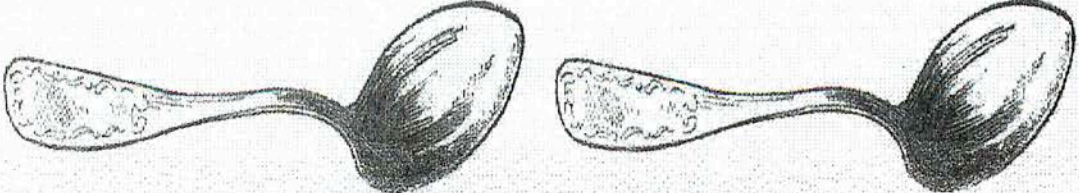
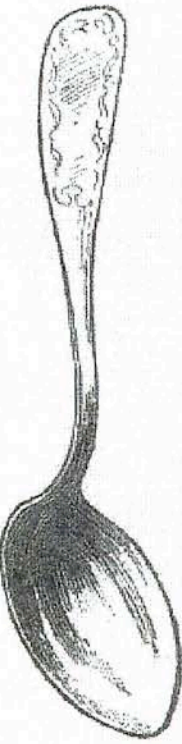
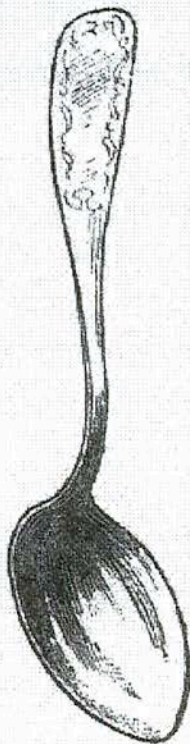


