-centered, bullying man who taught you so well. He's only been dead twelve years. Not long enough to work his way up to a welcome committee for departing spirits.*

Do you remember, she mentally asked her dead husband, the time Grandma Myrtie came to see me, thirty years after her death?

Myrtie had stood beside the bed one night and waited patiently until Cara awoke. As she slept, Cara sensed someone watching her and opened her eyes. She had expected it to be Missie, the family dog. When Missie wanted to go outside in the night, she stood with her front paws on the bed by Cara's pillow and stared at her until she woke.

But it was not Missie. A short woman in a white dress stood beside the bed. Cara was not afraid. There was a peaceful feeling in the room.

Who is this? What does she want? were the questions that came to mind. Then she recognized the woman she had not

seen for many years. Myrtie, her father's mother. Myrtie did not speak, but through thought transference, she chided her granddaughter for not caring enough about their relationship to get the necessary names, dates, and places recorded so her family sealings could be completed.

You've always questioned your birth. If you had paid more attention to the Spirit, you'd know you were born at the right place, during the right time, into the right line of people. You made a promise. A covenant. A lot of people are depending on you. How long are you going to make everyone wait?

She seemed to know that Cara still carried a grudge about the way Myrtie had treated her as a child.

Cara had told Josie that she would do Myrtie's work when the Spirit moved her. "Not one minute, not one hour, not one year sooner."

As her grandmother stood by the bed, Cara got another message. *It isn't just me you are holding back. There is your grandfather, our children, our parents; we are all links in a chain. Every link must be connected. You are one of the links. Like it or not, you can't be saved without me.*

Cara blinked, and Myrtie was gone. She felt properly chastised and certainly moved by the Spirit. Until the next day. Negative feelings about her grandmother had accumulated like onion layers since she was nine months old. Daylight put everything back into human perspective. Myrtie could have said she was sorry, could have apologized. But she didn't.

Days stretched into weeks, and then became months, as Cara pondered the vision.

Finally, more than two years later, she finished gathering the information, filled out the sheets, and submitted the names. There was no softening of feelings towards her grandmother. But she had fond memories of Grandpa L.J., and she knew it was true; if her work was not done, there would be a black hole where Myrtie's life had been. No one else was going to do it.

Kneeling at the altar in proxy, Cara was sure she heard Myrtie's quiet laughter.

"God can sort this out," she told Josie, who went with her to do the sealings.

Remember, Rob? I woke you. I wanted to share Grandma Myrtie's visit. You laughed. "Spirit beings do not come to earth. There is no such thing as thought transference. When people die, they are dead as an orange peel. Close your yap about stuff like that. Go back to sleep before I give you something else to think about."

She smiled wryly. *No wonder you were surprised just now. Your scientific mind was shocked down to your socks. Spirit beings do move back and forth between the veil.*

CARA GOT UP and went into the kitchen. The telephone book and her address book were on the counter. She dialed the mortuary and gave information to the voice that answered. She filled a glass with water and waited at the table for them to come. When she heard a vehicle in the driveway, she went to the front door and opened it. She knew one of the men who stood there.

"Hello, Russell," she said. He nodded solemnly. They carried a small, wheeled stretcher with collapsible legs. She walked down the hallway. They followed her into the bedroom. She watched as the men deftly did their business. Lifting Rob onto the stretcher, they zipped him into a dark blue bag. She followed them out of the room, waited as they maneuvered the corner, opened the door, and went down the steps.

She watched from the open door as they slipped the stretcher into the back of the van. Russell handed her a clipboard with a paper on it. He showed her the place where she should sign her name. He gave her the receipt.

Janus, Rob's big tabby cat, stalked regally up to the door. She sat on her haunches and looked at Cara. She turned her head, sniffed the air, watched the men, and made a move toward the open door. Cara closed it quickly, leaving her outside.

