

## U Is Part of US

BY PATRICIA HANCOCK

One day my mother just started to cry. I'll never forget it. Marianne and Sheila, my girlfriends, came home with me that afternoon. It had been snowing all day, and I was a little late getting back from school. When we came in, Alan — that's my brother — was already there with two of his friends. They had the stereo turned up to full blast in the rec room. We made ourselves some sandwiches and went downstairs to join them. I turned the stereo down a bit.

"Where's Mom?" I remember asking. Alan said she'd gone out to help Michael with his papers. Michael's my little brother.

We were just sitting around, looking at some books, when I heard the front door open. I even remember hearing Mom and Michael stamping their feet to shake the snow off.

"Kathleen," my mother called out loudly. Her voice sounded a little squeaky. "What's all this mess up here?"

"What mess, Mom? We just made some sandwiches," I called back. I didn't move from the beanbag chair. "Hey, Mom, I told Sheila you've got some really neat art books you'd let her use for a project. Okay?"

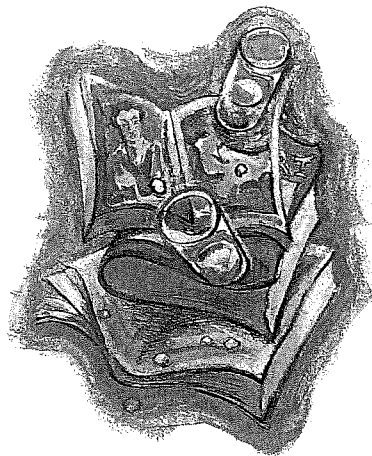
"Well..." She hesitated, coming to the top of the stairs. Alan and his buddies had left their books on the first two stairs and she had to step over them. I remember worrying just for a second that she might trip. She stopped halfway down.

"Oh, no," she said, but in such a sad voice. "Why? Why? Why?" I'd never heard her sound quite like that before.

"Why what?" Alan asked, without looking up from a magazine.

"Why all this?" She pointed to the mess we'd made. "You're dad's bringing someone home for dinner and I spent all day cleaning up this place."

Then she saw them. Her art books. They were spread all over the floor near Sheila, and Marianne and I had balanced our glasses on the two books next to us. She came down very slowly, walked over to one book, and lifted



the glass from it. There was a wet ring on it. It was just a little ring. But she stared at it. She stared at it for a long time, then picked up the book and walked back upstairs without saying another word.

I don't know why, but I turned off the stereo. Alan's and my friends looked at us, and somebody suggested maybe they should be going. But Alan said, "Naw, it's okay. Mom never gets too mad. And she likes us to have friends over, so don't worry about it." He went back to his magazine.

About five minutes later I heard Michael. "Mom, stop. Please stop," he was saying. Then he called me. "Kath, come here. Something's wrong with Mom."

"Coming," I called back. I remember saying that. I guess I still didn't think there was anything wrong. Michael met me at the top of the stairs.

"She's in there," he whispered, pointing to the living room. "I didn't do anything, honest. But she just won't stop."

I went into the living room. There she was, sitting on the couch, holding the art book close to her, and rocking back and forth just a little. She was crying softly.

"What's wrong, Mom?" I asked. "Is it the art book? I'm sorry. Mom?" She didn't answer. She didn't even look at me. She wasn't looking at anything, really.

"Mom, please. Did you hurt yourself or something? Are you sick?"

No answer.

"Please, Mom, stop crying. Do you want to go upstairs and lie down? Here, I'll help you."

I reached out and touched her arm, but I don't think she even felt it. She just sat there and cried, a soft crying that didn't make much noise but seemed to be coming from way inside her. Tears were running down her cheeks. Then she closed her eyes for a minute, and said "Why?" five or six times.

"Why what, Mom? Is it the mess? I'm really sorry. We'll clean it up right away, honest. You'll see."

I ran into the kitchen and started putting things back into the cupboard. I remembered Michael and called him into the kitchen. I got him some date loaf and juice, and went back into the living room.

"It's nearly done, Mom. And I'll go clean up the rec room too. Okay?" I was begging for a response.

Nothing. Her eyes were open again, but she was still sobbing quietly, her face wet with tears.