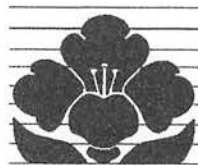
A SPOON
SHAPED LIKE A
HEART



A Spoon Shaped Like a Heart

by

Andrew L. Coffey



The Orchid Press

Albany, Boston

2000



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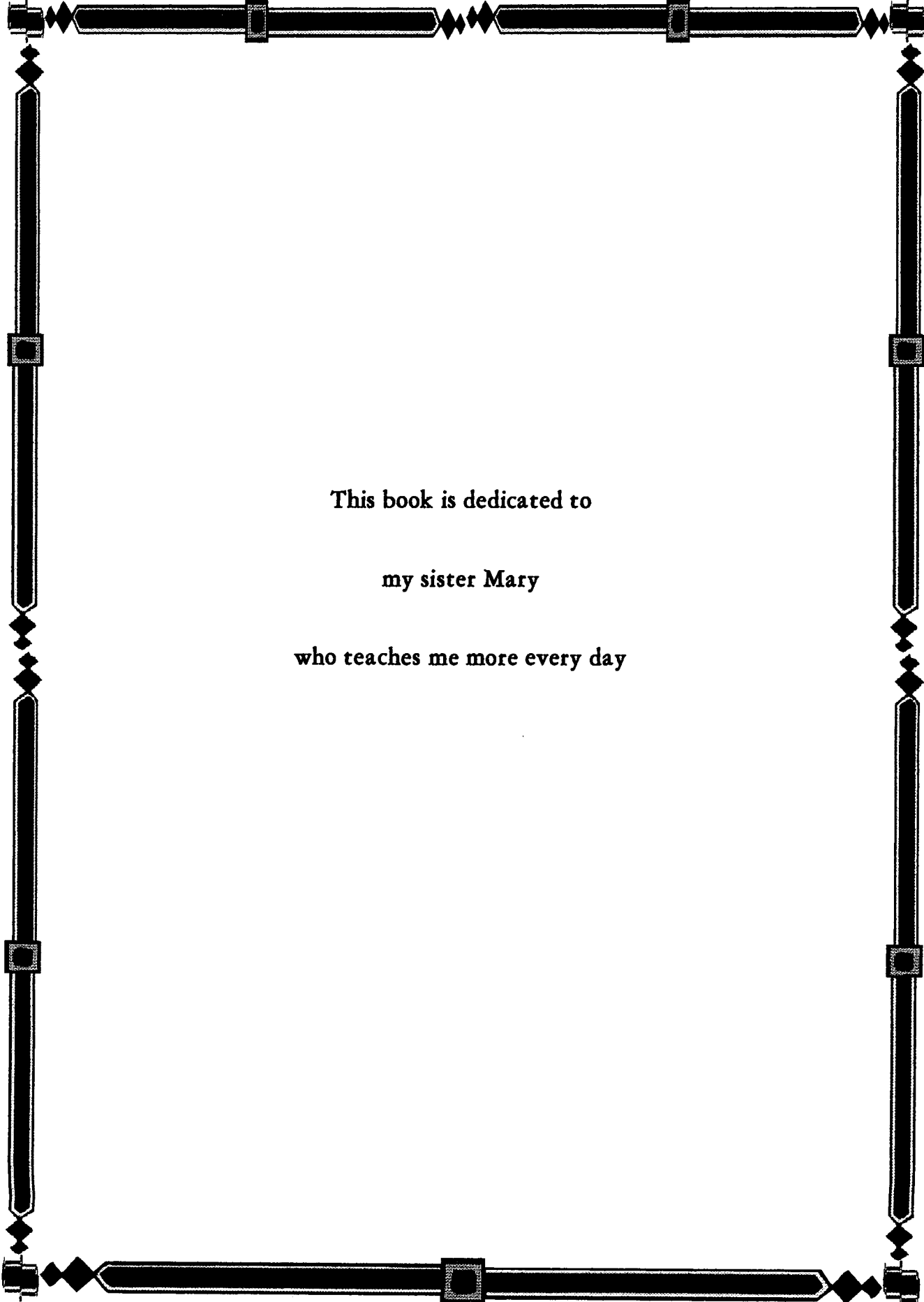
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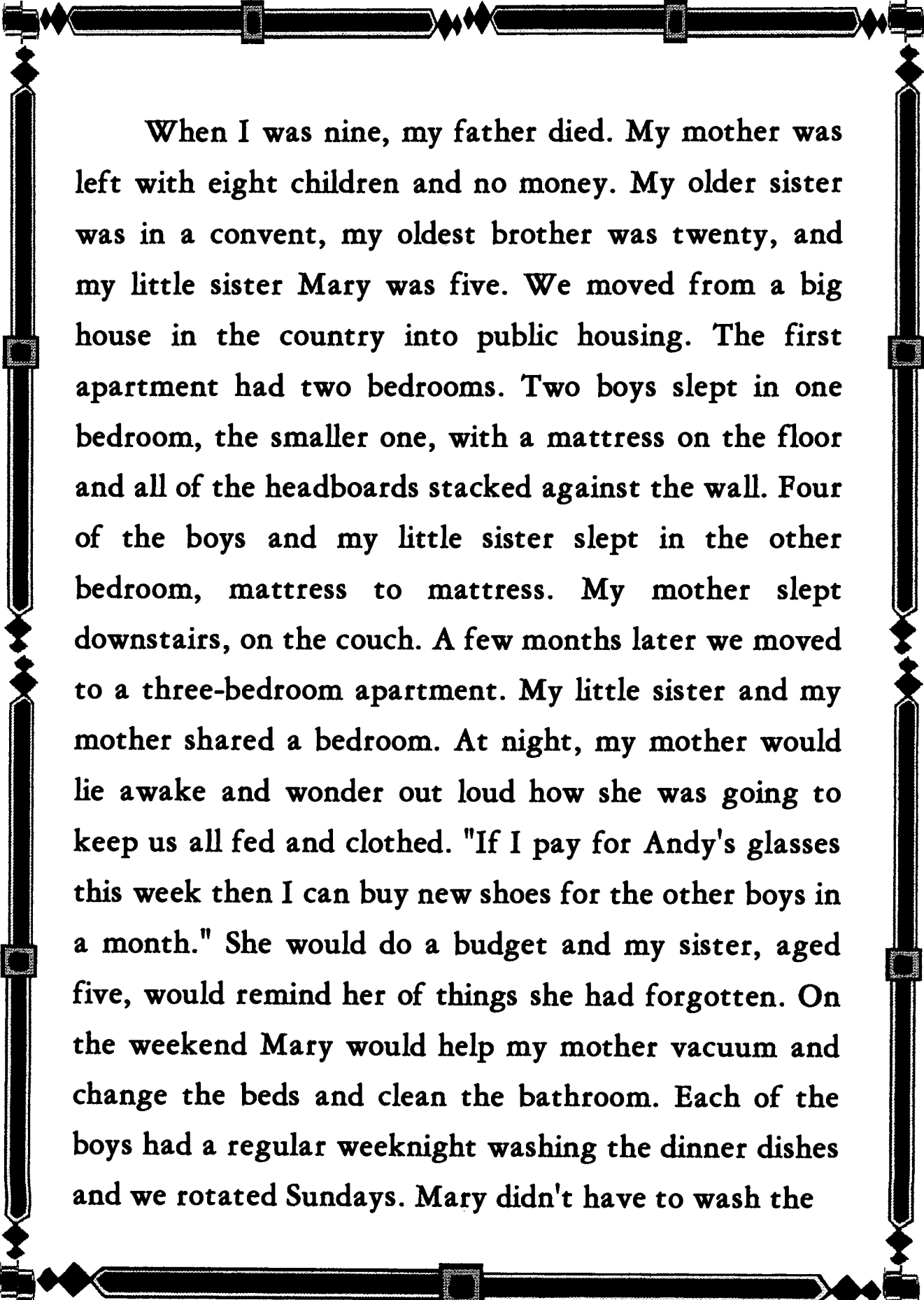
Albany, New York