Janus's name came about because she was two-faced. She could purr contentedly beside you one minute, and in a split-second unsheathe her claws and pull back her lips, sinking teeth and claws into some part of your anatomy. Cara had scars on the inside of one wrist that she would carry forever. Rob was the only one in the family Janus had not clawed or bitten. He insisted on keeping her despite her primal nature.

Cara returned to the kitchen, sat on a stool, and drew the address book closer. It was time to call the children. Five adult children, each living in a different state.

How much of a shock will it be to them? She wondered. Rob would not allow her to tell the children that his illness was serious. Chemical lung cancer not serious? Cara's lips tightened. He wouldn't believe there was something he could not control.

A FEW DAYS AFTER the oncologist had given his diagnosis, with the prognosis of six months left to live, Rob called their home teacher and made an appointment.

The home teacher was a good man who took his calling seriously and, so far as Cara knew, honored the priesthood that he held. He was their neighbor. They had known him for years.

"Thank you for coming, Cal," Rob said. He shook hands with Cal Hunter and smiled. In thirty-six years, he had not said "please" or "thank you" to Cara, or any of the children.

But he was careful to do that with other people. Most of them probably didn't notice that the smile on his mouth rarely reached his eyes.

After the three of them were settled into chairs in the living room, Rob cleared his throat, began to cough, got out his handkerchief and pressed it against his mouth. The coughing subsided.

"We've had a bit of disquieting news," Rob then said.

You've had a bit of disquieting news, Cara thought.

"Sorry to hear that," Cal said. "How can I help?"

"It's my lungs. We've been going to doctors for several weeks. They've done diagnostic tests. What my personal physician was treating as an allergy all last year turns out to be a rare form of lung cancer."



Rob did not wear jewelry. He was a scientist, a hard-headed realist. Nothing could cause him to believe in charms.

At the word cancer, Cal's eyes widened. He took a deep breath and looked away. He did not make eye contact with either Cara or Rob. He needed time to process the information. Cancer. The word had its own life. It hung in the air.

"Of course," Rob continued, "I refuse to accept a negative verdict. I believe it is possible to overcome cancer the same way people overcome other things. A few years ago, Norman Cousins put his cancer into remission by watching, hour after hour, for a month, all the old comedies he could find; Laurel and Hardy, the Keystone Cops, Charlie Chaplin. He was a writer. He did his own research and discovered that laughter releases healthy endorphins which go to work destroying diseased cells. I may try something like that."

Cara stared at Rob. *First you'd need to develop a sense of humor. You'd have to learn how to laugh. You may not have that much time.*

"The doctors say I have six months. I intend to show them how wrong they are."

"Six months?" Cal was clearly at a loss for words.

"Like something you hear in the movies, or read in a book." Rob said. A coughing spasm began. He got out his handkerchief again. When it was under control, he said: "What I want—what I need—is a priesthood blessing. I'm asking you and Brother Campbell to fast with Cara and me for twenty-four hours; then I'd like you to give me a health blessing."

It was the first Cara had heard of the proposed blessing. *Thank you for confiding in me. Thanks for asking.*

"Well, of course. I'd be honored. I'm sure Brother Campbell will feel the same way. I'll drop in and speak with him on my way home." He stood up and prepared to leave. He put out his hand and gripped Rob's hand tightly. "I don't know what to say. But if there is anything I can do, anything at all, please call me."

The priesthood blessing held out hope. Rob clung to that. He began every day with prayer and insisted that Cara kneel with him, a thing they had not usually done together. He promised God that he would research his genealogy (part of the blessing). He would serve a mission when he retired (another part of the blessing). He remembered Ezra Taft Benson's promises that great personal power comes to those who daily read the Book of Mormon. He began studying the book each morning.

He exercised faithfully every day, riding a bicycle, pumping iron, trying to rebuild his lungs. He researched diets that promised cures for cancer. Cara shopped and cooked and prepared the various foods. They went to health food stores and

bought strange-looking roots and herbs from the Orient, bark from Brazil, elixir from Greece, powder from Egypt.