I headed downstairs. I remember telling our friends something about Mom being sick and asking everyone to go home. They gathered their



things together, and I went back up with them. I remember talking to them a lot and trying to keep them in the hall so they wouldn't hear Mom or see her. For some reason I couldn't understand, I was embarrassed.

"What's wrong?" Alan asked when I came back down. I had told him to start cleaning up, and for one of the first times ever he had listened to me. Nearly everything was back in place. "Why all the fuss? Has Mom got the flu or something?" He pushed a chair toward the wall, then added, "Did she throw up?" He hated people being sick to their stomachs and often left the house when they were.

"No. I'd know better than to tell you if she had." I tried to explain what was wrong. He looked at me as if I were crazy.

"So she's crying. So what? I guess she's just upset about that book."

I nearly punched him. "Alan, please. This is really serious. You're the oldest. You go up and see what you can do to make her stop. Please?" I was nearly ready to cry myself.

I don't think I was prepared for the look on Alan's face when he came back down a few minutes later. I still must have been hoping I was imagining things.

"You're right," he said. "Something is wrong with Mom. I think we'd better call Dad."

I don't remember when I started, but by then I was crying too.

"Gee, Kathleen, not you too," Alan said as he reached for the phone. "Why don't you go upstairs and find something for Michael to do? I'll be back up as soon as I talk to Dad."

Mom was still crying when Dad came in, alone, at a quarter to six. I felt better as soon as I saw that familiar old face. In low voices, we tried to explain to him what had happened. But he didn't wait for us to finish. He went right in to Mom. I can still see him sitting beside her, his parka all snowy, trying to talk to her. She didn't seem to know he was there. She wouldn't stop crying. She wouldn't even let him touch her.

Dad finally came back into the hall where we were all standing, and motioned us into the kitchen. He asked us to make some sandwiches for supper — just to keep us busy, I suppose — and to go back downstairs to the rec room. Dad has always seemed strong and, well, decisive but this time I could tell that even he wasn't sure what to do and that frightened me.

When we were out of the way, Dad called Dr. Derstein — he's our family doctor, and a good friend of Mom's and Dad's, too. The doctor came over about fifteen minutes later. When I was sure he and Dad had gone into the living room, I left Michael and Alan watching a *Star Trek* rerun, and crept up the stairs. I sat down in the hallway and listened. The doctor was talking to Mom.

"Nona, can you hear me? Nona, it's me, Bob."

I remember thinking how silly that sounded. Why did he have to tell her who he was? Then I heard them moving, and I slid back around the corner onto the first step.

"Jim, I'm afraid I can't do much for her right now. And I can't let her stay here." The doctor was talking quietly to Dad.

"But, Bob, what is it? I've never seen her like this before. You know how organized she is, always in charge, usually smiling. What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure, Jim, so I'd just as soon not say. But I really think you should take her to the hospital."

"But, Bob, when you come right down to it, she's just crying. Maybe if I..."

"Jim." Dr. Derstein sounded so serious.

"All right. I'll get her coat."

"And pack a few night things for her too. We can all go over in my car. I'll go down and tell the kids."

I made it downstairs about two seconds before the doctor. I vaguely remember him telling us something about Mom not being well, and how they were going to take her to the hospital, that that was what she needed right now. And of course he told us not to worry, and asked if we could manage. Then Dad was there, saying the same things, his eyes full of worry despite his reassuring words. Five minutes later we were saying goodbye to a mother who didn't seem to hear us and who was walking between the doctor and Dad as if she were a robot.

Dad came back about ten-thirty. We'd done our homework and tidied up, and I remember him thanking us for co-operating. He didn't have anything much to tell us. He said Mom was asleep when he'd left the hospital, that they'd given her a sedative to relax her and it had worked. He used the words "nerves," "tension," and "stress" — words the hospital doctors had used. I went to bed that night without any idea of what had happened to Mom. I was scared, just as if I were a little kid again, lost at the Exhibition grounds among all those rides and clowns and circus elephants.

The next three weeks aren't as clear in my head as that first day. I do remember silly things like the pancakes Alan made that were so hard we actually used them as frisbees. I remember losing at least three socks every time I did the washing. (I now believe my mother's story about washers running on digested socks instead of electricity.) I remember all the phone calls Dad got the stormy day he came home early to help Michael with his papers. He had neglected to read the third column on the route list, showing that Mrs. Bradley always wanted her paper under the mat, Mr. Disantis wanted his jammed in the handle of the side door, and Miss Grafton got very upset if the candy she left for the paper boy wasn't gone when she came out to get her paper. We all slept in three times the first week, ran out of clean underwear in four days, and forgot to take meat out of the freezer two days running. How had Mom kept track of everything?