This book is dedicated to

my sister Mary

who teaches me more every day



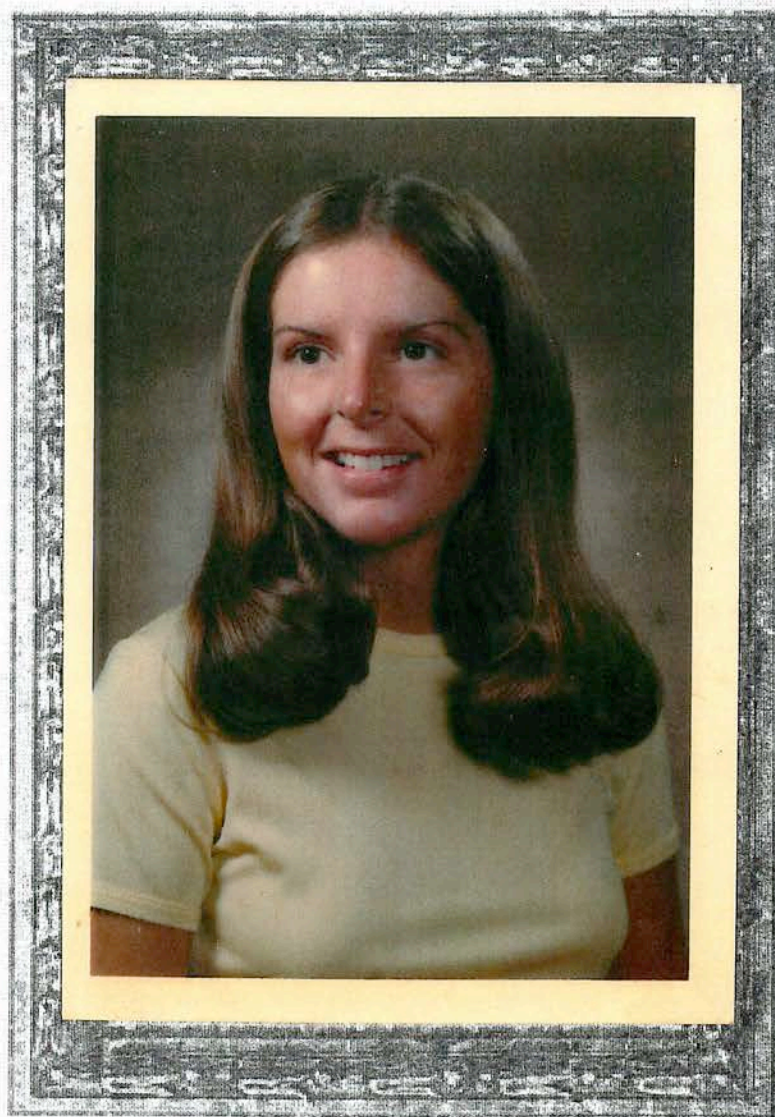
When I was nine, my father died. My mother was left with eight children and no money. My older sister was in a convent, my oldest brother was twenty, and my little sister Mary was five. We moved from a big house in the country into public housing. The first apartment had two bedrooms. Two boys slept in one bedroom, the smaller one, with a mattress on the floor and all of the headboards stacked against the wall. Four of the boys and my little sister slept in the other bedroom, mattress to mattress. My mother slept downstairs, on the couch. A few months later we moved to a three-bedroom apartment. My little sister and my mother shared a bedroom. At night, my mother would lie awake and wonder out loud how she was going to keep us all fed and clothed. "If I pay for Andy's glasses this week then I can buy new shoes for the other boys in a month." She would do a budget and my sister, aged five, would remind her of things she had forgotten. On the weekend Mary would help my mother vacuum and change the beds and clean the bathroom. Each of the boys had a regular weeknight washing the dinner dishes and we rotated Sundays. Mary didn't have to wash the