Some of the concoctions caused him to gag and vomit. After a few months, Cara convinced him to stop experimenting with foreign food supplements.

"Let's concentrate on high-protein drinks four times a day. Your body cannot make a miracle out of what it rejects. Besides, vomiting is hard on your stomach and can burn the lining of the esophagus."

For a while, the plan seemed to work. He began gaining weight. He felt stronger.

A Buddhist colleague from China with whom he corresponded sent a jade pendant on a thick, red silk cord. A lotus blossom was delicately carved into the fine piece of jade.

"Put on immediately," the friend wrote. "Do not take off. Jade is good-luck gem. Red cord mean long life. Lotus blossom bring peace. Must get bamboo plant for growing inside house. Touch leaf of bamboo each day. Is good-luck plant."

Cara read the card. She smiled. Rob did not wear jewelry. He was a scientist, a hard-headed realist. Nothing could cause him to believe in charms.

That night, when he was getting ready for bed, Cara was surprised to see the red cord around his neck. She pretended not to notice and never mentioned it.

A few days later, he brought home three slender stalks of bamboo planted in a dark-gold oriental bowl. The bowl was filled with brightly colored, pea-sized rocks. Rob came into the study where Cara was opening mail and sorting medical bills. He placed the plant on the window sill above the desk.

In answer to Cara's quizzical look, he said: "I was looking at spring flowers and there it was. I liked the look of the plants, the vase, and the rocks. Tom says they only need light and water."

Tom Hansen was a friend who owned a large gardening supply store. He had called earlier to tell Cara that some bamboo plants Rob asked about had just been delivered from San Francisco.

So this dying business has turned into game playing. We are not going to discuss the things that should be talked about. We are going to clutch at straws and pretend that what is happening is not happening.

Cara picked up the bowl and held it in the palm of her hand. There was a nice feel to it. She fingered the satin-smooth reeds and touched the pale green leaves.

"Yes," Cara said. "It's well done. Do you remember the young woman we saw in China at the Buddhist temple, kneeling in front of the fertility goddess? She had bamboo

stalks.” The young woman had brought gifts for the goddess: tangerines and pink and white lotus blossoms, in addition to small leafy stalks of bamboo. She sought a blessing. Cara remembered the tears on the woman’s cheeks, and how humbly she offered up the plate that held the gifts.

“I have no memory of that. Orientals have many child-like, superstitious beliefs,” said Rob, who was wearing a jade pendant on a red cord. Avoiding her eyes, he left the room. Cara returned the “good-luck” plant to the window sill.

Ah yes. Occidentals. We are the ones who understand God’s nature. We too are only human, but out of pride, we hide humility and deny vulnerability.

A few days later, Rob sought her out. He was holding the Book of Mormon.

“I’ve been reading in Alma where he writes about the mighty change that came over him when he realized the magnitude of his sins against God and the Church.”

He sat down, marked his place, and closed the book. He rubbed the back of his neck. He looked out the window.

Hard for priesthood-holding Alpha male to speak with lowly wife about weighty spiritual matters?

Cara gave him no help. She had been in this place before with the positions reversed. How many times had she come to him and said: “I’ve been reading something, and I wonder”—holding out her cup—hoping for understanding. Only to be met with a derisive scholarly lecture—“How long have you been a member of the Church and you don’t know that? Keep looking. That’s how you learn.”

Nervously, he chewed his upper lip. Warily, Cara waited.

“This mighty change? I wonder. Do you have an understanding of it?”

He was asking her for spiritual help? She was stunned. And fearful. She was silent.

She and Rob could not do serious conversation. Usually they held differing points of view. Angry words and demeaning confrontations were often the result.

Shall I open myself up? She hesitated.

“What are you, deaf, dumb, and stupid?” The rage begins. “You have no opinion about this simple question?” He stands up, comes close, spits out the words. His face reddens. His eyes protrude and become glittering marbles.