We missed her terribly. The first day after she left, only Dad went to visit her. He came home looking sad, and at first I was afraid to hear what he had to say. But I think he was mostly upset by the fact that he couldn't talk with her. She had slept all through his visit, and had been sleeping since she'd arrived. Dad said the doctors thought this was just what she needed, that her head had called for "time out." Alan and Michael seemed to accept that explanation, or at least pretended they did, but I couldn't help wondering how long such a time out would last.

I asked Dad why it happened, and he said he really didn't know. But he wouldn't allow any of us to start blaming ourselves.

"I'm sure we can all help your Mom get through this, but let's hold off analyzing things, at least until we meet with the social worker tomorrow," he said.

"What social worker?" I asked.

He explained that the doctors wanted a better picture of our family so they could understand Mom's situation more clearly. We were to meet with a social worker the next day at 4:15, at the hospital.

I dreamed a lot that night. I don't often dream, or if I do, I don't remember doing it. But that night was filled with empty houses, people pointing fingers, and Mom crying for years and years.

Dad picked up Alan and me at the junior high school first, and then drove over to Gibson Elementary for Michael. On the way to the hospital he talked about the floor Mom was on, and how nice her room was, and about some of the other patients he'd seen. But I don't think I was ready for the people he hadn't talked about.

I'd never known that people could look so sad. Oh, some were really happy and lively, and some were old, and some were just a few years older than Alan. But some just sat in chairs near the window, staring and staring. And others walked along the hall, up and down, up and down, not even looking at each other as they passed. I could feel my stomach knotting and soon I was actually shaking.

The social worker was waiting for us at the desk, and took us into a bright sunny office right away, as if she knew how we were feeling. We were all embarrassed at first, even Dad. It isn't easy to talk to a stranger about what you do every day, what your house is like, how much time you spend at home, how your Mom reacts to what you do, and so on. But Dad was honest, and we all felt he expected us to be the same. And we were. Somehow all of this was going to help Mom. Even Michael seemed to understand that much. Then there were no more questions and we were being asked if we'd like to see Mom. I'd actually forgotten that she was somewhere just outside that office door.

Dad and the social worker led us down the hall to Room 604. It looked better than I expected. There were plants, four beds that looked like couches in the corners of the room, desks, chairs, and bookshelves. The window glowed red with a winter sunset. The lady nearest the door was lying on her bed reading. She gave a little nod when she saw Dad, and we all looked over to a corner near the window.

Mom was sitting in an easy chair, and she wasn't crying. She had a big pad of white paper on her lap and she was drawing. I had almost forgotten — my mom draws well, well enough that she even sold some of



her pictures when she was younger. We walked over to her. I felt shy — shy of my own mother! She looked up at us. Oh, good, I thought. She's better already. She knows we're here. But Mom didn't smile. She didn't get up and kiss us. I wanted her to, even if it *was* a gushy thing to do. She didn't say hello.

Dad leaned over and kissed her. "Hi, Nona. Here we are," he said. That sounded sort of silly. But I didn't care, because she answered him. "Hello, Jim," she said. Her voice was quiet and strange. "Hello, Alan, hello, Kathleen. Oh, Michael..." Her voice faltered. "I'm sorry." That's what she said. We all began to speak at once, saying "No way, Mom," "What's there to be sorry for?" and so on. Then somehow we started telling her how much we missed her, and how we'd all slept in that morning and burned the bacon and forgotten to put the garbage out. Mom started to cry again.

Nothing we did could make her stop. Dad finally went out to find a nurse. One came in eventually and gave Mom a pill. Then she gently suggested that we leave so Mom could rest.