dishes because she was only five, but by the time she was seven she was doing dishes for any brother that had ball practice or missed dinner because he was at school studying late. I thought she was crazy; I did the least amount of work I could get away with and complained about even that.

She and I fought all the time. Since we were the two youngest we ended up spending a lot of time with my mother when we went shopping because she couldn't leave us at home alone. Mary and my mother would talk about what were good values for the money or what clothes looked good them. Mary could do six racks of dresses in four minutes and find the one thing that looked as though it had been custom-made for my mother. When I was asked for my opinion I made bizarre choices that looked as though they had been made for circus performers or for women nothing like my mother. Mary and my mother tolerated me, but they spoke a language of their own.



One day Mary and I were fighting in the back seat and I expressed the wish that we leave Mary by the side of the road for strangers, or perhaps send her out West to some kind of school. My mother, who by this time was largely



unfazed by anything any of her children said, told me, "You watch, the two of you will be close someday. It was the kind of incomprehensible remark parents made.

I ignored it, going back to teasing Mary for the fun of making her yell, "Moooooooooom...."

In the following years I didn't always like her all that much better. She was so responsible, she was so... reasonable. She saved her allowance and did her homework and had nice friends and got along with everyone. She bossed around all of her brothers, myself included, but only when she thought that we were making life more difficult for our mother.