So there it is. Just as she feared. Once she would have quivered and shook, her heart fluttering almost beyond control. But there is a protective covering now. Her heart beats steadily on. She takes a deep breath. Her voice is calm.

“It’s not a simple question, Rob. Alma writes about it, but scriptures show that the mighty change came to a lot of people—to Abraham before he offered up Isaac, and to Jacob when he wrestled all night with an angel. It came to Christ in Gethsemane; to Enos kneeling in the forest; to Moroni, wandering alone in the world waiting to die; to Joseph in Liberty Jail, wondering where God’s hiding place is.”

“Cut to the chase, if you know. What is the mighty change? How does it come about? If it happens, how do we know? What is it about? Do you have an answer for that, Mrs. Mighty Mouth?”

“It’s about honesty, approaching God with total honesty; laying what we are on the altar, all that is bad, all that is good, all that we wish we were—and are not. We lay our sins there and accept the Savior’s blood sacrifice for them.

“We must be able to say truthfully, ‘Here I am. Forgive me. Use me. Help me. Teach me how to love those I don’t like, to forgive those who persecute me.’ If we can do that—and mean it—God can bring about the mighty change. And we’ll know.”

Silence falls between them. Outside sounds are amplified. Robins chatter noisily in the cherry tree outside the kitchen window. Cara knows Janus is prowling, tail twitching, beneath the tree, frightening the birds.

Damn cat.

Rob sat down. “Could you and I do that?”

“Do what?”

“Are you that obtuse? What have we been talking about? Change of heart! Change of heart! Could you and I do that?”

Cara shook her head. “Christ shed his drops of blood alone. Enos was alone in the forest. Moroni was alone in the world. Alma met God’s angel alone. Pentecost may happen in a crowd, but the mighty change of heart that prepares us to meet God comes quietly when we’re alone. It’s a lonely quest. And we pay a price for it. It’s not something two people can do together.”

“I should have known, *Helpmeet*.” His voice trembled with anger. “You don’t know the meaning of the word.” He stood up, shouldered his portable oxygen tank, went into the study, and slammed the door.

Cara was contrite. *Sorry, Father. I messed that up. But how can I help him? He has no respect for my opinion. There’s too much garbage between us. He needs priesthood counsel—if only his pride would allow him to ask.*

Once she would have followed after him—prostitution of self for the good of the family, offering whatever it took to quiet the storm, to smooth troubled waters.

Not now. The family is gone. The oil cruse is empty.

She went downstairs. Work! An antidote for emotional poison. She tackled the washing and ironing. Then she went out and began mowing the lawn.

During the weeks that followed, she knew Rob was wrestling with his dilemma. She knew he was spending time on his knees seeking answers. Daily she saw red knuckle marks imprinted on his forehead. She asked no questions. She waited for signs of the changed heart.

His prayers became more humble. One night he said, “Help me to be better than I am.” He began to treat her more kindly. But the day never came when he said “please” or “thank you.” The day never came when he expressed repentance, or regret, to her.

CARA TOOK DOWN the telephone receiver and began calling her children, the oldest one first. When she had spoken with the last one, she hung up the telephone and went back to the bedroom.

She removed the candlewick spread from the bed, stripped off the sheets and mattress cover, shook pillows out of cases,



“Are you that obtuse? . . . Change of heart! Change of heart! Could you and I do that?”

gathered towels from the bathrooms. Arms loaded, she walked downstairs to the laundry room. She opened the washer, stuffed things inside, added soap, set the controls, and pushed the button that would begin the cleansing process.

She went back upstairs, gathered clean linen, and began re-making the bed. Without thinking, she tightly tucked the sheets, made hospital corners, slipped on fresh-smelling pillow cases, flipped on the bedspread and smoothed it into place.

As she worked, she thought about the weeping and wailing that was expected of new widows. There were Regulations, Protocol, Emily Post, Society, Common Decency to be considered. But thirty-six years of clever acupuncture along exposed nerve endings had done its job. No one would believe what she really felt. Except Josie.