Nobody said much at dinner that evening, and when we'd finished the dishes I left Michael, Alan, and Dad trying to look interested in a hockey

game on television. I went upstairs and lay down on my bed. I stared at the ceiling for a long time. I wasn't really thinking about anything in particular. Then I looked over at my closet. The door was open and I could see in. There they were — my pink cat, my daffodils with faces, my dancing tulips — all part of a mural Mom had painted on the walls for me when I was five. She had let me choose everything I wanted in there, and had painted it all just the way I'd asked. She hadn't said that suns aren't blue and dogs don't have yellow polka dots, or anything. It was my place, she'd said, and had even made a cushion for me that just fit the closet floor. The cushion was gone now, probably to the attic. I nearly went to get it. All of a sudden I just wanted to crawl into my private place and cry. But a thirteen-year-old can't do that, can she? I finally got up and did my homework instead.

The rest of the week wasn't much different. We went to see Mom each day after school, and Dad went in the evenings. She didn't cry again, but she didn't say very much, either. I started to talk to the other women in Mom's room. Two of them frightened me a little, I guess because what they said didn't always make sense. But they really liked to talk, and they told me what a nice lady my mom was. I already knew that, but it was good to hear it from somebody else.

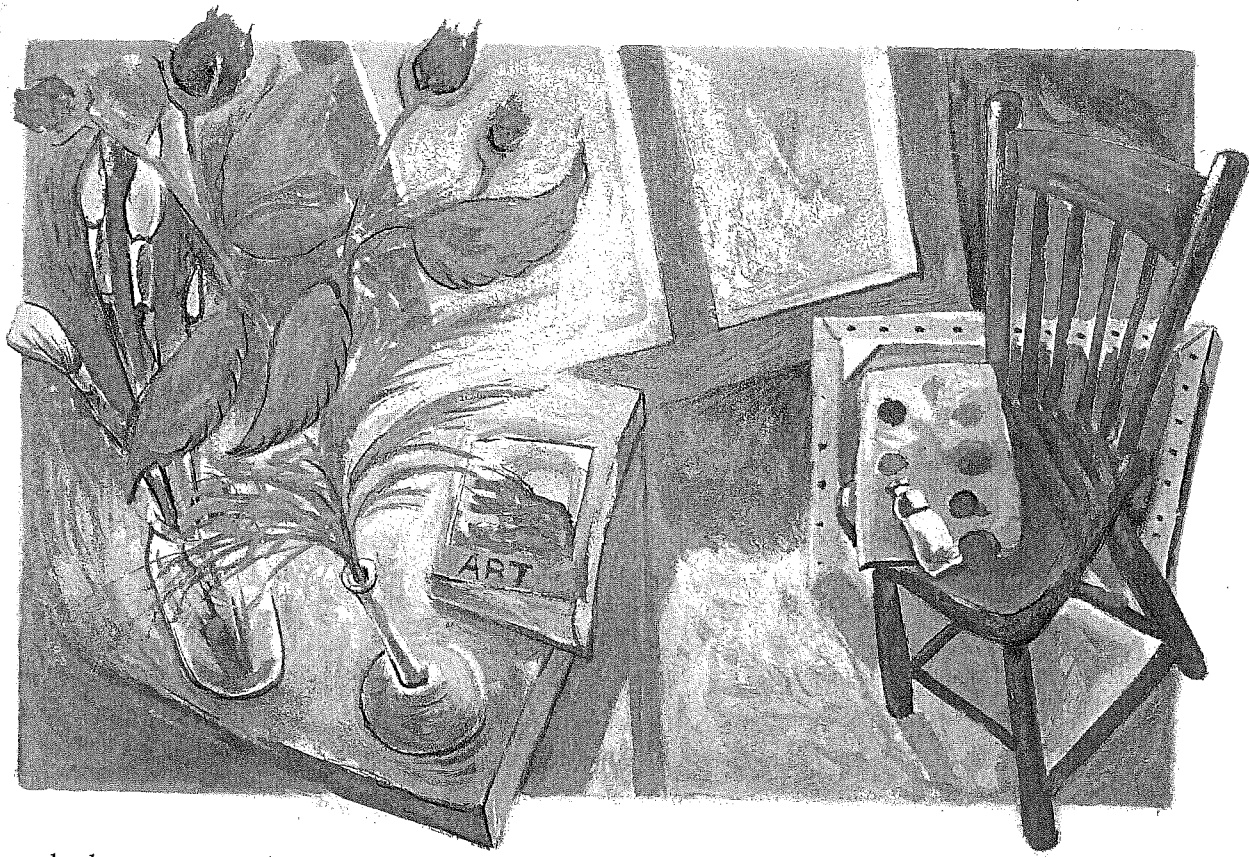
The next Tuesday we all met with Mom's new doctor, Dr. Kay. He answered our questions as best he could, and asked us quite a few, too. He told us Mom was doing well, and he used the same expression he'd used with Dad a week before, saying that something in Mom had called for "time out." Then he said something that finally made a little more sense. He asked me if I could tell him about a round wooden puzzle we had at home. He said it had airplanes on it. I remembered it. It was in an old toy box in the basement. He asked me to describe it.