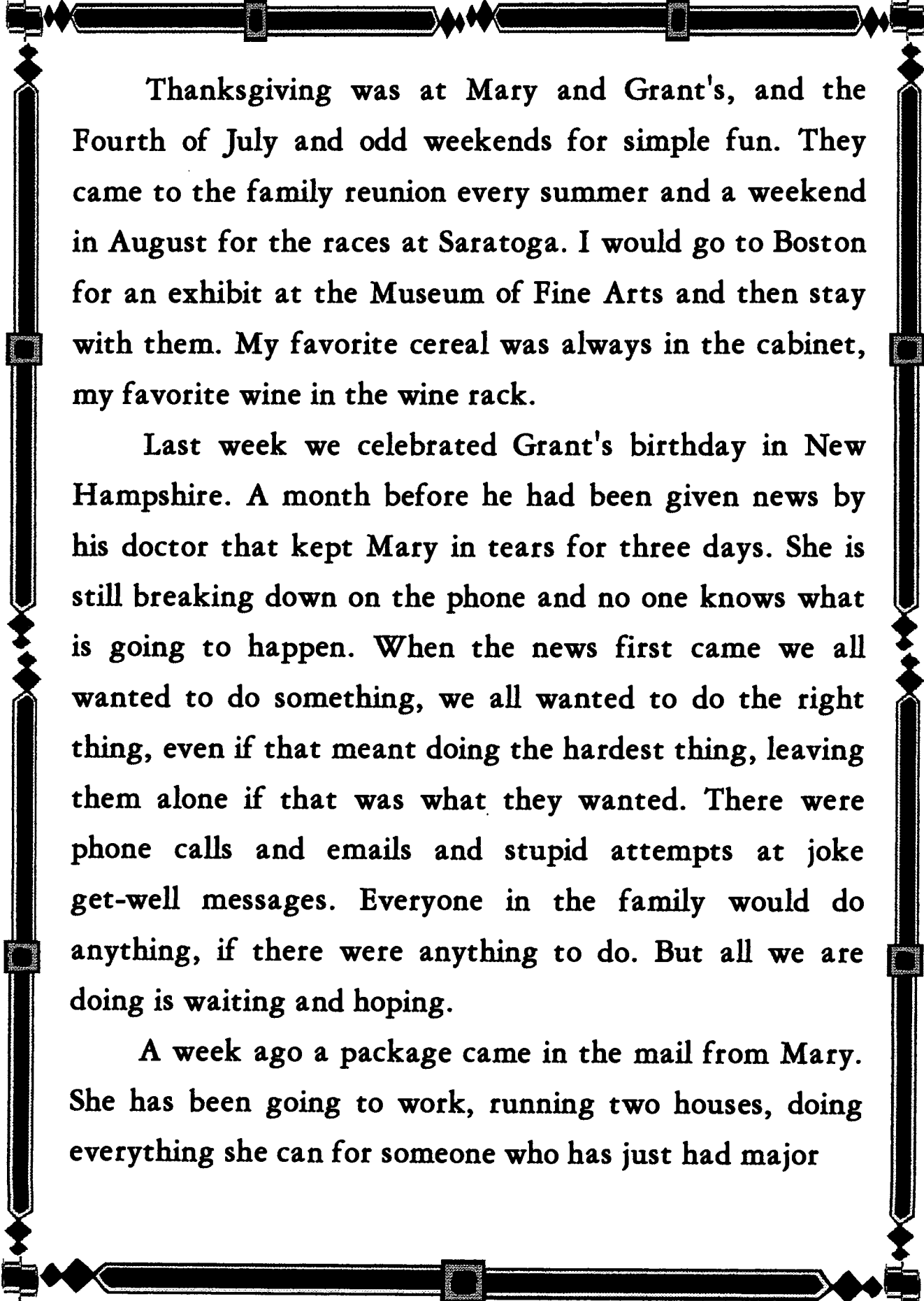
Mary knew that she would need a scholarship if she wanted to go away to college and I think she began working toward one the first day of her freshman year in high school. But she had started laughing at my jokes once in a while and even asking me questions about subjects I might know something about. When she went away to college I missed her and when she brought home boyfriends I wanted them to like me.

Then I went overseas and she wrote long, funny letters and kept me current on everyone. Once she went up to my parents attic and brought down a stack of my albums to make a cassette of all my favorite songs.

When I would visit the States I would go to see her in Boston or she would come to Troy. The year she turned thirty we met in London for a week of theatre and shopping for a particular wallpaper at Laura Ashley that she needed for a bedroom and couldn't find in Boston.

By the time I came home for good she had fallen in love with someone who was everything she wanted. He was all the things she respected and admired and found sexy and funny. Ten years later they were still planning surprises for each other. He came first, but together they made space for all of us, and in a way we all became part of their family instead of him becoming part of ours.