A poem she had written after a time of particular terror came to mind:

*Cruel
Memories pushed down
Into deep pools
Rise to the surface
Recreate pain
Are tied with rocks
And submerged
Again!*

She continued her methodical work. She wheeled the large oxygen tank with its yards of serpentine tubing into the utility closet and closed the door. She hung clean towels in both bathrooms, washed glasses and soap dishes, and put new bars of soap in each dish.

When every trace of Rob's illness was gone, she opened a window. The October air was cold—clean and crisp—no hint of autumnal death and decay. She inhaled deeply. The rising sun was coloring clouds above the Wasatch mountains.

The birth of a new day for each of us. Me here. You, wherever you are.

She left the room, went into the study, and called Josie, her sister/friend who could be depended on to help deal with life's rawest reality. Old wisdom was in her. Ready-made platitudes did not trip off Josie's tongue.

SHE AND JOSIE had been friends for thirty-two years. Both were born in the South; Josie in Texas, Cara in Missouri. Except for a few peculiarities—Cara's ma-

ternal great-grandmother smoked a cob pipe and made serious life predictions from dreams and visions; Josie's rode horses, roped calves, and read tea leaves—their families, extending backwards for a hundred years, were run-of-the-mill, dyed-in-the-wool Southern Baptists, each line with a fair sprinkling of Bible-thumping ministers.

As adults, at the same time in different places, she and Josie had joined the Church and received sacred ordinances that sealed them to their husbands and families eternally. At the time of their conversion, neither woman realized that their husbands, both fourth-generation Mormons, believed without a doubt that they held a clear mandate to rule over wives and children.

The two women believed they were premortal friends. They bonded the day they met, and the bond held. When bad things happened to either of them, they walked the halls of hell together, until the one with the problem could draw clean breaths of untormented air.

Josie's voice comes into the receiver. Cara tries to speak and finds that she is mute.

“Hello?” Josie's voice again.

“It's me.” Cara manages a cracked whisper. “Umm. Rob. He has. Umm.”

“I'm on my way,” Josie says. The line goes dead.

Cara stayed where she was, curled into a corner of the couch. The door was unlocked. Josie could just walk in. She lived only a few miles away. Cara listened for the sound of her car, heard it, and waited for Josie to come inside.

What she heard was the outside door opening and closing. She heard muttering, the sound of cupboard doors opening in the kitchen, the front door opening and closing again. Water running. Cara was numbly curious. But she did not move.

Josie appears; tall, slender, and pretty; her naturally curly hair, once a bright red-gold that glistened in the sunlight, is now auburn without a trace of gray. (She often says it is a pure wonder it hasn't turned white from dealing with the hazardous conditions of life.) Josie is fifty-eight, two years older than Cara.

“Janus left you a love offering on the door mat—a dead robin. Its neck was broken. It was still warm. It was lying on its back with its feet in the air and its tongue hanging out.”

A natural-born mimic, Josie illustrates.

Cara can't help laughing. “Birds don't have tongues.”

"Well, if they did, that's how it would have looked. I gave it a decent burial. I put it in a plastic bag and threw it in the outside garbage bin."

"That cat is evil."

"It's the nature of cats. She's disturbed. Cats have a sense about death."

"I have scars to prove her evilness. I needed stitches and shots." Cara turned her hand over to show the three long white lines on her wrist.

Josie sat down on the couch and took Cara's hand in hers. "A lot of us bear scars having to do with evil. Some aren't so obvious. Do you want to talk?"

Cara began relating the last hours of Rob's life, finishing with how startled she had been when out of a coma, Rob sat straight up in bed staring at someone, or something, that she could not see.

"Like the time Grandma Myrtie came, which he refused to believe. Do you suppose he knows the difference between a live spirit and a dead orange peel now?"

They laugh. Their laughter slides into silence. Then, heads bent together, they begin to weep and murmur unwritten primeval woman-soft comforting sounds for hurt anger sorrow, for mysteries unknown, and known things not understood. When their hearts are cleansed, and their tears are spent, with limp tissues scattered around them like wilted flowers, they wipe their eyes.