I told him the puzzle had ten little airplanes around the outside of the circle that all pointed in to the centre, and a piece in the middle that joined them all together. He asked me what the middle piece looked like, and I told him it didn't look like anything. It was just a piece the rest all fitted into.

"Don't look so surprised," he said. "I don't have E.S.P. Your mother told me about that puzzle. You see, she says that lately she's felt that she's just like that middle piece. It's needed to hold all of the other pieces together, but it doesn't have any shape of its own."

He said a lot more that afternoon, but that's the idea that stuck with me. When our interview was over we went down to see Mom, and that day





we had a pretty good visit. For some reason, nobody said much about all the things we'd had trouble doing without her.

On the way home that afternoon, I had a brain wave. After dinner I told everyone about it. Dad said he'd had the same idea lots of times, but had just never got around to doing anything about it. The boys thought it was a great idea, too. I made out a list. Michael and Alan were to clean out the upstairs sunroom. Dad was to get paint and we'd all start painting the sunroom as soon as it was empty. I was to go to the office supplies store for all sorts of things. And Dad was to go through some of Mom's stuff up in the attic and decide what should be brought down.

The next two weeks flew by, what with visiting Mom, taking care of the house, and working on the sun room. Then, on the fourth Thursday after Mom had gone, Dad came home with great news. He was bringing her home Saturday morning. She would still see Dr. Kay once a week for the next few months, but she was coming home.

"I think we'll make it on schedule," I said, dragging everyone up to the sunroom. "Look."

While Dad had been at the hospital, I'd finished rearranging things for the last time. I'd brought two plants up from the living room, and put the sheepskin from my bedroom on the floor.

"Kathleen, this is an even nicer studio than the one your mom had before we were married. I just know she'll love it. Well done, all three of you." He reached out and grabbed all of us in a bear hug, even Alan.

Saturday morning Dad took Michael with him to get Mom. Alan and I cleaned up the kitchen. Then I asked him to come upstairs with me.

"Do you think you could make a sign real fast?" I asked when we got to my room.

"You and your ideas. What do you want on it?"

"Oh, something like MOM'S PLACE: DON'T EVEN KNOCK TUESDAY AND THURSDAY EVENINGS, AND SUNDAY AFTERNOONS." I handed him paper and markers.

"Sounds good," he said, and started to work on it.

I went into the studio for one last look. The roses Dad had brought the night before looked beautiful in the morning sunlight. Then I remembered the card I'd bought for Mom on Monday. I went back to my desk and pulled it out. It was one of those things that can be made to stand up and it was in the shape of a heart. I read the words to myself: "*U* is part of *US*."

I suddenly felt scared. I read the words again. The puzzle. That's what they reminded me of. That's what was wrong. I grabbed the black marker from Alan and added another line: "But *U* is *YOU* too." Boy, that sounded dumb. But it was done, and so was the sign. Alan got some tape and stuck the sign on the door, and I went in and stood my card on the table by the window. Just in time, too. The car was pulling into the driveway.

We met Mom in the hall. She was smiling and talking and that made all the rest of us happy. We went into the kitchen for coffee, milk, and some muffins Dad had made. They were good, too. Then I couldn't wait any longer.

"Now, Dad?" I asked. He nodded, and I asked Mom to come upstairs. We led her to the sunroom. When she saw the sign, she stopped.

"You can change the days if you want, Mom," Alan said. Michael asked if he could open the door. He didn't wait for an answer.

Mom walked in slowly. She looked all around. Everything we could think of was there — her old easel, paints, and brushes; some new sketch pads and four canvases; and her art books. She didn't say anything. She went over and touched the roses. Then she saw the card. She picked it up and read it. When she turned around she was crying. But I wasn't worried. This was a good kind of crying and I knew it would stop in a minute.