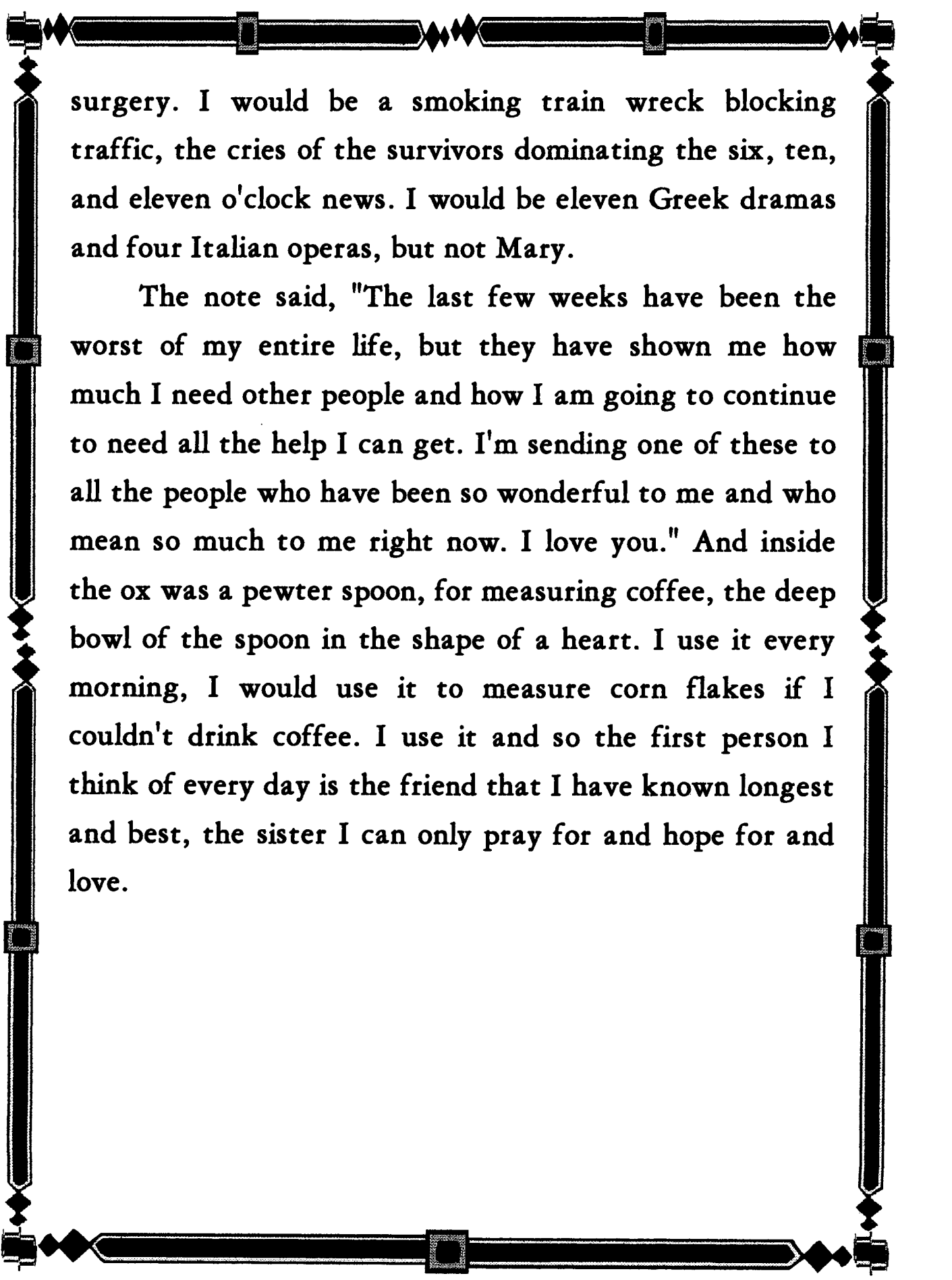




Thanksgiving was at Mary and Grant's, and the Fourth of July and odd weekends for simple fun. They came to the family reunion every summer and a weekend in August for the races at Saratoga. I would go to Boston for an exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts and then stay with them. My favorite cereal was always in the cabinet, my favorite wine in the wine rack.

Last week we celebrated Grant's birthday in New Hampshire. A month before he had been given news by his doctor that kept Mary in tears for three days. She is still breaking down on the phone and no one knows what is going to happen. When the news first came we all wanted to do something, we all wanted to do the right thing, even if that meant doing the hardest thing, leaving them alone if that was what they wanted. There were phone calls and emails and stupid attempts at joke get-well messages. Everyone in the family would do anything, if there were anything to do. But all we are doing is waiting and hoping.

A week ago a package came in the mail from Mary. She has been going to work, running two houses, doing everything she can for someone who has just had major



surgery. I would be a smoking train wreck blocking traffic, the cries of the survivors dominating the six, ten, and eleven o'clock news. I would be eleven Greek dramas and four Italian operas, but not Mary.

The note said, "The last few weeks have been the worst of my entire life, but they have shown me how much I need other people and how I am going to continue to need all the help I can get. I'm sending one of these to all the people who have been so wonderful to me and who mean so much to me right now. I love you." And inside the box was a pewter spoon, for measuring coffee, the deep bowl of the spoon in the shape of a heart. I use it every morning, I would use it to measure corn flakes if I couldn't drink coffee. I use it and so the first person I think of every day is the friend that I have known longest and best, the sister I can only pray for and hope for and love.