"Let's go for a walk," Josie says, "before the phone starts ringing."

Outside, without a word, they head downhill towards the cemetery two miles away, their favorite sanctuary. It is a secluded place surrounded by ages-old oaks, poplars, and pines. The walkways are wide. There is seldom anyone around.

On their visits, they stop beside three graves. Each of them has a grandchild buried there, and Josie's son, who took his own life. They pull weeds, clean around the headstones, and sit beside one of the graves to rest and talk.

"What if . . . ?" they sometimes say. It is fruitless to wonder, and they know it. But still they sometimes look at each other and say, "What if?"

THE NEXT DAY, Cara's children begin to arrive. Some with their own children. The bedrooms are full, and there are sleeping bags in the family room. There are tears. There is laughter. The good times are remembered. Painful memories are skillfully skirted.

When the funeral and burial are over, Cara can stop saying: "Yes, he was a good man. Yes, we will miss him. Yes, the children will be a comfort."

In their far away places, with their own lives to live.

"Yes, he did endure to the end."

What choice did he have? What choice do any of us have? Hope and endurance.

She can stop smiling. Stop comforting. Stop covering her own feelings.

The house is empty. Everyone has returned to the separate lives they are making. She will hear from them. But she is no

longer their center; she is at the periphery now, the outer edge of a sphere that goes round and round. She has adjusted to this painful fact.

She moves through the house, straightening, putting things right but missing deeply the vibrancy recently there—the touch of her children's hands, the feel of their strong, young arms holding her close, the sound of their voices. From the walls, she hears faint echoes, the innocent, joyous laughter of grandchildren who do not yet understand death.

She picks up a stray Raggedy Ann doll, smiles, presses it to her breast, feels the spirit of the child who last held it. Reluctant to let it go, she carries it into the study and puts it on the couch. She rights its apron and straightens the calico skirt. Its button eyes mock her with their emptiness.

She sits down at the desk. A large stack of mail needs attention. She picks up the letter opener, looks at it, lays it aside. She is not ready for that.

She notices a white envelope with the name of the mortuary stamped in black. She opens it.

The jade pendant on the red silk cord is inside.

Oh, yes. I forgot to remove it before calling the mortuary.

She lifts it out, slides the cord through her fingers, traces the delicate carving of the lotus blossom. She sighs deeply, tremulously, and slips the cord over her head. The pendant rests between her breasts, cool at first and then warm.

Peace. Bring me peace. I am not concerned with long life.

She lifts the golden bowl of slender bamboo reeds from the window sill. The stalks are taller now. There are more leaves. One by one she runs the long, pointed leaves between her fingers.

Good luck. Bring me good luck.

Reminded again of the Chinese woman kneeling beseechingly before the fertility goddess, Cara lifts the bowl and holds it out—an offering toward her own God. She closes her eyes. Tears gather and spill over.

Please, Father. I need healing. Heal my spirit. Take away the bitterness. Give me back the heart I once had that was tender as these leaves are tender; but let it be a little tough as the stalks are tough. The world is a scary place, and I will be alone in it.

Cara opens her eyes and looks out the window. Leaves are changing color, falling from the trees. A peaceful presence enters the room. She turns, expecting to see Josie, though she did not hear her come into the house. No one is there.

A feeling of love gathers and surrounds her. Cara breathes deeply, drawing the love inside. No words are spoken, but there is an impression of words. *I'm sorry. So very sorry. For you and for the children. I couldn't let go of the anger. I could not get past myself. I could not open my heart. I never found the love. I tried. But I never knew its power until now. Now it is too late. Please, please, try to forgive me.*

Slowly the presence withdraws. She feels bereft. She sits alone wearing the jade pendant, holding the golden bowl. Nothing in the room has changed except that a bamboo leaf is lying on the desk.

Green bamboo reeds do not drop their leaves.

Good luck.

